

# The Queen's Blade

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Please note that this is the first book of a series, but the remainder of the series is not available for free.

*This series is dedicated to my sister-in-law, Suzanne.*

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## Prologue

In the time of Shamsara, Idol of the Beasts, on the world of Chasym, favoured of the great god Tinsaron, Queen Minna-Satu, beloved of the Jashimari, took power upon her mother's deathbed. Tashi-Mansa, Elder Queen of the Jashimari, died two days later from the poison she had taken, and was duly interred within the royal tomb. On the day of her coronation, Minna-Satu stood upon the Plinth of Power and declared herself sworn to her people and the Endless War. Her declaration, however, proved different from those who had gone before her, for she vowed to bring an end to the eternal conflict.

Of the vast crowd that cheered and celebrated her ascension, many went away muttering darkly of her vow, unable to envision a world without war, an economy unspurred by the dark trades of death and weaponry. The Jashimari and the desert people of the Cotti had been at war for eight generations at least, some said longer, and none could remember its beginning or the reason for it. All that was known was that each successive queen was sworn to continue it, and every boy who reached manhood must fight in it, save those of high rank.

The seasoned warriors gathered before the golden palace to witness the new Queen's pledge raised their white-plumed spears in salute, and the populace beyond their ranks roared in adulation, as if her words had not reached them. In truth, the day's celebrations, the music, marching, chanting and priestly exhortations to the faithful, brushed this oddity from most people's minds much as a spider web is swept from its dusty corner by a housewife's broom. Some, with more ordered minds, noted it, wondered at it, and filed it away, while others wrote it down in texts and records. A few penned it on notes that swift, feathered messengers flew across the land, into the hands of the enemy king.

Upon receiving the first of these messages, King Shandor of the Cotti laughed uproariously and handed it to his eldest son. Prince Kerrion read it and tossed it aside, his countenance sombre. Shandor shook his head, still chuckling, and gazed at the sea of armoured warriors that surrounded his desert camp, an unstoppable tide of brawn marching inexorably towards the mountains that guarded Jashimari lands. There they would hurl themselves against the defenders' ramparts in waves of bloody combat in the time-honoured way.

Thus, with Queen Minna-Satu's declaration, began a time that would be remembered always. A time of sorrow and pain, of struggle and sacrifice; a time that would be named after the man who brought it about: the time of the Queen's Blade.

## Chapter One

Queen Minna-Satu stood and gazed at the gathered advisors for a moment before flicking aside her heavy, gold-patterned silver cloak and sinking onto the curved golden bench that was her throne. The advisors remained standing, each clad in the robes of his or her office, the colour varying according to their beast, some with their familiars. Many wore skins or feathers from their beast kin, but most shunned the out-dated practice and made do with rich cloth. Behind them, gaudily clad lords, ladies and courtiers lined the walls, their aristocratic faces set in expressions of haughty reverence well-practised over the years. Their rich garb, most picked out with silver and gold, glittered as they shifted under the Queen's gaze.

The massive golden audience chamber gleamed in the light of many torches and candles. Each gilded surface lighted others with its glow, reflecting the radiance into every corner, so that the very air seemed to shimmer. An occasional pale glitter of silver relieved the endless gold, but this was rare, for silver required polishing and the queens had ever disliked it. The taxes gleaned from her people, paid in gold, had, over the years, clad almost every inch of this vast building, there being no other use for it. The opulence of the surroundings was lost upon those who dwelt within the palace, well used to treading golden floors and eating with jewel-encrusted cutlery. The silence hung leaden upon the air, unbroken save for the flaring torches' hiss and the occasional scrape of a shifting foot.

Queen Minna-Satu raised her six-foot sceptre and brought it down with a dull clink. On cue, her mother's chief advisor, Mendal of the snakes, stepped forward and prostrated himself. She waited a full minute before allowing him to rise, and he did so red-faced.

"My Queen."

"Snake, you may speak."

The tiny green adder that coiled about his neck hissed, and he stroked it. "You must retract your earlier promise of ending the war, My Queen. Your people wonder at it, as do we. It cannot be taken seriously, and is unwise to even speak of -"

"Enough." Minna rose and released the sceptre, which a hovering attendant caught. Shucking the heavy cloak, she stepped down from the dais. Over her floor-sweeping gown of sheer indigo satin trimmed with gold, she wore a form-hugging sheath of golden mail, so finely woven as to be as malleable as cloth. She strolled closer to the old man.

Diamonds dripped from her midnight hair like frosted spider webs; pearls nestled in the hollow of her throat and hung in gleaming drops from her delicate earlobes. Mendal's wrinkled features remained impassive, but his cold eyes watched her as a cobra might eye an approaching rat. She stopped before him, an equal in height, and met his faded green gaze with a stare of profound chill.

"Do not presume to tell me what to do." Her soft words whispered around the chamber, and the adder wriggled down Mendal's back, taking refuge in his oiled snakeskin robe.

"You may have been my mother's favourite," Minna-Satu went on, "but you are not mine. You and she were kindred spirits, snakes both, as close as twined vipers. But you shall not find such intimacy with me, or such favour. I am no snake, but of cat kind I claim kin. No friend of snakes. Do not presume that your aged mien and former position holds any merit with me now. You advised my mother ill, and through you, many a young man found his death."

She addressed the assembly. "Mendal is no longer chief advisor. Those who would petition for the position may step forward now to be considered."

A dozen advisors stepped from the ranks and prostrated themselves with a rustle of robes. A flick of the Queen's fingers made them rise, and she approached the nearest, casting a considering eye over his handsome, muscled person clad mostly in feathers.

"Jasham of the eagles; I wish to stop the Endless War, advise me."

For a full minute he stared at her, speechless, and, as he opened his mouth, she waved him back.

"I have no time for those too slow of wit to find an answer before my patience ends."

Jasham retreated, and she approached the next. "Moret of the dogs. What is your answer?"

The stocky, middle-aged man regarded her with kindly eyes. The big dog beside him sat patiently. "It is not possible, My Queen."

"I did not ask if it was possible, Moret. Nothing can be said to be impossible unless it has been attempted. Has it?"

"No, Majesty."

“Then it is not impossible.” She waved him back and walked past, stopping before the next candidate. “Megan of the ferrets, advise me.”

The sharp-faced woman’s black eyes darted. “We must gather our armies into a mighty force and defeat the upstart king.”

Minna sighed. “If this was possible, it would have been done already. Defeating the desert kings, we have learnt, is impossible, although ending the war may not be.” She returned to the centre of the room and addressed them all. “I tire of foolish notions better suited to simpletons. Let the one amongst you who has a worthy idea advise me.”

After a brief, tense silence, during which the tension in the chamber rose, one of the candidates took a step forward. The Queen’s eyes raked the pretty countenance of a girl in her late teens. Curly chestnut hair framed a gentle face in which soft blue-grey eyes lowered respectfully under the Queen’s gaze. She lacked true beauty in its purest form, her mouth a little too wide, her eyes over large in a face that did not possess patrician lines, but held a hint of strength.

Minna approached her. “Chiana of the doves, advise me.”

“You must heed the council of Shamsara, My Queen.”

Minna frowned. “What is this? You pass your task on?”

“Only he will know the answer.”

“It is forbidden for the Queen to consult seers.”

“It is the Queen who makes the laws.”

Minna’s frown melted away, and she smiled. “That is correct. But why do you consider Shamsara to have the answer?”

“He can see the future. We cannot.”

“True. I will think on this advice, but what is yours, for my question?”

Chiana bowed her head, stroking the grey dove that nestled in her hands. “If we cannot defeat the desert kings, nor they us, we must call a truce.”

“A truce.” Minna nodded, turning away to retrace her steps to the throne. Seated upon it once more, she gazed at Chiana. “A truce,” she repeated. “And should I send you, Chiana, to negotiate it?”

The girl’s shoulders hunched. “If you will, My Queen.”

“Shandor will laugh in your face and then give you to his soldiers for sport. You would not survive the ordeal.”

“Doubtless, My Queen.”

“A waste. I desire your council. You shall be senior advisor henceforth.” The advisors stepped back, all save Chiana, who replaced Mendal before her. “Summon Shamsara to me now,” Minna ordered a hovering attendant, who spun on his heel and trotted away. She faced her audience once more. “Have any of you anything else to say?”

Mendal said, “Shamsara will not come, My Queen. You cannot summon the Idol of the Beasts. If you wish to consult him, you will have to travel to him.”

“Indeed?” Minna raised her brows. “We shall see. Shamsara pleases himself in these matters. Do not think me ignorant of the ways of the Idol of the Beasts, Mendal.” She rose to her feet. “This audience is over.”

Minna walked out, leaving her bevy of lords and advisors in the act of prostrating themselves. Some completed the ritual, others straightened the moment she was out of sight.

Mendal was one such, and frowned at the man beside him, plucking at his olive green robes with agitated, bony fingers. “She takes too much upon herself. She will fail.”

Symion of the horses straightened from completing his prostration and shrugged. “Perhaps, but if it is her wish to try, no one will gainsay her.”

“Indeed not, yet this is not a good course to be set upon.”

“Ending the war sounds like an excellent notion to me, Mendal.”

“Only if we do not lose it in the process. The great Queen Janna-Marū had good reason to forbid consulting seers. When the queens attempted it, there were disastrous results. Would Queen Minna-Satu, through Chiana’s foolish council, plunge us back into those dark days? The future is not set; it may be changed, yet, in doing so, often it is changed for the worse. I feel that no good can come of this.”

Symion gazed at Mendal with soft brown eyes, his placid countenance reflecting the peaceful nature of his animal kin. “Perhaps our queen does not seek to change the future, but merely to be

guided by it. Perhaps it is different now. No seer has been consulted since then, and that was a very different time. If our queen wishes to find a way to end this war, we must hope and pray she will.”

Mendal shot Symion a hard look and raised an arm to summon the new chief advisor. “Chiana, I would speak to you.”

When she approached, Mendal addressed her in a condescending manner. “Your new duties include finding consorts for the Queen, and you should set out immediately for the armies. She may take many moons to choose one from amongst them, you know.”

Chiana smiled. “I know. In fact, the duty is not mine alone, and in this I nominate you and Symion to journey to the armies. The Queen needs me beside her right now, but I doubt she needs you.”

Mendal bristled at the slight and accorded her a mocking bow. “Of course, Chief Advisor; I shall do my best.”

“Good. Try to choose plenty of cats, or at least warm-blooded men. You know how she hates snakes.”

He narrowed his eyes, raking her slender form with a disparaging look. “Well, we all know how much cats like birds; especially doves.”

Chiana scowled and swung away. Mendal smiled coldly at her back as she strode after the Queen. Symion said, “It is ill advised to insult her now. She has the Queen’s ear.”

“I said nothing that was not true.”

“Even so, you should watch your step. We have a new queen, who already dislikes you. And, with her, doubtless, a new set of intrigues and subterfuges. There will be much jockeying amongst the advisors, and many moons before we know where any of them stand. Perhaps leaving the palace now would be beneficial, for we will not be amongst those who fall foul of a knife in the back.”

Mendal grunted, glancing around at the muttering throng, most of which shuffled from the vast room. “I know where some of them stand, and now I will not be here to ensure their continued loyalty to me, which is perhaps worse than the risk of a knife. While we are away, Chiana will have much time to influence them.”

“Or find a knife in her back.”

Queen Minna-Satu reached the sanctuary of her rooms and sank onto a pile of gilt-edged satin cushions. Since her coronation two days ago, her new duties had drained her, coming as they did so soon after her mother’s interment and the cessation of the tolling of the great golden bell that had mourned the Elder Queen’s demise for the three days it had taken her to die. The sadness of her mother’s death was tinged with a hint of guilty relief, for they had never agreed upon matters of importance.

A handmaiden approached to enquire after the Queen’s wishes, and Minna ordered a bath. When the girl left, Minna’s eyes drifted to a corner of the room, where a pair of the palest green met them. The huge sand cat lolled on a cushion, her chin resting on her paws. Her pale golden hide, dappled with an intricate pattern of white, dark gold and black, shimmered in the sunlight that streamed through the window. Minna longed to run her hands over that silken fur and caress the sleek muscles that rippled just beneath it.

Shista rose and limped to her, rubbing her cheek against Minna’s thigh. The Queen hugged the cat’s neck, and then ran her hands over Shista’s soft coat. The cat, easily ten feet long and weighing more than four times as much as her friend, flopped down like a kitten and batted at her with great paws. One bore the scar that made her limp, a narrow band of bare skin just behind her toes. Minna took the paw and rubbed that scar, remembering its infliction, and how she had found her cat.

Five years before, Minna had travelled to the desert, where her troops had gained an area beyond the mountains and held it against Shandor’s attacks. For a tenday, she had observed the constant battles, which gained a few arid miles one day, then lost them the next. Her presence had spurred the troops to great feats of courage, but the desert King had held his ground in the end and forced her warriors back.

During the retreat, she and a group of her personal guard had entered a narrow canyon with crumbling walls. Leading them, Minna had almost been unseated when her horse shied violently.

*Minna controlled the beast and dismounted to approach the reason for its fear. A young sand cat, maybe a year old, maybe less, lay dying on the rocks. She still had a cub’s brown stripes, and her dull hide was stretched over prominent bones. Although she regarded the Princess with blazing eyes and snarled her defiance, she could not flee. The reason for her plight was a front paw trapped*

*amongst the stones, crushed by a recent rock fall. Days of lying in the sun without food or water had reduced her to skin and bones, and suffering filled her eyes with madness.*

*“Be careful, Princess,” a soldier warned, but she approached the cat, which spat and bared her fangs, growling deep in her chest. Minna reached out to stroke her coat, and the cat whipped around and bit Minna’s hand with bruising force. A soldier notched an arrow and drew it.*

*Minna murmured, “You fire that arrow, and I shall personally cut out your heart.”*

*An officer knocked the weapon from the soldier’s hands, and all waited as Minna crouched beside the cat. Their eyes met and held, blue and pale green, locked in a battle of wills for a length of time that gave the soldiers ample opportunity to start sweating. At last, the cat released the Princess’ hand and licked it, then flopped onto her side as if ready to die. Minna examined the red marks on her hand and smiled. Within minutes, the soldiers moved the rock, and Minna gave the cat water and dried meat before they were forced to leave her as Shandor’s men drew closer.*

Two days later, Shista had wandered into Minna’s tent and taken up residence, becoming a permanent fixture from then on. The crushed paw had healed, and she had followed the Princess back to the palace. The strong bond that had formed between them could never be broken now, a sharing of minds and traits that had increased Minna’s feline qualities and imbued her familiar with an almost human intelligence.

Minna scratched the cat’s belly and listened to her rumbling purr. Shista was larger than any cat found in Jashimari, which boasted only the white snow cats from the mountains, wood cats and small domestic cats. Shista outweighed the largest, the snow cat, by twice its weight. In the five years that had passed since then, Shista had never shown aggression to anyone, but appeared to be fond of all, even rubbing affectionately on certain people she especially liked.

Minna alone was accorded the honour of play, when Shista would roll about like a cub and pat her human friend with massive paws that could disembowel her with a swipe. She had a herd of goats in a pen outside, from which she would select a meal whenever she was hungry. On rare ceremonial occasions, Minna would put a jewelled golden collar on her and persuade the great cat to walk at her side, but Shista disliked this, and bore it with ill-concealed disgruntlement.

The maid returned to announce that the Queen’s bath was ready, and Minna went to enjoy a long soak in a hot scented tub, aided by several virgin girls whose sole duty it was to tend to the Queen.

Shamsara looked up at a raven’s harsh caw, and the snow cat beside him snarled a warning. The scuffle of slipping footsteps and gasps of an exhausted man reached him, and he put aside the bowl of herbs he had been grinding to settle back on his pile of leaves, his gaze fixed on the cave entrance. The snow cat spat and slipped away, and the two mongooses that played together on the floor sat up. The raven cawed again, and the owl that roosted outside the cave entrance hooted. A panting grey wolf trotted in and sat beside Shamsara, tongue lolling.

A man’s silhouette appeared against the sky, stepped within and fell to his knees. Shamsara noted his livery and beckoned him closer. The messenger stopped two paces away at a snarl from the wolf. A chameleon clung to his shoulder, blending with the green and gold of the Queen’s colours.

Shamsara smiled. “Well, man of chameleons, what does the Queen wish of Shamsara?”

“She summons you, Idol of the Beasts.”

“Ah.” Shamsara nodded. “What is her reason?”

The man took several deep breaths. The trail to Shamsara’s cave was an arduous one, designed to repel any who did not have a good reason to seek him out. The Queen, however, did not have to make this journey herself, or, at least, did not think so.

When the messenger regained his breath, he said, “She has vowed to end the Endless War, and wishes to consult you upon the matter.”

“Ahha!” Shamsara’s smile broadened into a grin, revealing perfect white teeth that he knew were incongruous in an ageless face of lined, weather-beaten skin tanned to a deep nut brown. He nodded cheerfully, reached back and grabbed a bunch of leaves, added them to the bowl and ground them into a paste with the rest of the ingredients. The messenger waited, looking a little puzzled at Shamsara’s sudden preoccupation with his grinding. The wolf whined and retreated to curl up in the shadows; the mongooses groomed each other. Only the gritty sound of Shamsara’s pestle on the stone bowl broke the silence.

The messenger bowed and backed away.

Shamsara glanced up sharply. “I did not give you leave to go.”



The man paused. “Will you come, then?”  
“Mmm. As soon as I have had my lunch.”

## Chapter Two

The news of Shamsara's arrival in the Queen's city provoked great excitement, and vast crowds flocked to see him. The capital city of Jondar, far from the border and therefore spared the savagery of war, prospered in a broad vale patch-worked with farmers' fields. The Queen's most ardent supporters and greatest dissenters populated the bustling metropolis in a cauldron of political intrigue that sheltered within its tall grey walls. All were united in their reverence for the Idol of the Beasts, however, a living emissary of the great god Tinsaron and harbinger of the Age of Beasts. He alone could bond with any animal and resembled none. His birth seven centuries ago had signalled the end of the Age of Trees and ushered in a new aeon.

The Idol of the Beasts rode a mighty grey stallion without rein or spur, a wolf trotting at his heels, a hawk perched upon his shoulder. His garb, made up of many skins and feathers, hid a number of smaller friends, some of which peered out at the sea of humanity. The crowd threw flowers in his path and chanted his name. Mothers held their children up for his blessing. The Idol of the Beasts rode with dignified calm, occasionally raising a hand in a vague gesture of acknowledgment.

Arriving at the palace steps, he dismounted and walked within, a bevy of advisors, who bowed and vied for his attention, surrounding him. Shamsara followed a royal attendant, who led him through the immense audience hall and into the Queen's private chambers. The doors closed in the advisors' faces, and the Idol of the Beasts entered a room hung with silks and tapestries. Rich carpets woven from the wool of rare antelope and piles of embroidered cushions covered the floor. Jade and crystal ornaments graced carved tables. Huge diamond-paned doors opened into park-like gardens, and pale blue curtains billowed in the breeze with a whisper of silk. The fragrance of puffwood and smoke tree blossoms rode upon it, along with the city's distant sounds. He met the unblinking gaze of a sand cat, which lolled on a pile of cushions. The wolf at his side sat down, and the hawk ruffled its feathers.

Shamsara smiled at the cat and allowed his gaze to wander on, lingering on a pool filled with flowering water lilies. Here was tranquillity and happiness, a sense of serenity he found most pleasing. The sand cat stretched and purred as a slender, petite woman brushed aside a silk hanging and strolled in. Ink-black hair framed a fine-featured face with slanted, long-lashed blue eyes. Her creamy skin seemed to glow in the soft light, and her lips curved in a slight smile. Her graceful movements and air of contentment confirmed her cat kindred, and he would have known it even without the over-large familiar.

"Shamsara."

He inclined his head. "Minna-Satu."

"Welcome. Sit, if you will." She sank onto a pile of cushions, arranging her skirts about her in a fall of turquoise silk. Gold gleamed at her neck and wrists, surprisingly little adornment for a queen. As he sat down, a handmaiden brought a tray upon which rested an assortment of goblets. He chose water, and the Queen selected a pale wine. As soon as the maiden left, the Queen set aside her cup and folded her hands.

"I am glad you spared me the journey to your home, Shamsara."

He shrugged. "It is not as fine as yours."

"I would like to see it one day."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

She laughed; a husky, gilded tone. "Not this one."

The wolf lay down with a sigh, resting his muzzle on his paws. Shamsara sipped his water, savouring it as a connoisseur might before setting it aside. A brown field mouse crept from his sleeve to sample it before retreating into its sanctuary again. The Queen started as a slender yellow viper slid from his hair and coiled around his neck. Its presence would startle most, for it was the deadliest snake in the world, and cat people disliked them, he knew. Shamsara smiled, his ageless countenance wrinkling along well-used lines, for he smiled often.

"So, Minna-Satu; you requested my presence, and here I am. What will you ask of me?"

Her face became solemn, belying its youthful beauty. The sand cat stopped purring, and Shamsara missed the deep rumble. He cast the cat a reproachful look and received a cool stare.

Minna-Satu asked, "How can I stop this eternal, accursed war?"

Shamsara's smile faded. "Only by a great sacrifice; one that is not easily made by one so young."

"I will make it, if necessary."

“Do not pledge yourself so hastily to a sacrifice you have yet to know.”

“Tell me.”

Shamsara turned his gaze upon the great cat. “You must die.”

The cat sat up in a lithe movement that required the lash of her tail to achieve it. Her eyes fixed upon the Idol of the Beasts, and she rose, her limping gait carrying her to him in a few strides. Imposing herself between him and the Queen, she settled back on her haunches and studied him with alarm and puzzlement.

Shamsara stroked the sand cat’s silken cheek, and her brilliant eyes sought the Queen’s.

He followed her gaze. “She loves you very much.”

“I know.”

“She will kill anyone who tries to harm you.”

“What do you mean, I must die? What will that achieve?”

Shamsara sighed. “If you wish to end the war, your task will not be an easy one. If you do as I say, this will come to pass. But the decision must be yours alone, for yours will be the greatest sacrifice.”

“Tell me what I must do.”

Chiana waited outside the massive double doors of the Queen’s inner chambers for what seemed like an age. Her fingers pleated the material of her new robe, the same dove grey as she had always worn, but now trimmed and belted with gold in accordance with her newly elevated status. Her father, a merchant, had sacrificed much to pay for the many years of study needed to gain the knowledge required to become an advisor to the Queen. The Elder Queen had never noticed her, and her youth had always relegated her to the lesser ranks, for chief advisors were generally elderly. Her meteoric rise to her new post astonished her, but she was well aware that it could just as easily be lost, should she displease the Queen.

The doors opened, jerking Chiana from her thoughts, and Shamsara emerged, followed by the Queen. The old man strode briskly, the wolf at his heels. His soft blue eyes gleamed with gentle humour, and a mane of pure white hair framed the open honesty of his countenance. Shista brought up the rear, looking unusually alert. Minna stopped before her chief advisor, her face pale but composed.

“Show Shamsara to his rooms and see that he has every comfort, then return to me here.”

Chiana bowed to the Idol of the Beasts and led him down a short corridor, opening the doors to a suite of rooms as opulent as the Queen’s.

“If you require anything, ring the bell, Your Grace,” she murmured.

Shamsara nodded, strolling towards the windows. Chiana closed the doors and hastened back to the Queen’s rooms. The patter of her slippers seemed loud in the corridors’ pillared vastness, adding to the already overwhelming sense of inadequacy that had plagued her since gaining her new position. Minna-Satu sat gazing ahead with wide eyes, Shista beside her. Chiana prostrated herself, and received the signal to rise.

“Chiana, go at once to the captain of my guard and bid him come to me.”

Chiana retreated, frightened by the Queen’s distracted air and Shista’s obvious agitation. She hurried to the officers’ quarters, where the captain sat at his desk, filling in reports. He looked up at her entry, a man of foxes whose shy familiar was rarely seen. Cropped red hair crowned a narrow, clever, sharp-featured face common to his kind, and his quick green eyes missed nothing in their vigilance. The broad stripe of peacock blue that denoted his rank ran down the right side of his chest from shoulder to waist, relieving the dark green of his gold-trimmed uniform.

At the Queen’s summons, he followed Chiana back through the corridors, his light footsteps ringing on the marble floors. She showed him into the Queen’s presence, and would have retreated, but Minna said, “Stay, Chiana, this is for you to hear also.”

Chiana stood beside the captain, and Shista paced by the windows, her pads silent on the rugs.

“Captain,” the Queen said, “I have a strange and fearsome task for your men. You will select the best from amongst them, the strongest, bravest and cleverest. You will send them to King Shandor’s camp, where they must slay him and bring me his son, unharmed.”

Captain Redgard gaped, the shock of this unexpected and momentous announcement momentarily making him break his rigid military stance, then he collected himself and resumed his formal pose. “My Queen. Such a thing... is impossible. If it was not, we would have won the war by such means long ago. The King is guarded night and day by the most seasoned warriors and their familiars, giant cats like your own....”

Minna-Satu raised a hand. "Nevertheless, it must be done, and I have charged you with the task. Bring me the Prince, but first make him the King."

"My Queen...." The captain struggled with his words, his expression despairing. "I fear... this will fail. Almost at every opportunity, our armies have striven to reach the King and slay him, for to do so would demoralise his troops and give us victory until the next king took power. We have never succeeded."

"Then this time you will." Minna's tone brooked no argument, and the captain's shoulders slumped. Still, his courage was admirable, for he rallied again, to Chiana's surprise.

"My Queen, you send good men to their deaths."

"Good men die almost every day, Captain. How many do we lose in a battle?"

He shrugged. "In a good one, perhaps a few score, but on a really bad day, over a thousand have been lost. In the Rout of Ashtolon, we lost five thousand and seven hundred."

"So, I ask you to send only a few, a score, or half a score, enough to do the deed, not defeat Shandor's army. Perhaps several score shall perish before they succeed, but when they do succeed, the end of the war will be nigh, and that will save a good many more lives."

The captain bowed before voicing his doubts, diminishing the boldness of his words. "After the first attempt, the King will know our plan and be alerted. It will be suicide."

Chiana thought the Queen was remarkably patient with Redgard. People never argued with her, and if they tried, not for long. The captain, she was convinced, had just set a record for the longest such argument ever attempted.

Minna smiled. "Then let them be volunteers, Captain. Tell them that they will earn great honour, the highest awards, and my favour. The men who achieve this will become nobles of my court and own vast estates. Their riches shall exceed all others. But send no fools who long only for glory. These men must be qualified for the task."

The captain sighed, shaking his head. "Of course; it will be as you order, My Queen. Many will come forward without any promise of reward, merely for the honour of serving you."

"Send them here to me before they leave. I would wish them luck."

Redgard bowed. "As you command, Majesty."

Chiana gazed after him as he left the room, impressed by his courage and honourable demeanour. She faced the Queen as the doors closed behind him.

Minna asked, "Have we any other business, you and I?"

Chiana hesitated. "I must report, I have ordered Mendal and Symion to go in search of consorts, My Queen."

"No. I shall receive no consorts now."

"But -"

Minna made an impatient gesture. "I have made the decision. Much of my future rests upon the success of the men who go to King Shandor's camp. If I require consorts, I shall inform you. Anything else?"

Chiana bowed. "Nothing of import, Majesty."

"Just palace politics, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"So, are all my advisors ranked against me in this?"

"No, indeed," Chiana replied. "Many side with you, but they grow fearful for their lives. Karshon of the bears was slain last night, and an attempt was made upon the life of Dermon of the wolves."

"Who replaces Karshon?"

"Emial."

The Queen rose and wandered over to the windows to stare out. "How did Karshon die?"

"Snakebite."

Minna swung around. "Mendal!"

"No, My Queen. He was not to blame, for the bite was inflicted by a brown rock adder, and Mendal's familiar is a tree adder, as you know. The guilty party, I believe, is Asmol, a junior advisor whose familiar is a brown rock adder. The killing was sloppy, ill planned."

"And ill advised." Minna frowned. "Does he think I allow my advisors to be slain without reprisal? What of the attempt on Dermon?"

"An assassin, so we know not who hired him. Dermon was lucky that he had four wolves with him at the time, and escaped with only a few wounds."

"The assassin escaped?"

“Yes, My Queen.”

Minna turned back to the window. “The assassin will try again. Failure is not acceptable to them. If the killing has been paid for, he will not stop until one of them is dead. Send Dermon to the armies. Tell him to find consorts for me, but let him take his time. Send Asmol to the armies as well, but let him be stripped of his post and made a common soldier. If he wishes the war to continue, let him fight in it. That will be his punishment.”

Chiana smiled. “That is a fitting punishment, My Queen.”

“Yes. Tell the others that any who are found guilty of plotting to murder my loyal advisors shall suffer an identical fate. From now on, all those who wish that the war continue will fight in it themselves.” The Queen faced Chiana again. “For too long, the highborn have profited from this constant slaughter and grown fat off the death of so many innocents. If they love this war so much, they should enjoy the privilege of partaking in it.”

“Your mother, praise her name, always let her advisors fight their battles amongst themselves,” Chiana pointed out.

“My mother,” Minna retorted, “was a snake.”

Chiana prostrated herself and left, still smiling.

That night, Shamsara dined with Minna-Satu, and she experienced the unique pleasure of sharing her table with all of his companions. The wolf remained under the table, awaiting the meat that Shamsara passed him, and the hawk perched on the back of an empty chair. Two mice shared his plate of vegetables and sweetmeats, for the Idol of the Beasts ate no flesh. A ferret helped himself to meat on the table, and a small tortoise shared the salad bowl with a tiny leaf-eating monkey. Minna listened as the old man detailed the events that had brought each of his special companions to him, while Shista watched disdainfully from her cushions.

The next day, Captain Redgard brought before Minna five volunteers, all seasoned warriors. Each had distinguished himself at the front, earning the right to become a member of the palace guard. Their leader was a man of foxes who displayed the sly intelligence of his kind in his alert glances and quick movements. Two claimed kin with bulls, great, muscled men who towered over their companions. One was a man of the deer, and possessed his kindred’s shy demeanour and swift gentle ways, while the last was of the ravens, with sharp black eyes and a vigilant nature. He had a familiar perched upon his shoulder, an airborne spy that would aid them greatly in their quest. Minna gave them her blessing and sent them on their way.

Even on horseback, the journey to the desert would take at least three tendays, and Minna settled down to the task of sorting out the wrangles amongst her advisors. Asmol was taken away in chains to serve his sentence at the front, and Dermon went with him, on the pretext of finding consorts for the Queen. After the example of Asmol, the intrigues became subtler, and assassination attempts were disguised as accidents. Ishtan of the wolves was run down by a cart and severely injured, and the horses were later found to have been burnt. Dalreesh of the eagles discovered a scorpion in his bed, and a tenday later was found dead in a palace corridor with a knife in his back.

Shamsara returned to his mountain cave, and Minna missed his lively conversations and the tales of his long and fascinating life. For a tenday after his departure, the palace was quiet, then a gang of street thugs attacked Symion in the city and almost killed him, but for Moret’s timely rescue. One of the thugs, wounded by Moret’s dogs, admitted the name of his employer under torture, and Yassin of the bats was sent to fight at the front. Minna employed seven new spies to find those disloyal to her, adding two more advisors to her army.

After two tendays of relative peace, a message arrived from the front, informing the Queen of the five soldiers’ failure. Minna dispatched another five men with a heavy heart, this time a wolf, a cat, a horse and two bears. A further four tendays elapsed, with only a botched assassination attempt on Mendal, which made the Queen laugh. The news that the second quintet had failed plunged her into a deep depression that not even her best jesters could alleviate, and she despatched a third group of six. The inclusion in this group of a man of snakes gave her fresh hope, but four tendays later the news was bad once more. Four more veterans volunteered, a deadly quartet of snake, scorpion, dog and shark, the first three with familiars.

Three tendays after they left, when Minna was growing impatient for news of them, Chiana gave her some other, startling news during their daily discussion of events.

“My Queen, a man arrived at the palace yesterday, requesting an audience.”

“Indeed? What sort of man? One of my lords?”

“No.” Chiana looked a little puzzled. “He would tell me nothing of himself, saying that he would speak only to you. He seemed proud, and would not bend his knee to me, your chief advisor.”

Minna smiled at Chiana’s indignant air. “How very uncivil of him; but do not let your little ego bloat too much, or I shall have to deflate it somewhat.”

“He would not even give his name,” Chiana hurried on, “and he was strange looking.”

“How so?”

She shrugged, pondering the question with a slight frown. “I could not describe it; just strange.”

“Well, did he have a big nose, or one eye? What?”

“No, nothing like that, in fact, I thought him handsome, but... he was not ordinary.”

The Queen cocked her head. “Then he must be extraordinary. My curiosity is aroused. Show me this stranger.”

“But, My Queen, is it safe? He seemed... dangerous, I thought.”

Minna-Satu glanced at Shista, stretched out asleep in a patch of sunlight. “Have him searched and stripped to the waist. Bring me any weapons you find.”

Chiana looked doubtful, but made her prostration and left. Minna picked at a bowl of plump, bite-sized dil fruit while she waited, and was growing impatient by the time the two guards who stood outside pushed open the doors. Chiana entered and abased herself before rising to approach the Queen. Minna studied the man who walked behind her, a glance telling her more than Chiana had. He was a man of cats, and moved with the lithe grace of his kind, but more, he was an assassin, his trade clearly evident from the black dagger tattoo at the base of his throat.

When Chiana stopped, the assassin dropped to one knee and bowed his head, a gesture of respect that was by no means a prostration. Minna cast another glance at Shista, who snored in the sun. She turned her attention to Chiana as the advisor held out two slender daggers.

“He carried only these.”

Minna looked at the man again. “Get up.”

The assassin stood and raised his head, his gaze meeting hers for a moment. The odd colour of his eyes struck her: a pale grey ringed with darkness, like a winter sky lighted by a silver sun in eclipse. Never had she encountered a gaze so frigid. Its brief touch made her shiver. A leather thong caught his long black hair at his nape, and a few strands straggled across one pale cheek. A red mark marred his lean jaw, and a speck of blood leaked from one side of his narrow nose. The grim set of his well-formed mouth spoilt its sensuality, and his fine brows were knotted. Taken as a whole, his face had a fineness of feature not usually associated with the burly, hirsute inclination of his sex. His torso also bore the marks of fresh abuse, and his hands were clenched.

Minna was struck by the strangeness Chiana had seen, but unable to pin it down. Beneath his handsome appearance dwelt something deeper and far more sinister, which puzzled her. His expression betrayed his anger, but his eyes contained a deeper rage, an inner turmoil that burnt from his gaze, even though it was directed at her feet. He also lacked something, she realised as she struggled to identify his peculiarity. Although he was definitely a man of cats, betrayed by his lean build and graceful gait, his feline traits were slight, hardly noticeable to one who was unobservant.

Breaking with tradition, the Queen rose and approached him, rewarded by his brief, startled glance. He stood a mere half a head taller than her, not a big man by any measure, and he did not seem to mind being taller than the Queen, something others dreaded. On closer scrutiny, she noticed an oddity that had not immediately struck her. His cheeks were as smooth as a young boy’s, yet he appeared to be several years older than her.

Minna-Satu cast Chiana a probing look. “Why does he bear the marks of ill treatment?”

“I was told that he resisted the search, My Queen.”

“And what had he to hide?”

Chiana shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Well, Chiana, you are most unobservant.” Minna’s tone held a hint of censure. “Even now, I see more in him than you could tell me. He is a man of cats, and, I would say, one driven by a great hatred. Moreover, he is an assassin.”

Chiana gasped, and her eyes flew to the man, who shot the Queen a startled look. “An assassin?”

“Yes, do you not see the tattoo at his throat?”

“Now I do, but before it was hidden.”

Minna appraised the man once more. He kept his eyes lowered, but a muscle in his jaw jumped, betraying his wish to speak. He awaited her permission, however, as he must.

She smiled. "I know one other thing, but that I will not tell you. All that remains a mystery is why he is here."

"If he is an assassin -"

"He would not have requested an audience, and besides, no one would wish me dead except the Cotti, and he is clearly Jashimari." Minna glanced at her slumbering familiar again. "His presence does not bother Shista, so he bears me no ill will. You may return his weapons and leave us. I have decided to grant him an audience."

Chiana opened her mouth, then shut it again and held out the daggers, which the assassin took with a nod. The chief advisor strode to the doors and yanked them open with unnecessary vigour. Under Minna's hard eyes, she closed them softly behind her. The Queen returned to her cushions and sat down with a sigh, gazing up at the slender man.

"What is your name?"

"I am called Blade... My Queen." His soft, husky voice was deep enough to be unmistakably male, but pitched pleasantly above the rich baritone of most men, which Minna often found irritating. He would make a pleasing conversationalist, if he had the intelligence to hold a good discussion. He spoke decisively, and lacked the mumbling subservience of most commoners in her presence.

Minna motioned to the floor. "Sit. Tell me what you will."

Blade settled on a cushion and tucked his daggers away. He licked his lips, and his mouth relaxed and frown faded. Without it, he looked much better, Minna thought. He glanced at her, then away again, and she got the impression that the speech he had readied for this occasion had deserted him. She plucked a fruit and popped it into her mouth, casting yet another irritated glance at Shista, who continued to snore, oblivious to the stranger.

The assassin said, "I have heard that you offer a mighty reward for the death of King Shandor."

Minna nodded. "To my soldiers. If I wished to hire an assassin, I would have done so."

"But an assassin is what you need."

Minna plucked another fruit. "Is that why you have come? To offer your services?"

"Yes."

"This is not a task for an assassin. I also require that his son be brought to me, alive."

"I can do that," Blade said.

"How did you hear of the reward?"

"In a brothel. Your soldiers visited it before they went to their deaths."

"And what were you doing there?"

He shrugged. "Drinking."

"Of course." Minna ate another fruit. "I have no need of your services. I have despatched another group of men, and expect to hear from them soon."

"They will fail."

She frowned, and the assassin looked away. "I dislike your tone, Blade. You are insolent."

"I am not accustomed to the company of queens, nor is my nature well suited to grovelling." He raised his eyes to meet hers, his gaze as bleak as a midwinter's day. "I did not resist the search. Your men took delight in hurting me. Had I chosen to resist, they would be dead now."

"You have a high opinion of your abilities."

"From experience."

Minna considered him, irked by her curiosity. She had never been so interested in a commoner before. This assassin, she sensed, harboured many dark secrets, and she longed to know them. At the same time, she was aware of his secretive nature, and the mystery that surrounded assassins and their strange, barbaric laws.

"Tell me about your life." The demand tripped off her tongue before she could bite it back.

"You mean how I came to be as I am?" His lips twisted. "I did not come here to entertain you with the tale of my misfortune. I have made my offer. What is your reply?"

Annoyed, Minna retorted, "I have no need of an assassin."

He rose to his feet, startling her. "Then I shall waste no more of your time." He swung away.

"Wait!"

Blade pivoted to face her, balanced like a dancer on the balls of his feet.

The Queen said, "I have given you no leave to go. Offer me any more insult, and I shall see you punished." She flung a cushion at the slumbering sand cat. "Shista!"

The cat snorted, opened a bleary eye, and yawned. Noting the Queen's ire, she rose and stretched, padding over to her friend. Minna glared at the assassin, knowing that Shista would sense her mood

and treat the subject of her anger accordingly. Perhaps the sand cat could intimidate him when the Queen could not. Shista wandered over to the assassin, sniffed him, and purred, rubbing her silken length against his legs. Blade, unperturbed, scratched the cat's ears, and she flopped down, her purr growing to a great rumble. He smiled and crouched to stroke the recumbent cat.

"Why would you have me stay, when we have no more to discuss?"

Minna stared at him, at a loss for words. The smile lighted his countenance, and she was unable to look away. As if aware of it, his smile faded, and he bowed his head.

The Queen gave herself a mental shake. "I will consider your offer, if you tell me why you want the task so much."

He scratched the sand cat's throat. "What difference does it make to you?"

"How can the reward tempt a man like you?"

"Does it surprise you that I want riches and land when I will never have sons to pass them on to?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps I tire of living in brothels and inns, killing men for a fee and earning nothing but scorn and hatred from all those I meet." He looked up. "I am still young enough to enjoy the reward myself, but, in truth, it does not interest me as much as the prospect of killing King Shandor. If ever there was a man who deserved to die, it is he, and perhaps, by killing him, I shall make my existence worthwhile."

"I see. I shall consider this. You will remain in the palace until I have decided."

His frown betrayed his dislike for her order, but he fell on one knee and bowed his head. "My Queen."

"You may go," she said, as he rose and swung away.

Blade stalked to the doors and let himself out. Moments later, Chiana returned, her eyes full of curiosity. Minna made her wait for several minutes before she spoke.

"He will stay in the palace for a while. See to it that he has whatever he needs."

"My Queen... he is an assassin."

Minna nodded. Assassins were held in the lowest regard, deemed no better than paid murderers. Most were men of the snake or scorpion, cold, unfeeling people without remorse or love. Blade, however, was of the cat, warm, generous individuals whose affections ran deep and strong, who treasured relationships and were prone to love deeply. Despite his lack of a familiar, Blade must share some of these traits, although his trade did not go against his kind, since cats were predatory.

"He is my assassin now. Ensure he is comfortable."

The chief advisor performed a prostration and retreated, her expression puzzled and doubtful.

Chiana found the assassin waiting in the corridor, the two guards who stood outside the Queen's doors watching him. He had donned the black leather tunic of which he had been stripped earlier, and was employed in lacing it up. She averted her eyes from his sculpted torso, visible through the jacket's open front, and led the way down the corridor.

Twice she glanced back to ensure he was following, for he walked as silently as his feline kindred. Arriving outside the door to a servant's room, she pushed it open and stood aside, allowing him to enter. He surveyed the chamber with obvious dislike, his lip curling as he turned to her. Chiana raised her chin and met his chilly gaze. As before, his grey eyes sent a jolt through her.

"If you wish for anything, there is a bell pull by the bed, which will summon a maid. Your meals will be brought to you here."

His lips twisted further. "Am I a prisoner then?"

"Certainly not. The Queen has ordered that you have every comfort; it is merely a matter of convenience. You present a slight problem of protocol, since you are not a servant, or a noble, and so may dine with neither."

"I did not ask to be kept here, Chief Advisor."

Her cheeks warmed, and she cursed her traitorous reactions. "You have not given me your name."

"You may call me Blade."

Unable to hold his gaze, Chiana lowered her eyes to the slender hands at his sides. Beautiful hands, unsuited to a man, especially a killer. She suppressed a shiver. "I must return to the Queen."

The assassin inclined his head, and she closed the door and headed down the corridor, recalling her first, unnerving encounter with him in the audience room.

Rarely did commoners request an audience with the Queen. Usually their grievances were aired through the lords who governed them, and nobles always applied for an audience in writing. Captain



Redgard had informed her of this unusual application, and she had entered the audience chamber to find Blade standing amid a quartet of guards. She would never forget the way he had turned slowly to face her, and the shock of meeting his icy gaze. Her heart had jumped at the sight of him, her breath catching. Even after he had left, his effect on her had lingered. When she had seen him again, battered by his encounter with the guards, she had experienced the same strange reaction in his presence.

Chiana returned to her duties, striving to push his image from her mind.

### Chapter Three

A tenday later, the message Minna-Satu awaited arrived from the front. The soldiers had failed yet again. Captain Redgard brought the news himself, delivering it with a tinge of reproof in his tone. Minna kicked a cushion across the room, causing Shista to raise her head and look around.

“Shall I select the next group of volunteers, My Queen?” the captain enquired without enthusiasm.

“No. I shall send no more soldiers to perform this task.”

Redgard slumped. “As you wish.”

“It is not a mission suited to soldiers, Redgard. Do you not agree?”

“As we have seen -”

“Yes, yes. It is a task better suited to an assassin, is it not?”

“Well...” The captain hesitated. “Perhaps, My Queen, but I doubt that an assassin would succeed either. The job is simply impossible.”

“No. Not impossible. There is little that is truly impossible.” Minna paced the floor. “For a man to flap his arms and fly is impossible. For a man to live beneath the sea is impossible. But to kill King Shandor... is possible, for an assassin.”

“Certainly they would be no great loss, and, being men of greed, they will flock to claim the reward...” He trailed off under Minna’s glare.

She gestured. “You may go.”

The captain prostrated himself and retreated. Minna went to the window to gaze out at the sun-drenched garden. Over the last tenday, she had glimpsed Blade twice in it, wandering amongst the flowers and shrubs, his black leather garb soaking up the light. His solitude told of sorrow and pain, and she sensed that death walked in his shadow, a hated ally at his side.

She turned as Chiana entered. “Send for the assassin.”

The chief advisor retreated almost as quickly as the captain had done. Minna stared out of the window while she waited, her eyes following the winding silken banners that flew above the temple. The dream silk snapped and slithered in the breeze, its soft hiss underscoring the birdsong. Minna had never liked the dream silk. The invasion of her dreams by its sliding coils of bright cloth sometimes woke her in shivering distress, but she could rarely remember the unpleasant dreams it evoked.

The church used the power of its silken dream disturbers to frighten the unfaithful into unwilling respectfulness, claiming the ability to madden those who did not worship Tinsaron. The long streamers of gushing, many-coloured silk rustled into peoples’ dreams even on the stillest nights, when the hanging coils could fill a man with dread and rouse him screaming from his rest. She wondered if Blade had ever experienced the chilling touch of silken dreams, and what kind of horrors the slithering silk had brought him.

Minna was so lost in her thoughts that she did not hear the doors open, or his soft tread. Shista’s deep purr alerted her to his presence, and she turned.

Blade fell to one knee and bowed his head. “My Queen.”

“Arise.”

The assassin stood up, his cold eyes meeting hers in a brief glance before he lowered them to the hem of her azure satin skirts. Shista rubbed against his leather-clad legs. His black garb hugged him, a high collar, strengthened with thin metal strips, covering his throat and the tattoo at the base of it. On another man, the outfit might have looked like the product of vanity, to show off a splendid physique, but she knew this was impossible in his case. The clothes were functional, designed to give an opponent no hold during a fight, when loose attire would prove a great liability.

The high collar shielded his throat from knives and garrottes, and the leather provided some protection for the rest of him, reinforced around his torso with a layer of fine chainmail. The tunic hung below his hips, slit at the sides and trimmed with silver thread. The colour allowed him to blend into the shadows, and gave him an air of subdued menace that his quiet, watchful manner heightened. Two daggers rode in his belt, and she glimpsed the gleam of a hilt up one of his sleeves. The weapons neither surprised nor alarmed her, for she sensed no animosity from him, only a cold disinterest that irritated her somewhat. Minna sank down on the cushions, and he sat in front of her.

“I have considered your offer, and have decided to accept it,” she said. “You will go to King Shandor’s camp and kill him; you will bring me his son.”

Blade inclined his head.

“Do you wish men to aid you?”

“No. I work alone. Two horses, supplies and a little money are all I require.”

“Tell me how you will do it.”

“No.”

She stared at him, shocked. A faint smile curled his lips, and hot words died on her tongue. “You are as insolent as ever, Blade. I shall have to teach you some manners when you return.”

“If it pleases you.”

“You do not need them though, do you? All you have to do is smile.”

He sighed and stroked the sand cat. “Sometimes.”

“When will you leave?”

“As soon as you allow me to.”

She frowned, piqued by his terse replies. “How can one man walk into a mighty army such as Shandor’s and live to tell the tale?”

His smile became wry, touched with bitterness. “I have been there before.”

“Of course.” She gazed at the garden. The sight of him brought the unfamiliar gush of interest that she strived to quell. “You have an excellent reason for wanting his death; no one can deny you that. This accursed war has caused too much suffering already, and I shall end it forever.”

“Not by holding the Prince to ransom. He has fifteen brothers.”

“I know. That is not my intention, but I want him unharmed. Do you understand?”

He nodded. “My trade does not make me a compulsive killer, only an efficient one. Do you wish the King to suffer?”

The Queen shivered at the impassive tone with which he made the offer. Death was a mere commodity to him, a service rendered to any who could afford it, without a trace of remorse on his part. “That is not necessary. Do you offer this to all your clients?”

“Yes. It can be fast or slow, their choice.”

“Do many choose a slow death for their enemies?”

He shrugged, expressionless. “Sometimes.”

“Do you enjoy killing?”

“No.”

“I am glad,” Minna said. “I would not wish to bestow the reward of lands and nobility upon a man who enjoyed killing, for nobles are able to abuse their position.”

“Rest assured, I am employed in this trade only to earn a living, and once I no longer need to, I shall retire.”

“Why did you choose this occupation?”

He clearly did not like to be questioned, but her rank drew answers from him that he would have denied a lesser person, terse though they were. “It was thrust upon me. It is the only trade I am good at.”

“And how many men have you killed?”

His glance rebuked her. “I do not keep count.”

To vindicate her rather morbid curiosity, Minna said, “I simply wish to assess how good you are. I would not want to send an overeager fool to his death.”

Blade’s smile returned, genuine amusement tinged with sadness. “I am no overeager fool. I do have a certain reputation that has not reached your ears, and I am the Master of the Dance. Ask about me, if you will.”

“I shall.” Minna rose to her feet, and the assassin stood up, looking uncertain when she approached him. She stopped in front of him, and, after a moment of confusion, he realised what he had to do and sank down on one knee, bowing his head.

She said, “I give you my blessing and wish you good luck, Blade.”

“Thank you.”

“You may go.”

“My Queen.” He rose and left.

Moments later, the doors were thrust open again to admit Chiana, who wore a scowl and patted her hair self-consciously as she rose from her prostration. Minna stared out of the windows until the chief advisor coughed to get her attention, whereupon the Queen shook herself from her reverie and turned.

“See to it that the assassin has all the supplies he needs for his journey. Provide whatever he requests, and give him two of the finest horses in the stables.”

Chiana withdrew, returning after a few minutes to report that it was done.

“Good.” Minna sat down. “Let us hope and pray that he succeeds. He is our last hope.”

“He is a very strange man,”

“I know.” The Queen cocked her head. “What do you see strange about him?”

Chiana shrugged. “Well, as a part of the comforts you ordered for him, I sent a woman to his room the first night.”

“You did?” Minna laughed, confusing her advisor. Sobering, she asked, “What happened?”

“He sent her away. Thinking he was tired, I sent her again the next night. He sent her away again, and this time with instructions not to return.” Minna chuckled, and Chiana looked perplexed. “You know the reason for this?”

“Yes, I do.” The Queen smiled. “Are you so unobservant, Chiana?”

“Evidently I am, My Queen, for I do not understand his behaviour, or the reason for your mirth.”

“He must have been most amused by your thoughtfulness, and perhaps flattered that you did not see what he is. Perhaps many do not recognise him, for he is not typical of his kind.”

“What kind is that?”

Minna sighed, her regret for Blade’s misfortune colouring her tone with sadness. “He is a eunuch.”

The chief advisor recoiled as if slapped, deep sorrow invading her expression. “Are you certain? How do you know?”

“He has no beard, and his voice is a little high, do you not agree?”

“Well, now that you mention it...” Chiana frowned. “But I thought -”

“That they are always fat and lazy? Usually they are, but Blade has a vigorous occupation, and one that interests him, I would venture to say.”

Chiana looked aggrieved. “Who would do such a thing, and how? He does not seem the kind of man easily overcome by his enemies.”

“Oh, no, this happened a long time ago, when he was little more than a child, I would hazard to guess. As for who would do it, I can only think of one people capable of such things.”

“The Cotti.”

“Indeed,” the Queen agreed, “and his current quest will go a long way to fulfilling his lust for vengeance.”

“What a waste, for such a handsome man to be...”

Minna chuckled. “So, you find him attractive.”

“Who would not, My Queen?”

“Indeed, you are quite right. Who would not? But alas, no woman will ever find comfort in his arms, or passion in his eyes, although it is not impossible that he should love. A woman willing to sacrifice the hope of children might find great happiness with him, if she was prepared to be his friend.”

“But would he wish it?”

Minna shrugged. “It all depends, I suppose, on whether his affections can be won. He may be too proud, too used to being alone, too bitter perhaps. But everyone grows lonely, and there can be none as alone as a man such as him; an outcast, a misfit through no fault of his own. It must be hard.”

Chiana nodded, and, after a short silence, they turned to the business of the day.

Blade crouched behind a ridge and pulled the spyglass from his belt, setting it to his eye. Through it, he scanned the massive camp below him. Thousands of men milled amid a sea of dull brown tents pitched in the desert, and the hot wind whipped away the smoke from their fires. It carried the scent of cooking meat and sweat, the tang of rusting armour and the stale stench of urine. The mountains at his back guarded the Jashimari lands beyond, craggy grey peaks that rose in a long line like a god-made wall dividing the warring kingdoms.

All the battles of the Endless War had been fought along this border, on one side or the other. Here, the bones of countless warriors enriched the soil, and the remnants of broken armour and weapons rusted in the sand. Once there had been many towns on the far side of the mountains, peaceful villages that farmers and shepherds tenanted. Most of these had been wiped out now, like the one in which he had been born. The change in terrain from one side of the mountains to the other was drastic. On this side, sand lapped at the foothills; on the other, grassland stretched away to distant forests.

The Cotti warriors loomed large in Blade’s spyglass, their shaven heads gleaming in the sun, their

skins a deep golden-brown. Most had shucked their boiled leather armour and wore only rich yellow tunics emblazoned with a silver sun, symbol of the Cotti kings. He wondered how tired they must be of fighting, and of eating the salted meat sent to them from the distant oasis where their city was built. He spotted a group of camp followers, harridans and toothless whores who earned their keep on their backs each night.

Their presence comforted him, and he moved the glass on, searching for the King's tent. Blade recoiled as a dead face filled the glass, pausing long enough to take in the details of the four corpses staked out in the sand, mutilated beyond belief, their eyes plucked out by crows. Snatching the glass from his eye, he turned and retched, emptying the meagre contents of his stomach. If he failed, his fate would be similar to theirs, perhaps worse.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he lay back on the hot rock and struggled for composure. His bold words to the Queen mocked him now that he faced the enemy, and the horror that could befall him. After a few minutes, he lifted the glass again, avoiding the grim sight as he continued his search. King Shandor's tent was little different from his warriors', but for the pennant that flew above it. It stood almost at the centre of the camp, so any who tried to reach it would be forced to walk a long way through the King's army. Lowering the glass, he noted its location, then gathered his possessions and moved back to the cave he had selected for his preparations.

There, he sat on the sandy floor and contemplated the task before him. This was no simple feat. One slip, one mistake, and he would die horribly. He had much in his favour, though, compared to the men who had gone before him. The Queen had sent strong warriors, doubtless wise and wily, but no amount of courage or cunning could save them within King Shandor's camp.

Blade pondered Queen Minna-Satu, enjoying the memory; a regal lady, certainly, and a perceptive one. He had spent many moons nursing tankards of ale in shoddy inns, finding the courage to go to her. When Lilu had told him of the reward her client had bragged of soon receiving, he had been only slightly interested. When she had revealed the intended victim, however, his blood had coursed faster. Lilu, like Chiana, was unobservant, and had never understood his lack of interest, seeking every opportunity to speak to him, hoping, he supposed, to lure him with her doubtful charms. After the first piece of information, he had encouraged her a little, and learnt of the failure of the others sent to kill the King. After the third failure, he had mustered his courage and gone to the palace.

Queen Minna-Satu's beauty had surprised him. Her people knew little about her. Few had ever seen her, and then only briefly at a distance. He wondered what she planned to do with the Prince. King Shandor's death would be a great blow to his people, but he had plenty of sons to replace him. Kidnapping the heir would only put a younger prince on the throne, a pointless exercise. Yet the Queen did not strike him as a fool.

Blade pulled one of his packs closer and undid the thong that bound it. After spreading a cloth on the floor, he emptied out the bag's contents. A pile of women's clothing tumbled out, worn and faded, followed by a slither of vivid blue silk and a knot of necklaces, earrings, bangles and rings. Last of all, a leather pouch. Blade contemplated the pile with bitter eyes.

The items were the sometimes tools of his trade, used for special assassinations, such as this one. With a sigh, he poured water onto a cloth and washed his face, then stripped to the waist and bathed his torso, wiping the sweat from his armpits. He opened a pot of oily dye he had purchased along the way and rubbed it onto his arms and face, covering his neck and some of his chest. The colour was right, a pale golden-brown. Selecting a bottle of cheap perfume, he anointed himself.

A small mirror afforded him a view of his face as he outlined his eyes with kohl and rubbed blue powder onto the lids. Berry juice reddened his lips, and he pinned a blond wig over his hair, then surveyed the results with some satisfaction. He removed his trousers and boots and wrapped a length of cloth around his hips before donning the ankle-length blue gown. Two water bags filled the bodice, granting him a generous bosom.

Aware that the tiniest detail could betray him, he checked his hands to ensure they bore no calluses. His fingers were as fine as a woman's, the nails clean and short, and the skin dye hid the faint scars of dagger practice in his youth. He strapped the leather dagger sheaths to his forearms and pulled the loose sleeves over them. The earrings had to be forced through the holes in his earlobes, long since closed from disuse. The baubles added the final touch, the necklaces hiding his tattoo, and he strapped on a pair of sandals, wondering if he looked a little too fine to pass as a camp whore. He rubbed some dirt into the faded overdress, just to be safe.

Picking up the mirror, he searched for imperfections that might give him away. The reflected face could easily have been that of a remarkably handsome woman. A little strong-featured perhaps, but his

cheeks were as smooth as any girl's, impossible for a normal man, no matter how well shaven. He used this disguise rarely, and hated it. The memories it evoked were painful and ugly. It enabled him to be the perfect assassin, however, with the appearance of a weak woman. Putting away the mirror, he brushed the wig and donned a gossamer veil over it, then checked himself one last time. Pulling up the hood of the pale fawn cloak, he left the cave and moved down towards the camp.

By the time he reached the outskirts, the sun sank in a medley of glorious colours, and the gathering gloom added to the perfection of his disguise. Emerging from the desert, he would appear to be a camp woman returning from the latrine pits. He passed two guards unnoticed, and slipped between the tents. Walking with a graceful, swaying gait, he strolled towards the King's distant abode. For some time he passed unchallenged, then a hag looked up from the pot she stirred and called out to him.

The Queen's warriors had doubtless donned excellent disguises to enter the enemy camp, and perhaps had succeeded in going unnoticed for a while, but the Cotti spoke with a strong accent, and their dialect contained a few alien words. The moment a Jashimari opened his mouth, he gave himself away, but Blade spoke the tongue perfectly, a legacy of four years spent amongst them.

"Hey! You new around here?" the old woman asked.

Blade strolled closer and modulated his voice to a female tone. "Yes. What of it?"

"Why would a pretty girl like you come to a damned camp?"

He shrugged, placing a hand on his hip. "The money's good."

She spat. "Money! Don't you know what these animals will do to you?"

"No worse than the animals in the city."

"You won't keep your teeth long."

He turned away with a toss of his head. "I can look after myself."

"You're a fool, girl! Catch the next supply wagon home, while you've still got your looks!"

Blade shot her a disdainful look and sauntered away, leaving the crone shaking her head. He walked more slowly now, the men becoming abundant as he drew closer to the camp's centre. Several whistled and leered, a few called obscene compliments and one offered him money. He brushed this aside, skipping away from the drunken soldier's grasping hands. Others laughed at the man's failure, and a minor brawl started in Blade's wake.

Further on, two soldiers blocked his path and insisted upon his going with them to their tent. Blade tried to evade them, stated his unwillingness and scorned their money, but the soldiers would not be refused. He had no choice but to allow them to lead him to their tent, one man gripping his arm. He affected a woman's weakness in his struggles, and the men laughed at his frailty while admiring his size. They pushed him into the tent, and one soldier started to undo his breeches.

Blade released the catch of a dagger and allowed the weapon to slide into his hand. Hiding it in his skirts, he moved towards the nearer man, smiling. The soldier stared at him and licked his lips, shivering as Blade slid his hands up the man's flanks. Finding the exact spot between the fourth and fifth ribs under the armpit, Blade slid the dagger into the soldier's heart. A little blood oozed from the wound as the man gasped and slumped, his mouth open in a soundless cry.

Blade lowered him to the floor, pretending that his grasping hands and trembling lips were the result of passion. The other protested, still struggling with his breeches, and Blade turned to him. Once again the luckless soldier welcomed his deadly embrace, and two hand-spans of cold steel ended his life. Blade wiped the blood off his hand and the dagger with the edge of the second man's tunic and sheathed the weapon. He checked himself, then pushed open the flap and strolled outside.

Moving on through the camp, he took a direct route towards the King's tent, not bothering to disguise his destination. He refused two more offers of employment and paused to buy a sweetmeat at an old woman's barrow. A bonfire blazed outside the King's tent, lighting the area around it, and a sheep's carcass was spitted over a smaller fire. Two cooks tended this, and several bubbling pots. Beyond the fire, a burly, hirsute blond man sat on a gilded chair, armed with a tankard of ale. His garb of furs and silk betrayed his rank, confirmed by the gold band that encircled his brow. A slender man, slightly younger than Blade, sat beside the King, staring into the flames and ignoring his father's loud banter. Several high-ranking officers stood around them, laughing at the King's jokes and offering their own.

Blade watched them, listened to their talk and hated them with a deep-seated loathing that had burnt within him for years, and now found fresh fuel to fan it to new heights. King Shandor, from his size and hairiness, loud talk and raucous laughter, was a man of the bear, Blade deduced. Perhaps next to snakes, he disliked bears the most; braggarts, liars and bullies all; the women coarse and cruel. King

Shandor, however, did not appear to have his familiar with him, for bears were not desert creatures. If he had one at all, it must be kept at the palace.

Blade thought it more likely that the Cotti King was one of the Shunned, and lacked a familiar altogether. He studied the Prince, with his silver circlet, and came to a different conclusion with him. Prince Kerrion's quiet watchfulness and air of disdain marked him as a man of birds, most likely eagles. Blade had always rather liked eagles, next to cats, of course. They were usually honourable and just, hardworking and a little idealistic.

There was no sign of the Prince's familiar either, but Blade studied the ones belonging to the officers. Three maned male sand cats, smaller than the Queen's Shista, lay together to one side, asleep. Four big, vicious-looking war dogs begged at the feet of their men, and two officers carried snakes about their shoulders.

Several whores mingled with the officers, having their bottoms pinched and breasts squeezed, and he had no wish to join them. Yet in order to succeed, he must catch the King's eye. He pushed back the cloak's hood and opened the front of it, revealing the bright blue silk gown beneath, and his almost-white wig. All Cotti were blond, and the paler her hair, the more prized a woman was. The wig itched abominably, making his scalp sweat under its clammy confines, and he resisted the urge to scratch, hoping lice had not invaded it.

As yet, the night was young, and the King had not even eaten, so Blade waited on the far side of the fire. Sooner or later the King would notice him, and, given a choice between a beautiful woman and the rather slatternly harlots who vied for his attention, Blade was confident of his selection. A sober soldier approached the assassin, who smiled at him. The man fell under his spell and stayed at his side, talking to him in a friendly manner, most of his conversation complimentary. Blade encouraged him a little, for the man was a junior officer, and protected him from other advances.

The King noticed Blade halfway through his dinner and gawped at him. At first the assassin looked away, sending Shandor several shy, seductive smiles. By the end of the meal, Blade knew he had succeeded. The monarch leered and winked at him in a repulsive manner, dribbling grease onto his beard as he tore at the meat. The Prince noticed the exchange and looked disgusted. The young officer beside Blade observed it as well, and wandered away with a sad grimace. The assassin's heart beat faster as the King beckoned to him. Now the dangerous part of his subterfuge began. He swayed over to the monarch and sank to his knees, bowing his head. King Shandor placed a greasy hand under his chin and raised his face to study him.

"My, but you are a comely one, are you not?"

Blade smiled, keeping his eyes lowered. "Thank you, Sire."

"New in the camp?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Hmm, I thought I had not seen you before. I would have remembered you if I had. Why, you are almost lovely enough to grace my court. What is your name?"

"Jishi, Sire."

Shandor grinned at his son. "What do you think? A nice big girl, is she not?"

Prince Kerrion cast Blade a scornful look. "I do not lie with whores, Father."

"Picky, picky. She would make you a fine wife and bear strong sons. Not often you see such a strong female, most are such tiny things. Why, I have almost squashed a few to death in my time."

The King guffawed, and his officers joined in, but Kerrion snorted and looked away. Shandor released Blade's chin and wiped his eyes, giggling. He reeked of beer and sweat, and his nails were black with grime.

"I will wager she is almost as tall as you, Kerry." He chortled, stroking Blade's wig. Prince Kerrion ignored the jibe, and the King thrust a piece of chewed meat into Blade's hands.

"Here, have something to eat. You will need your strength for later."

Blade took the meat with a smile and bit into it, wary of the grease that might remove the dye from his chin if he wiped it, as well as the berry juice on his lips. The King drained his ale, patting the assassin's head. Blade was forced to sit at Shandor's feet and chew the cold meat, enduring the monarch's lecherous pawing. To speed things up, he cast many seductive looks at Shandor, until the King could bear it no longer and stood up, stretched, and belched.

When King Shandor pulled Blade to his feet, the assassin bent his knees a little, lest he appear too tall. Shandor placed an arm about Blade's waist and leered at his officers, who laughed and called encouragement. The assassin allowed the King to lead him to the tent, and only once had to avoid the big man's hands when he reached for his wrist where a dagger was strapped.

Inside the tent, the King fumbled with his tunic and nodded at the cot. "Get on the bed and take off your clothes." He giggled. "Or take them off first, whichever you prefer, my sweet."

Blade smiled. "Sire, there is no hurry. Let me help you."

Shandor tottered as he struggled with his tunic's thongs. "An excellent idea; you help me, and I shall help you."

Blade released the dagger in his right wrist sheath, and the cold hilt slid into his hand. The deed had to be done swiftly and without sound, but he was determined to deliver a message with the killing stroke. He undid the King's tunic and slipped his hands under it as Shandor groped for his water-bag bosom. With the dagger poised between the fourth and fifth ribs under the King's armpit, Blade leant close and whispered in his ear.

"This is a gift from Queen Minna-Satu."

Shandor tensed, his eyes widening. As he opened his mouth to bellow, Blade rammed the dagger in, and the shout of outrage and alarm died to a whimper in the King's throat. For a few seconds Shandor stood swaying, staring at Blade with bulging eyes, his lips trembling as he fought to draw breath. His heart had stopped the moment it had been pierced, however.

The assassin's smile faded as Shandor's knees buckled and his eyes glazed, his limbs twitching in the grotesque manner of dying men. Blade lowered the corpse onto the bed, lifted its legs onto it and arranged it so anyone who looked in would think the King asleep. Blade needed to buy time, for the Prince still sat by the fire. Once he arranged the body and pulled the sheet up to its chin, he settled on the bed to wait. If anyone looked in, the scene was a cosy one, and completely innocent.

The waiting ate at his nerves, and Blade disliked lying beside the cooling corpse. He would have preferred to leave through the back of the tent, but this was the safest place to hide until the Prince retired. He listened to the men talking around the fire, willing them to go to bed. When the conversation ebbed, he crept to the tent flap to peer out.

Most of the officers had left, but the Prince still stared into the flames. Blade cursed and returned to the cot, settling down to wait once more. The wig itched terribly, and he allowed himself the luxury of scratching it, but that only made it worse. As the time dragged on, he checked his attire again and ensured no blood soiled his hands. If there was one thing that he had learnt from his life as an assassin, it was to master the art of limitless patience.



## Chapter Four

By the time the Prince retired, the King's body was cold. Blade scanned the area within the dying fire's light. Two soldiers sat back to back, apparently asleep, and a guard leant on his spear, yawning. Blade pulled up the cloak's hood and crept out while the sentry's back was turned, crossed the sand to the Prince's tent and pushed aside the flap. Kerrion looked up from unlacing his tunic and frowned.

"What, has my father failed to satisfy you, whore?"

Blade smiled, strolling closer with a seductive gait. "The King snores. May I not stay with you?"

"No. Get out." Kerrion turned away.

The assassin was a mere two paces from his quarry, and inched closer so he would barely notice the gap between them diminishing. Blade lifted slender, be-ringed hands in a graceful female gesture.

"May I help you to disrobe, mighty prince?"

Kerrion swung towards him, and Blade released a dagger into his hand and slid it under the thongs that laced Kerrion's tunic, parting them. The blade's tip came to rest against the Prince's throat.

Blade murmured, "One sound, and you die."

Kerrion froze as the weapon drew a drop of blood, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Blade scanned the tent. A big golden bird slept on a perch in the corner; a desert eagle, female, judging by the black stripes on her tail feathers. "If your familiar attacks, you will both die."

"She is asleep," Kerrion croaked.

"Be silent! You live or die at my whim, remember that."

Blade searched the Prince for weapons and, finding none, allowed himself a grim smile. "Put your right arm around my shoulders."

The Prince obeyed, moving stiffly as the dagger pricked him.

"That's it," Blade said. "If you make a sound, or disobey me, you will die instantly. Understand?"

Kerrion nodded.

Blade slid his left arm around the Kerrion's waist and transferred the dagger to it in a brief embrace that brought his face inches from his prisoner's. Once again, he found the place between the fourth and fifth ribs under the Prince's armpit and pressed the dagger's point to it until he flinched.

Blade murmured, "If I push this blade in, you will die so quickly you will have no time to shout or struggle. You will drop dead in your tracks, and no one will save you. I am an assassin, and skilled at my trade. Obey me, and you will live. Try to escape or call your men, and you will die. Is that clear?"

Kerrion nodded again, frowning. "You will not get away with this." His shock was wearing off, which was bad, and Blade hoped he did not find his courage too soon.

"Be silent!" Blade jabbed the dagger deeper, making the Prince wince again. "You speak when I tell you to, not before. Now, we are going to walk out of this camp, and it is up to you to make sure we are not stopped. Your life is in your hands. If a guard becomes suspicious, you will die before I do. So the choice is yours. My Queen wants you alive, but if she cannot have you, you must die."

Kerrion nodded once more, impotent anger in his eyes. The assassin turned his captive towards the tent flap, using the dagger as a goad. Its painful jabs forced the Prince to walk with him, clasped together like lovers strolling in the moonlight. To add to the illusion, the assassin kept the pace unhurried as they wandered through the sleeping camp. By the time they reached the outskirts, Blade's wrist was stiff from holding the dagger poised, and the Prince sagged from the pain.

Here sentries patrolled, scanning the desert for any sign of the enemy. One stepped out from behind a tent ahead, and Blade leant closer to Kerrion to whisper, "Your life is in your hands."

The soldier started in surprise at the sight of the Prince strolling in a whore's arms, and peered at them as if to make sure his eyes did not deceive him. "Your Highness?"

"Yes?" Kerrion raised his chin and glared at the man.

The soldier saluted. "Is everything all right, My Lord?"

"Quite all right, soldier."

They walked past, but the sentry followed. "You should stay in the camp, Highness, it's not safe -"

"I shall do as I please," Kerrion asserted.

"But My Prince..."

Blade stopped the Prince and smiled at the soldier. "Would you spoil our fun, sir?"

The sentry shot him a confused glance, then addressed the Prince. "You must take a guard, My Lord."

Blade laid a hand on Kerrion's chest, making him shudder. "I have persuaded His Highness to experience the joys of making love in the sand, under the silvery moon. We would enjoy it more, I think, without any prying eyes."

The soldier scowled, his concern for his Prince clearly warring with the seductive innocence of Blade's smile. "The safety of the Prince is more important -"

"Soldier," Kerrion interrupted, "I wish to be left alone. The desert is empty for miles, and I shall be no more than a few hundred paces away. You are not to follow us. Understand?"

The sentry saluted and stepped back. Blade silently congratulated Prince Kerrion, and twisted the dagger a little to remind him of who was in charge. The Prince nodded to the guard, and they sauntered on, leaving the man gazing after them.

Blade walked parallel to the mountains, leading the Prince into the gentle swells of the dunes, a moon-silvered sea of sharp-edged, undulating shadows. The sentry stood at the edge of the camp and watched them with a deep frown of uncertainty and concern. Blade wondered if he would have the initiative to call an officer, and glanced back several times to ensure the soldier was not following, but he stayed where he was, gazing after them. When a dune hid them from the watchful sentry, Blade turned towards the mountains.

"You will not get away with this," the Prince snarled.

"Be quiet."

"The men know I do not lie with whores."

Blade jabbed the dagger a little deeper into the wound, making Kerrion grunt.

The Prince said, "Within a time-glass, they will come to search for me."

"They will not find you." Blade stopped and released his captive, turning to face him. He pulled two leather thongs from his bodice and used one to tie Kerrion's hands behind his back, the other as a leash around the Prince's neck. Tugging him forward, Blade set off at a trot, holding the skirt up to free his legs. Kerrion cursed vilely as he was towed along, the thong digging into his neck. The deep sand dragged at Blade's feet, invaded the flimsy sandals and made the straps cut into his ankles. The Prince stumbled after him, his bound arms and the leash's constant tugging throwing him off balance.

Much as he enjoyed Kerrion's discomfort, Blade was glad to reach the stony ground at the foothills of the looming grey Endine Mountains. After a pause to find his bearings, he led the Prince up the sloping rocks to the cave. Inside, he pushed Kerrion ahead, sending him reeling into the darkness, where he flopped down. The Prince was right that Cotti soldiers would soon give chase, and, since there was no way to hide their tracks, Blade knew he must take the Prince over the mountains with all haste. The Cotti would lose the trail in the stony foothills, so it was unlikely they would find the cave unless they had dogs. Nevertheless, the assassin wanted to be far away before they reached the mountains. Blade groped for the packs and struck flint to light a torch, then removed the sandals and stripped off the woman's clothes and baubles. His disguise, which had taken time-glasses to don, was almost gone in a few moments.

Kerrion stared at him with incredulous eyes. "You are a man!"

"Surely you jest?" Blade asked. "Did you really still think me a woman?"

"You certainly...." The Prince shook his head. "My father will hunt you down, no matter where you go."

"Your father is dead."

Kerrion gaped at him. "You killed him."

"With a great deal of pleasure. As for being hunted down, will your men find you in the Queen's palace, do you think?"

"My brother will send men to rescue me."

"Your brother will be happy to let you rot in the Queen's prison. Now be quiet."

Blade dressed in his own clothes and stuffed the whore's disguise into a pack, which he tied on the Prince's back, ignoring his obvious fury at the ignominy. Shouldering the other pack, Blade picked up the leash and towed his captive from the cave, laden like a packhorse with the bulk of the baggage. Dismissing the guarded pass to the west as too dangerous, Blade set off along a narrow goat trail that led over the mountains to the east, a route he had known about since childhood.

As the first hint of dawn coloured the sky with pale pink and yellow, Blade led his prize down into the foothills on the far side of the mountains. In the distance, Queen Minna-Satu's army slumbered against the backdrop of the grasslands, a sprawling cluster of dull green tents flying the blue and gold banners of the Jashimari. One carried the Queen's crest, a rampant golden cat on a blue field; the others bore the insignias of the various lords whose troops fought for her.

Herds of sheep, goats, cattle and horses grazed around the camp, dozing in the dawn glow. Blade wondered why the soldiers still used tents after so many centuries of war, but the ruins that dotted the fields gave him his answer. Every so often, the Cotti broke through the fortified pass and came boiling onto these lush meadows, at which time, all structures were demolished and burnt. Some permanent buildings were in evidence, but little more than sheds. One sprouted the long poles that held dream silk in the wind, and Blade scowled at it. He hated the hissing silk more than most, and it seemed to be everywhere. The clergy took their power even to the Queen's army.

Blade led Kerrion to the clump of stunted bloodwood trees where he had hidden the horses. His haste did not diminish, even now, and he tied the packs to the animals and boosted the Prince into the saddle of one before mounting the other. Turning away from the mountains, he urged his horse into a canter, leading the Prince's mount.

Within a few time-glasses, he was certain, the Cotti would mount a fierce attack on the pass, and he wanted to be far away by then. To his credit, the Prince was stoical about the stiff pace Blade set all day, for, although he slowed the horses to a walk several times, he kept on until sunset. The beasts were war steeds, tall and strong, bred for their stamina and spirit. He had been surprised to be given such highly trained animals, having expected dull-eyed work horses. Their ease of handling pleased him. The assassin was no horseman, and had little liking for the animals.

By the time Blade stopped, Kerrion was pale and drawn, the pain of his wound and bonds clearly debilitating him. Blade tethered the horses in a wood beside a stream, letting them cool before he watered them. He pulled the Prince down and dumped him on the ground, then went to the stream to wash off the dye and paint. Kerrion eyed him when he returned, patently startled by the transformation. Blade took a length of chain from a pack and tied it around the Prince's waist, leaving the ends free. He unbound Kerrion's hands and started to fasten the chains to his wrists.

The Prince's lunge surprised the assassin and sent him sprawling onto his back. Kerrion straddled him, forced him back when he struggled to rise and blocked the blows Blade aimed at his head. Before the assassin could change tactics, the Prince seized Blade's wrists and flung his weight against them, pinning them to the ground. Blade's whipcord strength was no match for the Prince's husky build and weight, since he was half a head taller and proportionally larger. Blade relaxed and scowled up at his former captive.

"Well, that was easy," Kerrion sneered. "Not much of a fighter, are you?"

"I am not a brutish warrior, no."

"You are not even a real man! No man has cheeks as smooth as a girl's. You were better suited to your previous costume."

Blade reined his temper. "You obviously have not noticed that you have created a situation from which you now have no way out, a particularly foolish move, I would say."

The Prince's expression became pensive. As long as he held the assassin's wrists, Blade was helpless, but Kerrion could do nothing further without releasing him. For a brief period of stalemate they glared at each other, then Kerrion did the only thing he could, and released one of Blade's wrists to punch him. Blade's vision darkened, and he went limp, closing his eyes. The Prince released his other wrist, and Blade sensed him straighten.

The assassin sat up and whipped his arms up, the edges of his stiff hands striking the Prince on either side of his neck. Kerrion's eyes rolled up as he keeled over. Blade pushed him away and raked leaves from his hair. He fettered Kerrion's wrists and allowed himself the satisfaction of kicking the Prince in the gut, then set about lighting a fire and setting up camp.

By the time Kerrion woke, Blade had watered the horses and unsaddled them, boiled water for tea and set a pot of stew on the fire to cook. The Prince groaned and clutched his gut, then tried to rub his neck. Finding his hands bound, he sat up and scowled at his captor.

Blade eyed him across the fire. "Try anything like that again, and you will have more than a sore gut and neck to worry about. The Queen wants you alive, but she did not specify in what condition."

Kerrion coughed and bent to rub his throat. "Could I have some water?"

"Certainly." Blade tossed him a water skin.

"You fight unfairly."

"Life is unfair, and that is the school that taught me. I do what is necessary to survive."

"What does your queen want with me?"

"She does not confide in me. I am not her advisor."

Kerrion looked bitter. "I expect she wants to execute me publicly, thereby raising the morale of her soldiers and people, strengthening them in the war. The death of my father will also aid her cause, for

it puts my younger brother, who is inexperienced in the art of war, on the throne.”

“If she executes you, it will not be for that reason. The Queen wishes to end the war.”

Kerrion snorted. “She will never win it.”

“She does not want to win; only to find peace.”

“By killing my father and kidnapping me? That will make my people hate her even more.”

Blade shrugged, disinterested. “I do not know her plans, but she is no fool.”

“She is a woman.”

“She is the Jashimari Queen, and if you show her any disrespect, I shall make you suffer for it.”

“I will never crawl on my belly and lick her feet like you do, half man.”

“I will see to it that you do.”

They scowled at each other, then Blade returned to stirring the stew.

Kerrion’s eyes drifted to the pot, and he swallowed. Blade dished up two bowls and handed one to the Prince, who ate awkwardly with his chained hands. After the meal, the assassin relaxed against an ironbark tree and sipped his tea, studying his captive. Kerrion’s only resemblances to his father were his bronze skin and blond hair. Shandor’s eyes had been murky brown, his skin coarse and brows thick and wiry. Kerrion’s fine dark brows knotted above clear eyes of a peculiar tawny gold, the colour of the desert sand. Although his features were strong, he lacked his father’s brutish looks, and owned a countenance considerably handsomer than the average man.

Kerrion fidgeted, rubbing his wrists where the chains chafed them. He drank more water and asked, “Did my father suffer?”

“No. Unfortunately, I was not asked to make his death a slow one. I would have enjoyed it more if he had.”

“Those bungling fools your queen sent before you died slowly. They squealed like stuck pigs and bled in fountains. I have never seen so much blood, or men take so long to die.”

“Be quiet.”

“I know my father died courageously.”

“He did not have time to be afraid. Doubtless, had I taken the time to torture him, he would have squealed as loudly as the finest pig.”

“He would have killed you with one blow,” Kerrion retorted.

“I killed him with far less effort.”

“You tricked him, dressing up as a damned whore! I expect you have been one often enough, to be so convincing.”

“Be quiet.”

“Did you lie with him before you killed him, half man?”

“Did your father enjoy bugging men?”

The Prince jerked at the chains. “Release me, and I will push those words down your throat until you choke on them.”

Blade drew a dagger and lunged across the fire, gripped one of Kerrion’s ears and held the weapon to it. “Keep goading me, and I will cut pieces off you until you stop.”

The Prince met his gaze, and Blade sat back and studied his captive again. The aquiline cast to his features gave him a fierce look, yet the uncertainty of inexperience tempered it. Although Kerrion was only a few years younger, Blade pondered the vast difference between them. The Cotti Prince had been raised on milk and honey and given all that he desired. He had undoubtedly never known pain or grief, hunger or thirst. His outlook was naive and his nature untested.

This experience would probably shape the Prince’s character more than any of the soft years he had lived until now. Blade compared this with his own life and shuddered. He did not like to dwell on his past. There was nothing good in it at all. He had lived a harsh existence from an early age, suffered all of life’s trials and been strengthened by them. If Kerrion was clay waiting to be moulded, Blade was the tempered steel of the name he had earned.

Blade closed his eyes, the weariness of two days and a night without sleep, combined with the nervous tension he had been under during that time, taking its toll. Aware that his prisoner was unsecured, he forced himself awake and tied the Prince’s leash to a tree, then spread a blanket on a pile of leaves and stretched out on it.

## Chapter Five

Blade jerked awake, the events of the previous day returning with a rush of anxiety. A glance at the Prince assured him that his captive was still bound and asleep in a huddle at the base of the tree. The assassin washed in the stream, then kicked the Prince awake, saddled the horses and packed up the camp. Kerrion's bloodshot eyes betrayed his sleepless night, and his chafed wrists testified to his struggles. Blade allowed him a drink of water and a call of nature, then thrust him towards his horse, making him stumble on stiff legs. Before Kerrion mounted, Blade produced a sack to put over the Prince's head, and he jerked away.

"Is there no end to your sadistic inclinations? Did your queen order you to humiliate me as much and as often as possible?"

Blade shook his head. "You are a Cotti. If people see you, I doubt that I will be able to keep them from lynching you, or worse. You will wear the hood if you want to live, and keep your mouth shut."

The assassin chuckled as he boosted his prisoner onto his horse, and Kerrion snarled a few choice insults in reply. The day passed peacefully with the Prince silenced, and Blade set a steady pace that ate up the miles.

That night, he again selected a grove in which to make camp, pulled the Prince from his horse and yanked the hood off with unnecessary force. Kerrion emerged angry and dishevelled, glancing around before unleashing his pent-up vitriol.

"If I am returned to my people, assassin, I shall see to it that you are hunted down and executed in the worst possible way."

"I sincerely doubt that," Blade muttered.

"I have plenty of spies amongst your people, men loyal to my crown, who would gladly avenge my ill treatment at your hands."

"I meant that I doubt you will ever be returned to your people."

Kerrion watched the assassin set up camp. "The Cotti will not want my younger brother on the throne, and, even if he does not wish it, those loyal to me will do everything in their power to see that I am released."

Blade broke a handful of twigs onto the tiny flames, then studied the Prince, his mouth set in a grim line. "You think my treatment of you is bad, yet you have no idea of your men's cruelty."

"If your queen fell into my soldiers' hands, I am sure she would be treated with every courtesy."

"And I am sure she would not."

"What would you know of my men, anyway? At least I do not neuter them."

Blade let the twigs fall into the fire and stood up. Drawing a dagger, he dragged the Prince to his feet and pushed his face close to the royal visage. Kerrion met his gaze unflinching, although his tension revealed his inner qualms at the intense hatred the assassin knew blazed in his eyes. Blade pressed the weapon to the Prince's throat, drawing a drop of blood.

"If you do not learn to hold your flapping tongue, I will cut it out."

They glowered at each other, then Blade gave the Prince a push that sent him sprawling and turned away to continue making camp.

Queen Minna-Satu looked up from a report when Chiana entered. The chief advisor rose from her prostration and said, "The man I sent to find out about the assassin has returned, My Queen."

Minna put aside the paper. "Bring him in."

Chiana opened the doors to admit Mendal, who stalked closer before prostrating himself. When the Queen allowed him to rise, he shot Chiana a hard look.

"I must protest, My Queen, at my treatment. I am no spy to be sent amongst the scum of your city in search of rumours concerning the unsavoury characters who dwell there."

Minna-Satu smiled, delighted to find her old enemy so misused. Mendal had always annoyed her with his snide remarks and overt contempt for almost everybody. "And yet, if no use is to be found for you, Mendal, what will become of you? I find you eminently qualified for the task, since you frequent those establishments."

"I protest! You have been told lies, My Queen. I do not mingle with the trash who dwell in the gutter."

“Come now, not everyone who knows you lies about you, do they? And you surely did not have to stoop quite so low?”

“Almost! And this flagrant insult to my character is intolerable. I would know who has slandered me so vilely behind my back.”

“Very well, I shall have my chief advisor make up a list for your perusal.”

Chiana giggled behind her hand, and Mendal looked at her suspiciously.

Minna controlled her expression and folded her hands. “Give your report.”

“A list?” Mendal frowned, realising that his protests were no longer finding a friendly ear, and, in truth, never had. Under the Queen’s glacial eyes, he groped amongst his snakeskin robes and pulled out a crumpled paper, tucking the green adder away when it emerged, hissing angrily at the intrusion. He cleared his throat and smoothed the paper.

“The assassin known as Blade also goes by Conash of the Cats. He was born in the frontier town of Goat’s Rest, and began his life as a goatherd.” Mendal smirked. “His family was wiped out in the Rout of Ashtolon, and he vanished for five years. He has a maternal aunt who lives in Jonaway, and several cousins there.” The advisor coughed, glancing at the Queen. Normally she would not have listened to such detail, but she was rapt.

Mendal continued, “He became an assassin at the age of eighteen, unusually young, so I am told. He earned the title of Master of the Dance only a year later, and has held it ever since. He is also known as the Silent Slayer and the Invisible Assassin. The tally of his trade varies greatly, some say two hundred men, others tell me more than four hundred. Apparently he is credited with the assassination of Lord Rothwayer, paid for by his rival Lord Mordon, but no one knows for certain, other than that Lord Rothwayer was killed in the distinctive fashion of the Invisible Assassin.”

“What fashion is that?” Minna asked.

Mendal raised his left arm and gestured to his flank. “A dagger in the heart, under the arm.”

“Is he a good assassin, then?”

“Good?” Mendal sniggered. “Few can claim more than a hundred kills, My Queen, and even fewer live to see thirty. The Invisible Assassin is said to be nine and twenty years of age.”

“I see. What else?”

Mendal waved the paper. “Details; nothing more.”

“Tell me.”

“Uh... he came from a large family, two brothers and three sisters, all dead now. His father’s name was Jarren, his mother Misha, and his aunt is called Perin. His village was utterly wiped out in the raid that killed them... um...” Mendal peered at his untidy scrawl.

“Why is he called the Invisible Assassin?”

He looked up. “Well, because no one ever sees him, My Queen.”

“But all assassins sneak about. It is how they do their job.”

“But in his case, it is more than that.” Mendal gestured with the paper. “Take the case of Lord Rothwayer, who was killed in his bedroom with a guard at every door and window. The lord, as usual, came home with a whore, and the girl left a time-glass or so later. No one entered the room after that, all the guards swore to it, yet Lord Rothwayer was found dead in his bed the next morning.”

“Very strange. Anything else?”

Mendal looked surprised. “Just gossip.”

“Indulge me. I am bored this morning.”

“Well, there is a story of one escapade in which he was hired by one large and powerful merchant family to kill the patriarch of another. He performed the task, but the seven brothers of the man he killed, knowing who their enemies were, took vengeance on the family that had hired him. They lay in wait for the assassin, and, when he came to collect his payment, they beat him to within an inch of his life. In truth, he should have died; they left him for dead on the street. Instead, he vanished, and reappeared several moons later, healthy again.”

“And no one knows who saved him, or why?”

“No, My Queen.”

“What of his character? What sort of man is he?”

Mendal chuckled. “Why, he is a killer; cold-blooded, unfeeling and merciless.”

“This is your opinion?”

“Of course, it stands to reason. Anyway, no one knows him well enough to speak of his personality, but his deeds say it for him, do they not?”

“Yet he must have at least one friend, who saved him from death and nursed him back to health.”

Mendal inclined his head. "It would seem so, My Queen. Then again, perhaps whoever did it was seeking a reward, for assassins are often quite rich."

"Perhaps. You have done well, Mendal. I am pleased. You may go."

The advisor prostrated himself and left; Chiana awaited orders. The Queen rose and went to stare out of the window at the sunny garden.

"It seems I have indeed chosen the right man for this task."

"Yes, My Queen."

"Almost a moon phase has passed, and we have heard nothing. Why does he not send a message?"

"Perhaps he cannot."

"Yes, I suppose so. If he fails, I shall...." Minna sighed. "So much depends on his success. All my plans."

"I am sure he will succeed, My Queen. If his reputation is as fearsome as Mendal describes, he must."

"Yes, yes, I agree, provided the tales Mendal passed on to me were not exaggerations."

"Even if they are, they must be based on some amazing facts."

Kerrion watched the assassin cut dried meat into a pot to prepare a stew. The last three days had passed relatively peacefully, since he had stopped goading the grey-eyed man, and, although his situation was still intolerable, it had improved slightly since then. The assassin had barely spoken two words, going about his business as if the Prince did not exist.

"Have you a name?" Kerrion asked, tired of the silence.

"Everyone has."

"What is it?"

The assassin glanced at him. "Blade."

"Suitable for a man so fond of his dagger."

"I thought so."

Kerrion pondered. "Have you ever met your queen?"

"Yes."

"What is she like?"

Blade looked impatient, slicing the meat with flashing strokes of the razor-sharp weapon. "She is a queen. I do not know her that well."

"Is she proud? Disdainful? Did she make you grovel?"

"She did not make me do anything," Blade retorted. "I showed my respect, nothing more."

"How long before we reach the palace, or castle?"

"About two tendays."

Kerrion eyed his captor. "You know, whatever she is paying you, I can better, if you take me back."

Blade shot him a contemptuous glance. "I am not for sale."

"Come, man, everyone has their price. I daresay yours is high, but name it. Lands, riches, titles, anything you wish, I can give you."

"The Cotti have nothing I want, even if I had a price, which I do not."

Kerrion shook his head. "Why else would you risk your life? I am sure she is paying you handsomely."

"So she is, but I would have done it simply for the pleasure of killing your father."

Blade contemplated the Prince, who stared into the newly lighted fire, his expression unreadable. How hard it must be, the assassin mused, to spend time in the company of the man who had slain your father. This was undoubtedly Kerrion's first taste of grief, yet he seemed to forget that his father was dead until Blade reminded him. It must be a difficult thing to accept when he had seen no body.

As if reading his thoughts, Kerrion looked up. "My father and I were not close. I am the eldest of sixteen sons, and not his favourite. I have always believed he brought me with him on his campaigns in the hope that I would be killed, for my younger brother is his choice for successor."

Blade concentrated on chopping meat into the pot, remembering all too well his own father's corpse, a spear protruding from its belly; the blood staining the ground.

His mind flew back to the time before that, when his father's gentle smiles, rough pats and warm

embraces had filled Blade's world with joy. He recalled his two brothers' horseplay, mud fights, tree climbing, skinned knees and swimming in a lake. He remembered his soft-eyed sisters with their hair tied up in long tails, like a pony's, and their bright smiles when they picked flowers in the fields and giggled as they rolled down the warm, sun-drenched grassy slopes. Then his mother would call them in for supper, scold them for their dirty clothes, wash their scrapes and scrub them pink in the tub in front of the fire. His mother's warm hugs had been so soft and tender; her fingers had stroked his hair and her sweet voice had told him of her love for him, her special son. Her screams had rent the air on the day shaven soldiers had come with long spears. The air had been filled with the smell of blood and smoke and the screams had pierced his heart...

"Blade."

The assassin looked up at the hated Prince, ruler of the Cotti, who had murdered his family. The urge to kill Kerrion almost overwhelmed him, and his hand clenched on the dagger. He forced himself to relax and resume chopping the salted meat. "Be quiet."

Kerrion obeyed, for Blade's deep frown and the vigour with which he cut the meat warned the Prince that something was amiss with the assassin. Sitting back with a sigh, Kerrion rubbed his chafed wrists and tried to ease the tight chains onto an area of less painful skin. The short length that joined his wrists to his waist allowed him to eat awkwardly and cling to the saddle when riding, but prevented him reaching the knot in the thong about his neck. When Blade secured him at night, he merely tied the thong to a tree, and, unless the Prince chewed through the tough leather, he could not get free. They ate in silence, then Blade bound Kerrion to a tree and went to sleep.

The next day, they rode on as before, the Prince blind and silent within the hood. At supper that night, Kerrion once again tried to strike up a conversation.

"Have you considered my offer?"

"No."

The Prince nodded, unsurprised, but dug at his food in frustration. "I suppose there is nothing I can say to change your mind?"

"You would be wasting your breath."

"Your hatred runs deep."

"More than you could ever imagine." Blade frowned. "And before you ask, it is none of your business."

"Maybe not. I suppose your father was killed in the war?"

Blade banged his empty bowl down. "You are as bad as a damned woman with your prying questions. What difference does it make to you? Yes, the damned Cotti killed my father. He was just a goatherd, and they did not only kill him, they massacred my entire family."

A pang of sympathy shot through Kerrion, but he hid it. "And how many more Cotti must you kill to even the score? How long will you lust for vengeance?"

"I evened the score a long time ago, but maybe if I kill you, I will feel better about it."

Kerrion set aside his bowl and held up his chained wrists. "Take these off, and we will see if you can."

Blade shook his head and leant against a tree. "I am not a fighter. You cannot provoke me with a challenge. I would have killed you in your tent, if not for my queen's wishes. Your father died too easily. He did not deserve such a clean death. Any man who orders the butchery of women and children, and who enslaves children, deserves to feel some of their pain before he dies."

"Slavery? My people do not practice slavery. That is another Jashimari lie."

"Have you spent your whole life with your head buried in the sand of your infernal desert? This is not something I heard in a taproom, bantered by a drunken soldier. I saw them with my own eyes. I was..." Blade looked away, scowling.

"You were what?" Kerrion demanded. "How could you have been in a Cotti camp and have lived to tell the tale?"

"I was in one just a few days ago, and I am still here."

"Disguised as a Cotti whore. Do you frequent Cotti camps in that guise often? Perhaps you earn more in that fashion than you do as an assassin. You did not lack for offers that night, I will wager."

"Be quiet."

"No. I will not be ordered around by a damned Jashimari half man assassin. There are no Jashimari child slaves in Cotti camps. Did you see any when you came to kill my father?"



“No.” Oddly, Blade seemed calmer. “But I was not looking for them. There might have been some hidden in the tents.”

“I would know if there were. No Cotti would stoop so low. What do you think we are, damned savages?”

“Yes, your soldiers are, even if you high and mighty royals think you are so good.”

“These so-called slaves you claim to have seen are doubtless the offspring of whores.”

“These were Jashimari children, not Cotti brats.”

Blade’s assertions annoyed Kerrion, who said, “So say you, but if they were dirty enough, you would not be able to tell the difference.”

“They were Jashimari.”

The Prince shook his head. “You are either lying, or your eyes have deceived you. Perhaps it was the cracked spyglass you used, and your over-active imagination. You Jashimari would love to believe us capable of such atrocities, but, in truth, the Cotti are more civilised than you.”

Blade studied Kerrion, then lowered his eyes to the fire. “You really are ignorant, not so?”

“I speak the truth!”

“As you know it.”

“Yes, as I know it! And as a prince of the Cotti people, I have spent more time than you in our camps. If there were Jashimari slaves, I would have seen them.”

“Unless your father did not wish you to,” Blade pointed out.

“Why would he not? He would never condone such a thing.”

“But he did.”

Kerrion leant forward. “Your lies do not convince me, assassin. Give me one good reason why I should believe you.”

Blade frowned at the fire, and Kerrion waited. When the assassin looked up, he met the Prince’s gaze with glacial eyes. “I do not particularly care whether or not you believe me. What happened to me is no great secret, nor am I ashamed of it. It is the Cotti who should be ashamed of what they did to innocent children, so I will tell you how I know that there are Jashimari child slaves in Cotti army camps. Fifteen years ago, I was one of them.”

The assassin jumped up and walked to the edge of the firelight. Kerrion gazed into the flames, grappling with the enormity of the crime his people had committed, if what Blade had said was true. Not for a moment did Kerrion doubt the veracity of Blade’s words, however. They were spoken with too much conviction and suppressed emotion to be lies. The Cotti were people of learning and refinement, and atrocities against the innocent would outrage them. A war was one thing, perhaps barbarous, yet acceptable to most, but the enslavement of children, even of an enemy, was abhorrent. He looked at Blade’s rigid back, his shoulders squared by pride, and understood the rage in his eyes.

He rose and went to stand beside Blade. “If I had known about it, I would have put a stop to it.”

The assassin shrugged. “But you did not.”

“How did you escape?”

Blade stared into the darkness, his face shadowed. “When I was sixteen, I stole some women’s clothes and walked into the desert.”

“And how long were you there for?”

“Four years.”

“How many of you were there?”

Blade glanced at him. “A few dozen, maybe more.”

“All boys?”

“No, there were girls. Three of them were my sisters. They were only six, eight and fourteen years old when we were captured.... They died before I escaped.”

“This was something the soldiers did on their own. My father would never have allowed it.”

“Your father was there.” Blade faced him. “He condoned it.”

“No. I cannot believe that. My father was a lot of things, but he would not keep child slaves.”

Blade seemed to lose interest, his anger evaporating as quickly as it had boiled over, and he stared into the night again. “I never saw him myself, but I knew two of the boys he owned.”

“Perhaps it was not him. Maybe the boys lied, or the man pretended to be my father.”

The assassin shook his head. “He ordered it. The soldiers rounded up almost all the young children in my village, mostly twelve and under. I was almost too old. They should have killed me, but I was small for my age.”

“What did you do in the camp? Fetch and carry, cook, clean and wash clothes, I suppose?”

“Amongst other things.”

“Like what?”

Blade shook his head again, evidently tiring of the conversation. “That is enough.” He returned to the fire.

The Prince followed. “What else? You must tell me. I have a right to know.”

“Why should I tell you anything? It makes no difference anymore, not to you, not to me. What is done is done, and nobody can change it.”

“Because it is still being done, is it not? No one has stopped it, because no one who cares knows about it. They are my people. I have a right to know the crimes they have committed.”

“You know enough.”

“But there is more, is there not, and worse?”

Blade sighed. “Yes.”

“What?”

“Were you born yesterday?” Blade asked. “What do you think? Must I spell it out for you?”

“Yes, I think you must.”

The assassin stepped closer, his eyes glittering in the firelight, white teeth flashing as he bit out the words as if they soiled his lips. “We were their toys; their playthings. They starved us, tortured us, forced us to perform unspeakable acts for their amusement, made us fight each other and whipped us if we refused.”

The Prince’s heart twisted with anguish and shame.

“Your great people,” Blade said, “the mighty Cotti, scourge of the desert, torturers of little children.”

“You have to let me go. I must put a stop to it.”

Blade smiled with bitter satisfaction. “No, you are going to meet the Queen. I hope she has something particularly nasty planned for you.”

“I am not to blame. I would never have allowed it.”

“That does not matter, does it? That is not why she wants you. She does not even know about it, as far as I know.” Blade looked away. “No one does. I am the only one who ever escaped, and I have told nobody.”

“Then you share the blame. You could have stopped it. Had you warned your people, they could have protected their children.”

“Your men attacked undefended towns and villages. Who could have protected the children? Do you think my father did not try? How could unarmed farmers fight soldiers? Your father launched surprise attacks across the mountains in the dead of night, burnt whole villages to the ground and flung women into the flames.

“Once all the border towns were wiped out, he sent raiding parties deep into Jashimari lands to attack more. He, most of all, enjoyed watching little girls dance until they dropped from exhaustion. He put babies on ants’ nests to see how long they screamed. Those who did not die of the cruelties perished from disease.”

Blade gripped Kerrion’s collar and pulled him closer. “And they made the rest of us watch! Do you know what that does to a young boy? To see his sisters forced to dance like puppets until their feet bled in the hot sand and their faces turned red, and they dropped like broken dolls...”

His face twisted with the intensity of his hatred, and his hand trembled. “The more I watched, the more I wanted to kill. Your father made me what I am, in more ways than one. He created the monster I have become, a killer, remorseless, ruthless and unfeeling. You do not see any tears in my eyes when I speak of what happened, do you? That is because I do not care anymore.

“He made me the finest assassin in all the lands, for I have no mercy. Do you know how many assassins have died simply because they hesitated? Their victims begged for their lives, and they paused, moved by their soft hearts.”

Blade gave a bark of bitter laughter, and Kerrion flinched at the madness in his eyes, a rage so powerful it swallowed all else. “Imagine that! An assassin with a soft heart! Yet compared to me, they did have feelings, enough to make them pause; enough to kill them. I have never hesitated, never felt the slightest twinge of pity for any man. Every time I kill, I grow emptier. The rush of hot blood does not bring me joy. The sigh of a final breath does not thrill me. I just grow colder inside. So, if you become my next victim, do not waste your breath begging for mercy.” Blade shoved him away, sending him staggering back a few steps.

“I will not,” the Prince murmured. “I do not doubt that you are an excellent and merciless killer.

But have you not become like those you profess to hate so much? If my father made you what you are, surely you hate his influence?"

The assassin's wintry gaze flicked away into the darkness. "Of course I do, but it has served me well. What else would I do with my life, being as I am? Perhaps become a soldier and throw it away in the carnage of a battle, yet that prospect has never appealed to me."

"But you must have scruples, surely? There must be someone you would not kill? Your queen, perhaps?"

Blade smiled, and the Prince marvelled at the seduction of his expression, which hid his ruthless nature so well. Blade's smile could probably charm birds from trees, and it meant nothing to him at all; it was just another tool he used for his own ends.

"No one is safe from me. If they have a price on their head, they are dead."

"Have you no loyalty then? She is your queen."

"I am loyal only to my hatred of the Cotti." The assassin squatted and held out his hands to the fire. Kerrion shivered, beginning to understand the man who had taken him prisoner with such ease. In the leaping light, Blade's face took on a sinister aspect. Death hung about him like a volt of vultures sitting in a tree, waiting for something to die.

The Prince sat on the far side of the fire, studying his captor. Blade's smile broadened to reveal even white teeth in an expression of profound, gentle beauty. This man, Kerrion pondered, was too fine in his looks to be described as handsome. His neutering robbed his face of true masculinity. What had caused that, he wondered. Who could have perpetrated this ultimate humiliation on a man such as Blade, and why? In his father's court, he had heard tales of how the Jashimari Queen used male slaves to sire her offspring and castrated any man who offended her.

Had Blade fallen foul of her anger, and, if so, why did he still serve her? Perhaps the assassin's castration had been the revenge of one of his victims' bereaved relatives. Would death not have been a better vengeance? Already he had learnt more about this strange man than he cared to, and had stumbled upon the secret of unlocking his tongue. The only way to make Blade talk, it seemed, was to goad him, and then he took his life in his hands whenever he did it. Only the Queen's orders prevented the assassin from killing him, he was certain.

"Was it only you and your sisters who were taken?"

Blade shook his head. "No. My younger brother, who was ten, was also taken. I buried his body."

"How did he die?"

"All the children in the camp fell ill eventually, and they all died. A disease carried by sand fleas, I was told, one that Jashimari have no resistance to." He paused, staring past Kerrion with such intensity that the Prince was hard put not to look behind him. "I got it too, but for some reason, I survived." Blade lowered his gaze to the fire again. "I seem to have a charmed life. There have been many times when I should have died. Yet I have never failed to kill the man I was sent to slay; even your father, who survived so many other attempts on his life."

"Were you afraid?"

Blade snorted. "Any man who claims never to have known fear is either a fool or a liar." He put down his wine cup. "Enough talk."

The assassin tied Kerrion to a tree, and then retired to his blanket.

## Chapter Six

Cold rain fell the next day, making travelling pure misery for Kerrion. The hood was plastered to his face, his clothes chafed him in every conceivable place, and his wrists stung. The wound in his side kept up a dull throbbing in time with the jolting of his horse's strides. By the time Blade made camp that evening, the Prince's hands and feet were numb. The assassin built a fire, ignoring Kerrion's violent shudders and chattering teeth. The inclement weather did not appear to have any effect on Blade. The water streamed down his face and slicked his hair to his head. When he passed Kerrion a bowl of hot stew, the Prince had warmed a little, and huddled close to the fire while he ate.

Once again, his curiosity prompted him to ask, "So what made you become an assassin?"

"I would have thought that was obvious, and it is none of your damned business. Do you never tire of yapping?"

"You must have had an interesting life."

"Is that what you would call it?"

Kerrion shrugged. "Well, it must have been hard, but I would dearly like to hear about it."

"Did you enjoy last night's tales so much then?"

"No. But there must have been some good times, even for you."

The assassin shot him a dark look, and Kerrion changed the subject. "I have had some good times, but with fifteen brothers who hated me, I have had some bad times too."

"Did they pull your hair?"

"They did their best to humiliate and discredit me as often as they could, and their mothers helped."

"Mothers?"

"My father had six wives and dozens of concubines. I have fourteen sisters, too."

"That is a lot of women under one roof."

Kerrion chuckled. "Indeed it is. A lot of children, too. Of course, as soon as they were old enough, my father married his daughters off to his lords and officers. There were plenty to go around."

Blade put aside his empty bowl, leant back against a tree and closed his eyes. "You talk too much. Have you nothing interesting to say?"

The Prince plucked at his chains. "You could take these off now. I cannot possibly escape. I would never make it back to the mountains."

Blade opened one eye. "You jest."

"No, I am in earnest."

"You expect me to trust you not to kill me in my sleep? What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

"I am a man of honour. I accept that I am your captive, and I will not attempt to harm you. You have my word."

Blade laughed. "Your word! You are my prisoner, and you will remain in those chains until we reach the Queen."

Kerrion scowled. "Whatever it is your queen wants from me, I will not do it."

"You probably will not have a choice, especially if it is your head."

"If she wants peace, as you say, she is not likely to do that." Kerrion shook his head. "She must think that she can negotiate some sort of truce. Perhaps she will offer me part of her kingdom in return for an end to the Cotti onslaught and inevitable victory. If she does, I shall ask for you as part of the bargain."

Blade sat up, frowning. "She would not offer you a grain of Jashimari soil, and you would never get me, but why would you do that?"

"So it is possible that she wants a truce?"

"I have no idea what she wants, but why would you ask for me?"

"We have a score to settle, regarding my father, and my treatment."

Blade gave a derisive snort. "I would kill you first."

"That would put my brother on the throne and ruin all your queen's plans."

"I do not care."

"You should, if you want the war to end," the Prince said.

"I do not care about that either."

"Is there anything you care about?"

"No."

Kerrion smiled. "Perhaps I will just ask for your head, in that case."

"Is this your idea of a friendly conversation?"

"I doubt that we will ever be friends."

"I know we will not."

Kerrion's smile broadened. His goading was starting to annoy the assassin, which was precisely what he wanted. Sensing that the time was ripe, he asked, "Does the Queen neuter all her assassins?"

"If you cannot control your tongue, I shall cut it out for you."

"No, you will not. So why did she neuter you? Was it a punishment?"

Blade leapt up and stepped towards the Prince, then swung away and walked off to stand with his back to the camp. Kerrion grinned. He enjoyed tormenting Blade. When Kerrion had been kidnapped, he had not doubted that Blade would have killed him in a moment. Now that the assassin was so close to delivering his prize, however, Kerrion knew he was safe. A little verbal abuse was trifling revenge for his abduction and harsh treatment, but it was all he could inflict.

"So who was it?" he insisted. "A jealous husband? A jilted girlfriend? Perhaps an angry customer?"

Blade strode over to the Prince, drew a dagger and pressed it to Kerrion's throat.

Kerrion glowered at him. "You will not kill me."

"If you think that, you are a fool. Killing you would give me more pleasure than delivering you to the Queen."

"You would not get your reward."

"I do not care."

A chill crawled down Kerrion's spine. "Do it then. I am not afraid to die."

"You should be." Blade sheathed the dagger, and the Prince relaxed.

"So did the Queen do it herself?"

The assassin punched Kerrion, making his eyes water and the salty tang of blood invade his mouth. "You do not learn, do you?"

Kerrion blinked, shocked by the sudden violence. Until now, Blade had seemed too well controlled to resort to brutality, but apparently he had found the one subject that enraged the assassin beyond the point where he could control his temper. The Prince spat blood, longing to strike back. Blade's mocking smile, ever on hand to rile his opponent, seemed to have deserted him.

Kerrion jeered, "So you do care about something."

"I dislike nousey Cotti bastards who pry into another man's business like a fishwife into her neighbour's household."

"So why did she do it? To punish you for some indiscretion? Did you forget to grovel properly?"

Blade yanked a cloth from one of the packs and stuffed it into the Prince's mouth. "If you will not be quiet, I shall make you."

While the assassin hunted for a rope, Kerrion pulled the gag out. "How does it feel to be a half man? Do you hate her now? Why do you still serve her?"

Blade rammed the gag back in with such force the Prince almost choked on it, then wound a strip of cloth around his head, holding it in place. He tied it tightly and shoved Kerrion aside before he reclaimed his seat on the far side of the fire, sipped his tea and regarded at his captive. Almost half a time-glass passed before he broke the silence.

"You are going to goad me with that whenever you can, are you not? You seem to enjoy making me angry. I see that now. It is a kind of revenge. The only one of which you are capable. You seem to think this is something I am ashamed of, hence my anger. But you are wrong. I will tell you what you want to know. It seems I have told you too much already, but hopefully you will die soon. Perhaps, being a Cotti, you have a right to know."

He paused, as if considering his words. "All the Jashimari boys were... gelded in your camps. I suppose they thought we would live to be adults, and by gelding us they would make us easier to handle. Jashimari are strong-willed and stubborn, unlike Cotti, who spend all their energy talking, and are easily persuaded to do as they are told, even offering to be willing captives." Blade cast a scornful eye over the Prince.

"I never stopped trying to escape, and several times they beat me almost to death. What they did to me only made me hate them more, and I became more determined to escape them, no matter how they punished me. Do not insult me with your pity, either. I have found my... difference to be a great asset at times, ensuring I never find myself at the mercy of some scheming woman. And it has enabled me to be a good assassin, providing, as it does, a fool-proof disguise."

"Your father fell for it, as many have done before him, and paid the price. You could say that what

your soldiers did led to his death, for any normal man would not be able to pass himself off as a woman, for obvious reasons.”

Blade’s gaze rested on Kerrion’s chin, from which a three-tenday-old beard sprouted. He rubbed his smooth cheek, a slight smile curling his lips again.

“So, now you know, and I do not really care who you tell. I do not like to talk about it, but it has never been a secret. Most people know what I am when they see me, and how I became what I am is irrelevant. You may take some pride in what your soldiers did to me, but it has not done you, or them, any good, has it? Perhaps I will suggest to the Queen that she return the favour with you, and send back to the Cotti a king who will never beget sons. I will gladly kill all your brothers, too.”

Kerrion longed to tell Blade that he had no pity in his heart for a man like him, but what the soldiers had done was so wrong it shamed him. That his father had been a part of it was even more shameful. The assassin finished his tea and put away the cup, then tied the Prince to a tree as usual before rolling himself into his blankets.

The Prince lay awake for a long time, thinking about what he had learnt. He had always thought war an honourable thing, an undertaking by brave men who fought for honour and glory, who battled and died proudly under the flags of their king and country. Sometimes there were prisoners, and these were taken to work in the mines, digging ore to forge into new weapons for the Cotti army, a fitting punishment for setting themselves against the might of his father’s kingdom.

Women and children were innocents, however, and to his knowledge never taken prisoner and certainly not abused in the way Blade described. He wondered if the assassin was lying, but somehow believed him. Much as he disliked Blade for murdering his father and his own harsh treatment, he also admired his courage, spirit and determination.

“When did this start?” Minna demanded of her chief advisor.

“Almost a three tendays ago, My Queen.”

“And why was I not informed earlier?”

“At first General Hannach thought it merely another attack. They are fighting a war, after all; the Cotti attack all the time. But they have been throwing themselves at the mountain pass relentlessly, and the general says that their fury is frightening to behold.”

Minna’s eyes sparkled. “Then he has succeeded!”

“Perhaps,” Chiana allowed. “He might have only enraged them with his attempt.”

“No. He has succeeded. What of the Prince?”

Chiana shook her head. “No one has seen either Blade or the Prince.”

“If this started three tendays ago, and Blade has been gone almost a moon phase, he must be nearly here by now.”

“My Queen, there is the more pressing matter of the general’s request for reinforcements.”

“Yes, yes.” Minna made an impatient gesture. “Send him whatever he requires.”

Chiana headed for the door, but the Queen said, “Wait. I did not give you leave to go. There is more. Send orders to the guards, to Captain Redgard, to be on the lookout for Blade. When he comes, they must let him in instantly.”

“Yes, My Queen.”

“He will be here any day now, with the Cotti King as his captive.”

The Queen went over to the windows and gazed at the dreary gardens drenched by sleeting rain, her cheeks flushed with excitement, or perhaps joy. She looked like a girl of sixteen, and sometimes acted like one, despite her upbringing, Chiana thought. The chief advisor closed the doors softly behind her.

The sound of approaching hoof beats woke Kerrion, and he jerked upright in alarm. He groaned as stiff muscles protested and looked around for the assassin, but he was alone. Had Blade abandoned him, trussed and helpless, to the mercy of local marauders? As the horse and rider came into view through the dripping mist, he slumped.

Blade dismounted, cast a glance at his gagged captive, and pulled a pack from his horse. Taking a loaf of bread from it, still warm from the oven, he broke it in two. He yanked the gag from the Prince’s mouth and handed him half.

Kerrion took it, rubbing his aching jaw. “Where did you go?”

“For supplies.”

The Prince tore at the bread. “You do not need to gag me anymore. I will not try to make you angry again.”

The assassin ignored him, glancing around as he ate.

“I do not pity you,” Kerrion stated. “I should think it must be impossible to pity a man like you. But what those soldiers and my father did was wrong. If I am returned to the desert, I shall see to it that these abominable practices are stopped.” Blade shook his head, and the Prince went on, “I shall appoint overseers and employ spies to ensure this. I know that is the only way.”

Blade uncorked a water skin and washed the bread down, then rose to saddle the Prince’s horse.

Kerrion scowled at him, frustrated by his silence. “Do you not have anything to say?”

The assassin shrugged. “I doubt you will get the opportunity.”

“When I tell your queen, I am sure I shall. War is one thing, but these atrocities must be stopped.”

“And you do not think that war itself is an atrocity?”

“We fight for our honour and defend our land.”

Blade snorted. “Honour! What would you know about that? And why would the Jashimari try to invade your god-forsaken desert? What do you have that we would want? Your wealth is measured in tonnes of useless sand.”

“The Cotti are a rich people. We have beautiful cities and great oases, as well as plenty of gold. Your queens have ever been fond of gold.”

“She has so much of the damned stuff that she has built her palace from it. What would she want with more?” Blade tightened the horse’s girth with an angry jerk. “No, it was the Cotti who tried to invade Jashimari land, envious of our fertile soil and abundance.”

Kerrion glanced at the chill mist. “No Cotti would wish to live in such a cold, wet place as this.”

“No Jashimari would want to be boiled to death in your damned desert, nor stricken with its plagues. So I do not know what we are fighting about, nor do I care.”

“No one knows what we are fighting about anymore.”

“Then I do not know why we bother,” Blade retorted. “Nor do I wish to argue about it.”

When the Prince finished his bread, Blade hooded him and boosted him into the saddle.

## Chapter Seven

Two days later, they reached Jondar. Kerrion's hooded form drew curious stares from the populace as they rode along the crowded streets. Blade opened his collar to display the tattoo at the base of his throat, well known as the mark of an assassin, which deflected any enquiries. It was rare to see an assassin abroad in public, even more uncommon in daylight and displaying his mark, which, in itself, aroused some unwelcome interest, and loitering city guards eyed the passing pair.

At the palace gates, two sentries crossed their spears in front of Blade's horse and forced him to stop, then demanded his business.

"I am the assassin Blade, returning from the front on the Queen's business, with a prisoner," he informed them.

One man peered at his tattoo, and then they stood aside, grounding their spears. Blade urged his tired mount forward as the soldier signalled to the men who manned the massive gates. The gilded barrier was pulled open, and he rode into the forecourt of the Queen's palace. Grooms ran up to take the horses, and Blade dragged the hooded Prince down. More guards approached, offering to take the prisoner. Blade declined, leading Kerrion towards the palace, and four guards fell in behind him.

In the audience chamber, he was told to wait, and he removed Kerrion's hood. The Prince surveyed his opulent surroundings without expression and turned to the assassin.

"Am I to be taken to the Queen in this state?" He looked down at his travel-stained clothes.

"There is no need to primp yourself, I am sure she does not care what you look like."

"I thought perhaps she was unused to dealing with dirty, unshaven men who stink of horse and sweat. Does she keep such company, then?"

"Insult the Queen at your peril. I will add a few bloodstains to your attire if you persist."

"You do not present yourself in such a state," the Prince pointed out, his gaze raking Blade's clean leather clothes and glossy hair. The assassin had bathed in a stream the previous evening, disdaining the cold to wash the mud and stink from himself and his clothes.

"No," Blade agreed. "I am not a prisoner."

"If you seek to humiliate me, your effort is wasted, since my filth is through no fault of mine. Your queen is more likely to be offended by such dirt in her presence."

Blade frowned, then Chief Advisor Chiana entered and approached them, her steps echoing in the pillared room. Kerrion glanced at the assassin, but Blade took no notice of his curious look as Chiana stopped before him.

"Welcome, assassin. The Queen is eager to see you and your... prisoner. You are to come immediately into her presence."

Chiana led the way to the small door through which she had entered, and Blade tugged the Prince after him, the guards following. At the entrance to the Queen's private sitting room, the group paused while the guards secured Kerrion's hands behind his back. Blade smiled at his sullen expression, daring him to protest this further insult.

Queen Minna-Satu paced her chamber. Chiana's news that the assassin had returned with a prisoner filled her with nervous excitement. She plucked at her peacock-blue silk skirt, dissatisfied with it. Her bodice's silver embroidery glinted under the sheath of fine golden chainmail. In the few minutes she had taken to prepare, her maids had dressed her hair and ornamented it with golden chains and jewel-tipped pins.

Strings of pearls adorned her neck and thin golden bangles slithered on her arms. For the umpteenth time, she peered into the mirror, examining her flushed face with deep discontent, then swung away to pace about again. Her heart thumped, and she could not say whether it was the prospect of meeting the Cotti Prince or seeing Blade again that made her so anxious.

"Do pay attention, Shista," she berated the sleepy cat. "Get up. Sit beside me and look fearsome."

The sand cat raised her head and cast her friend a disbelieving glance, her ears twitching.

"Come on," Minna insisted, "sit by me."

Had the cat been able to talk, she might have pointed out that it was hard to sit beside someone who was pacing the room. Instead, she flopped back with a sigh. Minna flung a cushion at her, then turned, patting her hair, as the doors opened. Chiana prostrated herself, and rose at the Queen's



gesture.

“They wait outside, My Queen. Shall I show them in?”

“Yes. At once.”

The chief advisor reopened the doors and stood aside. Blade entered, towing a dishevelled man by a leather thong. Four soldiers hesitated on the threshold, and Minna waved them away, refusing them entry. Chiana closed the doors and stood with her back to them, watching the men.

The assassin approached to within a few paces, dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “My Queen.”

“Get up.” Minna glared past him at the dirty man who stared at her with a scornful expression.

The assassin rose, took hold of his prisoner’s bound wrists and yanked his arms up, forcing him to his knees with a grunt of pain. Blade pushed his head down until his forehead touched the floor.

“You will bow to the Queen, Cotti.”

Minna watched the Prince’s struggles for a moment, then nodded. “Let him up.”

Blade stepped back, and Kerrion jumped up, flushed and scowling. “This is an outrage! I am no common criminal to be treated in such a fashion!”

Blade punched the Prince in the solar plexus, making him double over with a grunt.

Minna wound a string of pearls around her finger as she studied the captive. Kerrion glared first at the assassin, then at her with equal ferocity. His hair hung in dirty locks around his bearded visage, and his gold-embroidered velvet and satin clothes were torn and smeared with mud.

“That is enough, Blade,” Minna remonstrated. “He is a prince, although he does not look, or smell like one.” She wrinkled her nose.

“I should have been treated better than this,” Kerrion growled. “I should have been allowed to wash before meeting you, Queen Minna-Satu. I have not been accorded the right of my rank.”

Blade said, “You have no permission to speak, prisoner.”

“And rightly so,” Minna assured the Prince. “You are my prisoner, and subject to my whims. Do you think I would have been content to wait while you bathed? Do you have no idea of protocol?”

“Then I make no apology for my state. I have been kidnapped from my father’s camp and dragged through your land for three tendays without once being offered a bath or clean clothes. Even though we are enemies and I am your prisoner, I deserve to be treated according to my rank. If it was you who were my prisoner, rest assured, I would not insult you in this fashion.”

The ferocity of his outburst surprised Minna-Satu, and Shista stood up and wandered over. She rubbed against Blade’s legs and purred, then sniffed Kerrion, her purr fading. Wrinkling her nose, she gave a huge sneeze, then studied him with her tail twitching before returning to her cushions and flopping down amongst them.

Minna signalled to Chiana. “Take the prisoner away and have him washed and given clean clothes. I will speak to the assassin alone.”

Chiana went to the doors and ordered two guards to bring the Prince, following as they marched him away. As soon as the doors closed behind them, the Queen sat down and motioned for Blade to do the same. A maiden entered with a tray of aromatic tea and sweet cakes, leaving the moment she had deposited her burden.

Minna leant forward to take a cup. “Have some.”

The assassin took a cup and sipped from it. Although he hid his dislike behind a bland expression, she had the impression that he was not partial to this variety of tea, or perhaps tea in general.

The Queen considered him through the steam that rose from her cup. “You have done well. I am extremely pleased.”

The assassin inclined his head.

“Was the task a challenge, or not?”

He shrugged. “It was not beyond my abilities.”

“King Shandor is dead?”

“As you wished.”

She took a sticky cake. “Good. You are unharmed?”

“Not a scratch.”

“And the Prince?”

He smiled wryly. “A few bruises and cuts, nothing serious.”

“I cannot imagine how you succeeded when all my men failed. They were the best I had, seasoned warriors who had distinguished themselves in battle. Yet you...” She shook her head. “But no, I will not berate you, for you have done me a great service and I am most grateful.”

“Killing King Shandor gave me a great deal of satisfaction. I am well compensated already.”

“You did not need my sanction to assassinate the King. Had you truly wished it, you could have done so at any time, for you did not need my help either.”

Blade’s lips curved in a gentle smile. “The Guild of Assassins forbids me to kill without a client; otherwise we would be nothing more than common murderers.”

She nibbled the cake. “I see. A sensible rule, for you are right, that is the only difference between assassins and murderers. Your profession places the blame on your client, not you. So, how many did I murder, other than the King?”

“Only two soldiers.”

She eyed him. “I enquired about you, as you advised. Your reputation is certainly unequalled, it would appear. Four hundred is an impressive tally.”

“It is a gross exaggeration. I do not keep count, but I have not killed that many men.” He sipped his tea, keeping his gaze lowered.

“You have my sympathy for the loss of your family, Conash.”

He glanced up. “It seems your enquiries were quite thorough.”

“They usually are. I found the details interesting, but full of mystery. Is it true that you were once beaten and left for dead in the streets?”

He frowned at his tea. “Yes.”

“And will you tell me how you survived?”

He raised his eyes in a bold look that warned her of his dislike of the topic. “A whore from a nearby brothel took me in and nursed me back to health.”

The Queen smiled. “A kind lady.”

“Yes.” Blade looked away, expressionless.

Minna knew that his rescue had had little to do with kindness, and wondered if the unfortunate woman had ever discovered the futility of her hopes. Aware of his discomfiture, she changed the subject. “Your reward shall be as I stated. Your elevation of rank will take place at a ceremony tomorrow in the audience chamber. It must, of necessity, take place before the entire court. The witnesses make it official.”

“Then I would rather forgo the title. The lands and riches will be sufficient reward.”

The Queen shook her head, smiling at his reaction, which she had predicted. Blade, like all assassins, had learnt to shun publicity, and being the centre of attention in the royal court did not appeal to him. “I am afraid you must take the title. I insist.”

He shot her an accusing look. “Would you turn my reward into an ordeal?”

“Come now, you are to retire soon. You need not hide from the public any longer. If you are afraid of retribution, your new rank will protect you, and having the Queen’s favour ensures your safety.”

“I have your favour?”

“But of course; as well as my ear and high regard.”

“Then will you tell me what you intend for the Prince?”

“Alas, I cannot just yet. But he is not destined for the gallows.”

“A pity,” Blade said. “I would volunteer to kill him for nothing.”

“You have grown to dislike him?”

“No. He is a far better man than his father was, but he is Cotti.”

Minna-Satu nodded. “You have more to hate them for than the death of your family, do you not?”

“Yes.” Blade put down his cup and rose to his feet, startling her.

She stood up, annoyed. “Your manners have not improved. It is customary to wait for my permission to leave before doing so.”

“I will try to remember. For the moment, I am tired and hungry.”

She waved a hand. “Very well, you may go.”

He dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “My Queen.”

Blade went to the doors and opened them, revealing Chiana waiting outside. As he passed her, she glanced at Minna, and, at the Queen’s nod, turned to show him to his quarters.

The rooms Chiana led Blade to bore no resemblance to the one in which he had stayed for the first tenday. Whereas that had been a servant’s room, these boasted all the comforts the palace could provide, including a trained manservant. Hangings woven by master craftsmen graced the walls, some of which were panelled with polished bloodwood whose fine-grained veneer glowed deep crimson in

the lamplight, seamed and knotted with black. Embroidered black velvet curtains framed lead-paned windows that gave a view of a garden where a grove of smoke trees' gauzy foliage blended into the mist.

The sitting area had numerous cushions and poufs scattered on woollen rugs, and a fire crackled in a jade hearth. Paintings of hounds and horses, probably the familiars of long-dead nobles, relieved the plethora of tapestries depicting hunting scenes. A vast four-poster bed dominated the bed chamber, hung with silk and velvet and covered with a snow cat fur spread. An ironwood wardrobe stood against one wall, its doors chiselled with crude designs.

To achieve even such slight patterns in ironwood was a great feat, since the wood was legendary for its hardness. Only young ironwood trees could be felled without blunting numberless axes and exhausting armies of men. Once the tree had been chopped down, it had to be sawn into planks and carved before the wood dried, or else there was no hope of doing so. Legend had it that there had been a time, in an Age of Trees, when swords had been made from it.

A curtained washing alcove housed a brass tub and an ironwood table with a basin and pitcher of water upon it, as well as a selection of soft towels, scented soaps and sponges.

Chiana left him to return to the Queen, and the servant came forward to offer his services. Blade ordered a meal and a bath, and found the former already awaiting him in an adjoining dining room furnished with a jade-topped smokewood table. The service and accommodations made him wonder to what rank he was being elevated, and he wished he had asked the Queen. Tomorrow he would find out.

Kerrion surveyed his room, which was almost devoid of furnishings. Two cream-coloured linen cushions lay in the centre of the sitting area, next to a low glass-topped puffwood table. A narrow bed stood in the far corner, a plain chest of drawers beside it. Within a curtained alcove was a brass tub, a rough towel and a table with a basin and pitcher of water on it. A solitary, rather threadbare tapestry covered one wall, and another had two lead-paned windows in it, a puffwood tree blocking the view.

The room was either that of a servant that had been refurnished for him, or a junior advisor's quarters. The implication was obvious. He was, at best, an unwelcome guest, at worst, little more than a prisoner.

Two guards stood outside the door, and a sullen manservant obeyed him with grudging tardiness. Once bathed, he dressed in the clothes provided, which, although quite fine, did not come up to his standards. The pale fawn linen shirt hung below his hips in the Jashimari fashion, a silver-studded belt clasped his waist, and velvet leggings tucked into brown leather calf-boots. All that remained to show his princely status was his silver circlet, which the servant polished with great reluctance. After a simple meal of grilled butter fish and dellbeans with capelot greens, he was told to await the Queen's pleasure, which he did for most of the afternoon, fuming with impatience.

Finally, a liveried manservant showed him into the Queen's presence once more, the guards dogging his footsteps. The soldiers returned to their post outside the huge double doors, and the servant opened them and stood aside. Minna-Satu reclined on her cushions, and set aside a parchment when he halted in front of her. Kerrion hesitated, unsure of what to do, then accorded her a stiff bow, as he would his father.

The Queen gestured to a pile of cushions. "Sit."

Kerrion found it a little awkward, since the Cotti used chairs, and he was unused to lounging about on a plethora of cushions.

Minna studied him, and the intelligence in her eyes and her proud demeanour struck him. "I trust you are now comfortable, Prince Kerrion?"

He nodded. "The room is adequate."

"Good. I regret the death of your father. It was necessary, I am afraid. I ordered it to put you on the throne, thereby giving our people a chance for peace."

"Kidnapping me will only escalate the war, Queen Minna-Satu, and elevate my brother Lerton to the throne."

"I know that. You will regain your power when you return to the desert, once we have made our peace."

"So, you do wish to negotiate a treaty then?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"But you must know that neither of our peoples will allow it. After so many generations of war,

they will not want to simply walk away and return to their homes. The men know nothing but soldiering, and our nobles profit from it. We may be the rulers of our realms, but to announce an end to the war may well spark a revolt.”

Minna raised a hand. “I am aware of all this. Please do not mistake me for a fool. My plan has many conditions. My changes will be sweeping and final. When I am finished, my people and yours will have no choice but to accept peace.”

“You sound certain. How do you intend to achieve this? I have not agreed to anything, yet you speak as if the deed is done. How do you know that I want peace?”

The Queen shook her head. “Your wishes are irrelevant, but your co-operation would be beneficial. As yet, it is too early to divulge my plans to you. I wish to know you better first.”

“What bearing can that have? It matters not whether we know each other. We need not be friends to negotiate a treaty.”

“Then you would be willing to?”

“If the lands your people have stolen are returned to the Cotti, perhaps an agreement can be reached.”

Minna’s brows rose. “What lands are those?”

“The lands between the Endine Mountains and the Lelgara River, which was the border before your ancestors invaded them.”

A slight smile tugged at her lips, and Kerrion admired her poise. Unlike dusky Cotti maidens, the Queen had a pale, delicate beauty, which he likened to that of an orchid, as opposed to a bright daisy.

“We stole no lands from you,” she said. “According to our records, the Cotti kings tried to invade Jashimari lands, and we have been defending them ever since.”

“Then your records lie, and we will never have an end to this war if we cannot even agree on what started it.”

“No, the reason for its beginning has no bearing on its end. We have only to agree to end it, and it is over.”

“That will not satisfy my people,” Kerrion stated. “They have not fought so long and hard to gain nothing for their sacrifice in the end.”

“Nor will mine be content to give away the soil they have striven to defend for generations.”

“Then we are already at an impasse.”

“Do you wish to end the war?”

Kerrion shrugged, meeting her gaze with amusement in his eyes. Minna-Satu frowned, clearly unused to such bold glances. From what he knew of Jashimari culture, the men were spineless cowards. Her subjects rarely met her eyes, and even her most senior lords did not dare to stare her down in such a fashion.

The Prince smiled. “It is not something to which I have given much thought. My kingdom thrives on war and my people prosper from it. Without the war, many powerful men would lose their livelihood; arms merchants and mine owners, armourers who have spent years crafting fine weapons and inventing new ones. What use could they put their skills to, if there was no demand for their products?”

“What about the cost? The thousands of lives lost every year in battle, the bereaved families and destitute widows?”

“You speak of a woman’s concerns. The men are proud of their sons’ glorious achievements and honourable death in battle. Widows are compensated for the loss of their husbands and sons. They would be poorer if their menfolk lived than if they die.”

“And what of the cripples?” Minna asked. “Men without arms or legs or sight?”

“They too are compensated. No Cotti war veteran starves or is without a home. Those who have profited from the war pay huge taxes to support the less fortunate. Farmers grow rich feeding the army. The economy booms.”

“Yes, so it is here, too. Yet the war is evil, and I would end it.”

“Then surrender. You will receive good treatment. Your people will not be enslaved, and your wish will be granted.”

“Never.” Her eyes glinted. “How dare you make such a presumption, when it is you who are my prisoner?”

“Imprisoning me does you no good. It will only enrage my people and goad them to greater ferocity. If you execute me, my brother Lerton will inherit, and he is much like my father.”

Minna-Satu sat back and glanced at the dozing sand cat. “So you have said. Let us not discuss it

further today. Tell me of your family. I believe it is large.”

Kerrion obliged, her tactics confusing him a little. For the remainder of the afternoon and over dinner, they discussed their lives and relatives. The Queen was pleasant and talkative, although she smiled rarely, and he longed to know the reason for the distant sadness in her eyes. Her beauty seemed too fragile for the burdens of her high office, and there was no triumph for him in denying her the peace she craved. He thought it was unfair to have to deal with such a lovely woman, against whom any victory would inevitably be tinged with regret.

That night he lay awake, thinking about her and wondering at the mysterious plans she claimed to have. By the time he fell asleep, he was no wiser for his time-glasses of pondering.

## Chapter Eight

The door opening woke Blade the next morning, and he became instantly alert, in the usual manner of assassins. He relaxed when the manservant came in carrying a pile of bright, luxurious clothes. The man hung the garments on a smokewood rack, brushing and straightening them with obvious pride. Blade sat up and eyed the deep crimson silk shirt and tailored, brushed black velvet tunic with silver patterns embroidered on the shoulders and sleeves. Next to these was a pair of matching trousers and a silver-studded belt. A short cloak completed the outfit, and the servant placed a pair of narrow, polished black boots on the floor under the rack.

Blade raked back his rumpled hair. "Does the Queen expect me to wear that foppish outfit?"

"Yes sir."

The assassin slid from the bed, clad only in a pair of baggy grey flannel shorts that almost reached his knees. The servant's lips twitched as he suppressed a smile, and Blade went to splash his face in the bowl of water provided.

"Well, I won't," Blade declared. "Definitely not that garish shirt, and that tunic. Bring me something less gaudy."

"The Queen insists, sir. You must wear it for the ceremony today. A great feast has been ordered, with entertainment and dancing."

"And am I to be the freak on show? Take those things away and bring me my clothes."

"I can't, sir. The Queen would be angry."

"I don't care. I won't wear that outfit."

"Very good, sir, I'll inform the Queen." The man bowed and headed for the door.

"Wait! Why should the Queen concern herself with such trivial matters? Bring me my clothes!"

The servant paused in the doorway. "I'm sorry sir, but these are her orders. Today she concerns herself greatly with your ceremony."

Blade snorted and opened his mouth to berate the man further, but he was gone. A search of the wardrobe found it empty, and he cursed the servant as he sat on the bed and frowned at the clothes. Evidently the man had absconded with Blade's apparel while he had bathed the previous evening.

The door opened, and he turned to vent his displeasure upon the returning servant, then grabbed the sheet to wrap around himself as Minna-Satu sailed in, followed by Chiana and several handmaidens. Blade stared at her before lowering his eyes to the hem of her gown.

"My Queen, this is unseemly."

"Indeed?" Her brows rose, and he was surprised she did not comment on his failure to bend a knee. "This is my palace, and I go where I will in it. Come, I have seen naked men before. I may be a maiden, but I am not an innocent."

"But -"

"I am informed that you refuse to wear the clothes provided, which I selected myself for your ceremony."

Blade glanced at the outfit. "I... They are too bright. I am unused to such ornamental garments."

"Then it is time you changed your ways. You are to retire; you need not skulk in the shadows now."

"I have never -"

"I wish us to be friends, Blade. I hope to count you as one of my closest and most trusted advisors and confidants after your elevation."

"I had not planned -"

"I do not bestow these rewards lightly, or upon the undeserving."

"I -"

"Furthermore, I do expect to be at least patronised in this matter, for I shall not present a man to my court who is not decently attired."

The assassin raised his eyes, knowing that if he tried to argue she would just interrupt again. The challenge in her eyes was clear. She would brook no opposition, and a reluctant smile tugged at his lips. For the first time, she impressed him. Her regal bearing and demand of obedience, so at odds with her slender form, brought a twinge of respect.

He nodded. "Very well, but not the shirt."

Minna gestured to one of the girls. "Fetch another, a paler colour."

“Grey,” Blade stipulated, and the Queen nodded. The maiden hastened out, and another two came forward. They sat beside him and started to brush his hair, freeing it from its leather thong. Minna settled on a pouf, smiling.

Blade asked, “Surely you do not mean to supervise?”

“I do. I must speak to you now, since yesterday you were too tired and rude.”

“What about?”

“The ceremony. It is short, but complex, and I must warn you, given your nervous nature, not to be alarmed by the weapons that will be used in it.”

“Are they to be thrown at my head?”

She laughed. “No, certainly not, but they will be in close contact with your person, and I would not want you to think yourself in danger.”

“And who will be wielding these weapons?”

“I shall.”

“I see.” He winced as a girl tugged at a knot in his hair.

“Have a care, Terril,” the Queen remonstrated.

“I am sorry, My Queen,” the girl replied. “It is like combing a horse’s tail.” Blade cast her a sideways glance, and the maiden dimpled, adding, “Although finer hair I have seldom seen, and certainly not on a man.”

Minna giggled as the other maiden produced a razor, and Blade leant away from her, eyeing it sceptically. The girl ignored him as she trimmed the ragged edges of his hair at shoulder length.

“You have nothing to fear from my maidens,” Minna said. “They will not harm you.”

“She could cut my throat with one slip.”

“She will not slip, I assure you. Now, as to the ceremony. It will take place at noon, in the audience room, before my assembled court. When the usher gives the signal, you will enter through the side door and approach the throne. There I will make the award, and afterwards, you shall sit beside me at the banquet.”

He sighed, aggrieved. “Must there be all this pomp and ceremony?”

“Yes. You came forward to claim the reward I offered, and this is it.”

The maidens finished brushing and cutting his hair, and plaited it into a tight braid.

“What title are you giving me?” he asked.

The Queen shook her head. “I promised to teach you manners when you returned, and it is customary to refer to me as ‘My Queen’ every so often. It is a sign of respect. You understand?”

“What title are you giving me, My Queen?”

“You will find out soon enough.”

The maiden returned with a dark grey shirt as the other two finished braiding his hair. Minna studied him. “You have a noble face. You will look well in my court.” She clapped, and the maidens rose, filing out. Chiana, who stood by the door, smiled at him.

Minna rose with a rustle of skirts. “No weapons on your person, if you please. This once, you will not need them.”

He looked up at her. “As you wish.”

“I suppose you are just as deadly with your bare hands?”

“Yes.”

She shivered, turning away. “We will leave you to dress now. The manservant will help you.”

Blade dressed himself, then ate a hearty breakfast of poached neleggs and smoked ham before settling down to wait for the allotted time. When it came, the servant returned to fuss over Blade’s clothes, straightening, tugging, and brushing at invisible specks of lint. Blade bore it until the man had had his fill, then followed him into the corridor that led to the audience chamber.

Outside the open door, they stopped in front of two guards, one of whom came forward to search the assassin. Blade wondered at the need for this, but shrugged it off as he gazed at the scene through the door.

In the vast golden room, the Queen had just settled upon the throne, sceptre in hand. She wore a gown of silver and gold thread, a high fish-spine collar framing her head. Her coiled hair dripped gold and jewels, and her fingers and wrists sparkled with rings and bracelets. On a table beside her rested a peacock-hued ribbon, a jewel-encrusted dagger and a scroll. Two high-ranking officers, resplendent in golden armour and white plumes, stood on either side of the throne.

Advisors and nobles filled the audience chamber to capacity, and guards stood, statue-like, at the back of the throng. The silence would have made a pin falling sound like a thunderclap.

Queen Minna-Satu addressed her court. "Today, we honour and reward a man who has achieved what most people believed to be impossible. I set a task, some time ago, that of ending the life of King Shandor and bringing his son to Jondar. More than two score warriors took on the task, and failed.

"One man succeeded, alone and unaided, in completing that task. His name may be known to you. His reputation is well told, although his profession is not well liked. But, in this instance, he has served me well, and deserves all of the reward that I today bestow upon him. Let no man slight him or offer him harm. He has my favour and my ear. Any insult to him is an insult to me. From this day forth, he will be a noble, and join the highest ranks of my court."

The manservant took Blade's arm and pushed him towards the throne, overcoming his reluctance with a shove that almost sent him staggering into the room. The assassin swung around angrily, then realised that he was in full sight of the entire court. Minna turned to face him, and he swallowed his anger and embarrassment as he walked towards her.

"I present to you a man who holds my highest regard, and has many names to his credit," the Queen stated. "He is known as the Silent Slayer, the Invisible Assassin, or simply Blade. Today, he is Conash of the Cats."

A murmur arose from the assembly as many members turned to their neighbours with incredulous expressions. Minna raised her sceptre and brought it down with a clink. Silence fell. Blade reached the bottom of the dais and hesitated, but the Queen beckoned him forward, and he climbed the three shallow steps to her level. She rose as he approached, and he dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

"My Queen."

Another whisper hissed from the crowd at his failure to perform a prostration.

Minna gestured for him to rise, smiling. "Welcome, Conash of the Cats."

Blade stood, uncomfortably aware of the numerous glares directed at his back. The tension and anger radiating from the members of the court was palpable, and if looks could kill, he knew that he would be dead many times over. To distract himself from the itchy prickle between his shoulder blades, he watched the Queen step towards the table and pick up the jewelled dagger. She returned to stand almost toe-to-toe with him, and raised the weapon, pressing the point to his shirt in the vicinity of his heart. He smiled at her inaccuracy, for, had she pushed the dagger in, she would have missed the vital organ and pierced his left lung instead. Blade remained immobile, even when he became aware, with a slight start, that the two officers had taken up position on either side of him. The ceremony was starting to resemble an execution more than an award, and he frowned.

The Queen said, "As a man of my realm, you are beholden to me, but as a noble of my court, your life belongs to me alone. No one may take it from you without my permission, lest I do hunt them down and exact vengeance in kind upon them. But should I require it, none shall gainsay me. In return, you shall offer me no harm, nor disobey me. Do you so swear?"

He hesitated, unsure of the correct response. "Yes, My Queen."

Minna withdrew the dagger, and his scalp prickled as the officers drew their swords with a hiss of steel. The naked blades pointed at his flanks, almost touching his clothes, and he darted a surreptitious glance at them. The Queen pressed the edge of the dagger to one side of his throat, then the other.

"I grant you the title of Lord of the Realm, holder of the lands of Josham and the town of Bardim. I appoint you the Queen's guardian and personal advisor, second only to the chief advisor in that regard. I bestow upon you a living fitting to your title. Give me your hand."

Startled, Blade held out his right hand. The Queen never touched people, as far as he knew. Her maidens tended to her, but all others remained at a polite distance. She took his hand in a cool clasp, running her fingers over his palm with apparent pleasure.

"A nice hand," she murmured for him alone, and pressed the hilt of the dagger into it. Holding his fingers around the hilt, she turned the blade upon herself and poised it before her breast. Disconcerted, Blade tried to release the weapon, but could not until she freed his hand, whereupon the dagger clattered to the floor. He snatched his hand away and stepped back.

Minna smiled. "Good."

The officers sheathed their swords, and a servant scuttled forward to pick up the dagger. Minna-Satu went to the table and picked up the blue-green ribbon, coming close again to pin it onto his lapel.

"Here is my favour," she said, then picked up the scroll. "The deeds to your lands and title, which are, of course, hereditary." She lowered her voice to add, "Choose a fine son to adopt, who will do you honour."

He took the scroll. "What if I do not?"



“Then all shall revert to me, or my daughter, who will bestow it upon whomever she sees fit.” She stepped back. “Now, you bow and step from the dais.”

Blade did so, turning away as a desultory applause started. The accolade was so unenthusiastic that Queen Minna-Satu frowned and lifted her hands to clap, shooting a hard glance at the crowd. The courtiers redoubled their efforts, and Blade walked towards the door through which he had entered. Along the way, he passed Prince Kerrion, who grinned and clapped.

At the door, the manservant took the scroll and gripped his arm, steering him away from his room. “I’ll see to the deeds, My Lord. You must now go to the banquet hall for the feast. Your place is beside the Queen.”

“Not more rigmarole,” Blade groaned, allowing himself to be steered down a hall.

“Just a great deal of food, My Lord.”

A vast table, draped with a gilt-edged white satin cloth, dominated the centre of the banquet hall. An amazing variety of food covered it, laid out in crystal bowls, translucent jade plates and golden platters. Feathers and flowers decorated the steaming spread of succulent fowl, game and fish that jostled for space between jugs of rare herb sauces and dishes of vegetables. Many smaller tables surrounded it, set with alabaster plates and golden cutlery.

The servant led him to the high table at the far end of the chamber as murmuring nobles wandered in. Many stared at Blade in a hostile manner, but his glare made them look away. The ceremony had, by now, started to annoy him, and he growled when the servant tried to guide him to a chair.

“For God’s sake, leave me alone!”

The man bowed and left Blade standing beside the Queen’s table. Before he could decide what to do, a mocking voice spoke behind him.

“So, your deeds are rewarded, and quickly too, I must say.”

Blade swung around to find Kerrion grinning at him.

The Prince went on, “Usually these things take days to arrange. It seems your queen knew in advance of your success.”

The assassin scowled at his former captive. “So, they let you out of your cage.”

“Oh, yes, I have already dined with the Queen and spent many time-glasses talking to her. She is a little naive, but no more so than any other young woman. She wants a peace treaty, as I suspected. You will not be allowed the satisfaction of adding me to your tally.”

Blade shrugged. “Life is full of little surprises.”

“The Invisible Assassin, hmmm? If only they knew.”

“I have never left anyone alive to tell my secret before.”

“Well, I am sure it will make fascinating dinner conversation tonight.” Kerrion chuckled. “Perhaps you will give a demonstration?”

“I should have killed you.”

“Too late now; Lords do not kill princes.”

“One word from the Queen, and I will stop your flapping tongue forever.”

“You will be disappointed. She plans to send me back.”

Blade turned away. “She may yet change her mind.”

“I doubt it. She wants peace too much. I would say that she will do anything to achieve it.”

“But since you do not, you are quite useless to her, are you not?” The assassin faced him again. “Perhaps your brother will be more amenable, especially to threats upon his life. Now that he has seen that he is vulnerable, as your father was, he may wish to protect himself.”

Kerrion looked put out. “Lerton’s ego is too big for him to give way to such threats.”

“You do not sound entirely confident of that.”

“My brother will not leave the city.”

“That is supposed to daunt me?” Blade smiled.

Kerrion glowered at him. “Your queen will not sanction it.”

“If you co-operate, I doubt it. But if you do not, you may well end up dead, and your brother may find himself faced with a choice between peace and death.”

“You have a high opinion of your abilities.”

“Surely you cannot be such a fool as to doubt me?”

The Prince met Blade’s eyes, and the assassin knew that Kerrion would find in their wintry depths the chilling certainty that to doubt him was folly.

Blade went on, “Tread softly, Prince, and listen well to the Queen’s suggestions. Your life may depend upon it. Killing you and all your kin will give me more pleasure than lands and titles.”

“One word to the Queen, and you could find yourself on the gallows, assassin. I doubt she takes kindly to her minions threatening the man with whom she would negotiate peace.”

Blade affected a startled air. “Did I threaten you?” He smiled. “I never kill without a client, but she may grow weary of your foolishness yet, and decide to take another course, such as the one I have suggested. And since I now have her ear, I might suggest it to her myself, especially if I should find myself at all annoyed by certain disclosures regarding my occupation.”

“I will not be blackmailed,” Kerrion declared. “I will judge the negotiations upon their merit, and not be swayed by your threats.”

“Bear it in mind, nonetheless.”

By now, the hall had filled, and the Queen arrived with her retainers to seat herself between the assassin and the Prince. Blade was on her right hand, with Chiana just beyond him. As soon as all had taken their places, the meal was served, starting with the Queen, then her guests. As soon as the servants moved away, Minna turned to Blade.

“So, My Lord, how did you like the ceremony?”

Blade raised his brows. “You call me ‘My Lord’?”

“Of course. That is now your title. Any who do not address you thus are rude, and you may chastise them, if you will.”

“Really?” He glanced at Kerrion. “I will have to remember that.”

“You did not answer my question, Lord Conash.”

“The ceremony? I could have done well enough without it.”

“I could tell.” She smiled. “Nevertheless, it is now official. You no longer have to prostrate yourself to me. Not that you ever did, but a bow is all that is required of you.”

He sampled the suckling pig and steamed vegetables in a spicy sauce. “And these lands that are now mine, when may I see them?”

“For now, you are required here. When I can spare you, you may travel to inspect them. They are administered efficiently, at the moment.”

“What do you need me for, My Queen?”

Minna cast him a quelling look, and Kerrion commented, “You obviously have no knowledge of protocol, Lord Conash. It is not polite to question the Queen.”

“What would you know of queens, Kerrion, since you have none in Cotti lands?” Blade shot back.

“I treat them the same as kings, of which you have no experience, either.”

“I would not say that. I know that they bleed like any other man, and their blood is red. They die just like commoners, too.”

Minna frowned at Blade. “This is not a subject I wish to hear of, Lord Conash, and both of you will stop sparring this instant.”

Blade smiled and turned his attention to his meal, ignoring Kerrion’s furious glare. The Prince did not speak to him for the rest of the meal, and Minna-Satu divided her attention between them. When at last the feast ended, Blade had imbibed a great deal of excellent wine, and felt quite expansive. He had not been so drunk, he reflected, for several years. To do so was dangerous. It slowed his reflexes and interfered with his reasoning. This night, however, at the Queen’s side, he was confident of his safety.

The assassin’s wariness of becoming inebriated had never stopped him drinking; that had always been one of his few pleasures. Usually he only allowed himself to reach the point of being comfortably numb, when many things became amusing, and he could laugh. This night he had not laughed, but quickly passed to the point where he could no longer think clearly, whereupon the manservant helped him to his rooms. Blade flopped down on the bed and fell asleep as the servant removed his boots. A short while later, he snapped awake, his heightened senses warning him of a presence in the room. Minna sat on the edge of the bed, regarding him with deep concern.

He relaxed. “You should not be here, My Queen.”

“Why, pray tell?”

“It is not seemly for you to be in a man’s bed chamber.”

Minna smiled. “With you I am safe.”

“Still, rumours may grow from this. It is not right.”

“What will they say? Most know of your... misfortune, although I have only told Chiana. She was too innocent to see it. I think she was greatly disappointed.”

He rubbed his eyes, trying to see her more clearly. She wore a simple robe of vivid green, her hair loose about her shoulders. “Do you often frequent the bedrooms of your lords?”

“Blade!”

“I did not mean....” He groaned. “I am drunk. What are you doing here?”

“I was concerned. You drank far too much tonight.”

“Indeed I did, and now you torture me. I must sleep.”

Minna smiled again. “And so you shall, when I leave.”

Blade tried to sit up, but his right arm had gone numb. He rubbed it, grimacing as it tingled with returning blood. “Well, I am still alive, My Queen. You need not concern yourself.”

“But I am concerned. You abuse yourself. You are consumed by a great sadness and hatred. I saw it the moment I met you. What is it that makes you so sad?”

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

“There is more to life than the pleasures of the flesh.”

He tried to unlace his tunic, which pinched him, but the laces kept slipping from his fingers. “I have been denied more than that. I will never have a family, or be anything more than a paid killer with a fancy title.” He gave up trying to undo the laces and clasped his brow. “Why am I telling you this?”

“Because you are drunk. But now that you are a lord, you can make a good marriage. Many women would be honoured to wed you.”

“I do not need some trollop who will sleep with every man in the city and present me with a troop of bastards to feed and clothe.”

She shook her head. “A woman of good breeding would not do that.”

“Nor would she be happy. Why are you so concerned about me?”

The Queen rose and wandered around the room, multiplying in Blade’s blurred vision until he closed his eyes to block it out.

“You are a good man,” she said. “I knew it the moment I met you, and so did Shista. I shall need you at my side in the future, and I do not want you to drink yourself into an early grave, no matter how deep your sadness and hatred.”

He opened his eyes and smiled. “You are wrong, My Queen. I am not good. I am a cold, unfeeling bastard, and a remorseless killer. I care for no one, not even myself, and I do not care if I drink myself to death. If there was a price on your head, I may even kill you, but now you have made me so rich I do not think you need worry about that.”

She swung to face him with a frown. “You are lying. Why do you want everyone to hate you? Already you have made Kerrion dislike you, and that was deliberate, I will wager.”

“A fair bet. But Kerrion is an idiot.”

“No, he is not. He is a good man led astray, but he can be redeemed.”

“He is Cotti,” Blade said.

“Yes, I forgot. For that, you can never forgive him.”

“Why should I?”

“He did not do this to you, nor would he.” She reclaimed her seat beside him. “You have been mightily wronged, and you are bitter. But I shall need you at my side.”

“As a killer.”

Minna inclined her head. “Probably. If this war is to be ended, I shall make many enemies, and I need someone like you, someone I can trust, who cannot be bought or seduced.”

Blade made another attempt to undo the laces. “I thought I was to retire.”

“I am asking for your help.”

He slumped, closing his eyes again. “You have it. Now may I go to sleep?”

“Not yet. You said something to Kerrion tonight, for he has become more amenable since your conversation. What did you tell him?”

He chuckled. “The dolt. I told him that if he did not agree to your plans, you would give him to me, and then I would threaten his brother into a treaty.”

“Excellent. He believes you.”

“He is a fool, then.”

“Maybe not. With you, I have death at my side, and no one is beyond your reach.”

He sighed and rolled onto his side, facing away from her. “I am just a man who knows how to stick a dagger into people and get away with it. One who is very drunk, and probably will not remember any of this conversation tomorrow.”

Minna grasped his shoulder and rolled him onto his back. Her deft fingers undid the laces that had foiled him, while Blade watched her with narrowed eyes.

“What will your spies think, My Queen?”

“Jashimari queens were once tended by eunuchs as well as maidens. They will think nothing. Nor is there any shame in it.”

Blade smiled and closed his eyes.

Minna studied his peaceful face and the sweet smile that held such innocence. It could warm the heart of its beholder even as he slid two hand-spans of cold steel into it. It was perhaps a greater weapon than his daggers, more deadly than steel, with its ability to melt even the strongest resolve. Already she knew its power, yet she had never seen any joy in it. She shivered and left him to sleep, returning to her room, where Shista waited.

## Chapter Nine

The following day, Blade paid the penalty for his indulgence, and stayed abed until noon nursing a pounding head and a sour, rumbling gut.

When he was well enough to seek an audience with the Queen, the liveried flunky who stood at the doors informed him that Minna was entertaining Kerrion again, and had been doing so for most of the day. Blade waited while the servant conveyed his request to Minna-Satu, and it was soon granted. A scowling Kerrion emerged and stalked away down the corridor, two guards accompanying him. Clearly he had been sent away when the flunky had announced that Lord Conash wished to see the Queen, and was none too pleased. The servant bowed to Blade and motioned for him to enter, holding open the doors.

Blade accorded Minna-Satu a swift bow and sat on a cushion in front of her, trying to rub away his frown. A dull ache persisted behind his eyes, and his stomach still gave the occasional rumble. Minna folded her hands and waited for him to speak, her head tilted.

He came straight to the point. "I remember little of what we discussed last night, but what I do disturbs me. It seems you wish me to be some sort of protector. I am an assassin, not a bodyguard."

"I have a bodyguard." She glanced at the slumbering sand cat. "I need you to take death to my enemies, not protect me from them."

"So who do you want me to kill?"

"No one, at present; but I fear that there will be, in the future."

"I have done as you asked and had my reward. There are other assassins."

"But none as good as you. I will use them if you wish, but they will fail me."

He gazed out of the window, then turned back to her. "You have an army to do your bidding. Surely they can kill your enemies?"

"Not when my enemies are amongst my people. To send soldiers would start a revolt. People would cry repression and injustice. An assassin can kill without causing an outcry."

"Why would your people turn against you?" he enquired.

"Some will not like what I plan."

"I may be one of them."

The Queen appeared surprised. "Why would you wish the war to continue, Lord Conash?"

"Why would I want it to end? Or, more to the point, how do you plan to end it?"

Minna gazed at him as if trying to penetrate his guarded expression and read the thoughts hidden behind his eyes. She made a vague, helpless gesture, a slight frown tugging at her brows. "You make this extremely difficult. Will you not trust me?"

"No. I trust no one, least of all those in high office."

"Last night you promised to help me."

"Last night I was drunk. Set no store in anything I say in that state, My Queen, you will be sadly disappointed. You appointed me an advisor; does that not mean you will ask my opinion? You ask for my help, but is it only in the capacity of killing that you need it? You spoke of wishing to be my friend and confidant. Is now not the time to confide in me? You claim to trust me above all others, although I have given you no assurance that you may. Perhaps now is the time to put your intuition to the test, rather than later."

Minna-Satu studied him for several moments before she nodded. "You have the right of it. I cannot allow my promises to you to be empty when I shall need you so much on my side. I will not confide the details. I need no advice in that regard. My course is set upon the prediction of the Idol of the Beasts, and cannot be at fault." Her expression became sorrowful.

"I know that no treaty can be reached with Prince Kerrion. Even if he agreed to all of my terms, his people would never accept them, and he would probably be killed or deposed when he returned home. Kerrion has not the power to end the war, any more than I. But he is a tool I will use to achieve an end that will bring about peace. The Cotti and the Jashimari will be forced to accept peace, but there will be great turmoil before this happens. I have established that Kerrion suits my purpose. Had he not, he would have faced the gallows. As it is, he must live to return to his people, or my plan will fail."

"And what great sacrifice must you make to this end, My Queen?"

Her stiff smile was clearly forced. "You are too perceptive. Yes, I must make a sacrifice, but that is my choice. Will you help me?"

He frowned at the floor, aware that she held her breath while she waited for his answer. "All my life, I have had no purpose. I earned enough to feed and clothe myself, buy drink and gamble. Now that I no longer need to work, my life has even less purpose. My future is a bleak and empty one, unless I agree to help you in your endeavour. Therefore, I will do as you wish."

Minna inclined her head. "Thank you."

Blade nodded, shifting, and was relieved when she sensed his wish to be elsewhere.

"If there is nothing further you wish to discuss, you may go."

He rose and bowed. "My Queen."

"My Lord."

When the doors closed behind him, Minna slumped, not realising until then how tense she had been, how nervous that he would not accept. His agreement lifted a tremendous burden from her shoulders, and the future seemed less uncertain.

The following day, she met with Kerrion once more, and sat down to a luncheon of roast fowl and vegetables bathed in sauces. The Prince ate heartily and sampled the excellent wines with obvious pleasure, remarking that they were finer than his. He seemed to have accepted his situation, and the fierce, angry look had faded from his eyes, replaced by a disgruntled one. From time to time, his eyes would drift to the window, and he would gaze out at the sky like an eagle longing for freedom. Minna could not shake the impression that she had trapped a man with a wild heart, whose element was the wide open spaces and drifting golden sand.

Kerrion longed for the sun's warmth on his skin and the wind in his hair, just as Blade preferred stalking the night's shadows. Never had she met two men so completely opposite. One of cold nights, the other of warm days, and yet she could not say which one she preferred. Kerrion drank only a little wine and ate heartily; Blade picked at his food and consumed far too much alcohol, a foil for the Prince's sunny nature with his bitterness. She was glad there was no need to choose between them, for she doubted that she could.

Kerrion looked up and opened a new subject, as if reading her thoughts. "Your assassin, Blade. He is not a man to be trusted."

"What makes you say that?"

"He cares for nothing and no one. Such a man is not to be relied upon."

"He told you this?"

"He did. We had a few interesting conversations on the journey here, although it was like pulling teeth to make him talk."

Minna smiled. "But you acquired the knack, I daresay?"

"I did. He would dearly have liked to kill me for it, but I was able to goad him into divulging his true nature."

"And you maintain that he is not to be trusted?"

"No indeed. He is a cold, unfeeling man. He told me this himself, and boasted that no one is safe from him, should that person find a price on his or her head." He shot her a meaningful glance.

Minna laughed, helping herself to more vegetables. "You think he is a danger to me? His nature is no secret. He told me of it himself. And yes, he even said that he would kill me if he was paid. But I will have you know that he was lying to both of us."

"How can you be so certain? He has no reason to care for you."

"I am his queen, and he is Jashimari, born and bred. He hates the Cotti with a depth I have never encountered before, but he would not harm me. I trust him with my life, and he knows it. Perhaps my trust in him can earn his trustworthiness."

The Prince shook his head and took a sip of wine. "I would not rely on that. Malice has drowned his finer emotions. I fear that no one can reach him now. Look into his eyes and tell me that you see anything other than two pits of ice, and I will call you a liar."

"I will not argue his nature. I am touched by your concern, but I fear that time will prove you wrong. Blade is not a murderer, only an assassin. There is a difference."

"Indeed, he told me that killing brings him no pleasure. Nothing does, but he also has no pity. A man like that is dangerous." Kerrion pushed aside his empty plate, his expression despondent. "I must own that his mutilation was the heinous deed of Cotti soldiers, performed upon him when he was just a boy. I abhor it, and will put an end to the enslavement and torture of captured Jashimari children, if I am allowed to return to my people."

Minna digested this for several moments, hiding her horror. "I had not been told of these crimes against children. Did Blade admit this to you?"

"Yes, he was enslaved, and lived with my soldiers for four years. It shames me deeply."

"I had guessed that the Cotti were responsible. It explains his hatred of them. But I had thought him an isolated case, now you tell me that there are many?"

"Aye," the Prince admitted, "too many."

"This is yet another reason to stop the war. Such atrocities cannot be allowed to continue."

"I agree, but we both know that to stop the war is impossible. The moment I sign a treaty, Lerton will denounce me as a traitor and my life will be worthless, my crown his."

She nodded, lowering her eyes. "I am aware of this. I have another proposition to make, however, one that will solve those problems."

"What is that?"

She took a deep breath, her cheeks warming. "If we are ever to achieve peace between our lands, we must establish blood ties between our thrones. If you were to become my consort, our daughter would bridge the gulf between our peoples. Our families would be forever linked, so even her descendants and the future kings of the Cotti would be related by blood. Nothing is stronger than that, and we can stipulate that your heir must take a Jashimari bride from a powerful noble family, thereby strengthening the ties."

Kerrion stared at her, stunned, then rose and walked over to the windows to gaze out at the sun-drenched garden. Shista raised her head to watch him, then flopped back with a sigh.

He faced Minna again. "So, this is your plan. It is impossible. Your people would never accept my daughter as their queen. They would despise her; call her a half-breed and a mongrel."

"Allow me to know my people a little better than you, Prince. Yes, they would be angry at first, but my daughter will inherit, so it is laid down in the law. Also, I may choose my consort, and nowhere does it state that he must be Jashimari."

Prince Kerrion shook his head. "My people will not accept it. Nor will I. Cotti kings marry. They have wives to bear their sons. I could never be a consort."

"Will you have your pride stand in the way of peace? You will have your wives and sons when you return to your land. To be the Queen's consort is the greatest honour amongst Jashimari."

"But not amongst the Cotti. No, it is impossible."

"Your kings take many concubines, and brag of them. To your people I would be your concubine; to mine you would be my consort. Is either office less insulting? If I can bear the shame of being your concubine in the eyes of your people, surely you can stoop to being my consort in the eyes of mine?"

He frowned. "You are too logical and too clever by far. But I plan to take no concubines and only one wife. I am not my father."

"Then you plan that this war should truly be endless, and this does you little credit."

Kerrion shook his head and stared out at the gardens again. Her proposition surprised him, put as it was in such cold terms. Over the past three days, his initial attraction to her had blossomed into something stronger, although he was not yet prepared to name it. His longing to return to his kingdom warred with an illogical wish to become better acquainted with this fascinating woman.

Never had he met such a strong-willed female, so bent upon her own way that she ran roughshod over others, and yet they took it gladly, if her smile rewarded them. She was exasperating and beguiling, a mixture of sharp wit and shy looks that entranced him. Her presence quickened his heart and gave him an irrational wish to impress her.

That she held him in little regard was evident from her cold-hearted plans to conceive his daughter, then send him back to his people, using their child to bring about peace. Her wishes were noble, however, and he had little objection to them. His father had tried to make him love war, and be proud of the struggle, but now he had seen its ugliness too. Yet he could not agree to her proposal. At best, he would be dethroned and the war would continue. At worst, both kingdoms would plunge into bloody civil war, and their rulers would pay the ultimate price.

He faced her once more, unable to meet her gaze. "I will not agree to this, Queen Minna-Satu."

Minna rose to her feet. "Your people will not make war on the daughter of their king, any more than mine will wish to fight the father of their queen. It is the only way."

"No. Return me to my people, and I shall stop the atrocities. Perhaps, in time, I can divert the nobles' interest, start new industries, and the war will grow less fierce."

“You are a coward, Prince Kerrion.”

“Think what you will. I will not be a part of your insane plan.”

Kerrion stalked out, and Minna sank back onto her cushions, her heart thudding with frustration and anger. Shista, sensing her distress, came over to rub against her and purr. Minna stroked her, the sand cat’s love a balm to her wounded pride. In all her planning and preparation, she had not entertained the possibility that the Prince might refuse. Shamsara’s prediction had been certain. If she captured the Cotti Prince unharmed, a child would be born to her that would be neither Jashimari nor Cotti, and she would heal the breach. Kerrion’s handsomeness and intelligence made her task easy, but his stubbornness was a challenge she must find a way to overcome.

The following day, she entertained the Prince again, but from the outset he looked to be on his guard. Each time she mentioned her proposal, he frowned or turned away, which was far more frustrating than if he had argued. She put forward every argument she could think of to persuade him, but he remained indifferent and rose to none of her bait.

Finally, her temper broke its bonds, and she thumped the table, making the crockery jump. “Damn you, Kerrion, you must see the sense in my proposal! It would pain me greatly to give you to Blade, and deal with your brother instead.”

“You would get no joy from him. Lerton is a snake. He would agree to your plan, then stab you while you slept.”

She grimaced. “I do not like snakes.”

“Few people do, especially cats.”

“Perhaps I should send Blade to threaten his life, then he would have the task of persuading his people to accept peace between us.”

Kerrion smiled. “Even the Invisible Assassin may fail to kill Lerton in his palace.”

Minna leant forward. “You know how he does it, do you not?”

He nodded. “A clever trick.”

“How? Tell me.”

“He prefers to keep it a secret.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You keep his secrets for him now? I thought you disliked him?”

“I do, but I also respect him. He made it plain that he would be unhappy if I divulged what I know.”

“So, you are afraid of him, too. Rest assured, it will go no further than me, and I shall not tell him that you told me.”

“We would all do well to be afraid of him. He is a dangerous man.”

“Tell me.”

Kerrion sipped his wine. “Why do you not order him to tell you?”

She pulled a face. “Order Blade? I hesitate to try. It would be far simpler if you just told me.”

The Prince toyed with his wine cup. “Simply put, he becomes a woman. A very beautiful one, I might add.”

“Of course; I suspected it.”

Kerrion stared into his wine. “It is uncanny. The first time I saw him, he was a Cotti woman with blonde hair and dark skin, a woman’s voice and graceful ways. No one would see through his disguise, I will wager. Not even someone who knew him as a man.”

“He must hate it.”

“I would say so.”

“Death walks beside him, and he will not escape it until he embraces it.”

Kerrion nodded. “He is aptly named, for he cuts both ways. No one is truly safe from him. Do not imagine that you have a hold of him, Minna. A blade cannot be safely grasped, it cuts any who try. Hold it lightly and you may be safe, take a firmer grip, and you will lose your fingers.”

His deduction impressed her. It made a great deal of sense. “I shall bear that in mind.”

After Kerrion left, Minna spent the afternoon wrestling with her problem. That he was not about to be persuaded was now obvious, so she had to find another way. Chiana’s interruption with the day’s business was unwelcome, and she dealt with it as quickly as possible.

By dusk, she had arrived at the only possible solution, and invited Blade to dine with her.



The assassin arrived at the allotted time, clad once more in his old clothes, and glanced around. "Has Kerrion fallen from favour, My Queen?"

"In some ways."

They sat down to a simple meal, and Blade filled his wine cup. He smiled at her worried look. "Do not make yourself uneasy. I do not intend to get drunk."

"I am glad to hear it, for there is a matter I wish to discuss with you."

He spooned braised lamb cutlets in lemon sauce onto his plate. "Ah."

Minna tried to fathom his mood, but his slight smile mocked her efforts. "I have been thinking about your reputation."

He glanced at her, his smile fading.

She hurried on, "You are called the Invisible Assassin because no one sees you, so I must deduce that you are a master of disguise."

Blade shrugged. "Yes."

"I need your help in that regard. I need a disguise that no one can see through, even one who knows me."

"I see."

"Will you help me?"

He sampled the lamb. "How well does this person know you?"

"Quite well."

"By voice as well as sight?"

"Yes."

The assassin took a sip of wine. "And how close will the encounter be?"

"Very close."

"Touching?"

"Yes." Her cheeks warmed as Blade's strange eyes seemed to pierce her soul with their chilly gaze, and she was glad when he lowered them to his plate.

"That makes it a little more difficult, for you will not be able to use skin dyes. They tend to rub off, unless you use the permanent variety, and I suspect you would not wish to do that."

"No. I must be myself again the next day."

His eyes flicked over her face again. "You will have to wear a wig. Red, I think. Some kohl and powder, a little paint, and you must whisper."

"All right."

"When do you wish to do it?"

"Tomorrow night. I shall come to your room quite late. No one else must know of this. It must be our secret."

"Very well. May I ask why you wish to do this, My Queen? You may have your pick of consorts."

"I cannot tell you just yet, but one day soon, I shall."

The assassin regarded her from under lowered brows. "I should warn you that Kerrion does not approve of loose women. He professes not to lie with whores, so be sure he does not mistake you for one. Whether he lies with anything is another matter, I know nothing of his preferences."

Minna frowned, caught off guard. "How dare you? Do not presume to know what I intend."

"Am I wrong?"

She hesitated. "No, you are right."

"Then he is a fool if he does not desire you."

"There is much more to it than that."

"Politics." His eyes narrowed. "This is folly."

"What is?"

"To place the daughter of the Cotti King on the Jashimari throne."

Minna sighed, shaking her head. "You are too clever."

"I did not come this far on stupidity. Do you think your people will accept her?"

"They will have little choice. She will inherit by law."

He concentrated on his food. "They may demand that you bear a pureblood Jashimari Queen. That is within their rights, I believe."

"I shall not."

"Obviously Kerrion does not agree with this scheme of yours, which shows some little wit on his part."

"Does this mean you will not help me?"

He raised his eyes, and she met them with a defiant stare. He shook his head. "I have agreed to help you, My Queen. I do not go back on my word."

She took a gulp of wine to steady her nerves. For the time it had taken him to answer, she had thought he would refuse. The possibility had shaken her, for she knew of no way to make him obey. "And you can make sure Kerrion does not recognise me?"

He shrugged and turned his attention to his meal once more. "A lot depends upon you. You will have to act the part of a servant or handmaiden. You must be humble and obedient. You may not argue or object to anything he wishes. The best way is to imagine that you are who you claim to be, give yourself a name and take on the personality of the person you wish to emulate. Forget that you are a queen and become an awestruck handmaiden whose greatest wish is to bed the Cotti Prince. Do you think you can do that?"

Minna nodded. "Is that how you do it?"

"No. I am an assassin. I would be of little use if I forgot that."

"Of course." She resumed her meal. "Is there anything else I must do?"

"Yes. Bathe before you come to me and use no oils or perfume. I shall purchase something exotic and unfamiliar for you to wear."

She smiled at the incongruous picture his words conjured up. "Will it not seem strange for a man to buy perfume and women's clothes? What will the traders think?"

"Men buy such things for their wives and sweethearts all the time. There is nothing strange about it."

"I suppose so." Her smile broadened. "Have you ever bought such things before?"

He frowned. "This venture of yours may still fail, if the Prince is as he claims, and unmoved by your charms. I shall purchase a potion as well, which you must put in his wine at dinner. It will make him more... amenable."

The Queen pushed her food around her plate, her cheeks warming again. After the maidens cleared away the plates, she leant back and studied him. His reticence irritated her. She longed to know more about him, but knew he would not discuss his past with her, nor had she Kerrion's knack of goading him into speech. Blade sipped his wine and studied a tapestry.

Minna asked, "Have you no objection to a queen who is the daughter of your enemy?"

He glanced at her. "By the time she takes power, I shall either be dead, or too old to care."

"I know you despise this plan, but it is not mine."

"No?"

"No. Some moons ago, I summoned Shamsara and asked for his advice. He gave me a prediction; that peace will come to the land when a child who is neither Jashimari nor Cotti sits upon the Jashimari throne."

"What of the Cotti throne? Why should their blood remain unsullied while we have a half-breed queen?"

She inclined her head. "That is an excellent point, I grant you, but I doubt a Jashimari bride would live long in Cotti, even under Kerrion's protection. Still, it should be attempted."

"What of your daughter? Do you think that she will live long if the people hate her?"

"They cannot kill their queen. That would leave them without a ruler, and plunge the land into anarchy. Kerrion would invade and conquer Jashimari."

"They will not kill you, My Queen, only your daughter. Then you will have to bear another heir, and Kerrion will have returned to his kingdom."

"That is why I shall need you," she said. "My loyal spies will inform me of the plots, and you will take care of those who would pit themselves against me. When it is announced that the Idol of the Beasts has sanctioned this child, even some who dislike the idea will take my side."

Blade appeared to lose interest, turning his attention elsewhere once more, and, shortly after, Minna-Satu gave him leave to go.

## Chapter Ten

The next morning, Blade walked into the city. He declined the horse the grooms offered, for he had ever been more comfortable on foot, and found it less conspicuous. Clad in his dark clothes, he strolled along the broad streets that ran through the centre of Jondar. The metropolis bustled with people, mostly well-dressed merchants and nobles, in this more affluent area.

Carriages rumbled past on the cobbled streets, and sweaty servants carried ladies in sedan chairs. Street cleaners collected dung to fill the little carts they pulled, which they would add to the vast compost heaps on the city's outskirts. When it was sufficiently mature, they would sell it to farmers and gardeners to enrich their soil.

Noblemen rode in gossiping groups, or sprawled on benches outside drinking establishments and sipped ale or wine. An occasional park afforded a place for the children of nobles and merchants to play when the schools closed. Officers of the Watch patrolled, on hand to chase away urchins or pickpockets who strayed from the slums. Most of the buildings were constructed from dressed stone, their steep grey slate roofs designed to slough off the winter snow.

Merchants displayed their wares under tarpaulins outside their shops, and women examined bolts of cloth or haggled over ornaments, jewellery and leather goods. Many nobles watched Blade pass with narrow eyes, but while his garb hinted at his profession, it did not reveal it sufficiently to evoke any spitting or rude comments.

Blade was more at home when he reached the narrow, filthy back alleys in which he had spent so much of his life. Beggars rattled tin cups at passers-by, and pickpockets moved amongst the pedestrians with busy hands. Men stepped from his path with furtive glances, while harridans nudged their fellows and cast him knowing looks. A few thin horses pulled rickety carts, and rising damp stained the white-washed buildings. The stench of garbage mingled with the sickly scent of incense and stale ale. Drunkards lay in the gutter or slumped in doorways, their pockets picked clean.

Raucous singing emanated from taprooms, and housewives threw buckets of slops into the gutter. Urchins picked through the garbage and fought with dogs for scraps of bread. Threading his way through the whores and beggars, Blade headed for a building tucked away in a dead end street. He entered a dingy taproom populated by a few drunken men and several dishevelled harlots. Rough-hewn tables and benches cluttered the soot-stained room, and mildewed rushes covered the floor. A glance into the darkest corners ascertained that the one he sought was not there, and he gripped the arm of a passing trollop. She leered up at him, but he ignored her gap-toothed invitation.

"Where's Lilu?" he asked, using the common speech.

Her smile vanished. "Her again! She's in the back, but she's busy. I'm not, though."

He pushed her away. "I can see why."

The whore cursed him vilely as he made for the dirty curtain that separated the rooms at the back from the taproom. As he neared Lilu's room, he became aware of thuds and shrieks coming from within. Not caring if he interrupted her client, he pushed open the sagging door and walked in.

Lilu knelt before a brawny man who gripped her tangled brown hair. Blade eyed them, and Lilu cried, "Blade! Help me! He's trying to kill me!"

The man shook her. "Liar! I want my money back, you filthy whore! You stole from me!"

Lilu wailed, "Help me, Blade!"

The assassin leant against the wall and folded his arms. "If you stole from the man, give it back."

"I can't! I don't have it anymore!"

The man growled and slapped her. "You'd better find it, you damned whore!"

Lilu clutched her torn dress and wailed again, clawing at the big man's beefy hand. "Let me go, you bastard! Don't you know what he is?"

The man glanced at Blade, who shrugged. He recognised the man as a local armourer, a towering giant covered with muscles earned from years spent at the forge. He had no intention of tangling with such a brute.

"I'll not interfere," he assured the armourer.

"Damn you, Blade!" Lilu shrieked. "You owe me!"

"Be quiet, bitch!" the man roared, dragging her towards the lumpy, rumped bed. "I'll take it out of your hide until you give me back my money!"

"No!" Lilu grabbed at passing furniture. "He'll kill you! He's my friend!"

Blade raised his brows a fraction at this assertion, and the armourer snarled, "That little runt won't lift a finger to help you, trollop!"

Lilu seized a candle-holder and beat the man about the head with it. He yanked it from her grasp and flung it across the room, narrowly missing the assassin. Lilu's beating further enraged the man, who pinned her to the bed and slapped her. She clawed at his eyes, making him roar with pain, then kicked him in the shins. He grabbed her throat and throttled her.

"Blade!" she squeaked. "He's killing me!"

He frowned. "Why don't you two sort this out in a decent manner? Whatever she stole from you, she can pay back in kind."

The man glared at the assassin. "Twenty goldens! She'll be on her back for the next three years."

Blade shrugged. "I'm sure you'll require her services."

"I have to pay my rent!"

The assassin sighed. "Don't you have any money, Lilu?"

"No!" She glowered at him. "Just get rid of him. Don't waste your time talking."

"It seems that he's in the right, if you stole his money."

"He won't get it back if he kills me!"

The man squeezed, silencing her, and banged her head on the headboard. "I want my money now!"

"She can't give it to you if she hasn't got it," Blade pointed out.

"You stay out of this!" the armourer bellowed.

"I'm only trying to help."

"Why don't you get lost, you little fop?"

Blade shook his head. "I need to speak to Lilu."

The armourer straightened, his bloodshot eyes glaring. "Bugger off!"

"No."

The man swung with a roar, releasing the hapless harlot, and charged Blade. The assassin stepped aside, and the armourer smashed his fist into the wooden wall where Blade's head had been an instant before. The broken timbers trapped the giant's hand, and he struggled to pull it out.

Lilu coughed and rubbed her throat, sitting up. "Kill him, Blade! I'll pay you!"

He shot her an angry glance. "You don't have any money."

The armourer jerked his hand free and swung on the assassin again, bearing down on him like a charging bear. Blade stepped aside and headed for the door, unwilling to become embroiled in a fight. The man lunged at him, caught Blade's shoulder and spun him around with a powerful yank. The assassin stumbled, lost his footing and fell backwards into the narrow corridor, where he landed with a grunt, banging his head on the wall. The armourer came after him, raising a boot to stamp on his belly. Blade rolled away and leapt to his feet, heading for the taproom.

"Come back here, you coward!" the man bellowed, following.

Blade turned and jumped up to grab the lintel of the taproom door, jerked up his legs and smashed his boots into the armourer's face. The big man reeled back, blood oozing from his nose. Blade trotted into the taproom, making good his escape. The armourer, however, was made of sterner stuff, and his head from solid bone it seemed, for within seconds he came after the fleeing assassin. Blade vaulted a table just ahead of his pursuer, and the men in the taproom, seeing a fight, shouted and blocked the exit.

Blade turned, glancing about for an escape route. The armourer swung a punch, which, had it connected, might have ripped Blade's head off. The assassin ducked and dived for the door, but two bystanders caught him and flung him back. He cursed as he almost fell into his foe's grasping hands, twisting aside to roll under a table. The armourer kicked the table out of the way, and one of its legs struck the assassin a glancing blow on the temple.

Stars flashed in his eyes, and he glimpsed Lilu's grinning face amongst the crowd, shouting encouragement with the rest. At least, if nothing else, she seemed to be on his side. A beefy arm snaked around his neck and dragged him to his feet, choking him. He jabbed an elbow into his opponent's ribs, making him grunt, but he hung on. Gripping the man's arm, Blade heaved him over his shoulder, breaking his grip as the armourer crashed onto his back, splintering a table. Blade made for the door, but the man scrambled up and charged after him, unaffected by his fall.

Several men blocked the assassin's way, and he turned, dodging the giant's charge. The armourer hooked his fingers into Blade's collar, the only place he could gain purchase. Blade was spun around with tremendous force and smashed into the wall, turning his head at the last moment to save his nose. Again stars sparkled in his eyes, and he became aware of his danger as the big man lunged at him,

trying to crush him against the wall. With an agile twist, Blade evaded him and sprang onto a table. The armorer swung with a growl and rushed at him, smashing the table aside. Blade lost his footing and was forced to dive through the window.

Landing on the street in a shower of glass, he rolled away and leapt up in time to meet the giant's charge as the armorer followed him. Blade was lifted off his feet and thrown backwards, the man on top of him, his weight punching the air from Blade's lungs. The armorer glared down at him, a gap-toothed leer splitting his bullish visage. He raised a fist, but the assassin drew a dagger and pressed it to the man's throat. The armorer froze.

Blade snarled, "Get off me, you great oaf."

The giant's eyes narrowed with cunning calculation. "You're not going to use that little pig sticker, runt."

Unable to hide his trade any longer without being severely beaten, the assassin pulled his collar open with his free hand. The armorer's eyes widened, and he lowered his fist and climbed to his feet. Blade held the weapon against the man's throat until he moved out of reach, whereupon the armorer regained his bravado and spat blood on the muddy street.

"Damned assassin! I beat you fair and square, killer!"

Blade sat up, gasping a little. "That's hardly surprising."

"Little runts like you shouldn't go around picking fights!"

The assassin glanced at their audience. "I didn't start it."

"You shouldn't stick your nose in where it don't belong," the armorer said, still trying to pretend he had won the fight.

Blade was quite prepared to allow him that satisfaction. He did not care who claimed victory, only that he was still in one piece. He stood up and clutched his stomach, then rubbed his cheek. Sheathing the dagger, he fastened his collar. The armorer sneered and sidled away with his cronies.

Lilu rushed up and grabbed Blade's arm. "You did it! You beat him! You should have killed him."

He shoved her away. "I didn't want to fight him, and I certainly wasn't going to kill him. Also, don't imagine that I did it for you. I'm sure you deserved the beating you were getting."

Lilu pulled a face and shot a venomous glare at the armorer's back. Her fading looks were vanishing under a layer of puffy flesh. Bitterness lined the skin around her mouth and between her brows, and matronly plumpness ruined a once slender figure. She had never been beautiful, but now, with several missing teeth and a broken nose from angry clients, she was quite ugly. Still, she had taken in a half-dead man and nursed him back to health with such diligence that Blade, no matter how he hated to owe any favours, had to admit that he owed her something.

That did not include, he vowed to himself, taking on enraged clients the size of the armorer. Lilu had a penchant for filching money from her clients while they slept, a reason for her frequent beatings. She always survived, however. She seemed as indestructible as the earth itself, and was probably in less pain at this moment than he was. He fingered his jaw, making sure none of his teeth were loose. Lilu clicked her tongue and renewed her hold on his arm, tugging him back into the brothel. "I'll see to your hurts, my love."

Blade scowled at her, but allowed her to lead him to her room, where she pushed him down on the creaky bed with rumpled grey sheets and a tatty patchwork quilt. She left to fetch a bowl of water and a cloth, and when she returned, angry shouts from the brothel keeper, who demanded recompense for his broken window, followed her. Lilu paused to yell an insult from the doorway, then forced the sagging door closed to shut out the stream of vitriol from the taproom. Casting Blade a weary smile, she sat beside him and put the bowl on a rickety table, dipping the cloth in it. When she dabbed at the mud on his cheeks, he jerked his head aside and took the cloth to wipe his face.

"You always were a big baby," she remonstrated. "How you moaned and groaned when I was tending to your hurts after I found you lying in the gutter, more dead than alive."

"How you love to keep reminding me of that."

"I saved your life."

"And you'll never let me forget it."

She pouted. "They do say that when you save a person's life, it belongs to you."

Blade grimaced as he fingered the lump on his temple. Picking up a cracked mirror, he examined himself in it. "Wonderful, I look like I've been in a taproom brawl."

"You have."

"Because of you. Why must you always rob your clients? You know it only gets you into trouble."

"They pay me next to nothing, and I've got five children to feed. How am I supposed to do that?"

Most times they don't notice the missing money, they're so drunk, and even when they do, they don't know I took it."

"But when they do figure it out, they beat the stuffing out of you."

She rubbed her bruises with a shrug. "It's worth it. Twenty goldens will feed my children for three moons."

"Lucky for you that you had already sent it to them."

"It's right here." She opened a drawer in the cupboard and took out a pouch that clinked. "I only took it last night. I haven't had a chance to see my little ones."

Blade groaned, flexing his aching jaw. "You astound me. The bravest warrior would have given it back before taking a beating like that."

She snorted. "Then I'm tougher than them. Why should I give it back? He wouldn't have killed me."

"That's not what you said when I walked in."

"I wanted you to stop him."

"That great mountain of brawn? What do you take me for?"

"Certainly not a gentleman."

Blade finished wiping his face and tossed the rag aside, leaning back against the wall. For a moment he frowned at her, then he smiled. "No, I'm not that."

Lilu pounced on him and hugged him. "I've missed you. Where have you been?"

The assassin pushed her off. "Away."

Lilu gazed at him, clearly hurt by his rejection, then sat up to brush her hair and tug her ragged clothes into some semblance of order before facing him again. "I know I'm ugly, but you don't have to be so cold. Even whores need a hug now and then, you know, and you are my friend."

He pulled a face, turning away from her smell of stale sweat and sour wine. "I'm not your friend, and I didn't come here to see you."

"Why not?" She grinned. "I wouldn't charge you, you know that."

Blade sat up, moving out of her reach. "I didn't come here to argue with you about that again, either."

"So why did you come?"

"I need you to buy some things for me. Here's a list." He pulled a piece of paper from his tunic and handed it to her. "Can you read?"

Lilu scowled. "Of course I can read." She scanned the paper. "Perfume? Another wig? What do you need this for?"

"None of your business." He handed her a bag of coins. "Pay for it out of this. Whatever's left, you can keep."

She hefted the bag and grinned. "When do you want it?"

"Now. I'll wait here."

Lilu pouted, but rose and rummaged in her wardrobe, producing a dress almost as tattered as the one she was wearing. Blade closed his eyes while she changed, opening them as the door closed behind her. He yawned, then stretched out and settled down to wait.

The door opening woke him, and he sat up as Lilu entered, dropping a bag on the floor. She unpinned her cheap bonnet and bounced onto the bed beside him, flinging her arms around him again.

"I'm back!"

Blade fended her off. "I noticed. Did you get everything?"

"Sure." She frowned. "What do you need the lovers' potion for?"

"Never you mind." He rose and picked up the bag.

"Wait!" Lilu jumped up and grabbed his arm. "You can't leave now. Stay and have a glass of wine with me."

He shook his head. "I haven't the time."

"You do! Please, don't leave yet." Her eyes filled with tears, and he hesitated.

"What is it?"

"I..." She brushed at her cheeks. "I'm lonely. I have no one to talk to. Won't you just stay a little while, please?" Her soft brown eyes pleaded.

Blade sighed and put down the bag. "I don't know why I listen to you. You're a nuisance."

"Because you know you owe me your life, and even you're not so cold-hearted as to forget that."

"How could I, with you to remind me?" He sat on the bed, tolerating her possessive hold on his arm.

She stroked his hair, and he jerked away in annoyance. "My assassin, that's what you are, Blade. When I found you in that gutter, I thought you were dead. I paid that healer good money to set your bones and stitch up your wounds."

"I paid you back."

"The money, yes, but I spent long time-glasses nursing you, feeding you, cooling your fevered brow."

Blade frowned, barely able to remember the blurred images of that time, when fever had fogged his mind and pain had racked him. Vaguely he recalled gentle hands washing his wounds, pressing a cup to his lips and wiping away what spilt from them.

She stroked his arm, smiling. "I washed every inch of this beautiful body of yours."

He glanced at her, surprised. "You did?"

"Who else?" She looked at him flirtatiously through her lashes.

"And you never noticed...?"

"Course I did. What kind of fool do you take me for?"

"Then why do you keep flirting with me?"

"Just teasing you! You shouldn't be so touchy about it."

He eyed her. "So why are you telling me this now?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just needed something to talk about, and nothing else sprang to mind."

Lilu rose and poured him a cup of wine from a bottle in the cupboard across the room, ignoring the bottle beside the bed. He took a gulp as she sat beside him again, slipping her arm through his.

She said, "You know, I heard a story from one of my customers the other day. He told me that those men the Queen sent to kill King Shandor all failed, and she sent one man to do the job. Would you believe, he succeeded, and he brought back the Cotti Prince?" Lilu's eyes narrowed. "I hope the Queen flays him alive, one little strip of skin at a time. The man she sent, she's made a lord now, given him lands and riches, which he deserves, of course." She glanced at him again. "They call him the Queen's Blade."

"Do they?"

"They do. And they say that he's an assassin, and he now has the Queen's favour."

"Lucky man."

"Yes." She squeezed his arm. "And he's not married."

Blade disentangled himself and stood up. "It's time I was going."

"You owe me, Blade!"

He swung on her. "I didn't ask to be saved! Maybe you should have left me to die."

"No." She rose to face him. "You're a good man, and if I hadn't saved you, King Shandor would still be alive to wage the Endless War."

"You think his son won't carry on with it?"

"His son's a prisoner of the Queen."

"He has fifteen brothers." Blade banged the wine cup down on the table.

Lilu shook her head. "I don't care about that. You could make me very happy. Don't I deserve it?"

"You're asking to be my wife?"

She nodded. "I know what you are, and I don't care. I've had my fill of it. All I ask is a home for my children and money to live on. You can afford it now. No one else would have saved you. I did it out of the goodness of my heart, because you looked like a kind man. You have a noble face. I didn't expect anything in return, and you had nothing then. But you do now, and all I'm asking is a little share in it. Not much. I know you'd be ashamed of me. I'd never expect you to acknowledge me publicly, I mean, with your new friends. You could send me to your estate, and I'd stay there and raise my children. That's all I ask."

"No."

"Please, Blade!" Fresh tears filled her eyes, and she grasped his arm again. "I can't bear this life anymore! Have you no pity?"

"No, I don't." He regarded her coldly. "You did what you did for your own selfish reasons, whatever they were."

"I couldn't let you die!"

"You thought I might be a meal ticket."

"No!" She hung on when he tried to free himself. "I didn't, I swear! Don't leave me in this dump. I'm begging you. You have no reason to marry. Surely you can do it to save me, as I saved you? If

you leave me here, I'll die."

"I doubt that," he said, trying to prise her hands from his arm, but she clung to him like a limpet and sank to her knees, almost dragging him down with her. "Stop this, Lilu!"

"Don't, oh god, don't leave me here!" She buried her face in his thigh, transferred her hold to it and shook with a storm of wailing sobs.

Blade stared down at her, annoyed and confused. A vision flashed before his eyes. *A little girl knelt in the burning sand, her face streaked with tears, her hands raised in pleading. A girl with grey eyes and midnight hair, skin that had been as pale as milk until the fierce sun had reddened it. Her eyes were his own, and she wept before a laughing Cotti officer, begging.* She had died a few days later. He had wept then, but not since. Somewhere, he had lost his pity. He opened his eyes. Lilu raised a tear-stained face, ugly, beaten and abused, her expression despairing.

"All right, Lilu." He raised a hand to stem her leap of joy. "I'll not marry you, but you may go to my estate and live there with your children."

She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely, ignoring his attempts to prise her free. "Thank you, Blade! Oh, thank you, thank you!"

Lilu rained kisses on his face until he put a hand over her mouth and pushed her away. She bounced around the room, throwing tattered dresses onto the floor and flinging pots of powder and paint at the walls. "No more of this! I'm free! I can be with my children."

He glanced around, longing to leave. "Have you a quill and paper?"

She rushed to the dresser and yanked open a drawer. "Yes."

Blade scribbled a note, ordering whoever was in charge of his estate to provide Lilu and her children with board and lodging, money for clothes and schooling. It was the first time he had used his newly acquired rank, and signed his name 'Lord Conash'. Lilu snatched the paper and read it with a grin. Blade grabbed the bag and headed for the door.

Lilu reach it first and barred it.

"Now what?" he demanded.

"If only you could know the joy I'm feeling now."

"I'll try to imagine it."

"I was right. You are a good man. It's all there inside of you, hidden away, buried under ice." She tapped his chest. "I wish I could reach it."

"You're wrong. I did it to put an end to your carping. Now I must go."

She tried to stroke his cheek, but he evaded her caress. "My children will know who saved them from the gutter. My sons will honour your name. You're going to be a legend."

"Leave the predictions to Shamsara, Lilu. You've got what you wanted; now get out of my way."

She stood aside. "Goodbye, Blade. God be with you."

"I doubt that," he retorted, brushing past her into the corridor.

On the walk back to the palace, he wondered at his generosity and the momentary weakness that had prompted it. Perhaps she deserved some reward for saving his life. At least now he no longer had to be burdened with the sense of owing her something. He tried to imagine the shock and horror of his undoubtedly well-bred retainers when a broken-nosed whore arrived with five bastards in tow and a letter from their new lord ordering them to care for her. The thought brought a little amusement to brighten his day and compensate for his face's throbbing.

At the palace, he went to his rooms and ordered a bath, forced to don some of his new finery afterwards. The manservant grimaced at the state of his clothes and took them away to be cleaned, his expression making it clear that he would rather have burnt them. Blade sent the vial of potion to the Queen with a letter that told her how to use it, then settled down to wait, playing a game of peeress with himself.

The Queen arrived in his chamber at the chosen time, and her eyes widened at the sight of his bruised face. "My Lord Conash. What happened?"

He bowed. "My Queen. A minor altercation. Nothing serious."

Minna-Satu smiled. "Who won?"

"He did."

Her brows rose. "You surprise me. You, who are so deadly?"

"I am not a taproom brawler, My Queen. In my profession, there is seldom a call to fight; I am no expert at it."

"Then you should have run away."

"I tried."



“I see.” She settled on a pile of cushions. “Did you get what you need?”

He nodded.

“Good, then let us proceed.”

Over the next time-glass, Blade worked his magic on the Queen, transforming her, with the aid of paint and powder, into a sultry handmaiden even he barely recognised. During the times when he was forced to come into close contact with her in order to paint her eyes and don the wig, he avoided her gaze. When he finished she donned the cheap, but alluring gown and perfume, and he stood back to study her, nodding in satisfaction.

As he was putting away the pots of paint and powder, he said, “What of your safety, My Queen? Should Kerrion grow violent for any reason, what protection do you have?”

“Shista will come with me, unobserved, of course.”

He nodded. “Good.”

“Do you really think Prince Kerrion is a violent man?”

“I know him little, but I feel that he is unpredictable. He resents his captivity more than he shows. His politeness towards you is studied. You gave him the potion?”

“As you instructed.”

“That will help.”

Minna brushed at the silken gown. The red wig fell about her shoulders in coiled, gleaming tresses, and, being pinned to her luxuriant mane, seemed amazingly thick. He moved closer to tug at it, ensuring its security, and she gazed at him, turning away when he finished. At the door she paused, her eyes pools of sorrow.

“Thank you.”

He bowed. “My Queen.”

Blade lay awake for some time, staring at the ceiling. The Queen’s sadness seemed strange. He had expected nervousness, and the excitement of a maid going to her first lover, not solemnity and sorrow. Her mood was better suited to a woman facing the gallows than a queen encountering her chosen consort. He tried to puzzle out the meaning of it, but failed, drifting into the dark arms of sleep.

In the morning, a sealed package containing the wig and clothes was delivered, but Blade only saw the Queen again three days later, at a supper party. Several other lords and Kerrion attended, and Minna-Satu appeared distant, her attitude stiff and her expression guarded. She managed a brief smile when Blade arrived. Kerrion seemed morose, and picked at his food with an uncharacteristic lack of appetite. The nobles ignored the assassin, who ate his meal in silence, too far from the Queen to speak to her.

Kerrion was also seated further down the table between two lords. Blade watched the stilted interaction between the Prince and the Queen, gleaned little from it. Their conversation was curtly polite, although this seemed to be Kerrion’s doing more than Minna’s. The Prince’s eyes, however, rested upon her often whenever she glanced elsewhere, and when he was not looking, she gazed at him. Several times, Blade caught Minna looking at him, and wondered at this also.

Queen Minna-Satu’s gaze was often drawn to the Prince, the memory of their encounter still fresh. Since that night, she had hardly seen him, and he had declined her invitations to dine together. When she had visited him, he had been aloof and asked her to leave. The invitation to this party had been formal, so he had been obliged to accept, or appear rude, but his behaviour puzzled her.

Certainly he had not seen through her disguise, yet now he seemed to want nothing to do with her. She longed to admit her guilt and tell him that their encounter had meant so much more to her than merely conceiving a child, but could not. The sorrow of that concealment ate at her, and their cold politeness towards each other brought fresh pain with each occasion, yet she longed to share his company as often as she could. She also watched the assassin, wondering what thoughts hid behind his bland expression and cold eyes.

Trouble was brewing in her court; she could sense it even here at the supper table, although Blade seemed oblivious to it. Kerrion was too sunk in his thoughts to notice or care, but she noticed sly glances between some of her senior lords, which disturbed her, and she watched them warily.

After the dinner, she ordered extra guards to be stationed at the doors and windows of Kerrion’s rooms, intuition warning her of his danger. The next day, she sent four spies to the lords who had

aroused her suspicions, and decided to dine with them more often, so she could monitor their collaboration. Usually her lords spent most of their time scheming against each other and vying for her favour, now some of them seemed to be joining forces.

## Chapter Eleven

Mendal pushed aside the musty curtain and entered the gloomy room in the bowels of the palace, which had once been used as a royal burial chamber. Eight queens were interred within its dusty confines, using all the available floor space, and a new chamber had been designated for later burials. Since then, this room had been all but forgotten, and made an excellent meeting place far from prying eyes and ears. No one ventured down here anymore, not even the cleaners or historians. The undisturbed dust that filmed the floor and tombs testified to that.

Adding his torch to the four that already burnt in wall sconces, he surveyed his collaborators. The four lords seemed ill at ease in each other's company, more used to being at odds. Lord Mordon scowled at Lord Bellcamp, his dark eyes burning with hate in his thin, saturnine face. He resembled his kin, the ferret, and his quick movements and darting black eyes made his beast easy to recognise. Lord Bellcamp met his glare with pale eyes of icy blue, his thick red brows drawn together. The coldness of his stare betrayed his affinity with sharks, a rare beast for a powerful man.

Beside Bellcamp's beefy frame, the massive bulk of Lord Durlan strained at the seams of his clothes, and he mopped his face with a lacy linen handkerchief. He frowned at everyone, angered by the humid confines of the underground room, as any man of the boar would be. Lord Javare made up the final member of the quartet, but he ignored them all with equal scorn, a head of noble grey hair redeeming his rather brutish features. His beast was not so easily read, but Mendal found a kindred spirit in this man of snakes. His familiar, a ringed ground snake, had no venom, but could inflict a painful bite.

Mendal drew their attention as he sat on a dusty tomb with no regard for the remains of the ancient queen that rested within it. "So, we are all here," he observed, shooting each a scathing glance. "And you have managed not to kill each other. Amazing."

"There is more at stake now," Lord Javare said.

"Indeed," Mendal agreed. "All of your futures."

Lord Bellcamp asked, "How do we know what you claim is true, Mendal? You no longer have the Queen's confidence."

"I have spies. Why do you suppose the Prince is still alive? Do you think the Queen requires his entertainment? No, she is negotiating peace with him, and if she succeeds, you will all be ruined."

"And you," Lord Durlan said. "Why do we have to come to this stinking hot place?"

"Because there are no spies here," Mendal retorted, his eyes raking the lord's portly form.

"So what is the plan?" Lord Mordon asked. "Let us get on with this; I long to quit this company."

Mendal nodded. "We now know the Queen does not plan to execute Kerrion as we hoped. She keeps him alive for a reason, and I start to suspect that she will send him back to the desert. We cannot allow this. The war must continue, or we all face ruin."

"But how do we know she talks of peace with him, and, if she does, that he will agree?" Lord Bellcamp enquired. "Perhaps we need do nothing, for nothing will come of it. If he agrees to peace, his people will cast him out and place his brother Lerton on the throne."

"Not if Lerton's life is threatened," Mendal stated. "If the Queen sent Blade with Prince Kerrion, the threat to Lerton's life would prevent him from overthrowing Kerrion."

"Why Blade?" Javare asked. "Surely Kerrion has assassins?"

"They are not as good, and besides, what assassin do you know who would kill his own prince? A Cotti assassin would not do the deed, but Blade would delight in killing Lerton. Knowing this, and Blade's reputation, the mere threat to his life would be sufficient to silence Lerton, who, we hear, is fond of staying alive."

"So what is our course?" Lord Durlan queried. "Let us not waste time arguing petty details."

"Kill Kerrion," Mendal said. "With him out of the way, the Queen cannot strike a truce, and that will put Lerton on the throne."

"The Queen can still threaten him with Blade," Mordon pointed out.

"Without Kerrion's help, Blade would find it difficult to assassinate Lerton, who is not one for coming to the front as Shandor did. I doubt that threat would work, and if Blade was sent to kill only him, another brother would be waiting to take his place, and more after him. Even if Blade succeeded in wiping out the entire royal family, he would be unable to stop the war. The assassinations would enrage the Cotti. No, the Queen needs Kerrion to make peace, and once he is gone, so will any hope

of it be.”

“That is it then,” Lord Bellcamp declared. “We are agreed. Kerrion must die.”

“And many will applaud that action,” Mordon noted.

“Indeed,” Mendal agreed. “All we need do now is hire an assassin.”

“Pity Blade is not available,” Mordon grumbled.

“Lord Conash,” Mendal said, “is firmly in the Queen’s employ. Only a fool would approach him.”

“That is what I said.” Lord Mordon rose, jerked his torch from the sconce and headed for the door.

“I shall make the arrangements.”

Three nights after the dinner with Queen Minna-Satu, the sound of running feet in the corridor outside his room roused Blade. He grabbed the dagger wedged between the top of the mattress and the headboard and turned as his door burst open. Two guards entered, carrying torches. His manservant, looking ruffled and puffy-eyed, ran in and lighted the lamps.

The soldiers bowed, and one said, “Lord Conash, the Queen requires you at once.”

Blade slid from the bed and pulled on his trousers and a shirt, not bothering to tuck it in. “What is the trouble?”

“An attempted assassination of Prince Kerrion.”

“Attempted?”

“The assassin failed. He is dead.”

Blade frowned. “So what must I do about it?”

“The Queen requires you.”

“Yes, I am coming.”

Blade followed the guards into Kerrion’s brightly lighted bedroom, which was filled with soldiers. The Prince paced about, his eyes glinting, and a black-clad man lay in a pool of blood. Blade turned away, covering his mouth as his stomach heaved. Several cruel spear thrusts had eviscerated the strange assassin. Kerrion glared at the Queen’s assassin.

“Squeamish, Blade? One of your own kind, eh?”

Blade glowered at the Prince. “What happened?”

“He tried to kill me.”

“Obviously. Why are you not dead?”

“He tripped on the rug,” Kerrion gestured. “The sound woke me up, and I hit him before he could cut me. Then I shouted for the guards, and they killed him.”

“Pity.”

“A friend of yours, was he?”

“No, but he could have been followed to his employer if he was not dead. Then we might have found out who hired him. A dead assassin is of no use at all.”

“Better than a live one,” the Prince retorted. “At least I am not the one lying in a pool of blood.” He hesitated. “For a moment, I thought it was you.”

“Then you would have been lying in a pool of blood, although not such a large one. I do not trip over rugs.”

“How did he get in here?”

The assassin glanced around. “There is probably a secret passage somewhere in this room.” He turned to a soldier. “Have you searched him?”

“No, My Lord.”

“Then do it.”

The search produced a pouch of gold and a blood-stained map with instructions written on it in a flowing hand. Blade studied it.

“The entrance seems to be behind those curtains.” He pointed to the far side of the room, and two soldiers went over to pull the gold-trimmed burgundy velvet aside, revealing polished wood panelling. One panel was open, and a dark passage yawned beyond. The men entered it with their torches, but Blade shook his head.

“They will not find anyone down there. The assassin was given a map from the outside. He did not need any help getting here.”

Kerrion eyed the bag of gold the soldier held. “They did not pay him very much, did they?”

Blade glanced at the pouch. “That is just the down payment. Assassins do not get paid until the deed is done.”

“My Lord,” one of the soldiers said, “the Queen wishes a report as soon as you are ready.”

Blade nodded. “Very well, I have seen enough here.” Two guards followed as he went to the door.

Kerrion strode after him. “I must see the Queen.”

“What about?” The assassin paused in the doorway.

“This.” Kerrion gestured to the slain assassin.

“I can tell her what happened.”

“I have to speak to her.”

Blade’s eyes narrowed at the Prince’s tone, then he shrugged. “Very well. If she consents.”

The assassin led the way, and the guards fell in behind Kerrion.

Queen Minna-Satu paced around her gold-pillared lounge, clad in a flowing blue satin robe, her hair loose. She halted as Blade entered alone, leaving the Prince outside with the soldiers.

He bowed. “My Queen.”

“Blade, what happened?”

“Someone sent an assassin to kill Kerrion.”

“Who?”

“I do not know. Kerrion wishes to see you. He waits outside.”

A flush stole into Minna’s cheeks, and she looked away. “Let him in.”

The Prince entered and inclined his head to her. “Minna-Satu.”

She nodded before turning to Blade again. “What can you tell me?”

He shrugged. “The assassin’s name was Slash. He specialised in slitting throats. He was one of the better assassins, more experienced. He entered through the secret passage that leads to Kerrion’s room. Someone gave him a map.”

“You have it?”

He nodded.

“Let me see.” Blade handed her the map, and she frowned at it. “Lord Mordon.”

“Is it his writing?”

“I would know it anywhere. I have seen it often enough on petitions and letters. How dare he?”

She flung the map aside. “He will pay!”

“Why would he do it?”

She gestured, turning away. “He owns a large armouring business. An end to the war would ruin him. Obviously he suspects that I try to talk peace with Prince Kerrion. By killing him, he would end any hope of it.”

“Do you think he acted alone?”

She shook her head. “I doubt it.”

“Then you should arrest him, and find out who his collaborators are.”

“No.” Minna went over to a pile of gold-embroidered crimson cushions and sank onto them. Shista watched from her place by the windows, her eyes wide at the tension. “If I arrest him, he must go before the courts, and it will become public that I am protecting Prince Kerrion. The people still expect his execution any day. They will not be happy to see one of their lords punished for trying to kill an enemy prince. There will be riots.”

Kerrion said, “But he must be stopped, or he will try again.”

“Killing one wolf will not stop the pack,” Blade remarked. “We must find out who the others are.”

“He will be stopped,” Minna stated. “And sometimes killing the leader does stop the pack, if they are clever. Blade, you will see to it.”

“You want him dead?”

“Yes. I do not care who his collaborators are. His death will dissuade them.”

“It may not.”

“I will double the guard on the Prince, and place a man in his room.”

Kerrion said, “In view of this, I must ask you to return me to the desert. My life is in danger here. If you do not intend to execute me, send me to safety.”

“No,” Minna said. “The time is not right. You will be returned a moon phase from now.”

“Why? What are you waiting for? We have agreed that no treaty can be made between us, so there is no point in my staying here.”

“I have decided when you will return, and it will be in a moon phase. I shall ensure your safety. Once Mordon is dead, the others will lose heart, for they will be lost without their leader.”

“How do you know he is their leader?” Blade enquired.

His question clearly surprised the Queen. “He must be. He is a senior lord. He drew the map.”

Blade nodded, accepting this, for he knew little of politics. It was not his place to argue with the Queen, and he did not care if Kerrion lived or died, nor whether the war ended. The prospect of an assassination gave him a sense of purpose, and something to occupy him. It would require some planning, since, as a high-ranking aristocrat, Lord Mordon would be heavily guarded.

“Do you wish it to be quick or slow?”

She tried to hide a shudder. “Quick.”

He bowed. “My Queen.”

She waved a hand. “You may go, My Lord Conash.”

After the assassin left, Minna enquired, “Is there something else, Prince Kerrion?”

He avoided her eyes. “This is madness. Why keep me here, when you have no further use for me?”

“Are you in such a hurry to return to the desert?”

“If I am to keep my throne, I must do so soon. Lerton will be plotting against me in my absence. Every day I am away strengthens his position. In a moon phase he could declare me a traitor and usurp my crown. My people expect you to execute me, just as yours do. If I stay here too long and return unharmed, they will be angry and suspicious.”

Minna studied her hands. “And is there nothing here that makes you want to stay?”

“How could there be? Everyone here hates me. I am the enemy. I am a prisoner, no matter how well I am treated.”

She looked up at him. “I do not hate you.”

Kerrion swung away to pace. “Then you are the only one. Do you think that keeping me here will change my mind? We have agreed that there is no hope of finding a way to make peace between us.”

“Do you hate me?”

He stopped and faced her. “No. But we are the rulers of two kingdoms at war. No matter what we may think of each other, we cannot be friends. Neither of us can afford to go against the wishes of our people, and start a civil war. You are in a stronger position than me, for your people do not have a horde of siblings with whom to replace you. I, at least, can promise to try to lessen the war effort, stop the atrocities. If my brother takes the throne, it will intensify.”

“I do not want your brother on the throne. Nor will I be satisfied with anything less than peace.”

“You are a stubborn woman, true to your race. Yet your wishes can never come true, I am afraid.”

Minna-Satu rose to her feet, her expression aloof. “I bid you goodnight, Prince Kerrion.”

Her curt dismissal angered him. “I am no flunky for you to dismiss, Minna-Satu. Grant me the respect owed to my rank, if you wish civility from me.”

“Your civility is optional. You are my prisoner, and have no right to demand anything from me.”

“If you wish a lessening of hostilities between our kingdoms, it would be as well to start between the two of us. My tolerance for your games grows thin. This exercise in futility threatens my position amongst my people.”

She glared at him. “Yet you have no option but to accept it, Prince Kerrion. You have no hope of escape or rescue. The only way you may return to your people alive is through my generosity, and you would do well not to forget that.”

“I have not forgotten, and you would do well not to forget who I am. For the moment I am your prisoner, this is true, but, once freed, I command the greatest army ever assembled. Do not imagine that all of my warriors are at your border. Half as many again fight trivial battles with invading desert nomads to the east and keep control of the mud people in the west. Should I choose to throw everything at your borders, you will not survive the onslaught. You remember the invasion of Ashtolon? All your border towns were wiped out in that offensive, and my father’s army took land up to the Lelgala River.”

“And my mother’s army drove him back,” she retorted.

“With huge losses, yes. This war has ever been thus. We take a little of your land beyond the mountains, then you push us back into the desert. Yet you have lost forever certain tracts of land to the east, have you not? Those lands have been settled by the Cotti and used to supply my armies with food. We have a foothold in your kingdom, and, in time, your army will fall. Is that not why you wish so desperately for peace?”

“No. My people will fight to the bitter end, and you will win nothing but rotting corpses and salted ground. I wish to put an end to this for the sake of the innocents, the widows and orphans, the cripples and dead children whose unmarked graves litter our lands. What is the point of fighting a war

neither of us can win?"

Kerrion shook his head. "That is just the point. I could win it if I chose, whereas you cannot. You have a land rich in bounty for my army to plunder on the way to your city. I have a hundred and seventy leagues of pitiless desert guarding mine."

"Then why have none of your forefathers done so?"

"Because it would be uneconomical. An all-out offensive would severely weaken the desert armies, leaving us vulnerable to the nomads and start another war with your ally to the west, King Jan-Durval. You think the carnage is bad now, but we are only fighting a low-grade war, little more than a border skirmish. You may lose a thousand men in a moon, more or less, but a full Cotti invasion would cost you more than that in a day.

"Yet neither of us can afford to call a truce, for that would put twenty, thirty thousand jobless men on the streets of our cities. They would become thieves and murderers, or band together as brigands and outlaws. Our foundries would collapse and our mines close, putting more onto the streets. Men who know nothing but how to dig ore, smelt metal or make weapons."

"I know all this," Minna said. "What is your point?"

"My point is that you cannot afford to rile me. I have been quite patient up until now, and you have been polite. We have had our discussions and reached our conclusions. There is no need for me to stay here longer and risk losing my throne. Send me back now, or kill me and deal with Lerton. If you keep me here longer against my will, I shall be a worse enemy than him when I return."

Queen Minna-Satu sank onto her cushions again, bowing her head. Her downcast eyes and obvious dejection disturbed Kerrion, who longed to take her in his arms and promise her peace and happiness forever. His helplessness made his hands clench. Shista watched him with icy green eyes, her tail twitching.

"Will you leave me now, Prince Kerrion?" the Queen asked.

Kerrion inclined his head and swung away, closing the door behind him.

Blade began planning Lord Mordon's demise the following morning. Walking into the city early, he found the lord's town mansion in an affluent suburb, the domiciles of rich merchants and bankers surrounding it. The double-storey house stood in a manicured garden, the tall trees that grew beside it shading pale walls and a red-tiled roof. Blade wandered the streets around it, studying it from every angle as he weighed up the best course of action. A high stone wall separated it from the street and its neighbours, but that presented no problem. The quartet of guards who patrolled the grounds did hamper him, but not unduly. A disguise would not help, for Lord Mordon was a married man who kept to his wife. Well pleased, Blade decided on a stealthy kill.

The assassin spent most of the day on top of a wall on the other side of the street, watching the activity within the house. Through the windows, he mapped the various rooms with his spyglass, finding the main bedroom upstairs with a balcony. At lunchtime, Lady Mordon went into town in a smart carriage, a maid beside her and two footmen riding on the back. The assassin studied the familiars that accompanied the coach, deciding that the fat grey mare that trotted unburdened behind it was Lady Mordon's familiar, and the small dog belonged to one of the footmen. No others were in evidence, but this was not unusual, for most people who worked as servants had small, inconspicuous familiars. Lady Mordon's mare would pose no problem, since she would sleep in the stables at night.

Blade left his vigil to find an inn and eat a watery fish broth, then returned to take up his post once more. In the afternoon, a spotty youth came out to play with a large dog in the garden, his garb that of a nobleman's son. Lord Mordon returned at sunset, arriving in another carriage, a little grander than his wife's. He greeted his son with a wave, and the two went into the house together. Later, the servants left and the lights in the house winked out one by one, leaving only the patrolling guards. While Blade waited for the lord and his lady to fall asleep, he checked his equipment bag, ensuring he had everything he needed, then made sure his daggers slid from their sheaths with well-oiled ease.

Finally, he pulled on a black leather mask, rose and stretched out the kinks of the long wait, springing down from the wall. His dark clothes blended in with the shadows as he trotted across the street to the wall around the mansion, stopping there to listen.

The guards walked in pairs, chatting. Blade waited until their voices moved away before jumping up to grab the top of the high wall and pull himself onto it. Flattening himself, he watched the guards, marking their positions. They patrolled around the house in a clockwise fashion, each pair on opposite sides, so while one pair walked away, the second pair approached. Blade scanned the garden for dogs,

but found none.

Turning his attention to his route, he studied the tree that overhung the bedroom balcony. The smoke tree was named for its tiny grey leaves, which gave the appearance of its branches being wreathed in tendrils of smoke. In spring these trees were covered with minute, fragrant pink blossoms whose pollen caused a nasty rash and severe itching. Fortunately, it was late summer, and the tree bore only hard green fruit, some starting to turn yellow. It looked easy enough to climb, but its branches became rather thin before they reached the balcony. There were thicker boughs higher up, but that would mean a long drop down.

Again he bided his time, watching the guards and alert for any other danger. None offered itself, but still he waited as the moon rose, glancing at it irritably, for it was almost full. Had he been superstitious, the moon's face might have reassured him, for it was a Death Moon, its cratered surface resembling a skull. He pondered the moon's various faces and their significance, to pass the time.

Of its five aspects, the Death Moon was the most feared, but, as it turned, it presented a face called the Maiden, although Blade had never seen the resemblance. During this phase it was supposed to be a good time for maids to marry and lose their virginity, but he had no idea why. The next face to appear was the Warrior, bringing with it good omens for battles, when the pitted grey surface resembled a grotesque man with an upraised fist.

A cat fight started down an alley nearby, the wailing banshee dirge of battling toms soon rousing a householder to shout and throw something that clattered on the street, silencing the combatants. The assassin, his nerves jangling from the disturbance, relaxed again. A dog barked, answered by another, and then fell silent. Blade shifted his position as it grew uncomfortable, settled into a less awkward one and scratched the itch that had started under the leather mask.

Returning to his contemplation of the moon, he considered the next phase, the Sea Moon, when a smooth area of the satellite appeared, dotted with small craters. This was supposed to be a lucky phase for sailors and fishermen, who often waited for a Sea Moon before setting out on hazardous voyages. It never seemed to make any difference, as far as he could tell, but many swore by it.

As the moon turned, it showed its last face, called the Tree, several large craters atop a dark valley that had a vague similarity to a deformed puffwood tree. Farmers eagerly awaited this phase, for it was supposed to be a good moon for planting or reaping. When it appeared at spring or harvest time, great celebrations occurred in farming communities. The fact that the Death Moon followed also held grim significance for farmers whose crops stood in the fields after the Tree Moon.

A flitting shadow made him turn his head in alarm, relaxing as a cat loped down the street. Blade pondered the moon that hung above him, feared for its evil portents of death and pestilence. Indeed, there did seem to be some strange coincidences with the Death Moon. The Rout of Ashtolon had occurred under its baleful influence, and the Plague of Bennerald had wiped out the populations of two large towns during a Death Moon. Perhaps, for an assassin, a Death Moon could be seen as a good sign, but Blade had never set any store in such folklore. Clouds scudded across the moon as a slight wind rose, blotting out the grinning grey skull with its dark eyes, then the moment he had been waiting for arrived.

One pair of guards paused, striking flint to light a pipe, their backs turned to the wind, and to him. The other pair walked away. Blade slid off the wall, landed on the grass with a soft thud and sprinted for the smoke tree. Its lower branches offered many handholds, and he climbed swiftly into it as the second pair of guards passed below him.

The burst of exertion made his heart pound, and his breath came quicker as he glanced up at the balcony. Now that he was committed, his nerves twanged and tension heightened his senses. This was the excitement that gave his life purpose, the only pleasure in his otherwise dull existence. Not the kill itself, but stalking his victim, becoming a shadow that could enter a man's house undetected, take his life and slip away again without raising the alarm. That was the challenge, a little different from his triumph in King Shandor's camp, but far more familiar.

As the guards turned the corner, he climbed higher, wary of snapping twigs or scraping bark that might give him away. He passed the balcony, the branches there too thin for him to reach it. Choosing a stout branch that overhung it several feet higher up, he crawled up it, gripping it between his legs and pulling himself up. Arriving above the balcony, he looked down, gauging the distance and danger of the drop. The trick was to land silently. For this, his slender frame and whipcord strength were well suited, and he dropped, only making a slight thud.

Blade froze, awaiting a reaction, if any, then approached the glazed doors that led to the bedroom. Although the night was warm, the doors were locked, and he studied the catch before groping in his



bag for the appropriate tool. Inserting a flat steel instrument, he lifted the latch inside, then turned the handle and pushed the door open. There was a click, and then it started to creak. He yanked it open and stepped into the dark interior.

Crouching beside the door, he mapped the room, noting the placement of the bed and its occupants. Lord Mordon slept on his back, snoring, while his plump wife lay with her back to him. What gave Blade a moment of alarm were the two ferrets curled at the lord's feet, sleeping as soundly as him, but far easier to awake. He revised his plan, making a crucial change. Although the ferrets were harmless, they could raise the alarm, and if that happened his escape would be jeopardised.

The lord must then die soundlessly, so as not even to rouse his familiar. Only one ferret would be a familiar, the other was its mate. There had been times when Blade had been forced to deal with a familiar, but he disliked killing blameless animals and avoided it whenever possible. As long as Lord Mordon's ferret slept, he could let it live, but, since ferrets normally had a short life span, it would perish soon after its human friend.

Blade crawled towards the bed, his nerves tight. The slight breeze blew his scent away from the ferrets, and his progress was silent. When he was halfway to his quarry, Lord Mordon grunted, sighed and shifted, and the assassin froze until he grew still once more. Reaching the side of the bed, Blade knelt and released a dagger, which slid into his hand. The man's arm lay at his side, protecting the spot under his armpit. Blade, however, knew that Lord Mordon was used to sleeping with his wife, and his subconscious was therefore trained to ignore the movements of his partner.

With a feather-light caress, Blade ran his fingers up the nobleman's arm and slipped his hand between arm and ribs. Mordon sighed and shifted, then rolled onto his side, trapping Blade's fingers. He extricated them, frowning. Sweat trickled down his chest and prickled his scalp, making it itch. One slip now, and he could be dead, but that was all part of the excitement, the danger that quickened his heart. Mordon's movement disturbed the ferrets, which squirmed and snuggled closer to each other. Blade waited for all to settle before moving closer again. Gently he grasped Mordon's wrist and pulled his arm forward, exposing the site on his flank. The lord grunted and pushed his hand under the pillow, exposing the target even more.

Blade raised the dagger, its tip poised just above his victim's flank, and thrust it in with a quick stab. Lord Mordon stiffened as his heart burst, the speed with which he died allowing him only time to open his eyes and mouth, but no sound issued from his trembling lips. His eyes glazed and he went limp. Blade moved back to balcony, closed the doors behind him and used the steel tool to pull down the catch inside. He breathed more easily as the night air cooled him.

A pair of strolling guards passed beneath him, the scent of pipe smoke wafting up to him. As soon as they were out of earshot, Blade slid over the railing and dropped, flattening himself in case they heard the thud and turned. They sauntered on, engrossed in their conversation. Blade sprinted to the wall and leapt up to haul himself over.

Out on the street, he leant against the wall and breathed deeply, allowing the tension ebb. He pulled off the clammy mask and rubbed his hair, glad to rid himself of the persistent itch the sweat had caused. He had done it again, slipped in and out of a man's house unseen and killed him in his bed without even waking his wife. Blade chuckled, drunk on his success and the immense relief that came with a job well done. When he had killed Shandor, he had been denied this wave of euphoria, for he had then been burdened with Kerrion, whose presence had dampened his pleasure. He straightened, tossing back his hair as he revelled in the cool night air.

"You're good," he whispered. "The Invisible Assassin." He chuckled again.

Blade ambled along deserted streets back to the palace, surprising the sleepy gate guards. By the time he reached his room, the first pink streaks of dawn brightened the sky. He stripped off his clothes and bathed in the tub of cold water he had ordered the day before, then climbed into bed.

## Chapter Twelve

The Queen looked up from her breakfast when Chiana knocked and entered, signalling her to rise from her prostration. The advisor looked a little pale, and her soft eyes had a hunted look.

“What is it?” Minna asked.

“I have a report from Captain Redgard. Lord Mordon was assassinated last night.”

“Really?” Minna nibbled on a cake. “So soon.”

“You knew of it, then.”

“I ordered it.”

“And you sent Blade.”

Minna raised her brows at Chiana’s bold tone. “Who else?” Chiana frowned at her clasped hands, and the Queen pushed aside her plate. “You are upset, Chiana. Why?”

“You did not consult me on this matter, My Queen. As your chief advisor, I would have advised you not to take this course of action.”

“You know about the attempt on Prince Kerrion’s life?”

Chiana nodded.

“Lord Mordon hired the assassin who was killed in the Prince’s room. His act was treasonous, and, had he gone to trial, he would have been executed anyway.”

“Then you should have had him arrested, not assassinated.”

“Come, come, Chiana. For trying to kill an enemy prince? The people would have said that he was doing us all a favour.” Minna frowned. “Are you so upset because I did not confide in you?”

“No, not entirely; I wish you had, but the choice is yours. I thought Lord Conash was to retire.”

“Ah.” Queen Minna-Satu smiled and sat back. “I see. You like him, and you fear for his safety.”

“I hardly know him, My Queen.”

“That is of no account. I know exactly how you feel.”

“Do you?” Chiana raised her eyes in a bold glance. “There are angry mutterings amongst the lords and advisors. Everyone knows who did it. Lord Mordon was found cold in his bed beside his wife this morning. He was killed without even waking her or his familiar, and the guards saw no one. He was stabbed under the left armpit.”

“What of it? Blade is my assassin, and I sanctioned his actions. He is also under my protection, as a lord of my realm.”

“They will want to know why, My Queen.”

“He was plotting treason; that is all they need to know.”

“Then he should have been arrested.”

The Queen waved it away. “I shall deal with things the way I see fit. Let any objectors do so to my face. Bring me Blade.”

Chiana knocked on Blade’s door and opened it, surprised to find the assassin asleep in the vast four-poster bed. He sat up, a dagger glinting in his fist, then slumped back with a grunt. He raked tangled hair from his face and yawned, knuckling his eyes.

“What is it?” He eyed her with some displeasure.

“The Queen wishes to see you.”

Blade glanced at the sunlight slanting in through the windows and winced. Swinging his legs off the bed, he banged the dagger down on the side table and used both hands to rub his face. Chiana stepped back as he rose and stretched. He wore only a pair of baggy grey flannel shorts, which hung incongruously on his lean body and seemed in danger of falling down at any moment.

He shot her a scathing look. “I do not bite.”

“Unless you are paid to.”

He wandered over to the basin of water and splashed and dried his face before turning to her again. “Even then, I do not bite.” She looked at the dagger, and he followed her gaze. “Do not worry; I have washed the blood off it.”

Chiana shuddered.

Minna-Satu looked up from her tea and beckoned Blade closer. He bowed, his eyes a little bloodshot, his glossy hair showing signs of a rough finger combing.

“My Queen.”

“My Lord Conash. Sit.”

Blade obeyed, sparing a wry glance for the slumbering sand cat. “Does she only ever sleep?”

Minna smiled at her familiar. “Sand cats are nocturnal.”

“Ah.”

“I hear that you have completed your task.”

“As you wished,” he said.

“I was surprised that it was done so quickly. Was it very easy?”

“Reasonably so; I saw no point in wasting time.”

“You are unhurt?”

“Yes.”

She made a derisive sound. “Of course you are; no one even saw you. At least you did not trip over the rug.”

Blade’s smile pierced her heart its poignant sweetness. “No, My Queen, I never trip over rugs.”

She lowered her eyes, flustered. “Chiana tells me there are angry rumblings at court. Everyone knows you did the deed.”

“And therefore that you ordered it.”

“Yes, well, I am above censure.”

“And I am not?”

She shook her head. “You are under my protection, but, since they cannot touch me, their anger is directed at you.”

“And you fear for my life?”

“Chiana certainly does, and I share her worry.”

His brows rose. “Chiana?”

“She is protecting my assets.”

“Ah.”

“In view of this, perhaps it would be wise to stay in the palace for a while. You are safe here, but I cannot protect you in the city.”

Blade’s eyes narrowed. “I will not be kept caged like Kerrion, My Queen. I have seen how it eats at him, and I will like it no better.”

“It is for your safety, My Lord.”

He stifled a yawn. “Do not concern yourself, My Queen. I have had many years of dodging the angry relatives of my victims.”

“And once it almost cost you your life.”

“More than once, but I am still here.”

“These are not commoners who seek revenge. They are powerful men, lords and advisors.”

“I do not fear death.”

“What about pain?”

He grimaced. “I am not partial to it.”

“Then stay in the palace, at least until this all dies down.”

“I doubt it will, My Queen. Rather, I think you will find more work for me, and the hatred of me will grow.”

“I shall send Kerrion back soon, then there will be no call for attempts on his life.”

“But the traitors will still be afoot. If they seek to thwart your wish for peace, they will find other ways of doing so.”

“How?” she demanded. “They cannot threaten me.”

“Not you, but your loyal advisors and lords. They will undoubtedly try to turn the tide against you by lessening your support.”

“I have already stamped out a rash of assassinations by sending the guilty ones to the front. They will not try that again.”

Blade raised a hand to cover a yawn. “If not assassinations, perhaps threats and blackmail will suffice.”

“I have many spies. I will find them out and punish them. Nor will I need you to do it. I shall be able to do it through the courts. Protecting the Prince may seem a reprehensible act to my people, but political intrigue has ever been punished with their approval.”

His eyes drooped. "I would recommend that you find the traitors now and execute them before they foment more trouble."

"I have only suspicions; it is not enough to convict them." Blade stifled another yawn, his jaw cracking, and the Queen demanded, "Am I boring you, My Lord?"

His gaze sharpened a little. "I have had no sleep, My Queen."

"Very well, we shall continue this discussion another time, then."

"What is there to discuss? You will do as you wish, no matter what anyone says."

Minna smiled. "You are even more impertinent when you are tired. It is as well that I am fond of you, or I would punish such insults."

"I am usually very grumpy when I am this tired, and I had thought to pay you a compliment."

"That I am unswerving?"

"As a queen should be."

She raised her brows. "I did not think you a flatterer."

"I tell the truth occasionally, and this is one such occasion."

"Are you a good liar?"

The assassin shrugged, struggling not to yawn again. "I have spun many a good yarn. It is sometimes necessary in my profession."

"When you pretend to be a Cotti whore, for instance."

He frowned. "So he told you. I came very close to killing him. Perhaps I should have."

"No, your secret is safe with me. I admire your abilities, and the way you have turned a disadvantage into an advantage."

"You admire a killer?"

Minna pulled a face. "You are an assassin."

"What is the difference?"

"You told me yourself, a murderer is one who kills for no good reason, perhaps even for the pleasure of it. You take no pleasure in it, but supply a service for others. Am I a killer when I order an execution, or send thousands of men to war? Is the executioner a killer when he decapitates a man?"

"Perhaps; but you do not have to wash the blood off your hands afterwards."

The Queen stared at a tapestry on the far wall, lost in thought. Blade rubbed his gritty eyes and stifled another yawn, squinting at the sunlight that streamed in through the window. She noticed his discomfort and smiled. "Go and sleep, My Lord."

He rose and bowed. "My Queen."

Blade had almost reached his rooms when someone called his name, and he looked back. Chiana hurried after him. He groaned and carried on towards his door.

"Wait, I must speak to you, Blade."

He entered his rooms, leaving the door open. "So speak."

Chiana hesitated on the threshold, her expression wary.

He smiled, making her blush. "Do not worry; I have no orders to kill you, and no other designs on you."

She advanced and closed the door. "Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Kill me?"

He eyed her. "I have never killed a woman, believe it or not, but there is a first time for everything."

"Why have you never killed a woman?"

"I have never been hired to. Generally when a man wishes to be rid of his wife or lover, he kills her himself and claims it was an accident. Women are easy to kill. No one needs an assassin to do it."

She shivered, glancing at the door. Blade sat on the bed and pulled off his boots. "So what do you want to speak to me about?"

"What? Oh, yes. You should leave here. Go to your estate. The Queen courts danger by using you to assassinate her enemies. They will plot to kill you."

He shrugged. "I cannot disobey the Queen."

"She would not punish you. She is too fond of you for that. I thought you planned to retire after your elevation."

"I did, but what would I do? Plant fray flowers? Take up needlepoint, perhaps? Killing is all I am

good at.”

“Then kill if you must, but not for the Queen. Her enemies are powerful. They will kill you.”

He looked up at her. “Such concern. Tell me, what have I done to deserve it?”

“Nothing,” she snapped. “My concern is for the Queen, not you. Who would worry about a cold-blooded killer?”

“Who indeed? But why do you fear for the Queen? She is in no danger.”

“She makes more enemies with these tactics. Those who support her will turn against her.”

He unlaced his tunic, his eyes crossing with fatigue. “Then you should speak to her about it.”

“I have tried. It does no good.”

“I am in her employ. I have no choice.” He took off the tunic and flung it at the rack, missing.

“Are you a lapdog who obeys her every whim?”

He glared at her. “No, but I have lived too long in the gutter to risk losing my hard won rank and privileges.”

“I see.”

“I doubt it. Now, if you do not mind, Advisor Chiana, I would like to get some sleep.”

Chiana opened her mouth, probably to protest his casual dismissal, then apparently remembered his rank and bowed. “My Lord.”

Three days later, deep in the bowels of the palace, the remaining conspirators met in a heated argument, angry and afraid. Mendal had to raise his hands and shout to bring order before someone got hurt. When the three lords subsided to angry muttering, he glowered at them.

“Mordon made a mistake. We do not know what, but he gave himself away. That the rest of us are still alive proves that the Queen does not know about us.”

“Or she has not given the order yet,” Lord Durlan muttered. Lord Javare and Bellcamp nodded, glaring at Mendal.

“Why would she wait?” Mendal asked. “No, she does not know about us, I am certain. Mordon was sloppy, and paid the price.”

“And now you want us to risk our necks too,” Javare said.

“Would you rather face ruin?” Mendal stroked the serpent that coiled around his wrist. “The fact that Prince Kerrion is so well defended only confirms our suspicions. The Queen seeks to make peace with the Cotti. We cannot allow that.”

“Then advise her, Mendal. That is your job.” Durlan mopped his face.

Javare moved away from the fat man. “Let us get this over with. The stench of pigs sickens me.”

Durlan scowled at his antagonist. Mendal distracted their attention by saying, “Yes, we must strike again. The Prince must die. The Queen will not heed my advice. She listens only to that doltish girl, Chiana, and a few others.”

“How can we kill the Prince?” Bellcamp enquired. “The secret passage is blocked and guarded. A soldier sits in his room with him at all times. It is impossible.”

“Blade could do it,” Javare said.

Mendal nodded. “Doubtless he could, but he is not in our employ.”

“His services have always been for hire, and I am sure he would like to kill the Prince. All he needs is a client who pays him for it,” Lord Javare asserted, frowning at Mendal.

“He is a lord now, so he is no longer for hire.”

“What does he know about being a lord?” Bellcamp demanded. “He is an upstart commoner elevated to the rank. He has no notion of what it entails.”

“I would say that he has been educated, Bellcamp. The Queen would not allow him to embarrass her with ill-considered acts, I am sure.” Mendal shook his head, pondering the problem while the three lords shifted in the tomb’s dusty confines. “No, approaching Lord Conash would put all of our heads on the block. He would go straight to the Queen.” He raised a knobbly finger. “But we could get rid of him, then find a way to kill Kerrion.”

“What is the point?” Bellcamp asked. “Blade is not the one we truly wish to kill. Why bother?”

“Because with Blade out of the way, the Queen will not be able to kill any of us, should she find out. She will then have to go through the courts, which will be damaging. She will be forced to reveal her intentions towards Prince Kerrion, and you know how unpopular that will be. Also, we will have our revenge and remove a powerful supporter of the Queen.”

Durlan looked unhappy. “That smacks of treason.”

“It happens all the time,” the advisor said. “Blade is not protected as Kerrion is. In the palace he is relatively safe, but he goes into the city alone and usually on foot. To ambush him would be easy, and we could hire ordinary men to do the job, not expensive assassins. Once he is out of the way, we can concentrate on Kerrion.”

“We kill Lord Conash?” Javare asked.

“Not necessarily. He might be of more use to us alive. I am convinced that he knows the Queen’s plans. If he could be persuaded to talk, we would find out much from him, I think.”

Javare nodded, clearly mollified. “Yes, indeed, a good plan.”

“When we are finished with him, he dies,” Mendal added.

Lord Javare frowned. “I dislike the notion of killing a fellow lord, upstart or not. He was elevated for slaying King Shandor and delivering the Prince, honourable deeds. Let us not forget that our forefathers earned their titles in just such a fashion, and our ancestors were as common as his. In fact, his earning the rank puts him above us, in my opinion, for we merely inherited ours.”

“That is only your opinion, Javare,” Durlan sneered.

“I doubt you could do any great deed to earn your title, Durlan. You cannot even sit a horse without breaking the beast’s back.”

“Lords have always plotted against each other, Javare,” Bellcamp said. “One less will not be remarked upon.”

“Speak for yourself,” Javare countered.

Mendal raised his hands. “Let us not squabble, My Lords.” He looked at Javare. “We cannot allow him to live, if he knows who we are.”

“There is no reason for him to know our identities.”

“True.” Mendal shrugged. “Very well, we shall make it our intention to spare him, but we may have to kill him.”

Javare inclined his head. “I can abide that.”

Mendal rose from his hard seat atop a tomb. “Then we are agreed.”

Blade went into the city two days later, just to get out and stretch his legs. The day before, Lord Mordon had been buried, and he, as a fellow lord, had been obliged to attend. It was the first time he had been to the funeral of one of his victims, and he had found the experience discomfiting. Not only the sight of the weeping widow and four bereft children, all older than fifteen, but the angry, hate-filled glances of the mourners had unsettled him. Queen Minna-Satu stood beside the grave in regal splendour, daring anyone to accuse her of wrong doing. Although she had not accused Lord Mordon of treason, her lack of mourning spoke volumes for all to see.

At the funeral feast, Lady Mordon had tried to approach Minna, but the Queen had turned her back on the unfortunate woman. The guests had noticed her rejection, and many remarked upon it as the widow turned away. Lord Mordon’s eldest son, a pimply youth of eighteen, had looked cowed and uncertain, his dog familiar following him with tail tucked. His eldest daughter, however, had held her head high and dared any to speak ill of her father, her eyes bright with challenge. She was a fetching girl of twenty, and Blade had admired her courage. Strangely, despite the matriarchal nature of the monarchy, the title passed to Lord Mordon’s son. His eldest daughter would inherit the title of marchioness, but when she married her husband would remain untitled, and she would retain hers.

Lost in his thoughts, Blade took little notice of the dark figure that followed him into the city, keeping well behind and ducking out of sight whenever the assassin glanced around. Discounting it as one of Minna’s spies, sent to watch over him or spy on him, he paid it no heed. The Queen’s warning made him a little more alert than usual, and he kept a wary eye on side streets and alleys. Making his way through the more affluent parts of the city, he headed for a middle class area, where honest merchants lived and plied their trade.

At his favourite alehouse, he chose a table in a corner and imbibed several tankards of good ale, relaxed and enjoyed the atmosphere. The taproom had a welcoming air to it, with clean rushes on the floor and well-worn, but comfortable furniture. The innkeeper was an honest fellow with a merry disposition, who owned a well-stocked cellar and had a plump wife who cooked a wonderful rabbit stew. Horse brasses adorned the walls, and polished pots hung over a massive fireplace on the far side of the room, where often a sheep carcass turned to provide meat for the hungry patrons.

Just before dusk, Blade started back towards the palace, filled with the warm glow of beer. His time at the alehouse had relaxed his vigilance, for nothing untoward seemed imminent. When a figure

strode out of an alley beside him and collided with him, he recoiled with a startled oath. Alarm penetrated his ale-soaked brain when the man gripped his arm and gave it a powerful tug that yanked him off balance and sent him stumbling into the side street. Before he could regain his equilibrium, someone grabbed his arm again and swung him into the wall, knocked the wind out of him and made bright stars dance in his eyes. His knees buckled, and he slid down the wall, too stunned to offer any resistance as boots thudded into him from all sides.

The alcohol in his blood slowed him further, and all he could do was raise his arms to protect his face as the men punched the air from his lungs and bruised his ribs with savage kicks. After several minutes, they dragged him upright, twisting his arms behind his back. He shook his head, trying to clear it as he was pushed back against a wall. Blood sprinkled his chest, running from his nose, and he wondered dimly if it was broken.

Four brutish men stood around him, their faces wreathed in sneers and gleeful grins. Two held his arms, and a third drew back his fist. Blade ducked, and the thug's fist thudded into the wall. The man howled, clutching his hand as he hopped and cursed foully. Blade struggled to free his arms, but the men held him. The fourth roughneck stepped up and drove his fist into Blade's stomach. He doubled over with a groan, coughing. The man gripped Blade's hair and pulled him upright, punching him in the jaw. The assassin spat blood, jerked his hair from the thug's grip and kicked him in the crotch. The man shrieked and collapsed in a tangle of arms and legs, curling into a foetal ball on the cobbles.

The sight of his whimpering comrade apparently angered another of Blade's captors, who swung a fist. The assassin jerked free and ducked, butting the man in the stomach. The thug went down with a grunt, and Blade almost fell on top of him as his legs wobbled. He struggled to free himself from the roughneck who held his other arm, but the man punched Blade in the side of the head as the assassin lashed out with his free hand. The winded man, seeing the assassin on the brink of escaping, drew a knife and charged. The weapon skittered off Blade's chainmail and impaled his biceps.

Blade grunted and swung on his assailant as he released a dagger from its wrist sheath and let it slide into his hand. With a swift slash, he opened a wound across the man's chest from shoulder to hip. The thug howled and dropped his knife to clutch the wound. The last man whipped an arm around the assassin's neck, and a dagger sank into his hip just below the chainmail. Blade tried to twist free, but the man's arm tightened, crushing his windpipe. Before his vision darkened, Blade flipped his dagger over, gripped it point down and thrust it into the thug's belly. The man released him with a coughing grunt, doubling over to clutch the wound.

Blade staggered away, one leg dragging from the wound in his hip, shock and alcohol slowing him further. The dark alley swam in and out of focus as he tried to get his bearings. The two thugs who were not bleeding hobbled after him. He tried to increase his pace, his breath hissing through his bruised throat. Before he reached the main street where people might see the struggle and call the Watch, one of his pursuers tackled him, bringing him down hard enough to punch the wind from his lungs, and the dagger clattered away.

The second man pinned his arms and twisted them behind his back, and they dragged him back into the alley. Blade struggled, shouting for help, but they held him fast and bound his hands with coarse rope. A dirty rag was stuffed into his mouth and tied around his head. They hauled him further down the alley, along two dim side streets and down a flight of stone steps into a musty cellar. There he was flung onto a bed of damp straw, and the thugs slammed the door and barred it as they left, enveloping him in darkness.

For a while he twisted and tugged to try to loosen the ropes on his wrists, but to no avail. When his skin grew raw from the chafing, he slumped back on the straw, his wounds throbbing and his head aching. The ropes bound his remaining dagger to his wrist, so he could not free it. The stench of damp and mildew, mixed with something fouler, made him fight the urge to vomit. Inwardly he cursed whoever was responsible for this, and wondered what horrors lay ahead.

## Chapter Thirteen

Queen Minna-Satu picked at her midday meal without appetite. Her sense of foreboding increased by the time-glass, and she had been unable to relax since learning that Blade had not returned after going into the city the previous day. A squad of soldiers had been dispatched to search every alehouse and brothel, and would return at any moment.

She looked up as Chiana entered and prostrated herself. "What news?"

"None, My Queen. The soldiers are back, but they did not find him."

Minna jumped up, almost upsetting the tray, and strode over to the windows. "He is in trouble, I know it. Those who tried to kill Kerrion have taken him, which means they will attempt the Prince's life again, this time secure in the knowledge that I cannot retaliate. I could easily hire another assassin, although he may not be as good as Blade. He may fail.... Yet I am sure they have a better reason than that...." She frowned as a far worse thought struck her. "They plan to torture him, and find out what he knows."

Chiana wrung her hands. "What does he know?"

"Too much," Minna retorted. "If he talks, it could ruin everything."

"How?"

The Queen waved a dismissive hand. "I cannot tell you, but if my plans become public now, it would be a disaster."

"I doubt Blade would reveal them, My Queen."

"So do I, but I will not have him suffer at the hands of traitors and thugs. It is not right." She paused, staring out at the sunny garden. "I have orders for Captain Redgard. The Prince must be returned to the desert at once. He must be escorted by a squad of my best men, those who can be trusted. He must be taken to the pass and released on a horse, unharmed. Is that clear?"

Chiana nodded. "Yes, My Queen."

"See to it, then return to me."

Minna waited by the window while Chiana went to pass on the orders. The winding streamers of dream silk seemed to mock her, and she glared at the sombre cloths that rippled in the breeze above the temple. Today, in keeping with the Death Moon, the priestesses had hoisted grey, scarlet and black, to bring death and blood into the dreams of the unfaithful. The faint hissing and snapping made her shiver. When Chiana returned, Minna tore her eyes from the ominous cloth and turned.

"Despatch as many squads of soldiers as can be spared into the city, tell Redgard to lead them himself. I want every house searched; every business, cellar and loft. Round up all known criminals, every thief, pickpocket and beggar, and offer a reward of gold to the man or woman who can lead us to Lord Conash.

"Put out the word that whoever is found holding Lord Conash will face a sentence of death. Inform the advisors, in particular Mendal, Motice and Pelin, that if the assassin is not found alive, I shall find out who killed him and have him executed, slowly. Contact all my spies; have them listen out for any clue. I want him back, Chiana, alive."

The chief advisor nodded and took a step back. "At once, My Queen."

"I did not give you leave to go."

Chiana froze, her eyes wide.

Minna strode up to her. "Has Prince Kerrion left yet?"

"I believe he is even now in the courtyard, preparing to ride out."

Minna-Satu swept past her and into the golden hall, startling the guards outside her door. They leapt to attention as she marched past, then fell in behind her, spears ready. Chiana hastened after her as the Queen headed for the courtyard, surprising sentries, who sprang to open portals in her path, some joining the growing retinue in her wake.

In the courtyard, Prince Kerrion looked up from adjusting his horse's girth at a commotion behind him. Queen Minna-Satu strode into the sunlight, her hair gleaming like polished ebony. Two dozen soldiers fell to their knees and prostrated themselves at the sight of their sovereign, so rarely seen outside the palace or its enclosed gardens. She stopped several feet away, and he accorded her a slight, stiff bow.



“Prince Kerrion, I hope our talks have brought us some understanding of our troubles, so in time we may resolve our differences and work towards peace. I return you unharmed to your kingdom, and wish you well. Always remember that you were my prisoner, and I set you free. Let it be something to lessen the rancour between our kingdoms. We shall not meet again. I bid you farewell.”

Minna swung away and re-entered the palace, leaving Kerrion with his mouth open to reply, but no one to address. The soldiers followed her, and Kerrion, his escort, and Chiana stared after them. The Prince recovered first, turning to Chiana.

“What was that all about? Why the sudden change of plans?”

Chiana was clearly bemused, and he surmised that events had moved with bewildering rapidity, leaving her placid nature floundering in their wake. She gathered her wits with what appeared to be a conscious effort.

“Lord Conash has disappeared,” she explained. “The Queen blames it on the same traitors who tried to have you assassinated. Without the threat of the Queen’s Blade, she must send you to the safety of your land while she endeavours to find those responsible.”

“So, I have Blade to thank for this. He is probably drunk in some gutter, I should not wonder.”

“The Queen will tear the city apart to find him, and without you here, she can bring the traitors to trial.”

“I pity any who fall foul of her in her present mood.”

Chiana bowed. “If you will excuse me, Prince Kerrion, I have matters to tend to.”

He nodded, gazing at the doorway through which the Queen had vanished, a faint frown furrowing his brow. As Chiana left, he whispered, “Farewell, Minna.”

An officer gave the order to mount, and the Prince swung aboard his horse, gathering up the reins.

Minna stood on her balcony, where she could watch the cavalcade of Kerrion’s escort as they rode out of the palace gates into the city streets. A breeze loosened her hair and played with it, causing tendrils to fall about her face. Minna brushed them away as she strived to catch a glimpse of Kerrion amongst the troops, silently cursing the distraction of the hissing dream silk that flew on the temple behind her. The Prince’s golden head stood out amongst his guards’ polished silver helmets, and his short, dark blue cloak billowed from his shoulders as his horse pranced, eager to be off.

Angrily she brushed away the tears that ran down her cheeks. She watched until the buildings swallowed him up, wondering if he had once glanced back at the palace. Minna looked up at the great golden bell that hung in its tower high above her, which tolled only upon a queen’s death, every twenty-five years. Soon it would toll again, for her. She glanced down at a brush on her leg, meeting Shista’s eyes as she gazed up at her with deep concern. Minna knelt and slipped her arms around the cat’s neck, burying her face in her fur.

By the time Chiana returned, the Queen had regained her composure and sat amongst her cushions, the big cat purring at her side.

“The Prince has left, My Queen.”

Minna nodded. “What did he say?”

“Why, nothing, My Queen. He asked about the sudden change in plans, and I told him.”

“So, he was well pleased to be on his way?”

“I suppose so, but he did not look pleased or sad; maybe a little pensive, is all.”

Minna gazed at Shista, hiding her expression. “Leave me. Return only with news of Blade.”

The chief advisor made her abasement and left, looking a little alarmed.

In the city, the Queen’s men set about their duty with fervour. The orders they had received told of the Queen’s anger, which spurred them to extreme measures. They herded people from their homes and searched the dwellings from roofs to foundations. Businesses were disrupted as soldiers searched storerooms and cellars. Criers spread the news of a rich reward offered, and scores of criminals were arrested and questioned. By the end of the day, the populace’s interest or anger was thoroughly aroused, and the search went on into the night.

Blade opened his eyes as the cellar door banged open and four torch-bearing men descended the steps. From their beefy faces and the bandages two of them wore, they appeared to be the same thugs

who had attacked him in the alley. Two gripped his arms and hauled him to his feet, and he groaned as the wound in his hip tore open. A roughneck yanked the gag from Blade's mouth, and he spat out its foul taste. The man, who wore a bandage visible through the long, blood-stained tear in his shirt, thrust his face close to Blade's.

"The Queen wants her pet assassin back, Lord Conash," he sneered. "Got herself mighty steamed up about it, too." His voice dropped to a growl. "But she'll not see you alive again unless you tell us what we want to know."

Blade met the man's eyes. "And what's that?"

"Her plans. Why did she keep the Prince here so long? Why didn't she execute him? Why has she now sent him back all of a sudden? Tell us, or you suffer."

"Has she?" Blade muttered, and the cutthroats twisted his arms. "If your masters are too stupid to know the Queen's plans are no secret, I'll tell you. She was trying to make peace with the Cotti Prince. Perhaps she kept him because he wouldn't agree."

The lout glanced at one of his cohorts, who shrugged. Blade judged, by their obvious stupidity, that the questions came from someone else, who did not wish to reveal his identity. This gave him some hope that he might be released, and he took courage from it.

"Why has she sent him back now?" the thug demanded again.

"Probably because there's a group of traitors, undoubtedly your masters, who plotted to assassinate the Prince. I killed one of them, Lord Mordon, and that's no secret either. With me out of the way, she had no choice but to release the Prince before your masters killed him. Now she has a free hand to arrest and execute whomever she pleases, without the populace accusing her of protecting an enemy prince."

"You talk too much." The cutthroat dug his fingers into Blade's jaw to force his mouth open and stuffed the gag back in. "I hope I'm the one who gets to kill you."

The man turned away, and his companions dumped Blade on the straw again before following their leader up the steps, leaving the assassin in darkness once more.

For three days, the Queen's soldiers ransacked the city, turning it and its denizens upside down in their zeal. Minna read the reports of the chaos the search caused with some disquiet, but her anger tempered her concern, and a deep-seated need to find Blade alive. Loyal citizens turned upon their neighbours, accusing them of the deed. Dozens were arrested and questioned, dozens more clamoured for the reward, sending the soldiers of fruitless searches that found other dark-haired men. Many people took up searches of their own to claim the prize.

Fights erupted in the streets as ostensibly righteous citizens, intent on finding the Queen's Blade, invaded homes and pilfered valuables in their search. Petitions poured into the palace, and Chiana spent most of her time dealing with them, as well as irate lords and citizens claiming damages. Minna kept to her rooms, denied audiences and ignored her advisors' demands.

Blade lay motionless to conserve his strength and keep his suffering to a minimum by not aggravating his wounds. His arms had stiffened in their uncomfortable confinement, and moving only brought fresh pain. Rats scuttled and squeaked in the straw, at times crawling over him and waking him from the uneasy doze he fell into from time to time. In the darkness, he had no idea of how much time had passed. It seemed an eternity, and only his hunger and thirst gave him some measure of it.

The sounds of the search came close to his prison several times, and perhaps it was this that kept his jailers away. Each time the tramping of soldiers' feet and shouted commands drew close, his heart beat a little faster, but as they moved away again, his hopes faded. When the tramping and shouting came close once more, he paid it little heed, certain they would pass him by yet again.

The cellar door was kicked open, and heavy feet thudded down the steps. Someone lighted a torch and thrust it close to where he lay, then a startled exclamation filled him with hope and relief.

"Lord Conash!"

Two soldiers fell to their knees beside him. One pulled out the soggy gag; the other cut the ropes that bound his wrists. Blade hissed as fresh pain surged through him, grimacing when he tried to move. The men cut the ropes on his ankles, then tried to pull him to his feet. Blade groaned, and a voice barked orders from the top of the steps.

"Don't manhandle him, you lunkheads! He might be injured!"

Blade tried to agree with that statement, but only a hiss issued from his dry throat. The soldiers eased him back onto the straw, and several more men descended with torches and lamps. The one who was in charge shouted for a healer, and the crowd around the doorway shifted as someone ran to fetch one. Blade recognised Captain Redgard, whom he had met at the palace several times. The captain looked tired and worried, but triumphant as he knelt at Blade's side.

"Lord Conash, are you all right?"

Once again, he could only manage a hiss.

Redgard turned to the nearest soldier. "Give me your canteen."

The captain raised Blade's head and pressed the flask to his lips. The assassin tried to take the canteen, but discovered that his right arm would not move, and his wounded hip prevented him from sitting up. Since every movement hurt, he relaxed and allowed Redgard to hold the flask while he drank. Redgard eased him back onto the straw.

"The healer will be here soon, My Lord."

"I am all right," Blade croaked. "Just help me out of here."

"You're wounded, My Lord."

"I know, but nothing is broken."

Captain Redgard shook his head. "You'll tear open your wounds and bleed again. It's not a good idea."

Blade sighed, closing his eyes. "How did you find me?"

"The housewife down the road told us that she had seen a man dragged this way four days ago, but we had to search every house and cellar on this street. It took some time."

"Four days?"

"No sir, she only told us this morning."

Blade smiled. "I meant: I have been here for four days?"

"Yes sir."

"It seems longer."

"I would imagine so, My Lord." Redgard hesitated. "As soon as you are well enough, we will arrest whoever is responsible for this. The Queen has promised them execution."

"The bastards who brought me here are just pawns. I have no idea who hired them, although I should think they do."

A commotion at the door heralded the healer, who hurried down the steps. He knelt beside the captain and examined Blade's wounds, cutting away his clothes to bandage them.

Blade was barely aware of the journey to the palace. The healer gave him a draught for the pain, which made him sleepy and pleasantly detached. Four soldiers bore him along the streets on a litter, a squad of men surrounding him. He drifted off to sleep before they reached the palace.

Minna-Satu looked up from the petition she was reading at a strident knocking on the door. Chiana came in, flushed and smiling, hurrying to make her prostration.

Minna signalled for her to rise. "What is it? What news?"

"They have found him, My Queen."

The Queen dropped the parchment and rose. "When? Where?"

"A few time-glasses ago, in a cellar somewhere in the slums. They are taking him to his rooms."

Minna crossed the room with swift strides. "Taking him? He is wounded?"

"Yes, My Queen, but not too seriously."

"How seriously?" Minna demanded, then gestured. "Never mind, I shall see for myself."

Minna made her way to Blade's rooms with Chiana pattering in her wake, and opened the door to enter a crowded chamber. A dozen people fell to their knees, and she went to the bed. Blade was asleep, his face swollen and bruised, a clean bandage around one arm, the sheet covering the rest of him. Minna swung to confront the kneeling crowd.

"Which one of you is the healer?"

A balding man rose to his feet. "I am, My Queen."

"How bad are his injuries?"

"They are grave, but he will recover in time."

"How long?"

The doctor shrugged. "Three tendays, maybe a little more."

Minna gazed at the assassin again, her mouth set in a grim line. "Whoever did this will pay dearly. I

shall have their heads.” She paused, eyeing the healer. “You have tended to him? Given him a draught to make him sleep, I assume?”

“Yes, My Queen, I have done all I can.”

“Then you may go.” Her eyes raked the crowd. “All of you, save my chief advisor.”

The soldiers, servants and healer left, and Blade’s manservant closed the door behind them. Minna studied the sleeping assassin a little longer, then turned to Chiana.

“I suppose you are wondering why I make so much fuss over a worthless assassin.”

“He is also a lord, My Queen, and one who has done you a great service.”

The Queen gave a derisive snort. “Do not insult my intelligence, Chiana. You know full well that does not warrant such zeal on my part to find him.”

The chief advisor inclined her head. “Your reasons are your own, My Queen.”

“Still, I would not have you think I favour Blade unduly without good reason.” She wandered over to the windows. “I shall need him in the times to come. There are those who will plot against me once they know of my plans. Sending Prince Kerrion back to the desert does not solve all of my problems. I am facing a difficult time, and I will need Blade’s particular skills to defeat those who will turn against me.”

“You need him to kill your enemies,” Chiana murmured.

“Precisely, and do not preach to me about how inadvisable that is. I have not asked for your advice. Nothing and no one must stand in the way of my plans. I have not the time to go through the courts, nor the certainty that I shall find justice there. The judges are not as impartial as they claim to be, and there are those who will stop at nothing to prevent peace with the Cotti. I must be as ruthless as them, if I am to achieve it.”

“But the Prince is gone....”

“I do not need Kerrion here. My plans have no call for that.”

“Might I ask what your plans are, My Queen?”

“No.” Minna softened her answer with a stiff smile. “Not yet. All in good time.”

“But Blade knows.”

Minna cast the assassin a rueful glance. “He guessed.” She schooled her expression to a haughty one and made her tone brisk. “I want the men who did this. They must be made to confess the names of their employers, who will be rounded up and put to death.”

“My Queen, if you use Blade to kill your enemies, you will put him in extreme danger.”

“I know that.” She sighed. “He has lived all his life with danger, and I shall do my utmost to protect him. I do not need you to point out the obvious.” She swung away and headed for the door. “Tell me the moment he wakes. I wish to speak to him.”

“Yes, My Queen.”

## Chapter Fourteen

For three days, the doctor's draught kept Blade in a deep sleep, and when he roused, his manservant, Arken, fed him more of the potion. Chiana visited him several times, concerned for his health, which seemed fragile. He looked oddly vulnerable when asleep, she thought, and did not resemble a killer by any stretch of the imagination.

When he was allowed to become fully alert, Chiana went to see him.

He scowled at her. "What do you want?"

"How are you feeling?"

He looked away, presenting the less bruised side of his face to her. His skin was stretched too tightly over his bones, and lines of suffering bracketed his mouth and furrowed his brow. "Imagine being trampled by a herd of horses, then having your head beaten on the floor, and finally knives stuck into you. That may give you some idea."

"The Queen wishes to see you."

He sighed. "Not now. I am in no mood to be good company, and I fear my manners will fail me."

"They never were that good," she said, the words skipping off her tongue before she could bite them back.

He raked her with glacial eyes. "You have a sharp tongue for a woman of doves, but yes, you are right. It is hard to learn courtly manners in the gutter."

"Surely assassins do not live in the gutter? I thought it quite a lucrative profession."

"I was not always an assassin."

"I find it hard to imagine you as anything else."

"Do not bother to try."

"A message has arrived for you," she said.

"From whom?"

"I do not know. Do you wish me to read it to you?"

"I can read." He tried to sit up, but grimaced and sank back with a groan. "God, does that damned healer have nothing to stop the pain?"

"The draught for pain makes you sleep, and now you must eat again and regain your strength."

Blade held out his hand, and Chiana placed a black-edged missive in it. The assassin's eyes narrowed as he studied it, and he shot her a hard glance. "When did this arrive?"

"This morning."

"You may go."

Chiana opened her mouth to rebuke him, then recalled his rank and shut it. Spinning away, she marched out, banging the door behind her.

Blade contemplated the square of coarse yellow paper, its edges dipped in ink. He knew who it was from. Only the assassin's guild used such a distinctive trademark, and he pondered its probable contents. Previous missives had been invitations to attend one of their gatherings or defend his title as Master of the Dance. Aside from defending his title, he had not gone, or replied. He had found no use for the guild since receiving his tattoo, and was annoyed to receive a summons now. With a flick of his fingers, he broke the wax seal and opened the letter, reading the few lines written in blood.

The letter bore only a drawing of a dagger at its end, and was another invitation of sorts, but there was more to it than that. It held a warning, which, although not spelt out, was sufficiently obvious to cause him slight alarm. That the guild should seek to warn him was unusual; assassins were not prone to protecting their own. The date of the meeting was two days away, and the place was a sacred site of ancient stones outside the city, where the guild always met.

A knock at the door startled him, and two liveried flunkies opened it to admit the Queen. Minna-Satu wore a floating, pale green silk morning gown over a deep blue, form-hugging dress. The colours enhanced her eyes and paled her skin, accentuating the contrast of her hair. Her eyes sparkled, and he wondered if it was with happiness or anger. Her first words solved the mystery.

"How dare you refuse to see me?" She came to his bedside and glared at him.

Blade glanced past her at Chiana, who hovered by the door, looking smug. "I fear that my message was ill conveyed, My Queen. I merely said that I was not yet well enough to receive you properly,

since I cannot arise from my bed to give you a proper greeting.”

Minna’s brow smoothed, and her eyes narrowed as she too glanced at the advisor, who now appeared ill at ease. “I see.” She turned back to him. “Obviously I do not expect you to leap up and bow. You are ill.” She hesitated, then sat on the edge of the bed. “I am most pleased to see you awake. How do you feel? Have you much pain?”

“I am alive.”

She inclined her head. “Those who injured you will be brought to justice just as soon as you name them, or describe them accurately to Captain Redgard.”

“I do not know their names, and describing them would do little good. They look like common street thugs. They were hired men. I never saw their masters.”

“But they would know who hired them. They can be made to talk.”

Blade shook his head. “As I have said, I cannot describe them.”

“Surely you must have fought when they captured you? Did you not injure any of them?”

“Yes. All of them. One has a shallow cut across his chest, another I stabbed in the stomach, one has a broken hand, and the fourth...” He looked away. “I cannot remember what I did to him.”

“That is enough. You will describe all this to Captain Redgard, and he will find them.”

Blade shrugged, wincing. “They may not know who hired them either, My Queen. If the traitors were clever, they will not have revealed their identity to these thugs, or their faces.”

“Then we shall hope that those who hired these men were not that clever. I shall find out who is plotting against me. Such treason cannot go unpunished.”

Blade closed his eyes, wishing that she would go away. As if reading his thoughts, Minna stood up. “I will leave you to rest now, Lord Conash. Captain Redgard will be sent to you when you are feeling well enough to receive him.”

He nodded, feigning utter exhaustion. “My Queen.”

When the door closed behind his visitors, he found that his exhaustion was not wholly feigned, and soon fell asleep.

The following day, he described his assailants to an attentive Captain Redgard, then spent the day in a restful doze, rousing only to eat and drink. Arken tiptoed in and out as he tended to his patient, and the healer came in the afternoon to change Blade’s dressings again.

The day of his meeting with the assassin’s guild, Blade forced himself to rise from the bed. His knees almost buckled when he tried to stand, and he hung onto the bedpost, wondering how he would attend the meeting when he could barely walk. Trying to ignore the pain, he tottered across the room to peer into the mirror, examining the fading bruises on his face. The swelling had gone down, but greenish marks dappled his skin like sickly shadows. He fingered his nose, glad it was unbroken.

“Do not worry. You are still as handsome as ever.”

The sound of Chiana’s voice made him turn too quickly, and his bad leg buckled. He grabbed the table under the mirror as he fell, bringing several ornaments crashing down around him. The advisor hurried over and tried to help him up, but he slapped her hands away.

“Are you all right?” she enquired.

“No thanks to you. Do you never knock?”

“I thought you might be asleep. I did not want to disturb you.”

“Mighty considerate of you.” He levered himself onto a chair. The pain made sweat pop out on his brow, and he gritted his teeth.

“I did not expect to find you out of bed. You are still too weak.”

“I noticed.”

She raised a brow, a slight, mocking smile tugging at her lips. “Was it so important to look in the mirror?”

Blade glared at her. “What do you want?”

“The Queen wishes to know how you fare.”

“I was much better until you sneaked up on me with your rude comments.”

“I did not sneak up on you, nor was my comment intended to be rude.”

He snorted. Chiana moved to sit on a chair in front of him, arranging her skirts. Blade noted the slight flush in her cheeks, and the way her eyes avoided his.

“I only spoke the truth,” she went on, “although I am surprised by your concern.”

“So you find me handsome, and think me vain?”

“Yes.”

“And what possible reason, do you suppose, would I have for being vain? Do you think I wish to

attract members of the opposite sex?"

Her cheeks reddened further. "No, I suppose not." She hesitated, then glanced at him. "So why are you so concerned about your appearance?"

Blade gave her a gentle, mocking smile that made her look away. "I have to attend a meeting tonight, of the assassin's guild, and I do not relish the idea of meeting my peers looking like I have been beaten to within an inch of my life. Call it pride, if you will, but not vanity. Spare me your girlish assumptions."

"But you are not well enough. You cannot travel."

"I will decide what I can and cannot do."

"You will tear open your wounds, and you barely have the strength to stand."

"I am not planning on doing anything more strenuous than riding a horse and talking to some old acquaintances."

She shook her head. "The Queen will not allow it."

"You will not tell the Queen until I have gone. I will need new daggers, and a horse tonight."

Chiana looked scandalised. "You cannot order me to keep secrets from the Queen."

"Why not?"

"She has a right to know where you go."

Blade raised his brows a fraction, and his lips curled at the corners. "She is not my keeper. I am free to go when and where I wish. Should she wish to prevent me, she must throw me into the dungeons and put me in chains. For this she has no reason."

"You endanger yourself, and she has need of you."

Blade leant forward, wincing. "Chiana, whenever she sends me to do her killing, she puts me in danger, so do not claim that her concern is for anything other than selfish reasons. As long as I am a free man, my life is my own to do with as I see fit. I will not die from my wounds, and this meeting is not dangerous."

Chiana shivered, and he wondered at the cause of it. Her mutinous expression told him that she would protest further, and he smiled, knowing it would cause the words to die on her lips.

She averted her eyes. "Then take someone with you, to help you, should you need it."

"You?"

"No. Not unless you wish it."

"I must go alone, and I require no help."

She nodded. "If this is your wish, Lord Conash, I cannot prevent you, but the Queen will be angry when she hears of it."

He shrugged, unconcerned. "I am not afraid of her. Can you procure another dagger?"

"Of course."

"Bring me one before dusk, and arrange for a horse to be made ready. I shall ride out after dark."

"As you wish, My Lord." She rose to her feet. "And since you are feeling well enough to travel around attending meetings, I am sure you will have no trouble getting back to your bed."

With this tart remark, Chiana spun in a swirl of skirts and left, banging the door behind her. Blade gazed after her, then shook his head and struggled from the chair to continue his gentle exercise, loosening stiff muscles and forcing some strength into his legs.

By nightfall, the combination of exercise and good food had returned some of his vigour. Arken brought him a silver-hilted dagger, and a message that his horse was ready. The servant's frown held a wealth of disapproval for his charge's ill-advised jaunt. Blade dressed in his black leather garb, which had been washed and mended since the fight.

The ride to the meeting, although achieved at a sedate walk, proved to be painful and tiring. Blade arrived at the assigned location far weaker than he would have wished, and mustered all of his remaining energy to walk without a limp into the ring of torches that lighted the scene. A surprising number of assassins were assembled within the circle of tall grey stones whose origins had been lost in time. Their black clothes made them blend into a formless mass dotted with pale faces, their numerous familiars hidden amongst them. Many were apprentices, young boys barely in their teens.

An older man stepped from the ranks, a dark wolf following him like a shadow. Blade's former tutor's hair was touched with grey at the temples, and his well-trimmed beard bore twin white lines that gave him the distinguished air of a scholar. Then again, Blade mused, Kai had always looked distinguished, an asset that had helped his career. At over forty years old, he was, by assassins' standards, elderly.

Had he remained an active assassin, he would not have achieved such a great age. Kai had retired in

his late twenties, and now earned his living teaching young assassins for a share of their profits once they earned their tattoos. He was also an elder in the assassin's guild, aided in its decisions and partook in the rituals, such as judging young assassins striving to attain their mark. Older retired assassins ranked above him, but in this instance, he was the guild's spokesman, as Blade's erstwhile mentor.

He smiled. "Welcome, Blade. I'm pleased that you've finally honoured us with your presence."

Blade inclined his head. "Talon." He addressed the elder assassin by his trade name, as was polite.

Talon surveyed the assembly, with its many young, curious faces, and raised his voice. "For those of you who don't know him, I present to you the assassin Blade, our most renowned and proficient member, and the Master of the Dance. Over two hundred kills, amongst them great lords, and, of course, King Shandor of the Cotti, his greatest triumph yet. What's most amazing is that he's still alive, and almost thirty years old." He swung back to Blade. "Still no plans to retire?"

The assassin shrugged, meeting Talon's slanted, yellowish eyes, which betrayed his kindred to the wolf. "I'm considering it."

"Perhaps you shouldn't delay it until your edge is lost, and, with it, your life."

"Perhaps."

Talon walked around Blade, an old habit that brought back many memories. "But I wonder, should we address you as 'My Lord' now, and bow to you?"

"Do as you see fit."

"I also wonder what you are now. Are you a lord, or an assassin? Have you relinquished your trade? If you have, your mark must be burnt off with a hot iron. If you retire, you're expected to teach the young."

Blade's back prickled as Talon passed behind him. "I haven't relinquished my trade, nor am I retired as yet."

"Then you're still an assassin, and subject to our rules."

"Yes. Is this the reason I was summoned here?"

"Not exactly." Talon stopped in front of him. "An assassin died in the palace, not too long ago. He was sent to kill Prince Kerrion, but he failed. Do you deny killing him?"

Blade straightened, stung by the accusation. "You think I killed Slash? That's absurd. I have never broken the guild's laws. I had nothing to do with his death. I was only told of it afterwards. The soldiers guarding Prince Kerrion killed him."

"I find it hard to believe that an experienced assassin such as Slash was discovered by soldiers."

"He was not. The Prince discovered him, knocked him down and called the guards."

Talon's eyes narrowed. "Discovered by his target? How?"

"He tripped over a rug. Slash should have retired before now. He was almost nine and twenty, and had lost his edge."

"I see." Talon circled him again. "And you, in turn, were beaten badly by four street thugs, hired by those who paid Slash. Weren't they seeking to remove you as an obstacle in their efforts to kill the Prince, because it was you who foiled Slash's attempt?"

"No. They were avenging the death of Lord Mordon, whom I was paid to kill after Slash's death. He was one of those who hired Slash."

"And this, we must assume, since you're an assassin before your peers, is the truth."

"It is."

Talon stopped in front of him again. "Yes, I suspect the commoners would dearly like to turn us against our own. But they've presented us with another dilemma." He beckoned to the audience.

A tall man approached, his narrow face marred by a scar that ran from temple to chin, cutting through an eye, which a patch covered. A shiny black scorpion clung to his shoulder, its stinger curled over its back.

Talon placed a hand on the assassin's other shoulder. "This is Scar, aptly named. He's recently been asked to kill a certain Lord Conash, and offered a handsome fee. Since he knows that Lord Conash is also the assassin Blade, he came to me with the problem. As Lord Conash, you're fair game, but as Blade, you're not. He was told that you had relinquished your profession, and no longer enjoyed the protection of being one of us. He was told that you now answer only to the Queen, and have been called the Queen's Blade. Is this true?"

Blade shifted his weight off his injured leg, hiding his discomfort with a frown. "I have been called that, but I don't answer only to her. I'm still an assassin. Anyone may hire me."

"That's good." Talon patted Scar's shoulder. "So you'll have forego your fine fee, Scar."



The tall assassin smiled lopsidedly. “A pity.” He thrust out a hand. “Good to meet you.”

Blade shook it, surprised by the vigour with which his was wrung. “Is this the reason for this meeting, Talon?”

“Amongst other things. There were a number of reasons, most of which we have now dealt with. No assassin may become one man’s pet killer, or woman’s, and it’s this misconception that’s put your life in danger. Those who tried to hire Scar may still pay ordinary men to kill you, as they have already.”

“Those men weren’t sent to kill me. They only wanted me out of the way then, and they wanted information. The Queen foiled their plans by sending Prince Kerrion back to the desert, thereby putting him out of their reach.” Blade turned to Scar. “If I knew who hired you...”

The tall assassin’s smile twisted his scar, and the cold glint of his eye betrayed his kind. “He went to great lengths to hide beneath a hood, and didn’t give his name, but I can tell you that it was Lord Bellcamp.”

Talon looked disapproving. “Who’s now doubtless a dead man, and his accomplices will know who betrayed them.”

Scar shrugged, making his scorpion twitch. “They shouldn’t have hired an assassin to kill one of his own.”

“I thank you for telling me,” Blade said, “and I would say that he and his cohorts will be dead before they can have their revenge.”

“That’s as well,” Talon commented, “for assassins shouldn’t reveal their clients to anyone.” Again he cast a stern glance at Scar. “If you pay the price, you have only yourself to blame.”

As Scar opened his mouth to reply, Blade interjected, “If that’s all the business you have with me, I’ll take my leave.”

Talon stepped closer to peer at him. “Are you unwell?”

Blade toyed with the idea of telling the truth, but rejected it. Even though his rigid stance and pallor should have been obvious, he did not wish to reveal his weakness to his peers. “No, I’m well, but it’s late, and I have business to tend to.”

“Supper with the Queen, perhaps?”

Blade shook his head. “Nothing quite so important, I’m afraid.”

“A pity,” Talon murmured. “Many of these youngsters would like to meet you.”

“Another time, perhaps. I bid you goodnight.” With a curt nod, Blade turned away.

The information Blade gleaned mollified Minna-Satu’s fury at his jaunt somewhat, but his refusal to identify the assassin who had told him sparked her ire afresh. He had regarded her with wintry eyes that challenged her to punish his disobedience. Instead, she ordered Lord Bellcamp’s immediate arrest, only to find that he had already fled, warned by his spies. Realising the strength of her foes, she ordered that the assassin’s rooms be guarded and started a manhunt for the traitorous lord.

A tenday later, Captain Redgard arrested one of the men who had attacked Blade, but the cutthroat could tell him nothing, having never seen his employer’s face. He did, however, reveal the identity of the other three men, who were arrested and put on trial, found guilty and executed all in one day.

Blade healed more quickly than the healers had predicted, regaining his health a mere two tendays after the executions. To his disgust and amusement, the Queen assigned a bodyguard to protect him, and forbade him to leave the palace without his watchdog. Blade found it incongruous that an assassin should have a bodyguard, but Minna was adamant and would brook no argument. The soldier set to guard him was a pleasant, burly man named Lirek, a man of dogs with a brindled war hound familiar called Fang. True to the breed, Fang stood above knee height, with a robust, muscular frame, a whip-thin tail and lupine ears.

The conspirators met once more before Lord Bellcamp fled the city, this time at Mendal’s house. Suspicion and recrimination thickened the air, with Lord Bellcamp at the centre of the animosity. Lord Javare’s scathing remarks made Bellcamp’s hand stray often to the hilt of his sword, and Mendal barely managed to keep the three lords from each other’s throats. Lord Durlan mopped nervous sweat from his fat features, his small eyes darting between the other two. Until this incident, he had been the most hated of the three, now Bellcamp had usurped him. When at last Javare had exhausted his supply of vitriol, the meeting became more business-like.

Mendal said, "So, Bellcamp has been discovered through his foolishness in trying to hire an assassin to kill one of his own. The point is, what are we going to do about it?"

"You are the advisor," Javare remarked.

"Bellcamp will have to leave the city, of course." Mendal turned to the bearded lord. "Where will you go?"

"I have a sister in Luxborg," Bellcamp said with surly indifference. "I shall stay with her."

"We must kill the assassin," Durlan asserted.

"Which one?" Mendal enquired.

"Both, preferably, but particularly the bastard who lives in the palace."

"It is Scar's head I want," Bellcamp said. "He is the one who betrayed me."

"That will not be easy," Mendal pointed out. "He is a good assassin, I have heard. He will not be an easy target, and you will find few willing to take him on."

"We had no problem with Blade."

"It is well known that Blade is no fighter, but Scar, by all accounts, is a different matter."

Bellcamp snorted, swinging away to pace. "Then we should get rid of Blade. At least that would prevent him from learning more from his cronies."

Mendal shook his head. "There is no more to learn. No one else will try to hire an assassin to kill him, and now he has a bodyguard, so he too is a hard target. The Prince has been sent back to the desert, and the war continues unabated, so whatever the Queen had planned to bring about peace has failed. I say we leave well enough alone. Our kidnapping Blade had the unexpected effect of making the Queen send the Prince home, thus breaking off their discussions. There is no point in doing anything more. We have succeeded."

"We have to avenge Mordon's death," Durlan said.

"The Queen ordered it, My Lord. Blade was just the tool. According to our laws, she is responsible. Do you propose to kill her?"

Durlan looked away from Mendal's glassy stare. "Of course not."

"Then I say we lie low and see what develops. Bellcamp will go to Luxborg, where I daresay he will have to spend the remainder of his days, for to return to Jondar would be suicide."

Bellcamp shrugged. "I shall not miss it."

"Good, then we are agreed."

"I will put a price on that bastard's head before I go," Bellcamp avowed. "If he ever comes into the city without his bodyguard, he will die."

"Lord Conash is not to blame," Javare said, breaking his sombre silence. "As Mendal has pointed out, the Queen sanctioned Mordon's death."

"That is not the reason for it," Bellcamp argued, shooting Javare a glare. "If not for Blade, Mordon would be alive. The courts would not have convicted him for trying to kill a Cotti prince. Because of him, Prince Kerrion was sent back to the desert, and now the threat of him hangs over us like an executioner's axe. We should have killed him when we had the chance. He will only get in our way again."

Mendal said, "Providing the Queen makes no further attempts to stop the war, we have no reason to set ourselves against her."

Bellcamp raked the advisor with a scathing glance. "You, of all people, should know that Queen Minna-Satu does not give up so easily."

"She has spoken to Kerrion and failed. What more can she do?"

"I do not know, but I will wager that she will think of something."

"Let us not build any bridges where there are no rivers, My Lord. When we know in which direction she is going, we can start thinking about how to stop her. Until then, we do nothing."

Two tendays after Blade recovered from his wounds, the advisor Symion returned from the front with four prospective consorts for the Queen. Although she praised his diligence, the Queen sent Symion away without considering any of the young men, merely ordering that they should be housed in the palace. This puzzled all but Blade, who did not bother to enlighten anyone, not even Chiana, despite her accusing stares, or perhaps because of them.

An uneasy tranquillity settled on the palace, which deep currents of suspicion and anticipation underscored, as if everyone held their breath. The only one unaffected was Blade, who ignored the whispers around and about him. Several times, he gave Lirek the slip long enough to enjoy some

solitary drinking, and even once to perform an assassination for a merchant client.

Minna-Satu affected contentment, hiding her unhappiness behind a façade of well-being. Her daily routine went unchanged, although perhaps she showed a little more zeal than previously, as if to provide a distraction from her thoughts. Her countenance remained gloomy, despite the antics of monkey-kin jesters and graceful flamingo-kin dancers.

Blade was exercising in the garden when Chiana appeared between the hedgerows bearing a plain, grubby missive. She paused to watch him in the moment before he revealed that he was aware of her presence, and he raised mocking eyebrows when he turned to face her. She lowered her eyes and held out the letter, turning away when he took it.

Blade frowned at her back, wondering why the Queen's chief advisor should be the one to deliver a missive to him, then shrugged it off and tore it open. The scrawl within was barely legible, although written with great care and smudged with dirty fingerprints and tears. Blade sighed as he finished reading it, and raised his head to gaze around at the sunlit garden.

His retainers had rejected Lulu, despite the letter he had given her, which they had dismissed as a forgery. She was now living in someone's barn, working as a milkmaid in utter squalor. Her predicament did not unduly trouble him, but her letter gave him a good reason to travel to his estate, which he longed to see. His request to see the Queen was granted, as always, and she smiled when he bowed to her.

"My Lord Conash, it is good to see you. Since your remarkable recovery, I have scarcely had your company."

"You are busy, My Queen. I do not wish to intrude."

Minna-Satu waved it away. "You never intrude. Would you care for lunch?"

"No, thank you. I have come about a matter of some importance to myself."

The Queen sighed and sank onto a mound of silken cushions, glancing at the sand cat who slumbered in a patch of late autumn sunlight. Shista's ears and whiskers twitched as she hunted prey in the land of dreams, her paws jerking.

"So," Minna grumbled, "you have not come for the pleasure of my company, but for some favour."

Blade hesitated, surprised by her testy tone and obvious displeasure. Minna glance up at him and gestured to the floor in front of her. "Do not loom over me, Blade, sit."

He settled on a cushion. "I have not come for a favour, My Queen, only to inform you that I shall be visiting my estate."

Minna's brows rose. "To inform me? Not to ask permission?"

"No." Blade leant forward, frowning. "Whatever is troubling you, I ask that you put it aside for the moment. I have done nothing to deserve such rancour."

"No?" Minna jumped up and strode over to the window, staring out. "You have disobeyed me on numerous occasions, defied my wishes and flouted my instructions. You have even refused to answer my questions, for which a lesser man might have lost his head. I, on the other hand, have rewarded you richly, elevated your rank to one of the highest in the land, and saved your life. For all this, you do not see fit to ask my permission to leave? You brashly announce that you will be leaving, without asking me if I can spare you."

He gazed at her stiff back, noting her clenched hands, and his frown faded. "Why do you not write to him?"

Her shoulders slumped. "And say what?"

"Ask if he is well. Tell him of your unhappiness and of his child."

She turned to face him, looking defeated. "You are far too perceptive. It will get you into trouble one of these days." She sighed. "I cannot write to him. My letters would never reach him."

"Kerrion is a man of eagles. His familiar is a desert eagle. An eagle could bear a message to him and bring his to you. All you need is a man or woman of eagles who you can trust to have their familiar carry the missive."

She returned to sit on her cushions, her eyes dark with sadness. "How long will you be gone?"

He shrugged. "Not too long."

"You will be back before the winter storms begin? Once they do, the roads will be impassable."

Blade nodded, hiding his reluctance. "Of course."

"I will have need of you once my condition becomes known. People will suspect. There will be much speculation. My enemies will plot against me again."

"Unless you give them no reason to." At her puzzled look, he elaborated, "If you take one of the consorts to your room, they will assume -"

“No. I cannot do that.”

“He has only to sleep on the floor, as long as you can trust him. It will buy you some time, allay their suspicions until they realise that the consort could not be the father of your child.”

Her eyes roamed over his face. “You are clever, Blade, although your shrewdness does seem rather underhand. I do not like stooping to such measures, deceiving those around me with charades and lies. I shall, however, think on the matter, for it is my child’s life that is at stake here.”

For several minutes she appeared lost in thought, then she said, “Go to your estate then. All is quiet here for now, but return before the winter storms. I shall give you a company of men to guard you, for there are perils on the journey.”

Blade did not want a company of men, but saw no point in arguing. The Queen could be implacable at times, and he sensed that this was one of them. He rose and bowed. “My Queen.”

She inclined her head. “Safe journey, My Lord Conash.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Kerrion returned to his desert city in a glorious fashion. Thousands lined the way to his palace, cheering and tossing precious flowers in his path. He wondered at the hero's welcome bestowed upon a prince who had been the Jashimari Queen's prisoner and released at her behest. There was nothing heroic about his ignominious return to the desert, dressed in Jashimari clothes and riding a steed the Queen had provided. Upon reaching the Cotti camp, he had almost been shot before he was recognised. The well hidden, pitying looks of his senior officers had annoyed him greatly. In their eyes, at least, his captivity had reduced his stature.

Once dressed in Cotti clothes again, he had been joyously reunited with his familiar, Kiara, who had been caged during his absence to prevent her from following him and being killed. Fortunately, the officer who had discovered his abduction had had the foresight to cage the bird before she had woken on that fateful morning. With her perched upon his shoulder once more, he had compounded his unpopularity in the eyes of his men by announcing that he wished to have a Jashimari slave, and ordered that all the slaves in the camp be brought for his inspection. Twenty dull-eyed boys and fifteen frightened girls had been brought before him. Kerrion had ordered that they be taken to the mountain pass and released, which had incited angry mutters from some of his bolder officers. He had informed them that slavery was banned under his rule, and any slaves found would be released and their owners punished. A few officers had voiced protests to this, but his glare had silenced them.

Three days later, he had set off on the two-tenday journey to the city, where he would face his brothers and the ordeal of his coronation. The pale metropolis shimmered in the heat, its buildings constructed primarily from white stone or whitewashed to reflect the fierce sun. Tall palms shaded the wide, paved roads, and patches of verdure grew next to mansions and temples. Awnings extended from shops to cool their bland interiors and invite the heat stricken to enter their tempting shade. The throngs of sun-bronzed Cotti that lined the way to wave and cheer their prince provided thirsty patrons for roadside taprooms and teahouses after he passed.

Kerrion still wore a prince's silver circlet as he reined in his horse in front of the sweeping marble steps that led to the pillared archways of his father's palace. The tall, gilded domes glowed in the sun atop pale walls built by master crafters in a previous age. He dismounted before the roaring crowds that cordons of soldiers held at bay, and turned once to wave before mounting the steps, his officers flanking him. The noise was left behind as he entered the cool, bare halls of the palace, a building that had outgrown its furnishings and whose grandeur was marked by an echoing emptiness, apart from a few cosy rooms. The scarcity of wood made it impossible to fill the many chambers with anything other than stone statues and a few paintings.

Liveried servants bowed and took his dusty white cloak, brushing sand from his tunic with its silver sun emblem, while others ushered him towards his private quarters. He did not expect to reach them unmolested, and was not surprised when Lerton confronted him with a supercilious sneer. His younger brother, resplendent in foppish finery of pale yellow linen with gold trappings, bowed mockingly.

"Welcome home, Sire," he jeered.

Kerrion frowned, his fatigue making him curt. "I am not in the mood for your antics, Lerton. I am tired and I want a bath. Get out of my way."

Lerton hopped aside. "Whatever you say, Sire! Your word is my command."

Kerrion stalked past, and Kiara spread her wings to keep her balance.

Lerton fell into step beside him. "Did you enjoy the hospitality of the Jashimari Queen?"

"I was a prisoner."

Lerton laughed. "Aye, taken prisoner by a woman!"

Kerrion stopped and swung to face his brother, causing Kiara's claws to dig into his shoulder. Lerton eyed him, and the various retainers stepped back. Because they had different mothers, Lerton was a mere two moons younger than Kerrion. He took after his father, a broad bear of a man, despite being the kin of snakes. His familiar, a pale golden stone snake with enough venom to give a man a bad headache, was coiled around his neck. The half-brothers looked nothing alike, since Lerton owned blunt features, ash blond hair and dark brown eyes.

"Is that what everyone thinks?" Kerrion demanded.

"It is true." Lerton shrugged, his expression smug.

"No, it is a lie, which you probably made up. I was kidnapped by a man disguised as a woman, a

skilful assassin who also killed our father.”

Lerton snorted. “You were seen walking off into the desert with a whore, and you went willingly.”

“I had a knife at my ribs, you fool.”

“So you say, but of course you would. Who would admit to such a demeaning capture?”

“And do you also think our father was killed by a woman?”

“No one knows who killed him. Perhaps it was you, so you could run off with your whore and consort with the Jashimari Queen.”

Kerrion’s eyes narrowed as he saw the thrust of Lerton’s accusations and their danger. If enough people believed his brother, Kerrion could be denounced as a traitor. “You lying little worm,” he said. “If that was true, I would not have returned.”

“But you had to claim your crown. You are nothing without it.”

Kerrion glanced around at the gaggle of servants who stood blank-faced, absorbing every word, and mustered his poise. To allow Lerton to goad him into a public outburst would be ill advised, and was exactly what his brother was trying to do. Kerrion forced an indulgent smile.

“And you would dearly like to get your hands on it, would you not? No doubt you have regaled any who would listen with this ridiculous story. Be careful your desperation does not lead to anything that may be seen as treason. I would not like to see my little brother on the gallows for making false accusations and spreading malicious lies about me. If there are any doubts about what happened in Father’s camp, let the courts accuse me. It is not your place to do so.” Kerrion marched off.

Lerton seemed stunned for a moment, but then trotted after him again. “Rest assured, there will be an enquiry, brother. No one will believe that a woman killed Father. Trying to blame it on the whore he slept with that night is folly. Your claim that she was a man is ridiculous. Many of the officers observed her that night, and none doubt her sex.”

“That is what makes him so successful, idiot. How am I to prove the truth of my words? Would you have me call him as a witness?”

Lerton giggled. “Of course that is impossible, since he does not exist. All the killers the Jashimari bitch sent failed, so you decided to do it yourself and blame it on some non-existent assassin who looks like a woman. That is a tall story for anyone to swallow. Could you not think of a better one?”

“Sometimes the truth sounds more far-fetched than the tallest tale, but that does not make it a lie.”

“You had better start thinking of a better story than that. The council of judges will never believe such a ludicrous yarn.”

Arriving at the door to his chambers, Kerrion turned to face his younger brother. Blade, he thought angrily, was too good at his work, so much so that the blame was now being laid at his own doorstep. “I have never been eager to sit on the Cotti throne. That has always been your greatest ambition. If I did not know the Jashimari Queen sent that assassin, I might be tempted to accuse you of it.”

Lerton scowled. “I was here in the city when it happened.”

“There are plenty of assassins for hire.”

“None who would kill their king!”

“Not a Cotti, but a Jashimari or Contaran assassin would be eager for the work; a simple matter of sending a messenger to find a suitable man. Everyone has a price, and you have access to almost limitless funds, although not for much longer.” Kerrion stepped closer to his brother. “Once I am King, I intend to restrict your powers, since you only use them for ill. Think long and hard about what you are doing before you incur my wrath. You may live to regret it, if you make an enemy of the future King. I advise you to leave me alone right now; my mood is not good after the long journey.”

Kerrion left his brother gaping at him, and the servants closed the doors. Kerrion placed Kiara on her perch and crossed the room to splash his face in the water basin. The servants unbuckled his armour and stripped off the royal trappings he had worn for his return to the city. Curtained doors on one side of the room opened onto the palace’s inner garden, which spanned the area between the royal quarters and the harem on the far side of the square. A feast of fruit and cold meat awaited him on a table, and he went over to sample it as the retainers finished their tasks and retreated. With a sigh, he sat on one of the finely crafted wooden chairs and nibbled a grape, frowning.

The movement of a curtain caught his attention, for no wind blew in through the open doors. His hand dropped to the jewelled hilt of the dagger in his belt.

“Come out, or I will call the guards.”

A woman stepped out, her eyes downcast and her hands bunched in her skirt. She retained much of her former beauty, although the years had ravaged her fine skin and whitened her pale hair.

Kerrion relaxed. “Why are you hiding behind the curtains, Mother?”

She shot him an apologetic glance with pale amber eyes. "I wished to speak to you, but when you seemed in such an ill mood, I thought better of it."

He considered her, comparing her submissiveness to the Jashimari Queen's haughtier and poise, and disliked the contrast. "What did you want to speak to me about?"

"I came to warn you. Much has happened in your absence. Lerton, Armin and Ronan plot against you. They have already told the courts that they suspect you of killing your father, and have testified to your hatred of him."

"That is no secret," Kerrion muttered. "Many people hated Shandor."

"They have said that you were in league with the camp whore, and she drugged the King so you might kill him. Afterwards you went to Jashimari together to strike a bargain with the Queen."

"In which case I would not have returned. Surely the judges cannot think me such a fool? This story of Lerton's is implausible. It makes no sense."

His mother nodded. "And yet he will convince them, if not with the truth of his stories, then with the depth of his pockets. He is determined to oust you, and has grasped the perfect opportunity."

Kerrion frowned. "You should not be here. I did not summon you. If the guards find you, there will be an uproar that I will have to deal with, and right now I am not in the mood for an argument."

"Of course, you are tired, I understand. Do not worry; no one will see me leave." She bowed her head and folded her hands.

"See that they do not."

Patriss started to abase herself, but Kerrion waved an impatient hand, and she left through the curtains at the back of his bed chamber. He had vague memories of soft hands and a sweet voice singing lullabies to him in the darkness. At the age of six, he had been taken to the men's quarters, where a stern tutor had taken over the duty of rearing him. Menservants had washed and dressed him, and he had not known a woman's touch again until he was old enough to have a concubine to warm his bed. He hardly knew his mother, and had been brought up to believe that women were inferior, too stupid to talk to and good for nothing but bearing children and giving a man pleasure.

Since his encounter with the Jashimari Queen, however, his opinion had changed. She was not unique, either, he mused, for the chief advisor, Chiana, had been equally clever, although a little humbler. He wondered what it must be like to share a lifetime with such a fascinating woman, instead of the meek silence to which he was accustomed. His father had been a firm believer in the inferiority of women, taking every opportunity to scorn them. Yet beneath this arrogant exterior Kerrion had sensed a deep loneliness that had made King Shandor turn to drink and sports to fill his time.

Kerrion's problems had started at birth, when he had been the first son born to a wife Shandor disliked. The King's uncle had arranged the marriage, and Shandor had resented it, especially when his favourite wife, chosen for her charms, had borne a son just two moons later. Shandor had done his best to rid himself of his eldest, unwanted son by placing him in perilous situations. The first attempt on Kerrion's life had been when he was seven, and had recently learnt to ride. Shandor had given him a spirited horse and insisted that Kerrion master the animal. The Prince had soon lost control, and the stallion had bolted and thrown him. Luckily, he had escaped with only a broken leg and collarbone.

The next attempt had involved Lerton, who had pushed Kerrion down a well. A peasant had found and rescued him, and Lerton had received several light blows from his father's belt in token punishment. At the age of twelve, Shandor had sent Kerrion to inspect a village ravaged by a deadly plague. Although several of the soldiers who went with him had died, Kerrion had not sickened. At fourteen, he had been left on foot in the desert while out riding with his personal guard. They had camped overnight, and in the morning Kerrion had woken alone.

His personal guard had neglected to search for him, or to even notice his absence. He had walked to a village, where he spent two tendays recovering from his ordeal before returning to his father's palace. At sixteen, he had started his training in armed combat, and his years amongst the soldiers had been rife with strange accidents and odd mistakes by seasoned warriors. He had emerged battle-scarred and tempered by several brushes with death, which had left him wary and suspicious. Upon his return to his father's court, he had employed a food taster, and three had succumbed to poison over the years.

Kerrion pondered the strange fact that he had probably been safer in the Jashimari Queen's palace than he was in his own.

Blade halted his horse and gazed at the village nestled in a muddy hollow amid rolling hills covered

with giant bloodwood trees. The bleak view did little to lighten his mood, just as shifting his seat did little to relieve the smarting of his posterior after a tenday of almost constant contact with a saddle. Autumn winds had stripped most of the red-gold leaves from the trees and turned them dingy brown, matching the muddy streets and the houses built from undressed timber. The scene had little to recommend it; even the people who waddled through the sucking mire wore grey or brown clothes. Put together with the haze of smoke that hung about the place and the yapping of half-starved dogs, it struck him as a singularly unhealthy spot.

Blade turned to Lirek, who sat poker-faced on a broad bay horse beside him. "This is the Queen's reward? Does she wish me dead?"

Lirek smiled. "The town's not so good, but your estate is far better."

"You've been here before?"

The bodyguard shrugged. "I've passed through it."

Blade surveyed the scene once more. "What keeps these people here? What do they live on? I see no cultivation."

"These are miners. Your estate has one of the richest gold mines in the country."

"Gold." Blade pulled a face. "As if we haven't got enough of it."

"It pays the bills."

The assassin glanced back at the mud-splattered company who sat stony-faced on their steeds behind him. He had quickly deduced the advantage of riding in front, and, after two muddy days in the middle of the company, had assumed the lead. The young squad leader rode behind him, his livery somewhat soiled from the day's ride, an eager look in his eyes. Blade nudged his horse forward. He disliked eager-to-please people, and was unused to fawning.

As he and his men emerged from the forest, some of the peasants glanced at them, but few paused for more than a moment before going on about their business. Here, in the heart of Jashimari, the war seemed unreal, and the appearance of a squad of strange soldiers aroused no suspicions. Unlike the border town in which Blade had been raised, where the goatherds had doubled as lookouts and every stranger had been regarded with mistrust. He found their apathy depressing, and their smugness galled him when he thought of all the men who had died to keep these dull people safe.

The company followed the main street to the far side of the village, where the forest drew back on either side to reveal a tract of cleared land covered with soggy grass and a few cows, sheep and horses. The road divided into two, one winding away into the forest, the other leading to an imposing keep of grey and black stone. Set against a backdrop of dark, bare trees, it brooded beneath a sullen grey sky, summing up Blade's mood.

"How suitable," he muttered.

"My Lord?" Lirek enquired.

"It suits me, don't you think?"

Lirek shrugged. "If you say so."

Blade kicked his horse into a canter, his bodyguard and the troops following. The tall wooden gates stood open, allowing the cavalcade to clatter into the castle's courtyard unchallenged. Blade swung down from the tall black charger with a soft groan, rubbing his offended hind parts. Shock-haired grooms ran up to take the horses, gaping at the new arrivals.

Blade searched for someone more intelligent, and spotted a brown-clad man hurrying towards him. His animal kin was so easily recognisable Blade was hard put not to smile. The man's hook-nosed face poked forward on a wrinkled neck, his bald pate gleamed in the dull light, and small brown eyes glared from under heavy lids. His movements, while giving the appearance of haste, had a ponderous quality about them, and Blade awaited his arrival with interest.

"Who are you, sir, to ride in here unannounced?" the man demanded. "My lord, were he here, would not approve."

Blade switched to the high-born speech nobles used. "Indeed. And who might your lord be?"

The man drew himself up. "Lord Conash, holder of the Queen's favour, esteemed advisor and confidant of our illustrious matriarch and slayer of the despised King Shandor of the Cotti."

"He sounds like quite a man," Blade commented.

"He is indeed! He would be here to tell you this himself, if he wasn't so utterly indispensable to the Queen that she insists on keeping him at her side."

"Ah, well, maybe he has other attributes that she requires," Blade remarked, starting to enjoy himself.

"How dare you?" the retainer spluttered. "How dare you insult my lord and the Queen herself?"



“Did I? Is it so insulting to be chosen by the Queen, or for the Queen to choose from amongst her esteemed lords?”

The man’s face reddened and his eyes bulged as he wrestled with this conundrum. “My Lord Conash is.... He wouldn’t... couldn’t....” He waved an arm. “I don’t have to explain myself to you, sir. Suffice it to say that such a thing could never happen.”

Blade raised a brow at Lirek. “News does travel fast.” Lirek opened his mouth, but Blade held up a hand and addressed the retainer. “Tell me, my good man, do you know your lord well?”

“Well?” He shook his head. “Not exactly.”

“Truth be told, you do not know him at all, do you?”

“Well, not personally, no.”

“By reputation only, then?”

The retainer nodded. “That’s right.”

Blade started to pull off a glove, one finger at a time. “So you do not know what he looks like, do you?”

“No.”

“Nor do you know his signature.”

“No.”

Blade finished removing one glove and started on the other. “So if you were to receive a letter, signed by him, you would not know if it was indeed his signature, would you?”

“Of course I would!”

“How?”

“I know a noble’s hand. I can tell a lord’s signature from some peasant’s forgery.”

“Ah.” Blade folded his gloves, concentrating on the task to keep from laughing.

“What’s this all about, anyway?” the retainer demanded. “What right have you to question me? You haven’t even told me who you are. And all these soldiers!” He glanced at the troops. “You can’t stay here. We can’t feed this many men, and besides, you have no permission from Lord Conash.”

Blade smiled. “I do not need permission from Lord Conash. I am he.”

The man stepped back, dismay wrinkling his brow, then suspicion dawned. “So say you!”

Blade sighed, tiring of the game. “What, do I not look like a lord, even in such finery?” He glanced down at his black, silver-studded tunic. “Do I need to bring the Queen here to vouch for me? But then, you might doubt her identity, too.”

He stepped closer and poked the man in the chest. “I sent a woman and her children here several moons ago, with a letter, and they were turned away. Is this how you serve your lord? Would you try to turn me away as well? Because I assure you, I will not leave so easily, and I have a company of the Queen’s men to back me up. Ask them who I am, if you wish, but if you do, you will be out of a job.”

The retainer purpled, then paled, his eyes darting about the courtyard. Finally he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “I’m sorry, My Lord Conash, I had no way of knowing you.”

“Nor, apparently, my signature. A little less suspicion would have served you well, and if you had done as I ordered in the letter, I would not be here now, to make your life unpleasant.”

“I apologise, My Lord.”

“Bring me the woman and her children at once.”

“Yes, My Lord.” The man jumped up and trotted away in the manner of an agitated tortoise.

Blade smiled at Lirek, reverting to commoner’s speech with the ease of many years’ experience. “I could get used to this.”

“You seem to have the knack of it, My Lord.”

“Hmm. Well, let’s go and find something to eat and drink. A tankard or two of ale would go down well right now, I must say.”

Lirek grinned. “I won’t argue with that.”

Within the keep, they found willing serving girls and a well-stocked larder waiting to be washed down by an equally well-stocked cellar. Lirek was a compliant and pleasant drinking companion, if inclined to get bawdy. The over-eager squad leader and his junior officers joined them, but before long vanished in the company of giggling maids. Lirek eyed a buxom wench who winked at him, until Blade could stand it no longer and ordered him to give in to her blandishments.

After Lirek was dragged away, looking apologetic, Blade drank alone, as he often did, and surveyed his domain. The décor was depressing. Dusty trophies stared down with accusing eyes and tattered battle flags dangled like dirty washing on the walls. A pile of ash resided in the massive fireplace, and the rushes on the floor gave off a dank smell.

A scream from the doorway made him jump up and whip around in time to collect a ragged, dirty bundle of sobbing broken-nosed joy against his chest with such force that she almost bowled him over. A strong smell of cows accompanied her, mixed with the redolence of straw and dung. He fended her off, cursing. The smirking retainer and five snotty-nosed children stood in the doorway.

“Lilu, get a hold of yourself.” He pushed her away. “You’ve spent too much time with the cows.”

“Of course I have, because that buffoon couldn’t read your signature.” She shot the retainer a venomous glance.

“I’m sure you’ll make him pay.”

Her eyes glistened. “You came! I can’t believe it. You came all this way to save me.”

“I did no such thing!” he denied hotly. “I came to inspect my estate.”

She smiled. “Of course you did.”

Blade glared at the lurking retainer. “Fetch the lady some wine.”

After the man left, Lilu muttered, “Be careful of him. They say that he poisoned the last lord of this keep.”

“Poison.” Blade grimaced.

“Not something assassins use, hmm?”

“Some do. There was one who used to give his victims poisoned sweetmeats, and he was successful.”

“What happened to him?”

Blade shrugged. “Poison doesn’t always work quickly enough.”

“His victim killed him?”

“His victim’s brother.”

“Well, be careful of Vurk. I don’t trust him. He’s had this place to himself since he killed the last lord, some three years ago, I believe. Made himself rich from the mines.”

“Unusual for a man of tortoises to be a killer,” Blade said.

“He doesn’t have a familiar.”

“Ah. That explains it.” He picked up his mug of ale and moved away from her, relieved that the children were quiet and unobtrusive. Lilu watched him, biting her lip. Blade leant against the mantelpiece and contemplated the ashes in the fireplace, brushing at them with the toe of his boot. He sipped the nutty ale and looked at Lilu.

“I won’t be staying here long. This place is depressing.”

She nodded. “It’s much better in the summer, I’ve heard. The autumn rains have turned everything to mud, but soon the snows will come.”

“I’ll be gone before then. But even summer won’t cheer this place up. It’s like a tomb.”

“All it needs is a good cleaning, some new hangings and furniture. It could be quite nice.”

A serving maid entered with wine for Lilu, and Blade spotted Vurk lurking in the shadows beside the door. He beckoned to the retainer.

Vurk shuffled over and bowed. “My Lord.”

“Your services here are terminated. You will pack your belongings and be off my estate within the next two days.”

Vurk gaped, then spluttered, “But... My Lord! I’m in charge of this estate. I have been for -”

“I do not care. You will pack and leave. I never want to see you again. Is that understood?”

Vurk’s sullen eyes spat dull anger, but he bowed. “Yes My Lord.” He marched out, his back stiff with indignation. The serving maid stared after him.

Blade turned to her. “You, go and order baths for myself and the lady. See that her children are fed and scrubbed with your strongest soap, then put to bed, in that order. Is a room ready for me?”

She bobbed. “Yes My Lord.”

Lilu smiled at him as the maid hurried off. “You’re getting quite good at this, aren’t you?”

He shrugged, sipping his ale. “One problem solved, at least. Do you think you can manage the rest?”

“You... you mean run the estate?”

Blade smiled and shook his head. “No, I’ll hire someone better qualified than you for that job. Someone without sticky fingers, I hope. You can have charge of the keep, see to its running and make it a place worth living in. Can you do that?”

“Yes! Of course I can!” Her eyes overflowed, and she started towards him. “Thank you, Blade.”

He quit the fireplace and moved away, avoiding another smelly hug. “That’s settled then. I’ll see you tomorrow. It’s been a long journey, and I’m tired.”

Lilu nodded, wiping her eyes. He banged down his ale tankard and strode out.

Over the next few days, Lili rallied a small army of servants to wash, mop, brush and polish. They tore down the old curtains and musty banners and swept out the ancient rushes. The stuffed trophies fed the kitchen fires, and Lili supervised the creation of delicious dishes in the massive ovens. After a few days of riding over his estate, inspecting the mines and surveying the woods, Blade grew bored and helped with the work, enjoying the activity. By the end of the first tenday, the soldiers also joined in. Lili found a trader who sold quality cloth, elegant furniture and rich tapestries, persuading Blade to part with a sizeable fortune to refurnish the keep.

After three tendays, Blade judged the place to be quite habitable, and was a little sorry to return to the Queen's palace. He appointed an honest-seeming estate manager to replace Vurk. The man almost wept with gratitude and swore to serve Blade faithfully for the rest of his life. The assassin told Lili to keep an eye on the new manager and ordered him, in turn, to watch over Lili, content that they would find each other out if either became dishonest, unless they got together and compared notes. Lili wept on the day he left, much to his disgust and embarrassment, and he scowled at those soldiers amongst the company who dared to smile at her obvious affection for their taciturn lord.

## Chapter Sixteen

Blade arrived at Minna-Satu's palace just ahead of the first winter storm, which swept through the city on his heels, depositing knee-deep snow and making travelling almost impossible. Wet and tired, he strode to his room to strip off his mud-stained clothes. He had barely shucked his soggy cloak and damp gloves when the door burst open. Chiana paused on the threshold, then advanced.

Blade eyed her. "Do not tell me the Queen already knows I have returned."

Chiana bowed. "My Lord. The Queen knew even before you entered the city."

He sighed. "Of course."

"She wishes to see you at once."

Blade was struck by the chief advisor's subdued attitude and air of pent-up anguish. "What is it?"

"That is for the Queen to tell you."

He stripped off his damp tunic, throwing it on the rack. "Something momentous has happened."

"Yes."

Blade frowned. "More plots?"

"No. Far worse than that."

The assassin shrugged on a dry tunic. "Very well, take me to her."

When Blade entered the Queen's morning room, Minna-Satu turned from the windows with a welcoming smile. Chiana stopped just inside the portal and performed her prostration, rising to stand with her hands folded. Blade approached the Queen, whose eyes shimmered with something more than mere gladness.

He bowed. "My Queen."

"Lord Conash. Welcome back."

"Thank you."

She motioned to the cushions. "Sit. We will have wine."

Chiana left to order it, and Blade sat on a pile of embroidered cushions while Minna settled on another. She wrung a knot of white linen he assumed had once been a handkerchief, but that now resembled a rag. Her distress struck him as odd; he had never imagined Minna-Satu capable of weeping. He waited while she composed herself. Shista slumbered in a patch of sunlight as usual, oblivious to the undercurrents.

Minna took a deep breath. "I require your advice. King Jan-Durval has been slain by his son-in-law, Prince Verone, lately a widower. Our kingdoms were bonded by blood, for the son of Queen Jilla-Peru, my grandmother, wed King Jan-Durval's sister, Earist.

"Now the bond has been broken. The King and his sons are all dead, slain by the imposter prince. King Jan-Durval was our greatest ally, and defended our western border against the desert army. No sooner had I heard of his death, I was informed that Prince Verone no longer stands by our treaty." Minna bowed her head. "His army has invaded Jashimari lands to the west."

Blade frowned at the red wine in his cup, likening it to the blood that would soon be spilt in this new war.

Minna sipped hers. "I have sent troops to our western border, and even now refugees flood from the region, hampered by the snow. We cannot hope to win this war. I have no other allies. The savages to the east are peaceful, but they will do nothing to aid us. Jashimari will be overrun before the year is out."

Blade set aside his cup. "Is there no hope of a treaty?"

"No. Prince Verone desires conquests. He knows the Endless War has weakened my kingdom. He knows Jashimari will be an easy conquest when beset on two sides."

The assassin stared out of the window at the leaden sky heavy with unshed snow and unborn storms. It befitted the bloody war that was coming, as sorrowful as a funeral day. With the Cotti to the south and only icy wastes further north, there was no way out for the Jashimari people, nowhere to run but for the bog lands of the east, where people, it was said, lived like animals and scratched a living in the mud. He lowered his gaze to the snoring sand cat as he pondered just how much he disliked having weighty decisions thrown into his lap. If not for his elevation, he would have survived whatever befell the kingdom, unconcerned. Even now, all he wanted was to disappear into the city's back streets and find a good alehouse. His hatred of the Cotti had prompted him to kill King Shandor, but he bore the Contaran people no rancour.

Aware that the Queen awaited his reply, he said, "Assassinate this Prince Verone."

Minna smiled and shook her head. "He has five grown sons and scores of grandsons. Even if you killed them all, there are cousins and nephews, three brothers, four sisters and numberless in-laws. King Jan-Durval was old and ailing; his people had grown tired of his puritanical ways and iron-fisted rule. They have embraced this new prince. They welcome the war and the spoils it will bring.

"We need a powerful army to survive, but all I have is a war-weary people whose sons, brothers and fathers have been slaughtered on the desert border, and now face a new threat from the west. Already I have weakened the desert border by sending troops to the west, for it is easier to defend.

"Soon I shall be sending raw recruits, boys barely out of their teens, to the front to be slaughtered. When they are all gone, Prince Verone will invade, slaughter and rape our women, plunder our land. The desert armies will invade from the south, and perhaps the two will strike a bargain to divide the remainder of my land, and Jashimari will be no more."

Blade jumped up and strode over to the window. "What would you have me say? I am not an advisor. I have no solution to offer you."

"You are no fool, either."

The assassin placed his hands on the window ledge and gazed at the spires visible beyond the palace's garden walls. "Does Kerrion know about his child?" He looked around to find her staring at the crumpled handkerchief.

"No."

"If this child is meant to bring peace, why wait? If you can make peace with the Cotti, it will leave you in a position to fight the Contarans."

"Kerrion has yet to be crowned. My spy in his palace tells me that he faces a blatant challenge from his brother, Prince Lerton." She looked up with a wan smile. "Oddly, it is your doing. He is accused of colluding with a whore to murder his father. If Lerton convinces the judges, Kerrion will be deposed and face execution for treason."

Blade snorted, suppressing a chuckle.

"It is a serious matter," Minna admonished. "If Kerrion is ousted, my plans also fail. There is no hope of peace with Lerton."

"Is there much with Kerrion?"

"Shamsara predicted it."

"Yet he did not predict the Contaran invasion."

"He made no mention of it, no."

Blade pushed himself away from the window. "I see no solution to this problem, My Queen."

"You do, just as I do, but you will not admit it." She gestured to the cushions. "Sit, My Lord."

Blade obeyed, studying the embroidered hem of her skirt.

She said, "I wish there was another way out of this, but I see none. Look at me."

Surprised, he met her eyes.

Minna shivered as if a chill shot down her spine, but held his gaze. "The fate of Jashimari rests with you, Blade. Kerrion must ascend the throne if we are to survive."

"You are ordering my death."

She looked away. "Perhaps not. I have sent a message to my spy. He will conduct you to the Cotti oasis, and Kerrion's palace. Once you have testified to the judges, make good your escape, and he will bring you back to Jashimari."

"Make good my escape?" He raised his eyebrows. "From a Cotti courtroom where I have just testified to assassinating King Shandor? I will be slaughtered on the spot."

"Perhaps Kerrion will help you to escape."

"Kerrion hates me, and if he did, he would be accused of treason again."

"You refuse?"

He sighed, looking out at the sky once more, where a flock of robber ravens drifted on the cold wind. "I am an assassin, My Queen. I have always said that I care about nothing, therein lies my strength. If you would send me to Kerrion's city, let it be for the reason of my trade, not to save him from the gallows. At least give me the honour of dying as an assassin, not as a helpless pawn caught in the machinations of two rulers. Order Lerton's death, and I will leave for Jadaya tonight."

Her smile was sorrowful. "I am sacrificing a priceless weapon. I need you here to aid me when the time comes, and those who wish to thwart my plans will pit themselves against me. But this is even more important. Killing Lerton alone will not save Kerrion. You must testify as well. But yes, I order Lerton's death."

“Then you shall have it. What will my payment be, should I survive to collect it?”

“Name your price.”

Blade smiled, and she flinched as if it stabbed her heart like a silver dagger of pain. “I will think on it. Do you wish his death to be quick or slow?”

“I leave that to you.”

“Very well.”

“I have one more task for you, Blade.” She hesitated, biting her lip. “I order you to return when you have assassinated Prince Lerton.”

His smile broadened. “A tall order indeed. If at all possible, I shall, My Queen.”

“Good.” Minna returned his smile, her expression hopeful, as if her worries dropped from her shoulders like autumn leaves. She rose, and Blade stood up, awaiting his dismissal.

To his surprise, she took his hand, raised it and turned it palm up. She studied his smooth palm and slender fingers, which bore the scars of his dagger. A slight frown wrinkled her brow as she pressed a black vial into his hand, closing his fingers over it.

“A poison,” she said. “If they are to torture you, take it for a painless death. Before you go, I shall have the high priestess wash your sins away in the sacred river and anoint you a sacred Knight of the Veil.”

“I am not a religious -”

“But I am. Do this for me also. If I am sending you to your death, let it be with the assurance that you will be granted entry into the Everlasting. Do not burden me with your damnation also.”

He frowned, disliking the idea. “What is it to you? You order thousands of men to their deaths.”

Her stern glance rebuked him. “Do not be impudent. I am your queen. Do as I say.” She released his hand, and he stepped back.

“My Queen.” He bowed.

“Lord Conash.”

Blade left, already thinking about Lerton’s assassination. Next to Shandor, it would be his greatest triumph, yet he wished the target was Kerrion as well. Chiana waited in his rooms, and rose from a cushion when he glared at her.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“She ordered you to Jadaya, did she not?”

Blade shrugged. “Ask her.”

“You will be killed.”

Sighing, he started to pull off his tunic, his clothes still damp underneath. He longed for a hot bath and dry clothes, and lacked the patience to deal with more questions. “That seems a forgone conclusion.”

Chiana grabbed his arm as he headed past her towards the clothes rack, surprising and hampering him, since his arms were tangled in the tunic he strived to tug off.

“This is madness. You are needed here,” she said.

“A little while ago, you were urging me to leave. Now you want me to stay?”

“Sending you to Jadaya is folly. It will accomplish nothing. Kerrion will not make peace with us, even if we help him.”

Blade jerked his arm from her grasp and shucked the tunic, throwing it on the rack. “She still has not told you, then?”

“Told me what?”

He loosened the ties of his shirt. “Ask her. It is her secret.”

Chiana seemed to wilt, the fire going out of her. “She does not confide in me. I could offer no advice on the war with Contara. The situation is hopeless.”

“Well, if it is any consolation, nor could I.” He sat on the bed and began to pull off his boots.

“You must not go.”

He looked up at her, noting the agitated twisting of her hands. “Why not?”

Chiana swung away, frowning. “It will accomplish nothing. I have told you.”

“You do not know that. The Queen has a secret agenda.”

“But you will not survive.”

He shrugged, struggling with a reluctant boot. “That is no great loss to society.”

She turned to face him. “I do not want you to go.”

The boot came free, surprising Blade, so distracted was he by this unexpected statement. Since he had been tugging so hard at it, it hit him on the chin with some force. He cursed and flung the

offending footwear across the room. Rubbing his jaw, he frowned at her. "Why?"

She looked away. "I... It will accomplish nothing."

"You have already said that a dozen times. If you want to stop this, you will have to speak to the Queen."

"She will not heed me."

He started on the other boot. "Then I cannot help you."

"And nor will you heed me."

"Apparently not."

"You think me foolish."

He snorted in exasperation, tugging at the boot. "I make no judgements without hearing all the arguments, and so far you have put forward none better than that you think it will accomplish nothing, yet you do not even know what I am to do in Jadaya."

"Testify for Prince Kerrion."

"And assassinate Lerton."

Chiana gasped. "She has lost her mind!"

"It was my idea." The boot came free and flew across the room with a bang. Blade sighed and flexed his toes, bending to remove his wet socks. Chiana came closer, so the hem of her gown brushed his feet, and he looked up at her.

"If I asked you to stay, what would you say?" she enquired.

"No."

She blinked. "You are a selfish brute."

"Insults now? How novel."

"You do not understand."

"So enlighten me."

"No."

Blade stood up, growing impatient, and found himself toe-to-toe with her. Chiana raised her chin, daring him, he guessed, to push past her. He smiled, gripped her waist and moved her aside, stepping past. Going over to the curtained alcove where a steaming bath awaited him, he paused with a hand on the curtain and glanced back, wondering why she lingered and intending to order her out. A tear ran down her face, and he frowned, opening his mouth to ask the reason for it, but she turned away and left, banging the door. Evidently his refusal to be swayed upset her, and he wondered why.

Kerrion looked up from the report he had just read at the two senior advisors who stood before him, their expressions guarded. They waited on the far side of his carved milkwood desk, their bald heads gleaming with sweat despite their cool attire. Over their knee-length cotton shifts, they wore swathes of heavy, gold-trimmed linen wrapped around their hips and draped over one shoulder.

"Lerton ordered this?" Kerrion asked.

The elder advisor inclined his head. "Yes, My Prince."

Kerrion left his chair in a bound, the crumpled parchment clenched in one fist. The advisors bowed as he stormed past and yanked open the door, slamming it behind him. He arrived in Lerton's rooms still burning with rage. Sunlight streamed in through the doors that opened into the gardens. Sienna rugs were scattered on the marble floors and cream curtains billowed in the breeze that blew in through the doors. His brother rose from a gilded couch, pushing away a concubine who fed him grapes from the bowl of fruit on the low table beside him, where a bottle of wine and a goblet also rested. The concubine fled, and Lerton faced his taller brother, his expression wary and defiant. Kerrion shook the parchment under Lerton's nose.

"This is your doing!"

"What might that be?"

"You aided that upstart Verone to overthrow King Jan-Durval!"

Lerton nodded. "Indeed I did. A stroke of genius, I would say."

"Well I would not! He has invaded Jashimari!"

"That was the whole point, brother. With his help, we will overrun Jashimari before the spring."

Kerrion gritted his teeth. "Imbecile! He will ransack the place! There will be nothing left but burnt ruins and trampled fields. Then we will have to fight him."

"No. He is our ally. He has signed a treaty."

"A treaty!" Kerrion sneered. "It is as worthless as the paper it is written on. A man who can turn on

his kin will not honour an agreement with another kingdom.”

“King Jan-Durval was a thorn in our side. The threat of reprisals has ever thwarted our attempts to invade Jashimari.”

“So now you have handed it to Verone on a platter!” Kerrion threw the paper down. “And on what authority did you make this treaty? You are not the King!”

“Nor are you!” Lerton shot back. “The way the trial is going, you never will be, either.”

“You and your lies! I cannot believe the judges are sucking up your ridiculous tales.”

Lerton raised his chin. “They are better than yours, and perhaps they want a king like Shandor, not a weakling like you. You talk about downgrading the war. You freed the Jashimari captives.”

“Children! We do not make slaves of children. The Cotti have more pride.”

“They will grow up to fight in the Jashimari witch’s army.”

Kerrion controlled the urge to punch his brother, spinning away to pace. When he calmed down somewhat, he faced Lerton again. “Do you know what the Jashimari Queen’s most potent weapon is? A man who was once one of those slaves. One who escaped, and, because of his treatment and mutilation, because he saw his family tortured and murdered in slavery, hates the Cotti more than I would have thought possible.”

Lerton shrugged. “So?”

“He is the one who killed our father!”

“That is your story. I do not believe he exists.”

Kerrion growled in frustration. “Our father’s death warrant was signed the day Blade escaped from that camp. Not only does he know how to look like one of us, he also speaks like us. He can blend in perfectly and go anywhere in Cotti lands he pleases.”

“This is the one who is also a woman?”

“Looks like a woman when he chooses. There is a big difference.”

“He is a figment of your imagination. I have made a good deal with Prince Verone, one that our father should have made.”

“Did you stop to wonder why he did not?”

Lerton smirked. “He did not think of it.”

“He was not that stupid!”

“In a few days, you will be on the gallows, so you should not worry about affairs of state, brother.”

“I would not be so sure of that.”

Lerton laughed. “The only way you can save yourself now is if you can produce this fictitious assassin as a witness, and I do not see that happening.”

“Before you usurp me, remember that there is a nest of little vipers just waiting for their turn to do the same to you. Once I am gone, you will be the next target, and they are just as devious and scheming as you. I do not see you remaining King for very long.”

Kerrion stormed back to his quarters and ordered the doors closed to all visitors. The trial had dragged on for almost a moon phase now, and he could sense the judges leaning in Lerton’s direction, attentive to his tales and the witnesses he produced, their pockets jingling with newfound wealth.

The Maiden Moon waned and the Warrior started to show his face, boding well for battles just as the war had begun to escalate beyond all recognition. He sat at his desk and stared at Kiara on her perch, remembering the face that had haunted all his waking moments since his return and invaded his dreams at night. Jashimari’s imminent fall filled him with fear for Minna’s life, yet he could do nothing to help her until he was King. If Lerton succeeded in his endeavour to usurp Kerrion and condemn him for their father’s death, she and her kingdom were doomed.



## Chapter Seventeen

Blade arrived at the border tired and cold. The raw chill of the four-tenday journey that had brought him there through deep snow on frozen roads seemed to have invaded his bones. The horses had to be changed frequently, since the heavy going sapped their strength, and it had taken all of the Queen's resources to make the journey possible in the harsh winter conditions. A tenday before they reached the mountains, the snow had lessened and the pace quickened.

Here no snow lay on the ground, but the air was freezing and the wind nipped at any bare skin it found, reddening his nose and chapping his lips. After one night of comfort in a border camp tent, he was introduced to the Cotti spy who would take him to Jadaya. Valda was a man of crows, with a beaky nose and darting black eyes under a thatch of straw-like hair. He grumbled constantly, finding no end of complaints, and his raucous familiar annoyed the assassin. Blade bore his company in silence as they set off on two desert horses across the sea of sand.

No winter lay siege to Jadaya, and at the end of the two-tenday journey that brought him to the city, the days were hot enough to cook a man's brains. Disguised in the flowing, pale turquoise robes of the desert people, which covered almost every inch of him, Blade entered Jadaya with his face covered, forgoing the skin dyes until it was necessary. His irritating guide took him to the King's palace and left him outside the walls with directions to Prince Kerrion's rooms, then hastened away.

Kerrion sat slumped behind his desk, a cup of warm wine in one hand. Tomorrow the judges would give their verdict, and he knew what it would be. Lerton had convinced them, he was certain of it, and his spies could tell him nothing to refute it. Lerton took great pleasure in scorning every argument Kerrion put forward, painting a graphic picture of a power-hungry, hateful son whom Shandor had disliked and who had been determined to be rid of him. The worst part was that many of the accusations were true. Kerrion had never been close to his father, harbouring a deep resentment born of the fact that he was an unwanted son. He had not plotted to kill King Shandor, however, only to try to stay alive.

It seemed ironic that Lerton, so long in collusion with his father to rid themselves of Kerrion, would achieve that aim through Shandor's death. He sighed and sipped the wine, grimacing at the sour taste. So deep was he in his morbid thoughts that he had not noticed the time-glasses passing, or the wine warming in his cup. Only the arrival of servants to light the lamps and torches alerted him to the fact that night had fallen. He waved away the offer of supper, lacking an appetite and wishing only to be left alone to think. The servants filed out, leaving him to his solitary gloom, the newly lighted torches hissing and spluttering.

A movement amongst the curtains caught his eye, and he frowned at it. His mother had visited him several times over the tendays, voicing her concern and offering advice he did not want. Her visits irritated him, disturbing his solitude and quiet reveries. She often waited behind the curtains for the optimum moment to show herself, usually just when he had managed to relax.

"Come out, Mother."

A man dressed in black strolled from behind the curtains, the fine silver mail that clad his chest glinting in the torchlight. A faint smile curled his mouth, and his pale grey eyes pinned the Prince with an arctic stare.

"Mother? I did not know you were so fond of me, Kerrion."

Kerrion's jaw dropped. "Blade!"

"The one and only."

The Prince jumped up, slopping his wine. "What are you doing here? How did you get in? What do you want?"

Blade cocked his head. "To the first, I am here to save your worthless hide from the gallows. To the second, up the wall and through the balcony doors, and to the third... nothing really."

Kerrion reached for the bell pull that would summon a servant, but Blade raised a hand. A dagger glinted in it, held by the blade.

"Do not touch that."

Kerrion hesitated, then lowered his hand. He was unarmed, defenceless against the assassin. "What do you want? Were you sent to kill me?"

“No, unfortunately; and as I have said, I do not want anything, but you do.”

“What?”

Blade lowered the dagger and sauntered closer. “You need me to save you from the gallows, do you not?”

Kerrion scowled, hating to admit to needing the assassin’s aid. “Why would you want to help me?”

“I do not.” Blade smiled. “But the Queen does.”

“Why?”

The assassin shrugged, picked up a paper from the Prince’s desk and studied it. “Probably because she does not want Lerton on the throne.”

“So she sent you here to testify?”

“That is right.”

“But you would rather kill me.”

Blade raised his eyes to meet the Prince’s. “Of course; but if I had been sent to kill you, you would already be dead. I have no client, Kerrion. Remember my code.”

The Prince did not doubt that he only lived now at the Jashimari Queen’s behest, but still found the situation hard to believe. “So you came all this way just to testify? To save me?”

Blade’s lip curled. “No. She asked me to, but I would not. I am an assassin, not an informant.”

“So you came to kill someone.”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

Blade dropped the paper and glared at the Prince. “In return for saving your worthless life, you will see to it that I am unharmed.”

Kerrion shook his head, astounded. “How? The moment you admit to killing my father, you will be sentenced to death.”

“I know, but the moment I clear you of the charge, you will be the King.”

“If I set you free, I will be guilty of treason.”

“No, you will not, because by testifying, I will be saving your life.” Blade wandered away to study a woodland tapestry. “I realised this on the way here. You see, they are just about to lynch you for murdering your father, a crime you did not commit. That would make them the murderers of their king. You tell them I am testifying under total amnesty. In return for clearing you, I get a pardon.”

Kerrion pondered this, then nodded. “It may work.”

Blade turned, looking scornful. “It had better, because if they try to arrest me, you will die.”

“You will not get close to me, assassin.”

Blade’s hand jerked up, and the dagger imbedded itself in the picture frame behind Kerrion’s head. The prince stared at it, then turned back to the assassin. Blade smiled, another dagger in his hand. “I kill in many ways, I just have my favourites. Cross me, and you will pay the price.”

“What about your code?”

“I am allowed to kill in my defence.”

“It will not save you,” Kerrion pointed out.

“No, but it will give me a great deal of satisfaction. I am sure I will manage to take a few others with me, too.”

“What about the wishes of your queen?”

Blade shrugged. “They will not concern me, once I am dead.”

“I had no intention of breaking my word.”

“Good.”

“Who were you sent to kill?”

“Someone you will not miss at all.”

Kerrion sank back onto his chair. “Lerton.”

“Indeed.”

“He is my brother.”

“How touching. He is trying to send you to the gallows.”

Kerrion watched Blade walk behind him to retrieve the dagger. “What does your queen want in return for this help?”

Blade shrugged, studying the portrait of King Shandor. “An end to the war.”

“I cannot do that.”

Blade leant over the Prince’s shoulder, making him tense. “Try,” he whispered, then straightened and strolled to the front of the desk again. “It will end soon anyway. Shamsara has predicted it, and

even now, the Queen has the solution.”

“What is that?”

“In the spring, she will give birth to the next Jashimari Queen.” Kerrion looked down, frowning, and Blade continued, “That is, of course, if the Contarans have not overrun and murdered us.”

“Why would that end the Eternal War?”

“Because, Prince Kerrion...” Blade paused to test the dagger’s edge, making Kerrion fume with impatience. “Because the next Jashimari Queen will be your daughter.”

Kerrion stared at the assassin, dumbfounded.

Blade smiled. “Amazing, is it not? Shamsara says that you will not wage war on your own flesh and blood. Even your people will not wish it. Is that true?”

“That is not possible! I never...”

“You did. Remember the red-haired handmaiden who came to your room one night?”

“That was...?” The Prince was amazed, then wondering, and finally joy stole into his heart. “I thought -”

“You were meant to. You refused to be her consort, so she was forced to make other plans. I should know. I helped her.”

“You!” Kerrion glowered at him. “How do I know you are not lying? You are very good at it, I have heard.”

Blade flipped the dagger into the air and caught it by the hilt. “Ask the Queen.”

The Prince could still hardly believe that the Jashimari assassin stood in his room, so relaxed and confident, as if he belonged there. “That will be difficult. How did Minna know about my trial? She has a spy in my palace?”

“Several.”

Kerrion pondered the new information, watching the assassin flip and catch the dagger. “You know, just testifying to the judges will not be enough, you will have to prove that you killed my father.”

“I know.”

“You will have to wear the same disguise.”

“Obviously.”

“I thought you hated it.”

Blade paused in his dagger flipping to stare into space. “I do.”

“Then why are you doing this?” Kerrion gestured, confused. “You claim to care about nothing and no one. Why would you put yourself through this humiliation for the Queen? You told me yourself that you would kill her if someone paid you. Yet you travel into Cotti lands, knowing, I am sure, that you have little chance of leaving them alive, even with my help. Why?”

Blade toyed with the dagger, appearing unconcerned. “I do not care if I die. Have you not realised that yet? I might have been discovered in your father’s camp the night I killed him. I have spent my life courting death, yet it will not have me.

“The danger of my situation does not bother me. Only saving you sticks in my craw. But the life of a Cotti prince will be apt reward for saving one, do you not think? Perhaps this time death will take me. Who knows? What do I have to look forward to? A long happy life with a devoted wife, cared for in my dotage by my sons and daughters? The Cotti stole my future, and I will take as many of their futures as possible.”

“Vengeance,” Kerrion murmured.

“It is a sweet cup with bitter dregs, but I have grown accustomed to it. I have drunk my fill of it, yet it is never empty.” Blade went over to the window and stared into the darkness, where lights twinkled in the streets below. “I am the empty one.”

“You are a strange man. There are people who care about you, yet you shun them.”

Blade turned to sweep the Prince with a hard glance. “I tire of this conversation. Your morbid fascination for prying into my life annoys me.”

“I am trying to understand you, is all.”

“So you may find my weakness?” Blade gave a snort of laughter. “I have none.” He started towards the curtains through which he had appeared.

Kerrion jumped up. “Where are you going?”

“I have to sleep.”

“Stay here if you wish.”

Blade paused, raising a mocking brow. “And awake in chains? I think not.”

“What good would that do me? I need your testimony.”

“True. But if you expect me to trust a Cotti, you are sadly mistaken.” Blade vanished through the curtains.

“I will see you tomorrow then, at dawn!” Kerrion called after him.

The Prince sank back on his chair and poured a fresh goblet of wine. He pondered the sudden and unexpected turn of events as he sipped it. The impossible presence of the Jashimari assassin in his city, in his palace, and even, unnervingly, in his room, still stunned him a little. Blade’s stealth was extraordinary, and he wondered how the assassin had avoided the many guards around and in the palace.

Kerrion’s mother, coming from the harem, was able to use secret passages to gain admittance, but Blade had come from outside. He had eluded scores of guards to enter the Prince’s room. His respect for the assassin grew as he considered this remarkable feat, long thought to be impossible. Blade’s presence and mission brought fresh hope to brighten the Prince’s gloomy thoughts, pushing aside the despair that had been taking hold of him.

The amazing news of the child Minna carried also brought a surge of wonder and fresh tenderness for the Jashimari Queen. The night of passion he had spent with the red-haired maiden, although wine fogged and strangely muddled, had stayed with him ever since. His lack of self-control had baffled him, and he had woken alone and guilt ridden the next day. Now many pieces of the puzzle fell into place, and he experienced a wry admiration for her high-handed manipulation of events.

It seemed that Minna-Satu liked to have her own way, and usually did. Even he could not gainsay her, and he wondered if Blade was the only one who could. He did not doubt for a moment that the assassin was immune to the Queen’s blandishments, but did her will solely because he wished to do it. That she had succeeded in gaining his co-operation in this venture was admirable, but the price was Lerton’s life, for which he doubted she would otherwise have asked. Gravely, he raised his goblet towards the northern wall, smiling.

“My thanks, Minna.”

Setting aside the cup, he drew a blank sheet of parchment from the pile on his desk and dipped his quill into the inkwell, pausing to ponder the words he must set down to ensure Blade’s safety. The task galled him. He would rather see the assassin lynched for killing his father, but his word had been given and Blade’s threat was not an empty one, he knew. After a moment of contemplation, he began to write.

## Chapter Eighteen

Blade rose at dawn and brushed the straw from his clothes, then stretched and yawned. The night spent in the palace stables had been peaceful, and the deep bed of straw had provided a pleasant resting place. Digging out the bag he had secreted there the night before, he consumed a frugal breakfast of biscuits and water before wetting a cloth and beginning the long transformation he hated so much. This time, however, he donned the female clothes over his own, and applied the skin dye only to those parts of him that were exposed.

After he had applied the kohl to his eyes and berry juice to his lips, he forced the earrings through the long-unused holes in his earlobes with a grimace. He studied the disguise in his mirror, brushed the blond wig and tucked away errant strands of jet hair, then donned jingling bangles and a cheap necklace. Satisfied, he reburied his bag and rose to brush straw from his skirts, checking the daggers strapped to his wrists inside his sleeves. Covering his hair with a rippling length of blue silk, he wandered from the barn with a woman's graceful, swaying gait.

Several of the guards he passed on his way to Kerrion's rooms winked and leered, and one tried to pinch his bottom. Along the way, he pilfered a bottle of wine, then walked to Kerrion's door and knocked. The guards who stood outside it grinned at him, and Blade smiled and lowered his eyes. A gruff command to enter made a guard open the door, and Blade strolled into the Crown Prince's boudoir. Kerrion sat on the rumpled bed with his hair still tangled from sleep, and looked up from lacing his boots. He scowled when Blade thumped the wine bottle down on the table.

"What is this? I did not order wine. Get out."

Blade spoke in his own voice. "So it is true that Cotti men treat their women like slaves. No wonder you do it to Jashimari children too."

Kerrion grimaced. "Blade. The guards let you in?"

"Naturally. All they saw was a serving maid with a bottle of wine."

The prince straightened and studied the assassin. "No wonder you fool everyone. I did not have the opportunity to appreciate the perfection of your disguise on the night you abducted me."

"I did not come here for you to admire me. Let us get on with this."

Kerrion picked up an embroidered white tunic and shrugged it on. "I was starting to wonder if you had lost your nerve."

Blade glared at him. "You should learn to curb your tongue. Antagonising me is not a good idea."

Kerrion completed his ablutions before summoning his familiar from her perch, and the guards snapped to attention as the Prince marched past with the eagle perched on his shoulder, Blade following. The assassin found the walk through the palace educational, noting the corridors and rooms they passed through with keen interest. Its echoing emptiness struck him as amusing, but the décor's sheer opulence more than compensated for the lack of furnishings.

The desert mines were rich in many things besides metal, and, in some rooms, rows of quartz pillars glimmered in the warm light, streaked with shades of pink or blue. Quartz statues glowed with translucent beauty, and, in one vast room, a circular skylight let in shafts of pale pink radiance. The Prince seemed oblivious, striding past the breath-taking scenery without a glance at it.

Arriving at a pair of massive brass-studded doors, Kerrion said, "Wait here until you are called. I have to convince them to grant you a pardon first."

Blade nodded. "Lerton will help."

"What do you mean?"

"You will see."

Kerrion gazed at the assassin in puzzlement, then headed for the doors, which the guards opened for him. As they closed behind him, Blade moved closer to the wall and stood with his head bowed, pulling the blue silk over his face to foil curious stares.

Kerrion entered the immense audience room where the trial was being held, aware that dozens of hostile eyes followed his progress. Lerton, who sat with his brothers, smirked and waved. The judges stood in a row behind a long, polished palm wood table, watching him with hard, glittering eyes that belied their reverent bows.

The lords who filled the rest of the hall kept their expressions neutral, awaiting the outcome before

they committed themselves to either side. Familiars sat beside them or perched on their shoulders, those that were not twined around their necks or resident in the palace stables. The group of officers from King Shandor's camp, whom Lerton had called as witnesses, whispered amongst themselves, their eyes darting. Three male sand cats lolled at their feet, one snoring.

Kerrion stopped before the most senior of the seven judges and addressed him. "My Lord, before we continue with this farcical trial, I have one more witness to call."

The judge frowned, clearly displeased by the delay. "The time for witnesses is over, Prince Kerrion."

"I am aware of that, but this person can clear me of these ridiculous charges."

The judge raised his brows and glanced at his comrades, who nodded or shrugged as they seated themselves. "Very well."

"Before I do, My Lord, I must insist that this court grant amnesty to this witness, or the person will not come forward. By clearing me of the crime, the witness will be implicated, and I have promised that there will be no punishment."

"That is unheard-of," the judge declared. "If this person is guilty of some part in your father's death, he must be punished."

"My Lord, by testifying for me, this witness is saving my life." Kerrion pulled the speech he had written the night before from his tunic and began to read. "In such an instance, where a witness comes forward to save the life of an innocent, and when that innocent is the future king, any means should be used to procure their co-operation.

"By saving the heir's life, the witness performs such a great service for the kingdom that no reward is too much. Surely the court must agree that the granting of amnesty is a small price to pay for the truth? By saving the court from the massive blunder of executing their future king, an act of high treason, the witness in question, even if guilty of the crime with which I am charged, must be protected in order to facilitate their testimony."

The judge leant forward, the grey owl on his shoulder shuffling to keep its balance. "Are you saying that this witness is the true murderer?"

"That is for the witness to admit, or not, as the case may be. I ask that you grant this witness a pardon, no matter to what he or she may confess."

"We have not given our verdict yet, Prince Kerrion," another judge pointed out. "How do you know we have found you guilty?"

"I do not. Have you found me innocent?"

The judges glanced at each other, shifting in their hard, high-backed chairs.

Kerrion nodded. "As I thought."

"Let him call his witness," Lerton shouted from his seat in the gallery. "It is just another of his fabrications. His lies will not fool us."

"But My Prince, if this person is indeed guilty..." the senior judge protested.

"How can he be, when Kerrion is the true murderer? It is a futile attempt to save his neck, nothing more. Grant the amnesty. You will be pardoning nothing more than a petty liar my brother has hired to take the blame for his crime."

The judges conferred, then the senior man nodded to Kerrion. "Very well, My Prince. We will pardon your witness for whatever crime he has committed, or will commit here by perjuring himself. Since your accuser has no objection to this, we do not either. What is your witness' name?"

"I would rather the witness remained nameless for now, My Lord. The reason will become clear soon enough. There is no one else outside, I assure you."

The judge addressed the guards who stood by the doors. "Call the next witness."

Kerrion flashed a triumphant smile at Lerton. "Thank you, brother."

Lerton looked smug, stroking the golden snake that hung around his neck. "Do not mention it. Doubtless this will be entertaining."

"I am certain of it," Kerrion agreed as the guards pulled open the doors and bellowed into the corridor for the next witness.

Blade entered with gliding, graceful steps, pausing to bow to the judges before facing the officers from King Shandor's camp, who erupted with excited shouts.

"That is the whore from the camp!"

"She was the one who went with the King!"

Blade pushed back the blue silk to reveal the wig's long golden tresses and let them have a good look at him.

Kerrion asked the officers, "You are certain?"

"Absolutely," a young officer stated, and Kerrion recognised the man who had kept Blade company for most of that evening while the King had dined. The Prince had noticed the attractive whore long before his father had. The other officers nodded. Two of the sand cats roused sufficiently to yawn and stretch before flopping down again.

Kerrion pointed at Blade. "This is the woman who was with King Shandor on the night he died. You all agree?"

The officers nodded one by one as the Prince's gaze rested upon them, and when the last had assented, Kerrion faced the judges.

The senior judge inclined his head. "So noted."

Lerton chuckled. "My Lords, she is his partner in this heinous deed, naturally she would come forward to exonerate him now that he has procured a pardon for her. This only proves my case."

"Either that, or she is a harlot who looks like the woman these good officers saw, whom I have hired to lie on my behalf, eh, Lerton?" Kerrion suggested with a smile.

"Exactly!" Lerton crowed. "And doubtless she will admit to murdering the King, a preposterous claim!"

Kerrion swung back to the judges. "Is there any doubt in your minds that this is a woman, My Lords?"

The senior judge leant forward, scrutinising the assassin. "Let her speak. What has she to say?"

Blade spoke in a sweet, whispery voice. "I killed King Shandor."

"You see!" howled Lerton, thumping the railing in his glee. "Exactly as I said! My Lords, this is either Kerrion's partner in crime or some cheap harlot hired to speak those words."

"Why could it not be true?" Kerrion demanded. "Perhaps it is she who killed our father."

"Impossible!" Lerton asserted. "She is a woman! It would require a man's strength to overcome and stab a man as powerful as the King!"

"She is a large woman," Kerrion pointed out.

"No matter. She would not have the strength. She was sent to distract him so you could sneak in and stab your own father. Women do not kill in such a manner," he went on, becoming a little pompous in his mien. "They rarely have the stomach to kill, and when they do, they use poisons or hire assassins. They do not use daggers. Not only are they too weak and squeamish, they would not know how to kill a man so efficiently. My father was killed by an expert; someone trained in the arts of war, such as you, brother."

"So there is obviously no doubt in your mind that this is indeed a woman, and you seem to be quite an expert on the subject."

Lerton smirked. "I have known a lot of women, yes."

Kerrion faced the judges again. "My Lords, what do you see before you?"

The eldest judge shrugged. "A woman."

Kerrion nodded and turned back to Lerton. "I agree with you, brother. No woman would have the strength to murder King Shandor. He was a strong man, as we all know. But the person you see before you is, in fact, not a woman."

"Ridiculous!" Lerton shouted, leaping to his feet. "This is to substantiate your nonsensical story of an assassin who turns into a woman at will!" He laughed. "As if such a person could exist. No man can disguise himself as a woman without being discovered. I will show you!" He vaulted over the wooden partition that separated the gallery from the floor before the judges' bench and approached Blade. The assassin faced him, keeping his head bowed and his eyes downcast. Lerton stroked Blade's cheek, then turned to his brother with a triumphant grin.

"Smooth as a baby's bottom! What fools do you take us for? Will you trot her out now and bring in a man, then claim that they are one and the same person?"

"No." Kerrion glanced around at the audience. "None of you are fools. I never said you were. This disguise, in all its perfection, has fooled many people. It fooled my father, it fooled me, and it has made fools of all of you. The person before you is a man."

"Rubbish!" Lerton snapped. "Next you will claim that he is a mage!"

"No."

"Then prove it! Beyond a shadow of a doubt!"

Kerrion looked at Blade, who unpinned the blond wig and pulled it off. Lerton gaped as the assassin stripped off the gown with swift movements, removing the water bags that hung from his neck, then took off the jewellery and added it to the pile on the table beside him. Hisses of surprise

came from the spectators, and a few murmured to their neighbours, setting up an excited buzz that spread around the room. Blade took a damp cloth from his pocket and wiped away the berry juice and skin dye. The buzz of conversation grew louder as he revealed his pale skin, then he turned his back on the audience and faced the judges. Blade unhooked the earrings and wiped the dye from his hands, standing before them in his simple black outfit.

Kerrion walked closer to his brother. "Lerton, I would like you to meet the assassin who killed our father."

Lerton closed his mouth, shaking his head in mute denial. Kerrion looked at the stunned judges, and a hush fell over the assembly. "My Lords, I present to you the Jashimari assassin, Blade. He is also known as the Invisible Assassin, the Silent Slayer, and most recently, the Queen's Blade."

The eldest judge cleared his throat, staring at Blade. "You admit to killing King Shandor?"

Blade spoke in his own voice. "I do."

"You acted on the orders of your queen?"

"Yes."

"What were they?"

"To assassinate King Shandor and bring his son Kerrion to her, unharmed," Blade replied.

"For what reason?"

"She wished to talk of truce."

The judge shot Kerrion a doubtful look. "And he refused."

"He did."

"So she released him."

Blade nodded, clasping his hands behind his back.

"And now she sends you to testify on his behalf, even though he would not co-operate with her. Why?"

"The same reason that she released him. She wishes to deal with a Cotti king she perceives to be honourable and intelligent, not a devious, lying one, such as Prince Lerton would make."

"Our realms are at war," the judge pointed out. "What difference does it make to her?"

"She still wants peace."

"But Prince Kerrion refused."

Blade shrugged. "I am an assassin, not a politician."

"And a dead one!" Lerton shouted, recovering from his stunned stupor and stabbing a finger at Blade. "He murdered King Shandor. He must die!"

Kerrion said, "He has been granted amnesty."

"You would protect your father's murderer?"

"By coming here, he has saved my life. Had I not offered him amnesty, he would not have come forward, and I would be facing the gallows because of your lies."

"They were not lies!" Lerton protested, glancing at the judges. "The evidence against you was damning. No one believed this man existed; if you could call him a man."

"I have to keep my word. He is free to go."

The senior judge nodded. "Unfortunately, he has the right of it, Prince Lerton. We cannot charge him with a crime for which we have already agreed to pardon him. At your urging, I might add."

"He is dangerous!" Lerton cried. "You cannot let him remain free."

"Nor can you lock him up when he has committed no crime other than the one for which he has been granted a pardon," Kerrion remarked.

"He is a Jashimari!"

"One who has done me a great service, and has thereby earned his freedom. Since I am no longer accused of any crime, I will soon be King, and he has my protection as long as he obeys the laws of our land."

Lerton's expression became cunning. "He might have been sent here on the pretext of saving you, in order to assassinate someone."

"He did not need a pretext to come here. He arrived undetected in my rooms last night, and offered to testify for me if I was able to grant him amnesty. Had he wished to assassinate someone, he could have done it then. One thing is certain, he was not sent to assassinate me."

Lerton stepped back and shot Blade a hunted look. His snake hissed and coiled more tightly around his neck. The assassin smiled and gathered up his disguise.

Kerrion turned to the judges. "My Lords, what is your verdict?"

The senior judge stood up to address the court. "We find Prince Kerrion innocent of King



Shandor's death."

As if released from a trance, the audience burst into a hubbub. Some members turned to each other; others left to carry the news far and wide. The judges filed out through a door at the back. Lerton returned to the clutch of brothers who awaited him, vanishing into their midst as they drew close to listen to him.

Blade glanced at them, then at Kerrion. "Perhaps I should get rid of a few more of them."

The Prince gave him a push towards the door. "Try to control your bloodlust, Blade. They are still my brothers."

Back in Kerrion's rooms, Blade dumped his burden and perched on the edge of the desk to pour a cup of wine. Kerrion went to the window and stared out, his hands clasped behind his back. Kiara flapped to her perch and preened herself.

"Did Minna send any other messages with you?"

Blade tasted the wine and grimaced. "Not really."

"Is there any way I can repay her?"

"Make peace."

"I cannot do that." Kerrion turned to scowl at him.

"Jashimari cannot fight two kingdoms and survive. The Contarans will overrun us, and you will descend like vultures to feed on the spoils."

"That was Lerton's plan."

Blade sipped the wine. "And you approve of it."

"No!" Kerrion gestured. "It is dishonourable. I have inherited a war I have no wish to continue, but cannot end without being overthrown." He paused. "If she surrenders to me, I can promise her fair treatment. I will ensure a peaceful occupation, offer her protection and banish the Contarans back to their land."

"She will never surrender, not to you, or anyone else."

"Then the Jashimari will be wiped out."

"You will continue the war against your daughter?" Blade enquired.

"She will not take power for five and twenty years, but then no, I will not."

"Jashimari will not outlast the spring, and when Jondar falls, your daughter will be at the mercy of the Contarans. Why not end it now?"

Kerrion sighed, rubbing his eyes. "If only I could. My nobles will not agree to end the war against Minna-Satu, but they too will not wish to fight against a Cotti queen."

"Half Cotti."

"What if the child is a boy?"

Blade shrugged, frowning at the sour young wine in his cup. "Shamsara predicted a girl; chances are, he is right."

"The Idol of the Beasts should not be interfering in politics. It is not his place."

The assassin put down his goblet and stood. "Have you any messages for the Queen?"

Kerrion shook his head. "Only my offer of peaceful occupation. No slavery, no atrocities, and no massacres."

"Only oppression."

"I cannot do any more than that."

"You are the King," Blade said. "Or are you just a puppet?"

Kerrion's frown deepened. "I am no puppet, but the nobles wield a great deal of power, and have fifteen princes to choose from. If I try to end the war, they will turn the people against me; accuse me of treason or cowardice or something. I have no hope of support from the armies. They exist only to do battle. Without a war, they will be jobless and destitute."

"You saw how close I have already come to the gallows, and for no other reason than that my younger brother wished to get rid of me. It is well known that he was my father's favourite, and that he wanted Lerton to inherit the crown. I am not well liked because of that. My claim to the crown is only upheld because I am the first born son. Perhaps, over the course of a few years, I can make powerful friends and talk to them of the disadvantages of war, but I cannot call an end to it the moment I am crowned."

He turned away and bowed his head, his shoulders hunched. "If I am overthrown, the next in line will see to it that my daughter does not survive. I have to be King to ensure her safety. If I am King when Cotti invades Jashimari, I will protect them both, I swear it. I shall not allow any harm to come to Minna-Satu."

Kerrion paused. "Usually Cotti warriors take little notice of women. They are inconsequential, and if captured, spoils of war. But the fact that the child is of royal blood, both Minna's and mine, will ensure her death, should I be ousted.

"I suspect that Minna knows this, which is why she sent you, her most valuable ally, into the jaws of death to redeem me. Minna's child can only bring peace between our kingdoms if she is the daughter of the Cotti King. Even so, we would face another five and twenty years of war, if Jashimari could last that long."

Blade toyed with the wine cup, remembering the Queen's sadness on the night she had gone to Kerrion's bed, her strange depression since then, and her constant promises of peace, soon. "I do not think she would have waited five and twenty years, and now she cannot."

Kerrion swung to face him. "What do you mean? Every Jashimari queen rules for five and twenty years."

"Obviously Minna-Satu will not, since the Contarans will invade in the spring, but I think her rule will end before the Contarans reach Jondar."

The Prince closed the gap between them and gripped Blade's shoulders, his eyes filled with anxiety. "What are you saying?"

Blade shook him off. "You know perfectly well."

"She cannot do that! She cannot put an infant on the throne!"

"She can. If she appoints a regent, your daughter could be Queen in just a few moons."

Kerrion gave a despairing groan. "She will place me in an impossible position." He paused, frowning. "But how? She cannot step aside."

"She can, by taking the Queen's Cup."

Kerrion turned away. "I see."

Blade headed for the door, collecting his bundle. "Your brother dies tonight."

"Wait!"

Blade paused at the door, his hand on the knob.

Kerrion raked a hand through his hair. "Tell her that she cannot do this. She must give me time; a year or two, at the very least."

"I am sure she would like to, but I do not think the Contarans will allow her that option. With the spring, they will be able to advance swiftly on the capital city. Your daughter must take the throne before Jondar falls, so you will be forced to come to her aid, or not, as your conscience dictates.

"Of course, if you do not, Contara will conquer Jashimari, and all your centuries of war will be for nothing. How will your people feel if their prize is stolen from under their noses? If you take advantage of Jashimari's weakness now, you will have to slaughter every last man, woman and child before there is peace again." A slight, ironic smile curled his lips, tinged with sadness. "Besides, I may not live to deliver your message."

Kerrion stared at him. "Blade... let Lerton live."

The assassin frowned. "No."

"You do not understand. His death will delay my coronation. Six tendays of mourning will be declared; a whole moon phase. Then another three tendays before I can be crowned. I will not have time to pick up the pieces."

"You will have to manage."

"I could warn him."

Blade shrugged. "You already have."

The assassin opened the door and slipped into the passage, closing it behind him. The Prince stared at the door for a long time, his mind whirling with possible solutions and their pitfalls. Despair and sorrow filled him as he went to the desk and poured a goblet of wine. Draining it in a few gulps, he wandered to the window and gazed out at the pale city shimmering in the sun. Kiara flapped from her perch and landed on his shoulder, allowing him to stroke the sleek feathers of her breast.

He gestured to the sky. "Fly, Kiara. Take my thoughts with you, that they might find some solution closer to god."

Kerrion watched the big bird soar with none of the elation it usually brought him, then returned to the desk to pour more wine. "I hope you fail this time, Blade," he muttered. "Not because I am particularly fond of my brother, but because of all the trouble you will cause if you succeed, you bastard."

Blade walked through the palace, returning to the stables. Using the servants' narrow passages, he avoided guard posts and kept his head down, averting his face when he passed servants. He did not want too many Cotti to see him. Even his brief exposure in the courtroom had been tainted by the fact that he had not removed all of his face paint. Those who had glimpsed his visage would soon find it hard to remember, for he had avoided eye contact and wiped his countenance with a cloth when he had faced the gallery. Protecting his identity was second nature to him, since becoming well known could be fatal for an assassin. Even though he did not intend to return to Cotti, his caution was instinctive and well advised. With a blond wig and skin dye, he would become anonymous again quite easily.

The peace of the stables, with its warm redolence of horses and hay, was a welcome relief after the palace's tension and the palpable hatred of its denizens. He stretched out on the straw and ate some bread and cheese while he plotted the night's assassination. Forewarned, and knowing of his abilities, Lerton would undoubtedly have guards in his room and not allow any women entry. He needed to gain access without causing an outcry, so the stealthy approach would not work. The task called for a disguise, but not a female one. Fortunately Lerton's snake familiar was not a deadly variety, and snakes could do little to raise the alarm. His dislike of snakes made the task of killing the Prince's familiar a less odious one, if it came to that.

After a while, he fell asleep, awaking in the late afternoon. By then, a plan had taken shape, and he quit his nest to wander along the rows of stables, patting their inmates. These were the mounts of elite Cotti cavalry, officers and the King's personal guard. Since most of those men were horse kin, the majority of the beasts were familiars, and immune to the blandishments of strangers.

The intelligent glint in their eyes made familiars easy to spot, and he noted those that were not. He did not have to wait long before a young officer entered the stables armed with a bunch of cariroots for his steed. Blade eyed him, weighing his suitability. He was a man of otters, which made him vulnerable, since his mount would not object to his injury and his familiar was not with him. The young man wore the insignia of a cavalry officer, but without it, he might have been a guard sergeant.

Blade waited while the officer fed his horse the cariroots, positioning himself out of sight on the route to the door. As the man walked past, his task complete, Blade stepped out behind him and gripped his neck, pressing on the nerve bundles that would render the officer insensible. He dragged his victim to the straw pile and stripped, bound and gagged him before burying him in the straw. Hiding the uniform, Blade settled down to get some more sleep.

The assassin woke again in the pre-dawn chill. Rising, he lighted the lamp that hung in the stables before donning the officer's uniform with shivering haste. He anointed his face and hands with the golden skin dye, inspecting the result in the mirror. The oily dye also lightened his brows, making them brown. To add to the disguise, he glued on a blond moustache he had brought with him for just such an occasion. The plumed helmet, with its chainmail neck guard, hid his hair. Removing the uniform's cavalry insignia, he buried his clothes and supplies, then blew out the lamp, dusting himself off as he strolled from the barn.

The palace slumbered in semi-darkness, the few torches that still burnt sputtering as they ran out of oil. Sentries dozed at their posts, some making sleepy salutes as he passed. Most were dog soldiers, and their familiars slumbered beside them or glanced up incuriously. Blade had scorned the officer's heavy boots and retained his soft ones, which made little sound. Lerton's rooms were not far from Kerrion's, as the spy had described, and two alert guards stood outside the doors. They snapped to attention when he approached, and he stopped in front of them.

"Have you checked on your fellows inside?" Blade asked in perfectly accented Cotti.

"A couple of time-glasses ago, sir," one sentry replied.

"They could be asleep by now, dolt! Is this how you protect your prince? They should be checked every time-glass."

"I'll check on them now, sir," the man offered, reaching for the doorknob. The war dog beside him sat up and whined, sniffing Blade.

"No." Blade raised a hand. "I'll do it myself. There will be hell to pay if they're slacking, and I don't want you covering for them."

The sentry snapped to attention again. "Yes sir."

Blade opened the door and entered a dark sitting room, closing it behind him. The two guards who stood on either side of a canopied bed in the adjoining room turned at his entrance, relaxing when they saw his uniform. He beckoned them over, then crossed his hands and gripped the hilts of the daggers strapped to his wrists. The soldiers stopped before him and stood to attention. There was no sign of

their familiars, as he had expected. The Prince did not want dogs in his bedroom, due to their smell and fleas. Blade had counted on that, for two dogs would certainly have complicated matters quite considerably. He hoped the beasts were safely caged in the barracks, where they could not raise the alarm when their friends died, as familiars were wont to do.

Blade remarked in a hushed tone, "I'm glad to see you're awake and alert, men. Good work."

They smiled, and one murmured, "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome." Blade jerked his hands apart, raising them in a flash to slit the soldiers' throats. They coughed, pawing at their necks as they collapsed. The faint clatter of their falling bodies was unavoidable, and Blade hid his hands behind his back as the occupant of the vast, silk-strewn bed sat up, peering into the gloom.

"Who is there?" Lerton demanded.

Blade strolled closer, deepening his voice to a gruff baritone, lest the Prince recognise the peculiar timbre of his speech. "Don't be alarmed, My Prince, you're in no danger."

Lerton glared at him, the moonlight that streamed in through the window revealing features puffy with fatigue. "What woke me? Who are you? And what are you doing here? Where are my guards?"

The assassin wondered if all Cotti princes were so full of questions. It seemed to be a family trait. "The guards were tired, My Prince. I sent them for replacements before they fell asleep. The closing of the door woke you. I apologise."

Lerton flopped back. "And who are you?"

"An officer of the night watch, Jickal by name. I'll guard you until the new sentries arrive." Blade reached the bedside and stopped.

"Well do not loom over me. Go away," Lerton said peevishly. "Go and stand by the door."

"Yes, My Prince." Blade did a fair imitation of a guard's salute and made as if to turn away. Instead, he whipped his arms up and hurled the daggers underhand. One embedded itself at the base of Lerton's throat, cutting off any outcry; the other hit the pillow beside his head. Lerton stared at Blade with bulging eyes as his life oozed out in a crimson river. While he still had an audience, the assassin doffed the plumed helmet and smiled.

"A gift from Queen Minna-Satu. In case you do not recognise me, I am Blade."

Lerton's mouth worked as he strived to speak. Blade leant over to retrieve the dagger that had missed its mark.

"I must be getting sloppy in my old age," he commented as the Prince's eyes glazed. When the last flicker of life dimmed from them, Blade pulled the dagger from Lerton's throat and wiped it, then slid the weapons back into their sheaths. He glanced around for the stone snake, which was curled up on a chair nearby. Already it glided towards him, its black tongue tasting the air, its cold eyes fixed on him.

Fortunately it was a slow creature, and he grabbed it and snapped its neck, dropping the coiling body. The mindless writhing of the dying snake filled the room with soft slithering, adding to the discomfiting sight and stench of the Prince's blood. Eager to quit this chamber of horrors, Blade left. The sentries outside snapped to attention again, and Blade inspected them.

"Your friends inside are awake, luckily for them. I don't think they'll be dropping off now, but I'll be back in a time-glass to check on them."

"Yes sir."

Blade nodded and set off back towards the stables. Bleary-eyed guards watched him pass resentfully, his unwanted presence disturbing their napping. Moving with some urgency now, he dug his bag out of the straw and pinned the cavalry insignia back on the uniform before saddling the young officer's horse. He rode unchallenged from the palace courtyard and out into the city, breathing a sigh of relief when he passed the final sentries. Only the city guards stood between him and freedom, easy to pass before the alarm was raised.

The Cotti spy waited at the appointed place with horses and supplies, stamping his feet to ward off the chill. At first, he did not recognise the assassin, then set about swathing him in the flowing robes of a Cotti citizen, grumbling at the ungodly hour and the cold, as well as the ordeal of leaving a warm bed and plump wife to go travelling across the freezing desert.

Blade remounted and rode away, leaving the spy to follow. By the time they reached the city gates, Blade was heartily sick of the spy's endless carping, and pointed out acidly that he was being richly paid for the work, which silenced Valda for a time. As soon as they were out of the city, Blade urged his horse into a canter, eager to put as much distance between himself and Jadaya as possible.

Kerrion started awake when his bedroom door banged open and several soldiers and two senior advisors barged in. Dawn's cold light slanted in through the windows. The guards began to search the room, poking their swords into the curtains that hung against the walls and framed the windows. Their dogs sniffed around, tails wagging. Kerrion sat up, taking in the activity with some confusion. The advisors bowed, perhaps not quite as deeply as they should have, giving Kerrion a twinge of unease.

He frowned at them. "What is going on? What is the meaning of this intrusion? I was asleep!"

The elder advisor looked apologetic. "We beg your pardon, Sire, but we have terrible news."

Kerrion glared at the soldiers. "Why are they searching my room? What are you looking for?"

"Sire, your brother has been slain."

Kerrion ran a hand through his tousled hair. "Which one?"

"Prince Lerton."

"So why are you searching my room?"

The advisor's eyes slid away. "We can only assume Prince Lerton was killed by the assassin Blade, whom you were entertaining here yesterday."

The subtle accusation was not lost on Kerrion. "So you also assume he is hiding here after killing my brother? I think not, gentlemen. The Jashimari assassin left here yesterday at noon. I have not seen him since."

"Were you aware of his intentions, Sire?"

"Of course not! How dare you voice such an unfounded accusation?"

"There was no love lost between you and your brother," the advisor pointed out.

"That is no secret, but you forget, the assassin Blade does not work for me. He obeys the Jashimari Queen. Only she could order Lerton's death."

"You allowed him to remain free, by granting him a pardon."

"I did not grant him a pardon," Kerrion said, "the court did. You know very well what happened, Darjel. I had no idea that he had another task. Do you think I would have left him free if I had? Stop wasting time and seal the city gates. Search the city, arrest all suspicious persons and check for disguises. Are you morons? Do you expect to find him under my bed? Get out, all of you!"

The advisors hesitated, but then apologised and retreated with the soldiers. Kerrion sat on the bed for a while, his head in his hands, cursing Blade. "How in damnation did you do it, you bastard? Two guards in his room, and no women allowed; two guards at the door and four patrolling under his window. It should have been impossible."

The Prince washed and dressed, then went into his suite's living area and called in one of the advisors. Sitting behind the desk in his study, Kerrion glowered at the man.

"What happened?" he demanded. "How did he kill my brother?"

"We do not know, Sire."

"You must know something, Darjel. Tell me what happened."

The advisor sat on the chair in front of the desk, looking subdued. "The night watch in the Prince's room was changed at midnight, as were the guards at the door. Just before dawn, an officer came to inspect them, and found the guards awake and alert. No one else entered the room until the bodies were found at dawn."

"Bodies?"

"The two guards were also slain, Sire."

"How?"

Darjel made a feeble gesture towards his throat, looking sick. "Their throats were cut."

"And they did not fight or call out?"

"Apparently not, Sire. It seems they were killed at the same moment."

"Why did their dogs not raise the alarm? Were they slain also?"

The advisor shook his head. "Their dogs were not allowed in the room, by order of the Prince."

"And my brother?"

Darjel lowered his gaze. "Stabbed, Sire, through the throat."

Kerrion stared at him. "The officer."

"Pardon, Sire?"

"The officer was the assassin."

"But..." The advisor motioned towards his mouth.

"What? He had a moustache? A beard? What fools do we employ as guards here? No doubt he had dark skin and spoke perfect Cotti as well. Did no one listen to me in the court yesterday? Blade is a master of disguise, and not just female ones. Somewhere you will find the body of the officer whose

uniform he stole.” Kerrion thumped the desk. “Are the guards such buffoons? They should not have allowed anyone into Lerton’s room.”

“They thought he was an officer.”

Kerrion jumped up. “That is what they were supposed to think. I want him found! Send patrols into the desert towards Jashimari. If he has already left the city, which is probable, that is where he is. I want his head on a plate! We must show the Jashimari Queen that she cannot send an assassin to murder a Cotti prince and get away with it.”

The advisor rose, then hesitated. “What of the guards, Sire?”

“What, must I have them flogged for stupidity? Throw them out. They are not fit to be soldiers.”

“Yes, Sire.”

After the advisor left, Kerrion sat and stared into space. Reluctant admiration warred with deep resentment for the elusive assassin, whom he did not doubt was far across the desert by now, out of reach. He did not mourn Lerton’s death, but disliked the ease with which Blade had achieved it. It gave him a nasty, vulnerable feeling, even here in the bastion of his people.

One part of him hoped the assassin reached Jashimari safely and bore his message to the Queen, another part longed for his death. Each time they met, Blade humiliated Kerrion in one way or another, first by his ill treatment of the captive Prince, and now by offering his aid with such mocking effrontery and then killing Lerton despite the precautions that had been taken. Forewarned was forearmed, but against Blade, it seemed to do little good.

Blade scowled at his guide, wishing for the umpteenth time that the man would stop grumbling about every little thing. If it was not the sand in his clothes or the heat of the day, it was the discomfort of the saddle or the glare hurting his eyes. Most of all, it was the fast pace Blade set so relentlessly. With the mountains of Jashimari visible in the distance, the assassin was tempted to leave the man behind and gallop to the border. His horse, however, had little energy left for such an effort, and he disliked torturing a blameless beast for Valda’s crime.

“Anyone would think the Hounds of Damnation were after us,” the spy carped for the hundredth time. “Why we can’t simply walk is beyond me. All this jolting and jiggling is bad for my constitution. It makes me sick to my stomach and hurts my head, to say nothing of my rump. We don’t even stop to eat, and I can hardly chew when my teeth are rattling. Trying to drink water when it’s splashing all down your front is no fun at all. Not to mention -”

“You may stop if you wish,” Blade said, startling the spy with his remark after days of silence. “The mountains are there before us. I can reach them by dusk, and you can catch up at your leisure.”

“Oh, no, I must be seen to deliver you to the Jashimari soldiers, so I can collect my reward. You don’t think I’m putting myself through this for nothing, do you?”

“I’ll tell them you did your part.”

Valda shook his head. “If I’m not with you, they’ll think me incompetent or soft or something, and I’m none of those things.”

“Just full of endless complaints.”

“With good reason! I sweat all day because you insist on going so fast, and we haven’t enough water to give the horses, so they’ll probably drop dead from thirst soon enough, then I’ll have to walk. My blisters have blisters, and I might as well have run across the desert, so tired am I. Once the horses give out, I’ll be on foot, and I don’t think I need to tell you how much I’ll enjoy that!

“Yet you can’t even tell me why we’re in such a damned hurry. You went to deliver a message to Prince Kerrion, so I was told, and to meet with Prince Lerton on some vital matter, so why the rush to return? If it’s an urgent message for your queen, why wasn’t a familiar dispatched to carry it? In fact, why didn’t a familiar bring the message to Kerrion? Why did you have to go there yourself? I could understand -”

“I was not just sent to deliver a message,” Blade interrupted again, desperate to put an end to the constant grumbling. “We’re being pursued. That’s why we must go so fast.”

Valda glanced back at the empty desert. “I see no pursuit. What did you do, bed Prince Kerrion’s favourite concubine?” He laughed. “I hardly think the Prince would mind. I hear he’s not partial to women, unlike his brother, Prince Lerton. If she was one of Prince Lerton’s, I wouldn’t worry either. He’s got so many that he wouldn’t notice. He has....”

Blade closed his eyes, wishing he could be struck deaf. It seemed that giving Valda any information only broadened the subject matter of his constant chatter. Valda went on to enumerate Lerton’s

concubines, compare their charms and the number of children they had borne him, then started to talk about their families and pedigrees or lack of them.

Unable to stand it any longer, Blade said, "Damn it, be quiet! Lerton's dead, and I don't care about his bloody concubines!"

Valda gaped at him, granting Blade a short respite. All too soon, however, he recovered and demanded, "When? How did he die? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"For this very reason, I suspect."

"You must tell me! I have a right to know. He was my prince. He should have been King, not that snivelling weakling, Kerrion. Prince Lerton was the one with vision and plans. He took after his father, the great King Shandor. How was he killed? A riding accident? Lerton was ever one for riding spirited horses. He was -"

"One of his concubines stuck a knife in him, I heard," Blade drawled.

"Impossible!" Valda shouted. "They wouldn't dare, and he would strangle them for even trying! Don't lie to me. It's not a jest!"

Blade shrugged. "All right, he slipped in some dung and broke his neck."

"Don't insult Prince Lerton! He was the best of the princes! He was a great warrior, a strong man! Tell me the truth!"

Blade sighed. "I don't know, nor do I care. Perhaps one of his enemies killed him, or maybe his mother did what she should have done at his birth and drowned him. Just be quiet."

"No! You know what happened. I demand that you tell me!"

"I've just said I don't know. I heard that he was dead, that's all."

Valda cursed under his breath, and, for almost half a time-glass, Blade thought he had finally silenced the spy's grumbling. He hoped the man would retreat into gloomy introspection, which was why he had informed him of Lerton's demise. Blade sensed the spy's eyes boring into him. The Cotti's scrutiny made him uneasy, and he shot him a hard glance. Valda's mouth was set in a grim line, and the assassin glimpsed a flash of pure hatred in his eyes. It vanished, and his face became oddly expressionless. Blade studied the spy, becoming wary. For all that Valda was a well paid informant, he was also a Cotti, and perhaps a little too clever. Although it had achieved the desired result, he now regretted telling Valda of Lerton's death.

Blade looked ahead again, shrugging off his misgivings. Of course the spy hated him. He was Jashimari, and he had just insulted Valda's favourite prince. It did not mean Valda suspected him of anything. Nevertheless, he was on his guard. As far as he knew, Valda was unarmed, although he now wished he was certain of that. For the next time-glass, only the thudding of the horses' hooves and the occasional raucous comment from Valda's familiar broke the silence.

Valda muttered, "I'm tired. I'll let my horse walk for a while. You go on ahead, I'll catch up."

Blade shot him another suspicious glance, but had no objection to this idea. The further he was from the spy, the better. Valda reined his horse in and fell behind as Blade continued at a trot. He gazed ahead at the mountains that beckoned to him, filled with the promise of green grass and cool mists. By dusk he would reach them, and quit this accursed desert, hopefully forever.

Something struck him in the back, punching the air from his lungs with a coughing grunt. The force of the impact propelled him forwards, the world tilted as his limbs lost their strength and he slid from the saddle. Sand hit him in the face, and everything went black.

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The tale continues in Book II, *Sacrifice*, available at Smashwords, followed by Book III, *The Invisible Assassin*, Book IV, *Knight of the Veil*, Book V, *Master of the Dance* and Book VI, *Lord Protector*. Then get the two prequels, *Conash: Dead Son* and *God Touched*.

### **About the author**

T. C. Southwell was born in Sri Lanka and moved to the Seychelles with her family 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 and five screenplays. Her hobbies include motorcycling, horse riding and art.

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