

JALAV 4: The Will of the Gods

By Sharon Green

CH 1. The disagreement of male and the anger of Mida

I awoke in the thick, enveloping darkness of the room, at first convinced there had been movement near me, after a moment allowing that the movement must have been Mehrayn's, tossing about upon the furs beside me. The male's sleep was uneasy, perhaps by cause of the words of disagreement he and I had spoken in the dwelling of Aysayn, he who was called Sigurr's Shadow. It had been necessary to speak those words over and again, with Aysayn and Chaldrin as well as Mehrayn, and still the males refused to abandon their stand. I had, at last, refused to discuss the matter further, which had silenced the males yet had not moved them from their stubborn stance. Fool that I was, I had first spoken of the matter myself, therefore could blame no one else for the difficulty. Though reluctantly, I had known many males of late; I knew it was likely they would attempt to interfere with the doings of a warrior.

The darkness was cool and comfortable, bereft of the heat which would reappear with Mida's light. I lay upon the fur I shared with Mehrayn, feeling only comfort from its silky softness against my body, relieved that no intruding presence threatened. My sword and dagger were not far away, but the continuing presence of much drink lay even nearer, in my head and body. Had it been necessary to defend against intruders I would have done so, yet not with all of my usual skill. We had all of us drunk much of the drink called falar, that which was nearer unbrewed daru than the renth of city males, though none of the Sigurri males had had as much as I. As I was to depart with the new light, and alone, the males had insisted upon the sharing of falar, each cup, as they said, a prayer to Sigurr to watch over me upon my travels. I had not told them that their god cared naught for this warrior save for her use, for the doing would have been idle. I had, instead, accepted each cup given me, baffled by the surprise of the males when I continued to accept them. Falar had more presence than renth, yet less than brewed daru, that which warriors drank. I had agreed to take as much of the falar as I was able; did they believe I would give my word and then be forsworn?

I sighed as I turned toward Mehrayn where he lay, seeing the deeper darkness of his back, able to see no more than the broadness of it, none of the corded muscle which rippled with his movement. So strange were males, these Sigurri even stranger. First it had been the males of Bellinard, a city to the north, then the males of Ranistard, even farther north. Ceralt and his Belsayah, Hannis and his Neelarhi, the male god Sigurr and his fighters, and now his Sigurri. Bellinard had fallen to my sister clans of Midanna, whom I led as war leader; Ranistard held those of my own clan of Hosta and would fall in its turn when the Midanna were free to ride against it. Ceralt, by now surely healed, had returned to his Belsayah, and perhaps led the Neelarhi as well, in the absence of Hannis. Sigurr dwelt among his fighters in undoubted pleasure, for I had raised his Sigurri to stand with the Midanna against the coming strangers, just as he had demanded. I had but one further thing to see to before I might return to my warriors who held Bellinard, a thing demanded of me by Mida herself. It was this thing which upset these Sigurri so greatly, yet in Mida's name I was unable to fathom the reason for such upset.

I, who am Jalav, was first war leader to the Hosta clan before my sisters were taken by the males of Ranistard. This capture was allowed by the goddess Mida so that I might lead the other nine clans of sister Midanna against Bellinard with none to say I favored one clan above the others. It was necessary

that I do naught to free the Hosta, and though my soul writhed in agony at that lack of doing, I was not able to refuse the will of Mida. Strangers came to our world who were enemies to Mida and Sigurr, and the goddess and god demanded that their warriors face these strangers and best them. Nearly all of the Hosta carried the quickened seed of males within them, and would therefore be unable to stand in battle with us. I planned to lead my warriors against the strangers and then see to the males of Ranistard, but first the nine enemy clans of Midanna must join us.

Mehrayn stirred again as though in discomfort. That I rode with the new light to claim the war leadership of enemy Midanna had been an outrage to him, and he-and Chaldrin-had insisted on accompanying me, although I tried to convince them that they would be more burden than aid, that their lot among Midanna would be harsher than the lot of a female temple slave in their city, the lot of a female slave in Chaldrin's domain, the Caverns of the Doomed. I had not mentioned my own fate were I to lead free males to the home tents of Midanna, therefore they did not know what would befall me. To say my life would be forfeit would be an understatement. These strange Sigurri accepted my warriorhood and my ability with weapons-when other males did not-and yet insisted on standing with me where their presence would be a burden. Strange enough was the willingness of a male to stand beside a warrior, stranger still that he sought not to take from her those privileges which he demanded for himself. Strangest of all, however, was the way they demanded to be allowed to add their blades to mine, as though I were brother to them or they sister to me. That I had freed Mehrayn from slavery in Bellinard and had fought beside Aysayn and Chaldrin in the Caverns of the Doomed did not seem ample reason for males to do as they did. All warriors know males as being beyond reason, and beyond gratitude as well. Aysayn and Mehrayn looked upon me as a messenger from their god, Chaldrin, as the sole being who had bested him at blades; these, perhaps, were the reasons for the behavior of the males, but it still seemed odd.

"Why do you not sleep, wench?" Mehrayn's deep voice came suddenly, held low so as not to challenge the darkness. "Had I as much falar within me as you have within you, it would be feyd before I awoke."

"Falar is not like daru," said I, speaking as softly as he, my hand reaching to the dark shadow of his arm. "Had it been brewed daru I swallowed, I might well be insensible.

Was I not sufficiently awake and aware during your devotions?" "Indeed you were," said he, chuckling as he turned toward me. "With the removal of your life sign, your sufficiency is beyond question. You do not mean to deny me that sufficiency for a final time, I hope? I await the new light with thoughts of no other thing than my devotions."

"Dark Sigurr is surely pleased with your piety," said I, finding great pleasure at the touch of his hand upon my back, beneath my hair. "Mida, too, will be pleased that you no longer mean to impede her warrior. The home tents of Midanna would allow you no devotions, yet would you be used to the glory of Mida-again and again and again. The use you had at the hands of my warriors in Bellinard would be as naught in comparison."

"Were all Midanna as-sufficient as you, I would give myself to them with eager anticipation," he murmured, drawing me into his arms. "I will miss you sorely once you have gone, and more than that; already do I feel your absence. Will you join me upon my altar when the new light arrives, or do you mean to deny me a last taste of you?"

"Such a taste might be had now, here upon these furs, rather than with the new light upon your altar," I murmured, feeling the nearness of him begin to heat my blood. So broad and hard was the male, so warm to my hands which stroked his back, so alive to my bare body pressed to his. I, too, felt the gap his absence would bring, though I would not mind the emptiness when my life sign hung about my neck once more. At one time my life sign was of wood, carved from the tree which had been marked as mine at birth, though the symbol of the hadat had been changed; Mida had touched it and made it like her

Crystals, clear and light yet not easily broken; Sigurr had breathed into the crystal hadat, sending darkness swirling throughout its shape. In such a way was it shown that I rode for both goddess and god, and also was I given a great gift: with the life sign about my neck upon its thong, what wounds came to me in battle were not immediately felt, and were healed during no more than one darkness of sleep. The gift was priceless to a warrior and war leader such as I, yet there was something I did not understand! with my life sign upon me I felt no desire for males. I had thought my lack of interest due to the use I had been put to by the dark god Sigurr, yet it had not been so. Though to me the time had been horror-filled agony, I had been told by Mida that Sigurr had been unexpectedly pleased. For what reason, then, would interest in males be taken from me? It had surely not been Mida's doing, for her teachings council that one uninterested in males is a thing of pity; how are our clans to thrive and grow stronger if peopled by warriors who care naught for those who are able to give warriors new warrior lives? The doing was not beyond Sigurr, who would surely laugh soundlessly at whatever pain I was given due to a lack of interest, yet the reason seemed insufficient. It would not be-

"And yet, if I were to taste of you now, you would find yourself easily able to deny me come the new light," murmured Mehrayn, his lips to my hair, his words drawing me away from the distractions of thought. "I have no understanding of your dislike for use upon my altar, yet am I well aware of it. Perhaps it would be best if we were to abstain as once we did, so that your reluctance may be overcome at the proper time."

"Mehrayn, I do not mean to remain till the new light," I said, his body still as he heard my words. "The last of the darkness will do best to see me upon my way from this city, before those who dwell in it are up and about. A journey such as the one before me is best begun as soon as possible."

His motionlessness touched me more deeply than his flesh, for I knew well that I would now have no more of him. His flesh remained as warm as it had been, his great arms as tightly about me, yet would they soon be gone, withdrawn in male-seen insult.

"So soon?" he asked at last, and then, strangely, the arms I had expected to release me tightened the more. The breath was nearly taken from me with the abrupt constriction, and a small grunt escaped my throat, more from surprise than pain. My breasts were crushed against the broadness of his chest and I moved in silent protest, nearly wide-eyed at the strength he showed. So easily is a warrior able to forget the strength of males, yet recall it she must if she is to remain free and a warrior. Again I moved in protest, attempting to loose myself from the keren-like embrace, and at last Mehrayn perceived my difficulty.

"Have I hurt you, wench?" he asked, releasing me enough so that he could look at me. "It was not my intention to do you harm, yet the thought of losing you so quickly-the new light seems a great deal farther away than the end of this darkness. I suddenly find that my arms lack the strength to release you."

I breathed deeply as I continued to attempt to extricate myself. "The strength of your arms seems more than sufficient for any deed you may care to essay," I said. "Perhaps you could try to release me--else I seek the aid of another."

"Another?" asked Mehryn, chuckling as his arms tightened some small amount. "There are no others about to ask, nor would any Sigurri attempt to stand against me in a situation such as this. Even Chaldrin, who has sworn himself to your safety, would not attempt to come between us. Should I find it impossible to release you, who would there be to stand for you?"

"Mehrayn forgets that I require no more than one to stand with me," I replied, pressing my dagger to his throat. Again his body grew motionless, this time for different reasons. "This blade was given me by Mida, and by cause of that has become my sister. Is it your desire to be kissed more deeply by my

sister?"

"I had not realized you had brought your-sister to my furs," said he cautiously against the sharpened metal. "Never before this have you slept with a dagger so near to hand."

"Always do I sleep with a dagger near to hand," I replied, running my free palm slowly over his back. "Never before have I been free to do so in this city of males. Do you continue to consider abstinence?"

"Wench, I refuse to believe that you would use that blade on me," said he, remaining motionless. "We have come to mean too much to one another to cause each other harm. You will put that blade up and then we will pleasure ourselves, and come the new light we will leave together to see to those enemy wenches of yours. Aysayn will lead our legions out when the rites are done, and we will ride to meet them when our chore is completed."

"When our chore is completed," I echoed, once again annoyed. "So you insist that you will accompany me, do you? What of the agreement we came to?"

"I came to no agreement," said he. "It was you alone who refused the presence of those who would stand with you during your need. Once I rode from you and permitted you to ride from me; had Sigurr not moved those foul followers of the Oneness to attack my legion quickly, I well might have returned here rather than continue on to their city. The distress I felt apart from you was more than I was able to bear, Jalav, and I do not care to bear it again."

"Sooner would you bear what the Midanna would bring you," said I, disgusted. "You eagerly seek an unknown fate, forgetting that I cannot prevent it, for I stand in Mida's cause and not in that of a male! Perhaps you should have some small taste of that fate."

"Wench, you may not do this!" protested Mehrayn, but he released me at the urging of my blade. Though he seemed sure I would not harm him, he knew well enough that I need not slay him to see my will done. And were I to wound him, he would not only not accompany me, neither would Aysayn permit him to accompany the Sigurri legions when they rode forth. His insistence on foolishness had angered me, so that I wanted to wound him. In the darkness the male was unable to see my anger, but he could sense it from the near growl in my voice-and be properly wary.

As Mehrayn put himself flat upon the furs, I followed, one hand to his shoulder as I knelt across the dark shadow of his body, the other hand a fist about the hilt of the dagger which touched his throat. It had been some time since I had last used a male so, but I remembered the way of it. The male stirred faintly beneath me, clearly agitated, and I smiled into the surrounding darkness.

"You cared little for use of this sort as a captive in Bellinard," said I, my voice soft as I moved farther toward his thighs along his belly. "Were you captive to Midanna in their own home tents, you would know no other use. Never would you be permitted to take a warrior, only to serve her in her own chosen way. Jalav is a warrior and war leader, and has taken many males in this manner."

"Jalav has swallowed too great an amount of falar," said Mehrayn, sourly. "I am not a wench to be forced to the pleasure of a warrior, nor am I as deeply in need as in Bellinard. The war leader Jalav will receive from me no more than that which her esteemed enemies would receive-here or in their own home tents."

"You speak so by cause of never having tasted of the sthuvad drug," said I, moving myself to where his manhood lay. Indeed was he only partially aroused, not nearly enough for adequate use, yet did his flesh jump at the touch of mine, and begin somewhat to rise and harden. "In the presence of the sthuvad drug, a warrior may do with a male as she wishes, and the male may not deny her."

"I am the master of my own body," said Mehrayn, the words forced between clenched teeth. "It is not seemly for a man to be taken so, and I shall not allow it."

"And yet you deemed it seemly to take this warrior with your strength when she would have had none of you," I replied in a murmur, caressing his male-flesh with my female-flesh and causing him to continue to stir. "As that taking was to your liking, so is this taking to mine."

"Jalav, the sole taking to be thought upon is that you are taken with falar," said he, a faint heaviness having entered his tone. "When first I gave you my love you did indeed appear unwilling, yet was your body most willing. As you may see, mine is not the same, therefore must you, release me and put up that dagger."

"I find little unwillingness in your body, male," said I with a soft laugh, pressing my breasts to his chest as I kissed at the flesh beneath the hair. Red was that hair, like the hair upon his head though lighter, and had I been able to see him I would also have seen his sun-darkened skin, marked upon the left shoulder with the stroke in black which stood for Sigurr. At my kiss his great unwillingness stirred even more greatly, searching for the heat in which it might bask, and again I laughed. "For one who is unwilling, your rod seems uncommonly active," said I.

"Never would I wish to see a rod used upon you, wench," said he, growling softly. "A length of leather would suffice for your hiding, which shall be yours should you continue with this- Ahhh."

The breath flew from him as I succeeded in his capture and then, slowly, settled myself upon him. The male was far too used to having females many times each fey, and was therefore not difficult to bring to rigidity. Ah, Mida! The pleasure a warrior may find in the presence of a male of strength! I hummed along with the motion of my hips, and Mehrayn's great hands rose to my sides as he moaned.

"Perhaps-perhaps a brief time engaged so would not be too unseemly" he said haltingly, his hips rising to meet me. "There will yet be words between us on this matter, wench-at another time."

Again I laughed as I often did in the presence of the male, until I allowed the pleasure to take me. I kept the dagger firmly in my fist, carefully near the male's throat yet did not threaten his safety, and we both felt great pleasure. After an endless time his hand was able to force the dagger entirely away from him, and he threw me back in the furs, his body quickly following. So abruptly did I become possessed rather than possessor that I gasped, yet the pleasure did not cease. With Mehrayn's lips to mine came the first of his vigorous pummeling, and my dagger was forgotten entirely.

I did not awaken till the first of Mida's light spread warmth and color through the room. Mehrayn lay deeply asleep beside me to my left, my dagger lay abandoned and forgotten to my right, and I, sluggard that I was, lay where I had been left when the pleasure was done. I had immediately slept, more deeply than was usual; the falar had indeed affected me. Already was the fey advanced beyond my planned departure time, and I was as annoyed with myself as I had been at Mehrayn in the darkness. To take pleasure with a male is the right of a war leader and warrior, but yet the will of Mida must come first.

I arose from the furs and quietly donned my breech, then placed my dagger in its leg bands. Best to be gone before Mehrayn's awakening, so that I need not listen to him beg again to accompany me. Although my hair seemed snarled and twisted its entire length, from crown to thighs, it would keep till I rode the forests toward the land of the Midanna. A heavy wooden comb was among the few possessions I had wrapped for the journey. Upon a platform by the wall was my bow and shafts, and the life sign I had carefully removed the darkness previous. I raised my swordbelt and sword from the furs beside the place I had slept, then turned toward the platform. It would be the work of no more than a moment to gather all I required, and then would I be- "So you are prepared to depart," came Mehrayn's voice suddenly

from where he lay. "And I may not halt you, for you move to the will of the gods. Am I permitted to wish it might be otherwise?"

"To wish the matter otherwise would be to disapprove of the doings of the gods," said I, looking down to where he lay in the furs. "Few males approve of the demands of Mida, yet in this endeavor the will of Sigurr joins hers. Do you mean to set yourself against the dark god, O Sword of Sigurr?"

"Do you need to mock me as well as leave me?" he growled, rising to stand before me. "Sigurr demands no more of women than their use upon his altar. It is from men alone that he demands strength and battle and wounds and early death, as it should be. That you are a warrior of uncommon skill is undeniable, Jalav; however I would still far prefer to stand for you rather than beside you, yet also, undeniably, I may not do so." His hands rose to my arms and stroked me gently, and he smiled faintly as he looked down upon me. "I will not believe that blessed Sigurr would look upon my thoughts as sacrilege, yet should he do so, so be it. I would still wish to prohibit you from riding from me into danger and battle."

"And yet you will not," said I, knowing the truth of this as I looked up into the warmth of his eyes. Again I marveled at this male, this Sigurri, who could have held me with his strength yet refused to do so, for he knew that I did as I must, just as he did. I knew he was possessed of warrior honor, which moved each of us to the path of right rather than that of personal pleasure.

"Yes, Sigurr take me for the fool I am, I will allow you," he murmured, sliding his palms beneath my hair and drawing me easily to the firm strength of his bare body. "I shall have your lips a final time and then I shall turn from you, and in a hand of feyd I shall follow after and find you. Once I have done so we will face the final battle together, and then-and then the will of the gods will have been seen to."

His lips lowered to mine and eagerly did I meet them, endlessly pleased that I need not discuss my thoughts after battle with the strangers was done. It was then that Mida wished me to lead the Midanna against the Sigurri, destroying them before they might do us the same, yet had I learned that the Sigurri were honorable far beyond the god they served, and would not attack those they had fought beside. Should the matter come to it, I would give my life and soul to halt the intended attack, for the Midanna would not find it prudent to enter battle by the single clan against so large a force commanded by a single leader. Midanna and Sigurri would not raise blade to one another and I-I would find the peace I had come to long for, the peace that would not be mine while I lived. I let my swordbelt fall from my grasp and held Mehrayn as he held me, knowing that I would forget him once my soul thinned and melted into the final dark-yet somehow his strength and warmth would be eternally missed.

Our lips clung together in an attempt to prolong the moment, though it was impossible to prolong it forever. We parted at last and Mehrayn looked down upon me, his hand gently smoothing my hair.

"I shall help you gather your things and choose a kan," he said, with resolve. "Allow me a brief moment to cover myself, and then we may . . ."

A clear, deep ringing broke into his words, the summons from Sigurr that the time of devotions was at hand for all Sigurri. Mehrayn looked startled at the sound, and his tone became bitter.

"So I am not to be allowed even to see you off," he said, stroking my face. "Perhaps Sigurr was displeased with the words I spoke earlier after all, yet I refuse to withdraw them. I must go now to find a wench to take to my altar, but my prayers will be for you rather than her, my Jalav. Go with Sigurr's blessing, and care for yourself till I am able to stand once more beside you."

His lips brushed mine briefly and then he was gone, to take up his black body cloth from where it lay upon the floor covering and begin to wrap it about himself. No, I will not share your devotions, I had told him in the darkness, and he, recalling my words, would go without argument to seek another. I found my

swordbelt upon the floor at my feet but yet in Mida's name, I could not pick it up. Never would I allow a male to deter me and yet-

"Do you mean to send me to battle without a final blessing?" I asked, knowing how the male saw his devotions to Sigurr. "I had thought the male Mehrayn cared more for the war leader Jalav."

A wide, glad smile brightened him as his hands tore away the covering he had nearly replaced. His laughter rang out as he returned to me in an eye blink, and then his arms were about me, hugging me close in great joy.

"Wench, I had not thought you would remain," he said, amused, as I eyed him warily, recalling the embrace I had received in the darkness. "No, I shall not crush you to me again-at least until I have you upon my altar. Come, the time flies before us."

Quickly then did he take me to that black, padded platform which was his altar to his god, turned to light the black candle which stood above it upon a ledge, and then returned to me with eyes shining as brightly as the flame. In a moment was my breech opened and pulled away and my dagger taken and thrown aside, and then was I lowered gently to the black platform, Mehrayn following to crouch above me.

"Sigurr, hear these words from one privileged to be known as your Sword," said the male, pressing his lips lightly to mine as his hands touched everywhere. "I ask that you guard this woman I have beneath me as you would guard one you looked upon as your own beloved, one for whom you would gladly give your own life that hers be spared. She rides to danger among those who are enemy to her; protect her and aid her in her attempts as your breath in her life sign restores health to her wounded body. Should this be done, I will never again ask a thing of you, for all I wish for in this life will be seen to."

"Mehrayn," I whispered, but yet his lips stopped whatever words I would have spoken concerning his prayer. That he asked only for my well-being and not his own disturbed me, yet was I caught up in his devotions and unable to pursue the matter. The joy his body was able to bring to mine was a never-ending thing, and much did we revel in that joy till Mehrayn was no longer able to continue. For a long time the male continued to lie atop me and look down into my eyes.

"I do believe I detect a purr in the throat of my hadat," said he, clearly pleased. "To cause a hadat to purr, a man need only put her to her back and stroke her deep."

"True," said I with a smile, "and yet must a male be ever wary of her claws. The claws of a hadat are never long sheathed."

To prove the truth of my words I set my own claws to the flesh of his back and drew them gently down, and the male affected to cringe as though in pain.

"Ah, Sigurr, she wounds me!" he moaned, thrashing about so that his body touched mine at all points. "Surely she now shows her jealousy at my intention to take another wench to my altar. Once she has gone, how may I not take another wench? When she has returned to my side there will be no other, and yet while she is gone-"

No longer was his tone light, his eye sparkling. Soberly did he gaze at me, and surely did I believe his words were incomprehensible. The light of the fey bathed his features in the glow of growing warmth, and of a sudden it came to me that I had not the time to puzzle out his meaning. My task awaited me, the task which had for too long been put off.

"And now she must be gone," said I, touching the serious lines of his face. "Release me, male, so that we may be about the duties which await us."

"Ah, yes, the duties which await us," said he with a sigh, but he remained motionless. "We shall each of us see to our duties, and yet you have not spoken of your feelings toward my taking another to my altar for devotions. Do you mean to blame me for obeying the word of my god?"

"For what reason would I do so strange a thing?" I asked, truly perplexed. "Were you pledged to follow me in servitude, then would your use be mine to keep or give to another. As you do not follow me, I have no more right to direct you in the matter than you have the right to direct me so. Though you are male you are, in a manner of speaking, a war leader; who is there below Mida who may say who a war leader takes to her sleeping leather?"

"Oh, indeed," said he, essaying a smile. "You may no more hold me at fault than I may hold-" His words stopped abruptly to be followed by an odd smile and strange expression. "You-mean to take another to your-sleeping leather during our parting?" he asked in a strange voice. "You are a war leader, and will therefore lie with another man?"

"Should the desire come to me," I agreed with a shrug, moving somewhat beneath him. "There will undoubtedly be many males among the home tents of the enemy Midanna, and once I have won their leadership the males will be eager to please. Mehrayn, you must release me now, for I cannot move past the bulk of you."

"Oh, indeed, release you," said he, at last beginning to rise from the altar. "The-males will be eager to please you, and yet by then I will have led my legions to rejoin you. There will be little need for you to seek another when I am there."

"The matter will be seen to in its own time," said I, relieved, as I rose from the platform. Much did I dislike all that belonged to Sigurr, although I had ignored the dislike for Mehrayn's sake. "It may perhaps be necessary that I honor one or more of the favorites of those who will follow me," said I, stretching my body. "I will then put aside my life sign and use the males gently, so that I do not cause them upset."

"I cannot conceive of a man alive who would find upset at your use," muttered Mehrayn, eyeing me where I stood. "Even those who willingly enslave themselves. And yet-I had forgotten about your life sign. With your life sign about your lovely throat, you will feel desire for none of them."

The thought seemed to please the male; he grinned and chuckled. Again was I perplexed, even as I retrieved and replaced my breech and dagger, and bent for my sword. Once it was belted about me, I saw that Mehrayn did likewise. Much would it have pleased me to wash the smell of a male from me before taking my leave, yet would the washing be more thorough when once I found a stream or lake in the forests through which I meant to ride. I strode to the platform to find my life sign-and my fingers closed on air. Thinking I had mistaken the place, I looked about, yet nowhere was the life sign to be seen. In sudden upset I threw all things from the platform, the bow, the shafts, the flame-maker and comb I had prepared, yet all to no avail. The platform stood bare of all things-most especially my life sign.

"What occurs here, wench?" asked Mehrayn, halting beside me. "Do you mean to throw the whole room about now that you no longer will have use of it?"

"My life sign," I said, immediately turning toward him. "Have you moved it elsewhere, male?"

"Not I," said he, with a frown. "Perhaps it has fallen behind the table."

Quickly then did he reach to the platform, lift it from where it stood and peer beneath, with no success. Clearly the life sign was no more beneath the platform than upon it. The male then began a slow, careful search among those things that I had thrown to the floor cloth, yet a thought had come to me that held me from joining his search. In only one manner might the life sign have flown so completely from where it had

been left, and in such a manner was I able to know of Mida's displeasure with me. As Mehrayn stood to look about himself in great frustration, I quietly walked to those things I had thrown to the floor cloth and began gathering them to me.

"The life sign is not there, wench," said Mehrayn, giving me no more than a glance as he continued to look about. "Surely must it have been left elsewhere in error, the two of us so taken with falar that we knew not what was done. First we shall search this entire room, and should we fail to find it we must return to Aysayn's apartment and search there as well."

"There is no need," said I, holding the things I would soon take to the forests with me, shaking my hair back from my arms. "No search will discover that which has been reclaimed by the one who gave it."

"What foolishness do you speak?" he asked, turning his look of displeasure from all about to me. "The life sign has merely been misplaced, not reclaimed. Would your Mida take from you the magic of her healing powers and Sigurr's upon the dawn of the fey you ride to battle at her bidding? Such a thing would be inconceivable."

"Patience is more often to be found in mortals than in goddesses," I replied, stringing my bow. "Perhaps it came to Mida that I would have little need of her magic healing when I concerned myself with no other thing than dallying with a male. I must now see to her task without the aid of her magic, and for this I may blame no one other than myself. I cannot say I knew no better."

The bile rose high in me at thought of my stupidity. When one surrounds oneself with males, one begins to think as they, a thing I had not known was possible. I now must return to the forest ways as quickly as possible, and hope to avoid any further disasters.

"Should one be at fault, that one is myself," said Mehrayn, his firm hand resting on my shoulder. "I cannot believe, however, that the life sign has been reclaimed, and will immediately begin my search to prove the contention. You may assist me or merely sit and await the results; I will not be proven wrong."

"Perhaps not," said I, showing no awareness of his hand on me. "I, however, have already been proven wrong, and have not the time to sit about in idle patience. Should you find the life sign, you may bring it after me when your legions are prepared to march."

"Bring it after- No!" exclaimed Mehrayn, turning me quickly by the shoulders and snatching away the newly strung bow. "You cannot ride to battle without the protection given you! Do you seek crippling or death?"

"Do you mean to say that the war leader Jalav has never before faced battle without protection?" I demanded. So great was my anger at this insult that my hand closed about the hilt of my sword. The male saw the effect of his words upon me, yet showed annoyance rather than contrition.

"Do not think to lure me from my stand with misdirection, wench," said he, in a tone of disapproval. "I know well enough that you have faced battle many times and had need of no protection other than your sword. Yet I would also know how many of those times you alone faced enemies without number? How many of those times was done what you are about to do? No mortal wench-or man-may face your task without the protection of the gods, and this you may not deny."

"My task is what I may not deny," I said, the insult diminishing somewhat, the stiffness remaining unchanged. "When taken as a slave in Bellinard, I faced enemies without number; when held with the Hosta by the males of Ranistard, I faced enemies without number; when captured by Ceralt and his Belsayah, I faced enemies without number; when sent as a slave to the Caverns of the Doomed, I faced enemies without number. Also did I walk the lines for Silla trash, as the scars upon me testify, yet did I

survive to avenge the insult. Do not speak of what you don't know, male, and beware giving insult. Jalav does not care to swallow insult."

"Nor has she spoken, till now, of what service to the gods has entailed for her," said the male, his green looking down upon me. "These Silla, who gave you such terrible wounds as to cause the scarring you wear-they are enemy Midanna, are they not? They stand among those who unknowingly await you, do they not?"

"They do not," I replied, turning from him to fetch the bow he had thrown aside. "Those Silla for whom I walked the lines have been sent to Mida's Blessed Realm, some by my sword, some by the swords of those who follow me. The balance of the Silla lay in capture to the males of Ranistard, beside my own Hosta. When the strangers have been seen to and Mida satisfied, the Hosta will be freed, and likely the Silla as well." I straightened with the bow in my hand, and turned to face him squarely. "Must we bare blades before I am able to continue on in Mida's service? I would regret the loss of you, male, yet the Hosta wait and the gods may not be denied. "

"Indeed, denial is reserved to mortal men alone," said he, grimacing. "Should I attempt to stand in your path, I will be blown from it by those who may not be denied. I dislike being moved about so." He looked at his altar a moment, and then back at me. "Very well. As I am given no alternative, I shall see you upon your way. When your life sign is found, I shall follow after with it."

He came then to aid me in gathering the few things I would take to the forests, and another moment saw us moving toward the door which led from his chamber. Mehrayn put a hand to the door to open it, yet did he hesitate and then bend an odd look upon me.

"And who might this--Ceralt of the Belsayah be, in whose capture you were?" he asked, the oddness also a part of his tone. "No doubt a man of low character, who sought to give you no other thing than pain and shaming, a man whose life was well ended by the edge of your blade."

I, too, hesitated before the door, remembering Ceralt. As tall and broad as Mehrayn was Ceralt, with eyes nearly as light, yet was Ceralt dark of hair, and darker of skin despite Mehrayn's tanning. Many were the memories I had of Ceralt, not all of them unpleasant.

"Ceralt-was he who bought me as slave in Bellinard, he who claimed me as his own in Ranistard, he who found me after I had walked the lines for the Silla and lay near to death," said I, seeing each of these things against the wood of the door as I spoke of them. "It was he who was chosen by Mida to bring me to her, and for that reason was I given into his capture for the journey. Ceralt-wished to make me his, and would not acknowledge my service to Mida, therefore was his life nearly forfeit at journey's end. I-bargained with Sigurr for his life and the lives of those others with whom we traveled, then left them and rode to raise the Sigurri. Ceralt was too gravely wounded to speak with, yet did I leave word with others that he was not to seek me again, therefore shall I never lay eyes upon him again."

"I see," said Mehrayn quietly. "You warned him away, therefore will he refrain from seeking you out. Merely by cause of the warning."

"Certainly," said I, understanding naught of his oddness. "Nearly was his life lost by cause of his insinuations. No other than a fool would attempt the pursuit of that which has been denied him by the gods."

"The truth of your words cannot be denied," said Mehrayn, with a small, odd smile. "No other than a fool would do such a thing."

With such comment was the door then opened before me, so that I might walk through. I did so without

hesitation, relieved that the conversation need no longer be continued. As a Sigurri male, Mehrayn did well in upholding the greater strangeness of all Sigurri.

The corridor we entered was carved from stone, thick candles illuminating the black of the walls, as well as the small platforms which stood here and there against those walls, and the silver sconces in which the candles themselves were held. Though other doors appeared at intervals in the black walls along the corridor, no other living being did we see till we descended to the level below. Here were some few Sigurri males moving about their business, two slave females in red hip cloths and bare, red-tipped breasts who sought to take the dust from those things which stood about, and one slave female who bore a large wooden board laden with provender. When her eyes touched Mehrayn she halted and slipped to her knees, her head bending as far as possible above the board. Light of hair and eye was the slave, of a similar coloring to Ilvin, the Hitta warrior who had wished to accompany me to the land of the Sigurri, yet no further did the similarity run. Had Ilvin been captured by males, I much doubted that she would have knelt so easily. Midanna warriors do not so easily acknowledge themselves slave.

"For whom is that tray intended, slave?" asked Mehrayn, pausing to look down at the female, until he seemed to understand. "Nearly had I forgotten! Both Aysayn and Chaldrin slept beneath my roof, so that they, too, might see you on your way. It will be the work of no more than a moment to fetch them, and then we may see to provisioning you. Aysayn undoubtedly sent for a tray in the belief that you were not yet prepared to depart. Await me here, wench, as I shall return in a moment."

The male turned then and rapidly retraced his steps in the direction from which we had come, leaving the slave where she knelt and a Midanna warrior in whom impatience flared with the strength of Mida's light at mid fey. I looked briefly about at those who hurried to and fro, saw none who seemed intent upon barring my way, slung my bow across my shoulders and added the case of shafts to my left, then purposely took my leave.

To one side of Mehrayn's dwelling stood a smaller dwelling called stables, that which housed the kand in Mehrayn's possession. No Sigurri was then about, and no sign that a kan had been prepared for me, though as expected, brought disappointment. The stone of the floor was unlittered with the stiff, yellow stall bedding, as though one had already been there to clear away the trailings of the fey previous, leaving my feet an easier path through the dwelling. I sought the kan I had brought from Bellinard, thinking it might be among those of Mehrayn and, surprisingly, there in the dimness to the back of the dwelling, so it was.

The beast turned its head to regard me as I slid in beside it, softly whickering to show its recognition. A glance about the enclosure showed its bridle hung upon the wall, within easy reach. It was the work of a moment to place it upon the r beast, another moment to tie my small pack of belongings into its mane, and then did I back the beast from the enclosure and mount in a single, fluid jump. My weight upon the yellow and brown kan and its release from confinement caused it to dance about in anticipation, as pleased as I at the prospect of departure, as eager as I to be shut of the cities and doings of males. I touched its sides with my heels and we danced forward, leaving the dimness for the growing light and warmth beyond.

There were few about to see me ride from the glittering black of Mehrayn's dwelling, those few heedless of me as they moved along upon errands of their own. Truly had Mida sent a glorious fey for my travel's beginning, one which would be all the more glorious once the forests had been reached. The road tended ever downward, for the city of the Sigurri was built level upon level, carved from the face of the mountain against which it had been built. I rode past glittering black upon the fifth and fourth levels, yet the third and second brought more and more red-black dwellings to stand about the glittering black. The glittering dwellings of the higher levels were for those of higher station, those of lower level red-black for those of

lower station. Much were males concerned with position in life, as though there was importance to be found in so foolish a male thing. What greater importance was there than to gain the position of war leader to warriors of worth during the glory of battle? Those who were Midanna were warriors all, yet even the Sigurri had those about who were other than warriors. I looked about at those males of the lower levels who did not wear the black of Sigurr, those males who stood sweeping dust and dirt from before their odd-appearing dwellings, those males who saw to the kand of those from above who paused on their level, those males who did naught save stand about and converse idly with others like themselves. For what reason were they permitted to remain in what was purportedly a city of warriors? They none of them wore weapons, these males who looked me with unvoiced heat as I rode by, yet did they live among those who fought in the name of Sigurr. Much though I had tried, I could conceive of no use for these males, no reason for their presence; it remained one of the many male oddities.

The greatest number of those who were about were to be found upon the lowest level, as it had been when I had arrived at the city. Males in many colored body cloths, females in hip wraps which reached to their ankles, youths, babes, kand, wagons, noise, motion, stench. I urged my kan forward as quickly as possible through the mass, again feeling the illness to which I would never become accustomed. The dwellings standing so close upon one another contrived to keep the bedlam within and multiplied beyond belief, each shouting voice the voice of ten, each presence the presence of ten, each odor the strength of ten. Bodies pressed close all about me and about each other, causing my kan to snort with displeasure, causing me to struggle to keep hand from sword hilt. Much did I feel the need to lay all about me and clear a space within which one might breathe, yet was it a thing I might not do. Though the sweat beaded my brow and grew upon my body, though my seat upon my kan became less secure by cause of the moisture, still must I ride slowly forward with the flow. Those about me had not named themselves enemy to me; in honor I might cause them no harm.

It seemed as though half the fey had passed before the multitude thinned and the way carried me from the city. With none before me I allowed my kan his head, and quickly did his ever-lengthening stride take us farther and farther away. Truly were cities a thing of males, confining, violating, unreasoning and maddening. The open countryside through which I rode was a gift from Mida in comparison, the occasional dwellings and toiling field-males notwithstanding. The muscles of my kan bunched over and again as the beast strove to increase its pace, and I tightened my knees and bent forward, encouraging it to an even greater pace.

Not long did I allow my mount to continue at full tilt, for there was a considerable journey before us. I slowed our plunge to an easy trot, freed my bow from about my shoulders, then looked more purposefully food stuffs. There was a small hunger in me at that time, brought about by having fed thrice each fey as the males did, yet would I soon revert to the proper trail manner of only twice each fey. To be free of males was to be free to act as a warrior preferred, with none to insist upon another way, a supposedly superior way.

Abruptly I slowed the kan to a stop, slid from its back, placed my bow upon the stone of the way, and crouched with my arms about me. With head bowed I attempted to force the trembling from my body, much as my previous thoughts had attempted to force the trembling from my mind. Never before in my life as a warrior had I ridden forth without my life sign, the life sign which was the guardian of my soul. I raised my head and breathed deeply of the sweet, silken air, warmed to perfection by the climbing light of the fey, lifting my face to the gentle breeze which whispered by. Once thought upon, the reason for my difficulty became clear; others might dismiss consideration of Mida's displeasure, yet Jalav was not among them. I had put aside the wishes of Mida and had paused to dally with males, therefore had my life sign been taken. Was I then to be allowed the presence of those selfsame males, to allay the loss of the life sign? I laughed once, bitterly, knowing myself a fool. Never again would I be allowed the presence of Mehrayn, just as the presence of Ceralt had been denied me. My life and efforts were

Mida's alone, and were I to forget the lesson, it would soon be recalled to me. I was to continue on as I was, without life sign and without accompaniment, and I was to prevail. Failure would bring a greater loss than one single life alone, all those Midanna who followed me, all the Hosta lying in capture, those were the lives which would be forfeit should I fail. The other clans of Midanna would enter battle leaderless and would fall, leaving none to aid the Hosta at battle's end. So many lives looking to one, and the possessor of that one sat crouched upon the stone of a way, trembling from a punishment justly earned, bewailing the loss of males as though she were city slave-woman. In full disgust I rose from the crouch, taking my bow with me, feeling the weight of the sword which hung at my side, the comfort of the presence of the dagger in my leg bands. It came to me then that my life sign had not been about my neck when I had faced Chaldrin for my freedom, nor had it been there during the battle in which I had stood with Aysayn and the other males. Mida alone had watched over her warrior, and now a task had been given me which I would see to-and after the task would there be opportunity to mourn the loss of those who were denied me. I caught up the reins of the grazing kan and mounted quickly, then continued on toward the forests which awaited me.

Large was the area cleared about the city by those of the city, yet was I able to make the forests not long after the light had reached its highest. A paslat had foolishly shown itself from the fields as I passed it, therefore I had already fed upon its flesh, raw and bloody and satisfying as cooked meat was not. The paslat had been small, the leavings less than that which had been swallowed, therefore had I left them behind me; the shaft which had caught the paslat had been retrieved to fly again, when hunger next touched me. Well enough satisfied was this Midanna, save for the absence of a skin of water from which to drink. The blood of the paslat had bred something of a thirst in me, and therefore was my first desire upon entering the forests the seeking out of a stream. I would not pause to bathe till the city of the Sigurri lay far behind me, yet was there time enough to drink.

The smell of water was faint yet unmistakable beneath the green of the trees, calling to my mount as clearly as to myself. The heat of the fey lay upon both of us, causing the very air to waver in the occasional bright shafts falling through the trees. The stream appeared abruptly beyond a line of bushes, running happily above its bed of rock and stone, spreading into a pool at the point we met it. I slid from my kan and bent to the clear blue gurgling below the bank, drank my fill, then stood and waited while my mount did the same. The undisturbed quiet of the forest filled me with great pleasure and a large measure of calm, both of which were welcome to one with many thoughts racing about within. I paced a step or two farther about the pool, considering it a pity I had not the time to bathe-then stopped with hand to sword and looked quickly about. There was sign at the pool, unexpected sign, and no longer did the forest seem serene.

A hunter must be one with her surroundings, and Midanna were hunters as well as warriors. Again I tested what little wind there was, read the lellin song with sharpened ear, sought narrow-eyed for unusual movement. I took hand from hilt and again examined the sign upon the ground. Two had stopped at the pool no more than a pace from where I stood, one having had a leather sack within which was thrust various herbs, some which healed, some which flavored provender. The sack lay where it had been dropped, amid signs of a brief struggle, whereafter they who had knelt beside the pool to drink had been carried off. No indication of spilled blood marred the trail, therefore were those who had been carried off either taken alive or ended bloodlessly. The matter was no true concern of mine, yet is it wise to refrain from beginning a journey before being aware of that which may come behind. Again I looked about narrow-eyed, to be sure none awaited me unseen, then slowly followed the clear trail before me.

More deeply into the woods was I led, at one point seeing that those I followed had halted briefly for some unknowable reason. Still did the ground sign indicate a double burden for each, and neither had put aside that burden. My pace, though cautious, was faster than theirs; the sign quickly grew fresher and more recent, necessitating even greater caution. When the birdsong all about stilled to occasional

twittering and leaf-stirring I began to edge forward with no sounds of my own, quickly coming upon a point where words were to be heard, sounds alone with no meaning. Behind the word-sounds were whimperings and weepings in higher voices, confirming the tale the ground sign had given hint of: those who spoke were male, those who wept female. Another three paces took me to the very edge of a sizable clearing, wherein stood and lay more folk than I had anticipated. The thickened brush hid me easily from their eyes, yet were their words now wholly intelligible.

" . . . Oneness surely provides for those in need," said one, a large, light-haired male wrapped in brown body cloth. He, like the other three males he spoke with, wore sword and dagger and no further coverings, and stood looking down with amusement upon the two Sigurri females lying bound at their feet. The females wore hip coverings, one in yellow, one in green, yet were their breasts as open to the air as mine, showing them to be free females of the lowest levels. They squirmed about in the leather which bound them wrist and ankle, unable to free themselves, anguished at their capture yet helpless to do other than weep.

"These two would have seen more adequately to our needs at the beginning of our hunt," said a second, a male with hair as red as Mehrayn's, casting an annoyed glance toward the largest knot of males in the clearing. "With the easing of their wounds, they begin to look upon our captures with an eye toward sharing. They seem unacquainted with the laws under which we live."

"And with their numbers greater than ours, it seems unlikely that we shall be able to adequately instruct them," said the first, sourly. "I for one, however, having travelled so far with so little to show for it, have no intention of giving over that which is mine. Should they wish wench-hunts of their own, they may hunt for them as we have."

"They claim the status of warriors, and therefore feel themselves exempt from the need to hunt," said a third, a male as light-haired as the first, whose tone was as sour as the other's. "By the blessing of the Serene Oneness, we now have wench-hunts enough for ourselves; I will no more share mine than Ramsarn will share his. How do you mean to see to this, Gengan?"

"I know not," sighed the red-haired male, he who had been named Gengan. "Were it possible to take the wench-hunts and depart unnoticed, I would do so immediately. And yet those warriors are cousins to us, far from their homes and wounded from the battle which was joined with those of the dark god's legions. May we in honor abandon them in their need, when they have done no more than look upon our wench-hunts? How might we face the Serene Oneness in prayer, if we were to . . ."

"Ho, Gengan, bring them closer so that we may all see them," called a male from the scowled-upon knot, stepping forward with two others close upon his heels. A full five hands in number were these other males, all marked with wounds from recent battle, six of their number so badly taken that they lay unmoving upon pelts with others in attendance upon them. The four who had spoken not far from me turned toward the male who had shouted, little of friendliness to be seen in the movement.

"We will be pleased to share sight of our good fortune with you, Nobain," said this Gengan, an easy heartiness to be heard in his voice. "The Serene Oneness has smiled upon us and we now have six wench-hunts, one for each man of our hunting pack. We six need never wench-hunt again."

"You are men to be envied, Gengan," returned the male called Nobain, a sleekness to his tone as he and the others watched the fetching of the new females. The two were lifted from where they lay and carried into the center of the clearing, where they were again placed upon the grass. The four males stepped back so that the others might see the females, and a murmur of appreciation arose from the larger set, all of whom wore body cloths of gray. It had become clear that these were of the force which had done battle with Mehrayn and his males, a remnant which had run dishonorably. Sharply did my lip curl at

thought of such cowardice, yet were these males, after all, with little else to be expected. All gray-clad males able to move rose to stand with the initial three, and much did their gazes show the heat of their desire.

"These newest are fully as pleasing to the eye as those others," said the male Nobain, stepping forward to look down upon the females before raising his gaze to the males who stood above their captives. "As the Serene Oneness has seen fit to bless you so, surely you will not refuse to share your good fortune with those less fortunate, eh, cousin? We seek no more than their use till we part, and then they will again be yours alone. So little a thing . . ."

"The laws forbid it!" snapped the male Ramsarn, the harshness of his words cutting across the speech of Nobain, his features twisted in fury. "No man may take the woman of another, save that the other allows it! You enter battle in the name of the Serene Oneness, man! Do his laws mean naught to you?"

"We enter battle in the name of the Serene Oneness so that you and those like you might be free to wench-hunt!" returned this Nobain, his face cold as his hand caressed the hilt of his sword. "The laws do indeed say that no man may simply take the use of another man's women, therefore will we now have your freely given assent-else shall there be no living men to whom these wenches belong. What say you?"

Ramsarn stood with hands closed tight, fury in the gaze he sent to Nobain, restrained by the hand of Gengan upon his shoulder and the clear knowledge that he looked upon the promise of death. Again was I struck by the strangeness that there were among males those who were unfamiliar enough with the use of a sword that they dared not face others with a hilt in their hands, else their lives would be undeniably ended. These males in colored body cloths must give over the use of their captured females to those in gray, for those in gray would easily best them. Greatly pleased was I that the dilemma of the hunting males was not mine to deal with, for yielding without battle was not countenanced by Midanna. As I had seen that which I had come to see I prepared to depart as silently as I had come-and then my gaze fell upon something I had not seen earlier.

At the beginning of the heated words between the males Ramsarn and Nobain, two other males in colored body clothes had stepped forward from where they had been, allowing an unobstructed view of those who lay upon the grass behind them. Clearly were they the previous captures of the hunting males whom I had paid no mind-till my gaze had slid across them and then been sharply pulled back. One was a female of town males such as Islat, the town which had lain beneath the protection of the Hosta before the Hosta had been taken by the males of Ranistard. Small was the female, as small as the Sigurri females, also was she covered with cloth from neck to ankles, cloth which was soiled from long, hard use. Beside her lay a Midanna, one who continued to struggle against the leather which bound her, paying no heed to the snarls her struggles put in her long, pale hair. Clearly was I able to see that warrior, yet even had I no more than a glimpse I would have known Ilvin, the Hitta warrior who had so strongly wished to accompany me on my journey to the city of the Sigurri. I had refused to permit her to accompany me, yet had she clearly disobeyed and followed without permission, now reaping what disobedience had brought her. She lay in the capture of males, the reason for which was surely to be found lying next to her.

Beside Ilvin lay the last of the captives, no longer struggling, yet not acquiescent. Two warriors of the Summa were they, one brown-haired, the other light-haired, yet not so light-haired as Ilvin. The blue of their clan coverings was not the blue of the Hitta, but it was difficult to see this beneath the soiling of the coverings. Only with Ilvin beside them was it possible to know the difference easily, and the doubt was surely what had drawn the young Hitta warrior. Had they been her clan sisters she could not have abandoned them in their capture, and her close approach to them had gotten her captured. The Summa

and the town female had undoubtedly been taken by the hunting males in Midanna lands; Ilvin, hovering about the city of the Sigurri, awaiting my reappearance, had observed the arrival of the hunters and their captives, and then had been taken by them. Shame undoubtedly lay heavy on the shoulders of Ilvin, for none of the males seemed harmed, as though she had been taken with naught of battle to speak of. That she had been taken by cause of the presence of Summa rather than sister Hitta must truly gall, for Summa and Hitta were blood enemies.

I sighed as I stood hidden among the forest greenery, trying to cool my blazing vexation. Though Ilvin had earned her present plight through disobedience, how was I, in honor, to leave her to it? And what of those Summa who lay beside her? Hosta, too, were blood enemies to the Summa and Jalav remained Hosta, yet was Jalav to claim the leadership of all Midanna. How was I to stand before the enemy clans of Midanna with head held high, knowing I had consigned two of their number to slavery among males? The task set to my hand by Mida was clear, yet how was I to abandon my followers? The truth of it was that I could not, no matter that Mida would surely frown upon the added delay. Honorable goals may not be achieved through dishonorable means.

The males' doings now concerned me, therefore did I listen closely when the male Gengan stepped forward.

"There is little else we may do save agree," said he heatedly to the male Nobain. "You and your men may have use of our wenches, yet must you take care to cause them no harm. It must be clearly understood that they are ours, Nobain, and may not be kept beyond the time of our parting."

"Certainly not, Gengan, certainly not," returned the male Nobain, a wide grin of pleasure taking him as those others in gray chuckled aloud. "We have little use for wenches save in our furs, therefore shall they be returned to you at the time of our parting. Now shall we continue on our way, to put a greater distance between us and those demons of Sigurr. Should they discover us here, so near to their city, we will none of us have a use for wenches."

At his word the other males all turned from him, those in gray hurrying to obey, those of the smaller set reluctantly doing the same. There were opened packs to be closed, provender to be kept or thrown away, kand to be brought out, wounded to be mounted. With great care I returned as I had come, reentering the forest and making for the stream where my kan had been left, frustrated that I was not able merely to step within the clearing and challenge the males. Their numbers were far too great for a single warrior to attempt, so I could only skulk about, awaiting a moment when the three Midanna might be freed. That sat badly with me, but it was all I might do.

My kan awaited me where I had left him, calmly cropping the grass beside the stream, my bow lying not far from where he stood. The herb-gathering bag dropped by the Sigurri females also lay where it had been left, and quickly did I take it up and empty it of what herbs had been gathered. The bag was a large one, and once carefully rinsed within the stream, it did well holding what water I would require on my new journey. In following the males, I would have little time to seek out the ponds and streams of the forest, which the heat of the land would cause me to require. Best I carry water with me, and try instead to free my warriors.

No more than two hands of reckid passed before I was prepared to depart, yet were the males I followed no different from the balance of their ilk. Nearly a hin was it before all were mounted and away, the wounded tied to their kand, the captive females each ridden before a male in colored body cloth. He who held Ilvin was the male Ramsarn, and much did the fury burn high within her that the male dared to fondle her breasts as they moved with their set through the trees. Her wrists pulled at the leather which bound her as she struggled, yet did her movement do no more than put a grin upon the face of the male touching her. Well punished for her disobedience would the warrior Ilvin be, and not soon prepared to

repeat that disobedience.

The hind passed with little save movement to fill them, yet did I, at one point, find a pleasant distraction. Males in gray were sent out to hunt, and in that way become mine. One by one I put a shaft in each, paused only long enough to cut the shaft free, then continued on to the next till all five had been left for the children of the wild. In such a manner did I reduce the number of those to be faced, and also bring hunger to those who remained. That Midanna warriors rode with them mattered not; Midanna warriors would sooner hunger than take provender from their captors.

Darkness was perhaps a hind from settling when the males found a clearing to their liking and called a halt to the travels of the fey. The disappearance of the five males I had slain had been noted, yet more with annoyance than with apprehension. The male Nobain shouted his males about, filled with great anger, yet was his anger relieved in large part when a nilno bolted through the clearing in great fright, only to be brought down by the shafts of two of the males. Their good fortune brought much laughter to them, but I saw in this an indication of Mida's displeasure. The males would feed well despite my attempts to the contrary, retaining their strength and vigilance. Not soon would I find myself able to free my Midanna, and greatly did I chafe at the delay. The longer I kept from my task, the greater would grow the anger in Mida-yet I could not leave my present attempts.

When I returned to the clearing the males had chosen after seeing to my kan, the nilno had been skinned and set upon a large spit to roast. Two of the males in gray turned the spit, inattentively however. Silently I moved through the line of males guarding the camp, approached as near as I might, and then was able to see what held their attention. As the travels of the fey were done and the provender not yet ready, the males were amusing themselves with their captives.

The whimpers of the two Sigurri females and the town female reached me where I crouched at the edge of the clearing, no sound save struggle coming from the three Midanna. All six had been brought to the center of the clearing by gray-clad males, those in colored body cloths following sullenly after. The six captives struggled against the strength of the males who held them as they were brought before the male Nobain. He looked with great pleasure upon them, only turning as the male Gengan addressed him.

"Your word was given that no harm would come to our wenches," said Gengan, the others of his males stiffly astand at his back. "Is this the manner in which your word is kept, Nobain?"

"Indeed do I seek to keep my word," said Nobain, grinning. "These wenches must serve a large number of men this darkness, therefore must they be prepared for sustained eagerness. You who use them first will have no more eagerness than those who use them last."

"Your words hold no meaning for us!" snapped Ramsarn, he who had held Ilvin before him. "If we are to use our wenches first, for what reason have they been brought before you? Are you so foolish as to think we shall perform here, for your edification and entertainment?"

"You need not tremble in fear at thought of lost privacy, man," Nobain replied laughingly, despite Ramsarn's anger. "I have had the wenches brought here so that they might be treated before your use of them. Such treatment will enhance the pleasure of your own use as well as ours, and as the wenches are yours, you men may do the honors."

"We would know what-treatment you speak of," said Gengan, eyeing the small leather sack which was then being given to Nobain. "There are few enough wenches about in these parts, that to harm these would he . . ."

"This sack contains a salve made from the bulb of the gimba plant," said Nobain, as he held the leather sack high. "When once these wenches have had it spread within them, they will desire no more than the

use of men. This desire will last for hind, and will allow each of us their eager use without their tears of attempted refusal. Would you prefer instead that they be taken till they wept?"

The three city females seemed to know naught of the gimba plant, for city females also knew naught of the sthuvad drug used by warriors. From the gimba plant was our sthuvad drug derived, that drug which made it possible to use a male captive over and over again without loss of strength. Never had I heard of a salve having been made from it, that might extend its use to females. My left hand closed about my sword hilt where I crouched; a gesture as useless as the anger which gripped me. One alone could do naught against so many, no more than remain in place and witness the degradation of sisters.

"My men will hold the wenches the while you men apply the salve," said Nobain to those in colored body cloths, his grin remaining strong. "Once they are beneath the sway of the salve, you may take them for use."

"You are generous to allow us the salving of our own wenches," said Gengan, sardonically. "This generosity is unexpected. For what reason are you so eager to see us perform the task?"

"Why, man, merely for the reason that the wenches are yours," replied Nobain, with feigned innocence. "What other reason might there be? Take the salve now and apply it, for we others would have our turns as soon as may be."

"I think not," said Gengan, his decision joined grimly by the others. "We know not what you are about, Nobain, and we refuse to be gulled."

"I am merely about an attempt at having this salve applied," said Nobain. "As it must be applied, who is to do it if you will not?"

"We care not!" spat Ramsarn, as the males nodded with him. "Should you find the doing so necessary, you may do it!"

"An excellent suggestion!" said Nobain at once, great laughter having taken him. "As I have your freely given permission, I shall do that very thing. See to their positioning, men. "

The males in gray who held the captives gave voice to laughter of their own, the while they prepared the captives they held as they were commanded. Gengan and Ramsarn and the others, filled so greatly with fury that their skin paled, allowed themselves to be put to one side with no further words, knowing they had indeed been gulled. It had been in the mind of Nobain that they would not be permitted to touch their own captives, yet had he accomplished the doing without resort to sword threat. Their own suspicions had brought the males down, yet they saw the doing as other than their own. Now the male Nobain, had other things of greater interest to occupy his attention.

Each of the captives had been put to her knees, wrists bound tightly behind, head bent to the ground by the fist tight in her hair. The male Nobain took himself first to the town female, clearly amused as he indicated that her long covering was to be raised. Whimpering quickly became protests of shock, yet was the town female unable to keep herself from being bared. The large hand of the male who held her stroked her bottom, causing her to voice agitated cries, and then did her cries sharpen to fear. The male Nobain had also put a hand to her, first having put the fingers of that hand within the sack he held. With screams and weeping did she attempt to dislodge him from her body, over and again twisting herself about; he, with deep laughter, thrust yet farther into her, the hand of the other male aiding him to retain his place. Slowly did he stroke about in her and as slowly withdrew, and then did he turn from her and took about himself.

With purposeful steps did he approach the Summa, gazing from one bared bottom to the other, deeply

amused that no sound came from the females. Struggle there was aplenty yet no sound, even as they were touched, first the darkhaired warrior, then the light. Their bodies each twisted about with the effort to rid themselves of him, yet were they no more successful than the town female. Each was filled well with the contents of the leather sack, and then were the Sigurri females approached.

The clearing still rang with the screams of the two Sigurri females as the male Nobain at last reached Ilvin. The heat in his gaze was clear even in the fading light of the fey, and with much relish did he stroke his hand all about her, causing her to move in fury where she had been knelt. Her movement and fury caused greater amusement in the male, and much was she touched before his hand again dipped into the leather sack.

"You are truly to be congratulated, Ramsarn," said Nobain, as he delved deep within a furiously thrashing Ilvin. "This one has great spirit, so great that a man is challenged to tame her. Think you shall find it possible to master her?"

Bared teeth flashed briefly in the face of the male Ramsarn, the single forward step he had taken halted by the hand of Gengan upon his shoulder. Still were the males unwilling to face those who were gray-clad, even in the face of the laughter to be heard from Nobain.

"One such as she must be taught a proper fear of men," said Nobain withdrawing from Ilvin and handing the leather sack to another. "Such teaching brings great amusement to one who does not himself fear the wench. For what reason have you not yet taught this wench to fear you, Ramsarn?"

"The wench has been mine less than one full fey," said the male Ramsarn, with a growl. "Should I wish her fear I shall have it, as easily as any other man!"

"The Serene Oneness teaches that we are to seek respect from our wench, not fear," said the male Gengan cautiously, perhaps more to Ramsarn than Nobain. "Are we to liken ourselves to the followers of the beast god, those who will have naught save fearful service from their wench? Are we not far better than they, in that we follow the teachings of one greater than their god?"

"Are we not men as they are, with hungers like theirs which must be fed?" returned Nobain, sharply. "As we follow the true god, who may say that our desires are not his? Does he not know our desires, does he not know our beliefs and needs? Were these desires, beliefs and needs contrary to his wishes, would we have been accepted to raise sword in his name? It is you who follow a false path, man, and we who truly know our god, as he knows us! No true man will have respect from his wench, when he may, instead, have her fear! Should he be able to have her fear."

Again did the gaze of Nobain fall upon the male Ramsarn, a male who seemed filled with less reason even than other males. With the eyes of the gray-clad male upon him his chin rose high, and sharply clear was the set of his jaw.

"I am able to have the fear of any wench," said Ramsarn, "even a wench such as that. I shall take her now, and teach her deep fear."

"She is not yet able to appreciate the lesson," said Nobain, a victorious glance at Gengan. At Ramsarn's words Gengan had left his former male's side, to stand stiffly silent with the others of his males, all stepping back from the male Ramsarn, who had chosen the stand of the gray-clad ones. "When once the salve has thrown her into a frenzy of need," said Nobain, "her fear will be deep and complete upon realizing that it is you she must look to for relief. Should you be uncertain, the place you must enter her is here."

Amid the loud, howling laughter of the gray-clad males, Nobain again put a hand to Ilvin, again causing

her to throw herself about. Ramsarn, deeply shamed before his men, threw himself forward with hand to hilt, clearly intent upon battle. Deeply flushed was the face of Ramsarn as his sword began to clear his scabbard, foolish, mindless rage blinding his eyes to the doings of Nobain. The second male had drawn at the first rushing steps of the other, and swiftly, before Ramsarn might raise his blade, leaped forward and cut the head from the first male. Deep red blood fountained into the deep red of the end of fey's light, and Ramsarn's body fell to Mida's sweet ground, soon to be one with it.

"The fool should have heeded the wisdom of your words, Gengan, and kept his blade sheathed," said Nobain, sparing no whit of attention for the other, deeply shocked male. "His unprovoked attack merely ended his life-and left this lovely wench unspoken for. I shall have to see to her myself."

The gray-clad males chuckled as Nobain wiped the smears from his sword upon the unmoving thigh of he who had been Ramsarn, then sheathed the weapon. Even I, who knew full well the lack of honor to be found among males, could scarcely credit the doings of the leader. Full clear had it been that the male Ramsarn could not have faced Nobain and been victorious; the youngest of my warriors would easily have fared better. No more than slaughter had the action been, Nobain cravenly refusing to face the other male in honest battle even for the brief moment Ramsarn would have stood against him. I gazed upon this male called warrior with hand closed tight about sword hilt, nearly ill with the need to ask his life of Mida, yet was there Ilvin and the Summa to consider. Little pleasure would have come to me, were I given Nobain's life at the cost of Ilvin's.

In the moments I frothed in helpless rage, the craven Nobain had returned to Ilvin. Well was one able to see that it was she he had coveted, and for that reason had lured and slain the other male. Rarely did warriors bare blades over a male among the Midanna, for even a male who chose to follow a given warrior was shared among clan sisters when desire arose. Often had Midanna been called barbaric, yet never had I seen so barbaric a thing as two males at sword's point over a single female. The doing was entirely beyond reason, a thing to curl the lip of any warrior who witnessed it.

At a gesture from Nobain, Ilvin was straightened upon her knees and turned about, so that she might see the remains of the male who had first claimed her. Nobain watched closely as my warrior looked about in great anger, something of a smile turning his lips, and then did he take a single step forward.

"As you can see, wench," said he, "you have now become mine. Through battle prowess have I won you, and therefore shall you give me whatever pleasure I demand."

"Battle prowess," said Ilvin with a snort of disdain. "Ever have I seen greater battle prowess even among our warriors-to-be. Should you wish to prove battle prowess, face me instead-if you dare."

"You think to escape me by falling to my blade?" asked Nobain, greatly amused. "No, wench, you shall not escape my use, the use you will soon be in dire need of. When that need comes upon you, you will know me for your master; you will beg then, and pray I grant your pleading, yet perhaps I shall not. I may perhaps allow you to bear your need without relief, and only when it has passed put you to my use. You will then, perhaps, speak more respectfully to your master."

Again did Ilvin make a sound of contempt, yet had Nobain already turned from her to look upon those in colored body cloths. The males stood all in a clump, silent and unmoving as though they, too, had taken the edge of a blade. The touch of Nobain's gaze seemed to draw their attention yet did they make no effort to speak before him. This he noted with a smile of satisfaction, then gestured to the others of the captive females.

"First use of those wenches is yours, I believe," said he, full pleased with the silent, fear-filled attention he had from those he so clearly looked down upon. "You will need to spend very few reckid upon them

before you are able to take them to your furs, for the salve touches quickly. When once you have finished with them, you will then be responsible for the preparing of the nilno, which my men and I mean to take part of at the end of our-entertainment. Be very sure our provender is not allowed to burn."

Coarse laughter sounded about the clearing, low yet speaking well of the consternation felt by the hand of males in colored body cloths. Had they wished it, they might have drawn the blades hung at their sides, yet no other choice had they been given save, perhaps, to die. Warriors, in their place, would have chosen the glory of death in battle much the sooner, yet these males had not the stuff of warriors within them. I knew not what use those males might be of in any manner save as the very slaves they emulated, yet was not surprised to learn that they would continue to be allowed the use of their captives. Males have a fondness for slaves, most especially ones which need not be faced before they might be chained.

The cheeks of the males in colored body cloths flushed as they slowly began making their way toward the captive females. They had been commanded to heat their respective females before the eyes of the gray-clad males, yet did they seem hesitant and unsure, as though they anticipated failure. Those who halted before the Summa seemed even further taken aback, for the two warriors looked upon them with deep contempt. He called Gengan had gone to the town female, who remained covered in cloth from neck to ankles, whimpering, yet had she begun to move about where she knelt, as though in growing discomfort beneath the cloth.

"No," she whispered, looking upward yet shrinking back where she knelt. "Gengan, you are a man of sensitivity and patience and understanding; you cannot mean to degrade me as those monsters ask! You must find a place of privacy for us as you have previously done, and there I will give you all you desire. You will not need to ask, not limit your appetites, nor even consider my wishes in the matter. I will be yours entirely!"

"So, you have previously begged her favors, eh, Gengan?" said Nobain, again bringing laughter to his males and the flush of shame to the victim of his words. "Have you never been told that a man requires naught of consent from a wench? Have you never been shown how easily the heat may be raised in the center of one such as she? Perhaps I speak idly, for perhaps you have not yet even had the bit. Have you tasted her?"

"She is now my woman, and I have done with her what a man ever does with his woman," replied Gengan, his speech stiff with insult. "That I have also acted as the Serene Oneness demands is no shame, rather is it an example you and your-warriors would do well to emulate. The pleasure brought a man thereby cannot be equalled."

"I do not doubt that such pleasure cannot be equalled," returned Nobain, still amused. "What man, used to far greater pleasure, would seek to lessen his enjoyment? There are those, I am told, who find unmatched bliss in constant denial, however. Is it possible, Gengan, that you are one such as that?"

"Blessed is he who seeks consent from his woman!" shouted the male Gengan, fists clenched and color high at the raucous laughter which surrounded him. "Should a woman be taken against her wishes, the Serene Oneness will frown upon the man's efforts and give him no response from her! You who have never had true response cannot know the unmatched quality of it!"

"I believe the quality you speak of consists entirely of whining, complaints and denial," said Nobain with a snort of derision, folding his arms as he looked upon the other male. "Already have you had the woman deny you, for you were to have warmed her, not merely approached her. The Serene Oneness sneers upon a male who fears to intrude upon the will of a use wench, and clearly do you show yourself to be one who has earned his disapproval. See now the doings of one who has been smiled upon."

A nod from Nobain brought a gray-clad male forth, one who was large and light-haired, and who smiled in anticipation. A wide hand in the chest of Gengan brusquely pushed the other male aside, and then was the gray-clad one astand before the town female. The female whimpered in fear and shook her head as she looked upward at this larger male, then did she attempt to cringe back when he crouched before her.

"I beg you not to touch me before all these men!" she blurted at once, her voice uneven and filled with great trembling. "You must take one of those others, instead, for they are shameless and far less than I. They are disgusting as well, and will surely squirm in great pleasure at your touch, which I shall not. You may do no more than force yourself upon me, which I shall accept if it is done in privacy. Surely you would prefer the use of a woman of quality in private, to her useless humiliation in public? It is clear there are few women of quality in this area; do you not covet the freely given use of one?"

The female looked anxiously upon the male, clearly believing she might barter her use, clearly caring naught for her sister captives, yet were her foolish hopes dashed when the male chuckled.

"There are no more than two qualities to be found in wenches," said he, reaching toward the cloth covering the legs of the female. "There are those wenches a man wishes to use, and those he does not. All else matters not in the least, no more than the wishes of the wench herself. So you have never squirmed in pleasure, eh, wench?"

"No, do not bare me so!" choked the female, attempting to back upon her knees, yet were her words as useless as her attempted movement. All within the clearing, the female captives as well as the males, watched with interest as the large, light-haired male raised the female's covering well above the center of her thighs, then put his hands to the fastenings of the upper part of her garment. Amid many "Ohhh's!" of mortification were her breasts revealed, large and firm and scarcely a shame to be hidden beneath cloth. The oddness of town males was easily matched by their females; despite the fact that her sister captives were equally as bare-breasted, the female writhed and sobbed in humiliation with the thrusting back of the cloth covering her. The male Gengan continued to stand with fists clenched, yet had his gaze been drawn to those breasts. When the hands of the light-haired male touched them, drawing a ragged gasp from the female as her flesh hardened, the male in colored body cloth wet his lips with his tongue and rubbed hard at his body with one hand, clearly unaware of the grimace which covered his face.

Slow moments passed as the town female suffered her breasts to be touched, her humiliation keen, yet not so keen that she was able to remain perfectly unmoving. When, at last, she was forced to shift where she knelt, her earlier discomfort increasing, the male who crouched before her took his hands from her breasts and grasped her thighs.

"You are a wench I care to use," said he, forcing her thighs wider before putting a hand to her. "First I will see you squirm, and then I will hear you beg."

Again coarse laughter sounded as the female gasped with widening eyes, her body greeting the intrusion of the male in a manner she had not expected. Much did it seem that she had intended to remain unmoving in her shaming, yet did she immediately begin twisting about in response to the touch upon her.

"No-do not-I cannot bear it!" she gasped, wide-eyed and bent nearly double above the hand between her thighs, her bound arms attempting to battle the leather which held her. "The fire-it burns so high-it grows from naught and consumes me-No! You may not do this! No!"

"I may not touch you so?" asked the male before her, greatly amused. "I may not tickle about your softness and rub awake the warmth? Very well, then, I shall cease."

With a final touch did the male then withdraw his hand from her, yet was the gesture scarcely the comfort

expected by the female. Now her need had grown high, and quickly did it grow even greater. The female continued to move as though touched deeply by a male, in shock descended and disbelief.

"It will not cease!" she choked, writhing where she knelt, unaware of the laughter about her. "I cannot bear it as it is, and still it rises! I must be eased, I shall die if I am not eased! Please, I must be eased!"

"You squirm well for one who will not squirm," observed the male before her, again touching her breast. "You have squirmed, and now you must beg. Beg to be used, wench, beg to be used here, upon this very spot."

"I beg to be used!" screamed the female, seared to her soul by the flames rising within her, throwing her body about in mindless madness. "I beg to be used here, now, at once, I beg it! Please, I shall die if I am not used!"

The male's laughter came silent amid the screams of the female as he straightened from his crouch and reached to his body cloth, yet did a form suddenly appear from the lengthening shadows to thrust him aside as he had earlier thrust aside another. That other was Gengan, body cloth already opened, and swiftly did he fell upon the town female, throw her to her back, and thrust deep within her. The screams of the female beat against the ears of all within hearing, a nerve-tearing sound in the desperation of it, yet was he who had been thrust aside unaffected by it. The male's lips drew back in a snarl of rage, his fist clenched tight as his body moved toward the wildly pummeling Gengan; however he first glanced toward his leader. Nobain showed deep satisfaction with the doings of Gengan, and disapproval for the anger of his male. Gengan was not to be halted in his doing, and though the male in gray grew angrier still, he made no further movement toward the other.

Much had I hoped that I might somehow find the males so deeply taken with their pleasure that they, too, might be taken, yet was the hope an idle one. All of the captives, the sneering Summa, proud Ilvin, the two Sigurri females, all were soon writhing to the urgings of the salve placed within them, the Sigurri screaming wildly, the Midanna softly moaning. Though Nobain had spoken of leaving Ilvin untouched in her need, he quickly found himself unable to deny the need of his own body amidst the use of the other captives. Ilvin writhed slowly at his feet, eyes closed and body aflame, aware of naught save the agony she fought uselessly against, and the male was able to bear the sight of her no longer. Swiftly did he go to his knees above her, inflamed himself even more greatly with the touch of his hands to her body, and then was he preparing himself to enter her. I looked about, saw that those males not in possession of a captive remained alert to that which occurred about them, and abandoned the hope that I might somehow free my Midanna. Reluctantly yet with great relief, I left my place among the bushes and shadows and returned to where I had left my kan tethered.

A low whicker greeted my arrival, and I went to stroke my kan, at the same time attempting to still the wildly raging thoughts filling my head. My hand ached for the hilt of my sword, the need for spilling blood was a taste in my mouth which thickened my tongue, and calm was impossible. To be forced to leave my warriors as captives to males! To be unable to free them though I, myself, rode free and armed!

I turned from my kan and began stalking about, as helpless to halt the motion as to cease heaping abuse upon my own head. Upon learning that Midanna warriors were held captive to males, I had made the decision that I would see them freed; much good had the decision done them, as much as thought I, too, were bound beside them. Had I had even three or four warriors to stand with me, I would have attacked; to stand alone against such numbers would have meant certain death. Patience was necessary; I must await what came. Perhaps, should Mida desire strongly enough that I continue on with the task she had given me, the assistance of her aid might well be forthcoming. With Mida's aid my sword alone would suffice, and welcome indeed would be the sight of enemy blood upon its edges.

Although frustrated, I found a hunter's calm, enough so that I might return to my kan for a cut of the small matrig I had slain and skinned during the fey's ride. The greatest part of the heat had fled with Mida's light, leaving behind a pleasant cool breeze. I sat before the tree which stood nearest my kan, took a tasty mouthful of raw matrig, then leaned back to chew. Many of the words of the males had confused me ever since I had first begun traveling among males.

Both the male Nobain and the male Gengan had spoken of their god and yet, had they not called that god by the same name, one might easily have believed they discussed two entities rather than one. Each saw his god as being like unto himself, the one seeing diffidence and halting uncertainty, the other seeing aggression and impatient insinuations. How it was possible for each to see so different a thing I knew not, nor even the why of their views differing so greatly from those of Ceralt and his brothers. Those males, too, paid homage to that which was called the Serene Oneness, yet were Ceralt and his brothers unlike those who had once been Sigurri. Was he as Mida and Sigurr, this Serene Oneness, or in some manner entirely unlike them? Again and again was my path entwined with that of those who followed this Serene Oneness, males who brought pain to warriors both from without and within. The lash and slave chains in Bellinard, capture and the lash in Ranistard, shaming and capture with Ceralt among his Belsayah-all more easily withstood than those feelings drawn forth by Ceralt and the memory of his arms. Wise indeed had Mida been to deny all males to her Midanna save those who were taken for use. Best would be to avoid them entirely, yet how was that possible when three Midanna now lay in the clutches of yet another set of them?

No more than a bite was left to the cut of matrig I held, therefore did I swallow down the urge to rid myself of it and swallow down the matrig as well. Little aid would I be to Ilvin and the Summa were I to become light-headed from lack of provender, and though I had been unable to keep them from the agony of unnatural use, there were many feyd of travel yet before the males. I was sure an opportunity would come to free the three Midanna. I rose to my feet and went to drink a bit of the water I carried, thinking only of the opportunity which would come, naught of that which was then being done to three bound warriors.

CH 2. The new task-and the dishonor of cowards

The new fey was bright and golden, shining through the green of the forest, filled with the joy of continuing life for all save those who rode as captives to males-and she who followed. Though I had been loath to witness the continuing shaming of my warriors, I visited the camp of the males again, seeking an opportunity to free my sisters, only to find that the guard males remained alert and the captives lay in a motionless stupor, no more than occasional moans to be heard from those who had been used so harshly. Easily might I have slit the throats of those who stood guard, sending them one by one to Mida's chains; had Ilvin and the Summa been capable of movement of their own, quickly would I have done so. With my Midanna as they were, however, the slaying of the males would have done no more than alert the others, so I had to return clean-bladed to my own camp, where the sharp movements of my fury would only be heard by the children of the wild.

The new light had brought awakening to the camp, and a great look of pleasure to the males. With much laughter did they speak of their prowess to the darkness, few caring that the town female and Sigurri females wept raggedly, the three Midanna silent yet with blood-fury in their eyes. Gengan sat apart from his males, looking defeated, speaking to none and none speaking to him. The other males in colored body cloth had done much as Gengan had, yet did they cluster one near the other, speaking in low tones, attempting to laugh as freely and fully as they in gray body cloths. Gengan alone seemed taken in some manner; though I knew not what ailed the male, Nobain looked upon him with knowing eyes, and smiled his smile of triumph.

When all in the camp had been fed and the balance of the nilno packed away with the other possessions of the set, the males moved on. Again were the captives ridden before certain of the males, yet were these males of Nobain's set rather than those of Gengan. The males in colored body cloths disliked the loss of their captives, yet none would speak of the matter to his own self, and Gengan spoke not at all. The male rode alone in the midst of those who were gray-clad, seemingly heedless of all that occurred about him. Ilvin rode with no other than Nobain, the constant, grating presence of his hands upon her bringing an unheard growl to her movements.

The light was not yet at its highest when Nobain chose three of his males to ride from the set. It was not possible to hear what words were spoken to them, yet was I able to see their nods of agreement, and the manner in which each took a different direction. The hunters of the fey previous had not chosen separate paths till after they had left the set, but that seemed unimportant. The balance of the nilno would feed the set at light's highest, yet would the heat turn any unfed-upon rancid and inedible after that. The set required a fresh kill for the darkness, one I meant to see they did without. With grim pleasure I, too, turned from the path of the set, and sought the trail of those who had ridden elsewhere.

Much did the heat of the fey touch me with the slickness of sweat as I rode through the forest, following the track of the first of the three. The male rode with little care, looking only for provender, heedless of predators. Much sign was there all about that lenga prowled those woods, causing me to keep bow in hand and shafts within easy reach, yet the male either saw not or cared not. Large was the lenga, and beautiful even in the eyes of those it hunted, its long, silky fur highly prized by males of town and cities; nevertheless was it swift and terrible in attack, its claws and teeth difficult to avoid, often taking down those who hunted it even as it died. The male who rode some distance before me had strung his bow, yet was it across his back rather than in his hand, easily reached should prey be sighted, not so easily reached should he become prey. Many males were fools in the forest, I knew, and these gray-clad males appeared to be greater fools than most.

Movement ahead of the male caught his attention; he reached for his bow, but his prey was quickly gone, leaving him with bow in hand and naught to do with it save grasp its well-bound grip. Angrily, then, did the male put heels to his kan, sending it forward again in search of that which would stand and hold its place till a shaft reached it; instead did my shaft reach his back, knocking him from his leather seat as the life flew from him with a grunt.

Startled, his kan leapt away into the forest as he who had been of Nobain's set lay face down and unmoving, the red seeping out to cover him, the shaft I wished the return of standing unbroken from his flesh. That the deed I performed was distasteful was of no moment; sooner would I have faced each of the males with swords, yet I had not the time to offer them mock warrior courtesy. They, being males and naught of the true warrior sort, would have soiled the gesture, likely angering Mida yet further. I slid from the back of my kan and tied it to a tree. Best would be to reclaim my shaft quickly, before the scent of spilled blood drew the lenga to the place, then continue on to the next target for my bow.

I crouched beside the slain male and applied my dagger to the flesh about my shaft, digging deep to free the metal head, attempting to work as quickly as I might. A lenga screamed not far off, voicing its hunger and boasting of its presence upon the hunt, and I shook my head with impatience.

"Neatly done," said a voice from very near, causing me to look up quickly up. A male stood with drawn sword less than two paces from me, one of the remaining two who had been sent from the set by Nobain. Not so tall as others was this male, yet were his shoulders and chest broad, his arms firmly muscled, his body prepared for attack. Light of hair and eye was he as well, the light eyes of him happily taking me in.

"More than neatly done," said he, gleefully, his point not far from me where I crouched. "Follow after,

plant a shaft, retrieve the shaft, then continue on to the next. The beasts of the forest will see to the body, and should the remains be found afterward, there will be no indication of attack. Nobain thought the others deserters, yet did he clearly do them an injustice. They did not desert, they died, and had I not been set to watch the two who hunted for us this fey, again would we have been misled."

The male chuckled at his own words as though he discussed the fate of those who were his enemies rather than brothers. His gaze continued to move all about me, seemingly pleased and amused at that he saw.

"It was clearly the will of the Serene Oneness that certain of us lose our lives," said the male, "and yet are we to be compensated for that loss. Though the loss was small, no more than men clumsy enough to fall to a female, the compensation will be truly sweet. It amuses me to see a wench draped in a weapon of men, nevertheless shall you remove that swordbelt and step away from it, leaving the dagger as well. I will taste you quickly, and then shall I take you to Nobain, who will surely find interest in an addition to our collection. Take yourself from that carcass, wench, and do as I have bidden you."

Truly eager was the male for that which he intended, so eager that he stepped the nearer, bringing his point closer to where I crouched. My dagger moved swiftly in an arc against his blade. I had intended to drop my dagger and draw my sword, yet the male, far more alert than I had anticipated, jumped forward, bringing his sword very near. Never before had I faced a sword with a dagger, and although I again beat aside his sword, the male chuckled. He, as well as I, knew I could not long keep myself untouched with only a dagger, but I was not allowed to arm myself further.

Closely did the male press me as I moved about among the trees and bushes, his point seeking to disarm rather than slay, yet unavoidable for all of that. My dagger moved without stop, keeping his sharpened metal from my flesh, the frustration growing as sharp within me that I was able to do no more than defend. The heat of the fey brought the moisture forth from my body, rolling it into my eyes to burn there, but it affected the male as well. Remorselessness showed from his eyes as he continued to press me, seeking to strike the dagger from my hand or score my body seriously enough to disarm me, in no manner willing to be denied my use, most especially not by allowing me escape. It was his intention to take me as the others had been taken, my intention to keep from being done so. Too often had I been made slave to them; not again would I be forced to such use, not while breath remained in my body and strength in my arm.

A hand of reekid passed with the sword of the male pursuing me, the blade of my dagger flashing goldenly in the occasional shafts of light which found their way through the leaves above. I had discovered the difficulty and strain of constant backing, yet had it proven impossible to merely take a stand and hold it against attack. The blade of the male's sword struck hard against my dagger, causing both weapons to sing, his effort an attempt to break my blade and thereby disarm me. The shock of the contact flared through my arm, causing me to once again curse the strength of males, yet no more than that occurred. Much did I believe that another weapon would indeed have snapped at the calculatingly delivered blow, a weapon made by mortal hands and skill; the blade I wielded was goddess-made, and clearly proof against such destruction. The spirit within me soared at the thought, so high that I briefly attempted attack upon the male, yet was the attempt without possibility of success. My considerably shorter blade was laughingly struck aside, a sharpened metal blur sprang from my wrist, and again defense was my sole recourse.

It came to me of a sudden that I no longer moved in Mida's cause, in truth that my actions were contrary to the most basic beliefs held by Midanna. For one who had been given a task by Mida to turn aside from it to aid others, even sisters, was to spurn the will of the goddess. Had I thought Mida angered with me previously, how might she now be considered?

"Might that be consternation to be seen in your eyes, wench?" said the male, laughter in his voice as his blade snicked close to my middle. "How, you have till now avoided each tree and bush behind you I know not, yet do I know that my point is soon to be avoided no more. When that time has come, you will find a good deal more than consternation."

I growled in reply but the male was only amused. Jalav would be his when he triumphed, his to use as he wished, his to force shame and pain upon in the manner of all of his ilk. Again I struck his point from me, and then another growl sounded, from a throat other than my own. The male heard naught, nor did the scent reach him, the scent which spoke of the nearing presence of a lenga. Nearly did I whirl from the male to search the greenery with weapon held before me, yet the dagger would have done naught against the lenga, even if I could chance turning my back on the male which I could not. Much did it seem that Mida now stood with my enemies, as punishment for my disobedience, yet are Midanna taught that the truth of a matter, such as Mida's will, may not be known till the final blow is struck. Had Mida's face turned from me, I would surely find the final darkness; had it not, the insanity of the ploy which had suddenly come to me would take the male instead.

Still fending the male off, I set my continuing retreat in the direction from which I had heard the growl, the direction in which the scent of lenga seemed strongest, then did I increase my efforts in the battle and attempt to take a stand. An abrupt laugh of delight came from the male, he clearly believing that my strength waned, and in desperation I had launched a final effort. With the foolishness I had hoped for, the male allowed the stand, undoubtedly thinking to tire me the sooner and therefore have me the sooner, his light eyes continuing to move all about me, his swordarm striking with more and more strength. In some manner was I able to hold to the dagger and keep his point from my flesh, yet with nearly all of my attention elsewhere, I know not how. Amid the growing scent of lenga my ears heard the footfalls moving quickly nearer, the whisper of brush, the panting eagerness, almost even the bunching of silen-covered muscles. The sound of our scuffling, clanging half-battle had undoubtedly drawn the hunter, and hunger quickly sent it into the air with unbelievable speed, the entire mass of its weight behind the attack. Much had I believed that I would throw myself from its flying lunge with conscious effort, for I listened closely for the sound of its leaving the ground; somehow I found myself rolling and rolling through all manner of grass and branchlings and stones and bushes. The scream of the male rang in my ears as I rolled, chilling my blood the terror of it, until abruptly the cry ceased. I fetched up against a large bush, drew my sword with all the speed I possessed, then stood bent over, motionless, as I locked eyes with the lenga that had ended the battle I had been fated to lose.

The lenga snarled and tore a bloody mouthful from the thigh of the male as it gazed arrogantly toward me, but the male was well beyond agony. He lay sprawled upon his back, his throat torn out, looking shocked even through the blood which covered his face and hair. The sword which he had wielded with such glee lay not far from his outstretched arm, its blade gleaming silver in the warm light, totally untouched by the blood of his attacker. The lenga had taken its prey without sustaining injury of its own, its snarl half purr as it tore again into the carcass it rested upon, its gaze clearly challenging me to come closer in attack. Faintly I smiled, asking Mida in my heart to make the lenga know the male was my gift without challenge, then did I slip behind the bush I stood near and quickly take myself from the vicinity, before the lenga had quieted its immediate hunger and turned interested eyes toward other available prey. In the past I had hunted lenga and had slain them, yet not without spear or bow before they had closed with me. To allow a lenga to close with you is an action fit only for males, one which is indulged in no more than once. After that is the lenga left, the hunter no more than bones beneath Mida's light.

My kan was nearly beside himself with the fear of hunting lenga, and was unable to pull loose from the tree I had tied him to. I calmed him somewhat and then mounted and rode from there, feeling great relief and something of confusion. Though much of me was bruised from my roll across the ground, and my back was gouged where the point of the male had reached me as I threw myself from in front of him,

both the attack of the male and the attack of the lenga had been handily survived. Clearly did Mida's shield continue to stand firmly before me, and this despite the goddess' anger with me. Much had I doubted that this would be so, and even in the face of it could conceive of no explanation to account for it. Perhaps Mida was loath to release me as her chosen, therefore I rode with Mida's blessing, yet could not consider the blessing unending; best would be to free the captured Midanna as quickly as possible, before that blessing was no more.

With Mida's blessing, then, did I find and follow the track of the third male, one who had not sought prey which would stand and await the shaft of a mighty hunter. A large nilno had fallen to his bow, much in the same manner that he fell to mine. This time was I able to retrieve my shaft without difficulty, afterward taking a large enough cut of the nilno to allow me to feed my fill. The male had hunted so that I might feed, and this, together with the knowledge of Mida's smile, allowed my spirits to rise.

The balance of the fey was spent in finding the set of the males, they who awaited the return of their hunters. As the light of the fey faded toward darkness, the male Nobain called a halt to the march, his shouted words of fury silencing the forest's winged ones and echoing all about. The three who had been sent from the set had not returned, nor had another nilno blundered its way past them; the males had naught to feed upon save strings of dried meat, the words of shame so easily spoken that a sneer took me. How is it possible for one to ride through a forest so bountiful, end with naught upon which to feed, and then lay the blame at the feet of others? Even weaponless Jalav would have fed, as would any Midanna warrior worthy of the name; were there no vines to use in place of leather, no pits to be dug with pointed sticks and covered over with leaves and grass, no rocks to be thrown no branches to be fashioned into spears or quarterstaves? Well did the male rant and rage all about himself, calling down the curse of the Serene Oneness upon those who rode ahead without thought of those they left behind, and then was his fury turned upon the captives he held. No more than sixteen males remained who might seek their use, nevertheless Nobain demanded the use of the gimba salve upon the captives, saying that their screams and pleadings would take the thought of hunger from all of his males. My hand closed tight about the hold of my bow, snarling like a lenga. With the new light would I follow and slay those who were sent to hunt, and then would I return to the set, seeking stragglers who might be taken one by one. Less than two hands of hale gray-cloths continued to ride, plus those of Gengan's set; were I able to take the gray-cloths, those in colored body cloths would not long stand between me and my Midanna. This did I vow in silence to Mida, and did I turn away to seek a camping place of my own.

Again did the males remain alert during the darkness, therefore did I reluctantly take a few hind of sleep to chase away my weariness. With the new light were the captives roughly shaken awake and dragged stumbling to those they would ride with; only then was it discovered that he named Gengan was no longer to be found in the camp. That his kan was gone as well kept the males from looking about themselves, yet was it a near thing. Well prepared was I to fall back to keep from being discovered, yet that way I couldn't note what hunters were sent forth. Nearly did I call down the curse of Mida upon the head of the male Gengan, he who had used the town female, yet was the effort proven unnecessary. The gray-clad males shrugged in an uncaring manner over his departure, the males in colored body cloths seemed disturbed and uneasy, and all took to their kand and resumed their journey.

Perhaps two hind passed before it became clear that no males would that fey ride out to hunt. I knew not the reason for such a lack; Nobain failed to speak of the matter aloud, and none of the other males questioned him upon it. With Mida's light at its highest all partook of the dried string meat which the males carried, yet none paused to hunt. The town female and two Sigurri females were given small bits of the meat when they begged it, yet were the Midanna given naught save gulps from a water skin, these being forced upon them. Ilvin and the Summa showed no more than hatred and scorn for the males, a far cry from the groveling the males desired from them, therefore were those three captives sneeringly left with the hunger upon them. It had not come to the males that Midanna do not feed upon the leavings of

enemies; had they known the truth, they would undoubtedly have given the warriors pain.

Brief indeed was the halt for provender, yet did it seem to bring joy to those in colored body cloths. Low laughter and eager smiles were theirs upon the resumption of the journey, as though a great burden had been lifted from them. I, myself, felt no lightening of a burden, for the gray-clad males rode close to one another in their set, two by two as they had not done previously, all alert, all well bunched. My shafts fairly hummed in their quiver, eager to fly, yet no sensible target presented itself. Mida! The fury and frustration which gripped me then was unspeakable, well nigh to the point of sending me forward with sword hilt in fist, to lay all about at what targets I might reach. The need for the glory of battle gripped me fiercely; had I not had a Mida-given task before me, had my Midanna not been awaiting my return, were there not captives to be freed- So many things bound me that I frothed with near madness in the chains of them. To ride free and armed is at times no more than an enslavement. A warrior without freedom is a pitiful thing, one destined for no more than the final darkness.

The hind of the fey moved by beneath the steadily plodding hooves of the males' kand, ponderous and slow, bringing me a growing desire for the arrival of darkness. This darkness was I determined to do more than simply await the new light, this darkness would I see my Midanna freed! When all of the males had taken their pleasure and slept, then would I slay the guard males and cut the leather from Ilvin and the Summa, trusting to Mida that I could rouse them. I knew they would follow me to freedom even were they taken by pain and exhaustion, for they were Midanna. Were I to wait any longer they would be too weak from hunger so I had to ignore the likelihood of a hunter-light sleeper among the males. Perhaps, with Mida's aid, I could silence any who awoke before he might give the alarm.

Less than two hind of light remained to the fey when the forest began somewhat to thin. Rubbled hills appeared to the west of the males' line of travel, a reddish-black blot upon the warm greens and browns all about, a sight clearly expected by the males. Those in colored body cloths were greatly gladdened by the sight; they left their places in the set and rode together to Nobain, who, upon noticing them, halted the set with one hand upraised.

"This, I believe, is our point of parting, Nobain," said one of the males in colored body cloth, his words difficult to make out at the distance I was forced to keep. "As you and yours mean to turn off at the caves, my brothers and I must continue on to our city alone. We await only the return of our wenches. "

"Ah, yes, the return of your wenches," said Nobain, smiling broadly at those who sat their kand before him. "Four wenches, now, that would be. Ramsarn no longer requires a wench, and Gengan has taken himself off to nobler company. Am I correct?"

"Four!" echoed the male in sudden upset, exchanging glances with those three who rode with him. I, too, was dismayed, for it seemed that all of my expectations had been dashed. The males would not camp that darkness as I had anticipated, and Ilvin and the Summa would be parted! It would not be difficult to follow and free the Summa, yet would the Summa ride with me to free Ilvin? And even should they do so, what would await us at the caves of the gray-clad males? More than likely further males of Nobain's ilk, all eager for the use of Ilvin and the town female, all prepared to guard them well. My fist closed tightly about the reins I held, the silent voice of my mind roundly cursing all males and their doings.

"Four is correct," said another of the males astand before Nobain. "The others would have been warmly welcomed in our city and quickly taken as wives by two of those who have no women of their own, yet are they properly yours to dispose of. Should you choose to sell them in the city when you are done with them, their price will be yours. We have no wish to detain you longer; therefore-our wenches?"

The pleading note to be heard within the voice of the male set Nobain to chuckling as he gestured forward those four who held the spoken-of captives. The gray-clad males urged their kand to stand

beside and among the now smiling males of colored body cloths, riding close so that the two Sigurri and two Summa might be given over with the least amount of difficulty and awkwardness. Eagerly did the four males reach their arms out toward the captives they had been promised-only to meet the ending of their lives. Those in gray who held captives also held daggers beyond the sight of the four, and used them with dispatch, the sharpened edges in sides and backs bringing eternal silence to the four males. The Sigurri females screamed in terror, as did the town female, yet the males in gray were well pleased with their deed.

"How distressing," said Nobain with a laugh, his eyes upon the last of the four to fall to the ground beside his kan. "Our generous offer has been refused, for these men no longer desire females. It seems we shall be forced to retain possession of all six of the wenches."

Once having rid themselves of the unwanted, the gray-clad males then turned their set toward the caves which awaited them, leading off the kand of those who no longer had use for mounts. The fallen remained for the children of the wild. Again did I follow at a distance, soon finding it necessary to widen that distance. The trees had thinned enough so that even the males I followed would have seen me had I remained nearer, a thing I could not now allow.

It was now clear that Ilvin and the Summa were not to be simply used by their captors. When the males had taken all the pleasure they wished, the lives of their captives would be taken as well, leaving no opportunity for escape. Were I to find myself unable to free them their lives would be ended in great dishonor, all possibility of death in battle denied them, their entrance to Mida's Realm forever barred through the shame given them. Such agony could not be allowed if it were possible to avert, and to this end had I pledged myself.

Without undue haste did the males continue on toward the caves, unconcerned by the deserted-seeming caves which were their goal. For nearly a hin did I follow, increasing the distance between us, and then did I rein in my kan and resolutely dismount. Well did I know that I must be nearer the set; and I had to dismount and continue on afoot, fleetly and silently from tree to tree beyond the sight of the males, closing with them as they reached their destination. I tied my kan to a tree, well within reach of what grass there was, hesitated, then left bow and shafts behind me. I knew I would regret having left the weapon, yet did I also anticipate the need to move invisibly within the caves ahead; were it necessary to conceal myself the bow would be a hindrance.

The pace I took to reach the males was much of a trot, sending me forward swiftly yet silently, a pace used much by warriors on the hunt for quarry which must be run down. The light of the fey had gone to red before me, and I closed my eyes to slits against the last of its efforts. Much more easily would the males have seen me than I them, therefore did I proceed with caution, most especially once I had nearly reached them. Then did I circle right and edge ahead, allowing them to come to me, a thing easily possible at the slow pace they kept to. I stood hidden among the growing shadows of a wide tree, awaiting their approach to the caves which were no more than three gando-strides ahead, then quickly drew back even farther. A male appeared about the leg of stone which stretched before the caves, his eyes upon the approaching set, and lazily did he walk out a bit to meet them.

"Ho, Nobain, we thought you had forgotten us," he called to the set, grinning. Large and gray-clad was the male, and light of hair, his sword and dagger easily upon his hips. "The others returned a considerable time before you."

"We were pursued by those sons of Sigurr and could not chase them from our trail for feyd," returned the male Nobain, his voice its usual smoothness. "In the interim we encountered these wenches, took them from the Sigurri who had captured them, then thought to share them with our brothers. I trust our late arrival will yet be well looked upon."

"Only by those of us remaining," answered the other male with a laugh, his eyes moving slowly over the captives. "The bulk of our warriors have already departed upon the mission begged of us by the city. Will you leave immediately to follow them, or are we to have the pleasure of your company for this darkness?"

"I am of the opinion that our early success entitles us to at least a single darkness of taking our ease," said Nobain, halting before the new male. "Should you and the others remaining behind disagree, we will certainly depart immediately."

"No, no, by all means you must take your ease," said the guard male with a further laugh, reaching a hand up to stroke the thigh of Ilvin. "Should you depart immediately, your company would be sorely missed. Those within will be pleased to offer falar when once you have seen to your kand."

"Not nearly as pleased as we shall be to accept it," said Nobain with matching amusement. "Not to speak of adequate provender. You must be sure to join us when your watch is done."

"I shall be there within the hin," nodded the guard male, stepping higher upon the beginning of the protruding stone leg. Nobain raised a hand in temporary farewell then urged his kan forward, followed eagerly by those of his set. The males rounded the stone leg and rode toward the caves which disappeared in shadow behind the leg, they too disappearing with their forward movement. Within a hand of reckid were they gone from sight, the guard male looking about once before following. I stood a moment considering the matter, then I crouched down in the shadow which hid me, to await the darkness and the replacement of the guard male before I entered behind Nobain and his captives; I knew the time would not be long.

When the darkness was at last complete all about, I straightened and breathed deeply of the sweet forest air. Within the caves were males, and where males dwelt, there might one find even the air fouled. The silence of the shadows was mine as I passed from forest to rock, on toward the caves. Beneath my feet the ground was gritty and sharp; nearly speaking of my presence with whispers and hisses, yet was I Midanna rather than city dweller. He who stood within the cave mouth, faint light trickling out from behind him, was not the male who had greeted Nobain, nor was he one to search the darkness with his eyes when none might approach without being heard. He lifted to his lips the skin he held, drank deeply, then pulled the back of his hand across his lips, a low sound of satisfaction accompanying the faint odor of falar brought upon the breeze. Not much difficulty was there in slipping up behind the male with dagger in hand, and in a moment the throat of the male was no longer able to hold falar. Without a sound did the male begin the journey to Mida's chains, and quickly did I grasp the body and drag it some paces from the cave opening before allowing it to fall. Should one come seeking the male the while I and my warriors remained in the cave, he would not be easily found.

The entrance itself was wide enough for three to stand abreast, faint light to be seen within it, coming from a turning to the right beyond a short corridor of stone. Low voices and laughter accompanied the trickle of light, the while the odor of kand came from the left. The place the males had come to rest was clearly evident, yet did I halt just within the entrance I had won, remembering the cave entrance to Sigurr's altar. Though I berated myself, I could not halt the faint tremors which seized my flesh and brought accursed weakness to my limbs, all through memory of thrice-damned Sigurr. There in the darkness I stood, bloody dagger in my hand, trembling with the fear which had been well taught me in a cave in another place. My free hand stole upward, toward my life-sign, seeking the comforting, strengthening presence which had ever sustained me, only to encounter naught save unadorned flesh. Only then did I recall that my life sign had been taken, in punishment for my having dallied with a male. Had I been city slave-woman I would have fallen to my knees and wept, yet was I Midanna, and one who had learned much of males; I hated Sigurr and all things male, including the manner in which the

pleasure of male bodies lured a warrior. Much pain and deprivation had I suffered because of males, and though I continued to tremble at the thought of entering battle without my life sign, the thought of spilling male blood bested the trembling. Were I to be lost to the final darkness with all of my obligations unseen to, the shame would be forevermore unending-yet would I have first taken the lives of many males.

Once made, the decision took my steps to the right, toward the light and the sound of males. The turning in the rock continued on a short distance, then did it lead to the entrance of a large cavern. Spires of rock hung from the ceiling and grew from the floor of the cavern, graying the black of its outer reaches, and within the center of this cavern were the males, resting themselves upon lenga pelts and handing round large skins which undoubtedly contained falar. Their laughter was cruel and anticipatory, no doubt stemming from thoughts of that which they would do to their captives, who sat bound to spires toward the rear of the cavern. Faintly struggling were three of those captives, their attempts to free themselves no more than aborted movements in the gloom beyond the torches near the males. The thought came that swords would be welcome to the hands of those who struggled, and then did I curse my own stupidity and retrace my steps to the body of the slain guard. Though he had undoubtedly made little use of the sword he wore, still would the weapon be more than adequate in other, more highly skilled hands.

With the sword retrieved I returned to the cavern, then began the chore of making my way around to the captives without taking the notice of the males. There were open stretches which must be traversed, and I was burdened with an unsheathed weapon. Across these stretches did I go like the sednet, upon my belly with head low, slowly and with senses alert against detection, yet were the males too engrossed in provender and drink to espy me. Indeed I had reached a place no more than four paces from the first of the captives, when that occurred which took the attention of all.

"Nobain!" called a sudden harsh voice, drawing the silence and eyes of the male and his set, as well as those of the five hands of males who inhabited the caverns. From the dark before the entrance stepped he who was Gengan, he who had taken himself from the traveling set upon the trail. Wild-eyed yet with strangely forced calm did the red-haired male appear, and resolutely did he march himself to a place before the lounging Nobain. The second male looked up more in amusement than in upset, and sounded his usual, abrasive chuckle.

"So, Gengan, you have returned to yourself enough to rejoin us," said he, drinking briefly from the skin he held. "Had we known you suffered from phantoms of the mind, we would have aided you to a return to health."

"The sole phantoms which plague me are those of the slain!" returned Gengan, nearly with a sob, his hands closed to fists. "You led them on, causing them to believe that they would have the return of that which was theirs, using them as slaves about your camp to spare your own men the efforts, and then, when you no longer needed them, you slew them! You forced me to unbearable bestiality and lust so that I would in no manner be able to council and caution them, yet I understood this far too late to protect their lives. You are no other thing than evil, Nobain, yet will your evil not long continue!"

"Calmly, Gengan, calmly," soothed Nobain, his tone smooth and uncaring. "We slew none save followers of the accursed Sigurr, a thing you would know were you in full health. All else is the product of your illness, and you must allow us to aid you."

"You would aid me to death, as you aided my brothers!" sobbed Gengan, his chest heaving as though with great effort. "You will pay for your evil, Nobain, as surely as I am a Pathfinder for those who follow the true way! I have seen your death upon the Snows, and therefore have I come to challenge you! Arise and face me, Nobain, and face as well the fate you cannot avoid!"

With slaking hands did Gengan drag forth the blade he wore, stumbling backward a few steps to allow

the rising of Nobain. He who called himself warrior put aside the skin he held with a sigh, shook his head in helpless surrender, then rose to his feet.

"Gengan, brother, do not force me to harm you," said Nobain, his weapon drawn with a speed and ease which put the other male to shame. "You are ill, and cannot hope to match me. Put up your blade, and we shall . . ."

No further words were allowed the male as Gengan retook the steps he had given up, immediately swinging his weapon toward the covertly delighted Nobain. The youngest of warriors-to-be would have found avoidance of the stroke a thing of ease, therefore was Nobain able to deflect it smoothly with his own blade. Again and again the red-haired Gengan struck, seeking to reach the other male, yet was he clumsy and totally without skill. For a hand of reckid did Nobain fend him off, finding amusement in the sobbing vexation of the male who stood before him, and then did he tire of the foolishness and thrust his sword into the other male, low and hard to give the greatest pain before death. A small pouch was sheared away from Gengan's belt at the thrust, incongruously falling to the stone the while Gengan remained erect, eyes wide in disbelief and sword frozen in upraised arm. For two heartbeats did he remain so, and then a scream of torment escaped his lips, a scream filled with raging denial, shocked disbelief, and soul-tearing pain. All save Nobain cringed somewhat at the sound and then it was done, the spirit of Gengan having fled his body. The untenanted body fell to the stone at Nobain's feet, causing him to quickly free his sword with a wrench, and then did he look at the one who had faced him.

"Farewell, brother," intoned Nobain, again taken with a sigh. "Had you not been ill your life would not have been so uselessly lost, and yet this may perhaps be for the best. The Serene Oneness undoubtedly ached with the agony you suffered, and now joys in the peace you have found. I am the instrument of the Serene Oneness, therefore do I share his joy even in my grief."

Those who were of the caves murmured in admiration and agreement, putting sly smiles upon the faces of many of Nobain's set. Again had Nobain taken the life of an innocent, yet had he made it seem a noble act to keep the wrath of others from him. How low a sednet was this Nobain, more than sufficient to turn the stomach of any who was forced to watch him.

Two of the cavern males rose to see to Gengan's body, Nobain pausing no longer than to clean his sword before returning to his place and his falar skin. I had used the time of the battle, brief as it was, to make my way to where Ilvin and the Summa sat bound, silently thanking Mida for having seen to it that the three were placed one beside the other. My hair snarled about my arms as I pulled myself across the stone floor to a point just behind them, and impatiently I shook it back while the hum of laughter and conversation arose again among the males.

"Sisters, you are not alone," I whispered below the sound of the males, striving to keep my voice from all those save Ilvin and the Summa. "I have come to free you, yet have I been able to secure no more than one additional weapon. The strongest of you must stand beside me, guarding my back the while I win further weapons from these males. When all are armed, we may depart this place with none to halt us."

Not one of the three heads turned to me, none foolish enough to betray my presence to the males, nor did any of the three jump to her feet once my dagger had parted the leather which bound them. I replaced my dagger in its leg bands, paused a brief moment to peer out at the males above Ilvin's shoulder, then did I jump to my feet and vault between Hitta and Summa, dropping the male's sword at their feet as I drew mine from my scabbard.

"In the name of Mida, and for the glory of the Hitta and Summa clans!" I shouted, standing wide-legged and ready as I gazed upon the startled, exclaiming males. "Stand with me, sisters, and we shall soon be gone from here!"

Many of the males rose quickly to their feet at my appearance, drawing their weapons and looking about themselves as though expecting others to appear about the cavern. Though I was prepared for immediate attack none launched themselves toward me to engage in battle, therefore did I throw a quick glance back toward the three Midanna to see who would be the one to stand with me. The glance I took became a stare, for none of the three had gained her feet! The light-haired Summa remained leaning upon the stone spire with her back, one arm dragged forward while the other kept its place behind her, the place in which it had been when bound. The other Summa, she of the dark hair, and Ilvin, had both fought themselves free of the spires which had held them, yet was the Summa fallen to her left side and Ilvin sprawled half forward, sweating with the effort. Their limbs moved feebly, mere twitches rather than true movements, their lips opened in attempted speech, the dullness of forced lethargy peering out from their eyes. Clearly they had been fed some Mida-forsaken brew of males, and though they tried with all their strength, they could not stand with me!

"It appears our fair visitor is unaccompanied," Nobain said. The males stood about in amusement now, no longer alarmed, no longer seeking those who had attacked with me. It was fully plain that I had come alone, a fool of a warrior who had believed that Mida stood with her. No battle is done till the final stroke, yet was I now not far from just such a stroke. I had been allowed my arrogance and blindness, and now would another most certainly be chosen to ride for Mida, for Jalav would soon be no more. I would face the males alone, without my life sign, and would either be cut down or taken captive for later slaying. My fist tightened about my hilt, the cold emptiness growing in my belly matched fully by my earlier resolve; many males would accompany me to the final darkness, for I would not again be taken as slave.

"What more than one warrior is needed to best males?" I asked with sneering challenge, seeking to bring the males to anger and thereafter immediate attack. "I am Jalav, war leader of all the Midanna, and have come to free those warriors of mine you hold captive."

"We would much prefer that you join them," the male Nobain replied, his accursed amusement halting those who would have come forward in a rush. We stood four or five paces apart, the males and I, and clearly did all begin to show the look most males took on at sight of Jalav.

"Never have I seen one to match her," muttered one male of the caverns, stepping up beside Nobain, his point fallen to the ground. "Her pull is greater than that of that wench of yours, Nobain, and I would be the first to claim her."

"She must first be disarmed before she might be claimed," returned Nobain, the smooth persuasiveness having returned to his voice. "Do you fancy yourself able to accomplish this without seriously harming her?"

"As easily as you," replied the cavern male, a faint amusement coming to him at the sudden flash of anger to be seen in the eyes of Nobain. "I know you, brother, and will not be put off by your supposed eagerness to have me make the attempt. The light-haired wench is yours, and with her you must be content. This one will first be mine."

With that the male turned from Nobain and again raised his point, then confidently strode forward to face me. It was clear he anticipated little difficulty in his undertaking, yet was I not of a mind to oblige him. His first attempted stroke was to my wrist, his intention to cause me to drop my weapon; my return stroke merely brushed his aside, my intention being to feign small skill and thereby draw others into the attempt. A sound of annoyance came from the male, and then was I looked upon with severity.

"Wench, you cannot stand against me, therefore are you to surrender immediately!" he scolded, his tone stern and uncompromising. "Should it become necessary for me to wound you seriously before I might

take you, you will be soundly beaten!"

"To either wound or punish, you must first conquer," said I, finding it difficult to credit the foolishness of the male. Sooner would I have faced Nobain, he who merited slaying many times over, he who now spoke softly to two of his set who stood beside him.

"I shall certainly conquer!" growled the male before me, gripping his weapon and beating at me with strength. Perhaps the male imagined his weapon a branch instead, yet was I sufficiently startled by so mindless an attempt that I slipped his stroke and put my point to his throat. I had not intended slaying the male so quickly nor so easily, yet did my earlier ruse in some manner bear fruit.

"The slut took him unawares!" shouted another of the cavern males, seeing his brother fold silently to the rock beneath our feet. "We must have her blood to pay for his!"

Quickly did he raise his weapon and rush toward me, just as quickly being joined by another of their number, their charging forms sending jagged shadows in the torchlight. With two so intent upon spitting me, I could no longer control my feelings. Battle pleasure rose so strongly that a purr escaped my throat. Mida! The glory of battle at last! And then the first of the males reached me and began laying about himself, as though he faced a hand or more of those who came in attack upon him. The purr died in my throat and red-lined rage grew in its place, so keen was the disappointment I felt; this second male had fully as much skill as the first. So great a warrior was he that I was able to keep watch upon the other who came, the while I kept his wildly swinging point from my flesh. When the two at last stood before me I raised my voice in the piercing Hosta battle cry. The males, startled, gave ground to my charge, and then did they give their lives; a slash left and right took the throats from them, their own blades uselessly elsewhere. Now was it clear as to why these males had been left behind upon the departure of the others: their battle skills were so greatly lacking that to take them against Sigurri warriors would have surely brought about their ending. Had I had even one other Midanna to stand with me, easily would we have slain the lot of them.

And yet I had no other Midanna to stand with me. Though three now lay in their own blood at my feet and those two who had carried away the empty husk of Gengan had not yet returned, still were the numbers of the males too great for a single warrior. Those who stood about now looked upon me with fear touching them, and it came to me that there might yet be a manner of besting them all.

"You have said you would joy in having my use," I called to them, holding firm to the red-tipped sword in my fist. "Should this continue to be so, I give challenge to the leader amongst you. Let that one face me if he dares, and the outcome of battle shall decide. Should I stand victorious at the end of it, I shall take my warriors and go."

"And should you not stand victorious, it is you who shall be taken," said Nobain, his voice rising above the surrounding hubbub. The male spoke with the cool arrogance which was usual to him, his smirk likely calculated to anger me, yet was I other than an unblooded warrior-to-be or a fool of a male. I, too, grew a smile, one with the fangs of the hadat in it.

"To speak of a thing is not to see it done," said I, giving the male look for look. "Do you mean to face me with weapons, or slay me with the boredom of speech?"

Much of a fool did I feel, boasting witlessly in the manner of males, yet had I done so before in order to bring about the battle I required. The light eyes of Nobain grew cold as the males about him fell in silence, all eager for revenge. A low, muffled grunt sounded behind me, undoubtedly from one of the warriors who struggled in the bonds of the drug which held them, yet was I unable to turn and assist her. The males ranged before and about me, well to left and right, and I could not take my eyes from them

lest two or three slip past to my unguarded back.

"To defeat a wench requires little effort from a man," said Nobain, drawing his blade slowly, as though to frighten me with sight of the weapon. "Those you slew were warriors in name alone, as I am not. I shall do you the honor of facing you for a short time, wench, and then shall I honor you further by using you. You will find pain in that use, yet will you learn to beg that pain as though it were the deepest of pleasures. You have my word."

I made no effort to remark upon the qualities of the word of one such as he, for the male moved forward quickly, brought himself past those three who had fallen, then attacked with moderate strength. Indeed was Nobain more skillful with a blade than those others I had faced, yet was he short of the skill shown by those Sigurri such as Mehrayn and Aysayn and Chaldrin. His weapon flashed here and there, seeking my flesh, finding no more than the golden blade of Mida barring his path, the exchange, after a moment, bringing greater anger to his eyes. Again I felt the smile of the hadat take me, for I had not yet answered the attacks of the male in kind, nor would I till he knew himself thoroughly bested. Much anguish had this male given others, those who were no match for him, and much did I wish to return the same before I took his life. Well might Mida retain him for her chains, and should she do so, all eternity would be spent by his recalling the shame he had been given.

My smile brought greater effort from the male, his attack increasing in strength, the sound of his blade ringing against mine, dinning in the ears of all who watched. His frustration at being unable to reach me grew so great that he attempted to disembowel me, the wide, unreasoning swipe dragging his blade and arm swiftly past me. Swifter yet was my reply to such foolishness and Nobain jumped back with a shout, his upper arm deeply scored by the flick of my blade. I had as yet spent very little effort upon the male, doing no more than turning his blade, yet such play fighting was tiresome for one used to true battle. At his retreat I began to advance, fully prepared to end the farce, the match, and Nobain as well, and surely was the male able to see this in my eyes; his high color faded quickly and a look of desperate decision entered his eyes.

"I will waste no further time and effort upon this foolishness!" he shouted, backing again before I might reach him, nearly tripping upon the husk of one of those who had faced me before him. "The patience of a warrior is at an end. Take her!"

The words of treachery were not totally unexpected, yet was it difficult to see from where that treachery would come. No other male was within sword reach of me, nor did any of those nearest draw their weapons. I looked quickly about, seeing naught, and then caught sight of a male swiftly uncoiling a heavy fighting whip. One of those with whom Nobain had been speaking was he, and even as I began to turn to him the memory came that there had been another--yet the memory came to late. From my other side came the crack of a second whip, causing agony to flare in the hand which held my sword. Nearly did I cry out as my fingers flew open as a red streak appeared across my hand, the thin, sharpened metal braided within the end of the leather freeing my blood as easily as would a sword. In fury and desperation I knelt, my hair falling across my arms as I stretched wildly for my sword, yet the crack of the whip came again and filled my hand before the hilt. This time were my palm and inner fingers abruptly slick and red, and the pain that flew from hand to arm to body nearly flattened me. Both knees to the stone, I groped, left handed, shuddering at the pain in my right, and then came the next slash, this time to the left.

"Now you need no longer think of challenging a man, wench," said Nobain, laughter full in his tone as I fought in vain to flex my hands against the flaming pain. "You are no longer able to hold a sword, yet have you been left able to hold another thing, elsewhere than in your hands. Each man here shall have you, and then we may speak again of challenge."

A snarl of unbounded hatred took me as I looked up at the male, my blood dripping freely to the stone before me. To Mida did I swear that I would have his throat out with my teeth if he were insane enough to approach me without the aid of others, and indeed did he sheathe his sword and begin to move toward me. The blood which fell from his arm gave him no pause, yet was he able to take no more than a single step before the voice of another brought him to a halt.

"Perhaps you will speak of challenge with me," came the words of an angry voice I recognized. Nobain spun about to see the broad form of Mehrayn, a stand with sword gripped tightly in fist, thoroughly enraged. Beside Mehrayn stood Chaldrin, a deep coldness in the depth of his eyes. Here and there about the cavern appeared other black-clad males of the Sigurri, perhaps two hands of them, all with weapons drawn, bringing gasps and moans of shock from those who stood with Nobain. No idea had they of the manner in which the Sigurri had appeared so abruptly, nor was I more well informed than they; the Sigurri had come from out of the air, it seemed, at a time when their enemies had least expected them.

Nobain was given no opportunity for reply; in the blink of an eye were the two sets of males upon one another, those of the caverns seeking to best the intruders with the weight of greater numbers. Swords rang and males cursed and lunged, yet was it immediately clear that my earlier thoughts upon the skill possessed by those of the cavern was truth: by ones and twos they quickly fell before the warriors of Sigurr, and then was Nobain's set the target for their swords. Nobain himself faced Mehrayn, a male who now fought much as a Midanna would, giving no heed to what his opponent might attempt, concerned with naught save downing him. Nobain fought wildly and with great fear, seeking desperately to preserve his life, yet was his sword struck savagely aside, Mehrayn's sword seeking and finding an avenue to the center of his skull. He who had professed himself a follower of the Serene Oneness fell to the stone of the floor with his head cloven in twain, and then was Chaldrin before me, blocking off sight of all else.

"Stay as you are, wench," said the male of other caverns, looking carefully about to make sure no enemy male approached before he crouched down before me. Large and broad and thick in the waist was Chaldrin, dark-haired and dark-eyed and thickly covered with dark body hair where his white body cloth did not cover him. Also did he continue to wear a white cloth about his middle to cover the wound I had given him, yet had that wound not kept him from seeing his sword well streaked with red. He set his weapon upon the stone beside him, within easy reach should the need arise, and then attempted to take my hands in his.

"No, you must let me see them," said he, referring to my withdrawal. So great was the pain I felt that the cavern had begun to move somewhat about me, as though it had come loose from the rock and stone which held it. I had no wish to give voice to that pain, yet I might were the gaping, bloody wounds to be touched.

"You may see my hands as you wish, male," said I, my voice far too thin and small, "yet are you not to touch them. They have already been touched by those who are male, and have no further need of such helpful attentions. When my Midanna have regained themselves, I will have what aid I require."

"By then you will have bled to death," said he, annoyed, as he glanced at the warriors behind me. "They are all of them senseless from the exertions they attempted, and Sigurr alone knows when they will recover. The Sword believes you safely attended to by me, therefore does he lead his men in pursuit of those followers of the foul Oneness who have fled to escape a well-earned death. Will you give me the necessity of having to face him when he returns to find that you continue uncared for?"

I had seen that Mehrayn had indeed led his males deeper into the caverns in pursuit of those who fled their swords, nor had I missed the searching look he had sent toward me before departing. All thoughts in my head had grown fuzzy-edged through the presence of blazing, throbbing pain, and abruptly was I seated upon the stone rather than kneeling upon it, my bloody hands somewhat cradled at my middle.

"The decision is mine, therefore shall his anger be mine as well," I muttered, looking curiously about at the torches which had illuminated the cavern. All continued to burn as they had earlier, yet in some manner their light had begun dimming and darkening. "Should his anger come, it may join that of Mida, which continues to pursue me. I must depart this place and again take up my task, else shall Mida be taken with fury rather than anger-

Without further strength for words I left off speaking, but had I forgotten the dimming of the torches. When I attempted to rise to my feet, their light went quickly to blackness.

I awoke more slowly than was usual with me, feeling a heavy sluggishness that was unexplained till I attempted to put my hands to the fur I lay on and push myself to sitting. Sharp pain flared, causing me to draw my breath in sharply. Memory returned then of what had occurred before the darkness took me, and I raised my hands to see the red-dotted cloth which covered them from wrists to fingertips. Surely had Chaldrin been the one to tend me, and in some manner had lessened the pain which had earlier held me-when I made no attempt to use the hands. It was necessary to raise myself to sitting without them, a thing which had been accomplished more easily at other times.

Once erect I looked about, wondering how I had come to that place. A small chamber of stone was it, lit by a torch and closed off with a stout, metal-clad wooden door. Within the chamber stood some few wooden kegs and assorted sacks, putting the odor of dried provender and much falar in the air. To the rear of the chamber, beyond the sacks and kegs, had a fur been placed, the one upon which I now sat. I moved somewhat in discomfort and annoyance, unable to free my hair properly from beneath me, unable to catch sight of where my sword and dagger had been put, and then was the great wooden door thrust open so that Mehrayn might enter. Carefully did he bring within two wooden pots, one carrying the odor of cooked nilno, the other the odor of lellin broth, and when his eyes touched me, he smiled.

"Jalav, you are awake!" said he, bringing forward the bowls to set them upon the stone by the furs before returning to the door to close it once again. "Chaldrin assured me that the balm would take the pain from you, and I would know if he spoke the truth."

Closely were his eyes upon me as he returned to crouch before the furs I sat upon, a deep anxiety clear in the green pools which sought my soul. Much had I felt the absence of this large, red-haired Sigurri, yet to speak of my feelings would have been idle. Jalav rode as Mida sent her, and none would be allowed to lure her from that path.

"The pain has been taken so long as I remain unmoving," said I, aware of how thick my tongue continued to feel. "Perhaps, after a short while, it will aid during movement as well. You have my thanks for your assistance, male. The other knew naught of honor and shamed himself in challenge, yet cared not. Much would it have pleased me to have taken his life myself, yet am I nearly as well pleased that it was you who was given the pleasure."

"Pleasure indeed," said Mehrayn, a merciless look claiming him as his voice hardened. "I recalled the man as soon as I faced him, for I was one of those who pursued him when he fled our city. His crime was the senseless murder of a temple slave, a foul act which sickened all who learned of it. The slave was tortured before attaining the release of death, and for no reason other than that it pleased the filth to do her so. Had we caught him before he took refuge with those who follow the Oneness, he would have been put to death in the same manner as she whose life he took. How did you become entangled with him?"

"He and his males held captive three warriors of the Midanna," I replied. "Even had I been willing to abandon Ilvin, who followed me in disobedience to my will, I could not stand before the enemy clans and demand the leadership of them after having left two of their number to their fate. It was therefore

necessary that I free the Summa before continuing on with my task."

"Your task," echoed Mehrayn, looking strangely at me. "A task which you insisted you were to attempt alone, and which then became another task. Was it demanded by your Mida that this second task also be seen to alone, or was there a reason other than that which kept you from returning and asking Sigurri assistance?"

"You would have had me seek out males to assist in the freeing of Midanna?" I asked, amused at so strange a suggestion. "Never do males seek to aid Midanna, only to use them. It was my intention to see those warriors ride free, not to cause them to be chained in alcoves for Sigurri pleasure."

Much did it seem that Mehrayn was hurt and angered then, yet where would have come the reason for such feelings? Had I, myself, not been made slave by the Sigurri, finding freedom solely through the strength of my swordarm and their belief that I rode as a messenger of their god?

"So you continue to see us as no more than 'males,' " said Mehrayn, his bitterness taking the amusement from me. "Was it with thoughts of use that Chaldrin followed you, intending to allow none to keep him from raising his sword beside yours? Was it with thoughts of use that he hastened back to me, to speak of the enemy trail you had for some reason taken up? Was it with thoughts of use that we all rode after, praying to Sigurr that we find you before harm came from those followers of the putrid Oneness? Surely it was with thoughts of use that we slew them all, saw to your wounds, and gave comfort and easing of those poor creatures who had been so brutally used!"

Much indignation flashed from the eyes of Mehrayn, his head held high as he looked down upon me, his body stiff in the crouch he had taken. I, myself, felt no more than confusion, for Ceralt had also once spoken in such a manner. Always did these males make unreasonable demands upon a warrior; how was a warrior to know what moved a male?

"What other reason might there have been?" I asked, the words faltering. No more than the distant ache in my hands did I feel, and then was the anger and indignation gone from the male.

"It gives me pain that no other reason occurs to you," he sighed, "a pain which stems mainly from a deeper understanding of that which has been done to you to cause you to feel so. Suffice it to say that we are here, and shall not allow further harm to come to your wenches. You may rest easy in the knowledge that you have my word."

"The word of Mehrayn has proven honorable," I assured him, seeking to take the sadness from his eyes. "Jalav accepts it gladly, and without reserve."

"You do me great honor, I know," said Mehrayn, a faint smile turning his lips as his hand reached out to stroke my hair. "Now must you do me further honor by partaking of that which I have brought. First the broth, to ease the knots of pain from your belly, and then the nilno, to restore some portion of the blood and flesh which was lost to you. Do you feel yourself capable of holding the nilno within?"

"I shall make the effort," said I, for the first time looking directly within the pot which held the nilno. Barely warmed by the fire was it, bloody and raw as I most preferred it, yet did my insides lurch some small amount at the sight. Wounds often stole the appetite from a warrior; however I had to fortify myself for the journey I must immediately resume. I reached my hands out to the pot of broth, saw the cloth covering them before recalling its presence, then made a small sound of annoyance. No other than a male would bind a warrior's hands so closely, and clearly would the cloth need to be removed before I might again take up sword and dagger and kan's reins.

"Here, I will assist you," said Mehrayn, his large hand taking the pot of broth from the stone and raising it

toward my lips. No more than a moment did I hesitate, greatly displeased with the need for assistance, but I needed the provender so I could be on my way. I therefore drank the broth with my eyes upon the pot, pushing away thinly insistent thoughts of humiliation, giving no heed to the strong pleasure which fairly hummed from Mehrayn. I had no understanding of the pleasure males felt from doing a warrior in such an odd manner, yet was I certain of my dislike of it.

With all of the broth within me, Mehrayn then took up the nilno, which had been cut small as though in anticipation of difficulty on my part to do the thing for myself. Indeed would I have had difficulty in wielding a dagger, yet did I dislike such solicitous reminder of supposed helplessness. Jalav was a warrior and war leader of the Midanna, and well able was she to see to her own well-being! As Mehrayn looked within the pot for a cut to his liking, it came to me that the broth was all I was then able to hold; the nilno would turn my insides about, therefore it was best left behind me.

"I find I have no stomach for further provender," I informed Mehrayn the while I rose unsteadily to my feet. Though I seldom used my hands to assist me, just then their aid would not have been unwelcome. "When hunger returns to me upon the trail, I shall hunt and feed my fill."

"Trail?" echoed Mehrayn sharply, looking up quickly. "Hunt? What nonsense do you speak? You cannot take to the trail with your hands in ribbons."

"I may do no other thing." I shrugged, looking about with some small difficulty among the sack and kegs. "Where have my sword and dagger been put? I shall require them upon my journey. "

"Wench, you journey nowhere save in return to this fur!" the male growled, putting aside the pot and straightening to the fullness of his height. "You have no need of weapons you are unable to wield, solely do you have need of rest and care so that you may be restored! To speak of taking to the trail now is idiocy, an idiocy I shall not allow!"

"There is naught you may say upon the matter," I told him, gesturing aside the foolishness of his prattle. "Still do I ride in the name of Mida, and no mortal male may stand in my path. Go and fetch my weapons at once, and think only upon your word in regard to my warriors. They must be released as soon as they are able to ride, for we will require all of their swords when the strangers have come."

I turned my back upon the lowering look he gave me, tossed my hair back from about my arms, and took myself unsteadily toward the metal-bound, wooden door.

"Should it be your expectation that I shall leap to obey your commands, you are destined to find disappointment, O war leader of Midanna," came the angry words from behind me. "I do not leap to obey foolish girl-children, merely do I ignore their chatter and see to that which must be done. Return to this fur immediately, else shall I return you to it!"

"No longer have I the time to dally with males!" I snapped. "There has already been far too much of such idle foolishness, for which I have paid a high price in loss and pain! Should it become necessary to pay further, I may well fail to survive to do as I must! I will not see my Midanna leaderless and my Hosta left captive to males, solely by cause of my lack of sense of duty! Now, where are my weapons?"

"Woman, you speak utter nonsense!" Mehrayn exclaimed, more annoyed. "To consider your actions the cause of all that has occurred is the height of idiocy! To believe that you must take yourself into the forests this very moment, wounded and alone, is even greater idiocy! What will become of your wenches when you find yourself unable to defend against the prowlers of the forests? Or when you discover you are unable to hunt for the sustenance you require? You will fall a final time with none to know of it, nothing accomplished."

He stood with hands upon swordbelt, anger darkening his skin and blazing forth from the green of his eyes. Much would it have pleased me to find a male capable of sense and logic, one who knew and acknowledged the ways of the gods, yet was such an expectation idle. No more than males were they, each like unto the next, of use in no place other than a warrior's sleeping leather. I shook my head, then did I turn again toward the closed door.

"Mida will see to the safety and provender of her warrior," said I, putting a final end to the discussion. "I will find my sword and dagger alone."

Then was it necessary to give full attention to the door before me. To my surprise, the thing was made as no other door I had yet seen. No push plate adorned it, showing it was not meant to swing freely as the doors of the cities, nor was there leather and latch upon it, as was to be found upon the dwellings of Belsayah villages. No more than a rounded leg of metal protruded from the door at a point perhaps mid-high, near to that place where the metal-bound edge of the door met the metal frame it stood within. I nudged the door with my toes, attempting to see how it moved, yet it moved not, even when I nudged it again with greater strength. The thing stood silent and immovable, and a chuckle came from just behind me.

"In order for your Mida to see to your safety and provender upon the trail," said Mehrayn, "she must first see to the opening of that door. Surely so unimportant a thing will not be allowed to stand in your way."

"I do not know the method of its opening," said I through teeth clenched in anger, keeping my gaze from the accursed male. "You, of course, will refuse to speak of it."

"On the contrary, wench, I consider it my duty to assist you," said he, considerable amusement to be heard in the words. "One need only grasp the metal latch, push it down, then turn it in a full circle and pull to the right. The door will then open easily with no more than the slightest pull."

I continued to keep my gaze upon the dark, aged wood of the door, silently calling down the curse of Mida upon the heads of all males who would devise such things as that door. In order to perform the doing one must be able to grasp the leg of metal, a thing I was then unable to accomplish. Indeed did I attempt to close one hand about the cloth covering it, only to nearly moan at the flash of returning agony. A fury rose up in me that I might be closed in so effortlessly, causing me to attempt the leg of metal with my arms; the Mida-forsaken leg sprang back to its resting place the moment I attempted beginning the circle, no matter that I made the attempt over and over again. A growl rose to my throat with the last of it, to accompany the sweat of frustration and effort which covered me, and then did a big hand come to my shoulder.

"That mechanism is designed to keep without all those unfamiliar with it," said Mehrayn, in a soothing tone. "Also shall it keep within one who is as yet unfit to take to the trail. Return to the fur, wench, and allow your strength to find you again."

"I shall not!" I ground out, jerking my head about to glare up at him. "I shall go my way as I am meant to do! In Mida's name do I demand that this accursed door be opened!"

"Now do I know for certain that the wounds have affected you," said he, his brows low with disapproval as he withdrew his hand. "Though we have often shared words of disagreement, never before have you sounded the willful, demanding child. You go nowhere save to your furs, wench, and the door shall remain as it is."

With such words did he bend and lift me in his arms, and then return me to the fur I had left. Much did I shout and kick and attempt to struggle, yet all to no avail. Despite the closeness of the room a covering fur was placed upon me, and when I attempted to rid myself of it agony flared in my hands. I moaned as

the searing pain intensified, then moaned again when Mehrayn's hand touched my brow; so cool was that hand that I shivered to my soul, unable to fend off the feeling. The torchlight danced and shuddered in the dimness, partially illuminating the odd look which had taken Mehrayn, much as though deep concern held him close. Long reckid passed in my attempt to escape, and longer hind, yet was Mehrayn inescapable. I fought and struggled though all strength was lost to me, and then, at the end of strength, came the darkness.

CH 3. A gift is returned-and a journey begun

All was silent when I awoke, yet did it seem as though the air carried memory of the presence of many males--and warriors as well. At first I recalled naught of what had occurred; I knew only I was hungry and my body felt slick and unclean, my hair hanging again in greasy strands, yet was there a strength and well-being within me which squared my shoulders and allowed me to hold my head high. I sat upon a fur in a room of stone, a half-spent torch casting enough light to look about in, a large, metal-bound wooden door shutting off sight of what lay beyond. A sudden aroma came to me which caused me to twist toward a wooden board where stood an array of the provender which I had such a great need of. Nilno and paslat and fellin tubers there were, dark baked grain and a large metal goblet from which the aroma of falar came; though it seemed to have stood there some short time I reached for the first of it with pleasure, and at sight of the cloth wrapped about my hand, memory returned of what had gone before.

For a single brief moment I sat unmoving, and then did I look down between my breasts to see that which I already knew was there. My life sign, the crystal hadat with roiling black within, hung upon its leather as though it had ever been upon me, as though it had not been taken in anger by Mida. Slowly, though there was no longer a reason for caution, I took the wrapped cloth from first my right hand and then my left, seeing the faint lines of healing where so recently had been gaping wounds, feeling naught save strength and steadiness in my grip. The sole cause of unsteadiness I felt stemmed from the vast clouds of confusion surrounding me, for never had I thought to see my life sign again. Had Mida relented in her anger and therefore returned the life sign as she had taken it? Had she felt approval for my actions, rather than condemnation as I had at first believed? Was the pain I had been given no more than that which a warrior might expect at the hands of males, rather than the punishment I had thought it to be? I knew not what the goddess was about, yet did I know that I had again been healed; clearly, in future, it would be necessary to recall that the final stroke of a battle was not necessarily that which was clear to the eye.

The provender which awaited me was also unexplained, yet was I able to feed upon it without such explanation. Much of it had gone comfortably down my throat to fill the hollow within, the falar slowly and smoothly following, when the great door opened to admit Mehrayn. He halted briefly, his eyes touched me, with a look of satisfaction, and then he closed the door and approached the place where I sat.

"Though the doing of it was this time longer, you are again healed," said he, halting before the fur so that he might bend and seat himself upon it. "And you have eaten the food left for you."

"Indeed," said I, sipping at the falar as I considered the strangeness which held the male. Much did it seem as though he hid annoyance, yet for what reason I knew not. "You are already aware, then, of the return of my life sign, therefore was it you who provided provender. I had wondered upon the reason for its presence."

"Indeed," said he, almost as though he mocked me, his eyes continuing to hold mine. "You wondered upon the reason for the presence of the food, yet not upon the reason for the presence of your life sign. Perhaps you already know how it was returned?"

"Clearly has Mida relented in her anger toward me," said I, understanding naught of the tone of the male. "As it was she who took the life sign, it was also she who returned it. What part of the fey is it outside these stone walls? How long was I made to sleep?"

"Darkness has but recently fallen without," said he, keeping his eyes upon me. "You have slept the healing sleep since mid fey of the last fey, before that you lay in fever sleep since the darkness before last darkness. We discovered that the blades of the whips which touched you were coated with a resin which brings on delirium. If not properly counteracted, it eventually brings death as well. So it was your Mida who returned your life sign to you, was it? Just as she took it?"

"Of a certainty," said I, even more confused at his continuing strangeness. "Why do you question me upon a point you know as well as I?"

"Perhaps one might say with even greater certainty that I am better acquainted with the point than you," said he, reclining. "When the life sign was returned, you see, I was not in the midst of the sleep of delirium."

"You beheld Mida?" I asked, startled to a large degree. "Never before has she appeared to a male, save that that male was already . . ."

"It was not Mida," said he, his tone so flat that my words immediately died. Indeed, the male seemed to grow more and more angry and annoyed with each passing hand of reckid. "The one who returned your life sign was Aysayn, who rode after us as quickly as he discovered who had stolen it. And before you ask, that one was also not your Mida."

"I do not understand." I stumbled, confusion growing so great that it nearly overwhelmed me. "Who other than Mida would have dared . . ."

"Ladayna dared," said he, quickly taking the goblet of falar which I had nearly spilled through having forgotten that I held it. "The wench slipped into my chamber while we slept, having left Aysayn's side in my guest chamber where he slept. Through accident did Aysayn discover it in her possession, and then did the wench dare to insist that she had taken it to keep you from riding off alone as you intended. She was attempting to assist Aysayn and myself, said she, and yet she did not come forward with the life sign once you had left without it. She professed fear of accusation of having taken your protection once you were gone, yet do I recall that she took the sign once before, having found a great attraction in it. Aysayn beat her till her speech was nearly incoherent with pain, yet did she continue to maintain that she had not stolen for her own benefit."

I stretched my legs out upon the golden lenga fur and leaned down to one elbow, stunned at the tale Mehrayn had told. Ladayna! She it was who had twice condemned me to slavery, each time to protect the schemings she had contrived against Aysayn, he who was called Sigurr's Shadow upon this world. When I regained my freedom it had been my intention to take her life, yet had I been felled by the wound I had received in the battle fought shortly before; upon awakening I found I had been given my task by Mida, therefore had such petty thoughts been put aside. Perhaps it would have been best to complete that which had been nearly begun; to leave a living enemy behind is to offer one's back to that enemy's blade.

"So much for the term 'sister' used by her," I said at last, recalling the words the female had last addressed to me. "Surely was it her departure from your chamber which awakened me during that darkness, and surely would I have awakened the sooner had I not swallowed so great an amount of falar. Once again has it been proven that a warrior must be cautious when taking drink among males."

"And this is the sole conclusion you have come to?" asked Mehrayn, drawing my eyes back to him.

Though the torch sat upon the wall above and somewhat behind him, the eyes of the male fairly glowed with whatever emotion flared through him. "A warrior must be cautious of the company she keeps? No word upon the foolishness of wenchs who see themselves as of vast importance? No word of apology to those who have been badly used by those selfsame wenchs?"

"I know of none who have been badly used," said I, again confused. "Nor do I see my actions as foolish. As Mida commands so must it be, with none to deny her. No more have I done than attempt to obey."

"You obey neither mortal nor god," said he with a soft sound of disdain. "Your actions stem from no more than your own interpretation of events, an interpretation which is more often incorrect than true. You defy and deny those about you in the name of Mida, when the true source quoted should be Jalav the stubborn."

"What male foolishness do you speak?" I demanded, immediately bristling with insult as I sat straight upon the lenga pelt. "Was it I who directed that Bellinard be taken by the Midanna, that I ride to raise the Sigurri, that I claim the leadership of the enemy Midanna? Had the decision been mine, my Midanna alone would have sufficed to meet the strangers. Have the Sigurri thought better of riding to battle that you now insult me?"

"You know well enough that the Sigurri shall ride as Sigurr demands," said he, his tone calm yet implacable. "I shall not be distracted into argument upon a point other than that which we discuss. When your life sign was found to be gone from that place where it had been left, I asked that you delay your departure till a thorough search had been instituted. One of proper and mature reason would surely have agreed, yet Jalav the gando knew the true meaning behind the disappearance: Mida the goddess had fallen to anger, and Jalav's punishment was that she be bereft of protection. Immediately did the she-gando take her leave, without even so much as a final word to those who had come to care for her."

My lips parted to berate the male for the tone he dared to take with me, yet he quickly sat himself straight and continued before my words were able to come forth.

"Much did I heap curses upon my own head for having kept you so long from your task that terrible punishment was given you," said he, sharp anger now evident in face and voice. "Clearly was it my insistence upon accompanying you and the-'dallying' I had lured you with that had brought disaster upon you, for so had you maintained and so did it truly seem. When Chaldrin returned with word of the new direction you had taken I rode out immediately, ill with the thought that further punishment was to be added to that which had already been given you. We crept within this cavern, seeking to surround the enemy whose numbers were greater than ours, yet before the encirclement was complete the whips were used on you. Again I reviled myself, believing the ills which befell you continued to be caused by me, thinking you had spoken truly when you insisted that my presence would bring naught save grief. We slew our enemies and bound your wounds, then stood about and watched as delirium slowly sapped the life from you. We were helpless, unable to aid against the resin, for we knew not what the counteragent might be-and then your life sign was brought by Aysayn. The life sign you would already have worn had you waited another fey or two."

His green eyes held to me with an unsettling directness, a voiceless command that his words were to be taken as truth. Indeed was I greatly dismayed at his view of the happenings, yet was it clear that he saw only through the eyes of anger.

"You are a male, and therefore unfamiliar with the doings of Mida and unable to comprehend the true meaning of things," said I, attempting to free my tone of insult and merely to teach. "At first did I, too, see Ladayna at fault, yet must it be remembered that Mida may use any to see her will done, even a city slave-woman or males. Ladayna's doing was clearly at the behest of Mida, the return of my life sign by

Aysayn as clearly the same. Had I found the final darkness I would no longer have been able to ride in her cause, therefore did the goddess see to my survival. Chaldrin was allowed to follow and bring others, for I rode in a direction other than that from which they have been barred. It was indeed Mida's intention to see me punished, yet was it not her intention to see me ended. She continues to feel annoyance with her warrior, yet are there tasks which must be accomplished."

Again I stretched upon the lenga pelt and rested upon my left elbow, the now-healed fingers of my hand toying with the long, silky hair of the fur. I did not know whether or not Mida approved of my most recent doings, but I continued to feel that she did not. The males might well have been allowed to arrive soon enough to keep the metal-tipped fighting whips from my flesh, yet they had not. The word sent to me may well have been a warning to heed the command I had been given, else might my life sign also be kept from arriving should the occasion again arise. Under such a circumstance would my soul then be forfeit; however I still was not eager to obey. Instead I felt a faint curiosity, centering on a newly formed query: in what manner would the goddess act if I were to fling my life sign into a swiftly running stream and then open my own throat with a dagger? Would even the magic of the goddess be sufficient to keep the life from flowing swiftly from me? I had once been healed by her without the presence of the crystal life sign, yet had the process been long and filled with the frustrations of helplessness; if it were her intention to see me healed again, would this longer process be used, or would the life sign somehow be retrieved yet again? Faintly did it seem that the goddess challenged me rather than commanded yet the notion could be nothing more than empty-headed fancy.

"Ah, now do I understand all which has occurred," said Mehrayn, a false heartiness to his voice to match his strangely pleasant smile. "It was not the stubbornness of your single-minded viewpoint which sent you forth without the protection of the gods, it was no less than the will of those very same gods. Punishment has been decreed for you by cause of your actions, yet are you not to be ended, for your continuing efforts have also been demanded. No other than you is capable of free will, for all save you move to the demands of the gods. You alone move to your own urgings, obeying or disobeying the gods as you please, bringing about their will through efforts which no other is capable of performing. For such a reason is it you alone who is punished, when disobedience comes in place of obedience; no other may be held culpable, for all others move to the will of the gods."

I blinked in uncertainty at the words of the male, yet did it seem that, although strangely put, he had at last found the right of it. The reason behind so odd a circumstance was far beyond the vision of even a Midanna war leader, yet had the male done well in describing the circumstance itself. Again I parted my lips, this time to commend the male, yet was he in the midst of opening and removing his swordbelt, the overly pleasant smile he had worn now nearly a grin. I had no understanding of what brought him such amusement and lightheartedness, and surely did he see the words I had not yet put breath to.

"Your dark, lovely eyes are filled with question," said he, putting sword and scabbard well behind him. "Should you wonder at my feelings of pleasure, you need wonder no longer. I am pleased that I may now accompany you as I wish, for my presence will be in accordance with the will of the gods. Lacking free will of my own, my actions may be considered no other thing."

"You cannot!" I protested, so taken aback by his intention that I began to straighten to sitting again. "I must be on my way from here in as few reckid as possible, therefore . . ."

"No," said he, his voice soft, his movement so swift that he knelt across me before I was able to rise to sitting. "As the gods direct my actions, my will may be looked upon as the will of the gods. It is my will that you remain here through the darkness, therefore shall you obey the gods and remain."

"You do not speak with the voice of the gods!" I hissed, glaring up at his broad form in anger. "Merely are you used at times to see the will of the gods done! You, yourself, are no part of it! Remove your bulk

from before me this moment, for I must quickly depart!"

"Else shall I be struck down by the gods?" he inquired pleasantly, putting his great hands to my life sign and the leather which held it. "Surely do you seem to have forgotten that the gods are angered and have decreed punishment for you. What harsher punishment than to keep you in a place you wish to be gone from? What better way to punish disobedience than through forced obedience? You shall, I will wager, recall this punishment longer than many others you have been given, perhaps even unto a fair consideration in future of those about you who are other than Midanna."

His hands then lifted the life sign from about my neck, showing that the leather had not been settled beneath my hair. The anger within me grew to fury, for the male clearly believed not a word he spoke, his intent no more than to mock me and take that which was not freely given. I had not the time to dally with males, and surely would Mida see me truly punished if I again failed to ride as she had directed. Personal punishment might be borne in silence, yet what if the punishment should descend instead upon the Hosta or those other Midanna who followed me? That was how the gods punished, bringing agony to one's very soul, though this male above me did not know that. He moved in the cause of none save his own, his anger toward one who was chained to the gods more than foolish.

In fury, then, did I rise up and strike at the broad body of the male with both fists, attempting to force him from me, yet no more than a grin did I elicit with my efforts. Much did it seem as though I struck at the stone of the walls, Mehrayn's body warmer yet surely no softer. Again and again I struck at him, furious to see naught save that accursed grin, and then did he begin to bend slowly down to me, his well-muscled arms reaching to the lenga fur to either side of me. I quickly put my hands to his shoulders to thrust him from me, yet sooner would I have been able to thrust away the fangs of the attacking lenga from my flesh. Down and down he came, forcing me flat to the furs with the weight of his body alone, my arms bending slowly yet surely between us, and then his face was no more than a breath from mine.

"I give eternal thanks to Sigurr that you have been restored to full health, stubborn she-gando," he murmured, the green of his eyes now steady with sobriety. "Had you been taken from my arms to his, surely would I soon have followed you. I know now that I mean naught to you, for I am male and Sigurri rather than Midanna, yet do you remain all that holds meaning for me. Best you learn to care for yourself, for the pain which takes you takes me as well, and I care little for such added pain."

Then were his lips upon mine, warm and demanding, and I awash in limitless confusion. Though I had attempted to free myself of him, my desire for his lips and arms and body was so great that I felt I would burst with it. Merely to share the touch of his lips, my hands to the broadness of his shoulders. Mida! What enchantment the male had placed upon me I knew not, yet was I powerless to resist it. In the feyd we had been apart I had yearned for him endlessly, and he spoke of meaning naught to me. And yet, how was I to acknowledge what meaning he did hold for me, when the gods punished as they did? The warmth of his body came to mine as his tongue tasted me deeply, a tasting I could barely keep from sharing. Mida demanded that I ride at once, yet this male kept me from it; should she somehow gain the agreement of Sigurr, indeed might Mehrayn be struck down! I moved in protest beneath his body and lips, torn with the need for him, torn with the need to be away, unable to know more than a portion of the frenzied thoughts racing about in my head. If for no other reason, I must depart to protect the male, yet his arms moved beneath me and held me tight to his chest.

"I shall not allow you to squirm free of me, wench," he said with soft laughter, his right fist tangling in my hair. "There is punishment yet to come to you-as soon as I am done with giving thanks to Sigurr."

Again did his lips come to me, this time with greater strength, and no longer was I able to consider protection.

The coming light of the new fey was not evident within the crowding dimness of the large cavern where Nobain and many of his males had been slain, yet was the presence of so many newly awakened folk ample evidence of its nearness. Provender had already been prepared and offered to those who had desire for it, and Mehrayn's males sat about and fed slowly, attempting to chase the mists of sleep from their eyes. It came as no surprise that it was the town female and two Sigurri females who had been chosen to prepare the provender; what surprise there was came from the manner in which they looked upon me when I stood before them. Their haughty up-and-down appraisal attempted to dismiss my presence, it faltering only when I straightened to my full height and rested left hand upon sword hilt. Foul was the humor of Jalav that fey, and fortunate were the females for seeing this so quickly. I had no desire for the provender they had prepared, yet had I a great need of it; had I found it necessary to demand that provender, their haughtiness would have been keenly regretted.

With hastily given paslat and dark baked grain and falar, I took myself to a solitary corner of the cavern and sat, giving no note to the coolness of the stone. Soon enough would the heat of the forests bring the slickness of sweat to my flesh, and quickly would the cool of the cavern be no more than faint memory. I would depart as soon as I had filled the Mida-sent hollow within me, that hunger whichever came in the wake of the crystal's healing. Had I not had the hollow to contend with, I would surely have already been upon the trail.

"It pleases me to see you hale and strong again, wench," came a familiar voice. Chaldrin stood above me, partially shadowed, the steps of his approach so silent that they had not intruded upon my thoughts. I sank my teeth into the flesh of the paslat, tearing out a great chunk upon which to chew, giving the male no least sign of recognition. I had no desire for the company of any male, and wished the fact to be made plain to Chaldrin, yet was he male and unconcerned over remaining where he was unwanted. A deep silence descended when I spoke no word, and then was Chaldrin crouching beside me.

"Do you mean to hold all men culpable for what was done to you by the Sword?" he asked, his tone held low so that it might reach my ears alone. "All men are no more responsible for the doings of one, than all wenches are to be taken to task for the doings of one of theirs. Mehrayn was filled with great fury when the Shadow appeared bearing your life sign, and deeply did he vow to see you punished for thoughtless foolishness. Was he overly harsh with you?"

I tore again at the paslat flesh with my teeth, near to a growl at thought of Mehrayn's doings of the darkness. My hunger for him had been no less than his for me, and fully did we merge for an endless time, feeling more than simple pleasure of the flesh. Truly did I wish to weep as a city slave-woman would when he withdrew from me, for I knew I was bound to leave him behind once again and continue on the path demanded of me by Mida. I took his broad face in my hands, pressing my lips to his a final time, rose to sitting to seek out my breech, and then he had-

"Should that male approach me again, I shall have his life," I snarled low, reaching for the falar I had had the city females pour for me. "Mida take me if I fail to do so."

"And I have sworn to stand with you," said Chaldrin with a deep sigh, hanging his forearms upon his broad thighs. "A pity the Sword will not hold his stroke against me as he shall with you. Perhaps your Mida will find a place for me as you do not."

"Should he hold his stroke with me, he will not retain life long enough to face another," I informed Chaldrin. averting my eyes as I replaced the falar after one swallow and returned to the paslat. "Perhaps in future, however, you would be wise to consider carefully before giving your oath to stand beside another."

"You are undoubtedly correct," said the male with his deep-voiced chuckle. "I am, however, still in the

midst of the first oath, which shall also undoubtedly continue to hold my attention for some time. Do you mean to say you would strike at one who would not defend himself from you? That you would take his life though yours was not in jeopardy? I had not thought the coward's stroke to be among those you would use."

Again I growled low in my throat, this time sending a venom-filled glare toward the male, yet his dark eyes refused to look away from mine. Though I enjoyed the thought of facing Mehrayn with blades, indeed would I feel the coward striking at one who had vowed to raise no weapon against me. My sword and dagger had I found immediately without the room I had passed the darkness in, yet had I not returned to sink a blade deep in the sleeping body of he who was Sigurr's Sword. Though the male had earned that and more, honor forbade that I do him so.

"And yet the coward's stroke is not beyond others," said I, tearing at the paslat as my eyes held Chaldrin's. "The strength of a male is greater than that of a warrior, much as though I were armed and he was not, yet his stroke was not withheld. For what reason, then, should I withhold the stroke of my blade?"

"For the reason that his stroke might have been avoided, had you taken the trouble to learn what I had offered to teach you," replied the dark male, his tone unrelenting. "Perhaps your efforts would still have come to naught, for the Sword is not unskilled in this manner of battle, yet would you have found yourself able to strike a blow or two which would not have gone unfelt. Would there not have been satisfaction in knowing that even in defeat you had given nearly as well as you had received?"

The question the male posed hung between us, for I would have given much to have been able to strike a telling blow against Mehrayn. So large was that male, and so strongly made-was it truly possible Chaldrin spoke without deceit? I took my eyes from the male of the Caverns and put aside the paslat bones, then took up the dark baked grain. Had it not been necessary that I depart immediately upon Mida's work . . .

"Jalav." The softly spoken word was in a voice other than that of Chaldrin, higher and considerably more hesitant. I raised my eyes to see Ilvin to my right, astand as though she were a warrior-to-be and I a Keeper's Attendant who had cause to be cross with her. Indeed was I the war leader of her war leader, and indeed had I cause to be cross with her.

"So, Ilvin, you felt the need to take a short ride through the forests, I see," said I, staring up at a warrior who stood with head down and light eyes elsewhere. "Perhaps I have attained greater age than I had thought; surely do I recall having commanded you to remain with your sisters. This, however, cannot be, for what warrior would disobey her war leader?"

"Jalav, I meant no disobedience!" she begged, light eyes now beseechingly upon me. "Those males gave no respect to the greatest warrior among us, and deeply did I feel that they would cause you harm! I followed after so that I might be at hand should you require one to stand beside you, yet did I take care to stand well away from Mida's work! Had I known my capture would draw you from the return path to those who wait, surely would I have first taken my own life and stood in dishonor before Mida."

"For one who meant no disobedience, there was disobedience aplenty," said I, taking the baked grain and the falar and rising to my feet. Ilvin continued to look upon me with great anxiety, knowing the duty one owed to a war leader, knowing a war leader's word was ignored at a warrior's peril. The reason she had disobeyed was insufficient, for she had chosen her own estimation of the situation over mine-and then had been proven in error. At such a point one must either challenge the war leader in order to join Mida with weapon honorably in hand, else must the erring warrior accept punishment sternly given. "When I have returned to Bellinard," said I, "I shall expect to hear from your war leader what punishment was

given you-and how well you accepted it."

"I shall accept it gladly, Jalav," said she, happily eager, and then did the eyes which looked upward toward me widen with sudden distress. "When have you returned?" she echoed, truly hearing the words I had spoken. "You cannot mean to remain longer among these males?"

"You, warrior, have only to consider your own path!" I returned with some sharpness, my annoyance growing greater at the tone Ilvin had used. Surely did it seem that the Hitta warrior was again prepared for disobedience, a thing I would not again allow. "Where your war leader rides is a matter to be considered only by her and Mida."

"And me," said Chaldrin, who now stood behind my left shoulder. "Where you ride, wench, there is where I shall be, prepared to stand or fall with you. Not again shall I be left behind."

"A male, to stand with the war leader?" demanded Ilvin in outrage as I began to turn to Chaldrin to rebuke him. "Where stands Jalav, there stands Ilvin, for whom no male has yet proven a match!"

"You have been commanded to return to your own, girl," grumbled Chaldrin with calm as I turned again toward Ilvin. "Best you obey and leave swordwork for those possessing skill."

"For a male to speak of skill is like unto a sednet speaking of flight," returned Ilvin disdainfully. She stood before Chaldrin with head high and left hand resting upon sword hilt, taking no note of the manner in which he folded his arms across his chest, hiding sight of his leather-wrapped wrists. "Should the war leader require one to stand with her," said Ilvin, "she will require more than the presence of a male. Should she require none to stand with her, then would the presence of a male be fitting."

Chaldrin seemed greatly annoyed, but I did not want to remain and hear what his reply to Ilvin would be. I thought that two difficulties might easily be left to see to one another, therefore did I step within the cavern shadows as a prelude to departing without. The notice of all those who so fervently wished to ride with me. Perhaps Mida knew how all those offering assistance might be easily avoided, yet I did not.

"Hosta war leader." The words, softly spoken, came from the shadows I had entered, and then was the dark-haired Summa warrior before me, her light-haired sister at her right shoulder. "It pleased us to find it Mida's will that we escape the capture of those males," said the dark-haired Summa, her eyes continuing to rest upon me. "I am Wedin, and my sister is Dotil. We have no need to be told that you are Jalav, war leader of the Hosta, for we know you. We had not known, however, that you had become war leader to all of your clans, for never before has such a happening occurred. Our clans were taken with great surprise when it was discovered that all of our enemy sisters had left their lands, and we would know where they have gone. It was you, as war leader, who led them from their home tents, was it not?"

"Not precisely," said I, feeling a sigh take me. I had not known it was to begin so quickly, yet must there always, in every undertaking, be a beginning. "Our clans of the Midanna were led to the lands of males by Relis, our Keeper, who was directed by Mida in a dream. I, who was elsewhere, was sent by Mida to join them, and then did I become war leader of all of the clans. With all of our warriors fighting as a single clan, we were able to take and hold a city of males."

"You took a city?" asked Dotil, she of the light hair, her voice and face filled with delight. "Ah, Mida! Would that I had been there! The battle must truly have been glorious!"

"I see a thing more glorious still," said Wedin, her dark eyes soberly upon me as I smiled at the words of Dotil. "It was Mida herself who commanded the attack against the males? Mida who speaks to your clans as she does not to ours? Are we, also, to be sent as one clan against the males? Are we, also, to be spoken to?"

"Your clans have already been spoken to," said I, attempting to soothe the anxiety of the Summa. "I am the chosen of the goddess and have been directed to go to your clans and summon them to the great battle which approaches. All Midanna warriors are to fight as sisters, and I--I am to lead you."

"Mida preserve us all," muttered Wedin with a sigh, both comments fitting companions to Dotil's look of pain. "I mean no offense, Hosta, yet do I anticipate the response of my clan and our sister clans to the tidings that we are to follow a Hosta and call her war leader. Though Dotil and I are aware of the willing assistance given us by you, the others of our sisters were not bound beside us. They heard naught of the manner in which you called Hitta and Summa to battle, and will believe that you sought to aid the Hitta alone-or that you thought us Hitta as well. Wisest would be to see one of our own as leader to us."

"I have been given little choice in the matter," said I with a shrug, continuing to meet her concern-filled eyes. "It is I who has been named war leader of all Midanna, and so it must come to be. I shall visit each clan and each war leader and, with Mida's aid, win each of them over. The first will surely be most difficult, and yet I will thereafter have a . . ."

"Jalav, it cannot be!" said Dotil, interrupting my words in sudden upset, her light eyes wide. "The visiting! It was nearly the time for the visiting when we fell to capture! Should we depart for Midanna lands upon the moment, it will surely be in the midst of the visiting when we arrive!"

Wedin voiced a groan of memory suddenly recalled, and I, too, felt a great urge to give sound to the pain of understanding. Once each kalod do the various clans come together to a place of meeting, to greet sisters long unseen, to speak of the various battles each has fought in since the last meeting, to greet and give congratulations to new war leaders and newly blooded warriors, to look upon what males now followed those who allowed it. Each clan was bound to bring two newly learned things to share with its sister clans, things such as battle strategies, and hunting techniques, and insights in gando-breaking and handling, and weapons usage. At much the same time of the kalod do our two groups meet, each upon lands of their own clans, a truce of sorts existing at that time. Neither seeks out the meeting place of the other, and had my sister clans not ridden to take a city of males, they too would have been in the midst of visiting among their own. The two Summa continued to look upon me in upset, yet no alternate choice was possible to me.

"There is naught for it save that I face all nine clans at once," said I, drawing and releasing a long, deep breath. "Surely do I give thanks that Mida's shield stands before me, and surely shall I give even greater thanks if it continues to remain so. It seems clear I shall have need of it."

I raised my cup of falar to my lips and drank, finding that my mind already grappled with the problem I would face, and then another thought came to me. Much had I believed that my efforts in freeing Ilvin and the two Summa had caused anger in Mida, yet now it seemed more than likely that it was meant that I do so. Had I ridden on and left them to their capture, I would have found no single clan in its home tents, the locations of which I knew only a very few, nor would I have been able to easily discover the place of visiting. Much precious time would have been lost in search, easily more than that which had passed since I had left the city of the Sigurri. The lands of the Midanna are vast, and not easily searched through; with the Summa to guide me, however, the problem would no longer be of concern.

"Nine clans, you said," remarked Wedin, clearly a warrior alert to all which went on about her. "You are aware, then, of the disappearance of the Silla. Their actions were exceedingly strange for some time, and then were they one fey gone from their home tents, no word left even with the Keeper's Attendants who cared for their warriors-to-be. Have you knowledge of their fate?"

"Indeed I do," said I, looking about me at the greater stirrings among the Sigurri males. Soon would they be prepared to do whatever it was that they meant to do, therefore would it be best if the Summa and I

departed. I gestured toward the cavern opening, directly across the cavern floor rather than through the shadows, and said, "As we journey, I shall be pleased to inform you of the happenings which now concern your clans as well as ours. Best would be that we depart as quickly as possible."

"Indeed," agreed Wedin, looking about as I had, Dotil also aware of the stirring. "I find discomfort in the midst of so many males, despite their having offered us no indignity and no harm. Had our weapons not been returned to us, surely would we have awaited you in the forests to extend our thanks. I dislike the way these males look upon me."

"And yet have they some of them proven worthy of a warrior's attention," said Dotil, showing a grin of amused satisfaction. "The three I approached were not unwilling to allow me to taste them, and far superior were they to those who took us in capture. One of the three was truly excellent, and I regret being unable to offer him the opportunity of following me."

"I, too, have tasted a small number of them," said Wedin with a shrug, "yet is it their sword skill which I find most amazing. With practice would many of them reach nearly to the level of a warrior, and never have I before seen such a thing. What manner of males are these?"

"They are called Sigurri," said I, draining the cup of falar before tossing it from me. "Their swords will stand beside ours in the coming battle, for it is Mida's will that it be so. This, too, shall you be told of upon the journey."

I turned from their nods and began to make my way across the cavern, my stride quick and my heart eager to be free within the forests once again. There is little to compare with the glorious freedom of Mida's forests, and I continued to find myself unable to comprehend the attraction found by males in shelters of all sorts. When they were without dwellings they sought caves, forever locking themselves away from-

My thoughts ceased abruptly as my foot came down upon that which was not stone, my stride sending me forward another full pace before surprise and curiosity halted me. The Summa, following behind, halted as well, questioning clear in their eyes as I turned and bent to that which lay upon the stone floor of the cavern. My fingers found a small leather pouch, the strings of which had been cleanly severed, and within-within was a good supply of small, coarse brown grains well mixed with some bits of yellow grains. I stood unmoving as I gazed within the sack, not comprehending, but growing excited nevertheless.

"A sack without a pipe," said Wedin, some small interest in her tone. "Of what use is a sack without a pipe?"

"None," said I, finally bestirring myself to draw the sack closed again and knot the severed strings to a tie of my breech. "This sack, however, was that which was cut from the belt of the male Gengan when Nobain slew him. By the male's own words was he a Pathfinder, one whose spirit is released to walk free in the White Land when enveloped in the Clouds of Seeing. These grains will allow my spirit the same freedom-with none to halt me. Has either of you a pipe?"

"Not I," said Wedin, Dotil agreeing with a shrug and a shake of her head. "What is this White Land you speak of, and what might be the Clouds of Seeing?"

"Our journey may prove of insufficient length to allow the telling of all I have learned in the service of Mida," said I, considerably annoyed yet unable to alter matters. Clearly had I been set upon the trail of the males for a purpose other than simply freeing and following the Summa, for now the White Land was mine with Lialt unable to keep me from it as he had upon the first occasion. The brother of Ceralt was also a Pathfinder, the chief tracker of the White Lands for those of his village, a male who had feared my

presence in a place where heretofore only he had gone. I recalled that the male Gengan had spoken of seeing Nobain's death upon the Snows, yet had the male clearly been less skilled at reading the tracks of the White Land than Lialt. Red-haired Gengan had failed to see that his own death would occur first, Nobain's coming only later at the hands of Mehrayn, who was also red-haired. It was perhaps possible that their signs were nearly the same upon the Snows. I would need to spend much time in the White Lands before I might claim familiarity with the place, yet at the end of that time would my skill far exceed that of Lialt. There was little a male might do that a warrior could not easily match and better, and as soon as I found the opportunity to make a pipe, I would begin my conquest of the White Land.

Again I turned toward the egress from the cavern which would lead to Mida's sweet air, yet is there ever a balance struck between good fortune and ill. I had paused to speak with the Summa and to find the sack which would give me the White Lands, and the delays had been enough to allow the awakening and presence of the greatest thorn of my flesh. From my right came a large arm which reached past me to my left shoulder, and then did I find myself turned to face Mehrayn.

"I have not yet given you greeting for the new light, wench," said he, gazing down into my eyes as he drew me close. "The taste of that which will break my fast is far inferior to the taste of your lips. First I shall have the superior, and the inferior."

His lips lowered to mine, hungrily demanding as ever they were, yet was I filled full with the memory of the darkness. The nearness of the male was as naught to me, my body completely uncaring; in no more than a moment was the male aware of my lack of response, and then did his head raise once again.

"When my hands are upon you, my wits are ever elsewhere," he muttered, annoyance clear in the green of his eyes. "Your life sign must first be removed before the softness and warmth again return to you, and this has not been done. Let us see to it quickly, and then we may-"

His words ended as his eyes sought my life sign in vain, his hand lifting to where it normally hung, halting as well. No more than my breasts did his seeking gaze find, and when his eyes returned to mine they at last perceived the coldness therein. I had no words for the male for my fury remained too high; I had no wish to speak except in challenge, and such speech was useless. The male would meet me if I pressed the matter, yet would he refuse to strike, just as Chaldrin had said. Honor forbade that I draw weapon against him for the matter between us was not a blood debt, yet was I perilously close to the wish that it was. All this was the male able to see in my eyes, and a deep sigh took him.

"I would know, O Sigurr, why all females must be cut from the same cloth," said he, raising his eyes to the unseen roof of the cavern far above as he folded his arms across his chest. "Ever do they insist upon doing as they wish, yet when those doings earn them a punishment it is the man who punishes them whom they blame, rather than the doings they, themselves, have insisted upon. As a man is able to forgive their foolishness, so should they find it within themselves to forgive that man the doing of the necessary."

The foolishness of the male was incredible, therefore did I turn and walk from him, again attempting to depart. I had no understanding of the nonsense he spoke, nor did I feel a wish to understand. I wished for no more than a great deal of distance between us, yet was my wish fated to be ignored.

"The while you ready kand for yourself and those other wenches," Mehrayn called after me, "I shall gather up that which will break my fast upon the trail. I have no wish to cause further delay in our departure."

"Our departure?" echoed Dotil from behind me, she seeing naught of the urge within me to bare my teeth. "Does the male follow you, Jalav? Surely you cannot mean to allow him to follow you to the visiting place?"

"The male seems one who obeys naught save his own desires," remarked Wedin, who now strode along beside me, to my right. "Should he refuse to take himself from the midst of Midanna doings, you will, of course, speak to him with swords. "

"I cannot," I replied, vexation strong within me, too well aware of Wedin's dark eyes upon me. "The male has aided me too often, returned my life and freedom too often, for me now to take his life. Also has he sworn that he will never raise weapon to me, for once I kept him from the claws and teeth of the keren. It must be through Mida's efforts that he rides elsewhere than upon my track, and surely will she see it so. She knows even better than we that I cannot lead a free male to the visiting place."

"Am I, also, to be seen to?" came Chaldrin's voice from my left, just as I reached the egress to the outer cavern. The male stood within the shadows there, one wide shoulder against the gray of the stone, massive arms folded negligently across his chest. Though a glance about showed Ilvin in the midst of hurrying across the cavern with the clear intention of joining my set, Chaldrin was already in place where my departure was impossible without his notice. I had thought the male too deep in his dispute with Ilvin to bedevil me further, yet had I once again been mistaken.

"Another?" said Dotil with vast disbelief, stepping forward to study a calmly amused Chaldrin. "Should this continue, war leader, our clans will believe themselves under attack by males at your arrival. Also will your numbers be greater than theirs."

"I find little amusement in this state of affairs, warrior," said I, the growl in my tone bringing a chuckle not only to Chaldrin but to Dotil and Wedin as well. "The why of my having been burdened by Mida with males without number is beyond me, yet do they surely move to her bidding. Come the time she plans for, the males will serve their purpose and then shall they be gone from beneath our feet. Should the effort not be beyond all those who so ardently wish to ride with me, let us now find mounts and at last be on our way."

My annoyance was great as I took myself from the cavern room toward the entrance to the caves, so great that nearly did I forget that the kand were kept in a cavern to the opposite side of the entrance. I allowed the strong odor of kand to turn my steps in the proper direction, and then entered the long, close corridor which was the cavern of the mounts. Many kand were tied to either side of the torchlit stone area, each with fodder aplenty to keep it satisfied, and there, near to the front of the area, was the yellow and brown kan which I had ridden and left in the forests. It gave me pleasure to see the beast, and as Wedin and Dotil began the search for mounts of their own, I went to my kan and began to run my hands over him.

"The animal remains sound," said Chaldrin from very near, clearly having followed after once again. "I, myself, fetched him from where you had left him, for I knew you would need him again. His track was easily followed through the forests, most especially with the signposts so thoughtfully left for us."

"Signposts?" I asked, continuing to give the kan my attention. "Of what do you speak?"

"The carcasses of those who were once followers of the Oneness," said Chaldrin, a chuckle again accompanying his words. "Your bow was well occupied during your feyd of travel, as was your dagger upon your arrival here. We observed the entrance of a man alone as we considered the best means of approach to this place, and saw that no sentry attempted to halt him. As he entered so did we, yet did he overlook the remains of the one meant to guard against us, as we did not. Should he have neglected to give you thanks for your effort, allow me to repair the omission."

"Thanks for an effort which was undoubtedly merely adequate?" I asked, at last turning to look upon the male. "Had I had true skill, they would all of them have fallen to me, is this not so?"

"There are limits to the doings of even one with true skill," returned the male, amused rather than abashed at mention of the litany he had so often infuriated me with in the Caverns of the Doomed. "Had I been beside you when you came to this place, considerably more of the dross would have fallen to us, yet alone-your efforts were adequate."

I voiced a sound of disgust with the male, which brought further chuckling upon him, yet before I might take the matter further I detected the trace of a familiar odor. I sniffed, then sniffed again, then turned my head toward Chaldrin.

"What is that odor?" I asked, for some reason knowing the male would be familiar with it. "Much does it seem misplaced here-yet at the same time clearly fitting."

"I am aware of no odor save that of kand," replied Chaldrin, testing the air as I had. "From what direction does it come?"

"From there," said I, nodding toward the far end of the cavern. With that did I begin to walk in that direction, and Chaldrin came behind me, continuing to test the air for that which I had spoken of. We had nearly passed the last of the kand when the male put a hand to my arm, halting our steps.

"Your senses are keen indeed, wench," said he, looking toward the darkness at the far end of the cavern. "The odor you detected is one I am well familiar with, for the precincts in which I spent so long a time are well imbued with traces of it. It is a vapor called Sigurr's Breath, and many of the unused caverns below and about the Caverns of the Doomed are filled with it. In slight traces such as here and in the Caverns, it appears to be harmless. In places where it holds full sway its presence is deadly, the power of it able to fell a man full grown at first breath, and thereafter take the life from him. I had not known it was to be found in any place other than beneath our city-and perhaps it is not."

"What foolishness do you speak?" I asked, at last having recalled the odd odor from the time of my arrival at the Caverns of the Doomed. "How might this Sigurr's Breath be only beneath your city, and at the same time be here?"

"The Caverns run a very great distance below the ground," said Chaldrin, his eyes busily taking in all they might. "How far a distance none truly know, for many have been lost in an attempt to learn the truth. Those who have lived to return and speak of their attempts have told of vast caverns, each beyond another, the traversal of which took feyd in the doing. The greatest difficulty was in retracing their paths, for the twistings and turnings were so like one unto the other that those careless enough to make no sign marks of their passage quickly became lost. It seems likely that Sigurr's city now stands in greater safety than before, due entirely to your having noted a familiar odor."

"Never have I failed to note that males take great delight in speaking so that a warrior is unable to comprehend them," said I, standing myself before the male so that he might see my annoyance. "How might Sigurr's city find safety from my having detected an odor?"

Chaldrin's broad face took on a smile of amusement. "As the followers of the Oneness chose these caverns in which to shelter and hide their presence," said he, "it appears they meant to attack the city from below once they had gathered sufficient numbers. Likely the force which was met by the legions of the Sword was the one meant to accomplish the attack, yet there is little sense in considering the matter over and done with. Those of the city will need to block and guard their own entrances to the lower caverns, and then will the threat of attack from that direction be negated. Had you not noticed the odor, those in the city would continue to stand in jeopardy, therefore do they now stand instead in your debt. Why have you wound the leather of your life sign about the hilt of your dagger rather than hanging it about your neck?"

The abruptness of his question and his sobriety took me unawares, bringing to me at first a feeling of outrage. Never in all my kalod as a warrior and war leader had males made so bold as to enmesh themselves in my doings, yet from the time I had begun traveling in their lands, they had done little else. I had long since grown weary of the intrusion, no matter the curiosity which prompted it, and there was little reason to allow it to continue.

"Speak to me first of the reasons for which you were condemned to the Caverns of the Doomed," I retorted, taking his gaze and holding it with mine. Much did I expect the male to withdraw in insult at the boorishness of the demand, yet he did no more than smile faintly.

"I took the life of a man with my bare hands," said he, folding his arms as he continued to gaze upon me. "The man gave me great insult, so great that I was unable to control my rage, yet the then Shadow considered the insult insufficient cause for so permanent a reply. He may perhaps have been correct, yet I have never regretted the doing. Should you be unwilling to answer a question I put to you, girl, you need only indicate your unwillingness. Should it become my intention to intrude, I will first make mention of it."

The cool of the cavern continued to bring comfort to my body, yet the heat of shame entered my cheeks so that I found I must look away from the male who continued to gaze upon me with undisturbed calm. Once had Chaldrin refused to speak of the reason for the condemnation of one of his males, the question having then been put by Aysayn during our time in the Caverns. For him to now speak of his own condemnation was a sharing I had not expected nor, in my opinion, one that I merited. After sharing battle with him I had spoken of my willingness to call Chaldrin sister-brother, as he was male-yet my actions toward him had been colored with the awareness of his maleness and no other thing. The male had done naught to be slighted in such a manner, and would have been well within his rights to offer me challenge for the doing. A greasy, knotted lock of hair fell across my shoulder into my view, and I shook it back with impatience.

"Many are the males who have offered Jalav shame and insult," said I, the words coming with difficulty. "Chaldrin, too, offered Jalav the same, yet was he filled with sufficient honor to also allow her the challenge, which the others had not. I have wrapped my life sign about the hilt of my dagger for a reason I do not yet fully understand, for I feel a great reluctance to don that which is, in fact, the guardian of my soul. Perhaps the matter will be resolved with the passage of time, yet now I must leave it as it currently stands. Should you wish to give me the challenge, I will not refuse you."

I then attempted to pass him and return to where my kan stood tied, yet his arm came up before me and halted my steps. With great gentleness did his hand turn me toward him again, and I looked up to see the continued sobriety of his gaze.

"Shame and insult and no mention of pain," said he, looking hurt. "Is pain, then, a thing you have come to expect from all men as a matter of course? I give Sigurr my most profound thanks that I am now able to stand by your side, girl, to see that no further pain comes to you. The punishment I gave you was at the time justified, yet do I now regret it as I regret little else in my life. In reparation to you and the gods do I now offer a lifetime of service, no matter the length of that lifetime. Should I also find the need to give my life, I will do so gladly."

"Chaldrin may well find himself eternally occupied," said I, smiling faintly. "A warrior may indeed expect only pain from a male. Have you no intention, then, of offering me the challenge?"

"I most certainly have no intention of offering you the challenge," said he, suddenly amused. "I would not have the lifetime I spoke of abruptly shortened, for Treglin is no longer about to reclaim my errors. Perhaps I will one fey try you again with a weapon other than the sword, yet one which is shielded. Solely to be sure, of course, lest you prove yourself-adequate."

Gentle laughter came to me then, laughter which the male shared, and then did we both turn about and retrace our steps through the dimness to where Wedin and Dotil attempted to choose mounts. Little knowledge of kand did the Summa have, yet was Chaldrin able to indicate those mounts which had belonged to the followers of the Oneness, and I able to speak upon the most important points. The male left us to the choosing, yet had he returned in the few rekid necessary for the Summa to prepare themselves. His mount stood near to mine, therefore did we walk together behind the Summa in our departure from the cavern; the Summa passed through toward the outer air, eager to try for themselves the kand they had chosen, and one who had nearly been forgotten by me stepped out before me, determined persistence visible even in her upset.

"War leader, you must allow me to accompany you," said Ilvin, her light eyes insistent despite her misery. "I know not where you this time ride, yet must you allow me to stay beside you!"

"Your request seems oddly familiar, Ilvin," I said, hiding my annoyance. "Upon the instance previous was my word disobeyed, yet this time I will not have it so. You ride to your clan and war leader and a punishment well earned, you do not ride with me."

"And yet you allow males and Summa to accompany you!" protested the pale-haired warrior, a great indignation upon her. She stood before me with fists clenched tight, body squarely in my path, and much did I believe that she meant to remain so, even were I to lead my kan over her. "Have those who follow you loyally now been relegated to a place beneath males and Summa? Is a Hitta warrior too poor in your eyes to merit a place at your side? It is undeniable that I have disobeyed you, and equally undeniable that punishment has been earned; that punishment, however, need not be given by any save you."

"You would have me give you punishment?" I asked, with even greater annoyance. It was scarcely my place to punish the warrior of another war leader, save that that warrior chose to stand with naked blade before me-or requested that I see to the matter. I might not honorably deny her request, for the doing was more favorably looked upon by Mida were she to expiate her disobedience directly with she who was disobeyed. I had not the time to devise an adequate punishment, nor had I clan sisters who might be called upon to aid in the thing, yet Ilvin cared not. She knew only that I might not honorably deny her request, and therefore would it be necessary that she accompany me; she now stood before me with a glint of satisfaction in the light of her eyes, no longer taken by upset, no longer indignant. That she showed no trace of smug accomplishment meant only that she retained a certain respect for the temper of a war leader, not that she felt naught of the feeling. I met the newly come complaisancy in her eyes with an anger which did naught to diminish it, then stumbled upon a thought possibly Mida-sent, which cooled my anger. So I was to give this warrior a punishment, was I? So I was to search for a thing to teach her reluctance for disobedience, such as living a hand of feyd in the forests alone, with naught save a dagger? I had not the time for a punishment such as that, yet might there be a thing considerably worse, for which there was ample time.

"So, Ilvin, you would have me give you a punishment," I said with thoughtfulness, reaching over to stroke the soft brown nose of my kan. "It has given you great upset that I have been sent by Mida among males alone, yet have you neglected to think upon the reason for this. Mida had no wish to put the burden of such a thing upon more Midanna than necessary, therefore was Jalav bidden to ride alone. Should you remain with me and accept punishment from my hand, that punishment will be to learn a good deal more concerning males than your recent capture has taught you."

"War leader, I do not take your meaning," said she, the satisfaction no longer in her eyes. A deal of unease and wariness had quickly replaced it, and her left hand had closed about the hilt of her sword.

"My meaning is this, warrior," said I, a glance showing me Chaldrin's close, amused attention to the conversation. "Should it be your wish to take mount and return to your sisters, we shall speak no more of

your accompanying me, nor shall I allow memory of this exchange to remain with me. Should it be your decision to remain, however, your punishment will be to serve this male beside me, obeying his every command, till my word releases you from the confinement. I shall not intercede in his treatment of you, nor shall I allow the Summa to do so. You will be his to do with as he wishes, and in such a manner will learn some small part of that which Mida wished to spare you. The decision is yours, and may be thought upon no longer than the time you require to join us upon the journey we now begin."

I then led my kan past a silently stunned Hitta warrior, expecting no further words from her and receiving none. Beyond the entrance to the caves was the sweetly rising light of Mida, gloriously fresh in its rebirth, a golden backdrop to the songs of greeting trilled through the air by the feathered children of the wild. My spirit soared in response to the promise of freedom opened before me, and I vaulted happily to the back of my kan and rode in the track of Wedin and Dotil, who had already gone ahead over the gray of the rock underfoot. In no more than a moment was Chaldrin beside me again, his eyes upon the greens and browns before us, colors which grew warmer with each breath we took and each stride which brought us closer to it.

"You believe, then, that to be my woman would be a terrible punishment," came abruptly from the male. No tone at all had the voice of Chaldrin had, and I turned my head toward him in lack of understanding.

"To be a slave-woman to any male is great punishment for any Midanna," I said, searching that part of his face which I was able to see, seeking some sign of the unexplained hurt which I felt rather than saw or heard. "I have need of the aid of a-brother, and as Chaldrin did not deny the bond, I had thought I might call upon him to assist me. Should it not be his wish to give such assistance, I will seek another to see to Ilvin. Again it was not my intention to give insult."

A moment passed in silence and then Chaldrin's eyes were again upon me. "I am unused to your ways, wench, and therefore have difficulty in understanding what moves you," said he groping about for the phrases he wished. "It was my assistance you sought when you told the girl she must serve me? Another man would do as well for your purposes, and yet you chose me?"

"Indeed," said I, refraining from pointing out that I had just said the same. "Though the matter hardly calls for sword use, I had not thought you would object."

"I do not object," said he, amused and puzzled at once. "As for the matter requiring no sword use, such remains to be seen. Perhaps you forget that the wench and I exchanged several words. I would ask further, however, concerning another point made by you. You wenches are all of you called Midanna, and none of the Midanna wish to be-women-to men? You, yourself, feel the same?"

"Most certainly," said I with a shrug. "Each Midanna knows well the fact that males are unable to see to themselves, therefore do they take females to see to their needs. Midanna are warriors, not city slave-women, therefore do we shun the company of males. Had I had any doubt upon the point, it would have been well seen to during my time with Ceralt and his Belsayah. Much did he strive to make Jalav a slave-woman, yet were his efforts in vain, as they were destined to be. Jalav is Mida's, and none may deny the will of the goddess."

"I recall our discussion upon the matter of the notice of the gods," said he, thoughtfully. "For a man to defy the gods is futile, yet must one admire such a man for his attempt." Silence descended briefly as we left the bare, stoned area for the beginnings of the forests, and then a chuckle came from Chaldrin. "You believe the wench Ilvin will accept your punishment," said he, returning to our earlier converse. "Should she truly do so foolish a thing, what am I to do with her? You cannot mean that she be given hurt or pain, yet do you intend punishment for her. Of what is the punishment to consist?"

"It must consist of a knowledge of that which obedience would have spared her," said I, keeping watch all about for the presence of hunting children of the wild. "I do indeed believe Ilvin will accept the punishment, for she continues to believe herself chosen to accompany me. It may well be that Mida sent her behind me so that I might more easily find the presence of the Summa, yet was it the track of another which I followed to where they were held. Ilvin must be made to know her error, therefore must you be unyielding with her, seeing that she serves you as though she were a female slave in your former domain. Should she disobey or displease you, you may punish her without giving her true harm and may, of course, use her as you please."

"I am also to use her?" said Chaldrin surprised and amused. "It will be difficult to force myself to such a thing, yet will I attempt to make the effort. During the words we exchanged, the wench made comment upon the sole activity a man might be usefully put to, and then suggested that I might well be inadequate even for that purpose."

"She will discover her error," said I with a sharing of amusement, looking to Chaldrin briefly before returning my gaze to where we rode. "For a warrior's sleeping leather, the male Chaldrin may be deemed-adequate."

"It seems a fortunate thing that my sword word was given in support of you, wench," said he, a dryness to his tone as his gaze left me at last. "Had it not been, I might well have been tempted to defy the gods by taking a length of leather to their chosen."

"Chaldrin had best save his length of leather till Jalav bears shielded weapons," said I, truly amused by his faint annoyance. "He will then have no need to call upon the aid of the gods."

A gentle heel in the side of my kan sent it forward, leaving no more than the trail of soft laughter to accompany Chaldrin where he rode. Though the male did not merit true insult, it gave me pleasure to serve him some portion of the annoyance he had caused me during my time in the Caverns of the Doomed. Also would his annoyance bring a sharper lesson to Ilvin, who now foolishly thought herself untouchable by males by cause of the presence of her weapons. Too many were the males in those lands, and Ilvin no more than a warrior; were she to attempt true battle against them, she would not live to grow to the skill of a war leader.

No more than a few reckid passed before I sighted the Summa, and less than another hand brought Chaldrin to our set. We four rode through the forests in silence for a time, and then did Wedin ask after Mida and the Silla and my time among the males. The tale truly began with the theft of Mida's Crystal and therefore did I begin it there, speaking also of the Silla and the manner in which they had attempted to trade their Crystal for males to serve them. The Summa fell to fury upon hearing of such sacrilege, yet was the action not unexpected by those who knew the Silla. I continued on, through my time in Bellinard and Ranistard, through the pain of the device which spoke to the strangers, through the capture of the Hosta and Silla, arriving at last at the words which had come to us from the deep blackness of the device. The strangers had presented themselves as distant kin to use, yet were they known to Mida as evil ones, beings who would take and enslave our entire world. Enemies were they to Mida, and to Sigurr as well, therefore would the Midanna and Sigurri stand together in battle against them.

"This word was given me when I visited Mida in her realm upon this world," said I to Summa warriors who seemed much taken aback by my narrative. "I was given into the capture of Belsayah Riders, males who are led by Ceralt and his brother Lialt, and it was these males who were used by Mida to bring me to her presence. Telion, a male of Ranistard, also accompanies them, for those of Ranistard have not yet declared themselves willing to stand against the coming strangers as Ceralt and his males have. There will be little need for these others with our warriors and the Sigurri present, yet are they likely to attempt joining our ranks. Mida willing, that will not be till victory has already been granted us."

"Your time among men has been truly difficult," said Chaldrin, for the first time bringing me memory of his presence. "Stolen from by those of Ranistard, enslaved in Bellinard, taken to Ranistard in capture-and captured again by those you call Belsayah. And yet no one of them was able to make permanent his hold upon you."

"No more than the Sigurri of the Caverns," said I, looking upon the male with something of a smile. "Those males are fools who believe they might hold Jalav of the Midanna."

"Perhaps," allowed Chaldrin with the suggestion of a shrug through the thickness of his shoulders, quiet amusement in the dark of his eyes. "The time was, perhaps, brief, yet would I have felt a greater fool had I not held Jalav at all. Even in so short a time did she prove-"

The word, left unspoken, hung between us in a manner which removed the smile I had shown and brought Chaldrin to chuckling. Much did it seem the male would remain insolent forever, just as he had been even in defeat. I took my eyes from him and returned to converse with the Summa, and banished from my mind memory of the use he had put me to.

The hind passed quickly in travel and talk, and soon were my insides rumbling with warning that Mida's light was near to approaching its highest. Neither Ilvin nor Mehrayn had yet appeared, giving me to hope that Mida had in some manner intervened and sent the male riding elsewhere than upon my track. Ilvin, however, was another matter, for although she had not yet joined our set, both the Summa and I were aware of her proximity. The Hitta warrior appeared to be in the midst of difficulty regarding her decision, and it had been necessary for me to explain her actions to the Summa, who believed it was their presence which kept Ilvin from joining us. Dotil laughed in amusement at the punishment I had proclaimed for the Hitta, then took herself off to seek out that which might be fed upon by our set. Wedin, however, was more disturbed than amused.

"I mean no insult, Jalav," said she, "yet do I feel the punishment you proclaimed excessive. It is easily seen that I have more kalod than you, and though I am not a war leader, neither am I an innocent. To be bound so to a male will bring the Hitta great hurt, even more than our recent capture."

"It will bring her considerably less hurt than would have come in true capture," said I, as Wedin glared at me. I rode with eyes straight ahead, observing the path my kan trod through the forests, my inner eye occupied with sight of things other than trees and leaves and bushes. "In Bellinard was I hung by the wrists and lashed by males, then locked away behind lines of metal the while other males attempted to trade for my possession. In Ranistard I was lashed again, then given to a male called Nolthis, who took use from me which brought pleasure to him alone. Also was I beaten with the swordbelt of this Nolthis, so that the leavings of the lash did not heal. Once away from Ranistard it was Ceralt and his Belsayah who stood my capture, males who attempted to 'take me from my savage existence and bring me to civilized ways.' To ride the forests in freedom was savage, to serve a male upon my knees civilized; to hunt and see to my own needs was savage, to do no other thing than take the dust and clutter from a male's dwelling civilized, to wear a sword and proudly wield it savage, to give eager use to all males sent to me civilized. No thing other than the will of Ceralt was I allowed, no thing other than that done by village females, much the same as city slave-women. Would you have had Ilvin share a capture such as that, Wedin? The shame and pain were so great that I sought to end my life, and was kept from it solely by the intervention of Mida. I had not yet been named war leader to all of our clans at that time, yet would I have you assume that I had been, and that Ilvin had taken it upon herself to follow me. What then would have been her lot? It required the direct intercession of Mida to free me, for I could not free myself; what would have been the fate of Ilvin, who had not been chosen to ride for Mida and Sigurr? Do you continue to believe the punishment I decreed too harsh, despite the fact that this male beside me will not allow true harm to come to the foolish warrior?"

"No," said Wedin in a whisper, and I turned my head to see the reflection of deep hurt in her eyes. "I had not thought upon what service to Mida might mean for you, Jalav, and now do I clearly see the reason no other is to be war leader to all clans of Midanna. There are likely to be few indeed who are able to show the strength demanded by the goddess, few indeed who have been tested so harshly and thoroughly. The glory of such a place is endless, yet do I give eternal thanks to Mida that another place has been given me. My strength had ever been my pride, yet do I now gladly put such pride behind me. May I ask what assurance you have that that male will give no harm to the Hitta? All know the perfidy of males, and how greatly lacking they are in a sense of honor."

"None better than I," was my reply, filled with some faint return of amusement at the manner in which Chaldrin winced at Wedin's statement. The male had been silent and expressionless during my words to Wedin, yet had I seen the manner in which his fist had tightened, and his jaw had clenched, as though he would have bared his teeth. "My knowledge of this male comes from the fact that I have been in his capture as well," said I, even more amused at the instant indignation shown by Wedin. "Though my time with him was far from pleasant, it was clear even during my capture that there was no cruelty in him. Also has he a knowledge of the needs of a Midanna. He will give Ilvin humiliation without blood-shame, punishment without soul-harm, all by doing only as he normally would."

"Sigurr" muttered Chaldrin, looking upon me with brows drawn low. "I know not whether the wench gives me praise or insult! Should I continue to spend time among these wenches, I will soon come to heartily regret my manhood."

"Should it be your intention to continue to follow the war leader, male," said Wedin, reluctant amusement upon her at Chaldrin's words, "you had best be certain that your manhood is not forgotten. Should it be, she will no longer find a reason for your presence."

"A reason for my presence," echoed Chaldrin, his brows remaining low though this time in lack of understanding, his eyes upon Wedin. "Should I forget my manhood, she will no longer-" His words ended abruptly as his skin darkened somewhat, and then was he entirely indignant. After a moment he blew out a breath of vexation before moving his gaze to me. "I had not known I was to serve your pleasure, wench," he growled. "Shall I come to you when darkness has fallen, or am I to await your summons?"

"Chaldrin would do well to recall that Jalav did not take him in capture," said I, continuing to feel amusement. "It was his decision alone to follow Jalav, all the while knowing that Jalav was a war leader. To fill the sleeping leather of a war leader is a great honor for a male, yet should Chaldrin feel unequal to the task, I would not distress him by pressing the matter. That he has ever felt little desire for Jalav is known to her, yet does one discount such things with one who has been called brother."

"It amuses you to put the feather to me," said the male, yet his annoyance was no longer evident. In truth a gleam of amusement had entered his eyes, and then he chuckled. "I feel greatly relieved that you are aware of how little desire I have ever felt for you, yet must I confess to a vast confusion over the duties I am to assume in your service. Never would I refuse the honor of a place in your sleeping leather, yet what of the wench Ilvin? Should she appear and accept the punishment you have demanded, am I to bring her to your sleeping leather as well? And what of Sigurr's Sword, who will undoubtedly join us before the fey has ended? He, too, will expect a place in your sleeping leather. A war leader of Midanna wenches must surely have the widest sleeping leather known to our world-upon which no sleeping is accomplished."

"Insolent yet amusing," allowed Wedin with a chuckle of her own as I looked upon Chaldrin with annoyance. "Once he has been taught the proper manner with warriors and war leaders, he will surely be in great demand among those who follow you, Jalav. Should his ability to please prove a match to his size, you will undoubtedly find it necessary to command rest for him."

"I will not see him used beyond his limits to endure, Wedin, of that you may be sure," said I, grimly pleased with the instant annoyance which took Chaldrin. The male disliked the manner in which warriors discussed him, yet had it been his choice alone to follow me. "For this journey the question will scarcely arise, for the male is free and may sleep in any warrior's leather he chooses--or none at all. As for the male Mehrayn"-and with these words I looked straight upon Chaldrin-"he may sleep in any leather save mine. Should he make the attempt, my dagger will taste of his blood despite any question of honor. Are my words clear to you?"

"Indeed," said Chaldrin, the vexation having returned to fill his eyes. "You welcome me to a place you deny to the Sword, perhaps believing Mehrayn a generous man. In most things is he generous indeed, yet not with you; to learn what was done to you by Aysayn and myself would perhaps do no more than bring an itch to his palm for the hilt of the Great Sword of Sigurr, the blade he alone may wield. To see me with my arms about you and my manhood deep within you would put the hilt of any sword in his fist, and thereafter the blade in my belly. Should you persist in this foolishness I may well take a length of leather to you despite the displeasure of the gods; I cannot stand beside you if my life is uselessly thrown away."

"You would have me believe you fear the sword of Mehrayn?" I demanded angrily. "That male may say naught to the one I choose to take for pleasure, else shall he find himself facing my sword! As I fail to fear him, for what reason would you not feel the same? Are we not nearly of a comparable skill?"

"Indeed are we nearly of a comparable skill," said Chaldrin, and again a dryness had entered his tone. "I am sure, however, that you have never witnessed the full skill of the Sword, else would you speak with less derision at mention of my reluctance to face him. He won his place shortly before my condemnation to the Caverns, and never, before or since, have I seen one to match him. I was the best of the Caverns, girl, and I fell to the magic of your swordplay through ill luck; as well matched as we are, it might as easily have gone the other way about. Give thanks that Mehrayn will not raise sword to you, my fine Midanna war leader; were either of us to face him in true battle, we both would fall."

The eyes of Chaldrin looked directly upon me, demanding a belief in the words he spoke, refusing to see how angry I was. Wedin attempted to question me upon the strangeness of a male believing he might share a war leader's sleeping leather, yet was it beyond me to discuss the matter. I assured the Summa I meant no insult, then did I put heels to my kan and take myself from the midst of others, into the forests where my thoughts might be calmed without distraction.

I rode for perhaps three hands of reckid at high speed before coming upon the small glade, and once through it I slowed my kan and turned about, then reentered it and dismounted. I had felt a great need for speed and solitude, yet the speed had done naught save tire my kan, and the solitude had done naught in any manner. The light of Mida had brought the high heat of the land, and once dismounted I was again able to feel it, its presence underscoring my longstanding need to bathe in cool, cleansing waters. I pushed away the agitation within me as well, yet the effort was useless. An unexplained fury blazed high within me, and no thought or deed seemed able to quench it.

Leaving my kan to feed upon grass and leaves I began to circle the glade, attempting to force my left hand from my sword hilt, attempting to allow the peace and loveliness of the glade to calm the swirling disturbance which turned my pace to a furious stride. What disturbed me most was that I knew not why I felt such fury, save that the actions of Mehrayn had had much to do with it. He had given my body great pleasure the last darkness, yet when I had attempted to leave him and ride as Mida demanded, he had given me humiliation equally as great.

"Where do you think to go, wench," he had asked as I reached a hand out toward my breech, which lay beside the lenga pelt. His palm touched my back beneath my hair and stroked its way down, the broad strength of the hand nearly reawakening the heat in my blood.

"I go where I have been bidden to go," I gave answer, quickly denying my reluctance to depart. "The sooner I depart, the sooner I shall arrive at my destination."

"And the sooner find the necessity for facing those other savage wenches," said he, pulling me from the place where I reached toward my breech, back onto his chest. He lay flat upon the lenga pelt, both hands now holding me to him, a defiance in the green of his eyes which boded ill for both of us. "Yet have you forgotten that you are forbidden to ride without my presence, and that punishment has not yet been given you. I would see the manner in which a chosen of the gods accepts punishment."

"One accepts a punishment of the gods in silence," said I, of a sudden more than eager to be away. "It is a method of acceptance deplored by males, yet demanded by the gods. Should Mehrayn continue to insist upon defying the gods, it is a thing he will learn of his own self. Release me now, for I must be gone from here."

"Must you, indeed," he murmured, those green eyes upon me, his arms remaining metal-like about me. "You speak of my defying the gods, yet do I see no one other than you whom I defy. Do you fancy yourself a god, wench? To me you seem no more than a willful girl child, one who has earned strict punishment with her willfulness. Had you listened to reason your life would not have been nearly lost, and now you again turn a deaf ear to the voice of reason. Remain here this darkness, and with the new light we shall ride out together, having put all thoughts of punishment behind us."

"Mehrayn forgets that his thoughts are not the ones to be considered," said I, beginning to squirm against him in an effort to free myself. "The punishment of the gods may not be avoided by putting thoughts of it from one's mind. I have not been healed so that I might dally through another darkness with a male, therefore are you to release me now!"

"Sigurr is my witness, I made the effort," said Mehrayn with a sigh, and then did he straighten himself to sitting without releasing his hold upon me. His gaze was stern and impatient which would indeed have been fitting if directed toward an erring warrior-to-be, and I felt a flash of anger that he would look upon me so. Jalav was a war leader, not the child he had named her! Again I attempted to deny his strength, yet was the effort as futile as ever.

"Apparently you spoke with truth when you said the punishment of the gods may not be avoided," said Mehrayn, wrapping his great hands about my wrists as I beat at him with useless fists. Without effort were my arms put behind me, both wrists then held in a single hand, the struggle I attempted doing no more than rubbing my bare flesh upon his. "Also did he speak truth when you said you are not to dally further with a man. There will be no dalliance in what now comes to you, wench, and should you find yourself able afterward to take to the trail as you insist you must, I will not fail to see it as the will of the gods. For now it is I who dispenses the will of the gods, and my own will as well."

He looked deeply into my eyes for a moment before taking my lips with strength, and surely did a trembling begin within me at his words. I had seen no indication of a lash in his possession, yet did it seem that he promised me no other thing. I knew of no other manner in which I might be kept from doing as I must, and although I struggled again to free myself from his hand upon my wrists and his fist in my hair, a numbness had entered me which quickly took my strength. I had not thought Mehrayn would do me so, yet was there ever the possibility that he did indeed move to the will of the gods. Withdrawing from his lips proved an impossibility, he held me so tightly, and then was his demand done.

"I had not thought you would be so anxious to begin," said he, a dryness to his tone. "Though you greet the doings of the gods with full unconcern, I had forgotten you seek always to do men the same. Perhaps you will now be taught better."

With such words did Mehrayn then put his free arm about me, and quickly was I turned so that I now lay upon him, belly down upon his thighs. My wrists continued to be held by his hand, and an instant later was my hair thrown forward so that it fell all about my face and head. Again I struggled, confused as to where his lash might be, and then was I touched in another manner, which banished all thoughts of a lash and brought great indignation to me. The open hand of the male had struck my bottom, bringing me humiliation rather than agony, and as he continued to strike me in the same manner, I knew that agony would have been much the easier to bear.

"Mida take you, you may not do me so!" I snarled after a long moment, throwing my head about in an attempt to free my vision of naught save thick black locks, also uselessly attempting to free my wrists. "I am a war leader of Midanna, and may not be done so!"

"You should have been done in this manner kalod ago," said the accursed male, continuing to strike me with the flat of his hand. "It would surely have taught you moderation in your doings, and would as surely have kept you from greater hurt. Perhaps it would be well if I gave my word to see you done in this manner each time you attempt defiance and disobedience, most especially with the gods. This punishment is most suitable for disobedient girl children, even should it please them to call themselves otherwise. You have been a naughty girl child, Jalav, and now do you pay the price."

I snarled again in wordless rage, twisting about with all of my strength, yet helpless against the strength of this male.

The male who held me now gained his will, for the accursed strength of his arm allowed him to continue striking me for an endless time, far longer than I was able to bear without truly feeling the thing. I had given him no sound which might be taken for weakness, yet was I shaken nearly as much as I was enraged. Once had Ceralt done me nearly the same, he having pursued me about a tent to strike so rather than holding me as Mehrayn did, and I had then been certain that the punishment was Mida-sent, for the goddess to allow a male to do me so. When Mehrayn released me the thought came again, for surely I knew I could not sit a kan. In truth I thought it possible that walking was beyond me, and so deep was the humiliation I felt that I knelt where Mehryan had put me, my head to the lenga fur, my eyes closed tight, my fists holding my hair to my face so that I might not be seen in my shame. Tears of rage had long since stained my cheeks, yet was such a rage useless, for without a weapon I could not regain my own from the male. And should the punishment indeed have been Mida-sent, even a weapon to hand would avail me naught. I knelt so in silence for a few short reckid, attempting to quiet the shudder breathing put upon me, and a sigh came from the male who had caused it all.

"The pain of a punishment should not be for he who gives is as for she who receives it," said Mehrayn, naught of the satisfaction he surely felt evident in his voice. "Had I not felt this doing necessary to your well-being, Sigurr would surely have taken me before I was able to find the fill to strike you. I know that once again I am no other thing than a 'male' to you, yet do I accept the designation gladly, for I also know that your safety this darkness is assured. A man who is willing to give his life for a wench, must also be willing to forgo her approval of his actions where her safety is concerned. You may lie upon the lenga pelt without concern, wench, for I shall bring you no further hurt this darkness."

His hands came to me then and removed the mass of hair from before me, ignoring the manner in which I attempted to thrust him away. The shame I felt was greater than the ache he had given me, yet was it necessary that I force my eyes open in order that I might see what I was about. Much had I expected a look of ridicule and derision upon the broad face of the male, a look which would surely have increased my shame, however, sight brought me no such hateful gloating. Filled with hurt were the green eyes of the male, seemingly a hurt for that which he had done. He showed regret, yet was there hurt to match the hurt he had given me. His hand came to brush at the freely falling tears upon my cheek, and then were his

arms about me, holding me tightly to his chest. I had no true desire to be held by him for the useless fury continued to fill me, yet was I unable to push away from the warmth of his body and the strength of his arms, as unable to deny him as I had been unable to deny Ceralt. Instead did I cling tightly to him, feeling his lips upon my hair, and thrust away instead all thoughts concerning the punishment of the gods.

In a short while had sleep come to me, and so had I passed the darkness, held tight in the arms of the male who had dared give me the punishment of a child. In some manner were the whippings given me by Chaldrin more easily forgiven and forgotten, and I paced about the glade with fury burning through me, knowing not where the fury should fall-

Knowing not where the fury should fall? The thought brought me to an abrupt halt, a churning in my middle underscoring the sacrilege of the thing. To feel fury toward males was a usual doing, much to be expected when a warrior moved among them, yet the other-

Many times since my choosing had I been given trials and punishment by Mida, shamings and pain and humiliation which I had not questioned when once it became clear that the goddess had indeed sent them. I had at first thought Mehrayn's doing to be his alone, despite the manner in which he had spoken, and then had come the thought that Ilida moved the male as she had once moved Ceralt. I had been forced to remain in the darkness by the doing of Mehrayn, continuing to feel a remembrance of the weight of his hand even to the new light-and then had I spoken with the Summa and stumbled upon that which brought the Clouds of Seeing. Had I left during the darkness, the Summa might well have been in their sleeping leather, the pouch bypassed in the taking of a different path through the cavern.

I raised my right leg to the stump of along dead tree, gazing balefully upon my life sign where it lay wound about the hilt of my dagger. Though I rode in Mida's name and would continue to do so, it came to me at last that I was no longer willing to accept in silence the trials she sent.

The light, pretty glade was well paced out by the arrival of Chaldrin and the two Summa. I swung the thin branch I had broken from a tree, as if it were a sword, bringing imaginary death and destruction to the golden light about me, using the exertion as an aid to lightening my mood.

"Ho, Jalav, provender is at hand," called Dotil as she and Wedin and Chaldrin rode their kand to where mine stood. "A large young paslat happened across me, and though the battle was fierce I was at last able to prevail. There will be much of a victory celebration, and I would be honored by your attendance."
"

Chaldrin chuckled at Dotil's words as he dismounted, and even Wedin showed a grin of amusement. I, too, smiled at the picture evoked by the light-haired Summa warrior, for the paslat is a small, gentle child of the wild, easily frightened and easily hunted. I joined the three by their kand and looked upon the paslat, pleased to note that the beast was indeed larger than most of its kind. Easily would its flesh feed the four of us, even with my hunger as high as it was. Dotil took her dagger to the carcass and began skinning it, and Chaldrin took my arm in indication that he wished to walk with him to the opposite side of the glade.

"How do you fare, wench?" the male demanded as soon as we were beyond hearing of the others. "When last I saw such rage upon you, bodies dropped lifeless to the ground about us. It was not my intention to give you such woe, and I have come to a decision. Should it become necessary, I will face the Sword as I faced so many others in my time in the Caverns, for I am indeed not without skill."

His voice was firm and confident with decision, and I halted to turn and look up at him. His dark-eyed gaze did not avoid mine, and decision was as strong there as it had been in his voice. I continued to look upon him for a brief moment, and then made a sound of annoyance.

"You are much of a fool, male," said I, allowing him to see my displeasure. "Think you I allow you to ride beside me for the reason that I have grown tired of seeing to battle my own self? Should it become necessary to face Mehrayn, it is I who shall do so."

"He will refuse to face you," said Chaldrin, folding massive arms across an equally massive chest. "Should it truly be your desire to have naught further to do with him, it will be best if I face him immediately, else must you resign yourself to empty furs. I shall ever be as eager for your use as I was in the Caverns, yet do I refuse to sneak about behind the back of another man. The Sword will allow no other to live with you while he lives, therefore must he be faced."

The foolishness the male spouted was so incredible I laughed. "Chaldrin, you are most amusing," said I, reaching my hand up to touch his shoulder. "You have succeeded in lightening my mood, and for that you have my thanks."

"You believe I jest?" said he, continuing to frown. "You see the matter in another light?"

"Most certainly," said I with a comfortable chuckle. "Though you continually succeed in putting the point from your mind, I am a war leader of the Midanna. No male is permitted to speak upon the matter of who will fill the sleeping leather of a war leader who is not a captive, and Mehrayn is well aware of this. Should the male appear, he will not attempt to counter my decision."

"He spoke of this to you?" asked Chaldrin, surprised. "You have his word upon the matter?"

"For what reason would his word be necessary?" I asked in turn, enjoying the feel of my hand against the warm, muscled flesh of the male. Much pleasure was Chaldrin capable of bringing to a warrior, and little need was there to deny myself upon that journey. "Mehrayn is aware of the duties and rights of a war leader, the responsibilities and freedoms demanded by the position. Should he appear, he will abide by that knowledge."

"And I, the only other man about, am to test that theory," said Chaldrin with something of a groan, closing his eyes briefly as though at the urging of deep pain. Then did his arms unfold and his hand came to mine, and gently was my hand taken from his shoulder. "With each moment that passes do I learn more of how little you know of men," said he with a sigh. "There is a great deal of difference between being captive to men and being cherished by one; you have learned much of the first, naught of the second. It is my fond hope that I shall survive till the new learning has had opportunity to come to you."

He then put his hand to my face before turning away from me, back toward Dotil and the paslet she skinned. I had no understanding of why the male seemed so despondent, yet was that the way of males, to fret over the unimportant. Again I chuckled at Chaldrin's foolishness, and then followed him to where Dotil skinned our provender.

Our halt for provender continued to be a time of amusement. When once the paslat had been skinned and quartered, the Summa and I began our feeding at once, relishing the taste of the bloody flesh. Not often among males does a warrior find opportunity to feed upon uncooked meat, for males must ever burn their provender to ashes before they find it palatable. The sweet blood ran down our fingers and marked our faces, and a full two reckid of silence passed before it came to me that Chaldrin stared upon us rather than upon his portion, his own provender as yet untouched. A good deal of dismay looked out from the eyes of the male, undoubtedly due to witnessing for the first time the manner in which Midanna feed, and then did a throat-clearing sound come from him.

"Have none of you wenches a need for a fire?" he asked, his voice filled with upset as he looked from one to the other of us. "Is there a ritual you follow which requires uncooked meat for your mid-fey meal?"

"Midanna prefer their provender as Mida has provided it," said I, refraining from adding that this preference held sway most often only upon the trail. When in their home tents, warriors would also see their provender cooked, yet not to the extent sought by males. "Surely Chaldrin will have no difficulty in emulating mere females."

Again dismay gripped the male, he failing to see the amusement in the eyes of Dotil and Wedin. The Summa knew I twigged the male, therefore did they refrain from comment. Chaldrin looked again upon the paslat which was his, likely considering the matter, yet did the effort prove beyond him.

"I cannot," said he, a great deal of distaste behind the words. "Never have I eaten uncooked flesh, as it is said some hunters are able to do. I am no hunter, and I cannot do as they and you. I shall have to build a fire."

"To stand above a fire in the heat of this land will prove no pleasant chore," said Wedin, her amusement continuing cloaked, her tongue licking the blood from her fingers. "Such inability to feed properly is no doubt Mida-sent, as a punishment for males who presume and attempt over-familiarity with the warrior they follow. Are you not aware of the fact that Jalav is Mida's chosen, as well as war leader to Midanna?"

"So I have been told, wench," said Chaldrin, as he rose to his feet. "I have attempted to mend the matter of over-familiarity, yet do others refuse to have it so. With war leaders and goddesses, a man stands little chance of finding victory in life."

The sourness in Chaldrin's glance to me again brought a smile, yet did I see him gone about the matter of gathering wood for a fire without additional comment. The paslat was toothsome and already doing well to heal my hunger, the glade was lovely in its gold and green, and even the grass I sat cross-legged upon brought comfort. I tore off another mouthful of meat with my teeth, chewed with pleasure, then abruptly felt the urge to sigh. The peace of the glade would not be long in continuing, and that was a great pity.

"The Hitta approaches with what seems determination," said Wedin about a mouthful, her tone held low. "You will, of course, do with her as you earlier proposed."

"Of course," I replied, following the movements of Ilvin with no more than the corners of my eyes. Once within the glade she rode to where our kand were tied, dismounted and tied her beast beside the others, then hitched up her swordbelt and strode toward me with the determination Wedin had spoken of. As we sat not far from our mounts, her light-haired form was quickly before me.

"War leader, I have come to accept the punishment decreed for me," said she, a look about her which spoke of a grim willingness to accept in silence the cruel stroke of the lash. "It is my duty to stand beside you come what may, therefore shall I do so."

"It is your duty to obey your war leader, sister," said I, barely glancing upon her as I continued with the paslat. "Apparently you have not yet learned this truth. Should Mida smile, the learning shall come to you in due course, along with a proper regret for having done as you have. You may now approach the male."

"As you command, war leader," said she, the resignation in her tone doing naught to lessen her determination. "As I withstood the capture so recently over, so shall I withstand this trial to Mida's satisfaction."

With such words did Ilvin then take herself toward Chaldrin, where the male had gathered what wood he required and had set it upon bare ground in anticipation of lighting. The male had paid little mind to Ilvin's approach, so did the Hitta warrior had to speak first.

"In accordance with the commands of the war leader Jalav, male," said she, looking down upon Chaldrin, "I am now yours as though in capture. You may do with me as those others did, yet shall I continue as I have ever been—a warrior of Mida."

"Who is first a girl," said Chaldrin, keeping his eyes from Ilvin as he coaxed a small flame to life amid the wood he had gathered. "Remove those weapons, girl, and do not approach me with them again save the desire for punishment comes to you. Should I again see you draped about so, without my express permission, it is punishment you will find in plenty."

Tight-lipped did Ilvin stare down upon his bent back, yet for no more than a moment before her hands went to her swordbelt. Forced obedience is greatly more difficult than that which comes from the heart, a thing Ilvin would soon know well. After her swordbelt her dagger was thrown to the ground, and Chaldrin stood away from the spreading, crackling fire he had begun.

"You may now see to the cooking of my provender," said he, looking down into light pools of anger which looked up at his calm. "Should you find the need to address me, you shall call me Chaldrin, not 'male.' I, however, shall continue to call you 'girl,' for you have not yet earned a proper name. You will cook my provender properly, girl, you will bring it to me when it is done, and then, perhaps, we will discuss what hunger you might have. When you eat you will eat at my direction, for I dislike the look of scrawny females."

Well did it seem for Chaldrin that Ilvin had rid herself of weapons; with his words ended he turned his back upon her and came toward where the Summa and I sat, apparently caring naught for the fury he had bred within the pale-haired Hitta warrior. The abrupt presence of a dagger in his back would have brought surprise to none of us, yet did Ilvin merely turn to the fire and begin to do as she had been bidden, her movements sharp with anger. Dotil laughed softly as Wedin smiled, both unconcerned now over what humiliation was brought to one who was under normal circumstances an enemy. Well they knew that Chaldrin would give no true harm to her, therefore were they free to find amusement in her plight. I, who had begun the thing, found amusement difficult in the face of memory, as difficult as looking warmly upon the male who now joined us.

"Perhaps I am mistaken, wench," said Chaldrin to Wedin as he took seat upon the grass beside us, "yet does it seem that your Mida has spoken once again. The punishment which was to be mine is now another's, and I am to have service instead. Perhaps I have found approval after all."

"The outcome of a battle cannot be known till the final sword thrust, male," said Wedin with amusement. "Only at that time does one learn the true will of Mida, and then is it far too late to mend one's ways."

"Even should one have another to whom the mending may be given," added Dotil, drawing Chaldrin's eyes to her amusement. "A true warrior is one who is able to do for herself, in all things able to stand alone. To allow another to stand for you is not difficult, yet does the doing prove the warriorhood of none save that other."

"I see," said Chaldrin, his dark eyes now resting upon me. "The outcome of a battle is never known till its end, therefore do you wench fight on even in the face of what seems utter defeat. To have another stand for you in times of trial means naught, therefore do you ever welcome the call to stand alone. Now do I understand more fully the actions of one who was no more than captive, never a slave; also is my admiration greater, for the point of view is a difficult one to live by."

"More difficult is the living in some other manner," said I, sending a glance toward Chaldrin as I rose to my feet. "As we have done feeding we will continue on, leaving a clear trail which you may follow when once you, too, are done. Guard your back more carefully, brother, for that is indeed a warrior you toy

with, one who is far from the slave-women of your city. It would bring me distress to learn that your life was no more through naught save carelessness."

"Indeed," said he, leaning to one elbow. "It would bring you distress to learn that I might no longer be used to prove a point you mean to see proven no matter the cost. And yet the matter no longer disturbs me, for I feel that Sigurr has taken note of my vow and now means to bring me regret for having spoken it. When the final stroke has fallen, then shall we know the true will of the gods."

"The male Chaldrin learns quickly," said I, again amused at the sourness which continued to ride him. "As you are now among Midanna, you may leave all concern over sleeping leather to them. Whenever possible; Midanna consider the needs of males as well as their own."

"Whenever possible," echoed Chaldrin, looking up at me where I stood. "Is this a time, then, when my needs are to be considered beside yours?"

"Come the final stroke, the will of the gods will be known to all," said I, grinning at the male who had shown faint hope ashine from his eyes. "Till then, one may do no more than that which one has ever done."

"Then I shall be somewhat longer in following than a meal may account for," said he, annoyance clear in his look and tone as he took his eyes from me. "I will have the enjoyment of a wench for a final time before another of her ilk is the end of me, for I will surely have no other opportunity."

"Do not tire yourself too far, brother," I said with a laugh which the Summa echoed. "Should the will of Mida match mine, you will have many further opportunities."

No more than a growl came from Chaldrin in reply, therefore did the Summa and I gather up the leavings of our provender, dispose of them where the children of the wild might take what they wished, then paused by the tiny rill beyond the glade where we washed briefly and drank deeply. Cold and clear was the water of the swiftly running rill, yet so shallow and narrow that little more than drinking was possible with it. I continued to long for a body of water in which I might bathe, yet did it continue necessary to wait. The two Summa and I then went to our kand, allowed them also a drink at the rill, then mounted and took up the trail once more.

A good deal of amusement was shared by the Summa over the red-faced fury of Ilvin, she who had kept her eyes from us as we departed the glade. Ilvin had clearly heard Chaldrin's announced intention to use her, and much had she felt humiliated.

Mida's light had slid some distance from its highest, yet was it also a distance from darkness when we came upon the wide, coolly enticing pond. The heat of the fey had become sultry motionlessness, resting atop the Summa and myself as though it were a thrown lenga pelt, bringing the sheen of sweat to cover each of us most thoroughly. Had Mida appeared and demanded that we continue on past the pond we likely would have done so, yet naught less had the power to keep us from so exquisite an embrace which beckoned like the hand of glory attained. The kand had little interest in the pond save for a need to drink, therefore did we allow them their fill before tying them where grass was within their reach and then turning again to the beckoning. At my insistence did Wedin and Dotil enter the water as I stood guard, for I judged that their need was greater than mine. Though it had been far too long since soothing, cleansing water had last touched my body, it was the Summa who had been in such recent capture to males. I knew well the feelings which held them, and knew also that the reckid of waiting would be much the easier for me.

With their weapons and clan coverings removed, the two Summa warriors dove from the bank into the deep pond water as though they were no more than warriors-to-be, laughing loudly as they each

attempted to be the swifter. I watched no longer than to see their heads emerge dripping from the cool, blue-green depths, and then did I turn my attention to the forests we had emerged from. The place we had chosen would suit as a camping place as well, for there was too great a drop between the bank and the water for children of the wild to find the location a favorite one for drinking from. Our kand had stretched their necks to reach the water, finding themselves just able to do so, a thing those with shorter necks would not be able to accomplish. I smiled faintly at the shouts of joy voiced by the Summa which came to me as my eyes moved idly across the forest greens and browns, until I caught sight of abrupt movement. A lone figure emerged from the direction we, ourselves, had ridden from, clearly a male, clearly one I had never before come across.

The male was mounted upon a gray kan, an unassuming mount for an unassuming rider. Tall was the male, and fairly broad of shoulder, yet was he as gray of hair as his kan, with many wrinkles creasing the tanned leather of his face. Little fat marred the leanness of his frame, yet was there a hint of effort in his movements when he drew rein before me and slowly dismounted. The body cloth upon him seemed clean, yet was it far faded from whatever its color had originally been to a colorless shade of light mud. No more than a dagger hung from the belt cinching the body cloth, and also was the male barefoot; to one side of the city-male leather seat of his kan an unstrung bow was tied, bringing to me an unvoiced sense of scorn. To ride unarmed and unprepared through the forests was to purposely seek the eternal Realm of Mida or the endless dark, yet what other would be expected to ride so than a male?

"Good fey to you, child," said the male as he halted perhaps two paces before me, his voice deep and gentle and filled with an attempt to soothe one he apparently believed feared him. His dark eyes rested upon me with mildness, a mildness which did much to increase the annoyance I felt. I stroked the hilt of my sword with the open palm of my left hand, and met his gaze with other than mildness.

"For one who wears no weapon, you give insult easily, male," said I, my tone as soft as my gaze was not. "Were I the child you named me, surely would you have already been sent to Mida's chains."

"Indeed," said the male, amusement coming to him with his startlement, his dark eyes seemingly taking in my sword for the first time. "Indeed do you speak truly, wench, and indeed did I mean no insult. From the number of kalod I have lived, all seem as children to me, however you are clearly no child. Your anger would bring me great sorrow, therefore would I have your assurance that I am forgiven."

The smile he sent was strong all through him, as though amusement held him tightly. I had no understanding of what thing brought him such amusement, nor did I care.

"My anger would bring you a great deal more than sorrow," said I, voicing a soft sound of scorn. "For what reason have you halted here, male?"

"For the reason that I am weary," said he, now apparently delighted as well as amused. "I am completely a stranger to these parts, I have traveled far, and have had no company save my own for too long a time. As a cure for the weariness of solitude and travel, I have halted to ask the favor of being allowed to rest a short while in the midst of three lovely wenches. And I assure you that I am entirely alone."

The male's final words brought my eyes to him again, for I had been sending my gaze about the forest behind him, seeking those who were perhaps attempting approach the while the male before me engaged me in converse. An unexplained approval accompanied the continued amusement so clear in the dark - gaze touching me, yet my annoyance continued undiminished as well.

"Whether or not you are accompanied remains to be seen," said I, feeling little friendliness and belief, and showing less. "Your wish, however, is impossible to grant, for there are none about here save three Midanna warriors. Best would be if you sought your wenches elsewhere."

The gray of his brows rose in a questioning manner, although there seemed little puzzlement in the depth of his eyes. His gaze traveled quickly up and down the length of me.

"So young, and yet so sure and uncompromising," he murmured, as though he stood alone. "One should know from no more than the look of her, and yet-" His words ceased as he recalled where he stood, and the smile he then sent was of a sudden filled with a deal of the weariness he had earlier spoken of.

"Forgive me, lady," said he, and this time did the words sound as though they were meant to be heard and heeded. "Frankness is a quality held too lightly by my people, one which causes my tongue to trip strangely. I ask the favor of being allowed to rest here the while, in company with you and your companions. I shall attempt to cause as little difficulty as possible, and certainly shall not bring you harm. Should this be counter to your wishes, I shall go immediately."

The dark eyes continued to rest upon me, yet without amusement or condescension. At last had the male seen that I had little patience for his sort and had thrown himself upon my mercy, all unknowing that mercy was a cruelty most often practiced by males alone. I had no desire for strangers skulking about and disturbing the pleasure of the forests, yet was there an interruption before I might voice these thoughts.

"Jalav, you have added another!" came the voice of Dotil, amusement heavy in her tone as she halted beside me. Her body and hair dripped freely to the ground by cause of her recent emergence from the pond, and laughter danced spritely in her light eyes. "I do not recall this one," said she, examining the stranger with her gaze. "Was he among those at the caves?"

"This male is not Sigurri," said I, prepared to cast a baleful look upon the Summa. "Nor might he be considered one who is 'added.' We shall have enough of males in our midst, therefore"

"Jalav, what occurs here?" asked Wedin, coming dripping to my other side to add her stare to Dotil's. "From whence comes this male, and whom does he follow?"

"I would follow any-or none," said the stranger, his eyes moving between the two Summa, delight touching him again. "Command me and I am yours, lovely Midanna warriors, or merely leave me unwanted and ignored. Should I be permitted to remain, the choice would be entirely yours."

"We have no need of the presence of another male," I rasped, disliking the manner in which Dotil chuckled and Wedin allowed her eyes to rove about the stranger. "To allow ourselves to be burdened with one such as this would be the height of folly, therefore"

"Perhaps his presence would be an unburdening," said Wedin, her eyes continuing to examine the male. "Chaldrin is yours and will use the Hitta when you have no desire for him, and also is the red-haired male yours to use. The presence of one for Dotil and myself would relieve us of the need to share the others, and would be looked upon as a gesture of true sisterhood by us. How say you, war leader?"

At that time did her eyes come to me, and Dotil's as well, both prepared to abide by my decision. The Summa would not disobey the commands of a war leader, yet had they put forward a request which held importance for them. I truly disliked the thought of allowing the odd, gray-haired male to remain, however the dislike was not reasonable whereas the request I had from the Summa was. I looked again upon the male, his return gaze steady enough yet filled with some odd discomfort, and after a moment nodded once with decision.

"Very well," said I to Wedin, looking upon the darkhaired warrior with undisguised reluctance. "As the male pleases you, you may have him. Should he prove to have brothers hidden in the forests who mean to fall upon us in attack, however, you and I will speak of this matter again when they have been seen

to."

"As quickly as I spoke to the male himself of it," said Wedin, amusement in the glance she sent to the male. He, however, took no exception to our words nor to the look sent him as many another male would surely have done, seeming only extremely pleased and also filled with amusement. He had wished to remain, and now would see it so.

"How are you called, male?" asked Dotil, squeezing the drops from her hair as she began to walk about the male in examination. "It would be unwieldy to merely address you as 'male,' as you shall not be the only male about."

"I am called S'Heernoh," said he, the sparkle in his eyes showing that his sense of amusement felt tickled by the inspection. "I am from a land far from here, therefore do I ask your patience should I behave in a manner in which you find insult. Never would I consider giving insult to such lovely-ah-warriors. And how are you called?"

"I am Dotil of the Summa clan," said Dotil, completing her circuit to stand again before the male S'Heernoh. "My sister Summa is Wedin, and the war leader is Jalav, once only of the Hosta clan, now war leader to all ten of her clans. You may address us by name, or as warrior or war leader, and need not spend words upon city male foolishness. It matters little to a warrior if the male she uses finds her 'lovely.'"

"And no doubt the thing matters even less to a war leader," said this S'Heernoh, the dark of his eyes leaving Dotil and Wedin's bodies for mine, then coming to my face. "Nevertheless does honesty compel me to insist that you are each of you indeed lovely, and I shall not retract the observation. You are each most beautiful, and none with eyes would voice the thought differently."

At mention of eyes did the male's own eyes glow most brightly, an odd look which was akin to heat and yet quite different from it. Clearly were his words addressed to me, perhaps to challenge the manner in which I gazed upon him, yet was he far of the mark in his effort to achieve my approval.

"No male cares to voice thoughts other than the same when he looks upon a warrior," said I, making no effort to soften the edge which had entered my voice. "Nor does he hesitate to attempt to take use from that warrior, she preferably bound at his feet or held by his greater strength. Many males have found approval in the look of Jalav, in the black of her hair and eyes, in the size of her breasts, in the length of her legs; many have called her lovely even as they put their manhood within her despite her protests. She then stood without weapon to hand and was therefore unable to keep the males from her, yet is she no longer weaponless. Beware lest your honesty touch her at the wrong moment, male, and unintentional insult be paid for with your lifeblood. In such an instance would apology be idle."

Pain and disturbance entered the dark depths which held to me and the creased face worked as though there were words to be spoken, yet time limped past and naught save silence hovered about us. The glibness seemed to have slipped from the tongue of the male as quickly as the amusement had left his eyes, and though I knew not why the male failed to pursue his insistences, I was able to thank Mida for the peace and turn away from the small group which stood unspeaking. My movement seemed to waken Dotil and Wedin, who left the male who had been given to them and returned to the water of the pond, this time taking their clan coverings with them so that the attempt might be made to rid the cloth of dirt and stainings. The male S'Heernoh held his place for another moment before turning away to add his kan to those of the Summa and myself, aware of the manner in which I kept watch upon him as well as the forests, yet seemingly resigned to the doing. In no way might his silence have been bettered, save that he had mounted up and ridden off.

The two Summa saw to their clan coverings and wet themselves for a final time, then withdrew again from the pond. The male S'Heernoh had unburdened his kan so that it might be at ease as it fed, yet had he left his bow with the leather seat of city males, still unstrung and therefore naught save a length of wood. Wedin and Dotil donned their clan coverings so that the cloth might dry upon them, then did they replace their weapons before asking the use of the comb which lay among my possessions. So long ago did it seem that I had packed that comb for my journey that I sighed, and then did I take myself toward the bank of the pond where I would leave my sword, dagger, breech and life sign the while I took joy from the blue-green wetness which awaited me. The gray-haired male was now the concern of the Summa, and well pleased was I to have it so.

Quickly did I take the coverings and weapons from me, and then did I step to the edge of the bank and dive directly into the water. The depth of the pond was considerable even just below the bank, therefore was there naught save pleasure brought by my rapid entry into the water. The blue-green wetness closed over my head with a golden coolness touching me all about, and I slipped quickly and smoothly through dim-colored joy, my hair spread widely all about me. Gentle children of the wild dwelt within the pond, I saw, those creatures called eldod which moved awkwardly upon the land yet flowed like silk beneath the waters, able to stay beneath for periods far longer than any warrior. A large white calf shot past quite close, curiosity bringing it near, fear continuing it upon its way. I smiled at its presence as I made for the surface, for it is said that good luck dwells among eldod, good luck which might be shared by those who chance upon an eldo. I knew I would have need of each blessing Mida might send, therefore was the sight of eldod more than welcome.

I continued to swim about for some reckid, glorying in the feel of wetness upon me, breaking through the shining gold patches of Mida's light which floated serenely upon the blue-green of the water in each place the leaves above allowed its presence. I remained not far from the bank I dove from-and then a sharp movement beneath the water caught my eye. The eldod seemed in the midst of agitated motion, and diving below showed me the cause of their agitation: the sleekly silvered shape of a hunting toray had appeared among them, its long, sharply moving body attempting to frighten away the adult eldod so that the calves would be easy prey.

Again I surfaced to draw air into my lungs, yet not only for breathing. The intruding toray challenged the peace of more than the eldod, and I felt it should know this.

"Wedin, your dagger-quickly" I called to the Summa, who turned to look at me with curiosity. "We shall feed upon toray this darkness!"

"Ah, toray!" exclaimed Wedin, removing the dagger from her leg bands and throwing it to where I might take it out of the air. "I have not had toray in too long a time. I wish you good hunting, Jalav."

I raised the dagger in acknowledgment then turned away, swimming a short distance before diving again beneath the warmed surface waters. The water-blurred silver shape of the toray continued to move menacingly among the eldod, its length nearly my height, its teeth prepared to slash at anything unable to protect itself. Four-legged was the toray, for walking about upon the land, with webs rather than claws at the ends of its feet, its teeth alone sufficient for taking its favorite prey, the gentle eldo. The hunter paid scant attention to me as I approached, considering me no more than an odd-appearing eldo, my size sufficient to keep me from being marked as prey, my lack of hunter-speed obscuring all menace from my approach. I closed as far as possible and remained so till my lungs began to demand a breath, rose quickly to the surface to breathe deeply a hand of times, then dove again, until I was upon the toray before it might do more than begin to turn to me. My left hand touched the short, smooth fur of its body as the dagger in my right sought its vitals, and then was I kicking rapidly away, to keep my arm from the slash of dagger-sharp teeth. My blade had penetrated the sleek body of my intended prey, yet had a rib

turned the point before it might reach deeply enough to end the hunt properly. The toray had now turned upon me, its jaws gaping wide in fury and pain, a cloud of red staining the water all about.

Again I kicked toward the toray, giving thanks to Mida that I yet retained sufficient air within me that I need not seek the surface, knowing well enough that the toray must now be ended before my need for air grew pressing. The silver shape flashed toward me as I made to twist in the water in an attempt to avoid its attack, my dagger doing no more than scoring deeply along its side, the stroke adding further to the mist of dark red leaking from it, yet doing naught to slow it. Again it turned and again it attacked, and although I was still able to keep its teeth from me, I began to be aware of a greater need to breathe. The long black lines which were my hair floated all about me, threatening to tangle me in a slow, caressing grip which would likely prove deadly, and again the toray came toward me, this time from above. Again my dagger did no more than score it as it twisted aside to rise above me again, and despite the growing ache in my chest, the toray's purpose came to me with clarity. At intervals was it necessary for the eldod to rise to the surface for air, a thing which the toray required as well; an awareness of this need had sent the toray above me in an effort to keep me from surfacing when the need arose, an interval which would be shorter than the toray knew. The need for air was becoming frantic within me, and although I now attempted to close with the hunter so that I might end it it avoided my attack, preferring to wait till it was no longer necessary to face the blade in my fist.

And then the water was cut by another shape, a large, broad shape of tanned skin and hair of red, driving between the toray and myself in attack at the beast. In the instant before I kicked for the surface I saw the dagger in his fist, its silver blade untouched by the smears which clung to mine. My head rose into the still-golden air and I gulped greedily, seeking to send the flashes of black from my vision, and once I had done so I filled my lungs as I had earlier and dived again, to rejoin Mehrayn in the hunt.

The male had done no better with his attack than I had with mine, for the toray continued to hang alert in the water. I circled widely about the toray where it rested unmoving the beast warily watching the small movements of Mehrayn which kept him from drifting away. A wide sweep of my dagger through the water, back and forth, drew a broad nod from the male showing he understood that I wished him to drive the toray toward me so that we might trap it between us. The attempt was in the hopes that the toray had bled enough to slow it; were it still in possession of its previous speed, it would likely escape, yet was the attempt worth the trying. Toray flesh was sweet and tender beyond many others, and its escape would truly be a loss. The attack would likely be the last as well, for Mehrayn could not have much air left to him, and to continue surfacing and diving would be tempting Mida to allow the toray a run at victory. Mehrayn kicked strongly toward the toray, his dagger tight in his fist and flashing toward the beast-and then were there other shapes about as well, above, and around the hunted beast. The toray had begun a retreat from Mehrayn which would have taken it well beyond me, yet the arrival of the other shapes halted this retreat. In seeming startlement did the toray back through the water directly to me, and this time no rib interrupted the journey of my blade. The silvery body stiffened, shuddered, then grew lax, the mist of red pouring from it increasing, and then was Mehrayn beside it and me, assisting me in raising the former hunter to the surface of the pond.

"Sigurr!" gasped the male when once he had refilled his lungs with the golden air about us, his head flinging back the hair over his eyes. "Another moment and the great god would have been before me, welcoming me to his Eternal Legion. Perhaps it was he who sent those shadows, to aid his Sword against fish and female alike."

"Those shadows were eldod," said I with a sound of disdain, seeing clearly that Mehrayn had not the lung capacity of Midanna. "Had the toray escaped us, it would have returned another fey to hunt among the eldod, therefore did the eldod take steps to see that it would not escape. Never before have I heard of eldod acting in such a way, yet am I pleased to have seen the thing done. The memory of lost toray

would have soured the taste of whatever else I fed upon this darkness."

"You mean to eat this?" Mehrayn asked, his brows raised in surprise as he glanced at the carcass we supported between us. "Good fortune truly smiles upon the wench who is able to savor the taste of that which attacks her."

"It was I who attacked the toray," said I, amused at the tone and words of the male, shaking the wet hair from my eyes as he had done. "Had the toray found victory over me rather than the other way about, it would not have savored my taste with equally as much relish. Toray have not been allowed to acquire a taste for Midanna."

"It was you who attacked it," said Mehrayn, his tone flat, his green eyes narrowed, no note taken of the balance of my words. "Perhaps we had best return to the bank before we discuss this further."

I saw no need of further discussion yet I had observed many times, the strangeness of males. With a small shrug I began to move with him to the bank, where Wedin and Dotil waited to assist in removing the toray from the water. Two other males stood there as well, Sigurri warriors by the black of their body cloths, the gray-haired male S'Heernoh astand behind all, looking on in faintly amused interest. We brought the toray to the bank, Mehrayn and I, and then did we push from beneath as Wedin, Dotil and the two Sigurri pulled and heaved till the carcass lay upon the grass. Much weightier without the water than within was the toray, and Mehrayn and I found the need to move some paces to the right before we, ourselves, were able to climb from the water. The male, I saw, was yet clothed in the black body cloth he habitually wore, a thing I had no understanding of till he turned about and sent an odd look toward me.

"I seem to have no true understanding of what occurred beneath those waters," said he, sending one broad hand to push the sopping strands of hair from his eyes. "Upon my arrival did I see the agitation of the pond water and the spreading blood, and then did that stranger speak of your being in the pond. I dismounted immediately, removed my swordbelt, took my dagger, and dove to your assistance. Am I now to understand that you required no assistance?"

"On the contrary, your assistance was quite timely," said I, crouching down to plunge Wedin's dagger into the ground before attempting to squeeze the water from my hair. "The toray was attempting to keep me from the surface, and would have attacked me even had I been able to bypass it. Had you not come when you did, my life might well have been forfeit. "

"Then I am more than pleased to have arrived when I did," said he, grinning. "It was necessary to delay my departure by cause of the need to pass on your findings and Chaldrin's thoughts concerning the vapor you detected in the caves, the traces of Sigurr's Breath. Sigurr's city will now be safe from attack by the caverns, therefore is it most fitting that you were saved during your own attack against the toray. When darkness has fallen, I will reward you for your assistance and you may reward me for mine."

The look in his green eyes was most familiar. I squeezed the last of the drippings from my hair, threw the still wet mass of it behind me, pulled Wedin's dagger clear of the ground, then straightened to my full height.

"Should it be your wish to fill a war leader's sleeping leather," said I with a shrug, "the matter may be easily seen to. Should you adequately wipe out the insult given her, she may well consider your use among those others available to her. Should the insult remain standing, however, Mehrayn may look elsewhere for giving and receiving reward."

"Others?" said Mehrayn with a yelp, the grin abruptly abandoning him. "Insult? Of what do you speak, wench? In what manner am I expected to soothe the ache of your feelings?"

Annoyance had come to fill the green of his eyes, an annoyance which I easily shared. Had he not been male, it would not have been necessary for him to put so foolish a question.

"To assuage the insult given me, you may face me with swords," I snapped, holding his gaze with mine. "As you have been of some assistance to me in the past, you have my word that I will not take your life. There should, however, be some provision made for your possible wounds being seen to."

"For my possible wounds being seen to," he echoed, a flatness now in his tone. "The wounds you refer to will, of course, be those I would force you into giving me. It seems to have left your memory that I have already refused to face you, save that you alone draw sword and I merely stand there. If this is what you wish, wench, I will not gainsay your attempt."

"Do not be more foolish than your maleness calls for, male," I said derisively. "You know well enough that I will not draw weapon against one who merely stands his ground, even though that one is male. I have given you challenge for there is now no reason that you not face me."

"Has something occurred of which I am unaware?" he asked, his face now reflecting deep confusion, his forehead creased in perplexity. "In what manner do you see it as permissible that I face you?"

"In what manner may you not?" I countered, full weary with the thickness of the male. "Are we not now quits upon the matter of life-debt?" I asked. "Though Jalav returned Mehrayn's life before the keren, Mehrayn has now returned Jalav's life before the toray. As the matter now stands even between us, we may freely face one another in challenge."

As the point was of sufficient simplicity for even a warrior-to-be to understand readily, I fully expected the same understanding from the male. What was unexpected, however, was the stunned comprehension which took him, adding itself to the bewilderment which also appeared. Warrior had the male before me called himself, yet did he stare down upon me as though I had demanded that he take wing and fly.

"Am I to understand that you believe a matter of-life-debt alone has kept me from facing you?" he asked in confusion. "It is true I owe you my life, yet the love I feel for you is a greater restraint. I could not strike at one I love."

"Do not weary me further with male foolishness," I replied, dismissing the thing with a curt gesture. "I have heard many males speak of this thing they term 'love,' yet is it part and parcel with the cruelty of 'mercy.' When a male professes this 'love' for a female, he is stating to all his intention of taking that female in slavery. As it is 'love' he feels, he must be obeyed by the female, and served by her, and must be allowed to take her use at any time desire comes to him. Also has he the right to direct the living of her life, for should she indulge in battle or the hunt, she will endanger herself beyond his wishes. A male may not profess 'love' for one who has gone to Mida's Realm, nor may he give her humiliation for doing as she must."

"All men-and some wenches-do as they must," said he, folding well-muscled arms across his chest as he continued to gaze down upon me. "No man will punish a wench for doing as she must, yet will he certainly punish her for endangering herself beyond the necessary by thoughtlessness. Should the occasion arise, I will do again as I have already done, no matter the greater pain brought to me by the doing. And this is the true meaning of love, wench, the willingness to give necessary pain to one's beloved despite one's own pain to insure the safety of that beloved life."

"Then Jalav must certainly be the beloved of many males," said I, undoubtedly showing the disgust which I felt. "Never have they hesitated in the giving of pain and humiliation, yet have they hidden well the greater pain felt by them. Such courage is truly awe-inspiring, and worthy of endless praise. Should you overcome your hesitancy to face me as easily as you have overcome the deep soul-hurt so recently felt

by you, do not fail to speak to me of it."

I attempted to turn from him then, to return Wedin's dagger and retrieve my own weapons, yet did his hand come to my arm to halt me.

"I shall not spend words in an attempt to change your view of men and their doings," said he, his tone quiet yet determined, his eyes the same. "Too much has indeed been done to you for mere words to be effective, therefore shall I continue on as I must, and pray to Sigurr that the truth be eventually shown you. For the moment, however, I would know why such burning need to face me fills you. I have scarcely been guiltless of taking liberties with you in the past, some of which surely brought greater insult than that brought during the last darkness. For what reason do you now insist so firmly that we stand against one another with weapons?"

"No warrior would need ask so obvious a question," said I, seeing the annoyance which flashed briefly in his eyes, an annoyance which was not unexpected. "I am a warrior and war leader of Midanna, who consider it dishonorable for one of high skill to stand in challenge against one of considerably less skill, save that that other is she who demanded the challenge. Much did I believe you akin to most males, clumsy and with little skill to speak of, therefore did I refrain from pressing the matter of challenge in the past. Now that I have learned the truth, that you stand among the best of your males, I need no longer consider the challenge dishonorable."

"I see," said he, his light eyes hooded, his expression thoughtful. "And in what manner did you learn this enlightening truth?"

"The matter was spoken of by Chaldrin," said I, growing impatient to be about other doings. "He is of the opinion that no other is able to equal your sword skill, and Chaldrin is well versed in the matter of battle and weapons. Should it be your wish to converse further upon the point you may do so with him, for he arrives now with Ilvin. Jalav no longer has interest in converse."

Curtly did I nod toward where Chaldrin and Ilvin had appeared among the trees, seeing the strangely grim nod of Mehrayn before turning from him for the final time. Had his hand not already left my arm, he would have found me well prepared to tickle it with the dagger I held. Wedin and Dotil, I found, stood some few steps beyond the toray carcass exchanging words with the two Sigurri who had accompanied Mehrayn, having left the stranger S'Heernoh behind with the carcass. It was this S'Heernoh who put a hand up before me, halting my stride before I might pass him on my way to the Summa.

"I am greatly pleased no harm has come to you, war leader," said he in a soft voice, his dark eyes slitted against the dusk. "That man you spoke with, he with the hair of red-his concern for you must truly be deep and deeply felt. When he learned that you swam beneath the waters of the pond among indications of spilled blood, he immediately dove to your assistance without thought to his own safety. Such concern is rare."

"It is scarcely a matter of concern," said I impatiently. "The male then owed his life to me, he believes I ride in the service of his god, and also does he find great pleasure in my use. It is these things which cause his concern, as S'Heernoh shall learn the longer he remains in these lands. Should he wish to retain life long enough to remain in these lands, he had best first learn to be silent upon matters which concern warriors alone, and to keep from their path when he has not been summoned by them. Are my words clear to you?"

"Perfectly," said he, seeming annoyed and frustrated, he withdrew a pace. "It was not my intention to intrude, war leader, and I ask your pardon."

A wordless sound came from my throat in response to his reply, for no true words were called for. The

male spoke properly self-effacing words in apology for his intrusion, yet did I continue to find annoyance in his presence. I knew not why this should be so, yet it was.

No more than three paces farther were Wedin and Dotil and the two Sigurri, and as I approached, their words came clear to me.

". . . shall, of course, consider you," said Dotil to the Sigurri before her, amusement clear in her tone. "Midanna will ever consider those males who wish to follow them, yet not to the exclusion of all others. My sister and I already have a male who is eager to serve us, and perhaps, should he prove inadequate"

"We will then be allowed to make the attempt to please you," said one of the males, clearly exasperated. "You mean to have us stand about till then, praying to Sigurr for the failure of another, so that we might then perform for the honor of a wench in our furs"? Do you take us for slavies of the Caverns?"

"Should you be too persistent, we will not take you in any manner," put in Wedin, her left hand arrested upon the hilt of her sword. "It amuses us to see males skip about before us in an attempt to gain our attention, yet too great an insistence brings annoyance rather than amusement. Should your need be so great that you are unable to contain it, perhaps you would do well to speak to the war leader here. Possibly she has not yet settled upon a male for the darkness."

The eyes of the two males came to me where I stood, taking no note of the dagger I handed across to Wedin, their gazes immediately filling with startlement which quickly became the approval and heat which was usual when males gazed upon me. Jalav stood without covering or weapon of any sort, and the two light-haired Sigurri grinned well before the male who had spoken earlier slowly shook his head.

"It would give us great pleasure to speak to the war leader," said he, "and yet speak to her is all we might do. Had we a wish for an early entrance to Sigurr's Eternal Legions, there are far simpler and less painful methods of beginning the journey than putting a hand to the chosen of Sigurr's Sword. I, personally, consider it a great pity and loss, yet there is naught I may do for it."

"I am the chosen of none save Mida," said I to the male. "Sigurr's Sword will not share this war leader's sleeping leather till he faces her, and perhaps not even then. Should it be my desire to use you or your brother, male, you will come to me when summoned."

"Only should it be Sigurr himself who summons," said the second male, both continuing to grin well. "Sooner would I face the wrath of a wench than the wrath of Mehrayn. Not for naught is he Prince of Sigurr's Sword."

"And not for naught is Jalav the chosen of Mida," said I, looking upon the two fools of males for a final time. "As you are free I may not merely take your use, yet are we three Midanna free as well. As you refuse this war leader, so shall you be refused by her warriors. Perhaps the Sword you stand in so great a fear of will allow you to return to your city."

Dotil and Wedin chuckled well at the immediate stricken look which took the two Sigurri males, and then did the Summa take themselves back to the toray carcass the while I continued on to my weapons and breech. Much would it have pleased me to have no males about upon that journey, yet had the presence of Mehrayn and Chaldrin grown to two further Sigurri and the stranger S'Heernoh as well. The matter had moved far beyond my ability to halt or alter, therefore I had to trust in Mida to rid me of the males before my arrival at the visiting. Were she to fail to do so, she would undoubtedly find the necessity for deciding upon another chosen, if not by cause of the enemy Midanna, then surely because of the males themselves.

With breech and weapons replaced and my life sign again wound about my dagger hilt, I hefted the pouch of that which brought the Clouds of Seeing and then resolutely made for my kan. Chaldrin and Ilvin had ridden up to add their kand to the string of those of the rest of us, and as I reached my kan I saw the abrupt appearance of Mehrayn beside the two. The red-haired male had taken a moment or two to wring the wetness from his black body cloth before replacing it along with his weapons, and now his hand fell heavily upon the shoulder of Chaldrin.

"Greetings, brother, greetings!" said he to Chaldrin in so jovial a tone that the white-clad male turned to look upon him in startlement. "How pleased I am to have you join us!"

"Perhaps I am mistaken," said Chaldrin in a drawl, "yet do I feel that the Sword would have been even more pleased had I not joined this group. Had I been alone it might well have been so, yet the wench I ride with is able to read the forests as another reads the scarring upon his own palm."

"Not at all, brother," said Mehrayn, the heartiness dropping from his voice as his hand withdrew from Chaldrin's shoulder. "I have waited anxiously to thank you for speaking so well of me, better than I had thought you would. A man is pleased to know that another thinks so highly of him."

"What has she done?" asked Chaldrin with immediate weariness, one broad hand moving to rub at his eyes. "It can be no other thing than the wench, and I would . . ."

"She has challenged me!" said Mehrayn with such low fury that Chaldrin winced visibly at his vehemence. "She was told how able I am with a blade, and has therefore deemed me able enough to face her!"

"You have no need to accept the challenge," said Chaldrin, considerable strain audible in his voice. "Her blood need not be spilled in order for her to learn that you are able to best her."

"Her blood!" hissed Mehrayn, his fury growing. "You know well enough that I could not strike her, yet what would there be to stay her weapon? In no manner would I find myself able to counter her, yet do I also foolishly wish to remain unsliced! And I cannot simply refuse her challenge. If I fail to face her, I will never again be allowed the pleasure of her! Why could you not have told her I was inept, and was named Sigurr's Sword only through the influence of my family? For what reason was it necessary to laud me to the skies?"

"I spoke without thought," said Chaldrin with a sigh. "The wench demanded to know the reason I had no wish to face you, and I spoke the truth without thought as to what its effect would be on her. Does she mean to force you to the challenge?"

"By no means," said Mehrayn in a voice near to a growl, his light eyes meeting Chaldrin's dark ones levelly. Nearly of a size were those two males, and although Chaldrin was larger of girth, Mehrayn had the shoulder-width of him. "By no means am I to be forced to the challenge," said Mehrayn, vexation holding him close. "I need not face the stubborn she-lenga till I am of a mind to do so. Once I have faced her she will consider allowing me entrance to her sleeping leather, yet till then I am to look elsewhere for release. Sigurr take me, I have no wish to look elsewhere!" In vexation did the male begin to stalk about, yet a sudden thought turned him back to Chaldrin. "Nearly did I miss the point, so befuddled does that wench cause me to be. For what reason would you need to face me, that it was necessary for you to speak of why you would not wish to?"

The abrupt question seemed one Chaldrin had expected, yet expectation had not heartened him to its coming. Again he sighed, as though resigned to some matter, and slowly shook his head at Mehrayn.

"When once the dark god turns his face from a man, never again does he smile upon him," said he to a puzzled Mehrayn. "I had thought the Caverns the harshest thing I would face through Sigurr's displeasure,

yet have I found that there are things beyond harshness. I would not retract my vow to the wench even were I able, and yet-I had hoped for more time to stand beside her."

"You sound as though we had already faced one another and you had fallen," said Mehrayn, returning to stand before Chaldrin and look upon him with the puzzlement he continued to feel. "From what I, myself, have seen of your skill, a set-to between us would be no preordained victory for Sigurr's sword. For what reason do you speak as you do?"

"I speak as I do for the reason that I have learned to know men and what moves them," said Chaldrin, in no manner avoiding Mehrayn's eye. "A man who is barely your equal will fight you with the ability of a fiend from the depths, should he be given the proper motivation. I have seen your eyes when you looked upon the wench-and could in no manner envision myself doing as she insists and still retain life in my body. Should matters continue on as they are, she will surely have her way, for I am but a man. To put off the inevitable is foolish; would you have us face one another now?"

Mehrayn sighed. "I believe I now understand her reference to 'others,' " said he, both vexation and annoyance clear in his tone. "I see she does indeed seek to force me into facing her, yet would I sooner have that bottom within reach of my hand again. You will, of course, refuse her should she come to you."

"Refuse her?" said Chaldrin with the faintest of smiles, the while I bristled with anger where I stood. "Have I not said I am no more than a man? The taste of her fills even my waking dreams, the sight of her bringing desire like none I have ever felt. Should she come to me and press those large-pointed breasts into my flesh, touch my lips with the softness of hers, put her hand to me-Would you find yourself able to refuse her?"

"Much does it sound as though you have already had her use," said Mehrayn in so soft a voice that all amusement left Chaldrin, his smile fading beneath the green of the stare which held him. "This is foolishness, I know, for the wench is mine, yet does it seem that the taste of her is familiar to you. You will, of course, assure me that I am mistaken.

"In the Caverns, no wench belongs to a single man, nor are her origins made known to us," replied Chaldrin in a voice steady enough, yet did it seem that he looked upon his own death. "To refuse to take use from a wench such as that would have been lunacy, and none of us suffered from lunacy of that sort. As you wish the truth you shall have it: I would not have kept from her even had I know her to be Sigurr's, not to speak of yours. And quite confidently does the wench assure me that you will have no objection to her taking another man in your presence. Even when she was a captive, said she, her use was free to all who wished it, and no man has ever sought to keep her his alone. Now that she is again free, she insists, surely none will seek to limit her use of what 'males' she finds about her. Mehrayn is aware of the rights of a war leader, said she, and will not seek to limit her prerogative. Her belief in this is firm, and should it be necessary to speak words of disagreement, the chore must fall to Sigurr's Sword. I am more than weary of being laughed at."

"Laughed at," muttered Mehrayn, his left hand repeatedly freeing his sword a hand-span and then thrusting it back within its scabbard again. "No man has ever sought to keep her as his alone. The prerogatives of a war leader!" Then were his eyes blazing. "What am I to do?" he demanded, as though the other male held knowledge which he refused to share. "in Sigurr's name, tell me what I am to do! In all my kalod of life, in all my kalod as Sigurr's Sword, never have I felt so helpless! She will listen to no word I speak, for she has been taught that men speak 'foolishness' and lies, and is able to find trust in none of us through what has been done to her! And above that, she rides in the service of the gods! Any man who attempts to distract her pits himself against the gods! Willingly would I stand with sword in hand against any being who ever lived, yet how am I to challenge the gods for her? Every man who has attempted to do so has been thrown aside by them, as so much refuse! Tell me what I am to do!"

"Brother, I cannot," said Chaldrin in a voice filled with pity, his hand going to the shoulder of Mehrayn, who now stood with head down, as though in defeat. "My lot is simple in that I merely need follow her and stand with her, even should my life be forfeit. Had I the need to stand between her and her goals so that I might be seen and taken note of-fear of the wrath of the gods would surely drive me shuddering to my knees, not to speak of having to interrupt the wench's single-mindedness relating to her devotion to duty. Those who attempt to stand before her in the path she was set upon by the gods must face that blade of hers-and the skill which few have ever attained. Should you need the assurance of one who was foolish enough to face that blade, I give you my word that she will never fall without taking her due. Glibly did I tell her that you would easily best her were you to face one another, and perhaps this would be so. In full truth do I say to you that you would not go unscathed even were you to triumph over her, for she fights as none I have ever faced."

"I have no wish to face her," said Mehrayn, his head slowly rising from its position of defeat. "As Sigurr is my witness, I shall never face her. My sole desire is to hold her forever in my arms, and this I shall do though every god who ever stands in denial. I know not how I shall accomplish this, yet I shall. In this, above all other things, I shall not be bested. And you, my friend, had best watch your step."

Briskly did he clap Chaldrin upon the shoulder and then take himself off, a determination about him so strong that both Chaldrin and I could do no more than stare silently after him. Some time had it been since confusion had swirled so thickly about me, yet had it not lost its ability to set my head to spinning. What the words of the male meant I had no true idea, yet did one small part of it disturb me considerably. As I had already put away the small sack in among my belongings, I left the side of my kan to walk to Chaldrin where he still stood gazing after Mehrayn.

"What does he mean to do?" I asked, drawing Chaldrin's immediate attention. "Of what does he speak, and what does he mean to do?"

"You heard?" asked Chaldrin, looking down at me. "Should you have heard all which passed between us, you must know as well as I that he means to make you his alone. I have seen you beside him, wench, when indignation did not ride you as a warrior upon a kan. You cannot mean to deny him."

So quietly did Chaldrin speak, with calm acceptance in both tone and eyes, his gaze firmly upon me, his fingers resting upon his swordbelt. Broad and strong and calm was Chaldrin as he stood in his white body cloth looking down upon me, yet was he no more than a child speaking upon matters he had no true understanding of.

"I have no need to deny him," said I, feeling quick anger at such colossal foolishness. "It shall be Mida who denies him, as she has denied others, this time, perhaps, with Sigurr's assistance. And not again shall I barter my soul to reclaim the life of one who stands against the will of the gods. Not again."

I turned and strode quickly away from Chaldrin, aware of his wish to speak further upon the matter, yet unwilling to be drawn more deeply into useless male foolishness. A few steps into the forest and our halting place was gone from easy sight, yet did I continue on till I was well away, beyond sound of the others as well as sight of them. The lowering heat of the fey was again oppressive, taking the cool so recently given my body and turning it to small rills of sweat, save for where my still-wet hair touched me. My left palm rubbed fretfully against the hilt of my sword as I strode back and forth before a large, old tree, seeking to calm the mountainous turmoil which threatened to whirl me away forever from the sight of all.

The vanity of males! He who was pleased to call himself the Prince of Sigurr's Sword had come firmly and strongly to the decision that Jalav was to be his, therefore was Jalav not to deny him! Such a decision had Ceralt made, and nearly had Ceralt lost his life for the doing! Was I to again stand between a male

and his fate, accepting agony and terror beyond description so that he might be saved from that which he had so willingly and casually set himself to?

I put a hand to my middle at the strong flash of illness which clawed through my inner flesh, knowing I would not survive another such attempt. The very thought of it froze me where I stood, taking the strength from my knees and threatening to send me senseless to the ground. A war leader of Midanna should know no fear, yet had this war leader learned the true meaning of terror, and surely would such lessons keep her from acting in defense of one whose absence was an ache deep in the chest-and whose presence was constant irritation. To put such a demand to me again was beyond reason. I put a hand to the rough bark of the tree I stood beside, and in Mida's name did I vow it. Not again!

Fully a hin must easily have passed before I again joined those who traveled with me. Our halting place had become our camping place, and the first thing which came to me was the aroma of roasting toray, the cooking of which had become the chore of Ilvin. Flushed and sweating did she stand above the fire which had been set, and that despite the fact that the wet of her hair spoke of her having been allowed to bathe. The male S'Heernoh also seemed badly in need of cooling and washing, for it was he who labored on in an attempt to skin and gut the balance of the toray. Red to the elbows were his arms in gore, the same smeared here and there upon his body. Much did it seem that he somehow felt put out, and sight of his annoyance brought a smile to my lips. It pleased me that Wedin and Dotil received a full measure of service from the male they had allowed to follow them, service the male may not have expected to give. Midanna warriors are firm with those males who give them allegiance, so that the males will not mistake their place. Full Midanna warriors were the Summa, and this the male S'Heernoh would learn.

Mehrayn sat to one side of the camp with his males, his large body stretched at ease upon a cloth-covered lenga pelt, the other two to either side of him, all three conversing casually in low tones. Somewhat farther about the camp sat Chaldrin and the two Summa, the warriors speaking, the male merely listening. None save Ilvin took note of my reappearance from among the growing shadows, the unfinished pipe I had set myself to carving held in my hands. The Hitta's eyes met mine above the fire she stood near, a streak of something dark upon her left cheek, a look of bridled fury within the gaze she sent me. The warrior in her chafed at the tasks she had been set to as though she were a city slave-woman, however she had not as yet been touched by any part of the knowledge which would have come to her had she been in true capture. She continued to feel herself justified in following me, a thing shown clearly in the stubborn set of her body which remained even after her head had lowered at my approach.

"Chaldrin has not yet spoken of what pleasure he had when you were earlier made to serve him," said I very softly as she poked at the cuts of toray with the blackened end of the stick she held. "Were you made to serve well?"

Her body stiffened yet further at my words, and the face which raised to me had darkened with anger.

"It is beyond me why you allow that one to follow you, Jalav," said she, affronted indignation thick in her voice. "The male is impossible, and much would it please me to put the point of a blade in him! Come the fey I am no longer bound to him, I shall face him no matter the cost!"

"There are some costs, warrior," said I, "which are beyond a Midanna's ability to meet. You have given your word to obey this male in all things till I release you from the vow. The male is looked upon by me as a brother, and I would not care to see him harmed. What would be the cost to you, Ilvin, if I were to fail to release you from your vow? Would you see yourself forsworn?"

With the query Ilvin turned pale. No longer were there words in her throat nor fury in her widened eyes, and I stood but a moment longer before turning from her toward the kand, where I would put my unfinished pipe away beside the sack which would soon fill it. The kand had been seen to and were quiet

and satisfied some already dozing where they stood, Gandod, in their place, would have been in fighting temper, the manner in which they ever greeted the coming darkness, the time of fey they most preferred to vent their fury upon one another. For that reason were gandod mounts to warriors alone, for males cared little for attempting their taming. Without disturbing the drowsing kand I exchanged pipe for comb, then went to seat myself between Chaldrin and the Summa.

"The followers of you both see well to our needs," said I to male and warriors, settling myself upon the thick, soft grass before taking up the comb. "I eagerly anticipate the cut of toray which will be mine."

"Cooked toray," said Chaldrin with a growl, bringing forth chuckling from Wedin and Dotil. "I had thought the great Midanna warriors preferred uncooked flesh to fill their bellies. For what reason do you now see it cooked?"

"For the reason that we wish it so," said I, glancing in amusement at the male. "Midanna warriors do as they please, a thing Chaldrin will come to know well."

"Chaldrin is already aware of that thing," said the male, his voice filled with annoyance. "Would that he were able to take a switch to another of their number as easily as he did with that yellow-haired wench."

"You gave punishment to the Hitta?" asked Wedin as I turned a frown upon Chaldrin for his insolence. "For what reason was it necessary that you do so?"

"For the reason that she presumed," said the male, sending his calm, dark-eyed gaze to the Summa. "When I was done with my mid-fey meal and informed the wench she would then serve me with her body, she in turn informed me that she had ever taken from a male, never having been taken, and would serve me only in that manner. I cut a switch and whipped her till she screamed, then taught her the proper manner of accepting a man. Once taught, she was able to do no other thing than obey me completely. Well may she be Midanna, yet is she first and most thoroughly female."

The silence of hard-eyed blood insult settled upon the two Summa, clan commitments forgotten in the face of such treatment toward one of their own. Few others save the Silla among the enemy clans would see another Midanna savaged so by a male without feeling rage, yet were the eyes of Chaldrin upon me rather than upon those who were near to giving him challenge. I considered the words he had spoken very briefly, then did I make a sound of derision.

"So my brother seeks to give insult and anger," said I, allowing my gaze to hold his as I moved the comb slowly through the tangles of my hair. "Perhaps it would be well to inform him that should he be challenged, his sister would be honor-bound to stand beside him in that challenge. Also, should he bear the remains of a wound which might well hamper him during battle, honor would also demand that she stand alone in that challenge. Is this what Chaldrin wishes?"

The calm quickly fled the gaze of the male as his hand went to the white cloth about his middle, consternation and alarm immediately replacing that calm. The thick brows of Chaldrin lowered as he sought to look within me, and then did his eyes move to Wedin.

"She puts the feather to me again, does she not?" he asked, the rumble of his voice fainter than it normally was. "You and she are the same, you ride in service to the same goddess, you laugh and speak together as sisters. She would not face you above blade edges, nor would you face her."

"Honor demands no other thing," answered Wedin, her tone stiff and devoid of all friendliness. "Even should the war leader deplore your actions, she is bound to stand beside or for you, just as we are honor-bound to stand in challenge. Think you sisterhood comes before honor? Without honor, sisterhood would be idle."

Deep frustration took the male then, anger also coming at sight of my smile. I had truly fathomed Chaldrin's intentions, and had negated them by doing no more than speaking truth.

"The demands of honor!" growled the male, as though he spoke of things accursed. "Honor should be left to men, for wench will ever overdo a thing. For what reason did you fail to believe me?"

"For the reason that I have come to know you," said I, returning my attention to the snarls of my hair. "Chaldrin is not a male to gloat over having beaten and taken a female against her will. He is not above doing such things, I know, yet is he above gloating over them."

"He did not do the Hitta as he said?" demanded Wedin, confusion clear in her voice. "War leader, the male lied?"

"He did indeed," said I, seeing the amusement in Chaldrin over my previous words. The male chuckled to himself, for he knew I had again spoken truth. "Perhaps he would now care to speak of what truly occurred between Ilvin and himself."

All eyes went to Chaldrin where he sat, and the male returned each gaze before shaking his head. "The beliefs of the wench as to how she must be used were no lie," said he, a sigh of capitulation taking him. "Well might I have acceded to her needs, for I have no true ownership of her, yet was her manner of informing me of those needs distasteful. Much was I made to feel that my ownership was hers, and also was I moved to suggest, in mockery of her tone, that she need not beat me as she seemed eager to do. The wench immediately informed me that my plea was rejected, took up the switch that Jalav had been swinging all about, then had at me. I found it prudent to take the switch from her, gave to her the number of blows she had managed to give me, then put her to her back. She made no more sound at the feel of the switch than had I, yet was her body afterward eager to give me the pleasure I sought. In no manner is a wench able to deny the man who beats her, for she wishes to placate him so that he will not beat her again."

The eyes of the male became bland, a hidden smile barely turning the corners of his mouth. Well did he know that I had heard such a statement before from him, immediately following the first occasion he had taken a whip to me. The urge toward anger rose high within me as memory was returned of that time, yet was I aware of the intent of the male, and therefore did I smile rather than frown, and turn my head toward the affronted dignity of the Summa.

"My brother seeks to have us eject him from our midst," said I, drawing the bristling glare of both warriors. "He knows he will serve me this darkness should I demand it, therefore does he seek to keep the command unspoken. His words of insult are as deliberate as the lies he spoke, for he wishes to provoke anger within me. I would have you understand this, so that no difficulty is given him."

"By the blessed sword of Mida the Golden," growled Wedin, her eyes angrily going to Chaldrin. "Another moment and challenge would have been his rather than ejection! For what reason does he seek to avoid serving you, Jalav? Is he now unable due to having used the Hitta?"

"I seriously doubt his inability, Wedin," I said, turning my gaze to a Chaldrin who was once again wrapped deep in frustration. "He seeks to deny me, as was asked of him by another."

"Demanded of me," said Chaldrin, a sourness all through him. "The words were a demand, wench, not a request, nor do I take umbrage at the demand. A man has his rights."

"As a wench has her needs," said another voice, and then did Mehrayn appear to seat himself upon the far side of Chaldrin. "Ever has it been the right of a man to see happily to the needs of his wench, as I shall do for you. When our repast is done, my furs are yours."

"Jalav has no need of the furs of merely any male," said I, my voice and gaze equally cold. "Jalav will share pleasure with one who does not fear to face her, with one who is willingly called brother. The male Mehrayn may say naught upon this decision."

"The male Mehrayn has much to say upon a decision such as that," said Mehrayn, his eyes continuing calm, his voice gentle. "The male Mehrayn has respect for the wishes of she who is the war leader Jalav, yet are there certain matters in which he is not to be gainsaid. A man who feels such love as I feel for you, Jalav, cannot bear to see another man touch his woman. It would have given me far greater pleasure to have slain the filth Nobain with my bare hands, for he caused you great harm and agony and would have forced himself upon you. I feel no similar fury toward Chaldrin here, yet should you persist in tempting him out of anger toward me, I will surely call him out. Do you wish to see him slain through no fault of his own?"

The calm, unangered eyes of Mehrayn remained upon me, perhaps deliberately ignoring the hand Chaldrin had put to his own eyes, as though he were touched by pain. Wedin and Dotil exchanged looks of confusion, understanding little of what occurred, yet was it clear that Chaldrin had spoken the truth earlier in the fey. Although I found belief upon the point difficult, Mehrayn did indeed seek to fill my sleeping leather to the exclusion of all others. Such foolishness might be found among no others than males, and even had I not already determined to turn from Mehrayn, I would not have allowed it to continue.

"He who gives challenge to my brother gives challenge to me," said I, repeating the point for the benefit of those who had no true understanding of it. "As my brother bears a wound which would slow him, it is I alone who shall stand to the challenge. In a meeting such as this there may, of course, be no quarter given, no thought of keeping back the slaying stroke. When and where are we to meet, male?"

"We are not to meet," said Mehrayn calmly. "Should the need arise it is Chaldrin whom I shall meet, wound or no, with your approval or without. You shall not stand for him nor even by him, for your insinuations make this a matter between men. You have little understanding of this state of affairs, I know, therefore do I attempt to teach you of it. Was there naught between us I would say no word upon your doings, for I would not have the right. Did you not continue to be held by childish anger and petulance I would say no word for there would then be little need. There shall ever be a place for you beside me in my furs, therefore need you no longer torment this man. Come to me and allow me to ease your need as I have done in the past, and we need say no more concerning meetings and slayings. I shall hold you near to me as gently or as strongly as you wish, and we shall both banish all thoughts of anger and disagreement."

Earnestly did the male look upon me as his words ended, and though I felt the warmth and strength of the arms he spoke of I was also able to recall his vow to challenge the gods. Much did I wish to put my hands to my face and hide myself from the thought of that challenge, but that was impossible. Well did I know that were the male to stand in jeopardy I would not find myself able to deny his need, despite the curling fear in my soul, despite the agony and terror I would face. I would need to face again that which few were able to survive a first time, and my courage flagged and faded with the thought of it. Far better that I send the male from me, to pursue another who was not possessed jealously by the gods.

"The male Mehrayn is mistaken," said I, again sending the comb calmly through my hair. "There is naught between us to be considered, naught which moves me to a wish for his use. As for my brother Chaldrin, he has been accepted in the service of Mida. Should he be slain, the war leader Jalav shall avenge him, even against one who will not raise sword to her. Then shall there be two who are slain, and Jalav shall continue on in the service of the gods-without males to bedevil her. You seek a thing which is not and never shall be, male. Seek it elsewhere, and all may survive to face the strangers."

It was not possible for me to keep my gaze upon him, yet was I aware of the hurt and rage which drove him to his feet and away from where I sat. Mehrayn had no further words to speak, which was truly a blessing, yet would a greater blessing have been for Jalav to fall senseless to the ground. With no more than a few angry strides was the male gone entirely from me, and already had the ache of his going begun deep within. Mehrayn was denied me as Ceralt had been denied me, yet the ache came as though the matter might be done otherwise. A great fool was Jalav, and more than a fool, to feel such a thing for those who would never be hers.

Few words were exchanged among those in our camp before the toray was done, even the Summa refraining from questioning me upon that which had occurred. Chaldrin went and fetched my toray and his, and I took it and fed upon it even though I had lost all desire for it. The hunger of healing continued to be with me, and for that I gave silent thanks to Mida; the eyes of Mehrayn glowered from across the camp, and I had no wish to appear indecisive before him. I had sent him from me, and there he would stay.

With the toray fed upon I completed the combing of my hair as best I might, and then did I return the comb to its place upon my kan. Ilvin and the male S'Heernoh had both gone briefly into the pond to wash themselves, and as darkness had already fallen all those about the camp prepared to take their rest. The crackling fire cast shadows all about as S'Heernoh joined the Summa, and Chaldrin looked up as I halted before his cloth-covered lenga pelt. Even with the cloth the fur would be overwarm to lie upon, yet for once Mida's bare ground held little attraction for me. Chaldrin looked upon me where I stood silent and unmoving, joined my silence for a moment, then turned his head toward Ilvin.

"Girl, go to those Sigurri warriors who ride with the Sword and tell them you are theirs for this darkness," said he to Ilvin, his tone gentle yet firm. "Should they be uninterested in the use of a wench, seek a solitary place to take your rest. You are not to return here."

Ilvin, clearly distressed, parted her lips to speak, yet did the words die on her tongue when her gaze met mine. There was naught she might do save obey no matter the humiliation obedience brought her, and the realization of this truth took her away into the shadows. With her departure Chaldrin sighed, patted the cloth beside him, then waited till I had lowered myself near him before he spoke.

"So you would slay the Sword if he were to slay me," he murmured, his eyes upon me though I looked only at my folded legs. "Your honor would demand such a thing, I know, and I also know you capable of doing what must be done. Despite all, I feel compelled to ask: would you truly find it within you to cut Mehrayn down? I speak of no other, mind you; solely Mehrayn."

The cloth-covered pelt beneath me was warm and yielding, calling comfort to my weary body. I opened my swordbelt and removed it then put it aside, yet were there still no words to reply with. Chaldrin had said I had spoken untruth, yet was there naught of insult felt within me, for he was correct. I would not have found myself able to strike down Mehrayn, no matter the cause, no matter the provocation.

"So I thought," said Chaldrin with a further sigh when it was clear I would not reply to him. "It would not be possible for you to slay him, for you feel for him what he feels for you. For what reason then, have you entirely denied him?"

"He would throw his life away in an attempt to wrest me from the gods," I whispered, the pain of the thought touching me again. "I would buy back his life as I did with another, yet do I fear I no longer have the strength. He would be lost then, and I likely surviving to recall my failure, and all would be far more unbearable. Far better that he find belief in my words, and ride elsewhere to seek another."

"And this you believe he will do." The words of Chaldrin were without inflection, neither giving support to

the comment nor questioning it. I raised my eyes to look upon his shadow-darkened face, then nodded my head.

"He shall do so for I shall see to it," said I, lifting one hand to stroke it slowly down his arm from his shoulder. "I have no understanding of the reason he dislikes the thought of my use of another male, yet am I able to understand that such use speaks of there being naught between us. I had desired the pleasure of you for this darkness, brother, and now do I have need of it as well. Am I to be refused?"

The eyes of Chaldrin continued to rest upon me from out of a shadowy visage, his silence and the darkness keeping his thoughts from me. Much did I begin to believe that he would indeed refuse me, and then his hand came gently to my face.

"Had you demanded my agreement I would surely have refused you," said he, with resignation in his voice. "Had you sought to bring anger or jealousy to the Sword, I would also have refused you. However, as your intentions are honorable, and as I cannot refuse you when you call me brother in such a voice-

His words ended as his arm came to my waist, and then was I lifted back to lie upon the cloth-covered fur away from the fire, the back of Chaldrin turned toward it. The hand of the male caressed my breast a brief moment before lowering to the ties of my breech, and then were his lips beside my ear.

"The Sword does not dislike the thought of another man possessing you," Chaldrin murmured, slowly opening my breech and pulling it away. "The thought is abhorrent to him, as it would be to any man with sense. Should your schemings go counter to your expectations I am likely a dead man, and yet-" His hand, moving between my thighs, drew a soft gasp from me as my hands went to his arms, and gently he chuckled. "And yet, my girl, this will be the first I have had willing use from you. Perhaps the cost is not unreasonable."

His lips came to mine as the heat began to rise within me, brought about by his touch upon my womanhood and the feel of his thickly muscled body against me. Well had I known that Chaldrin would have the ability to cause me to feel so, and deep was my need for strong pleasure without thought. Had it not been foolish I would have wished Chaldrin to be another, one who filled more than the emptiness Chaldrin would fill, yet was it indeed foolishness and idle as well. Again I moaned, beginning to lose myself, and such was surely for the best.

CH 4. An abrupt departure-and the will of the gods

Fully had I expected Mehrayn to depart the camp with the new light in return to his city. My use of Chaldrin was to have shown him there was naught between him and me in accordance with his own views, yet had I forgotten how greatly lacking were males in reason. When we again took to the trail Mehrayn and his males were with us, he who was called Sigurr's Sword silent and grim.

Of those who rode in our set, no other save Ilvin emulated Mehrayn. The pale-haired Hitta warrior was fully disturbed, for the two Sigurri who accompanied Mehrayn had accepted her use for the darkness with wide grins. They, unlike Chaldrin, had not considered even briefly the allowing of Ilvin her own method of use, instead taking their pleasure by making Ilvin helpless to their demands. The Hitta's time in the capture of the followers of the Oneness had been harsh and cruel, ill preparing her for the use which Chaldrin and the Sigurri took. To be used with no thought for her own pleasure allows a warrior the dignity of hatred and the considering of revenge, yet to be made to feel great desire and need before she is granted use brings naught save humiliation. The consternation in Ilvin's eyes showed she began to learn the lesson I had meant for her, the lesson teaching what might well have been her fate forever.

Wedin and Dotil had looked fondly upon the gray-haired male S'Heernoh when all three were mounted, and the male had returned their look with amused delight. It had pleased the Summa to allow the male their use rather than taking his, and they had not regretted their decision. Despite the age of the male he had been able to satisfy both of those he followed, which put a knowledge of justification for the request she had made in Wedin's eyes.

The new light showed Chaldrin silent yet extremely pleased, and that despite the fact that he had chosen not to see the cold-eyed stare which Mehrayn had bestowed upon him. He no longer seemed concerned over facing Mehrayn, and this, to me, seemed one with the balance of the doings of males. For what reason would one fear a meeting one fey, and be unconcerned over it the next? Had the fear been mine it should certainly have increased, for Mehrayn had been the sole male in camp to fail to find release the darkness previous. All know that males must have the use of a female else their surliness increases, yet Chaldrin seemed to care not. Puzzlement accompanied me as I rode beside the Summa, speaking to them of Bellinard and city ways, yet this brought no more than amusement to Chaldrin.

For our mid-fey meal was there smoked toray, the last of the beast the heat of the land would allow us to taste. I fed with more relish than I had the darkness previous, and also did I come to the decision that more must be done to rid myself of the presence of Mehrayn. To allow him to remain with my set was to invite disaster, for one may not know what foolishness will suddenly enter the head of a male such as he. The sense of dignity he possessed was considerable, therefore I thought that bruising his dignity might well send him to ride elsewhere. When Chaldrin left my side to speak to Ilvin upon some matter which displeased him, with S'Heernoh also gone to look over the hooves of his kan, I turned to the Summa and briefly discussed my thoughts with them. Both grinned with amusement though they did not fully understand, and both agreed to assist me. Our journey to their homelands would be long, and diversions on such a journey were welcome indeed.

Nearly were we prepared to resume our journey, when Wedin and Dotil strolled toward where the three black-clad Sigurri warriors stood. Mehrayn paid them little mind and moved off toward the kand, yet were his males eager for their attention, puffing themselves up and grinning at the Summas' approach. Soft words were at first exchanged between the four, and then did Wedin laugh aloud the while Dotil grinned.

"Our interest in the males about us has its limit, Gidain," said Wedin to the Sigurri who had spoken to them the fey previous, her voice loud. "For what reason would we find interest in one who was spurned by all others? That warrior is foolish who takes the use of a male out of pity."

"Indeed," said Dotil in agreement, taking no heed of the manner in which both Sigurri paled and attempted to gesture the Summa to silence. "The male must truly be clumsy and inept, far beyond the few words of derision Jalav has spoken, despite the heartiness of his appearance. He continues to follow a war leader who has wearied of his clumsiness, most likely through there being no other female who will have him. And you would have us offer him use, as though he were worthy of our attentions? Seldom have we heard such foolishness."

"You have not heard such foolishness this time!" hissed the male Gidain, filled with fury, yet were his words far too late. He had hesitated in speechlessness after Dotil had done speaking, and a furiously red-faced Mehrayn had jumped to the back of his kan and ridden off. I felt a bottomless relief at the ending of Mehrayn's intentions to challenge those he had no hope of finding victory over, and stood looking after him where he had disappeared into the forest, pleased beyond words. The Summa had done well in using his pride against him, I thought, yet strangely enough another was not as pleased as I.

"To have a man treated so is naught to smile over," said S'Heernoh to me, great disapproval evident in the sharpness of his gaze. "He has done naught to deserve such humiliation at the hands of a wench."

"You speak to no wench but a war leader, male," said I, my words cold with the passing of surprise, my body stiffening in insult. "Should you wish to continue speaking so, first find a blade to give you the right. Insult may not be given by one who fears to arm himself."

"I do not fear to arm myself," said the gray-haired male, his gaze continuing to hold mine, "nor do I speak insult. I speak no more than truth, a truth which you, war leader, refuse to hear. I have listened to many words concerning the humiliation which others have given you, yet are they no more than words, to be spoken and forgotten. You give humiliation as freely as those who gave the same to you, and then do you excuse your actions by loud protestations that you will not refuse the challenge. How gracious of you, to allow the challenge to those who have no hope of besting you! You impose your will upon all those about you, never pausing to consider whether or not you have the right of the thing, giving hurt to those who would not return that hurt even at peril of their lives! When first we met I admired you, war leader, yet now-"

His words ended abruptly, as though he had no need to speak the last of them, and in truth he had not. I might perhaps have spoken of the truth he had not seen, yet did I turn from him instead and go to my kan. Far better Mehrayn suffer the small hurt and be kept from the greater, and this I would continue to believe no matter the beliefs of others.

Our journey through the forests continued in silence, all deeply enmeshed in thoughts of their own. The two Sigurri males had been unsure upon the point of continuing on with us, for their purpose had been to accompany Mehrayn, who was no longer with the set. Had it been I, I would have followed his track to see where he had gone, yet the two Sigurri seemed reluctant to face the one who was their leader. That they had spoken naught of the request attributed to them by Wedin and Dotil had no meaning, for Mehrayn might well be too embarrassed and ashamed to heed their protestations of innocence. They chose to continue with our set the while they considered what other thing might be done, yet did they ride far to the rear, away from the balance of us.

Wedin and Dotil had disliked the words spoken to me by their male, yet had S'Heernoh turned a deaf ear toward their attempt to remonstrate with him. He rode ahead of us upon his gray kan, his gaze turned inward, his silence a strong rebuke against what the Summa had done. Chaldrin continued to ride beside me, yet his gaze spoke of the displeasure he felt and also of his anger. It irked me that the males behaved so, as though it would have been better had I allowed Mehrayn to remain where his life would surely have been placed in jeopardy, yet wasn't irrationality to be expected from males? It requires a warrior to think clearly, and males, no matter that they took the calling to themselves, were scarcely warriors.

Perhaps two hind passed in undisturbed travel, and then was our set forced to turn our path east. The sounds of lenga battle came to us clearly from ahead and to the west, the volume of growling and screaming speaking of a great gathering. Well might it have been a mating gathering, which all those who rode and lived within the forests were wise enough to avoid. After a while were caves again visible to us in the distance, far ahead through the trees, so that we had to turn north again if we were not to be halted by the stone of their presence. This we began to do, and then did a deep rumble come to us from out of the distance.

"The skies begin to speak with Sigurr's anger," said Chaldrin, seeking sight of the blue which lay above the tops of the trees we rode through. "Perhaps it was unwise of you to do as you did with his chosen Sword."

"Thunder from out of Mida's skies brings naught of fear to her warriors," I retorted, seeing the manner in which the light of the fey turned brassy as it dimmed, and also the movement of the trees in the sudden wind which sprang up and stiffened. "Clearly does a storm approach, one of those which arise from naught, drop the tears of Mida quickly, then depart as rapidly as they came. Have you never seen a

storm of that sort?"

"I have seen many storms in these parts," said Chaldrin, looking about himself as the skies darkened as though the hand of Mida covered her light, and great, heavy drops of rain began to fall. "Never, however, have I seen one as brief and gentle as that which you describe. We must find shelter, and that at once."

My lips parted to express my thoughts upon the foolishness of males who feared the wetness which fell from Mida's skies, when my words were overcome by a number of happenings at once. Lightning flared through the skies with such strength that my eyes saw its image even after it had faded, and with it came a sound of thunder which deafened all who heard it. Harder and harder did the rain begin to fall, as though it meant to batter us into the ground, and then came another flash of lightning, screaming as it threw itself against a tree not far distant. Fire flared and crackled where the burning stroke had touched the tree, and the kan beneath me began plunging wildly with fear amidst the din of further thunder.

"The caves!" shouted a male voice, one impossible to distinguish from the sounds all about us. "We must take shelter in the caves!"

All of the kands were plunging with fear, attempting to pull from the reins which held them and race away from storm-brought terror. The rain had thickened to such a downpour that it was difficult to see about oneself, and clearly the caves which we had seen were the sole place we would indeed find shelter. I gestured onward through the pelting rain in the hopes that I might be seen, and then did I urge my kan in the proper direction, which he took at once. In the midst of rain and wind and darkness were the others quickly lost, yet had I seen them in a flash of lightning, and knew that they rode in the direction I did.

The ride to the caves was long and difficult, for my kan quickly discovered it could not race at full tilt as it wished to. Trees loomed too often in our path, and it was necessary to take care till they thinned enough to allow us to hurry. The stony ground before the caves was slippery from wetness, the darkened openings shown in a flare of lightning-fury spaced far one from the other. It mattered not at all to me which my kan chose, for memory lived strong within me of the last time I had experienced such a storm, toward the end of my time in Ranistard. The storm had come during the lashing decreed for me by Galiose, he who was High Seat of Ranistard, and each time lightning cracked and thunder spoke I was again able to feel the lash descending, cutting my flesh and bringing untold agony. My kan slowed before an opening large enough to admit him, giving me opportunity to slide from his back before he plunged within, leaving me to stumble shuddering in his wake. The cave might well have been the lair of some child of the wild, yet upon the moment I cared no more than my kan. The need I felt to be away from the storm transcended every care and consideration, even that which might well become a life threat. I entered the cave and moved from the entrance nearly as far as my kan, we both bringing trails and pools and drippings of water with us, and then I crouched down with my arms about me, attempting to quiet the shudderings which continued to bring tremors to my body. The thunder raved on in seeming anger that it had been escaped, and I know not how many reckless passed before it came to me that there was light in the cave in which I crouched, the light of a torch. I raised my head in lack of understanding, looking belatedly about, and there, in the entrance to a farther cave with faint light streaming out behind, stood the male S'Heernoh.

"I found these torches upon the ground when I first arrived and struck a light," said he, his voice odd as he looked upon me. "Likely they were left by those who took shelter here at some earlier time. I arrived enough before you so that I have also been able to light a small fire in the second cavern. "

He stood unmoving as he spoke, his face expressionless, and well did I recall the manner in which he had addressed me earlier in the fey. Though I had no wish at all to go again into the storm without, I had even less desire to remain with one who had so little relish for my presence. I arose from my crouch and turned again toward the opening through which I had so recently come, yet the words of the male came

again before I had gone more than two or three paces.

"Wait!" he called. "I cannot fault you for wishing naught of my company after the words I spoke earlier, however you cannot mean to brave the storm again. The next nearest caves are no short distance, and we need not even share the same cavern. I have already dried myself somewhat by the fire, and it would please me to see you do the same."

"I would not force another from a fire in this damp, even though that other be male," said I, seeing the dark light up beyond the cave opening in continued, mindless fury. "The next cave cannot be so far."

"And yet it is," said he, his voice smoothening to coaxing as his step sounded nearer upon the stone of the floor. "I saw its distance when I saw those men in black, the Sigurri warriors, enter it just before I entered here. And there is sufficient wood for a second fire which I will build here, in this cavern, for myself. Once I have taken the wood, I will not enter that cavern again to disturb you."

I turned my head to look at the male, and though he smiled, I continued to feel a good deal of reluctance to remain, and yet to leave that place only to go to the place chosen by the Sigurri males would be idle. In truth I had the wish for the company of none of those I rode with, and perhaps the farther cavern would truly be the best of it. My nod of acceptance had more than a bit of reluctance within it, yet the smile of the male warmed regardless.

"I shall fetch the wood and my kan at once," said S'Heernoh, his hand lifting as though he would touch my shoulder, then withdrawing as he turned from me and hurried toward the other opening. I followed more slowly, considering taking my kan farther within, yet did the beast back from me somewhat as I approached, as though in fear that I meant to return it to the insanity of the storm. Its eyes seemed prepared to roll wildly with the fear it felt, therefore did I leave it be and enter the next cavern without it.

The second cavern was a mate to the first, rounded rather than squared and large enough to have held our entire traveling set within it. The single torch set within the rock of the wall was like that in the outer cavern, though aided by the presence of a fire near to the back wall. S'Heernoh had taken a double armload of wood from a pile which was much of a surprise by cause of its size, and the amusement had returned to his smile as he moved toward his kan.

"Those who were here before us must surely have anticipated a lengthy stay," said he, taking up the rein of his kan. "I have left cloths for you, with which you may take a deal of the wetness which covers you. I have others which I shall use in the outer cavern, and shall not disturb you."

His nod was friendly in a way I did not understand. Much did I doubt that there would ever be true friendliness between the male and myself, yet did I follow him to the opening through which he had gone, and looked on as he crouched beneath the torch.

"Should you require further wood," said I when his eyes were upon me, "you may enter and take it as you please. The cave, and the wood as well, were first yours. There would be little honor for this warrior in seeing you do without."

"Lady, you are most gracious," said he, remaining crouched where he had been, the smile warming the dark of his eyes. "Few females will consider a man so, preferring that he consider them to the exclusion of all things including himself. You do me honor by sharing my shelter."

Well did I know what honor my presence was for him, therefore did I turn away from the words which were not meant to be heeded and return to the fire which awaited me. As the male had said, there were cloths before the fire, therefore did I first remove my swordbelt and draw the sword given me by Mida, then took up one of the cloths. So penetrating the rain had been, that the blade of my sword was nearly

as wet as that of my dagger. First did I see my sword wiped, and then my dagger and life sign, and only then did I begin upon my own self. A warrior will ever see first to her weapons, else is she no warrior; the dark red crumbling will take any weapon not properly cared for, and that most likely when it is raised against an enemy. I crouched before the fire, the wet breech stripped from me, the stone rough yet warm beneath my feet, drying my body and hair and regretting that I had no oil to see more completely to my sword. Once the storm was gone, I would find the oil I required.

When once I had wiped the wetness from me I sat cross-legged before the fire, staring within its depths and thinking no thought beyond how lovely the colors of that fire were. Many plans would need to be made in the feyd to come, yet upon that moment was there the peace of no thought at all, a peace I was not often fortunate enough to find. I sat so for a number of reekid, and then did I hear the sound of a footfall at the opening to the other cavern. Likely had S'Heernoh found that the wood he had taken was insufficient for his needs, and he had come to fetch away more. I rose to my feet with a sigh and moved toward the pile of wood, thinking to aid him and thereby rid myself of the presence of another more quickly, yet when I glanced toward the opening I discovered the error I had made. The male who stood there was not S'Heernoh, nor was he seeking wood. The male who stood there was Mehrayn.

He who was called Sigurr's Sword stood astare in the opening, his thumbs in his swordbelt, his red hair darkened with wet, his broad face surrounding the deep anger gleaming from the green of his eyes. So large and well-muscled was he, so tall did he stand, that a thing deep within me chilled to see him so. He stood no more than a moment staring upon me in silence, and then did he come forward, away from the opening and toward me. Again did the chill twist about inside me, for my sword lay a number of paces behind me, beside the fire. No time at all was there to turn and make for it, scarcely was there time to take my dagger from its leg bands and bring it up, the front of my hand against the leather of my life sign where it was wound about the hilt just below the guard. I stood in readiness as the anger in the eyes of the male increased, his glance going to the blade in my hand, his pace slackened not at all as he came toward me, heedless of my weapon. I slashed the blade toward him, meaning to catch him below the ribs and give him what my sword had given Chaldrin, yet did my blade meet naught save air, for the male twisted about with unexpected speed to avoid the stroke. A heartbeat and half breath later my arm and hand were in his grip, the arm held tight, Mehrayn's back to me, the hand turned in some manner so that I was unable to struggle or free myself. One turn and the dagger was gone from lifeless fingers, one pull and I followed the weapon quickly to the rock of the floor. No sound save a pair or two of scuffling footsteps had been made in the dimness of torch and firelight, yet I lay upon the stone unable to move, unable to keep the dripping, red-haired, kneeling figure from capturing my left wrist as well and adding it to the right. With both wrists together was the irresistible pressure gone and I able to struggle again, against what fate I knew not, yet did I know I wished naught of it.

"You have now raised that weapon to me twice," said Mehrayn, looking down upon me where I lay, his voice overly soft with the anger he felt. "In the first instance you received no punishment, yet this instance shall not be the same. Should you ever attempt such a thing again, you had best see that I am quickly slain; should I continue among the living, your regret will be very deep."

My regret was already deep for I had not expected to see the foolish male again, nor had I thought he would be able to take my dagger with such ease. The hardness of the rock pressed into my back as I tried uselessly to free my wrists, faint sounds of storm-fury drifting through from the other cavern again touching and bringing forth memories of pain. The male meant to revenge himself upon me for the attack I had attempted-and likely the humiliation he had been given as well-and there was naught I might do to prevent it.

"For what reason do I hear no words from you?" Mehrayn demanded after a brief moment of silence, his anger continuing as it had been. "Are you no longer the chosen of all the gods there are, far above the

doings and wishes of mere males? Will you not tell me of the terrible fate awaiting me should I dare to touch you in punishment? Speak to me, woman and warn me away as you have ever done!"

I moved my wrists in discomfort against his strengthening grip, making no attempt to meet the blaze in his eyes, or to speak the words he demanded. Well had I learned that Mida would not shield me from the pain given by males, therefore would all words be useless. Males are males, after all, and words may do naught against their intentions.

"Perhaps she merely awaits the harm you mean to bring her," said the voice of S'Heernoh. Mehrayn's head snapped up to send his anger toward the opening to the next cavern, a place I was unable to see from where I lay. "The humiliation she caused you justifies such a doing does it not, Prince? There are none about who would condemn you for seeking revenge, and none about capable of halting you. For what reason do you hesitate?"

"I do not hesitate," growled Mehrayn, his eyes continuing angrily upon the male I was unable to see, his broad hands still clamped about my wrists. "There is no need for anyone to halt me, for I have no intentions of offering this wench harm. It is words I will have from her, and those right quickly."

The anger-filled gaze returned once more to me, but I knew not what words he awaited, for I had none which he would heed.

"Do you seek to have her beg to be released?" came the voice of S'Heernoh again, puzzlement clear in the tone of it. "She may well hesitate to do such a thing, Prince, yet am I able to assure you that freedom would bring her deep gratitude, so deep that she will surely recall the doing in the most favorable of lights. Her gratitude will . . ."

"Gratitude!" interrupted Mehrayn with a snort of derision, halting the flow of smoothly spoken words from the other male. "This female is incapable of true gratitude, incapable of accepting a freely given gesture, incapable of believing that gesture performed without hidden motivations: And I do not await a begging of any sort from her. I know well enough she would sooner give up her life."

His gaze continued to flame down toward me, his anger unabating, and when I again attempted to struggle free from his grip, he moved from his crouch to kneel above me, his knees straddling my body.

"Do you await words of apology, then?" asked S'Heernoh, his voice somewhat fainter than it had been. "The wench must truly be in discomfort to be held so, therefore perhaps you would consider . . ."

"I will consider naught save continuing her discomfort!" snapped Mehrayn. "My own discomfort has continued long enough and strongly enough, yet what consideration have I had from her? The words I await are ones of explanation, ones I shall have even should it be necessary to hold her here as I now do till Sigurr tires of our world and sends the flames of ending to destroy it! The longer I think upon the matter the higher my anger grows, therefore had her words best come quickly! For what reason do you insist so upon facing me, wench? For what reason does the need burn so within you?"

His anger approached nearer as he leaned down farther toward me, yet the greater confusion he also brought was a distraction from that anger. I moved my wrists against the strength of his grip, feeling the dampness of his flesh where it touched my body, unable to free my hair where most of it lay crushed beneath me.

"I have already spoken of what reasons I have which cause my wish to face the male Mehrayn," I replied, sending my own gaze up toward him. "At this moment, the male does naught save add to them."

"Indeed?" said Mehrayn, his brows rising in mock questioning. "You seek to face me now in insult over

what was done to you by me, for now you have learned that I am no stranger to the hilt of a sword? You attempt to face me as you faced Chaldrin when he allowed you the challenge, yet do I have a question concerning that bout: in what manner did you learn of Chaldrin's prowess? Whose valued opinion assured you of his ability to face you?"

"Why, all those within the Caverns were aware of Chaldrin's ability," I replied, the words coming slowly from the confusion which remained with me. "I continued to demand the challenge, and at last he agreed to face me."

"You continued to demand the challenge," said Mehrayn, the words putting a glint in the green of his gaze. "Am I mistaken in believing that you first gave him challenge upon the moment he initially refused to grant you freedom? How then did you know of his prowess? And for what reason would you accept the opinion of mere 'males,' those whose own abilities are so often, in your own words, clumsy and inept? What then of the dishonor in facing one whose abilities are less than yours?"

"A warrior is free to challenge any who attempt her capture!" I snapped, struggling yet further against the strength which held me. "All males show great bravery when Jalav is bound, less when they must face her with weapon in fist!"

"A warrior is free to do many things, it seems," said Mehrayn, deliberately taking no note of my struggles. "Most especially is a warrior free to begrudge and envy the skill of others, as petulantly as any wench of the cities. Why do you fail to shrill in anger and stamp your foot as well as offer challenge, child warrior? Perhaps then a man would allow his patience to fly, and immediately grant you your challenge."

"You would accuse a warrior of envying the skill of a male?" I said in derision, scarcely able to credit the foolishness he spoke. "For what reason would one envy another for possessing less than she? You speak as do all males, without reason and without sense, and I have long since grown weary of it. Release me immediately!"

"If there is no sense in what I speak," said Mehrayn, the anger growing yet again, "for what reason did you not insist upon challenge before you were told of how great a skill I am the possessor of? For what reason was it necessary that you first be told you could not best me before highly incensed insult touched you? For what reason do you do all in your power to force me to face you, rather than merely drawing your weapon and having at me? Is it for the reason that merely slaying me would not allow you to boast that you had bested me? Is it for the very possible reason that the smallness of your soul will not allow another to go unmolested who might well be your superior? Must all those about you bow to your mighty blade or be slain? What if I were to best you instead? What if you were to find defeat rather than victory? What then, wench?"

His voice had risen to deafening shouts, and so great was his anger that the grip he held me in had become true pain. My thoughts whirled in agitation over the words he spoke, for I found myself unable to bear the truth I had been forced to see. Perhaps at first my anger toward him and his doing in the caverns had caused me to be incensed over the thought that he might possess the skill to best me with swords, yet then had come the unacknowledged fancy that all pain and striving would at last come to an end were he able to bury a blade in me. How greatly I longed for such an end I had not known myself, for I had pursued and provoked the male at every opportunity, speaking of insult only so that I need not acknowledge the truth even in my own heart. To attain the blessed peace of the eternal darkness I would have gladly forsaken all those who looked to me for leadership and succor, and so deeply shamed did I feel that I closed my eyes and turned my face from the male who glared furiously upon me. To forsake those who had placed their trust in one is unforgivable, no matter the burdens one carries, no matter the weight and pain of them. So great a coward had Jalav become that naught meant more to her than her own comfort and wishes, and in whatever manner the male took his revenge, the coward Jalav had

earned the pain in full measure.

A moment of silence passed as my mind thrashed about in the confines of self-made shame, and then did the grip loosen upon my wrists as Mehrayn shifted about.

"I hear no further protests of innocence, wench," said he, no longer in a shout though still with anger. "However, I also hear naught in answer to my question. Have you any concept of the loss I would face if I were to slay you?"

"The loss of this one would be minimal at best," I replied in a whisper, hearing the bitterness in his voice yet understanding naught of it. "I have, however, certain duties which seemed to have slipped from my thoughts, therefore must I withdraw my challenge to you. She who is Jalav is not free to lightly face one who might well best her."

Again came the silence surrounding the dark of closed lids in which I lay, and again did Mehrayn move about upon his knees. The feel of the stone against them could not have been one of comfort, yet he continued to hold me in place as he had. Then, as though the words fought their way through clouds of confusion, he spoke.

"Sooner would I have thought to hear begging than that which you have just voiced, wench," said he, his anger momentarily forgotten beneath the weight of puzzlement. "You withdraw the challenge? Just so easily? You will no longer seek to face me?"

"Blindness no longer covers me, and my duty stands clear again in my sight," said I with a sigh, looking upon him once more. "Should the male Mehrayn think upon the matter and find that his anger demands challenge after all, Jalav will meet him after the strangers have come and been seen to. She will then be free to do as she wishes."

"Yet till then the matter of challenge must be forgotten," said Mehrayn in a mutter filled with growing pleasure. "I had not thought to find myself joyed at the prospect of the arrival of those who mean us ill, yet now-" His muttering ended as his gaze returned to me, and a smile turned his lips. "Should the choice be left to me, wench, there shall never be challenge between us, for I shall never face you. I am endlessly pleased that matters between us may now return to that which they were."

With such words did his head then lower toward mine, his intention clearly to have our lips touch, yet such a thing could not be allowed. I had seen naught to suggest he no longer meant defiance of the gods, and I would continue forever to refuse to be party to such mindlessness. I turned my head quickly so that his lips found my ear rather than that which they had sought, and his head rose again in immediate annoyance.

"Perhaps this time it is I who has forgotten," said he dryly, "yet does it seem that matters between us were other than this. I cannot recall having often sought your ear to kiss. It is your lips I wish, wench, and I wish them now."

Again his head lowered toward me, and again I turned my face from him. "Your wishes are of no concern to me, male," said I to the even greater annoyance in his eyes. "I have said there is naught between us, and have also attempted to prove that. Even a male should have found the doings sufficiently clear for full understanding, therefore may you now release me."

"May I indeed," said he, gazing down upon me with a lowering look which showed how completely his previous pleasure had departed. "And for what reason is there now naught between us, when till now there was more than I had ever known was possible?"

"I find I have tired of you," said I, speaking the lie with discomfort as I moved my wrists in his continuing grip. "A war leader is accustomed to using many males, and the use of no more than one grows quickly tiring. I shall never again find interest in you; therefore may you give over all thoughts of defying the gods. The gesture would be an empty one, even were it possible to find survival and victory."

Again he was silent seeming more taken aback than angered, then Mehrayn slowly began nodding his head.

"I see," said he, glancing briefly at S'Heernoh, whose sigh had returned his presence to our awareness. "You no longer find interest in me, therefore need I no longer consider defying the gods. It strikes me that you are correct, and I shall indeed no longer consider such a thing, however-"

The pleasure that his words brought was short-lived, for he quickly slid one arm beneath me, turned me to my belly upon the stone, then brought my arms down and crossed my wrists at my back.

"I, myself, have not yet tired of you," he continued, fumbling about briefly with one hand before the feel of a strip of leather was brought to my wrists. "As you no longer find me of interest, it will be necessary that I hold you in capture till I have had my fill of you. That will easily take the balance of this fey and all of the darkness to follow."

The accursed male chuckled as he tightened the leather about my wrists, then backed upon his knees till he was able to do the same with a second strip about my ankles, paying no mind to the manner in which I growled and struggled in fury. The stone of the floor put grit on my breasts and belly and all down the front of me, the sole accomplishment of my struggles; the leather refused to stretch free to loose me from the male.

"I shall return momentarily to begin the enjoyment of my captive," said Mehrayn, stroking my thigh before rising to his feet. "I desire greater comfort than this cavern now provides, and my kin has not yet been seen to."

With little concern did he then leave the cavern, crossing before S'Heernoh, who stood perhaps a pace from the opening. The gray-haired male was clearly amused at Mehrayn's doing, yet when he saw my eyes upon him he attempted to swallow his amusement.

"The thongs have not been tightened too far upon you, have they, war leader?" he asked, some small indication of true concern evident in his tone. "Should you be in pain, I feel certain that the Prince will immediately loosen them."

"It would please me to loosen certain parts of the Prince!" I snarled low, furious that the male would dare to attempt to make me his captive. "My dagger lies here beside me, S'Heernoh. Take it up quickly and free me."

"Alas, war leader, I may do no such thing," the Mida-forsaken male replied with a return of amusement, badly hidden beneath a false look of sorrow. "As you have so often pointed out, one who fails to bear weapons would be a fool to stand in the path of one of skill. I have, in my time, held a hilt in my fist, yet was I far from the best among my people. As I am unable to challenge the prince for his captive, that captive must remain his. It is my fondest hope that that captivity will not prove to be too-tiring."

His bow took his smirk briefly from my sight, and then did he turn and depart through the opening. The snarl in my throat was well high wordless, yet was Mida surely able to make out in it my demand for her wrath to fall upon the heads of all males alike. Had Mehrayn attempted to give me pain in vengeance for that which I had done to him I would not have made an effort to deny him, yet I could not bear the thought of spending another darkness in his capture. Once before had he held me briefly in capture, and

no warrior in even partial possession of her wits and reason would wish for another darkness like it. The male had been impossible, as totally beyond reasoning with as all males, and memory of that time set me to squirming about upon the stone in an effort to reach the dagger which lay near where I lay. It had become desperately necessary that I free myself, and that as quickly as possible.

My flesh stung from the scrape of stone upon it in many places, yet had the passage of but a few reckless seconds seen me able to turn to my side, then to my back, then to my side again with the hilt of my dagger held precariously in my fingers. It would not have been difficult to tighten my hold, however such tightening would not have put the sharpened edge of the weapon to the leather which bound me. I was able to touch the leather with the blade, or I was able to hold the dagger firmly; the curse of the gods denied both things at once. The sweat stood out upon my body as I struggled to approach the leather without dropping the weapon altogether, the dimness of the cavern having grown more oppressive than soothing, the sound of the continuing storm easily heard in the silence all about, and then the blade fell upon the leather while my fingertips retained their hold upon the hilt. A breath of heartfelt relief escaped my throat with the attainment of success-and then that success was snatched firmly from my grip.

"Your dexterity is truly admirable, wench," said Mehrayn, stepping over me to halt where I might see him with my dagger in his hands. Also did he hold his cloth-covered lenga fur, rolled and tucked beneath one arm, the smile he showed one of true amusement. "Had I not returned when I did, my captive might well have been lost due to that dexterity, yet does the effort remain admirable. A pity it was fated to be wasted. "

I ground my teeth and struggled against the leather at sound of his chuckle, yet were my doings ignored as the male had already turned from me to walk closer to the fire S'Heernoh had built. My dagger was dropped with my swordbelt, the rolled fur was opened and spread upon the stone of the floor, and then did Mehrayn open his own swordbelt and remove his weapons. Once they had been carefully placed with mine, the male turned toward me again.

"It will be pleasant having a captive for this darkness," said he, coming to where he had earlier stood. "Though a man is relieved of the necessity of adhering strictly to his devotions when he travels from our city, his body has nevertheless grown accustomed to those devotions and voices serious complaint when it is disallowed its usual performance. We must cause you to feel great desire for me, wench, else shall I likely bring you harm."

"I have no wish to feel desire for you!" I spat as he went to one knee, put his arms beneath me, then lifted me from the stone. "The sole desire I have is for solitude, the solitude which was mine before your arrival!"

"Wench, it is unheard of to be captive in solitude," said he, his tone gently admonishing as he rose to his feet. "One must be reasonable in these matters even though one is female. Let us have no further foolishness now, for there is much undone left before us."

The ridiculing grin the male wore set me to struggling once again, yet the strength of his arms would have easily held me even had the leather been absent. With no effort was I taken to the covered lenga fur, set down upon it, then left as Mehrayn went to the cloths I had dried myself upon. After removing his black body cloth he set to drying himself, and once a good deal of the wetness had been taken from his body and hair, he returned with the cloth to the fur where I lay.

"I dislike a captive with stone dust covering her," said he, putting himself upon the fur beside me. "We shall first see to the removal of the dust, and then we may continue on to those things which are required of a captive."

Had it been possible to run from him I would certainly have done so, at great speed and with no thought given to dignity. He brought the cloth first to my breasts, the dampness of it taking the grit from my flesh slowly and carefully, his eyes all the while looking down into mine, his nearness and the touch of his hand nearly setting me to moaning. To allow the male to remain beside me would be to encourage his thoughts of defiance to rise again, yet how was I to see his life preserved when he did me so? Beneath me my hands were fists as I twisted about, my breathing grew more rapid despite my efforts to calm myself, and then did the male move the cloth to my middle and bend over the breast he had finished with. His kiss was fire to my flesh, so painful that I voiced a sound of desperate agony, so deeply pleasurable that I writhed with the need to feel the same all over me.

"Mehrayn, release me!" I begged, throwing my head about as his lips continued to touch me. "I cannot bear being done so, and you must release me!"

"Jalav, I have only just barely begun," said he, his voice a murmur as his tongue also tasted of me, mild reproof again to be heard. "As you have so little interest in me, it will be quite some time before your desire is strong enough for you to be used. I would not wish to bring you harm."

"Mida, take him from me!" I screamed as the cloth moved over my belly to my thighs, his lips and tongue continuing as they had been doing. My eyes squeezed shut and I writhed in earnest, my prayer to Mida as unfulfilled as it was unacknowledged. My desire for Mehrayn was so great that my body seemed unable to contain it, so fierce that I would have slain without stop for his use, so consuming that the mere thought of him made me his without question. It had been necessary to deny him so that his survival would be assured; that necessity remained, yet was it no longer possible to see to. The male had taken me in capture, a capture that ended all necessity save one.

"I am endlessly pleased that your Mida chooses to allow your call to go unheeded," whispered Mehrayn, the cloth no longer in the hands that touched me. "You have been given to me by the gods for my pleasure, wench, a pleasure which is mine from no more than the sight of you. To also be allowed the touch of you, and the taste of you, and the use of you-A man would be a fool to believe life able to hold and bring more. I had thought to keep myself back from you for a time, as punishment for your misdeeds, yet such a punishment would be more mine than yours. I cannot keep myself from you, nor shall I attempt to do so."

His lips came to me then, fiercely demanding, his hands touched me everywhere, adding to the flames which consumed me, and then was he gone, moving quickly to the leather which held my ankles. One tug and the knot was opened, one pull and the leather was gone, and then was he between my thighs, his desire quivering as it eagerly sought mine. Mida! So great was my need that I felt naught from the fingers of metal which held to my thighs, no more than the awareness of his manhood entering me coming to my flesh. He plunged deep with a grunt then gathered me to him, and as his lips took mine my thoughts were his as well.

I know not how long a time Mehrayn spent in his use of me, yet was the time clearly more use than sharing. The determination to punish me was evident in his eyes from the time the first of his need was seen to, yet his intentions mattered not. Use or sharing, it was sufficient that I had him deep within me, filling that emptiness and that other which was unreachable by those who were not he. When final release took him I lay unmoving at last, my eyes closed to allow me to savor the last of his presence. I awaited his withdrawal, yet his hands came to my back instead, and his lips to my face.

"I sense no resentment within you, my lovely hadat," said he, touching his lips to the closed lids over my eyes. "It was my intention again to give you punishment, and again I have failed. "

"Mehrayn has not failed," said I, making no attempt to return sight to myself. "Jalav has been well and

truly and thoroughly punished. She will not again attempt that which brought the punishment."

A silence came, during which time my throat was given the presence of his lips, and then Mehrayn sighed.

"I had not known that the thought of my vow would disturb you so," said he, a great weariness to be heard in his voice. "When a man desires a woman as greatly as I desire you, there is naught he would not face to win her. Such battle becomes ludicrous, however, when the fact of it causes his beloved to turn from him. I take it you would have me withdraw the vow."

"You would do so?" I asked in vast surprise, at last finding the need to look upon him. "You would truly withdraw the vow?"

"I have been given little choice," said he, faint annoyance to be seen in the sober green depths of his eyes. "Were I to keep to the vow, the wench I desire would be immediately gone from me, withdrawing herself in utter despair. As keeping to the vow would mean immediate defeat, how may I continue? It had not occurred to me that the gods would do battle in such a manner."

"They do battle in whatever manner most pleases them," said I, disturbed over the anger which filled him at thought of his defeat. "Give thanks that they did battle in any manner, for they do not always have it so. Their chosen may not be halted in the tasks she sees to for them."

"Had their chosen been old and ugly and infirm, the difficulty would not have arisen," said he, a sourness to him as he looked down upon me. "I dislike this state of affairs more than I care to speak of, yet shall I allow it to pass by without complaint under one condition: as I am to give up my vow, I will have a thing in its place."

"What thing?" I asked, abruptly filled with confusion and disbelief. The male would bargain with the gods?

"As I am not to be allowed full and complete possession of the woman I desire, I must be allowed her presence and use at any time I wish it," said he, his voice and eyes as implacably upon me as though I spoke for the gods. "I shall not allow my wishes to interfere with the tasks which have been given her, yet must those wishes at all other times be obeyed. Have I made myself clear?"

"Indeed," said I, all at once aware of a great discomfort. "You would have the chosen of the gods in slavery. Has she given you such deep, unforgivable humiliation then?"

"I would not have her in slavery," said he, a softening coming to his grimness as he stroked my hair. "It will not be as a slave that I take and use her, but as a promise of more to come when once her tasks are seen to. In no other manner will I find myself able to calm my desire for her."

"And if the gods should choose not to accept your demand?" I asked, discomfort growing even higher. The male was truly impossible, and I knew not what to do.

"If my request is refused," said he, leaning down toward me with determination, "then I shall have no choice save to continue to hold the wench in capture, keeping her from all those things the gods wish seen to. Should the doing mean my life, then so be it; my life is mine to do with as I please. I will not be swayed from the purpose I have chosen."

I attempted to move in desperation beneath the male, yet the leather on my wrists and his continued presence upon me refused to allow it. Were I to deny his terms I would surely be sealing his fate, yet to accept them would be to place myself at his command. Mida! The male watched me closely, awaiting

what words I would speak, yet words refused to come to me. My thoughts swirled about, first this way and then that, unable to find escape from the dilemma, finding instead only a small protest.

"I am scarcely the one to speak such a request to," I faltered. "The decision is one for the gods to make, and I am not they."

"And yet you speak for them in all other matters," he returned without pause, a sharpness now entering the green of his eyes. "I feel certain that should you decide upon a course of action, they will not gainsay the decision."

"Mehrayn, I cannot!" I hissed, desperately. "Should I refuse, they will take your life to return my freedom! And should I agree, then my life is no longer mine! You cannot demand such a decision of me!"

"Wench, I may do no other thing," said he, with compassion-and determination. "Sooner than lose you I would see my own life lost, for my life would be naught without you beside me. I shall gladly lead my warriors and the Princes of the Blood into battle against the strangers, yet must my mind be clear for the thing else shall few of us survive. For the sake of those who follow me, then, this matter must be settled to my satisfaction. Should you give me what part of your life you may, you will not regret it."

So deeply did he gaze into my eyes, that nearly did I agree to that which he asked. His presence within me had once again grown to strength, a thing he was not unaware of, and perhaps, had he not attempted to steal my vow in the manner of another before him, I might well have heeded the madness he brought and agreed. And yet, though the effort was not the same it seemed the same, and I could not again face the consequences of a stolen vow.

"The life of this warrior is not hers to keep or give away," said I at last, feeling much the coward yet able to do no other thing. "No other than Mida may speak on the doings of Jalav, therefore the male Mehrayn must release her, and together they will ride against the strangers as the gods have demanded. All is as the gods demand, Mehrayn, and we are neither of us able to alter that. Bitterness is useless, for we each of us have our duty."

"Duty," he growled, the fury of frustrated anger filling his eyes. "is there no such thing as duty to oneself? Must all duty be to others? The word once meant much to me, and still does it mean much, yet in an entirely different manner."

Still held by anger he withdrew from me, for he could not deny the words I spoke no matter that he would have had it otherwise. With his knees to either side of me his hands came to my waist, and then was I face down upon the pelt, my bound wrists where he might reach the leather upon them. I awaited the untying of the leather, yet his hand came instead to stroke my bottom.

"Never, in all the kalod of my life, have I ever felt such desire for a woman," said he, the words a mutter meant for ears other than mine. "To show a man what might be his and then deny it him when he has grown to desire it above all else is the act of a fool, for men may not be so easily denied. The gods, I know, are far from fools, therefore shall I make a final attempt and address them directly. Sigurr, hear my words! Though I address them to the goddess Mida, I ask your aid as well! Lady, the wench here before me is Jalav, one of yours, therefore must I ask your leave for that which I seek. I would possess the wench as far as I might, yet does she refuse to hear me for she rides as your chosen. My possession of her will not take her from you, indeed it will aid you, for I will guard her life with my own, a thing which will allow her to continue in your service. Should it be your will that I be allowed her possession you must give her a sign, for the stubborn she-lenga will not heed the words spoken by a 'male.' She rides now to danger where her life might well be lost before she is able to oppose the coming strangers. Grant her to

me, goddess, and I will spend my own life before allowing hers to be lost!"

The words of the male rang in the dimness of the cavern air, an earnest plea spoken with sureness yet filled with desperation. I closed my eyes against the pain so clear in the voice of Mehrayn, a pain destined to grow larger and larger still. Jalav was not meant to be the possession of a male, and naught of the sign Mehrayn wished would be forthcoming.

"Sigurr!" said Mehrayn of a sudden with a low gasp, a tremor in the tone which had been so steady a moment earlier. "I had not expected-So quickly! Great Sigurr-Lady Mida! My thanks, great ones, my thanks! Jalav! Do you see?"

The joy which took Mehrayn brought a chill to me for no reason I could easily discern-till my eyes opened to see what he saw. I raised my head from the lenga pelt and there, beside the wall where our weapons lay, was a glow so pure and golden-bright that it might have been sent by no other than Mida. That the glow emanated from my life sign was undeniable, yet did sudden horror force me to attempt a denial.

"Mida, no!" I cried, struggling even more strongly against the leather which bound me. "Do not give me to this male! I am your chosen, and his presence is unnecessary! He is no more than a male, as lacking in reason as are they all, as blind, and foolish and stubborn! Do not give me to another of his kind!"

My prayer was truly heartfelt, for to have a male was most certainly not the equal of being given to one, yet for reasons beyond my understanding was Mehrayn heeded and I not. No sooner did my words cease than the glow did the same, rejecting my plea as Mehrayn's had not been. Mida had spoken, and I was again to be the possession of a male!

"A fine, understanding goddess, your lady Mida," said Mehrayn from behind me, deep satisfaction and happiness alive in his voice. "To know which boon the proper one to grant is surely the mark of true wisdom."

Wisdom! I lowered my face to the cloth of the lenga pelt, as deeply sunk in misery as Mehrayn was in happiness. At other times had I been given by Mida to males, once to breed hatred within me for those selfsame males. Thinking upon it I found I had come to believe that each time I was held in capture it was by Mida's intent, her purpose not always clear yet surely always served. What I was to be given this time I knew not, yet surely was punishment a possibility. Were it known to Mida that I desired Mehrayn, well might she have granted me to him so that his life would indeed be forfeit in exchange for mine. That I would not allow such a thing to occur should also have been known to her, and perhaps it was. Perhaps that very thing was the reason Mehrayn had been granted his request-Mehrayn of all males! It had been my deepest wish to have him return to his Sigurri where he might not be so easily seen by the gods, and now it would never come to be. Sooner would I have seen myself given again to Chaldrin!

"So, my girl, your presence and use are now mine to direct as I will," said Mehrayn, the satisfaction still strongly with him, his hands going at last to the leather on my wrists. "It seems a man need only state his needs, and the gods will see to them."

"It is scarcely the gods who have been set to tending your needs," said I in a mutter, bringing my arms before me as quickly as they were freed. My wrists ached and, to a lesser extent, my arms as well, and no thought seemed so pleasing as that of departing the cavern immediately. Even facing the storm without was preferable to being commanded to the service of a male.

"You seem less than pleased that my request has been granted," said Mehrayn, moving my hair to my left shoulder so that he might touch my back and arm without impediment. "Do you envision the slavery you spoke of earlier, that you fail to share my joy?"

"A warrior must be entirely free, else is she no other thing than slave in truth," said I, keeping my sight to the marks of the leather remaining upon my wrists. "The word given you was not mine, therefore may your joy be premature. I have ever been free to escape capture when I might."

The silence which this time descended was very short in duration, and then was I taken by the arms and thrown to my back. I continued to lie between Mehrayn's thighs, and the anger his light eyes blazed down at me was no small thing.

"You consider willful disobedience of the gods?" he demanded in a roar, bending somewhat toward me, his outrage most evident. "Accidental or necessary disobedience is not the same, for they will not overlook this as they have other disobediences of yours! Do you seek to be ended? Do you seek to be horribly punished?"

"The male Mehrayn may defy the gods, and the war leader Jalav may not?" I asked, again made uneasily aware of how large the male was. He had put his hands to either side of me upon the pelt, and the thews stood out stonelike in his arms.

"The male Mehrayn does not ride for the gods," said he, his words more growl than voice, the glitter in his eyes akin to the metal of a sword. "He does not pass his feyd ever taking their notice, nor needing their constant good will to assist in survival! He does not now ride toward the waiting hands of enemies, to make himself their leader whether they will it or no! There are those who await you to lead them into battle, others who await an end to captivity; what would become of them should your lady Mida take insult at your doings and turn from you?"

The demanding question, once spoken, hung between us, unanswerable in the manner I most wished to reply in. My honor forbade that I abandon those who looked to me for leadership and freedom, and one may not turn one's back upon honor.

"Indeed the male Mehrayn may and the war leader Jalav may not," said Mehrayn, his anger somewhat cooled by my silence. "Freedom is a true blessing from the gods, wench, yet are there those of us who have little of it, though no chain or binding touches us. We are bound by far stronger ties, those of the needs of the ones who follow us, and may not escape the capture of our service. Were we meant to effect such an escape, we would not have been bound so to begin with."

I turned from the sober gaze of the male to lie upon my right side, my hair beneath my cheek and arm, continued silence the sole reply I was able to make. The truth he had spoken could not be denied, nor was it possible to regret the thing; I had sought the glory in being war leader to Midanna, and would not put away the honor even if such a thing were possible. Had I not become the chosen of the gods I would have regretted naught of my life, yet regret at the doings of the gods is idle. Far better to accept the burden and continue on, looking toward the fey the burden would be no more.

"And so the war leader Jalav shall remain in the possession of the male Mehrayn," said Mehrayn, putting himself upon the lenga pelt behind me, the deep intensity gone from his voice, yet not so the hard determination. "She will obey his wishes and come to him at any time he desires her, and will no longer dwell upon the foolishness of escape and disobedience. Will she not?"

The agreement sought by Mehrayn continued to be difficult for me, yet there was naught I might do save nod my head in capitulation. As abhorrent as the state was to a warrior, I had been commanded to allow my captivity.

"Excellent," said Mehrayn with pleasure-filled satisfaction, his great hand coming to gently stroke my arm. "Your reluctance stems from the manner in which you are bound to me, I know, therefore do I discount such reluctance and overlook it. You felt constrained to deny me of your own self due to your sense of

duty, and this I understand as well. Turn and look at me, wench."

I turned from my side to my back with a sigh, then flinched when I saw the manner in which the male looked upon me. Unflinching was that look, hard as the rock which stood all about us.

"What I shall not overlook without comment is the manner in which you spoke of me to the goddess," said he, gently brushing the tangled hair from my right arm, his eyes continuing to hold me where I lay. "Have you naught you wish to add to so complimentary a description, no other words of praise as fitting as those already spoken? You need not hesitate now any more than you did a few reekid earlier."

"Words of praise?" I echoed, finding naught in my memory of that which I had said to Mida concerning Mehrayn. "Of what description do you speak? In what manner might I have spoken of you, that I fail to recall it?"

"Perhaps your failure to recall the doing is an attempt by your lady to protect you once again," said he, smoothing his hand across my belly below my breasts. "The attempt cannot be a command for me, however, for my memory of the episode is as clear as possible. 'You need not give me to this male, for his presence is unnecessary,' you said. 'He is no more than a male who is blind, foolish, stubborn and lacking in reason,' you said. Perhaps you should have added how little pride I possess, how rarely I take insult over that which is disparagingly said of me, and how well it pleases me to be humiliated before the gods."

An odd manner of pleasantness had formed upon his visage, yet was it entirely negated by the manner in which he continued to look upon me. His eyes would not have seemed improperly placed had they been given to a lenga whose kill was being carried off by a paslat, and indeed did I abruptly feel the paslat before him, for the words I had spoken in desperation and dismay had returned to me. His hand upon me was soft and undemanding, yet did its presence and his nearness cause me to truly regret the loss of my weapons.

"Mida is well acquainted with the true nature of males," said I at last, attempting to soothe his upset. "Naught was said that she was not already aware of, therefore Mehrayn need not be overly disturbed. Mida possesses males of her own. "

"Naught was said that she was not already aware of," muttered Mehrayn, his eyes closing in a manner which seemed to indicate pain. "The goddess is already acquainted with-she possesses-Great Sigurr, give me the strength to keep my hands from curling about her throat and slowly closing! Give me the strength to keep from beating her as she has never before been beaten!"

"Should Jalav's presence so disturb Mehrayn, she need not remain here," said I, disliking the manner in which he spoke to his god. "It was not she who asked the possession of a male."

I began to rise to sit up on the pelt, more than pleased at the prospect of departing the cavern-and that right quickly-yet was Mehrayn not of a mind to see it so. His right fist came immediately to tangle in my hair, and then was I once again put flat upon the pelt.

"You are correct, wench," said he, holding me still against all attempts at struggling, his green eyes holding mine once more. "It was I who asked the possession of a wench, and I who was granted that possession. I believe it is more than time for the wench to be taught of the man in whose possession she is, so that should she find it needful to speak of him again, she will not be in doubt concerning his true nature. Pay close heed to the lesson, girl, else shall it be repeated till it is remembered."

The words of the male caused me to wish even more fervently for my weapons, yet was I mistaken in believing that he meant me true harm. No more was done to me than that which had ever been done by

him, a thing which, in truth, brought many another word and phrase to mind concerning the true nature of him. When, at last, I was able to do no other thing than speak them, he beat me.

CH 5. The difference between males-end a difference in capture

The new fey was fresh and clean and bright, a rebirth of Mida's world after the abrupt storm. My kan moved joyfully through the rising warmth of the still-dripping forests, sated after having fed upon sweet, green grass and drunk from a small rill. We had all of us partaken of the water, yet had too great an amount of trail time been lost to allow the hunting-and, for the males, cooking--of provender. This I had insisted upon at the urgings of the sharp impatience within me, and none had sought to argue the point with much vigor.

When once the new light had come, I had departed the cave to discover that the others of our set had all found similar caves in which to shelter themselves. The Sigurri males had indeed been in the nearest cave as S'Heernoh had said, yet had he failed to note that Wedin and Dotil had shared the shelter. The two Summa seemed as well pleased with the darkness which had passed as did the males, yet did they greet S'Heernoh with a warmth and concern which seemed odd. Chaldrin and Ilvin also appeared from the mouth of a cave, the male as calm and placid as ever, the Hitta warrior silent and thoughtful. I spoke little past my wishes upon the point of departure, and soon took to the trail even before the others.

Despite the glory of the fey, the despondency I felt caused me to ride alone, joying in naught about me. Deep resentment burned within me that Mida would give me to yet another male, this time bound only by her command. Jalav had had thoughts which were no credit to the goddess, and Jalav had not feared the loss of her magical life sign as deeply as was meant that she should, therefore was Jalav given to a male to serve, to teach her regret and a proper humility. Had there been none other upon whom punishment might fall I might well have refused the command, yet there were far too many others who might bear the wrath brought about by my defiance. Even were I to find it within myself to challenge the authority of the one who was mother to all Midanna, how might I do so when defeat would be visited upon others in addition to myself? I tangled my hand in the mane of my kan against the smouldering embers which burned so within me, attempting to swallow and quiet my anger.

"-You have as yet said no word to me this fey, wench," came the voice of Mehrayn, his kan drawing close to mine as he rode up. "The sweet chirpings of the lellin in the treetops would be sweeter still were you to send me a smile and ask after my rest."

The continuing satisfaction in the voice of the male was as a breath upon those smouldering embers within me, and truly did I find it necessary to make myself aware of the kan beneath me and the forest we rode through to keep the fire from leaping high. I tightened the hold of my legs upon the smooth sides of my mount, and we moved forward away from him who had been given possession of me.

"So, again you sulk after having been given a well earned punishment," said Mehrayn, again urging his kan beside mine at the swifter pace I held to. "To speak in such a manner to one who holds you with greater strength is the act of a foolish child, an act which merits only punishment. Should you do such a thing again, you will be punished again."

Memory of the beating Mehrayn had given me with the leather previously used to bind me did naught for my attempt to contain my anger. Deliberately I slowed my kan well behind his, allowing him to ride ahead alone. This second doing drove the satisfaction from him, nearly causing him to jerk upon his reins in order to return to my side.

"One who cannot stand in challenge also may not offer insult," he pursued, annoyance now to be heard entangled in his words. "Am I so much less than you, that I must accept humiliation and shame

unprotestingly, the while you do not? As we may not raise sword against one another, would it not be far more pleasant to forgo all insults and beatings and simply enjoy one another as we have in the past? I have pledged myself to your protection, and you have been pledged to my service; may we not merely take pleasure in the time we have, and leave thoughts of other things for when they may no longer be put away from us?"

So persuasive was the voice of the male, as though his words were sure to soothe away all of the disturbance and confusion and dilemma of the world. It had not yet come to him that he was likely meant to fall at the end of his time of pleasure, and that none might keep him from it with the possible exception of myself. So foolish were these males, and so filled with thoughts of naught save pleasure, that it was surely the doing of their god that they survived what battles they fought. As there were true matters of import to concern me, I continued to keep my eyes from him as we rode, and quickly reaped the reward of those who remain alert. A large tree loomed in our path, and as Mehrayn made to ride about it to the right, I chose the left and then angled even more sharply left, away from the line Mehrayn continued to hold. The distance between us widened considerably with each forward stride of my kan, and the male's curses of frustration faded as I left him behind, he seeking a swift enough path through the growth and underbrush to cut my trail again. I had to consider what lay before me and what I might do for it, and the distraction of male prattle was best avoided whenever possible.

By the time Mida's light reached its highest our set rode together again, silent till we came upon the small clearing. At sight of the clearing the males began a great clamor that we halt and take provender, and although Ilvin and the two Summa said naught, they too seemed in need of feeding. A number of lellin had been brought down by the two Sigurri who rode with Mehrayn, and although my warriors and I might well have fed upon the already featherless flesh as we rode, the males had need of a halt and a fire. To calm my impatience I recalled that our kand had need of rest as well, for they were not like the gandod warriors were able to ride from the beginning of a fey's new light until its end. I quieted the clamor by allowing the halt, and once we had dismounted and preparations for the meal had begun, I took myself to the far side of the clearing alone. The need to face all nine of the enemy clans together was a great vexation to me, for to meet and speak with a single war leader was not to face nine and a Keeper as well. It would be necessary to ride alone into their midst, a doing far simpler than remaining unattacked till the words I meant to speak were spoken. How was I to . . .

"You seem preoccupied, wench," came the voice of Chaldrin. "The Sword seemed well enough pleased at first light, yet now seems somewhat out of sorts. For what reason do you continue to provoke him?"

"I do not provoke him," I answered. "The male is as much a fool as the gods, and I do no more than refrain from giving any of them words."

"Wench, do not speak so!" Chaldrin protested with upset, his great hand coming to close upon my shoulder. "You may speak as you will of men, yet the gods may not be given such insult! Do you wish to be punished by them?"

"I am already punished by them," I replied in a mutter, moving forward away from his hand. "Mida has commanded me to give service to Mehrayn, and now he will never return to his own. The fool has pledged his life in protection of mine, thinking himself well repaid by my service. He has no knowledge of how the gods take repayment for that which they give, yet shall he learn of it to his sorrow. To think of naught save the pleasure of the present is the doing of a child, and much do I wish it were possible to take the leather to the child Mehrayn as he did to me."

"So he found it necessary to again give you a hiding," said Chaldrin, the calm returned to his voice. "Were you rash enough to speak of the gods before him as you have before me, there was little else you might expect. And for what reason should he not pledge his life to defend yours? He would do so even had he

not spoken the vow aloud, and having spoken it allows him his way with you. Had I been given the opportunity, I would have done the same."

"Such is to be expected, for you are as much of a male as he," said I, turning my head to cast a dark look at Chaldrin. "I would know, however, if you are Midanna enough to teach me this battle without weapons you have spoken so often of. I am weary of being prey to one with greater strength than I, one who beats me at any time desire comes to him. I am a war leader of Midanna, and will not be treated so."

"Should you learn quickly and well, you need not be," said Chaldrin, deep approval and satisfaction appearing in his dark eyes. "The Sword is not unskilled in unarmed battle, yet is he far from the level of skill he has with a blade. Should your own skill grow to adequacy, you may well be able to best him."

"I shall dream of the fey," said I, moving forward to put a hand to the broadness of Chaldrin's shoulder. "Upon that fey I shall take a length of leather to Mehrayn, and then shall he learn of the indignity he so easily gives others."

"And after the hiding, will you then use me?" came the voice of Mehrayn, filled with amusement. The male came from the trees we stood near, and halted beside Chaldrin with the amusement clear in his eyes. "Had I striped her back rather than warmed her bottom, she would have long since forgiven me," said he to Chaldrin with a chuckle, reaching out to take my hand from the darker male's shoulder. "You may attempt to teach her what she would know, brother, yet must she be disallowed the liberties she continues to take with you. As you will not again have her use, you will find the doing uncomfortable in the extreme should it continue, a thing the wench is innocently unaware of. It takes a man, I think, to appreciate the point."

"Indeed," agreed Chaldrin with matching amusement in his own eyes, naught to be seen of anger nor insult. "A man may appreciate her as a woman may not. You believe she will not acquire great enough skill to do you harm?"

"Should she grow to my size, my concern will grow as well," said Mehrayn, his amusement continuing. "As you observed, I am not entirely unskilled, and perhaps not so unskilled as to fare badly against one who is of a size with me. Would you care to share a bit of sport with one who lacks your exalted standing?"

The pleasantness had not left Mehrayn's face nor voice, yet was it clear that he gave challenge to Chaldrin in an area where the other male did not consider the bout lost before it had even begun. Vexation rose high in me that I would be unable to stand for Chaldrin in such a meeting even if Mehrayn did not withdraw the challenge, for these males were far too large for a warrior to best with empty hands. A faint smile came to Chaldrin, and deliberately did he fold his leather-clad wrists beneath his massive arms.

"The Sword must forgive me," he drawled, "yet am I not far enough healed to accept so kind an offer. Should my apologies for having used the wench be insufficient to heal the insult, I will not refuse a meeting with blades. A man does, after all, have his rights."

"And you would not deny me those rights, even though you would pay with your life," observed Mehrayn, meeting Chaldrin's eyes with a slow nod of understanding. "Nor will you face me in a meeting where you know yourself to be superior, for you feel you have not the right. The wench is correct in relying upon your honor, brother, for it is clear it will never fail her. It is my fondest hope, however, that another thing will fail her, and that from this fey forward. It would give me great pain to take the life of so honorable a man."

"And Sigurr will surely not forgive me should I bring pain to his Sword," said Chaldrin, chuckling. "What choice have I, save to say that her service was given by the gods to one other than myself? I will face any man who seeks to face me, yet am I not so foolish as to pit myself against the gods. I will not again allow the wench to lure me, and for this you have my word."

"Entirely adequate, and far more pleasing than broken bones or spilled blood," said Mehrayn with satisfaction, clapping Chaldrin briskly upon the shoulder. "Had I not known that the fault lay with the wench rather than with you, I would have allowed my sword to speak for me from the first. I will now take my leave of you, for there are things to be discussed with the wench herself."

Chaldrin nodded with a continued chuckling as Mehrayn took my arm and pulled me with him, retracing his outward steps from the trees. I had no desire to accompany the male, yet was there little I might do against his strength-as yet. Branches and leaves beat at me as Mehrayn hurried me through the forest away from the clearing, and when a sufficient distance had been achieved, he halted and thrust me within a ring of closely set bushes. The grass was soft and thick and cool beneath my feet there, and thin golden ribbons of Mida's light played down through the treetops.

"I have had enough of your thick, censoring silence, wench," said Mehrayn, turning me so that I might look up at him. "You have been directed to serve me and obey me, and I have no wish to be served by a woman who will not speak to me. I have allowed you to sulk for a time, and now I command that you speak."

"I obeyed Mehrayn's command by remaining silent," I replied with a shrug, allowing my gaze to rise no higher than the wide chest before me. "As no other insults are to be given him, I have naught further to say."

Had his hand not remained upon my arm I would have turned away and left him there, for the impatience I had felt all of that fey continued to plague me. The male, however, was not of a mind to see me free. His hand closed somewhat more tightly about my arm, and his free hand came to raise my face so that I must look up into his eyes.

"I do believe I spoke truly when I said you would have already forgiven me had I striped your back rather than warmed your bottom," said he with a narrowing of the green which looked down upon me. "Once we discussed the punishment given a warrior as opposed to that given a girl, and it would have been clear even without your agreement that you far preferred the greater pain of being done as a warrior. Never will you have a warrior's punishment from me, wench, though in truth you are no other thing, however the punishment of a girl is another matter entirely. Will you give over your insolence, or must I continue as I have already done?"

I met the steadiness of his gaze in silence, attempting to show naught of the turmoil within me. The male was more than capable of giving me humiliation again and there was naught I might do to halt his intentions. His hand against my face was gentle despite the strength in it, and he waited no more than a moment for the answer I was not able to give.

"The turbulence in your dark, lovely eyes grows greater," said he with a sigh, as though he truly believed the thought of humiliation would cow me. "I know not what might be done with you, wench, yet do I mean to know before this journey is done. For now I will merely have service from you, therefore are you to remove those weapons and that breech."

With the command spoken his hands left me, giving me the opportunity to obey him. A long moment passed in hesitation before my hands were able to begin the movement toward my swordbelt, and truly did I believe that had Mida then appeared before me, I would have put many, many lives in jeopardy. To

be set to the service of a male sat ill with me, putting the sort of humor upon me which must be washed away with blood.

Removing swordbelt and breech and dagger was unfortunately no more than the work of a moment, and then I merely stood within the ring of bushes, having obeyed the command I had been given. Mehrayn, with swordbelt and black covering already put aside, sat himself upon the grass, then lay back to look up at me.

"It seems I would have done far better had I asked for willing service," said he, putting his hands beneath the back of his head. "It was not my intention to have you remove your weapons and breech so that you might merely stand there, girl. Come down here, and we shall begin you upon your service."

He lay at his ease upon the thick, green grass, his tan, well made body clearly awaiting me, though he was as clearly not yet prepared for my use. I went to my knees beside him, taking care not to so much as brush his flesh, and a faint smile curved his lips.

"Should you intend seeing me regret having asked for your service, you will find disappointment," said he, making no attempt to touch me. "Willingness does indeed make your use the sweeter, yet far better unwilling use than no use of you at all. I am helpless before the madness which possesses me, girl, a madness which I find myself unable to recover from. Bring your lips to mine, and press them to me as though you truly desired my use."

I leaned over him with great care, still attempting to keep my flesh from his, yet my breasts touched the warmth of his chest even before our lips met. So strong and warm were those lips, demanding even in acceptance, setting my mind to whirling even as I strove to cling to thoughts of anger against Mida and fury for having been given the punishment of a girl. It was Mehrayn whose lips touched mine, Mehrayn whose flesh burned my flesh, Mehrayn whose wide shoulders were suddenly beneath my hands. Never would I be allowed to possess him, never would he be allowed to survive after having brought himself to the notice of Mida, yet was I as helpless as he against the madness which held us both. I had attempted to deny him and send him from me so his life would not be forfeit, yet had he refused to allow the thing which would have meant his safety. He had demanded my service from Mida and had been granted his demand, and though my confusion and lack of understanding was great, I did not truly begrudge him the boon. His arms circled me and pulled me close as my hands went to his face, bringing to me the knowledge that my service would forever be his.

"Jalav, my Jalav," he crooned, rolling me to the grass so that he might lean over me and press his lips to my face all about. "You are truly mine, are you not, wench? Despite your anger with me and your attempts to ride from me, and your never-ending denial-you are now and always shall be mine!"

I am Mida's, I whispered in my heart, unable to voice the words through the fierce possession of my lips. My vow to the goddess is unbreakable, and I shall ride in her service to the end of my time. I cannot deny you, my red-haired Sigurri male, for you will not allow it, and yet shall Mida deny you as she denied Ceralt, demanding that I turn from you as I turned from him. How strong and warm you are beneath my hands, Mehrayn, as warm and strong as Ceralt, and also in such a way did he part my legs with his knee and prepare to enter me. The feel of your manhood against my desire maddens me, and although I whimper and moan and struggle in your arms you enter me slowly, making me know the strength of he who is Sigurr's Sword. Ceralt's thrust was not so slow, his throbbing need pierced me quickly, and yet the feel of you within is the same, the breathless, sobbing, demanding, pleading desire put on me no matter my frantic wish to deny such feelings. Ah, Mida, how well the male uses me, the pleasure so great that I would weep unashamedly like the lowliest of slave women! Do you mean to take them both to serve you, to give you the pleasure only I now know? Am I to be denied them so that they might not interfere with the tasks I have been given-or in punishment at my having dared consider them without

your let? Is it possible to retrieve one's life-vow in challenge? Is it possible to challenge the gods? My thoughts fade to naught as the male touches my soul, and yet-is my sword skill truly less than yours?

To count the time passing in pleasure is not possible, for kalod are lived during reckless and hind, the time unending and yet ending too soon. When the need had passed from us I lay in Mehrayn's arms, my face to his great chest, his hands spread across my back, beneath my hair. The thoughts I had had at the beginning of his use remained with me, returning the dark mood which had held me and the impatience as well. There were so great a number of matters to be thought upon that my head rang with the clatter of them all.

"Ah, Sigurr," sighed Mehrayn, one hand coming to stroke my hair. "Clearly it was through your guidance that I failed to ask for the wench's willing service. I am nearly done from her hesitation; had she been willing, she would surely have slain me."

Gently did his arms tighten about me as he chuckled, clearly an attempt to reassure me that he made no sport of me, yet it would have mattered not even had he seriously sought to torment me. It would truly have been idle to attempt to deny my desire for him, not when touching him meant I must have him.

"You are a great fool, Mehrayn, greater even than other males," I said, holding him as tightly as he held me, breathing in the musky male smell of him. "You must return to your Sigurri immediately, and remain with them till we meet again before the gates of Bellinard."

"You would ask a man to break a vow to the gods?" said he, the amusement still with him as he toyed with my hair. "Had I not made the vow to guard your life with my own I would surely have ridden off and left you, yet now am I forced to remain here and submit over and over again to your service. The time will be greatly trying for me, and wearying as well, yet honor demands that I accept my suffering in silence."

"It amuses you to act the fool," said I in accusation, raising my head to look darkly upon him. "It is to be hoped that it will amuse you as well to be closed in Mida's chains and set to her service."

"You believe the goddess wishes me for her own?" he asked, mockery joining the amusement in his eyes. "Your opinion of my prowess is flattering, wench, yet would I prefer that you seek to keep me instead from other wenches like yourself. You would not face your Mida for me, I know, and I currently feel a great need to be jealously guarded."

"There is more to be feared from a goddess than from her warriors," I made answer to his foolishness, along with a sound of disdain. "Ceralt was denied me and so shall you be, yet I am now certain that unlike him, you are meant to be taken to serve. His fate would simply have been death, yet now do you both stand in jeopardy far greater than the endless dark. Should you return to your males, there is some faint possibility that the fate may be avoided."

"You do not jest," said he, losing all amusement as he looked closely upon me. "You truly believe the goddess wishes me for her own. Are you not able to see the outrageousness of such a suggestion, girl? I am no more than a man, naught to breed desire within a goddess! For what conceivable reason would she wish my service?"

"For the reason that I desire you," I replied, seeking to banish the heavy doubt he showed with firm assurance. "Ceralt denied Mida's existence, therefore was his own existence denied. You, however, have not only acknowledged her existence, you have asked for and been granted a boon. Such a doing is never without a price, and the price already offered by you is insufficient. Think you Mida has need of your swordarm to aid me, when none have yet been able to best me? And what of the time before our meeting? Who was it who stood before me then? No, male, Prince of Sigurr's Sword Mehrayn, the

goddess has no need of your swordarm. She desires my humiliation in punishment the while I am pledged to serve you, and then she will take you for her own and have your other sword instead. Perhaps she feels I will hunger for your blood as once I led her to believe I hungered for Ceralt's, and for that reason will take you from me, both of you. It is denial she wishes for me, and denial she will have. You must return to your Sigurri, for even your god cannot aid you now."

"For what reason would Sigurr be unable to aid me?" he asked, clearly shaken despite the steadiness of his voice, worry in the green of his eyes. "It continues to disturb me that you speak so--knowingly and intimately of the gods. I am Sigurr's Sword, wench, Prince of his Blood and Chosen to lead his warriors into battle. For what reason would blessed Sigurr turn his back upon me?"

"Your god would have continued his protection of you had you remained in his domain," I informed the male with all the scathing condemnation which then filled me, pushing from his unresisting arms to sit upon the thick, cool grass. "So clever was the male Mehrayn, however, and so intent upon his desire to plunge as deeply and as often as possible within a Midanna war leader, that he asked a boon of the goddess Mida, thereby taking himself from the domain of his god into the domain of another. Another who will see that he begs to plunge deep for all eternity."

"I begin to see more fully the qualities of a war leader," he muttered, as subdued before my anger as would have been a newly blooded warrior, a glance no more of his gaze than he was able to give me. "I have not had a dressing down such as that since the feyd of my training as a young warrior. You say you have seen the men chosen to serve the goddess?"

"Aye," said I with a grim nod of acknowledgment, recalling those males whose souls were no longer their own. "It was during my time with Mida and Sigurr in their domain upon this world. Those who were commanded to serve me were naught save empty husks, well made and desirable without, trembling and fearful within. No males were they but slaves, held by that which was far worse than chains. And he who was taken to serve Mida herself was given the sthuvad drug, an aid Mida has no true need of, yet did it amuse her to do him so. She took me to where he lay chained to a couch of stone in a large, bright, otherwise empty cavern, the drug having been given him many hind earlier. The agony of forced lust strained his flesh so greatly that he screamed with the belief that it would soon part, yet was he denied the use of any save Mida, and she not then of a mind to indulge in that use. Insanity attempted to take him at sight of two whose use he had so great a need of, his struggles increasing the flow of blood from rawly savaged wrists and ankles where the chains held him, yet neither insanity nor death were allowed him. No release, no freedom, not even escape to the final darkness. Is that what you wish for yourself, Mehrayn?"

Silence hung between us as the male stared upon me, an unnamable expression strong in his eyes. A faint breath of cool whispered about the bushes we sat among, yet was the pleasure of it without strength enough to banish the heaviness left by my words. A long moment passed with the silence, and then did Mehrayn stiffen somewhat where he sat.

"When first we met, you spoke of your soul having been slain by the god I serve," said he, unbelievably making no mention of that which he had been told. "Much did I believe that you spoke so through lack of true knowledge of the use of men, yet have I since learned differently. You are fully aware of the strength men may bring to a wench, therefore do your previous words take on new meaning. Tell me of the use you had from my god."

Memory of the use I had had from Sigurr remained as strong within me as though the doing were only just past, and briefly did I feel again the terror and agony and soul illness of the time. A shudder touched me, as it ever did when I thought upon the thing, and then was the feeling pushed aside by matters of greater moment.

"Mehrayn, we do not now discuss Sigurr," said I, a bit impatiently. "It is Mida we must consider, for it is she "

"No!" He interrupted sharply and harshly, the green of his eyes having turned very cold as his hand came gently to my arm. "It is Sigurr I must hear of, for it is he who holds my vow of fealty. For what reason did you twice nearly spill my blood when I spoke of the possibility of your being taken to Sigurr's arms? For what reason have you never truly spoken of your time in Sigurr's domain, nor discussed the blessing of his use? What was done to you to make you feel and act so?"

Ardently were those answers demanded of me, answers the male believed he truly craved. He served Sigurr as I served Mida, yet what choice had we in that service?

"It would not be possible to speak of the time to one who was not then present," I replied, taking no note of the way his hand tightened upon my arm, the way the cold deepened in his eyes. "The use of Sigurr was-not as the use of his Sigurri, for he is a god and they are not. Just as Mida is a goddess. Will you continue to court disaster, or will you display the reason other males lack?"

"Woman, I dislike the manner in which you avoid my queries," growled Mehrayn, a great dissatisfaction upon him. His hand left my arm yet his gaze remained upon me, little warming to be seen therein. "It seems most clear that there is much you must yet be made to speak of, yet shall I refrain from pressing the point-for the moment. There will be another time when the words flow more freely, and at that time I shall listen."

His hand came gently to my face in a brief caress, and then he rose to his feet, looking about himself for his body cloth. I, too, arose from the grass and retrieved my breech, feeling a deep satisfaction that Mehrayn would return to his males, a thing I knew from his having spoken of another time. The doing would surely be best for him, for it would take him from the immediate notice of Mida, perhaps to be forgotten altogether amid the arrival of the strangers and the battle to follow. I replaced the life-sign-wound dagger in my leg bands and lifted my swordbelt, then turned again to Mehrayn.

"Best would be if you and the others depart as quickly as you have fed," said I, aware of the scent of roast lellin upon the faint, sweetly pleasant breeze. "We shall meet again before the walls of Bellinard, and then, perhaps, shall find it possible to discuss now the battle shall be fought., Without knowledge of the enemy, it will be difficult to

"Hold, wench, hold," interrupted the male, one hand raised. "Where do you think I ride, that you send me forth in so commanding a manner? I have voiced no intentions of departing. "

"You continue to refuse?" I demanded in disbelief, the usual confusion I found when conversing with males returning to swirl about me. "When it would be mindless to remain? When you would not then be able to take yourself from the notice of Mida? When you spoke of another time?"

"When I continue to have a wench who must serve me?" he returned with a laugh, the amusement fully upon him. "The other time I spoke of will appear in due course, and I must be present when it does. Do you mean to don your swordbelt, or cart it in one hand?"

My eyes lowered to the weapon he gestured toward, its presence having entirely escaped me amid the vast annoyance of his continued insistences. With short, angry motions I wrapped it about myself and secured it, then looked again upon the fool of a male.

"You will surely be present when many things occur," said I with disgust, my hands resting upon the newly replaced swordbelt. "Do not fail to give my greetings to Mida when her chains close about you, and the sthuvad drug begins to flow down your throat. It will be then that you will truly regret not having

taken yourself from her sight, yet will the time for so reasonable a doing be long behind you."

I began to turn from him then, to leave that place and return to the others, however a large hand came to my arm to halt me.

"Should the goddess mean to have me, I will be hers though I ride to the farthest ends of the world," said he, little disturbance to be heard in his voice. "I am as yet far from convinced that she does indeed wish me for her own, yet am I certain as to the earnest wishes of another female. This wench desires me as greatly as I desire her, yet does it infuriate her that she must serve me whenever I wish it. The situation would be acceptable were it turned the other way about, yet the need for her own obedience is like a thorn bush thrust against the tender flesh of her pride. Would you be so deeply convinced of the mortal danger I stood in were you not commanded to obey and serve me, girl? Would you be so eager to see me gone from this traveling party were you not mine to do with as I please?"

The strength in the green of his gaze was clear as he looked down upon me, an annoyance nearly as thick as my own accompanying it. The male was a fool and I have little patience with fools, therefore did I attempt to pull my arm from his grip in order to depart. Rather than release me he abruptly pulled me close, locking his arms about me to keep me before him.

"It disturbs you most, I know, that I refuse to do as you think best," said he, his voice now soft with understanding. "You would see me safely away and secure from peril, yet, wench-are you unable to see that I wish the same for you? I have no doubt that should I require the presence of your sword and the skill of your swordarm, they would be there to aid me; am I not to be allowed to do the same for you? Think you I would find life full and satisfying elsewhere, knowing you rode to danger and I too far from there to give what aid I might? Life would be bereft of all save duty were you lost to me; far sooner would I spend that life in your defense than keep it and be forced to live it. And perhaps we two might use our skill to see to the safety of one another, in a situation where either of us alone would fall. Will you send me from you to ride alone, and therefore fail to be there when I have need of you? Will you let me fall, never again to rise, merely by cause of your annoyance over having to serve me?"

The strength of his arms continued to hold me to the warm, firm flesh of him, else would I have surely fled with my hands clapped to my ears, to keep all further words of his from reaching me. My agitation was so great that I pushed hard against the chest of the male, freeing myself from his suddenly loosening hold, and then sped away from him. Once again I knew not what to do, and my head buzzed and whirled with the confusion thought brought.

The others were already partaking of the lëllin when I reached the clearing, and although I had no true wish for provender it was far easier accepting that which was given me than refusing it and thereby beginning a many-sided discussion. I took myself and the lëllin to the far side of the fire and sat, beside none of those who rode with me, disturbed by none of them. Wedin and Dotil and Ilvin and Chaldrin all looked upon me with concern in their silence, and so, too, did the male S'Heernoh. Only the two Sigurri took especial note of the appearance of Mehrayn, they having prepared and kept his provender for him. His low words of thanks preceded his seating himself by them, and then he hungrily began upon the flesh he had been given.

My eyes went to the lëllin I, myself, held, the churning in my middle speaking of a need too long held in abeyance, yet did I not begin upon it.

"That lëllin is meant to be eaten, not merely torn apart," said Chaldrin, his appearance and Ilvin's before me startling me. Dotil and Wedin accompanied the male and the Hitta, and all four crouched down to give me the sobriety of their gazes.

"Are you ill, war leader?" asked Ilvin, deep concern in the pale blue of her eyes, her hand raising somewhat before halting, as though she had meant to put it to my shoulder before thinking better of the doing. "Has the male harmed you in some manner?"

"We find it difficult to believe that Mida has given you to him," said Wedin her dark eyes disturbed as her right hand toyed with the hilt of her dagger. "Might it not be some nefarious scheme contrived by the male, designed to hoodwink us all into belief?"

"My life sign glowed with Mida's own golden light," I made answer, looking down at the lellin I had twisted and torn between my hands. "Who other than a god might have caused it to glow in such a manner? Should the male have contrived the doing, he, too, must be a god, and therefore would all discussion upon the point remain idle. I am his to command and use, save that he may not interfere with my tasks on behalf of the goddess." My eyes then went to Chaldrin, where he crouched as did the others. "Have you no other welcome tidings, brother, which it would please you to share with all the world?" I asked, at last taking a mouthful of the redly running provender I held. "Do not hesitate to speak, for all eagerly await your words."

"These wenches follow you as I do, girl," he rumbled, naught of diffidence breaking into his usual calm. "They asked after what disturbed you, therefore did I inform them as to what was imparted to me. I was not, you may recall, asked to keep silent upon the matter. Surely you would have soon informed them yourself."

"A warrior's shame is not so easily discussed," I muttered about a mouthful, still upset, then did I turn my eyes to the others. "As Mida is so clearly displeased with me, it is in my mind that best would be for us to take separate trails. I would not bring her wrath down upon you as well, for no other reason than that you accompany me."

"You ask us to abandon you?" declared Dotil, outrage clear in the light of her eyes, her body stiffening as did Wedin's. "Surely such abandonment would be of greater distaste to the goddess than our remaining, and surely would we then also be punished! No, war leader of the Hosta, we will not do as you suggest!"

"Nor may I," said Ilvin, she sharing the agreement shown Wedin. "I have given my vow upon a certain matter, and must therefore remain beside the one who holds that vow. Against the time I will be released, you understand."

Her amusement was clear, this warrior who had so disliked the need to follow and serve a male, she who now crouched companionably close to Chaldrin and no longer scowled upon him. I saw the difference in Ilvin which I had earlier failed to note, and her amusement turned wry at the questioning gaze I sent to her.

"Clearly I must now admit that your punishment is no longer a punishment," said she, something of a sigh taking her. "I have not yet learned the lesson you wished to teach, war leader, yet have I learned one which was unanticipated by both of us."

Her crouch became a cross-legged, seated position, and when the others had done as she, she again sent a faint smile toward me.

"It had not occurred to me that there might be differences among males," said she, shaking her head to send her pale hair back from about her arms. "The sthuvad which our clan used, the males we fought in the city called Bellinard, those who held me captive-all were of the same sort, fit for naught save us or death, no more to be noticed than Mida's ground beneath a warrior's feet. Deep outrage took me that I was required to serve one of that ilk, and I sought to force the male to the challenge so that I might rid

myself of him. When he refused to issue a challenge I grew even more enraged, and began thinking of naught save the fey I would be able to issue challenge of my own."

Again her smile grew wry, and her hand rose to stroke her life sign where it hung between her breasts.

"When I spoke of my intentions to you," she continued, "you replied that the life of the male was precious to you, and should it be my intention to end that life, my vow might never be returned. Never had I been given such devastating upset, and for a time all thought was impossible to me. For a war leader of Midanna to speak so of a male! And then, slowly, it came to me to wonder upon the reason you spoke so. I looked again upon the male, considered the actions he had taken with me, then spent much of the darkness of the storm speaking with him. Though his treatment of me was of the sort to be given a city slave-woman, the doing was in accordance with your wishes-and it became clear that he, himself, looked upon me as a warrior and would have honored me for the state had he been left to his own devices. There is naught within him of the cruelty of others, and I have discovered that I need only speak of some matter with which I have difficulty, and he will aid me if he may. I continued to dislike being forced to give him service, yet the matter is no longer a punishment, merely an inconvenience which is easily borne."

Ilvin's words ceased in a somewhat shame-faced manner, yet was it Chaldrin I looked sourly upon as I chewed and swallowed the lellin. The male was clearly taken by amusement, and when I looked upon him, he chuckled.

"The wench has most obviously taken a liking to my use," said he, his dark eyes making no effort to avoid mine. "Will you have me beat her for showing such excellent taste?"

Both the Summa and Ilvin laughed aloud at Chaldrin's sally, knowing the male intended no such thing, and Wedin shook her dark-haired head.

"You may not lay the blame for the thing at the feet of the male, Jalav," said she, looking fondly upon him whom I called brother. "He is, as spoken of by both you and the Hitta, without the cruelty of other males. He may, in honor, do no more than he has already done. Has your purpose been served?"

"No, Wedin, my purpose has not been served," I replied with weariness, throwing the lellin bones from me and then wiping the blood and grease from my fingers with two handfuls of grass. "Or perhaps it has been served, and I merely unaware of the accomplishment. Had Ilvin followed me elsewhere than to the Sigurri, her word would now be held by another, never to be returned to her; yet-is she a warrior and free, free to ride where she wills, free to spend her life in any manner she sees fit. I am no longer able to see the truth as clearly as once I did, therefore shall I no longer insist upon possibly pointless punishments. Ilvin, your word is now returned to you; you may ride and do at the direction of no one save yourself."

I put my hand to the Hitta's shoulder to show I felt no anger toward her, yet was I unable to meet her eyes. My efforts to show her without agony that which I had learned amid great pain had failed, and should her life and freedom be subsequently lost, the blame for the thing would be mine alone. I rose quickly to my feet and went directly to my kan, mounted in a single leap after freeing my reins, then rode from the clearing. My attempt to save Ilvin had failed, much as many of my other recent attempts, and no longer was I sure of the rightness of my path. Unaccustomed indecision twisted me about within, and much did I silently revile myself for having avoided the teeth and claws of the lenga.

The others once again rode in my near wake when darkness approached, therefore did I call a halt before a clamor might again arise. The forest had withdrawn from a wide, lovely meadow, and I drew rein beside a small yet swiftly running stream, dismounted, then stretched into the fey's lowering light. The heat continued sultry all about and heavy upon one's shoulders, and I bent to the stream to drink as my

kan did, bringing the wetness to cool my insides until I might slip into the waters and see to my outward flesh. Silence had returned to those four who followed me, yet had there been many words from Summa, Hitta and male before that return. Each had attempted to question me as to that which whirled about in my head, yet how was I to speak of those things which could not even be thought upon? Polite refusal at last saw to the Summa, firmer refusal and an assurance of lack of anger took Ilvin from my shadow, yet was there naught which moved Chaldrin from his insinuations till I called down Mida's wrath upon his head and rode from him at high speed. His kan, more heavily burdened than mine, found itself unable to match the pace I set, therefore was the male forced to fall back. When I had ridden from Chaldrin for the third time he gave up his attempts, and took up a position beside Mehrayn. The two had ridden together from then on, a thing which had happily kept them both from bedeviling me.

When my kan had drunk his fill I took him from the stream edge, staked him out upon a long line which allowed him to graze freely upon the thick, sweet meadow grass, then returned to the stream to wash the heat of the fey from my body. The water was beautifully cold, a thing which drew the others of my set, all save the male S'Heernoh, who was set to skinning the kirol which had been slain by Dotil and Wedin. The kirol was a long-snouted, short-tusked child of the wild which is more easily hunted with spears than bows, yet had the Summa been keen for its flesh and had made do with shafts. It was clear the male would have preferred bathing to skinning, yet had he accepted the chore with no more of a demurrer than a sigh, a soft chuckling coming to him thereafter as though something amused him. Odd was the male S'Heernoh, perhaps even more so than other males, surely well suited to all that which then occurred about me.

Much did it cause me great upset to be so enclosed by events and the doings of others that I felt borne along by those events, my own actions forced upon me and none of my choosing. The stream current tugged strongly at me, swirling my wet hair about and attempting to carry it away, seemingly whispering that best would be if I were to leave all those who laughed and splashed and cavorted upstream from where I stood, and continue on alone. Much did I wish to do so, so much so that the need was a struggling, demanding heaviness within me, yet without the Summa I rode I knew not where; were two to accompany me the other six were naught, for it was complete solitude I craved, not some partial shadow of it. I turned from the bank in the deep red of fey's end, and began to stroke toward the far side of the stream.

The stream was not much widened from where it left the forest a short distance away, and no more than a few reckid saw me at its other bank. I pulled myself up and sat with feet adangle in the water, squeezing the wetness from my hair as I moved about upon the grass, seeking to halt its attempts to cling to my bottom. The lowering light showed me the others at the opposite side of the stream, Ilvin, Wedin and Dotil showering great splashes of water upon Chaldrin and the two Sigurri warriors, the males retaliating in kind, all laughing well at the foolishness, even Mehrayn, who merely stood in the stream and observed the others. I did not begrudge them their laughter and joy, yet was I far from a state where I might join them in their play with a fullness of heart. The lack increased the annoyance I felt, over the length of the journey before me, over the need to do as I had no wish to do, over the indecision concerning Mehrayn's presence or absence, over the need to face all enemy Midanna at once, over the strangers who would come. I threw the heavy, twisted coil of my hair behind me, rose to my feet upon the stream bank, then walked toward the blood-red remnants of Mida's dying light, afloat in the thoughts I could not rid myself of. I walked from the stream bank, again attempting to find the words which would need to be spoken to the enemy clans of Midanna, and they came at me from behind the clouds of sightlessness and lack of hearing in which I was enmeshed. The first I knew of their presence was hands on my arms and a fist in my hair, tightening quickly and cruelly, and causing my lips to part in a gasp of surprise and pain. Just so quickly as my lips parted was a wad of cloth thrust between them, a thin length of leather immediately tied about to hold the thing within, the strength of male hands holding me where I struggled. Three males there were, the gray of their body cloths difficult to see in the waning light, and

with the strip of leather tied I was hurriedly taken by them into the forests, from which they had obviously emerged.

Once among the trees and no longer in danger of observation by their enemies, the gray-clad males ceased their hurry and came to a halt. Two of them continued to hold to my arms as all three looked upon me, and the shadows were not so thick that their great pleasure was difficult to see. I struggled in their grasp, attempting to pull free, and he before me laughed softly.

"Truly was it the will of the Serene Oneness that we leave the expedition and begin the return to our city," said he, putting a hand out to fondle my breast. Light-haired was the male, as were the other two, all three not much larger than I, yet considerably stronger. "-We now have a wench to serve us without the need to do battle for her, a wench who was sent to our waiting hands."

"I give thanks that we observed their arrival rather than they observing ours," said a second, he who held to my left arm. "This one would not then have come running to us. What of the other wenches still at their camp?"

"Those who ride with us will surely return for them," said the first, bringing his free hand to the place between my thighs. Again I struggled, attempting to avoid his touch, yet the other two each put a knee behind my thighs, forcing me to endure the outrage rather than escape it. The male stroked and toyed till the heat began to rise within me despite my fury, and then he laughed. "Should the others be as hot as this one," said he, "their capture will be well worth the small effort of slaying the men who now hold them. We are, after all, twelve to their four, the slavey who toils for them unarmed and therefore of little concern. The others should not need our assistance, yet shall they have it, should they be willing to wait till we have thoroughly used our little bird here."

"I shall use her last," said the second, he who held to my left arm, his tongue moistening his lips as he looked upon the manner in which I was forced to move by the hand at my thighs. "She squirms about now with the need you put upon her, and I care little for eager acceptance by the wench beneath me. I will have her fear and pain instead, which will bring her more quickly to know me her master."

"She will know me her master when I choose to ease her," replied the first, joining the laughter of the third, purposefully continuing with his efforts to heat me. "She will be taught to beg her use, and prettily, else shall I keep her in need the whole fey through, squirming and weeping and unable to halt the flames within her. She will learn to crawl to me and kiss my feet, and please me well before her own need is seen to."

"And she is large, and will likely afford us longer use than the last wench we shared," put in the third with high-pitched laughter, speaking for the first time, spittle running from the corner of his mouth. "She will serve us all, and well, else shall I open her throat with my blade and drink her lifeblood!"

The edge of the male's dagger was at my throat then, his laughter shared by the other two, and surely would I have snarled in rage had the cloth not been thrust in my mouth. Was a warrior of Mida, a war leader of Midanna, to tremble in fear at the touch of a dagger at her throat, to obey the demands of males to halt the spilling of her lifeblood? Should the males end me I would then have the solitude I craved, a state they knew not how deeply was desired by me. Perhaps I would have laughed had the cloth not been there, for the males knew naught of what thoughts touched me, and would therefore, at some time, see me free so that I might serve them. They each of them wore swords, and should a hilt come to my hand, my life would be sold dearly indeed.

"We must take her in proper style to our camp," said the male before me, his toying continuing without halt. "She now squirms even with the blade threatening her, and would surely beg had she not been

silenced. Bind her wrists, Cludain, the while Clomain ties a lead upon her."

"For what reason must it ever be Cludain and I who bind the wenches?" said he who held the dagger, he who now withdrew it with great reluctance and petulance. "For what reason may we not give her our attention as you now give her yours, Mondolain?"

"For the reason that we wish use from her before the arrival of the end of her strength," said the male before me in amusement, he who was called Mondolain. "Should you and your brother attend her, Clomain, she will be fit for naught save feeding to the beasts of this forest. And yet I have thought of an amusement which may be seen to when we have returned to camp, and you may perform it if you wish."

"An amusement!" exclaimed this Clomain, he who stood to my right, immediately brightening. "Ever have I been fond of your amusements, Mondolain! I will certainly assist you. "

"Excellent," murmured he before me, a faint smile upon his lips as he gazed upon me. He took no note of the manner in which he to my left drew my arms behind me and tightly knotted leather about my wrists, nor the manner in which the third did the same with a length of leather about my throat. The leather had been held in the swordbelts of these males, and much did it seem that that leather had seen a deal of similar use. He before me continued to increase my need, and much amusement did he find in my inability to keep from burning as he wished. When the leather was tightly upon me he at last ceased his ministrations, then took the leather lead from the male Clomain.

"See the lovely kan filly we have captured, my friends," said Mondolain, reaching to stroke my hair with a laugh. "Let us lead her before the others so that they, too, may admire her before we -mount and ride."

He pulled hard upon the throat leather then, nearly sending me from my feet, pulling me forward as he strode off more deeply into the forest. The other two males laughed, Clomain more shrilly than Cludain, both following quickly, though Clomain paused briefly with a further laugh. In a moment had his footsteps rejoined his brother's, yet another hand of hurried steps were forced upon me before I learned of the reason for his pause.

"Hat, filly, step along more briskly there!" came the voice of Clomain, accompanied by the sharp sting of a switch across my thighs. Again the three males laughed, and again I would have snarled, yet there was naught else I might do for it. Bound in leather and pulled by the neck, I was able to do no more than follow.

The distance to the camp of the gray-clad males was not far, and those who peopled the camp sprang to their feet with exclamations of surprise at our appearance. The male Mondolain continued his unrelenting pull till we stood in the very center of the camp, near to the large, now easily seen fire, and then he turned to the others.

"The first of four, my friends!" he cried, attempting to send me to my knees by a sharp pull upon the leather he held. As I stood flat-footed he did no more than bring an ache to my neck-till one of those behind struck my knees with his second pull. Down I went, nearly pitching forward on my face, and the laughter set flame to my rage so that it well nigh boiled over. My teeth set hard in the cloth between my lips, my wrists pulled furiously at the leather which held them, and little of the grass, dirt and stones beneath my knees penetrated my awareness.

"The first of four, my friends," laughed Mondolain, drawing the leather about my throat as tight as he was able. "The other three are as toothsome as this one, and held by only four men. We will gladly accompany you in the taking of them-as soon as we have taught this one to know the men she now serves. Clomain!"

"Yes, Mondolain!" acknowledged the third male eagerly amid the stirring excitement and laughter of those who had been found within the camp. "Are we to begin the amusement?"

"Indeed we are," said Mondolain, sending an already amused glance at the switch the other male held. My thighs and calves ached from the doing of that switch, nearly as much as my hand ached for the hilt of my sword. "We must be sure our filly is not lost among the others," said Mondolain, his eyes close upon me. "Therefore must we mark her clearly as ours. Draw your dagger Clomain, and come stand beside me."

The switch was quickly discarded as the male drew his blade from its sheath at his swordbelt, and then he, too, stared upon me from beside the other, the flames of the fire glinting off the blade he held with such eagerness, spittle again running from the corner of his mouth.

"See how large and insolent her breasts are, Clomain," murmured the other into what had become a deep, breathless silence, his eyes close to glowing. "Such breasts draw a man's eyes and hands; therefore shall we make certain that all know whose property they are being drawn to. We shall mark her with the letters of our names, Clomain, one letter upon each of her breasts, cut deep so that they will scar properly when they have healed. Are we not fortunate that there are no more than the two letters among the three of us? Had it not been so, we would require a wench with three breasts."

"Indeed, a wench with three breasts!" laughed Clomain, his hands caressing his dagger, the wildness in his laughter bringing a chill to those who stood about in the warmth of the darkness. One or two attempted to join his laughter, yet was their mirth filled more with fear than amusement, for the male before me truly relished the thought of that which he would do. His use of the dagger would be slow, I knew, and fervently did I give thanks that what pain I felt would be unable to pass my lips, yet thought of the shame in being marked so brought a trembling to my body which I was unable to halt. No honest battle scars would I be given, but the marks of ownership by males! My breathing grew faster to the great thud off my heart, and when I made to rise to my feet, a fist came suddenly to tangle painfully in my hair.

"Begin now, Clomain," came the voice of the other, he who was called Cludain, he who continued to stand to my left. By the fistful of hair was I bent backward enough so that he with the dagger would have no difficulty in reaching me, also disallowing me all possibility of rising. "Perhaps I will take her first after all," said Cludain, "yet must you begin now."

The voice of the male who held me was thick, companioning the smell of desire which was equally thick upon him. The male was greatly aroused by the pain I would be given, a thing which brought me greater illness than the prospect of the doing itself. A rush of hatred for all things male flashed deeply through me as he with the dagger came slowly, laughingly forward, and when his free hand touched me softly, caressingly, truly did I believe I would soon be even more deeply ill despite the cloth between my teeth. Again I struggled where I was held, sweat slicking my body and face, the dagger now coming to touch my flesh-and then was it suddenly withdrawn in shocked surprise.

"Jalav, where have you gone to?" came the call of alight, unconcerned voice, clearly the voice of Ilvin. "Darkness has fallen, and Mehrayn desires your service. You must return and see to him, for he grows most agitated. Jalav!"

All in the camp had turned at the sound of Ilvin's voice, even those who stood about me. With my hair no longer held in so tight a grip I, too, was able to look toward the sound, and then was it no longer sound alone which took the attention of all. Into the clearing stepped Ilvin, her long, pale hair wet yet from her swim across the stream, her body as bare as mine and also pale from the faint illumination thrown upon it by the firelight. She halted a scant step within the clearing, looked all about herself, then let her eyes come to me.

"What do you all do here?" she demanded angrily. "That is not a city slave-woman you hold, therefore are you to release her at once!"

"Rather than release her, my pretty," said Mondolain, a slow grin taking him, "it would please us more to have you join her. You were to be ours in any event, yet sooner is more desirable than later. Seize her, you men!"

His command was for those who stood nearest Ilvin, and with whoops of laughter did four begin to run toward the unmoving Hitta warrior. Fury came to me that the fool of a warrior would do no more than stand and await the capture of these males, yet through the fury was I struck by the faint amusement which appeared upon the face of Ilvin. I had no more understanding of that amusement than had the gray-clad males, yet were we quickly shown the reason for it.

"Perhaps you would also care to seize me," said Chaldrin, suddenly appearing from behind a tree no more than two steps from Ilvin, a sword held in each of his hands. He, too, was otherwise bare of covering, and as he halted beside her, she took her sword from him.

"You, male, are scarcely as seizable as I," said Ilvin, settling the hilt in her fist with a widening grin. "It is I they wish to seize, therefore must they be allowed to do so. Come, males, come and seize me."

Those who had begun to make for Ilvin had halted at the appearance of Chaldrin, milling about with hands to weapons as though in great confusion. All had been startled by the abrupt appearance of the male, yet startlement held Mondolain the shortest.

"He is no more than one blade against your four!" he called to those who milled about. "The wench is naught, and may be taken when his blood flows to the ground! Down him quickly and then seize her!"

"Ah, now am I able to understand," said Chaldrin as the four drew and began a cautious advance upon him. "I am to be downed, wench, while you are to be seized. I had thought at first that I was to be ignored entirely."

"No, it is I they think to ignore," said Ilvin with a sniff of contempt, her attention close upon those who approached. "A pity they will not survive to learn how greatly they err."

A grin took Chaldrin at the scorn in Ilvin's tone, and then the four who approached rushed together upon him. He and Ilvin stood shoulder to shoulder as the clash of fire-glaring blades sounded for a brief moment, and then one of the gray-clad males stepped back in shock the while his brothers fell lifelessly to the ground.

"Ha! You were mistaken, girl," said Chaldrin, gesturing with a red-streaked blade to the male who continued to back from the two. "There is one who survives to learn how greatly he has erred."

"For now," agreed Ilvin as she again raised her own redly glistening weapon. "We shared the last of those three, therefore am I due the fourth alone. I am, after all, a warrior of Mida, and you no more than simply a male."

"Slay them," whispered Mondolain, a sudden trembling taking him. "Slay them both and slay them now!"

His scream of rage brought the others, forward as they dragged weapon from scabbard, and surely did I think to see Chaldrin and Ilvin stand back to back against so many; that they merely stood as they had with grins upon their faces brought me confusion, yet again the confusion was quickly seen to.

"Are we also to be allowed to slay them?" came a voice, and this time the followers of the Oneness whirled to see Wedin and the Sigurri male Gidain to the right, Dotil and the second Sigurri Rinain to the

left. Each held a sword, each was completely bare, and each wore a grin resembling those upon Chaldrin and Ilvin. It was the male Gidain who had spoken, and the words brought even greater rage to Mondolain.

"Our numbers remain greater than theirs!" he screamed to his males, many of whom began trembling in fear. "Attack now and together, and victory may still be ours!"

Fear now drove the gray-clad ones, therefore did they obey without hesitation. All six made for Chaldrin and Ilvin, thinking to take those two and then have fewer to face when the Summa and Sigurri reached them. Ilvin and Chaldrin were quickly engaged, the Summa and Sigurri ran as quickly to their aid, and he who was called Mondolain trembled in fear and fury as he watched.

"They may best us," he muttered, a wildness to the muttering. "Our numbers were greater than theirs, and yet they may best us. It is all the fault of the wench, and she, at least, will not live to mock us."

With the end of his muttering was his sword drawn slowly clear of its scabbard, and then he turned toward me, his intent plain. That he and his two stood without aiding the others was of no moment to him, nor was the lack of ability of those he rode with. I pulled again, futilely, at the leather which bound me as Mondolain and his two turned full to look upon me, then ceased my struggles in confusion when their eyes rose in startlement to look beyond me.

"The wench may well have asked to be taken by strolling about alone and unarmed, yet you need not have obliged her," came the voice of Mehrayn, from the sound of it so near that he was well nigh upon me. "A man must learn to be responsible for the consequences of his own doings, else shall those consequences be the last he receives in this life."

"You are a fool to believe you may stand before us alone," said Mondolain to Mehrayn, his face now twisted in a sneer of gratification. "We three, at least, will have the opportunity of losing ourselves in the darkness of the forests, and you may go to your death knowing the wench will accompany us. When she follows you to your unknown god's pastures, you will no longer find her recognizable. Let us take him now, and quickly!"

His final words were hissed urgently to his companions, yet before they might comply Mehrayn, as bare as the others, had leapt to a place before me, bringing the battle to those who foolishly thought to slay him. The swords of all three made frantic attempt to reach him, yet he knocked their blades aside with a sound of contempt, his effortless replies causing the gray-clad males to strain to keep his point from their bodies. Again and again the three attempted to best the one, yet their sword skill was no greater than that of the others of their ilk; when abruptly the male Clomain gasped and drew his brother back with him, Mondolain was left to face Mehrayn alone.

"Disengage quickly, Mondolain!" Clomain cried, grasping Cludain by the arm in shrill terror. "His shoulder- Can you not see his shoulder? He is a Prince of the Blood in Sigurr's legions!"

"No!" screamed Mondolain, taken fully by terror, yet had the warning come far too late. Mehrayn's sword slid easily within his belly, bringing forth gurgling redness from his mouth, and then did the male slip lifelessly to the ground, his sword falling from eternally numbed fingers.

Cludain and Clomain watched till Mondolain lay crumpled in his own blood, and then did they begin, as one, to back from Mehrayn. No longer was Cludain distant and Clomain wildly amused, for the two were filled with a fear which paled them to powder, and set their limbs to trembling as though with a fever. Step by step they backed, their eyes unmoving from Mehrayn, who slowly pursued them, till the breath of their god upon the backs of their necks caused them to jerk their heads about. Behind them were none living save those of my traveling set, the six of whom also slowly advanced with bloodied

blades, the still forms of those who had been followers of the Serene Oneness covering the ground behind them. A soul-lost whimper escaped Clomain, his sword fell from an unfeeling grip, and then did he go to his knees, in the fire-lit darkness and grasp the leg of his brother with both arms.

"They mean to give me hurt, Cludain!" he cried, trembling and holding desperately to his brother, as though to hide himself. "I do not wish to be hurt, Cludain, therefore must you send them from me! Send them from me! Send them from me!"

The words of the male turned to wordless screams, echoing about the camp and tearing at the flesh of those who heard them. He who was called Cludain stood with point down and eyes nearly closed, a shudder running through him at his brother's terror that was clearly derived from great pleasure. All had halted short of the two, males and warriors alike, disgust covering the faces of the males, frowns upon the warriors. When he who was erect clasped himself one-handed with the agony of his pleasure, the Hitta and two Summa warriors lost their frowns and advanced together to circle about and stand before the two. Wedin and Dotil quickly raised their blades as Ilvin guarded their backs, and then was there sharpened metal plunged into the bodies of the last of those who were gray-clad, ending screams of terror and grunts of pleasure together. Those males who rode with our set remained unmoving even after the two brothers had fallen side by side, a thing which showed them possessed of greater reason than most males. The sight of those bereft too often brought pity to males, filling them only with thoughts of those whom the gods had crookedly touched, taking all thought of those who would be victim to such unfortunates. Kindest and wisest was to end ones unable to live as those about them, for in such an ending lay the sole salvation of those innocents who would feed their monstrous appetites. Had it been possible to straighten their crookedness the Summa would surely have done that instead; with straightening impossible, no other avenue was practical save that which they had taken.

"You wenchies had best clean your blades as quickly as possible," said Chaldrin in a rumble filled with vast distaste, his eyes upon the two males who lay upon the ground. "I have heard it said that the blood of ones such as they may poison a man simply by its touch. We would none of us wish to be poisoned in such a manner."

The faces of the two Sigurri warriors reflected fervent agreement with Chaldrin's words, and then was I able to see no further of them, for Mehrayn had turned and come back toward me. He stood before me as his hand went to the leather which held the cloth between my lips, the leather was freed, and then was the cloth pulled away. I attempted to return moisture to my mouth as I awaited the removal of the leather from my wrists, yet Mehrayn crouched before me instead, his gore-smearred sword still held in his fist.

"I give thanks to Sigurr that that madman had not the time to use his dagger upon you," said he, his shadowed eyes looking down upon me. "Ilvin's appearance kept him from it as it was meant to, and no later opportunity was allowed him. For what reason did you take yourself to this side of the stream, alone and without a single weapon? How was it possible for those three to have surprised you so easily?"

"Consideration of the tasks yet before me filled my mind too full," I husked, the cloth taste remaining to plague my tongue. "So many are the matters which demand my attention, that nearly did I find an end to them all. The state is distasteful, and once again I must give my thanks for having had my life returned to me. Will you now remove the leather upon my wrists?"

"Distasteful," said he, continuing to stare upon me without attempting to do as I had asked. The others, not far distant to begin with, came to stand and stare in a similar manner, silent in the darkness. "Nearly does she end mutilated or slain, and the state is distasteful," said Mehrayn in a mutter. "She wanders about lost in thought, unconcerned over that which occurs about her, finds herself taken captive by madman, and considers the matter no more than distasteful. "

"Clearly is it through Mida's wishes that we accompany her," said Wedin, something of annoyance to be heard in her voice. "Mida desires the survival of her chosen during times of difficulty, therefore are we to guard the war leader in her distraction. Our presence can have no other purpose."

"Indeed," said Dotil with a firm nod from Ilvin, even the two Sigurri males clearly agreeing with such foolishness. Chaldrin said naught, yet was the large, dark male already of the opinion that I required his presence. Mehrayn considered Wedin's words with faint surprise, plainly about to add his own agreement, therefore did I hasten to air more reasonable views.

"A war leader of the Midanna requires no others to guard her!" I snapped, glaring about at males and warriors alike, unthinkingly pulling at the leather which continued to hold me. "To allow others to stand for one is the act of a coward, a thing warriors, at least, should be aware of! Jalav shall guard herself as ever she has done, facing her enemies in her own shadow, and now does she demand to be released!"

"Ever does Jalav make demands upon one point or another," said Mehrayn, thick annoyance having come to him, his shadow-form still crouched before me. "So enmeshed is she in the doings of the gods, that the doings of men have become of less importance to her than ever. To guard one at the behest of the gods brings no dishonor upon that one, wench, no more than the desired safety given them. Such safety will be given Jalav, for in her foolishness such guarding has become necessary. Kneel silently, wench, and obey the man to whom the gods have given you."

Great anger wished to bring forth further words from my throat, yet the male had presumed upon the foolishness of the gods and I was unable to deny his command. I knelt in seething rage before him, no longer permitted to discuss the false understanding of those who stood about me, and then the male straightened and moved to stand behind me. Carefully did the edge of his sword touch the leather which bound me, its keenness slicing quickly through the coils, and when all of it had fallen away, his hand came to my arm to raise me to my feet.

"No," said he, halting my fingers they began to unknot the leather upon my throat. "As Jalav pays so little heed to where she strolls, she is clearly in need of some form of guidance. You will remain close beside me till I release you, wench, for I strongly feel that the gods wish you to be well schooled in the consequences of folly. Perhaps when you are once again unbound, you will give greater thought to retaining that freedom."

Approval was strong in the manner of those others who stood about, unbelievably even in those who called themselves Midanna. Mehrayn took up the leather lead in his free hand, paying no mind to the soundless fury he was doubtless able to see upon me, and turned to the balance of our set.

"Let us merely put out their fire," said he, looking about at the unmoving forms in the clearing. "The beasts of the forest will see to the disposal of their carcasses, a disposition which is more than fitting for such as these."

Murmurs of agreement came only from the males as they and my warriors turned to give their attention to the leaping flames, and Mehrayn's glance touched me briefly.

"Indeed does your lady continue to watch over you," he murmured, coiling the end of the leather he held. "Had S'Heernoh not seen you being taken and spoken of it immediately, you would now be held more closely by agony than this leather holds you. We paused no longer than to take up swords before we came, therefore do we all seem more prepared for pleasure than battle. I give thanks to Sigurr that your wench has no more need to cover herself than do we."

By then was the fire nearly smothered and quenched by the dirt thrown up from the ground and the contents of the drinking skins which had been found among the possessions of the gray-clad males,

therefore was Mehrayn unable to see my look of derision. No other than city slave-women would find it necessary to first cover their bodies before going gladly to battle, and the Midanna were far from so low a place. Had Mehrayn had a true understanding of warriors, never would he have shown surprise over so obvious a point.

When even the embers no longer glowed in the fire, we left the clearing to return to our own camp. Though the others ringed us with swords held ready, Mehrayn held me close beside him by the lead he had wrapped about his free hand, taking me about as though I had no volition of my own. The seething within me was cooled not at all by the swim across the stream, for although Mehrayn was faced with the need to hold his sword up while he swam, he did not choose to relinquish his hold upon the leather. Both-were held in his left hand as he swam with his right, and my mood was foul indeed when we climbed from the stream to be greeted by a smiling S'Heernoh.

"How pleased I am to see that you all return in safety," he exclaimed, grinning about in greatly relieved welcome. "The kirol is already upon the fire, therefore may you all take your ease the while it cooks, regathering your strength and drying your hides." He chuckled well at the delight shown by Summa, Hitta and Sigurri, then did he turn to me when they had taken themselves toward the coverings and weapons they had left behind. "I am most gratified to find that you are unharmed, war leader," said he, looking with amusement upon the leather held by Mehrayn. "To see your health and beauty undiminished gladdens my heart."

I spoke no word to the male for I had been bidden to silence, yet surely was he able to see to how small an extent I shared his amusement. I held his gaze till discomfort began to touch him, a thing which Mehrayn was able to see.

"Had I not demanded silence from her, she would surely give you gracious thanks for your timely warning, S'Heernoh, " said Sigurr's Sword, the words smooth despite the shadow of annoyance to be heard behind them. "I have decreed punishment for her for her carelessness, from which she will learn or face additional punishment. You have, of course, my own thanks as well."

"The pleasure was mine, Prince," said S'Heernoh with a gesture of dismissal, a faint smile now touching him. "If you will excuse me, I must see to the kirol."

His bow to me was wryly formal, odd in its execution, as odd as the male himself. The moment he turned away Mehrayn also took himself off, and I, perforce, followed after. When we reached the covered pelt he took his sleep upon, Mehrayn gestured curtly toward it.

"Put yourself there, wench, belly down and cheek to the fur," said he, his voice held low to keep the growl of anger from reaching the ears of others. "You behave as a child would, sullenly ungrateful to the man who deserves your thanks, the while you sulk from the punishment you so eagerly sought with your own actions. Much do I feel the urge to cut a switch with which to see to you, and should there be any further difficulty from you this darkness, I shall surely do so."

He watched as I placed myself upon the pelt as he had commanded, then did he turn from me and walk to his body cloth and swordbelt, anger continuing to turn his movements brusque and stiff. I, too, was filled with anger, for the male was a fool in all he said. Most certainly would I have given S'Heernoh thanks for his assistance had I been able, and that despite the fact of his amusement over the indignity termed "punishment" imposed upon me by Mehrayn. It was Mehrayn with whom I felt anger, for the male had no right to do as he did, despite the fact that the gods had granted him possession of me. Such possession was complete foolishness, for nearly had it been ended by the actions of the gray-clad males. Had they done as they had intended, his possession would have been shown as the mockery it was.

I turned my head away from the fire, settling my left cheek to the pelt cloth, unable to find comfort through the twistings of my anger, and then all thoughts of anger and discomfort were gone, smothered beneath the sudden realization which took me. Mehrayn had spoken of my capture as carelessness, yet was Jalav seldom guilty of such a thing when she rode or walked the forests alone. Those who approached the forests with carelessness rarely survived them, a thing which all Midanna knew. That I had been lost in thought was true, and yet the reason for my having been taken so deeply into myself did not now seem as easily discernible as I had at first thought. Well was it possible that my senses had been turned inward and kept so, to ensure the capture which waited hidden from easy sight. Was this supposition true, the brevity of my capture in no manner indicated a jocular, light-hearted intent, for there was considerably more to the matter, which apparently only I now knew of.

I shifted about upon the cloth-covered pelt, moving my wet hair away from my back, briefly annoyed that the leather lead might not be removed, attempting to warm the chill of my thoughts with renewed anger. No other than Mida had the ability to befuddle my mind to such an extent that I became unaware of the doings about me, therefore had my capture clearly been the wish of the goddess. Had the assistance sent me been even a pair of reckid longer in the coming, my flesh would have held the marks of males, deeply cut with much pain and loss of blood, marks which well might have remained even had I been healed. That the marks would have been the strokes called letters by males clearly confirmed my suppositions, for the letters would have been those named em and cee, em for Mondolain and cee for Clomain and Cludain. That they were also for Mehrayn and Ceralt spoke of Mida's awareness of my recent thoughts, of her anger with me, of the warning she now sent. That the warning was a final one I had no doubt, and I shuddered to consider what my punishment would be if I transgressed again. To be marked with the strokes which stood for the males I would keep from Mida could easily have been my punishment, said the warning, for no war leader, no matter how thickly filled with pride, might think to challenge a goddess. Were I unable to send the males from my thoughts and consider no more than the duty I owed to she who held my life vow, I would, in some deeply unpleasant manner, bear full memory of them for the rest of my feyd. The males would be Mida's at any time she wished to take them, and naught I might foolishly think to do would halt that intent.

"Jalav, you tremble," came Mehrayn's voice from close behind me, and then was his hand warm upon my arm. "Do not allow the thought of what was nearly done to you to bring you upset, wench. No man or beast will bring harm to you while I live."

I turned upon the fur to see him where he knelt beside me, a dark shape in the sultry warmth of the darkness, then quickly rose to my own knees so that I might hold him about with all the strength in my arms. His own arms closed about me and held me as tightly as I held him, and had I not been a war leader of Midanna I would surely have wept with the loss which was to be mine. First Ceralt and now Mehrayn, for Jalav was to have no males; Jalav was to do no more than ride at Mida's command. So warm and strong was the body I held to, so familiar was the male smell of him-and so soon would he be taken from me. A fool was the male, as unreasoning and willing to give humiliation to a warrior as all males, yet would memory of him indeed remain with me for the rest of my feyd. That was the punishment I had been given, the agony of memory; beside it, Mehrayn's foolish efforts faded to naught. I closed my eyes in the circle of his arms, throbbing with the agony, knowing it was destined to be mine forever.

CH 6. A new lesson-and a fool's challenge

"Now, you wench, pay close heed," said Chaldrin, walking slowly and unconcernedly along. Our camp was nearly ready to be abandoned for the new light had already come, yet was there a thing the males were of a mind to show us first. The two Sigurri warriors crouched down ahead of and to either side of the path Chaldrin trod, taking there from the sight of Mehrayn, beyond them and also in a crouch, also undetected.

"Here I stroll, totally ignorant of the villains who lie in wait for me," said Chaldrin, slowly approaching the crouching Sigurri, yet seemingly seeing naught of them. "I am unarmed, therefore do the villains take me for easy prey, a lovely wench who may be captured and used till the tears fall from my eyes, 'till the evil lust is gone from them."

Snickering laughter came from Wedin, Dotil, and Ilvin, S'Heernoh chuckling at their side, for the two Sigurri had put evil, leering expressions upon their faces at Chaldrin's words, also raising their hands clawlike in lustful anticipation. Mehrayn grinned briefly where he crouched, amused by the foolishness, and then did he return his attention to his approaching "prey." He and his males wore sword and dagger, yet Chaldrin, true to his words, was unarmed.

"As I come within reach, the villains leap and pounce upon me," said Chaldrin, his words bringing the two Sigurri warriors upright in mock attack. "As their hands close upon me I struggle, yet is their strength too great for me to overcome. I part my lips to scream for assistance, yet does the third of their ilk move quickly to silence my cries."

Mehrayn, already erect, moved forward to place an imaginary cloth between Chaldrin's lips, yet was there something amiss.

"The third came from behind," said I as Mehrayn approached Chaldrin, halting them in their movements. "The two held to me as these hold to you, yet did the third approach from behind and take my hair in his fist. An attacker from behind is not as easily guarded against."

"To one with proper training, it makes no matter," said Chaldrin with a shrug of indifference, his arms still held by the Sigurri. "The Sword may approach from behind me if he wishes, yet must he guard himself more closely there, for I will not be able to see him well enough to know that my blow is sufficiently restrained."

"How closely will I need to guard myself from a 'lovely, desirable wench?'" asked Mehrayn with a grin, looking upon Chaldrin. "The strength of a woman is not the strength of a man."

"The movements I mean to demonstrate are not dependent upon strength," returned Chaldrin, the faintest trace of annoyance evident in his voice. "Even delivered by a wench, they are devastating."

"You truly believe that you, using half strength, would find it possible to best the three of us, we using our full strength?" asked Mehrayn with a laugh, his two warriors joining his amusement. "We are trained warriors of Sigurr, Chaldrin, far from the ignorance and helplessness of those you are accustomed to teaching. If you wish your demonstration to have meaning, you may not propose such a thing to us."

"And what meaning will my demonstration have if my attackers attack half-heartedly?" asked Chaldrin in turn, meeting the amused gaze of Mehrayn. "It was agreed that you and your warriors would use full strength, the while I would not. I shall use even less than the strength of a wench, for I would not wish to cause you and yours harm, brother."

"Ah, you do not care to harm us," said Mehrayn, continuing in his amusement. "You wish us, however, to attempt to cause you harm. I would not have you look the fool, brother, for as I recall, you are not yet far enough healed to attempt a proper defense, yet should it truly be your wish-"

"It is," said Chaldrin, a faint smile coming to him at the manner in which Mehrayn's words trailed off. "Should our wench not be convinced of the efficiency of this manner of battle, she will not make the attempt to master its precepts. In this instance, I must consider her needs above yours."

"For the sake of our wench, then," said Mehrayn, his head raising somewhat as he nodded at Chaldrin.

"We will take our 'prey' with full strength."

With a final nod to his males Mehrayn took himself about behind Chaldrin, and clearly was it then possible to see that the two Sigurri held him in grips that seemed unbreakable. Chaldrin stood unmoving in the grips, as though truly held, and then did Mehrayn's fist take his hair in preparation for pulling his head back, free hand also held fist, as though there were a cloth in it.

So quickly did Chaldrin's movements then come, that they were difficult to see, and to follow. Much did it seem that his right leg moved first, raising then striking out toward the Sigurri who held his right arm. The kick struck the male in the middle, doubling him over as he released his hold, yet was Chaldrin already moving his now free arm backward, catching Mehrayn sharply in the head with his elbow, sending Sigurr's sword stumbling backward away from him and to the ground. Before Mehrayn struck the ground, however, Chaldrin had already turned toward the third male who held to his left arm with incredulous disbelief clear upon his face, threw a wide fist into that face, then stepped calmly away from the male who now held both hands to his face as he bent forward, and turned to those of us who watched.

"Had this been a true attack," said he with continuing calm, "the kick would have been to the attacker's privates, the elbow to the second attacker's throat, and the fist also to the throat. The first attacker would then be held by crippling pain, and the second and third slain from their throats having been crushed. The first would then be available either for questioning or for a leisurely ending, whichever course of action you preferred. There are also other responses available against such an attack, some as lethal as that which I chose, some more gentle. The decision of which to use is ever the choice of the one who is attacked."

"Perhaps I should have stipulated a more gentle choice," said Mehrayn, raising himself from the ground with one hand to his head. The manner in which he looked upon Chaldrin should surely have produced deep chuckling in the second male, and when it did not, Mehrayn shook his head. "Very well," said he with a sigh, stepping nearer to the dark-haired male. "I have always been of the belief that a man should be given the credit due him, even should such giving be painful to the pride. Your ability to do battle without weapons far surpasses the ability I imagined was yours, and I ask your pardon for having doubted you. Had you used your full strength, my warriors and I might well have slept through the glory of this entire fey, if not longer. I will refrain from giving you challenge with swords, brother, if you will continue to refuse challenge from me with no weapons. I have been struck on the head, you see, and therefore cannot be held responsible for what foolish challenges I offer."

"Sigurr would surely frown upon me if I were to take advantage of a man who has been struck on the head," said Chaldrin, and now the chuckling was indeed upon him. "You need feel no anxiety, brother, for I shall not accept challenge from anyone in this manner of battle-save, perhaps, from the wenches, when they feel themselves far enough advanced. I shall do with them as my teacher did with me."

"I give thanks that they have not as many kalod in which to learn," said Mehrayn, sending a look to me as his hand went again to his head. "It should prove possible to successfully defend myself for the balance of this journey, I hope, for there may be additional punishment to be given, and I shall not stint upon my duty no matter the consequences. For now, I think it best that we ride."

With Mida's light growing stronger it was well past time to continue our journey, yet had I been forbidden to speak upon the point. Indeed I had been forbidden all matters of leadership the while Mehrayn's punishment continued, a foolishness which already filled me with annoyance. Soon the male would be taken from me, and he concerned himself with no other thing than punishment. Such great fools were males that I could not tell why warriors found any attraction in them whatsoever.

Chaldrin and Mehrayn and S'Heernoh examined each of Mehrayn's males, found them no more than shaken, then Chaldrin and the gray-haired male assisted them to their kand. Summa and Hitta also went to their kand, yet was she who was Hosta forced to remain where she stood till Mehrayn came to again take up the leather lead tied about her throat. Weapons had been permitted her-nay, it was demanded that she don them-yet had she been commanded to take no step save that Sigurr's Sword held her leash. A growling anger flexed its claws in her flesh, yet the male Mehrayn cared not; her possession had been given him by the gods, and she was able to deny him naught.

Approaching the kand showed me that Ilvin, Wedin and Dotil had not yet mounted, for a concern other than our journey then held them. Ilvin stood frowning beside Chaldrin, Wedin and Dotil with the two Sigurri warriors, and all three Midanna looked carefully to see whether the males had taken any harm. Chaldrin's side was again covered with cloth, yet had his wound been uncovered when he and the others had come across the stream to my aid the darkness previous. Ilvin had disliked the look of the wound, and had insisted upon rubbing it with an herb mixture before it was again covered, this despite the male's protests that the wound no longer gave him pain. She now peered beneath the cloth to assure herself that no harm had come to the healing flesh, Wedin and Dotil engaged in similar investigations with the two Sigurri. All knew that males had not the wit to see properly to themselves, yet the solicitude of my warriors for these males was a thing I found myself unable to comprehend. Much did it seem as though they concerned themselves with clan sisters instead of males, and I frowned as I looked upon them all.

"Your wenchs have changed considerably since they fought beside Chaldrin and my warriors last darkness," said Mehrayn, amusement to be heard in his voice as he, too, looked upon what occurred between the others. "They no longer consider Sigurri 'mere males,' for they have become battle companions through the shared shedding of enemy blood. The wenchs, too, are now looked upon differently by my men, for they have become more than 'mere wenchs.' "

Indeed did it seem that Mehrayn spoke the truth, for the males hastened to assure my warriors that no lasting hurt had come to them, their manner quiet and without amusement at the concern shown on their behalf. Truly did it seem that males and warriors had formed an odd, new clan, each member pleased with the presence of the others, each member happily aware of the new state. To me, however, the thing seemed in some manner wrong, for never before had warriors and males drawn together so.

"Remove that frown from your face, wench," said Mehrayn, drawing my eyes to where he looked down upon me. "Your disapproval stems only from the punishment you now find yourself subjected to, and will disappear once you no longer chafe beneath my restrictions. You cannot deny warriors the pleasure they have ever sought, the pleasure of one who will not only lie with them but who will also stand with them. No warrior will be denied so."

It came to me then with a good deal of shock that Mehrayn referred to both male and female, both Midanna and Sigurri. Neither would find it possible to live as the other currently did, therefore had they chosen an entirely different manner, one new to both, one acceptable to both. The male before me seemed desperately eager to become a part of that newness, yet I recalled that he had been denied to me. Were I to attempt to join the newness of the others, my very presence would likely bring Mida such anger that she would bring the newness crashing down upon the heads of those who attempted it. For the sake of those about me I must obey the goddess, and think naught of the bitter gall which filled me.

"I care not what others do," I said to him who looked upon me so closely, turning my face from him. "There is but one thing for this warrior to do, and that is to see to the tasks she has been given. I have neither the time nor the interest to dally and sport, for I am a war leader. Those others are not."

"For one who has no interest in sport, wench, you do well in the furs," returned the male, his hand coming to touch my neck beneath my hair, amusement in his tone. "When we halt for our mid-fey meal I shall be

more than prepared for you again, and it is my command that you speak to me then of how you greatly desire my use. The words will not be lies, I know, for you have shown your true feelings for me often enough when not angry and petulant. You may mount now for the others are prepared to depart, yet are you to think often in the hind to come of the use which awaits you. In such a manner will you soon come to be as eager as I."

Well amused was the male as I tore loose the reins of my kan from the stake which held them, turned completely from him, and jumped to the back of my mount. It continued to be his intention to give me punishment, a punishment of humiliation and lack of freedom and commands without end. Clearly did he believe that once the punishment was done I would be filled with such gratitude and elation that I would do as the others had done and accept him beside me, one to be shared with rather than obeyed. Had he been other than male, he might well have been filled with sufficient reason to understand that all I possessed to share was one task after another, the jealousy of the gods, and unending denial. It filled me with fury that I was able to see no manner in which such a state of affairs might be changed, yet was the fury a useless one. I watched Mehrayn mount, then was tugged gently along in his wake by the neck leather, to begin the fey's journey in the possession of the dark mood which had become so frequent a companion of late.

We rode till the light was near its highest, the silence allowing me to remain deeply immersed in my thoughts. In the midst of consideration of what approach would be best to the enemy clans, and possible deployment of warriors against that which the strangers would bring to the coming battle, the hind flew away to naught; before I became aware of it a clearing had been found in the forest we had reentered, all were preparing to dismount. I looked about me in considerable confusion, and Mehrayn chuckled as he came to my kan to put his hands to my waist.

"So you have at last returned to us," said he, taking me from the kan as though I were unable to do the thing myself. "So well wrapped in thought were you that none of us thought it wise to disturb you, for you undoubtedly considered the tasks you have been given-as well as that which was commanded by me. Are you prepared to please me?"

I looked upon the male with a good deal of exasperation, for in the midst of matters of import, his commands had slipped from my memory. Had the word which bound me to him been mine, I would have been forsworn; as the condition had come about by the decision of another, I was merely visited with annoyance.

"You cannot mean I was disobeyed," said he, seeing in my face the truth I had not yet put words to. "Are you so simple-minded a wench that you cannot recall what disobedience brings you?"

The mock sternness in his manner as he looked down upon me increased my annoyance, for it was clear that the male spoke only to bring me anger which could not be protested nor revenged. In this instance, however, his intentions were idle, for he, himself, had admitted acquiescence to necessity.

"Perhaps it is Mehrayn who has forgotten that the commands of Mida are not to be interfered with by a male," said I, meeting the green gaze in which the hint of amusement attempted to hide. "As it was her tasks I considered as I rode, I cannot be taken to task for having overlooked male foolishness. The goddess will undoubtedly make clear the point when the male Mehrayn has been claimed by her."

Abruptly was all amusement gone from the male, the look he sent to me as I folded my arms well filled with rapidly growing annoyance, yet before he might speak of his displeasure, Chaldrin appeared beside us.

"With the permission of Sigurr's Sword, I will have the wench now," said he, his calm taking no note of

the manner in which Mehrayn looked upon me-and I him. "There is a good deal of time yet before our meal is prepared, therefore shall we begin her lessons. I would see her as knowledgeable and competent as possible for the time she must face those other wenches."

A brief moment did Mehrayn continue to send his annoyance toward me, and then did he nod with reluctance.

"Very well," said he, reaching to the knot of the leather about my throat. "You may have the wench for a lesson, yet is she to be sent back to me immediately the lesson is done. There will be a second lesson awaiting her which she will see to before she takes her provender. Best you see that the matter does not again slip from your mind, girl."

Again was that green gaze sent to me, no amusement to be seen as he coiled the leather, then did Sigurr's Sword turn and walk off. Chaldrin watched him gone, then did he turn to send me a look of his own.

"You seem to joy in provoking him, wench," said he, resting one hand upon the flank of my kan, "Do you joy as well in the hidings your provocation brings you?"

"I do no more than speak the truth," said I, looking upon Chaldrin as I had looked upon Mehrayn. "Would you care to have me speak the truth to you as well, brother?"

"At times the truth is best left unspoken," said he, showing faint amusement at my question. "One such as I, with great wisdom to call upon, am easily able to tell that this is such a time. Remove your sword and dagger, and stand with the others."

Ilvin, Wedin and Dotil, already weaponless, stood awaiting my arrival and the battle method Chaldrin would teach, therefore did I divest myself of sword and dagger and join them, tying a bit of leather about my hair as they had done. Midanna much preferred entering battle with leather holding their hair, yet recent circumstances kept me from the practice. The three Midanna warriors greeted me warmly when I joined their ranks. It would have brought shame to all had they allowed themselves to see the humiliation being given a war leader without trying to halt it, therefore would they have been bound to give me assistance-against Mida's will. That they believed the punishments given me by Mehrayn were Mida-sent was clear, for the will of a mere male would have meant naught to them; this belief freed them from the embarrassment of needing to come to my aid. I returned their greetings with polite formality, unable to argue against an unwillingness to oppose a goddess-yet did my former annoyance and anger increase.

Chaldrin began lessons that did well to lessen the emotion of anger. First were we required to stretch ourselves in all manner of odd ways, so that we would not harm ourselves when we began the true lessons. The heat of the fey did naught to aid us, and quickly were we covered with the sweat of exertion, bending and stretching as though we attempted to warm ourselves against the cold. When this loosening, as Chaldrin called it, was done, we began to learn the proper manner of delivering kicks. One did not merely kick out, we were told, one kicked with either the heel, the side of one's foot, or the place just beneath the toes, with the toes held well up out of the way. We attempted these manners of kicks, over and over, Chaldrin speaking quietly in correction, berating us only when it seemed to him that our efforts flagged. Many reekid passed in the doing, and then were we begun upon the method of keeping another's hands from us with our own fists and arms, a thing termed blocking. This, too, was done again and again, the time lasting till our provender was done, and then did Chaldrin call a halt.

"You wenches may now rest yourselves," said he, seemingly pleased with our efforts and the sheen of sweat which covered us. "Your rate of breathing remains well in your control, a pleasant sight for me after my having trained so many who panted and gasped from so small an effort. When we make darkness camp, we will do the same again."

Ilvin and the Summa murmured approval of the intention, undoubtedly feeling the same pleasure which touched me. The movements which Chaldrin had shown us were clearly no more than a small beginning, and I wanted to continue on as far as possible, all the while perfecting that which I had already been shown. The movements brought a greater awareness of the glory in the life of a warrior, a joy begun which would not soon fade.

"I have not seen such happiness upon you in many feyd," said Mehrayn, his voice quite near. I turned to see that he stood behind me, looking down upon me with an odd warmth in his eyes. "It gives me great pleasure to see you so, despite the fact that the greater your skill grows, the closer comes the time of my beating. Will you give me comfort when the beating is done?"

"You will not wish comfort," I told him, folding my arms as I spoke. "You will feel the throbbing ache in your flesh from the touch of the leather, the humiliation and shame and fury from having been done so, and will wish only to be avenged. No other than a slave would seek naught save comfort. Am I to serve you now?"

"I will first see your provender within you," said he, disturbance having taken the place of amusement, his hand came to wipe at the beads of moisture upon my brow. "You ate naught of the kirol last darkness, and little of it when we arose with the new light. Should you continue to eat so poorly your strength will fail you, and that likely at the worst of times. One cannot take revenge for insults given if one's strength drains away to naught."

He took my arm then, to lead me to where the provender awaited, and fed upon his own the while I attended to mine. I wondered upon the lesson he had spoken of to Chaldrin, the additional punishment he had so clearly meant to give me, yet no mention was made of it. With the provender swallowed he took me in his arms, waited till I had told him how greatly I desired his use, then gave me that use. So strong was the male, and so filled with pleasure for a warrior, that the words I had spoken were once again proven sooth. Perhaps Mida might deny him to me, yet I, myself, was able to deny him naught. His use was thorough yet briefer than usual, and when he withdrew from me he sat beside me to stroke my hair.

"It has come to me that you take care to hold yourself far from me, for you believe your lady goddess will soon take me for her own," said he, seeking my gaze where I lay in the grass. "Only when I am in possession of you are you no longer able to remain aloof and uncaring, for I have then made you mine despite your doubts and reservations. Is there no manner in which I may assure you that I am not necessarily meant to be taken, nor that the fancy predestines the deed? I am here and alive and vital, Jalav; even should it be truth that I am to be taken, your coldness will do naught to halt it. I crave the warmth we once had between us, to feed my vitality; may I not have the pleasure of more of such memories, to warm me forever in the soul-cold of possible goddess chaining?"

The sobriety in the green gaze brought a film to mine, and I quickly turned from him and closed my eyes, the better to bear the deep pain I had been given. So well able was the male to bind and wound and slay with words, that I wondered at his having attained sword skill as well. How easily was a warrior brought low by such other skill, the likes of which even I had never imagined. It was true punishment I now had from the male, and also was it without doubt Mida-sent.

"Sigurr curse me for a fool!" the male muttered in sudden anger, quickly pulling me back to his arms. The trembling had taken me so thoroughly that I was unable to struggle, unable even to protest the strength with which he held me. "Now am I able to see the truth," said he, rocking gently as he held me, "only now, after having given you such hurt. You seek to drive all thought of me from your mind against your time of loss, for you do indeed feel for me what I feel for you. And yet, as Sigurr is my witness, I cannot allow that. What if I allow you to put me from your mind and then am left where I have ever been, whole and unharmed? You will be gone off with another, and I left with naught save the memories I had asked

for. Warmth between us will mean pain and loss for you, lack of warmth will bring the same to me, and possibly for naught. In Sigurr's name, I know not what to do!"

He released me then and got quickly to his feet, gathered up his body cloth and swordbelt, then rode quickly off, going toward the kand. Ever is it necessary to recall that a weapon is able to cut both enemy and friend alike, and therefore must care be taken in its use. The male had forgotten this truth, therefore he had drawn blood from his own self, just as he had heretofore drawn the same only from me. I sat upon the grass with a hand to my ribs, pleased that the wielder had felt the same edge which so often tormented only me, less pleased that Mehrayn continued to forget how great a strength was in him. It would be necessary to speak of the matter to Chaldrin, I saw, to learn if there was aught which might be done to free me from such an embrace.

"The Prince has given himself a great difficulty to ponder," came a voice, and a moment later S'Heernoh crouched before me, his odd gaze full upon me. "Much does it seem that a weight has been taken from you, however, and it pleases me to see your burdens lightened. Have you been given harm through the Prince's distress?"

His gaze had gone to my hand where it lay against my ribs, therefore was the question not unreasonable. I withdrew the hand, for there was naught save a small soreness within, and looked upon the male.

"I thank you for your concern, yet am I unharmed," said I, attempting to keep the annoyance from my voice. "It does indeed ease me to have one less difficulty to ponder, for I truly believe that that difficulty is one without an answer, one beyond the power of a war leader to solve. As I am now able to speak with you, I also wish to give you my thanks for your assistance of the last darkness. I dislike your amusement over the doings of Mehrayn, yet are you indisputably due my thanks--despite the fact that you continue to pry into matters which concern only others. Have you no desire for continued life, that you press the patience of a Midanna war leader so closely and so often?"

The male blinked at me in seeming surprise, then did he smile with the wry amusement which had come to him so often of late.

"Your openness might well be considered childlike, were one to discount the topic spoken upon," said he, linking his fingers before him as he continued in his crouch. "For what reason do you consider concern from the others permissible, the while from me it is prying? Am I then so much less than they?"

The question was mildly put, no more than curiosity to be heard in it, and yet did it seem that there was something of hurt hovering beneath. For what reason the male would feel hurt I knew not; was he not a stranger among us?

"The Summa and Hitta are sisters to me, the male Chaldrin a brother," said I, an odd discomfort beginning to touch me. "Mehrayn and his males are battle companions, those who have earned a place at my back. All of those I ride with are warriors, known and valued for their presence. The male S'Heernoh is-unknown."

"Ah, I am the stranger in your midst," said he with a nod of understanding, his smile warming. "I have not stood in battle with you, therefore do I remain an outsider. Your upbringing among the clans has taught you suspicion and distrust of the stranger, for he might well be an enemy. A pity you were not raised as a town girl, who is taught instead to respect and obey a man of mature kalod. And yet even if you had been, I much doubt you would be as the others about you, well-mannered, shy, and obedient. There is that within you which would disallow such qualities."

His smile grew to amusement as he straightened out of his crouch, and it was with that amusement that he looked down upon me.

"I doubt I shall ever become a battle companion to you, lady war leader," said he with his odd smile. "I shall, however, endeavor to become less of a stranger, for it is not my intention to curb the 'prying' which brings you such annoyance. I shall continue to concern myself with your doings, therefore may you take sword in hand and strike me down, else may you resign yourself to the 'prying.' Among my people it was my place to give what comfort and aid I might to those who had need of them. I have come too far along the road to change the habits of a lifetime."

"All who take to the road must at some time come to its end," said I with a shrug, also rising to my feet. Much of what the male had said was beyond understanding by me, yet had he made his intentions clear. "Should I find the prying of S'Heernoh too annoying to bear, I shall assist him to the end of his road. Such a doing is well within the rights of this war leader, you see, for the male S'Heernoh is not of a clan beneath Jalav's protection. Pay close heed to your steps upon the road, male-should it be your wish to remain upon it."

Again did the male look upon me with blinking surprise, much of his amusement gone, yet had I no further time to spend in converse with him. I therefore turned to my breech and weapons and prepared to once again resume my journey.

Mehrayn had ridden ahead of our set, yet was his track clear through the forest and for the most part unhurried. He undoubtedly sought no more than the solitude I had sought, in which to consider the difficulty he had given himself. It mattered little what decision the male made, for it continued to escape him that the final decision lay in hands other than his. The request he had made of me had at first brought pain, yet the pain grew less the longer I considered it. If Mehrayn were taken, his need would truly be greater than mine, for agony and forced use would be his sole companions. I well remembered how greatly I had been aided by sweet memory through the use I had been put to by Sigurr, and clearly saw that Mehrayn would require the same. It had been foolish to believe that I might put the male from my mind, for such a thing was no longer possible; memory of him would remain with me till my soul spread and faded in the final darkness. The doings of the gray-clad males, the near marking of my flesh by cause of their twisted desires, had brought me an unreasoning fear over the anger of the goddess, yet that fear no longer held to me with the strength it had first had, therefore would struggle and an attempted humility be doomed to failure before it had truly begun. I must obey Mida, yet would I do so as I had ever done, acting in the manner I deemed most fit. Were I to be punished for the decision I had made, it would be clear that Mida no longer wished me for her chosen.

Though the others rode not far from me, I remained alert and aware of the forests I rode through, deep thought this time finding it impossible to take me. It was for this reason that I knew immediately of Mehrayn's return, and found no startlement when he drew his kan up beside mine.

"Wench, I have come to a decision," said he, his tone brisk and decisive, his eyes more upon the forest we rode through than upon she to whom he spoke. "As I would sooner lose you than bring you pain, I will no longer press you for that which you are reluctant to give. You may withdraw from me as far as you are able, for I shall no longer even take use from you."

"Indeed," said I in a murmur, examining our path with fully as much care as he. "And do you also mean to return to your own?"

"Would that I were able to do so," said he, a weariness behind the words. "Had I not given my vow to the gods, I would surely relieve you of my presence, yet has my word indeed been given. I must remain with you, yet shall I take care to give you as little awareness of my presence as possible."

"Shall you, indeed," said I again, this time turning my head to gaze upon him. "And what shall occur, great fool of a male, should the war leader Jalav come to the decision that she wishes the near presence of a

fool of a male? Does the male believe he will refuse her?"

"You believe I will allow you to give me the warmth I mindlessly asked for despite the pain it brings you?" he said with a sound of disdain, also turning his head so that he might meet my gaze. "I will not permit you to do such a thing, Jalav, and it is my word which must be obeyed."

"Only in your service must I obey you," said I. "As there is to be no further service, there shall also be no obedience."

"You stubborn she-lenga!" growled Mehrayn, anger in his tone. "Never is there obedience from you, no matter the point, no matter the desires of others! Upon this point, however, there shall be obedience, for I am determined that it will be so! Do not protest, for I will hear none of it! I will simply be obeyed!"

His anger then put heels to his kan, taking him and his mount once again from our set. I watched till his stiffened shoulders disappeared from view, the greens and browns all about enfolding him quickly, then shook my head with a good deal of annoyance. It was said that fools are oft-times protected by the gods, therefore was Mehrayn's continued survival in some manner explained. As a male, Mehrayn did well in upholding the standards of them all.

Our ride through the balance of the fey was uneventful, and when we reached an adequate place to camp for the darkness, we discovered that Mehrayn had halted there first. There was no stream nor pond in which to bathe, no more than a narrow rill from which to drink, and when Ilvin, Wedin, Dotil and I again began upon our lessons, we regretted the lack. We did again as we had done earlier in the fey, halting only when our nilno was nearly done. We who were Midanna might well have fed upon the nilno as it then was, yet was S'Heernoh firm in his decision that the provender would not be given us till it had received his approval, therefore did we wait with the others for the cuts to be properly roasted. Wedin and Dotil were amused at S'Heernoh's insistence, and Ilvin was uncaring; though I, myself, felt some faint annoyance, the matter was scarcely of great enough import to remark upon. There were other things to concern me then, one of which sat in solitary thought upon his cloth-covered fur, some distance about the fire from the balance of our set.

"Rarely have I seen a man who appeared so determined and at the same time so filled with misery," said Chaldrin as he took a place beside me in the grass, his voice low, his eyes upon Mehrayn. "Have you been speaking further truths to him, wench, or has he found truths of his own?"

"He is taken by what he believes to be his will," said I, moving my eyes from the fool of a male. "It yet remains to be seen for how long he considers it such. Which brings to mind, brother, a question I would ask: is there a manner one might use to escape from the clasp of arms too vigorously held to one? Well might such a thing be of use to a warrior, for males are ever of a mind to abuse their greater strength."

"Indeed is there a method of relief for such a thing," said Chaldrin, faint amusement showing in the dark of his eyes. "There are, in fact, a number of such methods, some more ruinous than others. Do you anticipate the need of them in the near future?"

His glance returned briefly to Mehrayn as his amusement increased, and this time did it seem that the humor was at the expense of one other than I.

"The fool believes he will keep himself from me," said I, choosing not to add my glance to Chaldrin's. "Does he believe himself different from other males, that he spouts such foolishness? All males who look upon Jalav desire her, and in that Mehrayn has been so different from his brothers; given the opportunity to use Jalav he will do so, no matter the words he spoke, no matter his attempt to keep to his resolve. He is male, and will quickly come to recall naught else."

"You are most likely correct, wench," said Chaldrin, his amusement having turned inward, his dark eyes full upon me. "I, myself, found it impossible to refuse you, and that in the face of a threat to my very life. How, then, might a man refuse you who feels for you what the Sword does?"

The words of Chaldrin were as his words ever were, calm and rumbling and spoken without deep inflection, yet was I taken by the fancy that his meaning was other than that given by those words. There was no time to pursue the thought, however, for Chaldrin then began to speak upon the matter of freeing oneself from a grip of strength. If one's hands and arms were free, it was possible to do many things, we were told. A sharp blow to the nose or throat, a thumb in an eye, two thumbs beneath the jawbone, a fingernail in an earlobe; these were methods which required little or no skill, yet which were extremely effective. Other methods would become available when our skill had grown, said Chaldrin, yet for now those others should prove sufficient. Were our arms held as well as ourselves, we were then told, it would be necessary to kick or butt with our heads, for the skill necessary to break free from such confinement with the use of arms was greater than that which would be ours for some time. Hitta and Summa listened as did I, all nodding with understanding, all clearly feeling the impatience to continue which gripped me. Demanding, indeed, was the lure of the battle method shown us by Chaldrin, and deeply did we yearn to continue with it.

Our provender was at last allowed us by S'Heernoh, therefore did we see to it in becoming silence. The nilno flesh was truly sweet, aided by the fire rather than ruined by it, a thing decreed by all who tasted of it. Truly pleased did S'Heernoh seem, he who had labored to bring us satisfaction, most especially when I added my voice to those of the others. I knew not the reason my approval brought him such pleasure, save perhaps that he understood at last that proper service alone would bring him such approval. Should such have been the truth, I might at last be freed from the annoyance I ever felt in his presence.

Our fire had taken on greater and greater brilliance as the darkness deepened, and soon were we surrounded by naught save the sounds of the forest, calming hums and far-off snarls. Chaldrin and the two Sigurri spoke quietly with Ilvin, Dotil, and Wedin, sharing the various watches up among themselves, S'Heernoh sitting with them and merely listening. Mehrayn continued to keep to himself a distance from the balance of us, his nilno, like ours, already fed upon, his large body now stretched at ease upon his right side, his gaze lost to the leaping fire. I stirred where I sat then rose to my feet, feeling the beginnings of desire touch me. I would give Mehrayn the pleasure he would keep in memory, and then I would seek the healing depths of sleep, to rid myself of as much of the same memory as possible. Too many were the memories I had to be rid of them all, yet to dwell upon any of them would be idle; Jalav was denied males of her own by Mida, and there was naught which might be done for it.

Mehrayn kept his gaze with the fire when I halted before him, seemingly taking no note of my presence. His swordbelt lay upon the ground beside him, within easy reach of his hand, and when I took mine and laid it by his, his eyes at last came up to my face.

"You seem to be of the belief that no fey must pass without at least one disobedience," said he, looking blankly upon me. "Are you not able to understand that I will not use you-"

"You seek to make me believe you have no desire for me?" I asked, smiling faintly as I put my dagger with my swordbelt, then knelt down before him upon the edge of his pelt. "All males feel desire for Jalav, all males use her when they may, and Mehrayn is very much male. Open your arms to me, male, for my desire for you will quickly warm all reluctance and foolishness from your body and will"

I had put my hand out to stroke the broad strength of his arm, yet the caress and my words were ended together when Mehrayn's hands flashed to my arms and pulled me down past him, onto the pelt behind where he lay. He twisted about to kneel across me as his hands captured my wrists and held them above my head, and surely did I believe that his foolishness was done till I saw the fire-brightened anger upon

him.

"Once again are you completely mistaken, wench," he growled, his hands and thighs holding me still without giving me pain, his eyes near to burning. "I have said naught about feeling no desire for you, for words such as those would be lies. Upon the moment do I feel more desire for you than ever, yet do I refuse to use you. Take yourself from me now and do not return, else shall it be a switch rather than a rod which you find. In this I will not be disobeyed."

The male then rose to his feet and pulled me to mine, bent to take up my swordbelt and dagger and thrust them at me, then sent me stumbling from him with a wide hand in my back which propelled me from the vicinity of his fur. Shocked lack of understanding continued my steps away, yet did I turn and look at him as I backed. No longer did his gaze follow me, for he had returned to his place upon his cloth-covered fur, leaning down upon one elbow, his eyes again with the fire.

"Take care that you do not stumble, wench," came the soft voice of Chaldrin from behind me, his bulk halting my backward progress. "One must look upon one's path, else is that one likely to become lost."

I turned to look upon Chaldrin with all of the confusion which spun my head about, clutching my weapons to me as though there were one nearby who would take them from me, finding no words to express what I felt. In no manner would understanding come to me of that which had occurred, that which was so far beyond reason.

"You appeared less disturbed when still in the capture of the followers of the Oneness," said Chaldrin, his tone and eyes gentle as he looked down upon me. "Come to my fur, wench, and perhaps I may assist you."

Had his hand not come to my arm, I might well have remained where I stood for all of the darkness. The doings of males most often lack reason, yet never had I seen a doing quite so lacking in reason as Mehrayn's. The Summa and Sigurri sat apart from the place where Chaldrin's pelt lay, S'Heernoh saw to the balance of the unfed-upon nilno, and Ilvin assisted him. None save Chaldrin and I sat upon his pelt, then, and when his hands came to ease my weapons from my grasp, I turned my eyes to his face.

"It is an illness which has suddenly touched him is it not?" I asked, allowing the swordbelt and dagger to be taken as the thought came from the swirling of my mind. It was surely the explanation I had not been earlier able to see, yet Chaldrin smiled somewhat and shook his head as he put my weapons aside.

"There is no illness, wench," said he, his voice as calm and gentle as it had been. "Mehrayn is as hale as ever, perhaps even more so. Have you never before been refused by a man?"

"Never," said I, shaking my head in an attempt to free myself from the confusion which strove to grow even stronger. "Among the Midanna, no male would begin to consider refusing a warrior, not to speak of a war leader. And when once I began to move through the lands of males, much did it seem that all about me strove for my capture and use or, if capture were impossible, then merely the use. All know males will ever take the use of what females they may, as often as they may, as often as they are able. All males have ever done me so, all males! For what reason would Mehrayn not do the same? Is he no longer able?"

"No, no, wench, you continue to misunderstand," said Chaldrin, his hand coming to smooth my hair. "You must not feel that harm has touched him, for it has not. It has simply come to him that further use of you by him will bring you pain, and the Sword has no wish to bring you pain; sooner will he keep himself from you."

"Yet what of the memories he will require?" I asked, too deeply upset to put credence in the words

Chaldrin spoke. No male would deny himself merely to keep pain from a warrior, for most often it was they themselves, who brought the pain. "When he lies in Mida's chains, agony and hopelessness all through him, he will have naught of memories to warm away the pain! He will have need of those memories, Chaldrin, as I had need of them! How may I allow him to refuse me?"

"Jalav, wench, you may do no other thing," said he, pulling me to his chest in an attempt to calm my agitation. "The Sword denies you in order to keep harm from you. You attempt to refute your earlier denial to keep harm from him. Sigurr! How have the two of you become so ensnared by such outrageous circumstances?"

"By trafficking with the gods!" I snarled, pushing away from Chaldrin as the true meaning of what had occurred abruptly came to me. Just so easily was the goddess able to take the male from me, and yet not take him at all. The fool of a male did her bidding as though he were sworn to her service, all the while unknowing! No other than a male would see the refusal of a war leader's willing use as a justifiable thing, a noble thing! Again I was to be denied, and again by the hand of Mida-and Mehrayn was to be without the warmth of memories.

"Take another tone when you speak of the gods, wench," said Chaldrin, a growl having entered his voice as his eyes narrowed. "Have you not had enough pain through disrespect? Will you court disaster through a lack of common sense?"

"Disaster need not be courted," I grated, rising to my feet to look down at him in the glow of the fire. "It comes whenever it wills, just as anger and fury-and awareness of a need to be revenged. There are some few about who have not learned to be wary of the vengeance of a Midanna, yet are those few destined to be wary of the vengeance of a Midanna, yet are those few destined to some fey learn of it, to their sorrow. I shall not speak upon this matter further, nor shall I speak of it again; merely shall I allow it to be."

I took up my weapons and walked from the staring, frowning male, seeking and finding a place upon the ground to take my solitary rest. To give challenge to the gods was the act of a fool, yet I no longer had patience for the doings of reason.

Even the gods might toy with a Midanna war leader only so long before that which made her a war leader demanded a halt to the constant humiliation. Pain had I been given, even unto agony, yet pain from then on would be reckoned as part of vengeance due, the greater the pain, the more to be returned in revenge. I lay down upon the ground, stretched at full length, my hand not far from my sword hilt, my dagger returned to my leg bands. I would not consider vengeance again till after the strangers had been seen to-save were I forced to it by further toying. Should the concern of the gods over the strangers be great enough, they would leave me be till I had seen to my tasks; should their concern be less, my life would be quickly taken. I looked upon the warm, dark sky above me, seeing only a small part circle of Mida's Realm shining there, then closed my eyes, caring little which the gods chose.

CH 7. A task continues--and the white lend

My awakening with the new light seemed to indicate that I was to be allowed to continue with my tasks without further foolishness, therefore did I begin to do so. The nilno we had might be fed upon as we rode and so did I see it done despite the protests of the males. No time was there to work further at Chaldrin's battle methods, yet the impatience which held me so strongly in some small way assuaged my regret over the loss. The impatience I now saw for what it was---an impatience to be done with the tasks of the gods-and no longer attempted to push it from me. It was necessary that I clearly recall what I was about, and this would be seen to through that impatience.

Again the fey was warm as we rode beneath the close green and brown of the forest, and therefore was it necessary to keep from over-tiring our mounts despite my impatience. I rode somewhat ahead of our set, keeping a calm eye upon where I rode, and after perhaps two hind of traveling Chaldrin brought his kan up beside mine. He rode in silence for a number of reekid, also considering the forests, and then were his eyes of a sudden upon me.

"I am able to think of no other manner in which to ask this, girl," said he, his rumble filled with less than its usual calm. "We would all of us know what vengeance you mean to take, and also when."

"The matter scarcely concerns you, brother," I replied, keeping my eyes from him as I looked about. "I will require no sword other than my own when the proper time has come, therefore will you and the others be free to go about your own concerns. "

"I and the others," he echoed. "I and all the others, even Mehrayn?"

"As he is numbered among the others, aye, even Mehrayn," said I, turning my frown upon Chaldrin to see the surprise in the dark of his eyes. "What ails you, male, that you come to me with such foolishness?"

"Foolishness?" he repeated, indignantly. "You speak of vengeance you mean to take after having been refused by Mehrayn, and we are not to believe you mean the Sword? How might we believe otherwise? And for what reason do you not hold him culpable? It was he who refused you, was it not?"

Only by the doings of another, I thought, looking upon the confused vexation of the male beside me. He attempted to take up his usual calm to soothe the roiling within him, yet the effort proved useless.

"The male is free, and was therefore within his rights to refuse me," I informed Chaldrin, the calm that was usually his now mine instead. "As for what vengeance I mean to take, that is a matter I have no wish to discuss. I was told, was I not, that I had only to say I had no wish to discuss a thing, and I would not be pressed?"

"Yes, I spoke those words," said he, "and yet-" His speech ended and his face worked in agitation. Annoyance touched him then, one mixed with deep frustration, and then his head nodded curtly. "Very well," said he, giving ground with little grace. "As you have no wish to be questioned, I shall not press you. Do you also have no desire to be questioned upon the life sign which now hangs about your throat? I had thought its presence disturbed you?"

"I have come to feel otherwise," I replied with a shrug, turning my face from him as my hand rose to touch the crystal hadat. "Also do I feel that the time has come to turn from all dallyings with males. My next task is not so far before me that I may continue to befog my mind with foolishness. Should I fail to survive, there are others who will fall with me."

"You bar the door upon your side after another has foolishly closed it in your face," said Chaldrin, his voice again calm, his hand suddenly and gently upon my shoulder. "Is this what you truly wish, wench? No avenue left open for apology and forgiveness, for realization of the truth and patience rewarded? All men are at one time or another foolish, yet Sigurr has blessed them by giving to wenches the capacity for great patience and deep understanding. Will you take a man's blessing from him?"

"Free males, like free warriors, may do and say as they please, freely speaking to the gods of their intentions," said I, feeling no distress at Chaldrin's male foolishness. "Warriors have learned to accept the consequences of such doings, no matter how distasteful those consequences come to be. Males would be wise to learn to do as warriors."

With a final glance at Chaldrin I kicked my mount into faster motion, ending the discussion and leaving

the male to his agitation. Ever do males behave so, swearing to do a thing, learning to regret the vow, then seeking about to be freed of it by the efforts of another. As Mida so valued the possession of such males she was welcome to them; Jalav would seek out none of them, and would thereby come to her vengeance with unburdened soul.

A brief halt saw to our new battle practice and mid-fey meal, then did we continue on. Darkness found us already encamped, our practice done and our meal as well. Mehrayn continued to remain apart from those he rode with, yet had he sent Chaldrin with his cloth-covered lenga pelt, saying it had disturbed him that I had taken my rest the darkness previous upon bare ground. As I chose no other to sleep beside, the pelt was sent to assure my comfort through the darkness. Though Chaldrin seemed pleased with the attempted gift, I was not; no other than males require protection from Mida's sweet ground, and Jalav was no male. I waved away the pelt with impatience and went to fetch the pipe I had begun, and worked upon it till I felt the need for sleep. Neither Mehrayn nor Chaldrin made comment upon my return of the pelt, yet did both appear filled with a great deal of annoyance.

Two further feyd fled past in travel, and with the arrival of the third darkness came the completion of the pipe I fashioned, the pipe which would allow me to return to the White Land. With roast lellin and fellin tubers filling me to satisfaction, I took both pipe and sack and sat myself beside Chaldrin, feeling the pleasure of anticipation.

"You must know what I do, so that none attempt improper interference," said I to the male who frowned upon that which I held. "With the aid of the contents of this sack, my spirit shall journey to a far land, a land from which I have heretofore been barred, save for my initial journey there. I know not how long I shall journey, yet are you forbidden to attempt drawing me back against my will. There is much to be seen in the White Land, and I shall not return till I have looked my fill."

Chaldrin, still frowning, parted his lips to speak, but another spoke before him.

"Surely, lady, you have been taught that so prolonged a stay is impossible," said S'Heernoh, halting before me with some of what remained of the lellin in his hands. "One of skill may see much in the short time one is allotted upon the Snows, yet not so a novice. The time which seems like reckid there is hind here, and to spend hind there is to allow one's untenanted flesh here to die from lack of attention. Best you remain no more than the allotted time and then return, for many here would mourn your loss. Those of us who walk the Snows dislike such restrictions, yet how may mortals disobey the will of the gods?"

His half-shadowed smile was cordial as he turned from me, to return to packing the lellin for the new fey's journey. I stared silently for a long moment, just as Chaldrin did, both of us looking upon the male who prepared our provender without complaint. Little had I thought upon the male S'Heernoh save for the annoyance he had brought, yet was it now necessary that I consider him more closely. Speaking his name turned him to me and a gesture brought him to crouch where he had previously stood, his smile as cordial as it had been despite the questioning in it.

"So you are a Pathfinder," said I to this male who regarded me with amused, dark eyes. "I wonder that you did not speak of this sooner."

"To what purpose?" he asked, spreading his hands as his amusement turned wry. "My store of grains to bring the Clouds of Seeing was long since exhausted when we met, for I have been quite some time from my people. And among them I am called a Walker, one who prowls the Snows. This is what you term 'Pathfinder,' is it not? Are you a Pathfinder to your wenches as well as their war leader?"

"No," I replied, unsure why I continued to mistrust the male. "My warriors have no Pathfinders among them, for I am the first to have visited the White Land. In what manner does one know when her allotted

time upon the Snows has elapsed? Mida's light does not appear in the skies there so that it may be tracked."

"Indeed is there naught save the eternal gray and white," said S'Heernoh, his gaze now growing thoughtful. "The awareness of the passage of time upon the Snows is an inner thing, taught a Walker by the Walkers who have been themselves taught in such a manner. Have none made the effort to train you to self-sufficiency?"

"I have met no others than males who are able to walk the White Land," said I, seeing no more than true concern in the eyes of S'Heernoh. "Males have refused the White Land to Jalav, for males fear that she will conquer it sooner than they. Does the male S'Heernoh fear the same?"

He seemed startled, then amused. "You mistake the situation, wench," said he, clasping his hands before his lean body. "All who walk the Snows, man and wench alike, are in their turn conquered by them, not the other way about. The Snows show the events which lay before us, the triumphs and defeats, the sadness and joys, which we will encounter, even unto our deaths. That which will be cannot be conquered."

"Should I find victory awaiting me, I will not seek to conquer," said I, growing even more eager to begin my search. "This and no more will Java give her word upon, for defeat is not acceptable. Will you teach me the manner of walking the White Land, or am I to seek the knowledge alone?"

"War leader, you have my utmost admiration," said this S'Heernoh with much of a chuckle to indicate his increased amusement. "Were it possible to conquer the Snows, I have no doubt that the victory would be yours. I will be honored to share my modest knowledge with you as quickly as I have completed my tasks, which will take no longer than the time required to fill and light your pipe."

The male then stood straight and returned to the fire, clearly moving with purpose. I lifted the sack and pipe, prepared to begin as soon as might be, feeling the eagerness put a small trembling in my hands, and Chaldrin stirred where he sat.

"You mean to go to a place of great danger with none save that weaponless man to stand beside you?" he asked, his voice showing his disturbance and also his scorn for the stranger S'Heernoh. "You have accepted my presence till now, wench; am I now to be left behind?"

"Should you find yourself able to accompany me, you may do so," said I in return, sending him no more than a glance as I carefully filled my pipe within the sack. "Have you ever been in the midst of the Clouds of Seeing?"

"Aye, I have indeed," said Chaldrin, and truly had his calm soured. "For me, as for all who are not Pathfinders, they are the Clouds of Blindness. I fail to see in what manner duty draws you in such an odd direction, girl. What will occur should you fail to return?"

"I will not fail to return," I murmured, paying more mind to filling my pipe without loss of the coarse grains than to giving heed to male fretting. "Once before did I walk the Snows, and returned just as I departed. Chaldrin merely dislikes being unable to accompany me."

"Indeed do I dislike the need to remain behind," said he in a growl, his frown clear as I realized that I had no flame maker. It would be necessary to borrow from our cooking fire, I saw, yet before I might rise to my feet, S'Heernoh turned from the fire and began to approach me, a twig alight in his hand. Again Chaldrin growled, this time wordlessly, his eyes upon the male who approached.

"Should you return alone from your journey," said he to S'Heernoh as I took the twig carefully handed

me, "do not consider your life, at least, as having been preserved. Either both live or neither will continue, for this you have my word."

"How might I have expected less?" asked S'Heernoh, seeming amused as he sat beside me, away from Chaldrin. "Have no fear that I will leave the war leader behind upon the Snows. Do we not both return, it will be neither."

"Best you keep that firmly in mind," returned Chaldrin, not to be soothed by mere words. I puffed upon the pipe, bringing the grains alight, allowing the small flame upon the twig to die, feeling the odd bite which touched my tongue. Twice did I draw upon the smoke before passing the pipe to S'Heernoh, and just then did Mehrayn appear to block the glow from the fire.

"What occurs here?" said he, looking narrow-eyed upon pipe and male, one of whom now took deep, pleasurable breaths of smoke from the other. "For what reason do you appear so disturbed, Chaldrin?"

"Our wench goes to walk the Snows with S'Heernoh," said Chaldrin, the disapproval strong in his voice. "I have attempted to reason with her, yet to no avail."

"Ever does a man find difficulty in reasoning with a wench, for there is no reason within one," said Mehrayn, his growl much like Chaldrin's. "As there is no conceivable need for her to risk the Snows, she will remain behind. Do you hear, wench? You are bound to obey me, and I forbid your walking of the Snows."

Indeed was I able to hear the male, yet only at a seemingly great distance. His form was dark, as was Chaldrin's and those of the others who now crowded about, all save S'Heernoh and myself. He and I seemed nigh to glowing with the Clouds of Seeing which filled and surrounded us, his movements as slow and deliberate as mine. Soft gray began to rise up higher all about us, gathering in S'Heernoh and myself, yet did I breathe in a final breath of smoke and smile.

"The male Mehrayn is free to do as he wills-as is the war leader Jalav," said I, the words coming forth as soft and breathy as the growing gray. "Should Mehrayn dislike the doings of Jalav, he may speak his displeasure to the gods; they, perhaps, will find interest in such foolishness. Jalav does not."

Words of greater anger came from Mehrayn, yet were they so far distant that naught intelligible was able to reach me. The strength had gone so swiftly from my body that I lay back in the grass as though mortally wounded, S'Heernoh beside me, we both unmoving in the growing gray. Deeper and deeper did the foggy mist take us, and then was I surrounded by white, once again upon my feet, yet bereft of all coverings and weapons. Naught was I able to see in the mist, yet was I in some manner aware of a presence close beside me. I looked all about, continuing to see naught, and then was my head filled with the strange, voiceless speech of the White Land.

"Let us move forward, war leader, to where your instruction may begin," said S'Heernoh, for it was his voiceless voice which came to me. "Do you mean to seek out whatever you may, or have you specific events you wish to study?"

"I would see the battle with the strangers," said I, mouthing no words, yet somehow replying to the query put to me. The effort was filled with greater discomfort than previous, and briefly did I wonder if my intent had reached my unseen companion.

"Then let us search among the paths," came the reply, soothing my wondering and reawakening my eagerness. Alone in the white mist I paced slowly forward with the difficulty of motion I had experienced before, as though I moved through thick, clinging mud, seeking the end of the mist, and then, as before, abruptly stood upon a vast white plain with many tracks proceeding in many directions. Movement to my

left brought me sight of S'Heernoh, who stood as bare as I.

"Where now we stand is near to the present, therefore are there fewer branchings," came the voice of my companion, warmed by his gentle amusement. "Behind us is what has already been, therefore is there but a single path. The branchings ahead at times converge to meet at a single place as well, showing that some happenings are not to be avoided no matter the effort, yet is there choice in the greatest portion of that-which-will-come-to-be. Save for those few events which are set by doings of the past, the happenings of the feyd to come are determined by that which goes just before it."

I turned slowly to look back at the mist from which I had come, and saw with great surprise that no mist hung behind me. Instead was there a vast, unending white plain, so wide and far that much did it seem to continue on forever, a single, much-twisting path which emerged from the end of forever and continued to the place where we stood, then ran beyond. Just behind, though the path was as dark and sure as that which preceded it, faint, slowly fading branchings might still be seen where they had grown from the path to end in abrupt termination.

"See there," said S'Heernoh, clearly indicating one branching in a manner which left no doubt, despite the lack of gesture or near approach. "See you the traces remaining of what-might-have-been? So great was its possibility of attaining reality that it continues to cling to visibility even after its defeat and bypassing. It is gone now to that nether realm of shall-never-be, yet will it fade only slowly to complete extinction."

"I am able to see no movement, also is the scene difficult to make out," said I, forcing my step nearer to the indicated branching. No mark did my step leave to show my presence in that land, and that, like the silent speaking, was somehow unsurprising. "Somewhat am I drawn toward that unfulfilled doing, though I know not why."

"The why of it is easily explained," said S'Heernoh from his place to my left, his mind-voice containing a good deal less amusement. "The event is one you were deeply embroiled in, which may be seen by the figures frozen in the last of their movements. See you the hadat, clearly female, and the three male sednet shapes surrounding her? Had they not been halted, the three would have ended the hadat amid much pain, and clearly was such halting no more than the faintest of possibilities. It gives me great pleasure, in this instance, to see the faintest become the strongest."

The grimness in his silent voice brought a great disturbance to me, for he spoke of the time of my recent capture by those who had been followers of the Oneness. How close I had been to an end I had not known, yet had another known and had taken steps to have it otherwise. Much did I wish to wrap my arms about myself as I stared down upon the frozen, fading figures, yet I did not; that which is past and done is gone, and that warrior who concerns herself with might-have-been is a fool. What-will-be is ever more to the point, for one who means to see her will done.

"There is little time left for us here," said S'Heernoh from where he had not stirred, calling me back from a contemplation of the obvious. "Shall we search for that which you wish to see?"

"Indeed," said I, slowly turning from the dead branching toward the male, again feeling eagerness flare within me. Even were I able to see no more than the forces which would be arrayed against me, victory would surely be mine. I raised my head to look beyond S'Heernoh-and frowned at the thick, impenetrable mist which rolled toward us from the direction of that which would be. The male, too, frowned, then uttered a silent exclamation of surprise.

"From whence comes that mist?" he asked, turning all about to seek out the edges of that which rolled toward us. "Were you able to see from when it arose?"

"I saw naught save its abrupt presence," said I, taking a step toward that which rolled silently at us. "May

we not make our way through it to see that which I must see?"

"It is-a barrier," said S'Heernoh, backing a step from the approaching mist. "Should we attempt to enter it, it will immediately return us from whence we came. Such a barrier rises only rarely, and never have I seen one before, no more than heard of it from those who Walked before me. We are not to be allowed longer upon the Snows this fey."

"And yet we may return?" I demanded, feeling eagerness turn to frustrated anger. "We may not remain longer this fey, and yet we may return?"

"So has it ever been," said he, looking upon me with disturbance in the dark of his eyes. "You feel great disappointment, I know, yet will there be other times. I would now teach you to know when you must return, and the manner of returning itself. Step away from the mist with me, so that we shall not be ejected from here before the lesson might be taught. "

With great reluctance I made myself follow the male who accompanied me, both of us avoiding the track of that-which-had-been. When S'Heernoh halted I did the same, and then did silent words reach me again.

"Feel within yourself for a sense of well-being or lack thereof," said he, his eyes full upon me. "Do not anticipate which you will feel, merely allow the feeling to reach your awareness."

The words made little sense, yet did I attempt to do as he had said. It came to me that there was naught of bodily feeling about me as I was, and then did I become aware of a sense of distress, faint at the time, yet growing stronger with the passing of each racing moment. A pressure of sorts did it seem, drawing me in a direction I could not envision. This I spoke of to the male, and he nodded with pleased satisfaction.

"Your deserted body sends you the feeling of distress," said he, "telling you of it, need for your return. You must always be aware of the size of that distress; for it is that which will tell you when you must return. In order to do so, you have only to close your eyes and allow your spirit to be drawn back. You need not be aware of the direction in which you move. Merely close your eyes and allow yourself to be drawn back."

Again I had no true understanding of that which he spoke, yet did I close my eyes and attempt again to learn. The pressure I had felt grew greater and greater, pulling and pushing and clinging and thrusting all at the same moment, ringing me more and more closely, pushing and pulling the breath from me-and then was I aware of the tickling of grass, and the firmness of Mida's ground, and the lingering scent of roast lellin, and the cooling of a small breeze in the sultry heat of darkness. My limbs and body were held in a familiar lethargy, yet was I able to force my lids open to the sight of many shadows hovering close.

"Thanks be to Sigurr!" came the voice of Mehrayn, strain underlying its usual strength. "She has returned at last and lives again!"

"And now does S'Heernoh return," said Chaldrin as hands lifted me from the grass to lean upon a hard, broad body. "Clearly did he recall my words and allow the wench to return first."

"I-had no need-of your words," said S'Heernoh with some difficulty, his strength undoubtedly returning as slowly as mine. "I would not--have returned-without one who-could not return--alone. She--is now able-to return alone."

"Then you have taught her the skill she requires to find safety in great danger," said Chaldrin, the growl gone. "For that you have my thanks, man, and my respect as well. Should you ever require a thing done,

you have only to speak of it."

"And I," said Mehrayn, he who now held me to him with such strength. "Again are my thanks yours, S'Heernoh, and more than my thanks. My debt to you is very great, and happily shall I some fey pay it."

"There is no need to speak of repayment," said S'Heernoh, now sitting upon the grass with the aid of Dotil and Wedin, right hand rubbing left shoulder. "I have come to feel a great deal of fondness and respect for the war leader, and would have done as I did in any event. Should you wish to consider repayment, be assured that it is already mine from the sight of you beside her once again. A man should not keep himself from the woman who is his life."

"Indeed is this woman my life," said Mehrayn, his arms again tightening about me. "Though rational thought is impossible when I am beside her, life itself is impossible when I am not. I have returned to the place I belong, and shall not leave it again. Do you hear my words, wench?"

The smell of him came to me clearly there in the dark of the forests, and the warmth and strength of his body and arms as well. I stirred somewhat against the manner in which I was held, and when the movement caused those arms to release me, I sat straight in the grass-and alone.

"Indeed do I hear the words of the male Mehrayn," said I, pleased that the presence of my life sign allowed me to feel naught save a faint annoyance. "Again he seeks the notice of a war leader of Midanna, yet does that war leader now have matters of true import to concern her. Go seek another to serve, male, for this Midanna wishes naught of you."

"You are justified in feeling anger toward me," said Mehrayn with much of a sigh, his face wincing yet from the coldness of my words. "I would not deny you justified anger, yet would I have you recall that I acted from a wish to keep pain from touching you. Am I to be condemned, then, for feeling too great a love for she who is my chosen?"

Steadily did his light eyes look upon me, a reflection of our fire shining brightly therein, and clearly did the male mean to bind me with his words. Had my life sign not been upon me it might perhaps have been so, yet my life sign was indeed upon me. For a brief moment I returned his gaze as steadily as it was given, and then did I rise to my feet.

"The male Mehrayn is free to do as he wishes," said I, looking down upon the surprise which took him. "Jalav, too, is free, and in no manner does she wish the service of a male who is filled so full of the foolishness which touches all males. Do not come again to me, male, save that you come with weapon in hand. This one is chosen to no other than the gods."

I turned to walk from him then, needing the movement to take the last of the stiffness from me, yet he rose quickly to his feet and halted me with a hand upon my shoulder.

"That you refuse to hear me is not unexpected," said he, no more than steadiness to be heard in his tone. "You seem to forget, however, that the service of their chosen was given me by the gods. Come with me to my fur, wench, and I will warm all anger and thoughts of hurt from you."

"The male Mehrayn may seek service from those who granted it!" I snarled, turning and knocking his hand from my shoulder with a movement taught me by Chaldrin. "Should you wish to see the blood flow all about, male, approach me again with words such as those! And a war leader of Midanna will not take the possession of another till battle has been joined-and survived! We Midanna are not to be likened to males!"

"Battle?" He frowned, immediately distracted from the anger he showed at the manner in which I had

freed myself. "What battle do you speak of, wench, and who is to be fought over? And what have I told you upon the matter of disobedience to the gods?"

"The battle I speak of concerns none save this Midanna," said I, looking up at the male with little approval. "What male I keep to please me will be my decision entirely, else shall I have no need of the decision. I will not have any other seek to limit me, and this point will be decided by swords. You, however, need not be overly concerned with the outcome of the battle. Even should I win the right to put hand to you again, it is scarcely likely that I shall do so. Males find serious decision difficult, I know, yet even a child is able to know her own true will. As for disobedience to the gods, mortal males would do well to allow those above to voice their own insult--else might their anger fall instead upon he who presumes to speak for them."

Naught save deep confusion and consternation was to be seen upon the face of the male, therefore did I turn from him again and this time walk where I willed. All about the camp did I go, loosening the cramp and ache from my body, seeing the manner in which warriors and males spoke agitatedly among themselves, Mehrayn more agitated than the rest, and yet also more silent. Although Wedin and S'Heernoh seemed prepared to come forth to speak with me, Chaldrin disallowed such a doing with a rumble they wisely chose not to ignore. My mind was much with that which I would learn from the White Land when I returned there, and I would not treat gently with any who interrupted those thoughts. Around and around the camp I went, deep in thought, and when the thoughts left me at last, I reclaimed my weapons, found a place about the fire, and slept.

CH 8. Denial-and an oath to follow

"I simply do not understand," said S'Heernoh, looking upon the pipe he held, seeing it clearly in the glow of our fire. "Never before has such a thing been."

"I take it from that that you are still unable to reach the Snows," said Mehrayn from where he crouched beside the other male. "Are you able to know the reason your spirit and the wench's are unable to attain release from your bodies?"

"Attaining the release of our spirits is not the difficulty," said S'Heernoh, his voice earnest as he looked upon Mehrayn. "The Clouds of Seeing take us up as quickly as ever-yet are we immediately hurled back to our bodies at the touch of the mist which covers the Snows. We may approach the Snows, yet we may not walk them."

"Nor may we look upon that-which-is-coming-to-be," said I with all the bile which filled me, pulling angrily at the grass upon which I sat. "Three times we have tried, and still the numbers and disposition of our enemy remains unknown!"

"War leader, our being barred from the Snows may not be the loss you think it," said S'Heernoh, his earnest dark eyes now turned toward me. "Progress through the Snows is a slow and trying thing, for ever must one begin his Walk near to the point which is his present. To see that which lies far ahead, one must risk being parted from one's body for too long a time. The battle you thought to look upon may well have been too far ahead for us to reach."

"And again it may not have been," said I, not to be soothed as a child too small to take up dagger use. "How may we know till we have made the attempt?"

"One with sense would by now begin to suspect that the gods frown upon such an attempt," said Mehrayn, his light eyes seeking to draw mine. "Disobedience to the gods often brings unexpected punishments."

"How long will that mist remain upon the Snows?" said I to S'Heernoh, paying Mehrayn no more mind than I had for the six feyd behind us. "How long has it been known to remain?"

"Never has it been known to remain even as long as it already has," said S'Heernoh, speaking quickly in the face of Mehrayn's sudden anger. "At times are certain happenings barred to us all, yet for all of it to be barred-! Perhaps it is indeed the will of the gods."

"Even the gods are constrained by the will of the Snows," said I with a gesture of impatience, still deeply annoyed. "So was I told by Mida upon the journey which brought me to her, and little reason was there for her to speak other than the truth. We cannot be barred by the will of the gods."

"Clearly, then, are you barred by the will of the Snows," said Chaldrin, his words drawing nods of agreement from both warriors and Sigurri, who sat not far from him. "There is some-thing which must not be looked upon, and surely is it within reach of seeing, else you would not be barred from it. To continue your attempt to see that which you are not meant to see would be foolishness, girl."

"Mida take it, you have the right of it, brother," said I, looking upon Chaldrin with newly uncovered eyes. "The doing is close before us, therefore would I find it possible to see it upon the Snows if I were not barred from the White Land! What doing might it be, and for what reason am I refused a knowledge of it?"

I rose to my feet to pace with agitation, weakness not touching me at all, for my spirit had not been parted long enough from my body. The heat of the fire was no lure in the warmth of the darkness, yet did I begin to pace about it.

"Perhaps it would be unwise for you to consider the point," ventured S'Heernoh from his place in the grass. "There are certain events which will not come about should even the least hint of them come to the key mover of the sequence. It may well be pain or harm which might be easily avoided with prior knowledge, a pain or harm which is utterly necessary to bring about a further key event. Few of us would not seek, even unconsciously, to avoid what pain and harm we might, even though we knew that acceptance of such was necessary. Even might it be other than pain or harm, pleasure, perhaps, which must be accepted, a pleasure which one would forgo if one were to think upon the doing. Foreknowledge will negate what is meant to be, and might well cost you a victory in some manner."

"Mida take it all!" I shouted, then did I turn in great fury and stalk away from those others who rode with me, to sit alone. Ever was Jalav to strive without sight in those tasks set to her hand, for sight would perhaps smooth the path she rode, and perhaps also bring victory more easily to her grasp. No other thing than difficulty was to be her lot, with none about even to raise weapon to in frustration!

"So it might well be pleasure which you are not to avoid," came the voice of Mehrayn as he halted beside me, to look down upon me. "in that event you must remove your life sign once again, so that what comes might be properly accepted."

Had it been my wish to acknowledge the existence of the male, I would easily have pointed out that I was to do naught to alter matters as they were, not act to change them. The male saw the point as clearly as I, I suspected, therefore did I indeed do naught save turn my back toward him and stretch out upon the grass on my side, the more easily to stare into the fire.

"Had you not replaced that life sign, I would already have taken the anger from you," persisted the male, his own frustration clear in his voice. "I have given my word not to interfere with the tasks given you, wench, yet was I to have my woman in return. As the time passes without my woman beside me, the strength of my vow grows weaker and weaker, soon to be no more. Do as you will, Jalav, for so shall I, most especially at the time when my patience is no more."

Having spoken his annoyance the male then took himself off, leaving me annoyed myself. I cared little what the male attempted for he was not mine, yet were his insinuations beginning to anger me. Did Mida not soon curb him, I would find it necessary to do the thing myself. There were matters of true import before me, matters far removed from the foolishness of males, yet Mehrayn refused to see this. Happily there was not much trail time ahead before he might be left behind, and that calming thought assisted me in finding sleep.

The following feyd passed one into the other, filled with riding and practicing what Chaldrin taught, and feeding, and occasional attempts to gain the White Land. The brightness of Mida's light dimmed slowly to rolling gray, with the mutter of thunder in the far distance, as though rain fell elsewhere ahead of us, yet were we given naught save the grayness. To Chaldrin's satisfaction, my skill and that of my warriors slowly grew, yet was that the sole satisfaction to be found among us. The White Land continued to be barred, I continued to take no note of Mehrayn, Mehrayn's frustration continued to grow, and those about us took to walking softly indeed when near to Mehrayn or myself. Our tempers were such that blood would surely have been spilled had there been words exchanged, therefore were we ever kept one from the other by many contrivances of Chaldrin's. The state suited me well, yet Mehrayn was not equally pleased with it.

The fey came at last when we reached Midanna lands, therefore did Ilvin, the Summa, and I seek out a place to halt for our mid-fey meal which would also serve as a camping place for the Hitta and the males. Ilvin knew well enough that she might not accompany me, and she had grown to know and have trust in the Summa who had become her sisters, and was grimly pleased that they would be beside me. The Summa had sworn to stand beside me in any battle which came to be, save against their clan sisters, and Ilvin knew the worth of their words. When our meal was done the Summa and I rose to our feet, yet did I gesture Chaldrin back as he made to do the same.

"Our journey together is at an end, brother," said I, seeing the frown which took Chaldrin and the surprise of the other males. "From here the Summa and I continue on alone, for there is no place among the clans for a male such as you."

"There had best be a place for me," said Mehrayn before Chaldrin might speak, standing slowly to rest one hand upon sword hilt. "If there is not then they shall find the need to make one, for I will not remain behind. My sword cannot protect one who is not beside me."

"And have you forgotten my vow to Sigurr, girl?" asked Chaldrin, also rising to his feet. "Would you have me be forsworn?"

"Were you to accompany me, brother, then would you be forsworn," said I, looking upon Chaldrin alone. "You will remain here, and should any come to fetch you save Wedin or Dotil, you will know yourself faced by enemies. Bide in peace, Chaldrin, for we are meant to stand together against the strangers."

I turned from the deep upset upon Chaldrin with a gesture to the Summa, and we three began to move toward our kand. No more than two steps were gone beneath our feet, however, when it became clear that one came behind us. Dotil glanced back in annoyance, then did she voice a very low groan.

"Wherever you ride, there shall I follow," said Mehrayn, his tone so inflexible that I halted where I was. "You may ignore me as you wish, wench, yet do I also do as I wish. When darkness has fallen to end this fey, I shall take that life sign from you, and then we shall see how long you are able to continue to ignore me."

The words of the male were more than challenge, yet had I no further anger to waste upon him. Mida

knew well enough what his presence would mean, and if I were to be ended in such a manner, then so be it. The Midanna would have no war leader to take them into battle against the strangers, and all by cause of spite. If this was in accordance with the wishes of the goddess, there was naught I might do to change it. After no more than the slightest hesitation I again began walking toward my kan, unaware of the fact that the Summa no longer paced me till Wedin spoke.

"Should you ride with us, male, it will surely mean the war leader's life," said she, addressing Mehrayn with more compassion than impatience. "No Midanna may lead a free male to the place of the clans, else is she ended with the greatest pain possible. Perhaps if you were to accompany her to the place of her own clans the matter might not be viewed in the same manner, yet to do such a thing with those who believe themselves to be enemies to her-She would not even be allowed to speak in her own defense."

I reached my kan and ran my hands over him, aware of the silence which had fallen behind me. The male undoubtedly sought a path about the wall which Wedin had erected, for his often-voiced concern for Jalav would become hollow indeed were he to merely brush aside the words of caution given him. He would not do other than accompany me, I knew, for he had at last determined to have me again, no matter the cost of his appetites. I freed my reins from the bush to which they had been tied and began to back my kan from the press of the others, yet was halted again by the voice, not of Mehrayn, but of S'Heernoh.

"You said, 'free male,' lady Wedin," said he, a thoughtfulness to his tone. "Are there men, then, who are allowed among your clans, men who are not free? What is done to restrain these men who are not free?"

"Those males who have begged to follow a warrior are not free," said Wedin, a lack of understanding clearly touching her. "They are forbidden weapons, and they must obey the word of she whom they follow, else are they slain. No slightest disobedience are they allowed, for they must forgo their own will in deference to the will of warriors. With their lives held hostage to their word, what further restraints might be necessary?"

"Then there is the manner in which you might be safely accompanied," said S'Heernoh, the smile of his triumph bright as he looked about, yet did Dotil's laughter immediately dim the radiance.

"You believe a male of our set other than yourself would behave in such a manner?" she asked, also looking about at the others. "Few males choose to follow a warrior, for few males have so small a sense of self to allow them to obey properly. Males are far too arrogant, S'Heernoh, and these more arrogant than any others I have seen. To be brother warriors, yes; to be followers of warriors? Never."

All of the males seemed to take some small insult at Dotil's amusement, as though they thought themselves capable of being followers despite the truth of the words spoken. I sighed without sound at such colossal foolishness and gathered my reins to mount, yet was it Chaldrin who this time halted me.

"Arrogance is a coin I have in the past been taught to spend little of," said he, reaching down to open his swordbelt. "As my life has already been dedicated to following a wench, I have only to give up some small bit of my pride to see my vow fulfilled. Will I need to continue on without a sword once those enemy wenchs are yours, girl?"

I stared upon Chaldrin with narrowed eyes, for surely the male knew not what he said. This former leader in the Caverns of the Doomed, he who was foremost among the fighters there, he who took females to please him whether they willed it or no, was to follow meekly after a war leader?

"One who no longer lives has little need of a sword," said I, looking upon the male with scorn. "Think you the sisters of the Summa will smile with acceptance upon one who wishes to treat with them as equals? Males are less than warriors, considerably less, and so must they conduct themselves when among those

who have the power and ability to take their lives. Also will there be none to 'take a fancy to your furs,' for you will have no furs. No more than the sleeping leather of the warrior who uses you will you have, she whom you must serve whether you will it or no. Should your temper be lost your life will soon follow, and that I will not allow. Should you wish to obey a war leader, you may do so by remaining here."

"I wish to follow a war leader, sister," said he, unabashed by my words, a faint glitter of amusement in his dark eyes. "Indeed have I sworn to do no other thing, and will not see my vow broken through lack of tenacity. Without all weapons will I follow you, and should you ride from me in the forests and leave me to make my way alone, my blood will be on your head. I give you my word that I will not turn back."

He had stepped forward away from his swordbelt and had folded those massive arms across his broad chest, making me know that the word he had given me had not been idly given. Sister he had called me, just as I called him brother, and well he knew that I would not leave him to die in the forests. I continued to gaze upon the male in silence, disliking the need which had been forced upon me, yet was there naught I might do for it.

"Very well, male," said I at last, nodding coldly, telling him that no longer would he find himself brother to me. "As you wish so heartily to follow a war leader she will allow it, yet are you to prepare yourself for prompt and absolute obedience. Should you behave in any other manner, it will need to be my sword which takes your life. Do you understand the words I speak?"

"Indeed," said he, losing a deal of the satisfaction which had filled him with the first of my words. "Should I do aught to cause my life to be taken, the pain of taking that life will be yours long after my last breath has been drawn. I will recall that I have sworn to keep pain from you, and will give you no cause to end me."

"Such is my sincere hope," said I, unable to keep the dryness from my tone. "Males are scarcely of such great value that they will be kept no matter their doings. One alone may be used to serve many-if he is properly cared for between the times of his use."

Chaldrin's jaws tightened as I taunted him with a reversal of his own words upon the subject of female slaves in the Caverns, yet was he not so great a fool that he protested his indignation aloud. He accepted my words in a becoming silence, therefore did I indicate that he and the Summa were to mount up. Just as they began moving toward their kand, it was proven that the matter was not yet over and done with.

"Wait," called Mehrayn, frustration having turned to decision in his eyes. "Where one might go, so might another. I, too, wish to follow a war leader."

His hands opened and removed his swordbelt, then let it fall to the ground as his eyes challenged mine. Again did a low-voiced groan come from Dotil, for the male was well-nigh made of arrogance. One such as he would never truly follow a warrior, and any Midanna who looked upon him would know this without doubt.

"Go to your knees and bow your head, and say the same again," said I with a snort of ridicule, seeing the manner in which the male's head rose in annoyance at such a suggestion. Wide-legged did he stand, with shoulders unbowed and red-maned head high, and one such as he was to follow and obey? Far better were I to open my own throat upon the instant, and save the enemy clans the effort.

"Speak seriously and I will obey," snapped Mehrayn, angered that I had turned once more to my kan. "Just as you would not obey such a command, neither might I be expected to."

"The war leader has no need to obey such a command, male," said Wedin when I failed to turn again to Mehrayn. "Never has she begged to follow a warrior, the very thing that you insist you do. Are you

unable to see that she need not coax forth approval of her commands from one who truly follows, before obedience might be expected? To follow a warrior, a male must be capable of giving complete, unquestioning obedience; this, I think, is beyond you, brother."

I knew a moment of startlement when Wedin gave Mehrayn the name of brother, yet in the silence which followed I found little to keep me from jumping to the back of my kan. I thought the foolishness was then at an end, however turning my kan about brought me more than startlement. With his light eyes directly upon me Mehrayn put himself to his knees, then did that flaming head bow in humility.

"I ask to be allowed to follow a war leader," said he, the words as humble as the posture. "So deep is my need to do so that I will pledge myself to absolute obedience for the time that I follow her, swearing to do only and precisely as I am bidden to do. Should I be refused I will follow without this vow, and stand with naked blade against any who attempt to bring harm to that war leader by cause of my presence. No other thing than one of these may I do, and I leave it to the war leader to decide between them."

Again were those light eyes upon me, calmly awaiting what decision I would make, calmly ignoring the anger I made no effort to conceal. That the male would follow after, I had no doubt, nor did I doubt the fury which would grip the enemy clans at sight of him. To keep the blood from flowing like water it was necessary that I accept his vow, yet was my anger not destined to be denied.

"You may consider your pledge accepted, male," I informed the light-eyed gaze upon me with grim pleasure. "You are now no longer free to do as you will, only as I will. Take yourself from your knees and find your mount, then follow along behind your betters-in silence. There is much for you to learn, and it shall begin immediately."

Many were the stares which came to me as Mehrayn rose slowly to his feet, his not the least among them, yet was a war leader well used to having many eyes upon her. S'Heernoh and the two Sigurri males stood silently beside Ilvin the while those who rode with me at long last got themselves mounted, yet did it seem that the gray-haired male sought words which might be spoken to me without adding to my anger. The sack containing the grains which brought the Clouds of Seeing hung from his belt, for it had been my decision that to carry the sack with me was to jeopardize the contents unnecessarily. Far better to leave the sack behind me, and again attempt its use when the matter of the enemy clans was done. Perhaps then the mist would be gone from the Snows, and Jalav would see what she sought to see. Before S'Heernoh found the words to approach me with, I raised a hand to all in farewell, turned my kan, and rode from the camp.

Growing anticipation and anxiety turned the Summa silent during the balance of the fey, my word upon the matter doing the same for the males. Anticipation grew within me as well, yet was there more determination than anxiety to accompany it. It would be glorious indeed to see all the Midanna ride as one, most especially against an enemy which was common to all. It would be wearying to have so many more war leaders to command-and be commanded by-yet would the time be for the battle against the strangers only. Afterward all would become as it had been, sister Midanna and enemy sister each going her own way-directly after the Hosta and Silla were freed. That final doing would also free Jalav, to seek out Mida and speak of many things-or possibly to end in the attempt. The thought brought me little agitation, no more than pleased anticipation, and so did the fey lower toward darkness in pleased contemplation.

Darkness camp saw three Midanna served by two males who followed them, large and well-made males who wore no weapon and made no objection to that which they were commanded to do. Silent were these males, for they had not received permission to speak as they would, and somewhat disturbed were they that the Midanna they rode with now took no true note of them, as though they were well beneath notice. Wedin and Dotil knew well that the only true safety for the males lay in their being no different

from those other males who followed warriors, therefore did the presence of Mehrayn disturb them considerably. The male served with a silence like Chaldrin's, yet was there some manner of difference to him.

"I cannot see what he does that Chaldrin does not, yet are they clearly not the same," fretted Dotil, speaking of the male as though he were elsewhere, properly unconcerned that every word was listened to by him. "He will draw immediate attention, Jalav, of the sort we will find most unwelcome."

"Perhaps Chaldrin does a thing which he does not," suggested Wedin, attentive to the paslat she fed upon. "We will be among the clans mid way through the next fey, war leader. I doubt there is time enough to discover the true difficulty."

"The difficulty is that Chaldrin finds no insult in standing back from the doings of warriors," said I, continuing to apply myself to my own provender. "The other feels the need to bring himself to the attention of those he serves, a vanity I am familiar with. There is a cure for the thing, one which did well with a previous male who followed me, and one it will do little harm to attempt with this one."

Only then did I allow my eyes to touch Mehrayn where he and Chaldrin crouched, awaiting what further service would be required of them, their own provender having been bolted down in anticipation of being summoned. A glint of hidden anticipated amusement showed in the eyes of Chaldrin, yet Mehrayn's light gaze held only wary unease.

"Rise and stand before us, male," said I to Mehrayn, my tone no warmer than it should be with one who served me with less than satisfaction. In truth I was wont to treat my males with a good deal more kindness, yet was Mehrayn of a different ilk than those others who had followed me. Those others had not been permitted to force their presence upon me when they were unwanted, yet Mehrayn had done no other thing.

"In future," said I to him who stood looking down upon me, "upon reaching a halting or camping place, you will immediately remove your body cloth and put it from you, not to be donned again till our journey resumes. You may begin the practice upon the moment, for we have not the time to await the new light."

"May I speak?" said the male, a tightness to the line of his jaw, a hardness to the look in his eye.

"Briefly," I acknowledged, taking my eyes from him and returning my attention to my provender.

"I alone am to do this thing?" he asked, his words uneven despite his attempt at calm. "Chaldrin will not be required to do the same?"

"Chaldrin makes no attempt to present himself with overblown importance," said I about a mouthful, seeking around me for the wet cloth which my male had earlier brought. "To serve warriors bare and continue to invite their attention is to ask to be used, upon your back and only to the extent that those warriors care to use you. Should it not be your wish to be used in such a manner, you will quickly learn self-effacement in the presence of those you serve." Then did I raise my eyes and look directly upon him. "Need I repeat a command?"

"No," said the male, growling, his gaze hard upon mine. "The war leader who holds my pledge has no need to repeat a command. Much does it seem that you are quite at ease commanding men to your will, war leader."

"I have, in the past, had some experience with such," I replied with a shrug, watching as the male before me reluctantly began to obey the command given him. Little effort was needed to remove the black body cloth, and then did Mehrayn attempt to stand uncaring before the Summa and myself. He it was who had

remarked upon the good fortune of Midanna being unencumbered with a sense of body-shame, yet had he then been but one bare among many. Now he alone stood so, gazed upon by warriors who grinned and murmured in appreciation of his form, his brother male continuing covered, and something of the red of the last of Mida's light brightened the tanned skin of him.

"I had not sooner noted how well hung he is," said Dotil, gazing thoughtfully upon Mehrayn with approval in her light eyes. "Has he skill with that which he possesses, Jalav?"

"Some small skill," I conceded, noting with amusement that Sigurr's Sword was scarcely pleased to be praised so. "I was also told by those Midanna who used him in Bellinard that he was deemed-adequate. Do you find interest in him, Dotil?"

"Indeed," said she, continuing to look upon Mehrayn, the single word spoken in such a manner that the male foolishly allowed his gaze to be drawn to hers. For many feyd had Mehrayn kept himself from the use of any female, a doing I had little understanding of. That he had at first not wished my use, then had not been allowed it, should not have kept him from seeking among the other warriors of our set, yet it had. No use at all had the male had, and he one who had great appetites and needs. His gaze touched that of Dotil, moved quickly all about her reclining form-then Wedin laughed aloud in great amusement.

"The male also seems to find interest in you, sister," said she to Dotil, bringing a grin to the face of her sister Summa. At once Mehrayn took on a closer resemblance to the dying light of the fey, yet was there naught he might do to change or deny his interest. Most evident had that interest grown, so evident that I, too, could not keep from chuckling. Wedin attempted to catch the eye of the male as Dotil had, yet did he avoid the gaze of both and close his eyes as though in pain. Clearly was it humiliation rather than pain that the male felt, a humiliation not often visited upon so doughty a warrior, and Wedin bethought herself to give him something of ease.

"I would have what more there is of this toothsome paslat," said she, glancing toward me as she smoothed away her amusement. "I would be grateful, Jalav, if you were to bid your male bring it to me."

"Certainly, Wedin," said I, nodding in an agreeable fashion, then did I look toward Chaldrin. The dark-haired Sigurri male crouched with elbow on thigh and hand rubbing face, striving diligently to keep his usual calm from sliding into laughter. Wedin's eyes followed mine and amusement flashed briefly, then did she speak again before I might do so.

"I would have your red-haired male serve me, Jalav," said she, no more than the lightest hint of amused reproof evident in her tone. Had she not called Mehrayn brother I might perhaps have felt insult, yet had she indeed addressed him so.

"As you wish, Wedin," said I with an uncaring shrug, seeing that the Summa had not thought through her desire to give Mehrayn assistance. "Fetch for the warrior Wedin what paslat remains, male."

The male nodded shortly and turned from us, taking sight of his humiliation from our view; then he went to the fire, not looking at Chaldrin. The second male continued in his calm crouch, also looking not upon he who avoided his eye, his face now serene as it had not earlier been. A brief moment did it take for the last pieces of paslat to be gathered, and then had Mehrayn returned with them to Wedin. He stood before her, unthinkingly leaning down to offer the paslat, and Dotil's laughter pealed out to echo throughout the forest.

"Indeed a toothsome choice, sister," said she to a Wedin who sighed with defeat at the manner in which Mehrayn flinched and immediately straightened himself. "What hunger you have must surely dictate that choice, nor will it be easy. The hungers of a warrior are never easily seen to."

"It seems I erred in suggesting this solution to the difficulty the male gave," said I, smiling at Dotil's amusement. "He has not only not given over his previous actions, he now presents himself in an even more forward manner."

My observation caused Dotil's laugh to ring out a second time, drew Wedin into falling to chuckling, and brought a deep sigh of pain to Chaldrin. I knew not what ailed the dark-eyed male, till it came to me that Mehrayn looked down upon me.

"It is my sincere hope that the war leader I follow has found a great deal of amused enjoyment," said he who was called Sigurr's Sword, his voice soft. "Come the fey my word no longer binds me, she will find a great need for memories of enjoyment."

The darkness had fallen too close about us for his features to be easily seen, yet had I no more need for seeing them than did Chaldrin. The white-clad Sigurri had known of Mehrayn's anger even before it was voiced, yet I, unlike him, felt little disturbance over it.

"Have you at last found a reason to give me the challenge, male?" I asked, leaning down to one elbow in the grass so that my comfort might be increased. "Humiliation is a strong goad toward that end, is it not? Should it be your choice then to give me the challenge I will not refuse you, yet do you now continue bound by a vow of obedience—and have spoken without permission. See to the balance of your tasks quickly, the while I consider what punishment is to be yours."

For a long moment the male stood unmoving, seemingly wishing to speak again, yet had he been commanded to silence. The need for obedience was a greater stone in his throat than he had anticipated it would be, so great that it well-nigh choked him before he turned and took himself to his tasks with frustration-stiffened movements. The remains of our repast needed seeing to, and this he began even before Chaldrin rose from his crouch to assist him.

"Should you continue to cause anger in him, Jalav, he will not learn," said Wedin in a soft voice, having put aside the paslat she had not truly wanted. "As he accompanies us solely to stand in your cause, it would be less than honorable to allow his life to be lost by cause of your need for turnabout. Do you truly mean to give him punishment?"

"He accompanies me by cause of his own stubbornness, Wedin," I returned with some annoyance. "The cause he stands in is his own, as ever it has been, and much has he earned a taste of turnabout. As for the matter of punishment, his arrogance needs taking down a bit. Did he follow you, would you allow him to speak as he did to me?"

The dark-haired Summa warrior turned her part-shadowy, part fire-lit face from me, choosing to remain silent rather than speak against the one she had called brother. Well did she know that she would not have permitted such a liberty with a male who followed her, yet had she accepted Mehrayn as warrior rather than male, much as I had done with Chaldrin. That I spoiled Chaldrin far less than she attempted to do with Mehrayn was not a matter which might be pointed out to her; a warrior treated with other warriors as she willed, allowing them liberties if that was her desire; a war leader required respect and obedience from those about her, else was she useless to her clan, both in battle and in peace. It was not possible that I overlook Mehrayn's insolence, nor would I have done so even had it been possible. After having forced himself upon me, it was no more than male idiocy to believe he would not be made to regret the doing.

Though Wedin looked only upon the fire, Dotil's gaze rested directly upon me, her shadowed eyes asking a silent question. I had no need to see her to know the question she asked, for I had expected the request. I nodded once, with a smile, and saw that smile reflected upon Dotil's face before she turned her

attention toward the two males who labored by the fire. The question of Mehrayn's punishment would require some thinking upon, and best would be to keep the male occupied the while, learning to do as he must do among the clans. I, too, looked toward the males, waiting for their tasks to be completed.

When all which needed attention had been seen to, the males left the fire with a good deal of relief. Full darkness was then upon us, and with it had descended the sultry, overcast heat we had had so much of. That the males looked forward to rest and sleep was clear, yet were they less than pleased that they had been denied the covered pelts they had till then taken their rest upon. Those pelts they had been made to leave behind them, for those who followed warriors did as those warriors did. As the two looked about themselves I gestured them to me, then rose to my feet.

"First watch this darkness is mine," said I, looking at the two as I loosened my sword in its scabbard. "Those who are unarmed stand no watches, even were they permitted to do such a thing under other circumstances. Best we seek our rest as quickly as possible, for the new fey will bring much to occupy us. "

Chaldrin nodded with calm acceptance as he looked down upon me, more so than Mehrayn who, though he also accepted my words, nevertheless was not pleased with them. Sigurr's Sword then began to turn from me, most likely to seek a place to take his rest, however Chaldrin remained where he was, apparently suspecting that there was more to come. I smiled at the perceptiveness of the male, then nodded my head.

"You, Chaldrin, will serve the warrior Wedin this darkness, obeying her as you would me," said I, sending approval to him with the smile. Mehrayn's attention returned to me immediately, therefore did I look upon him with considerably less approval. "You, male, will serve the warrior Dotil," said I, watching him closely. "You will give her all the pleasure you are capable of giving, and will obey her as you are bound to obey me. Are my instructions clear to you?"

"Aye, completely clear," growled the male, hands closed into fists at his sides. "And who is to serve the war leader?"

"The war leader desires no service," said I, touching my life sign as a faint smile came to me. It disturbed the male that I had no desire for him, yet was I greatly pleased by the circumstance. Best indeed was it for a warrior to keep herself from males, most especially ones such as Mehrayn. "As for the matter of your punishment," I continued, "we will see to it with the new light. I would not have you made unable to perform properly for the warrior who desires you."

"Ah, of course," said he, nodding with understanding as his great arms folded themselves across his chest. "It would be inconsiderate to allow my punishment to interfere with the duties given me. Accept my thanks for your consideration, war leader, and be assured that I shall serve the warrior Dotil to the very best of my abilities."

The nod he sent to me was more than cordial, and then had he turned from me to make his way toward Dotil, not far from where Chaldrin already began seating himself beside Wedin. Much did it seem that his words called for a reply, yet was I unable to conceive of what that reply should be. With some very faint, unexpected disturbance I turned from them all and began to move about the camp, a disturbance the following hind did naught to clarify nor dispel. The darkness dragged on a very long time, most especially after Dotil screamed with pleasure.

CH 9. The enemy clans-and trials to be faced

"It would perhaps be best if we halted now to take our mid-fey meal," said Wedin, wiping at the moisture

which beaded her brow despite the cool of numberless leaves above us. "The visiting place is not many reckid ahead, and another opportunity might well be disallowed us by the outlying sentries."

"You may well be correct," said I, pulling my kan to a halt beside hers. Her gaze moved no place save with the forests all about us, as did mine, yet was I well aware of the location of her true concern. Mehrayn rode with Chaldrin behind us, and he whom she called brother was in considerable distress, as he had been since the beginning of that fey's journey. With the new light I had seen him receive the punishment I had decreed for him, the punishment for insolence which he more than merited.

"I, too, would be pleased with a brief halt," said Dotil, freeing sweat-soaked strands of hair from her back. She sat her kan to the far side of Wedin, and looked upon me past her sister Summa. "Never do I recall the heat being this oppressive during a visiting," said she. "More often is it cool and pleasant, allowing one to take joy in the time."

"Perhaps Mida feels that this overcast heat will in some manner aid us," said I with a shrug. "Very well, let us dismount till we have taken our meal."

The two Summa dismounted quickly, yet did a glance back show that Mehrayn had acted with even greater speed. Chaldrin looked upon him covertly with much sympathetic feeling in his dark eyes, yet when that gaze came to me it contained a good deal of reproach. No words were spoken by Chaldrin, yet did he look upon me with accusation, for having commanded what I had, and for having commanded his own involvement. Early that fey I had had Mehrayn cut and trim a switch, then had I had Chaldrin beat him, in the manner that Mehrayn had last beaten me. The dark-haired male had not stinted on the strength of his blows, and then had it been necessary for Mehrayn to place his punishment directly upon the back of his mount. The ride till then had been painful and humiliating for him, as evidenced by his flushed countenance and stiff, slow movements. It was to be hoped that the male had in some manner learned from the pain and humiliation, both in regard to the use of insolence and the giving of humiliation to others, yet was the hope faint and unlikely in the extreme. Males learned slowly, if at all, and Mehrayn was, without the slightest doubt, male.

Our provender, prepared by the males before the new light, was fed upon quickly and quietly, with little more than single words from the Summa and myself. The matrig was set out before us and we each fed upon what tempted us, yet despite the wish of the two warriors with me for the halt to feed, little tempted them. They each looked down upon their provender rather than consuming it, deeply lost within themselves, disturbed over the visiting place we neared. Again and again had Wedin attempted to suggest that I allow her and Dotil to approach the war leaders of the clans alone, the purpose being that they would strive to ease the way for my appearance, thereby perhaps avoiding what might well come to immediate death for me. That I had refused to hear such a suggestion gave both Summa great upset, yet there was naught else I might do. The task of uniting all the clans was mine, given me by Mida herself; were I to delegate the task to others, would the wrath of the goddess not then be assured? How might victory be found in such a circumstance, with Mida's anger turning all to ashes? No, the task continued to be mine alone, no matter the near certainty of the reception I would receive.

"Your confidence is not as great as you would have us believe, is it, girl?" came the voice of Chaldrin, interrupting my thought. The male crouched close before me, speaking softly, unheard by any other save myself. Wedin and Dotil had gone to see to their kand, a departure I had not even been aware of.

"My task will be successfully completed," I replied in a mutter, throwing from me the matrig I no longer wished. The grass I sat upon stuck to my thighs and legs, and much would I have joyed in the presence of a stream just then. "To believe otherwise would be to believe that Mida's chosen has been poorly chosen indeed."

"Your goddess's chosen has triumphed before, yet not without pain and great difficulty," said he, continuing to look upon me though I avoided his gaze. "Will you need to face and withstand such things again?"

"Was the uniting of enemies among the Midanna easily seen to, it would have been done much the sooner," said I, giving him the sole answer I wished to give. Still was I loathe to meet his eyes, and this he understood as well as that which I had left unspoken.

"You feel there is an excellent chance you will not survive," said he, a flatness of statement rather than a rising of question in his voice, his hand coming to turn my face toward him. "For that reason as well as another did you command what you did this fey, seeking to turn Mehrayn and myself uncaring as to your fate. Did you take us for unthinking children, that you attempted such a thing?"

It was surely the warmth of the fey which brought greater heat to my cheeks, accompanying a sense of dismay that the male had so easily seen my intentions. As Ceralt had once done, so had I attempted to do, yet Chaldrin had known of the thing without overhearing the words of truth. He looked directly upon me with something of anger in the dark of his eyes, then nodded his head.

"I see you did indeed consider us in so flattering a manner," said he, his tone softly serious. "We were to greet the death of an unfeeling tyrant with great joy, then were we to return to our former lives with no further thought given to her, for we would have been avenged. I know not what Mehrayn means to give you for what has been done to him, yet do I know what you shall have from my hands when this task of yours has been seen to. I have given my word to stand beside you the while life remains to us, girl, but you may not brush aside my wishes as though they were unimportant. Perhaps best would be that you hope those savage wenches end you; do we both survive, you will find a suitable punishment for the thoughtless doings of an 'unfeeling tyrant.' "

"You believe I have naught to think upon save the rantings of a male with wounded pride?" I asked, pushing his hand from my face with impatience. "Should you wish to be revenged upon me, Chaldrin, you must wait till many others have first taken their vengeance. As for the male Mehrayn, he may speak of his displeasure to she who has claimed him through his own efforts. I am not that one."

"Sigurr's Sword will speak of his displeasure with the one who brought it to him," said Chaldrin, crouching close to prevent my rising from the grass. "We neither of us know the reason you continue to insist that he has been claimed by the goddess; we know only that it is he who means to claim you, no matter the difficulty he finds in the doing. His fury now rides so high that it is barely containable, and wise would you be, wench, to consider his wounded pride. He cares little for having been done in such a manner for the sake of uncalled-for jealousy. "

I could only respond with puzzlement. Ever do males speak so, with their meaning well hidden, so that a warrior must feel continually at a loss.

"For what reason must you be so like other males, and do naught save babble?" I asked of Chaldrin, touched well with annoyance. "To understand the nonsense you speak, one must also be male which, thanks be to Mida, I am not."

"You fail to avoid my gaze in guilt," observed Chaldrin, his tone now musing. "Can it truly be that you, yourself, are unaware of the jealousy you feel?"

"How may one feel a thing one has no knowledge of!" I snapped, truly losing patience with the fool of a male. "What of that male's am I this time accused of coveting?"

"Softly," cautioned Chaldrin with a small gesture, disallowing his gaze to move about us. "We know not

who might at this very moment be observing us, and for that reason do I rather than Mehrayn speak with you. We do not accuse you of coveting some ability of the Sword, but of coveting the man himself. We believe that had he used Dotil and given her no more than small pleasure, you would surely have found another punishment for him in place of that which he was given. The punishment was not for insolence, as you announced, but for daring to give another what was by right yours. It was for his full, anger-induced obedience for which he was humiliated so, obedience to a command which you, yourself, petulantly gave him. Only jealousy can account for it."

Were I taking the male aright, it was his belief and that of Mehrayn that I wished Mehrayn for my own, and could not countenance his use by any other warrior. While it was indeed true that the use of the male was more than worth having, actual possession of him continued to be a matter which must be seen to with the sword of challenge. And had I wished his use to be mine rather than Dotil's, surely I would have seen the matter done so with none to deny me. That I had succeeded in putting all thoughts of the male from me was beyond the belief of the two Sigurri, a thing which clearly showed they believed they looked upon a city slave-woman rather than a war leader of Midanna.

"I am to be of the opinion that there is a limit to the use of a male?" I asked, beginning to be taken by chuckling. "That once this limit has been reached, he may never again be used? That to allow his use by another warrior is to reach this limit sooner? That it would have pleased me more to have the male forsworn, doing other than that which he had been commanded to do? Truly do I regret not having known you sooner, brother. Your ability to bring me heart-lightening laughter is equalled by none I have ever met."

"Do not think to put me off with forced amusement, wench," snapped he. "I have told the Sword what I believe to be the truth, and once told, he believes as I do. You wish Mehrayn for your own, and no other thing save stubbornness keeps you from his side."

"Indeed?" said I, continuing to chuckle as I rose to my feet despite Chaldrin's nearness, "This is the truth you have seen and have shared with your brother male? Then perhaps you will be good enough to share an additional truth with him." I leaned down to put my lips near to Chaldrin's ear. "He who gave his vow to follow and obey me has not removed his body cloth as previously bidden. Although the omission was surely caused by his wish to keep hidden the humiliation which is his, he had nevertheless disobeyed me. You may inform him that there will be additional punishment for that disobedience."

"You cannot seriously mean to anger him further!" hissed Chaldrin, rising from his crouch to look down upon me with painful disbelief. "No man would be so mindless as to do such a thing, yet you, wench, show not the slightest hesitation! The Sword will not be forsworn, yet afterward"

"First there must be a beginning before there is an afterward," said I, disallowing the balance of his words. "For now I am the war leader whom you follow and obey, therefore shall you be silent and see to the clearing away of that which is no longer desired by my warriors and myself. The end of our journey is before us, and I would reach it as soon as may be."

Chaldrin drew himself up angrily, yet not a sound passed his lips. Much did he wish to speak further, I saw, yet had he been commanded to silence by she whom he followed. I held his gaze till he turned stiffly away to do my bidding, then smiled faintly as I took myself to where Wedin and Dotil stood awaiting me.

"He obeys with reluctance, yet does he obey," observed Wedin, looking upon naught save my smile. "I give thanks to Mida that his word is able to hold him."

"Most especially at this time," said Dotil with a worried sigh. "We are now unable to offer you our

assistance, Jalav, yet do we mean to continue to stand with you."

"Best you stand well to one side with the males behind you," said I, widening my smile in thanks to her. "As it is soon to begin, I would have you away from the path of danger, and the males firmly out from under foot."

"The males do well ignoring the manner in which they are being observed," said Dotil, glancing to where the two Sigurri saw to their tasks. "One would believe they were unaware of those who now surround us."

"Dotil, my sister, they are no other thing than unaware," said Wedin with a sigh. "Though they be true warriors, they are also males and naught of hunters. Mehrayn is able to follow a trail, the while Chaldrin is barely able to do even so much. They know naught of the warriors who now observe us, and will continue to know naught of them till those warriors step from cover."

"And that despite the mention made by Chaldrin that we knew not who might now be observing us," said I to a Dotil who attempted to swallow her stricken look. "Even then were the warriors moving to surround us, yet the male saw and heard naught of them. Do you doubt that they are as helpless as babes in the forests?"

"How might one doubt?" asked Dotil, again heaving a sigh. "The thing is so often made clear . . . What are we to do now, Jalav? Are we to be as the males and see naught?"

"And lose standing in the eyes of those who watch?" I asked, noting Wedin's faint amusement. "Best we acknowledge their presence at once, showing we neither seek to hide ourselves nor fear to face them."

"Never have I felt such reluctance to face sister Midanna," muttered Dotil, straightening where she stood as her left palm caressed her sword hilt. "Also is it true that never before have I faced them with an enemy war leader beside me and two nearly uncontrolled male warriors behind, and yet-Ah, Mida! How truly fortunate is the warrior who is able to meet all which comes to her with no concern other than the sword she grasps!"

"How truly fortunate is she who is not the chosen of the goddess," said Wedin, her hand to her life sign, a look of commiseration in her eyes. "I believe there are Summa among those who have found us, Jalav. Which of us is to address them?"

"You may do so, Wedin, after I have addressed the humble, obedient males who follow me," said I, finding a sigh within me much like those which had touched Dotil. "Should they forget their vows, we are all done. Should they recall and hold to those vows, they are to be absolutely forbidden to come to my aid no matter the circumstances, no matter how greatly they sire it. I ask of you no other thing than that-and their safe removal from the visiting place, should I be unable to see to the matter my own self."

"I will see to it, Jalav," said Wedin, a sadness upon her and Dotil. Much did it seem that we all of us contemplated defeat rather than victory, therefore did I turn from them and walk a small number of steps toward the males. It is truly said that one often receives that which one most often expects, therefore is a warrior wise to keep her thoughts and anticipations with victory alone.

"You males!" I snapped, bringing the startled attention of Chaldrin and Mehrayn to me. "To your knees, and quickly, and do not rise again till bidden to it by a warrior!"

Much did I look upon them as I was wont to look upon those males who had, from time to time, followed me, that is to say, as a war leader upon an unarmed male who merely follows, himself commanding naught. The two continued to be held by startlement, yet did they both go to their knees as

ordered. Had they not, I would likely have clubbed them down with my dagger hilt; this, I believe, they were able to see in my eyes, a thing which contributed much to their surprised lack of understanding. Once the males were as I wished them, I turned back to the Summa who accompanied me, folded my arms beneath my life sign, and nodded to Wedin. That warrior stepped forward with a faint smile, then addressed the trees and bushes all about us.

"We give you greetings, sisters," said she, her voice raised so that it might be readily heard by those who had found us. "Come forth now in peace, for we bring one who rides in Mida's name."

Where one moment there was naught save the forests about us, the next moment brought sight of four hands of warriors, the colors of their clan coverings speaking of the clans to which they belonged. Beside the blue of Summa was the white of Sarra, the brown of Sedda, and the gold of Selga, two of the warriors of each clan with bow drawn and well aimed, the others with bared blades or firmly held spears. I made no attempt to change the stance I had taken, yet little approval was to be seen in the faces of those who had appeared. One stepped forward before the others, a Selga by her covering, hair and eyes fully as dark as mine, the coldness of anger in her movement.

"All here ride in the name of Mida," said she to Wedin, a matching coldness in her tone, her gaze held firm to the stranger in their midst. "For what reason do Summa bring an interloper among us?"

"For the reason that Mida has sent her to us," said Wedin, angered by the manner of the Selga, yet unwilling to allow her anger full rein. "This is Jalav, once war leader to the Hosta, now war leader to all of her clans. She comes to speak with us on behalf of Mida herself."

"Indeed," murmured the Selga, her cold gaze faintly warming, her visage lightening. "War leader to the Hosta and all of her clans, you say. This rain-filled visiting now promises amusement beyond all which have gone before."

"She is a guest of the Summa, and therefore of the other clans as well!" snapped Wedin, taking a short step toward the other. "You cannot treat with her as though she were . . ."

"An enemy?" demanded the Selga, taking her eyes from me at last to send matching anger to Wedin. "What other thing might the war leader of our enemies be? And in what manner might she be a guest of the Summa, when the Summa war leader has spoken naught upon the expectation of her arrival? When your war leader is asked of this one, Summa, what will be her reply?"

"Our war leader was not present when Jalav freed us from the capture of males!" said Dotil, speaking quickly when Wedin did not. Dark-haired Wedin stood with deep anger all through her, the restraining hand of Dotil upon her shoulder likely the sole thing holding her from giving challenge to the Selga.

"Honor demands . . ."

"You guide enemies to our place of visiting, and dare to speak of honor?" interrupted the Selga, hearing naught of Dotil's opening words. Indeed did the Selga appear to be of the sort who heard naught save that which they wished to hear, the sort who self-importantly found naught save their own will in all matters. "What honor is there in turning one's back upon sisters to speak in defense of enemies? To stand with enemies? To . . ."

"None here save you name me enemy, Selga," said I, and the dark eyes which blazed so at Wedin and Dotil quickly returned to me. "It is not as an enemy that I have come, yet would it be dishonorable to refuse a challenge earnestly given. Should the burning within you allow you no other recourse, I will, with the reluctance of a guest, face you."

I continued to stand wide-legged as I had since just before their appearance, my arms folded below my

life sign, hands well away from sword and dagger hilt, an indication that I meant to conduct our discussion without battle. The eyes of the Selga quickly took me in once again, fleetingly touching weapons, life sign, and a height greater than any other warrior there, and surely did memory return to her that I was war leader to not one clan but ten. No more than a brief moistening of lips did I see, enough to know that the Selga would not allow her enmity to be put aside by my blade, and then was the thought fully confirmed.

"The place is not ours to give challenge to one who claims to be no enemy when shafts and points surround her," rasped the Selga, her fist closing even more tightly upon the hilt of the sword she held. "Our duty is to take in capture any who attempt to disturb the visiting, and this we have done. What follows must be at the bidding of our war leaders, who will issue or accept challenge of their own. Should they name you guest, Hosta, you will have words of apology from us; till then you are our captive."

"Very well, then, let us take her before the war leaders," said Wedin, anger still upon her, moving one step toward the Selga. "We agree that it must be they who unknot this tangle, therefore shall we seek them out at once."

"Not quite at once," said the Selga, turning her head from Wedin to eye me once again. "This captive must first be properly prepared, else shall the war leaders be greatly angered with us. A war leader of enemy Midanna must be treated with the respect due her rank."

With a gesture did the Selga summon those warriors who stood behind me, who were quick to obey the one who spoke for them all. My arms did no more than begin to unfold, when my back felt the presence of a spear point parting my hair. Sharp was that spear point, and entirely unwavering, showing the readiness of the warrior who held it to plunge it speedily through me. Before I was able to do more than consider the only-just-learned response of whirling away and striking aside the spear taught me by Chaldrin, four warriors had taken my arms, thrust me to my knees, and held my wrists behind me for immediate binding by a fifth. Truly had Chaldrin been correct when he had said that to hesitate at the onset of attack is to give victory to one's opponents! One must indeed enter into unarmed battle without thought, merely responding to that which is done, leaving thought for activities of leisure! My hesitation had cost me my freedom, a thing I had not intended giving up before facing the assembled war leaders. A bound captive is seldom listened to with the attentiveness given an armed, unbound warrior, a thing the grimly pleased Selga was aware of.

With the leather knotted tightly about my wrists and a thong tied between my ankles, I was pulled from my knees to stand upright once more. The hand of Summa warriors had taken no part in my binding, for they had been fully engrossed in keeping Wedin and Dotil from coming to my aid. Stern whispers of admonishment would have done little to keep my two new sisters from my side, yet had they also been held by unyielding grips and had had their swords taken. I looked upon the Selga who now approached me, with the fury I felt so strongly, yet was she uncaring of the fury of one who stood in her capture. With her own sword sheathed she reached to my swordbelt and removed it, then bent to take the dagger from my leg bands.

"Considerably more proper," said she as she straightened, something of a smile for my anger. "Where are your clan colors, war leader of the Hosta? Have you forsaken them and the sisters who followed you, for the greater glory of leadership of all of your clans? How pleased those warriors must be, to follow one who forsakes her own in order to achieve personal advancement."

"Do not speak upon matters you have no knowledge of, Selga," I growled, looking down upon her as my arms tested the strength of the leather which bound me. "The Hosta were no more abandoned by me than were my clan colors, nor has my position ought to do with personal advancement. When Mida speaks, a Midanna can only obey."

"Ah, I see," said she, nodding solemnly as she looked up into my eyes. "It was Mida herself who demanded that you abandon your own and seek greater glory. Upon occasion have one or two among our own clans put forth such an insistence, yet were we able, despite their protests, to see the truth behind such doings and speech. Mida willing, our war leaders will see the same again. To whom do those males belong?"

Her eyes went past me, and when I turned I, too, saw the males I had nearly forgotten. Both Chaldrin and Mehrayn remained upon their knees, four warriors just beyond them, two with bows, two with spears. Well aware of those warriors were the males, and perhaps for that reason was there no indication about them that they considered the disobedience of interference. The look of the Selga had contained considerable interest, as did the gazes of each warrior who was unconcerned enough with other matters to look upon them, and this, too, were the males aware of. Much did it seem that the interest they drew did more than the presence of ready weapons to bring about an earnest attempt at self-effacement by the two, and this estimation was able to bring a faint smile to my lips despite the sobriety of the balance of the happenings about me.

"Those males follow a war leader," said I, making certain my tone contained the disdain it should. "They are unschooled in the proper manner of behavior among the clans for I have but recently given them let to follow me, yet do I believe them possessed of just sufficient intelligence to learn their place quickly. In the absence of my commands, they will obey Wedin and Dotil."

"They will learn to obey whatever warrior commands them," said the Selga with a sound of her own disdain, drawing the eyes of the males from me. For an instant did the two Sigurri allow rebellion to show in those eyes at her words, a thing which brought amusement to all who looked upon them and approval to the Selga. "It pleases me to see that they are spirited," said she, nodding somewhat at the stubbornness the males attempted unsuccessfully to mask. "Taking the fire from a foolish male brings half the pleasure to be had from one. Bring them along as well."

Spears urged Chaldrin and Mehrayn to their feet, matching touches to the one which was given me by the Sedda behind me. I turned my attention from the hum of approval which arose at sight of the full size of the two males, and gave it to the chore of walking without destroying what little balance was left me by the leather thong tied between my ankles. The Selga led the way from our halting place, two Sarra saw to our kand, and Wedin and Dotil were kept by their sister Summa well away from the bound interloper in their midst.

The walk to where the tents had been erected for the visiting was longer and more difficult by cause of the leather upon me, the effort I was forced to bringing a heavy sheen of sweat to my body even before we passed the lone abandoned wooden dwelling which stood not far from where the Summa, the males, and I had halted. The dwelling seemed odd where it stood surrounded by naught save the forests, yet was the sight of it also familiar from those few similar sights to be found upon the lands claimed by my own clans. From time to time did city males attempt to take for their own the seemingly unused lands of Midanna warriors, their intention being to kill the forests which fed us all, and put in its place those lines of plantings which fed no more than those of the cities. Herds of tame beasts were also meant to be run by these males, beasts which tasted of the unending captivity which was theirs. In no manner would Midanna allow the forests to be destroyed by those of the cities, therefore were the males removed from our lands as quickly as they were found. Some few found the time to first erect a dwelling, yet were they ever denied the time to become accustomed to that dwelling.

At last did the forests open upon a large meadow, one which contained the tents of those who had come to the visiting. Beneath the lowering dark skies which seemed to press down the heat upon all beneath them were the colored visiting tents of Midanna, the white of the Sarra, the orange of the Samma, the

violet of the Sarda, the brown of the Sedda, the yellow of the Sonna, the gold of the Selga, the rose of the Sidda, the blue of the Summa, and the green of the Simma. Only the red of the Silla was not to be found, just as the green of the Hosta would be absent from a visiting of my own clans, and thought of the Hosta was again an illness within me. Perhaps, were the clans unable to ride to their rescue, Mida would take pity upon those who once rode in her name, and allow them the freedom of death.

The inner ring of tents were those of the war leaders, surrounding a large open space in the midst of which stood the tent of the Keeper of their clans, a tent which comprised all the colors of all the clans of their grouping. Rilas, Keeper of our own clans of Midanna, had told me of the choosing of a new Keeper for the enemy clans, one who had not long before been a warrior. Ennat, who had been of the Sidda, was not known to me, and the sight of her tent brought apprehension. The war leaders of the nine visiting clans would be within that tent, for the Selga who led us took no other place as her destination. Eager was the Selga to reach that destination, and at her command was the spear point applied even more vigorously to my back, so that my steps, too, would be hastened. The touch of sharpened metal in my flesh was no sensation of pleasure, and bound and disarmed as I was, my capture could not be denied-yet was I not of a mind to be hurried as though I were captive male or city slave-woman. Despite the abrupt presence of moisture other than sweat upon my back, my pace remained as it had been, filled with some modicum of dignity. The Selga looked upon me with fury in her eyes, her lips moved briefly without sound, and then did she turn and run on ahead, unable to wait longer to speak the news she brought.

By the time the captive had been prodded before them, the nine war leaders of the clans had emerged to stand without the tent they had so recently sat within. Warriors in ever increasing numbers appeared as well, all staring curiously upon the odd sight of the seeming Midanna who wore no clan colors, she who moved bound through their ranks as though she saw them not. Indeed was I able to give attention to none save the nine war leaders who awaited me with grim anticipation. True warriors of Mida were these war leaders, each with her life sign swinging between her breasts, each with sword at her side, each with dagger in her leg bands, each with her clan colors secure about her hips. I halted and began to regard them as they regarded me, war leader to war leader, yet a gesture from the Selga who had summoned them from the tent ended my effort. Hands took my arms and hair and forced me to my knees, and a spear butt upon the leather stretched between my ankles kept me so.

"She seems rather insolent for a captive," observed the Selga war leader to her warrior, looking down upon me where I struggled in fury to rise again. "And she is said to be war leader to the Hosta and the others of her clans as well?"

"She is without doubt war leader to the Hosta," said another voice, one I knew. I turned my head and looked up into the gray eyes of Ludir, war leader to the Simma. Green was the clan color of the Simma, a green different from Hosta green, and much red blood had been spilled in the battles between the wearers of those two greens. Once, not long after I had taken the second silver ring of a war leader, Ludir and I had met in battle. The broad scar across her middle was her remembrance of that battle, and the gray of her eyes glittered as her left hand stroked that scar.

"I, too, know Jalav of the Hosta," said another voice, a strong voice unknown to me. From behind the war leaders stepped one who wore the long, many colored clan coverings of a Keeper, one whose light brown hair was unlined with gray, one whose dark brown eyes looked down upon me from a height which was surely even greater than my own. Ennat the Keeper was far from the age of Rilas, yet was there respect in the eyes of the war leaders who looked upon her.

"I will be the one to face her," said Ludir to Ennat, sending no more than a glance to the Keeper before resuming her stare at me. "You are no longer a warrior, Ennat, and therefore no longer permitted the use

of a sword. I have learned much in the kalod since last we met, and this I am eager to show the Hosta trash."

"For what reason do you believe we will allow her the death of a warrior, Ludir?" asked another, she who wore Sonna yellow. Renin was the name of the war leader who led the Sonna, a warrior of repute, one who had met every challenge in a hand of kalod. Pleased anticipation gleamed from the light eyes of Renin, anticipation of other than the witnessing of a battle to the death. "Enemies captured while sneaking about are seldom accorded the treatment of warriors," said she. "Most often are they put to death with the shame they, themselves, have indicated they deserve."

"I have neither come with stealth, nor have I simply been captured!" I snapped at Renin, stiffening with the insult I had been given. "I have come to speak with war leaders of Mida, ones who do not fear the word I bring. Should all present prove to have naught save the courage of Renin, however, best would undoubtedly be that I be ended upon the instant."

A mutter of outraged anger rose to match the outraged insult taking Renin, and those who stood about above me closed somewhat with the object of their anger. So close were those warriors and war leaders, some with hands to hilts; I struggled furiously to free myself of the leather which bound me, too angry to countenance the thought of being put to death without striking all about me and taking as many as possible of those who attacked with me. The leather bit into the flesh of my wrists as I struggled, adding to my fury with its refusal to part, and then was my head snapped painfully back by the fistful of hair taken by Ennat.

"Your youth is little excuse for such foolishness, Jalav of the Hosta," said she, her voice and eyes free of the anger which gripped those others who stood with her. "No matter the manner of your capture, you are no other thing than captive to us, one who may indeed be ended by our slightest whim. One who kneels bound before her enemies may not give insult so freely, for there are many things other than death which she may be given in return. For what reason have you come here, then, if not to learn what you might for those who follow you? What word might you speak to those who have interest only in spilling your blood?"

The strength of her grip upon my hair did not lessen, nor was I able to lower my head to ease the ache in my neck. She who was now Keeper to the enemy clans held me as though I were a warrior-to-be, caught in a disobedience which would not be overlooked. My lips drew back in a silent snarl as I met her gaze, and faint amusement turned the corners of her mouth.

"Yes, I am aware of the fact that Keepers do not demand answers from war leaders," said she, not loosening her grip. "I, however, am newly come to the glory of being Keeper, and you do not stand as war leader among us. It is for those reasons that I ask you to indulge me in my harmless fancy, and ask also that you reply to the queries I have put to you. In such a manner shall we all learn, and that without the necessity for spilling blood. Come, Jalav of the Hosta; it cannot be that you fear to speak?"

The increase in her amusement was clear as was the lessening of the anger in those to whom she was Keeper. No longer did many hands curl about sword hilts, no longer was there the rumble of outrage; my anger, too, seemed less than it had been, and that despite the manner in which I continued to be held. No sisterly feeling arose within me toward Ennat the Keeper, yet was there the very beginning of respect.

"Indeed do I feel fear, Ennat," I husked, unable to speak clearly through so tautened a throat. "I fear that the word I bring from Mida will go unheeded, and then shall the anger of the goddess fall upon those who refuse to give ear to her messenger. I have seen the results of the goddess's anger, and truly does the memory bring me fear."

"You claim to bring the word of Mida?" said Ennat, her amusement gone more quickly than it had come. A long moment did she stand and stare upon me, and then did she release me and turn to the others. "I ask that you allow the Hosta to speak before us, war leaders," said she, no hint of demand to her tone. "The doing will cause little harm, for she may be put to death at any time."

"The sooner that, the greater my pleasure," muttered Renin coldly though she did not deny Ennat's request. A small number of the others nodded reluctantly, the respect they held for their Keeper eliciting grudging agreement, and slowly did they all reach the same position.

"I dislike her insolence, yet shall I be attentive to the words she speaks," said the Selga war leader, shaking back the brown hair which sought to curl about her arms. "It will be my pleasure to point up the falsehoods in them, to allow us the sooner to begin our discussion upon her fate. That discussion, too, will be short, yet not so her ending."

"Best we take this matter within my tent," said Ennat through the murmur of agreement which rose at the words of the Selga, the Keeper's eyes studying the thick gray which rode the skies above us. "Already do I feel the first drops of Mida's continuing tears, and surely have we been blessed enough this visiting. It would also please me to return to my daru."

At the Keeper's gesture my arms were taken so that I might be pulled to my feet, yet was our entrance into the tent halted by the words of the Selga warrior who had come first to announce my presence. Full confident was that warrior that the difficulty I presented would quickly be seen to, therefore was she now eager to see her own interests served.

"War leaders, what of the males who follow her?" she asked, as if she had just recalled the presence of those males. "Are they to accompany her into the Keeper's tent, or am I to see to their disposition?"

"There is no need of additional males in the tent," replied the Selga war leader with some annoyance, quickly gesturing aside the question. "You may do with them as you please, for the Hosta is unlikely to require further use of males."

The Selga warrior, pleased with the prospect of seeing to the new males, began to turn again toward the two Sigurri, who had stiffened with the knowledge that they would no longer be allowed to accompany me. No sound nor difficulty had come from them till that moment, and that despite the fact that Wedin and Dotil had been taken elsewhere and had not returned; the decision as to their disposition was not difficult to make, nor did I hesitate in the voicing of it.

"Selga," I called, halting her before she again faced the males she was so eager to see to. "For the moment you may have my males, yet would you do well to recall that I shall examine them closely when I come to reclaim them. Should I find aught amiss there will be a reckoning between us, one in which you will not be fortunate enough to find an ending. And yet, should it truly be your wish to see properly to them, there is a thing which must be done. He of the red hair was in a small way disobedient, yet did I lack the time to see to his punishment. As he is now in your possession, you may see to the thing for me."

A ripple of amusement at Mehrayn's suddenly reddened scowl sounded from those warriors who looked on, clearly an appreciation that having been taken captive had not turned me unaware of that which was necessary. To allow a male to go unpunished when he has earned it, will too often encourage the male to repeat his offense. My action had shown him that he might not do as he pleased among Midanna, and nods of approval came even from certain of the war leaders who stood about. The male himself showed little approval, nor did Chaldrin, yet were they turned away from where they stood and urged elsewhere with spears before they might do more than cast dark glances upon the war leader they followed. The

Selga who followed them also looked briefly upon that war leader, yet was her glance more thoughtful than those others which had touched me. She had realized that a vow had been given her, and such a thing is never taken lightly by a Midanna.

With the small distraction seen to, the nine war leaders and Ennat entered the Keeper's tent, their captive held where she stood till her captors had gone before. The tears of Mida had begun to thicken before I was thrust after, to enter the many-colored tent behind those who had already returned to the places they had so abruptly left. The clean black leather of the tent floor was true pleasure to the bottoms of my feet, recalling to me a happier time with my own clan, a time before it had been necessary to ride the lands of males and seek out those who joyed in the thought of spilling my blood. The aroma of brewed daru filled the confines of the large, candle-lit tent with its full-flavored beckoning, curling about me and also luring me down paths of sweet memory. How often I had had daru in the tent of Rilas, Keeper of our clans, downing pot after pot the while we spoke of-

"Hosta." The single word, evenly spoken, returned me to the tent of Ennat, to again find myself bound before those who had no wish to call me sister, to see those who would decide my fate seated upon the black leather, to look up at me where I stood. Pots of brewed daru did they hold, with some number of males seated a distance behind, near the fire, to serve the drink; Ennat alone stood as I did, her eyes upon me, the single word she had spoken hanging between us. When she gestured to those warriors who stood beside and behind me, I was again forced to my knees, and then did Ennat take her own seat upon the leather.

"Again must you be reminded that you stand before us as other than a war leader," said Ennat, evenly. "No more than captive are you, Jalav of the Hosta, and best would be that you recall the fact."

"Jalav has been captive many times since Mida called," said I, looking upon Ennat as she looked upon me. "No matter the number of times, however, Jalav has ever remained a war leader, a state whose glory may be taken by no other thing than a sword. There are those about you who are able to explain to you the truth I speak, Ennat."

Little liking for my words did it seem the Keeper had despite the expressionlessness she held to, yet did many of the war leaders chuckle and look upon Ennat in amusement. No war leader had Ennat been but a warrior, and none may know the fullness of war leadership without having herself slain for and taken the second silver ring.

"Jalav continues in her insolence," said the Selga war leader, sipping from her pot of daru the while her eyes continued to hold to me. "Should this be all Jalav has come to put before us, we would be wise to begin at once a discussion of her permanent disposition."

"Indeed," said Renin of the Sonna, the yellow of her clan colors bright in the dimness of the tent. "I would see to this great Hosta war leader before what little courage I have fails me."

"My courage has not diminished from what it was," said Ludir of the Simna, smiling somewhat at the words of Renin. "I will face this Hosta as once I did, and this time will her blood alone pool upon the ground."

"Sisters," said Ennat, her tone as calm and soothing as her smile. "Well do I know how eager you are to see to this interloper in our midst, yet has she been put to her knees before you and been bound at your pleasure. Though all Midanna serve Mida, a Keeper's service is somewhat nearer to the mother of us all, and I would hear what words the Hosta claims to bring from the goddess. Should we hear that which is patently untrue, you may then silence her in a fitting manner." In the grudging silence which followed, Ennat turned to me. "Speak, Jalav of the Hosta," said she, looking deeply into my eyes. "Should it truly

be Mida who has sent you you must cause us to know it without doubt."

The leather upon my wrists bit again into my flesh, the pain alone telling of my attempt to part my bonds. All those about me listened for what words I would speak, yet what weight would they have coming from one who was so clearly no more than a captive? Much did it seem, and scarcely for the first time, that defeat rather than victory was the goal of she who had caused me to be placed in such a state, yet thoughts of that sort were clearly foolishness. Only my success would bring Mida the force she required to meet the strangers, and such a force was desired by her above all else. As it was necessary to speak my tale from my knees I would do so, yet would there be a reckoning with certain of those war leaders in the tent before I allowed them to follow me.

"The matter begins with the Crystals of Mida," said I, seeing the quick surprise Ennat showed. "As all here know, the Silla were given the honor of guarding one, the Hosta the second. When my warriors in the Tower of the Crystal were slain and our Crystal stolen, the Hosta rode out to recover what was theirs and capture those who were responsible for desecration and slaughter. In such a manner did I first begin my travels through the lands of males, to return to her Midanna that which was Mida's."

No sound interrupted my narrative, therefore did I continue on through the balance of it, speaking briefly upon each point and as little as possible upon the shame which had been given me in the service to which I was bound. At times were the males gestured to those war leaders who wished more of the daru, yet were the actions done quietly, without an intent toward interruption. My knees began to ache through the telling, and my wrists and arms as well, the sweat poured from my legs which were covered by my hair, and my back flared in pain from the leavings of the spear point which had touched me; nevertheless did I continue on, and at last came to an end. Deep, thoughtful silence held each of those who had listened, and it was not unexpected when Ennat came to speak first.

"And it was in the city of these males you called to battle that Mida last walked your dreams?" she asked, a great disturbance upon her. "For what reason would the goddess choose an enemy to lead us? For what reason would the glory not be given to one of our own?"

"Perhaps for the reason that we are beloved enough to be spared such glory," said the Summa war leader, she who was called Faris. As light-haired and light-eyed as Dotil was she, and well pleased had she seemed when I had spoken of the capture of Dotil and Wedin as having been demanded by Mida so that I might be guided to their visiting place. "To have one's entire clan taken by males so that one might lead one's sisters unchallenged, to be given, time and again, into the capture of males to do Mida's bidding, to appear before one's blood enemies and say they must follow and not slay-No, Ennat, such glory is beyond my appetites. Might there be any here who see the matter differently?"

Faris looked upon the others as she spoke, her words in no manner a challenge, therefore were they accepted without insult; however, agreement became another matter entirely.

"Should one accept the Hosta's tale as it was spoken, no," said the Selga war leader, her tone full thoughtful, her eyes upon Faris. "One must recall, however, that a particular presentation of an event may not necessarily be a totally correct or properly interpreted presentation. As we none of us were present at these events, how may we be certain of those things we are asked to judge?"

"You feel uncertain as to the disappearance of the Crystal guarded by the Silla, or perhaps upon the disappearance of the Silla themselves?" asked Faris with a sound of faint disdain, returning the Selga look for look. "As we have discussed little else this visiting, Kalir, I trust you will forgive my lack of understanding of your skepticism."

"My skepticism is easily explained, Faris," returned the Selga Kalir, with a faint smile. "We have been

told that the Crystal of the Hosta was stolen, the Hosta rode out to effect its return, and then was it discovered that the Silla had given their Crystal in trade for males to serve them. The culmination of this entire affair is the possession by males of not only all of Mida's Crystals, but of the Hosta and Silla as well. For what reason might we not suppose that it was the Silla's Crystal which was stolen, the Hosta's Crystal which was given in trade, and the Silla war leader who was meant to lead us? Perhaps it is the Hosta who are held captive through Mida's anger, and the Silla who serve the goddess through required torment, their war leader Zolin now riding in the name of Mida, this Jalav doing no more than attempting to usurp her place and mislead those who would follow her. How are we to know, save that we await the return of Zolin?"

Faris the Summa hesitated before the foolishness spoken by the Selga, unable to say, of her own knowledge, that such a supposition was false. My throat would have done well with a swallow or two of daru after the length of the tale I had related, yet did I have sufficient spittle remaining to make a sound of derision of my own, one heard easily above the patter of rain from without.

"Should it be your intention to await the return of Zolin," said I to the Selga Kalir, "best would be that you provision yourself extremely well. Zolin now dwells with Mida in her Blessed Realm, undoubtedly reaping the rewards of her actions in regard to the Crystal which was her sacred trust. Zolin thought to best Jalav in the city of the males who had tainted Zolin's soul, yet did Zolin discover that Jalav stands behind Mida's shield. Had it been Zolin who stood in the right, surely would it have been Jalav who fell."

"A fair rebuttal," said Faris to Kalir, somewhat amused at the Selga's annoyance. "Are we to believe that Mida would have allowed Zolin to be bested had Zolin been her chosen? The shield of Mida is all, with no mere mortal able to breach it."

"Granted," said Kalir with continuing annoyance, rising to her feet to walk to where the males sat beside the brewing daru. One of the males rose to take her pot and see to its refilling, though Kalir seemed unaware. Her thoughts remained with the disagreement she wished to muster, and quickly was she prepared to speak further.

"I will, of course, grant the truth regarding Mida's shield," said she, taking her refilled pot with the same inattention she had surrendered it. "However, we have the word of none save the Hosta that Zolin has been bested. Well might it be that Zolin rides toward us this very moment."

"Indeed may it well be so," said Faris, looking to the Selga where she stood before the males. "However, the possibility also remains that Zolin has indeed been slain. Were we to choose to await what the new fey will bring, or perhaps the following fey or the one beyond that, we may well discover that it is Mida's anger which is brought. To sit about doing naught may well prove the doing of fools."

"Do you propose, then, that we follow the Hosta?" demanded Kalir angrily. "We are to unquestioningly accept the word of one who has ever been an enemy to us, stumbling in our haste to obey, asking no single question upon her right to command us? This, you believe, would not be a doing of fools?"

Tight-lipped did Faris look upon Kalir, unable to answer so pertinent an objection, a disturbed muttering from the others who sat there, flowing about the stiffened forms of the two who engaged in verbal battle. With some small effort did I shift where I knelt, attempting to ease the discomfort and pain which held me, attempting to search out the words which would cause these Midanna to find belief in my task. What words might be spoken had little difficulty eluding me, and then were there words from one who had for some time remained silent.

"To be the chosen of Mida is a blessing, for Mida protects her own," said Ennat, her eyes directly upon me, her voice again calm. "To have the shield of Mida before one is to have all, for none may prevail over

one who is so protected. To prove the point, one need only submit to testing, for in no other manner might such a contention be shown as truth. With Mida's aid, no challenge will prove too difficult to best.

"How wise you are, Ennat!" cried Kafir the Selga with a laugh. "From her own tale has the Hosta faced testing a number of times before this, and clearly was it indicated that she triumphed. Now is it given to Midanna to see to her testing, to prove her truly worthy of Mida's favor."

"How eager you seem to prove her worthy, Kalir," said Faris, her tone having gone dry, her pot of daru held negligently in her hand. "It cannot be that you contemplate more than a test to prove worth, more than one might reasonably be expected to endure. Midanna are strong, and Mida's chosen must be strongest of all, yet must it also be recalled that she is merely chosen, not Mida herself."

"Yet must it be proven that she is indeed strong beyond the strength of Midanna," said Renin the Sonna, rising to stand beside Kalir. "Should her tale be true and we are indeed meant to follow her, there must be no least feeling of doubt, no least cause to believe we follow one who is not the chosen of the goddess. To survive a trial any might survive would be idle, for it would prove naught."

"And it is no other thing than the truth which we seek here," said Ennat, continuing to look only upon me. "Should it truly be Mida's wish that we ride to battle with a stranger at our head, we must know that that stranger is truly our superior in all things, truly sent by the goddess to lead us. You must consent to be tested, Hosta war leader, else shall your words and efforts come to naught."

Again silence descended upon those in the tent, even the light eyes of Faris the Summa speaking of the need to know full truth in the matter. No words not spoken by Mida herself would then suffice, I saw, and the great weariness which lay buried in me rose high again, bringing with it a deep, burning anger which I was unable to acknowledge.

"Very well," said I, straightening myself where I knelt, looking upon each of those who watched me so carefully. "Testing has indeed been my lot many times, most especially while in the capture of males. Perhaps Midanna will find themselves able to accomplish that which the males were unable to do, and Jalav will be ended. Such a state is not without its benefits. Let us begin at once."

"For what reason are you so filled with bitterness, Jalav of the Hosta?" asked Ennat, curiously. "Should the words you spoke be true, you are more beloved by Mida than any other warrior at any time. Would this not be cause for soul-blazing joy rather than soul-blighting bitterness?"

I thought upon each of the joys I had been given in my service to Mida, the joys of pain and humiliation and shame, and saw at last the disappointment which had come to me when my acceptance among Midanna had been no better than that which had been mine among males. The feeling was foolishness, I knew, yet was I powerless to chase it from me. One is usually untouched by the manner in which one is treated by enemies, yet were these also Midanna, and I more touched than I had thought.

"Time enough for joy when I have survived your trials, Ennat," said I, looking upon the Keeper with little of the openness she herself showed. "The sooner we begin, the sooner will that joy come to me."

"An eagerness to face that which will surely be completely lacking in pleasure of any sort is commendable," said Ennat with the faint smile which seemed to indicate deep understanding. "However, despite your eagerness, our war leaders trust be allowed a time of discussion to determine the exact nature of the trials you will face. You will remain our-guest for the remainder of this fey and the darkness following, and we will begin with the new light."

"And I, personally, shall see to her comfort," said Kalir the Selga, showing pleasure. "One who was not

the chosen of Mida would require a good deal of uninterrupted rest, to prepare her for the rigors she must face; one who rides for the goddess, however, will not require the same. Victory will be hers no matter the barriers erected in her path."

"The war leader Kalir speaks the truth, Faris of the Summa," said Ennat to the Summa who clearly gathered herself for protest, ending the other's words before they were begun.

"The Hosta must triumph with no aid whatsoever, even in the face of distinct opposition, else shall the trials have no more meaning than words of insistence. Surely you are able to see this?"

"Aye, my vision is completely unimpaired, Ennat," said Faris with a glance for Kalir's amusement, rising to her feet to look down upon the Keeper. "It seems, however, to require more than unimpaired vision to see where lies the honor in these doings of ours. The Summa either greet sisters or end enemies; never do they find amusement in the plight of others. A pity the same cannot be said of the Selga."

She turned then and walked toward the fire above which hung the daru, giving no heed to the venomous look sent her by Kalir. Truly among her own would Kalir have been with the Silla, those who took great pleasure in the agony of others.

"And yet this-plight was freely accepted by the intruder among us," said she, restraining her anger. "The greater the number of difficulties we give her to overcome, the more certain will we be upon the question of her position. Benetros, come stand beside me."

At the summons, one of those males who served by the fire rose and came forward, halting beside the Selga as she had commanded. Dark-haired and dark-eyed was the male, of a height greater than Kalir, perhaps even somewhat larger than myself. What might be seen of the male both above and below the colorless wrap about his middle showed him to be well made, and the manner in which he looked upon me showed him to be one with the Selga.

"Benetros came to take, yet remained to give," said Kalir with a smile. "He thought to have a Midanna as slave-woman, then found more pleasure in himself giving service. As he has been thoroughly taught the proper manner with war leaders, he will see to the comfort of our guest till the time her presence is required at the first of the trials. Does any here object to this?"

Kalir looked about herself, most especially at Faris, yet the Summa drank freshly poured daru with her back to the Selga, no longer willing to spend words uselessly. Were I to survive what trials were put before me the Summa would find further words, yet was it necessary that I first demonstrate my worthiness of her support. None might fault Faris for her doing for she had, in honor, attempted to deal fairly with a difficult situation. Were I permitted to triumph over what lay before me, I would not forget such honorable treatment of one who was, in strictest truth, an enemy.

As none had given denial to Kalir, the Selga had turned to the male beside her, spoken softly so that only he might hear, then had smiled in approval at his nod of agreement. Despite the difficulty of my position in that tent, it undoubtedly would have aided me to remain during the discussions to come, therefore was I annoyed when the male immediately turned from Kalir and approached me. I was able to see the frown upon Ennat as the male went to one knee before me, then was I taken by the waist and raised to his shoulder, a moment later hanging head down as he rose again to his feet. My anger was great that the Selga would dare have me done so, as though I were in truth no other thing than a captive and a slave, yet did I speak no word of protest as the male bore me from the tent. I looked upon the Selga and met her smirk with the gaze of a war leader of the Hosta, promising a time when the matter would be seen to between us with swords. She smirked as though the silent vow I had made was meaningless, and I grew truly angry.

Without the tent were the tears of Mida, falling heavily upon the grass and tents, darkening the light of the fey even more than the gray of the skies. No warrior stood about to see the manner in which the male carried me, one arm about my legs, to a tent lacking all evidence of clan colors, one which stood not far from the Keeper's tent and was of a size larger than most. The male hurried through the rain, making no attempt to keep me from looking all about as best I might, and I wondered upon the oddity of one who served Midanna being hurried by even so heavy a rain. Among certain of the clans, males were often used beneath the tears of Mida to seek an added blessing, one which would give the birth of no more than daughters to that clan. Quite possibly the male who carried me had been used so, therefore was the reason for his hurry unclear-till we reached the unmarked tent and entered it. The voices of other males greeted him but the male remain silent till he had dropped me to the tent floor, in candle-lit dimness.

"How angered you seem, wench," said this Benetros with a silent laugh, looking down upon me where I lay attempting to loosen the leather which bound me. Three other males, also clad in colorless hip coverings, came to stand beside the first, clearly upset.

"Surely, Benetros, that is a Midanna," said one. "Also does she wear the second silver ring of a war leader. To do her so is to invite a death more horrible than I care to contemplate. Have you lost your wits?"

"My wits remain sound, Telemar," replied the male Benetros with a laugh, dragging his arm across his face to wipe away the tears of Mida which covered him. "This wench is in truth Midanna, yet is she enemy to those whom we serve. I have been commanded to see to her in whatever manner I please, with the aid of any others I choose. Would you care to join me in the use of a war leader?"

"In truth?" asked the male Telemar, his eyes widened as he again looked down upon me. "To again be permitted to take a wench, rather than being taken by one! And she a war leader! Indeed would I care to join you, Benetros, even should the time allowed be no more than reckid."

"The time allowed is hind, therefore may you others join us as well," said Benetros to those two who had not yet spoken, then did he seat himself beside me upon the soft tan leather of the tent floor. "It pleases me greatly to have had you given to me, wench. From the words you spoke to the war leaders-and from those which remained carefully unspoken-I am of the belief that you have been taught to serve a man well. In the hind to come, I will see that you serve me exceedingly well."

"I have been taught to serve males with sword and dagger," said I to Benetros, then did I look upon the others. "That I am currently bound in leather is meaningless, for I mean to win my freedom with the new light. Those who offer me insult now will surely be recalled at that time."

"Ah, but we shall offer you no insult," laughed Benetros even as one of the silent males shuddered and quickly walked to the far side of the tent. The touch of a hand to my breast immediately returned my attention to the darkhaired male who sat beside me, and again he laughed. "We offer you only pleasure, war leader," said he, "for you are surely made for no other thing. What lovely mounds you have, so high and full, calling to a man to put his hands and lips upon them. I feel sure you will quickly be brought to begging what pleasure you may be given-should it be our wish to give it."

"She shows naught of arousal, Benetros," said Telemar with unease, seating himself carefully to my other side as I growled and attempted to dislodge the hand of the first male. "Are you certain she may be made to desire us-and will not retain her anger?"

"Her anger is great, yet it will soon be put aside," said Benetros with much confidence, his amusement undiminished. "After we have caused her to squirm and beg and debase herself, her shame will be too great for her to ever approach us again. Have no fear, Telemar, for I have dwelt among these Midanna

longer than you, and therefore have a deeper understanding of them. Our deaths will not wipe away the shame she will feel, for she will have been proven less than we-and she will not, in any event, survive the trials she will face with the new light. We will be the last to take pleasure from this body, therefore shall we take as much as we are able, eh, brother?"

"Indeed," said the second male, his unease remaining, yet was that unease overcome by his desire to use a war leader as he had been used by them. My anger was indeed great as the hands of Benetros went to the ties of my breech. For the shaming I was to be given was at the command of Kalir the Selga. Again I struggled to loosen the leather which bound me, uselessly doing naught as the breech was pulled away, and then was a hand between my thighs, touching me in a manner intended to raise my heat. My shock was deep, then, yet was it an entirely unexpected shock. The shame I had anticipated had not come, nor would it, for I continued to wear my life sign! No desire for a male ran through my blood, no need was awakened, no awareness of the touch as anything other than a touch upon my flesh anywhere. I would not respond to the male no matter his efforts, and surely would this keep him from me.

"Benetros, she continues to be unaroused," said the third male, he who had not yet spoken, he who now crouched down beyond my feet. "Should you fail to arouse her, you may not use her."

"I must use her," muttered the first male, no longer amused due to the failure of his efforts. Anger seemed to hold the male, and a good deal of fear, and lines of upset entered his face as his eyes hardened. "Kalir has demanded that I use her, and I must not disobey. Should I fail she will send me from her, and I cannot bear the thought. And you two shall aid me, else shall I make it known that you disobeyed the word of a war leader! This one shall be ended with the new light, yet Kalir will remain; do you wish her to be told of your disobedience?"

The near-shrillness of Benetros caused the other two to look upon each other with great upset, yet there was naught they might do to deny the will of the first male. They dared not disobey the word of a war leader, and to them I was not the war leader they must obey. A thrill of apprehension flashed through me, bringing me a touch of cold in the heat of the tent, and then was Benetros again looking down upon me, his hands now moving all about my body.

"No more than one of us need be aroused, wench," said he, the look in his eyes far from pleasant. "Though you are somehow able to resist my touch, the feel of you is more than enough for my own arousal. Should you wish to be spared agony, you had best allow your own lubrication."

With that did his hands go to the leather upon my ankles, freeing one side of it, causing me to again throw myself about and kick. It was not possible to allow my body to protect itself, and as my knees were forced wide and Benetros came to present himself to me, I knew that the first of my trials was at hand. A Midanna will sooner have pain than shame, yet where the survival of many is at stake, even shame is preferable to failure. With difficulty did Benetros thrust within me, beginning the thing, and well aware was I suddenly made of the fact that darkness had not yet fallen. Hind had the male spoken of, and hind did it become.

CH 10. The fruits of success-and betrayal

The new fey was as gray as the last had been, lacking only the fall of Mida's tears. A small breeze touched me as I walked to the urging of the male's hand upon my arm, the small movement of the air bringing only a small lessening of the heat which sat upon all like a warrior upon a gando. Many warriors looked upon me as I was taken past them, therefore did I attempt to straighten myself as I walked, as befitted a war leader of Midanna. What success I had I was unable to judge, for no more than wordless murmurings came to me from those who watched, and then was I approaching Ennat and the nine war leaders, they who would decide if I indeed rode as the chosen of Mida.

"We greet you, Jalav of the Hosta," said Ennat as I halted before her, yet she frowned rather than smiled. Indeed was the Keeper larger than I, and as I attempted to straighten even further in my stance, her hand came to my shoulder. "How great is the pain you feel?" she demanded in low-voiced anger, her sharpened glance touching the male beside me. "What number of hind of sleep were you allowed?"

The male Benetros drew his breath in low and backed a step, yet I made no effort to look upon him. His obedience to Kalir had been complete, as was the obedience of the other males, and it had been their spendings alone which had kept the time from giving to them the pain it had given to me. Had I not worn my life sign I might well have been unable to walk, and unconsciousness rather than sleep had taken me for some few hind of the darkness. Had I expected to awaken healed and free of pain I would have found great disappointment, yet had I expected nothing of the sort. Only deep, grievous wounds did my life sign heal, and too lengthy a use by males was not the same. The sole benefit I had reaped from the darkness past was the unbinding of my wrists, and I had come to myself with the new light with much of the pain of first movement already past. I met the anger in Ennat's gaze with something like annoyance, and shook my head at her.

"What matters what pain I feel or what rest I have had?" I asked, my voice as low as hers had been. "Is the chosen of Mida not able to conquer all, pain and weariness alike? Or is it Mida alone who is able to do so, her chosen no more than a war leader with her blessing? Perhaps we will soon learn the truth of the thing, Ennat, you and your war leaders and I as well."

"We are here to begin a testing, not to engage in idle chatter," came the annoyance-filled voice of Kalir before Ennat was able to reply to me. The Keeper and I turned our heads to look upon the Selga, and much satisfaction filled her eyes at my appearance. I stood without covering or weapon of any sort, the aches of my body clearly spread all through me, and such was in accordance with her most ardent desires. Deep hatred had the Selga for she who was Jalav, and little attempt did Kalir make to disguise the feeling.

"The term testing may not be equated with the term 'execution,' save possibly at its end," said Faris of the Summa, looking upon Kalir with thinly veiled disgust. "Has the Hosta been allowed provender, either during the darkness or at the beginning of this fey? Our aim in this testing is to make success difficult, not wholly impossible. That would prove naught save that Mida's chosen was mortal, a thing we are already aware of."

"Faris speaks truly," came another voice before Kalir might reply, surprisingly the voice of Ludir. She who wore Simna green stood herself beside Faris and looked upon the Selga with little approval. "There is little glory to be found in facing one who has difficulty in holding herself erect, and little honor in sending such a one forth to survive against great odds. I would have the Hosta survive to face me, Kalir, and would have the besting of her to be sweet. Should we allow you to continue as you have so far done, I will have neither thing."

"I, too, must cast my vote with Ludir," said Renin of the Somna with great reluctance, yet with no uncertainty. "Though it would please me to end the Hosta without delay, if we have committed ourselves to testing, we must proceed with honor. Never have I faced a challenger who was unfit to face me, and never shall I do so. To handicap the Hosta too greatly is to make a mockery of our avowed intentions, and I will have none of it. At the very least she must be given water, for no one may face this heat without it and survive."

Kalir the Selga looked all about herself, seeing agreement even on the faces of those who stood with her. Again she fought down her anger, and then she faced the three who had spoken in opposition to her with a nod.

"Very well," said she, her capitulation stiff with resentment. "The Hosta may have what water she requires, that and no more! What sense in testing her in the first place, if the testing is not to be nearly impossible to survive? Are we not agreed that she must triumph against odds which we, ourselves, could not hope to best? Do you wish to find the necessity of following one who is given victory through the efforts of those who feel pity for her? The chosen of Mida will survive without the efforts of others, for Mida herself stands beside her. Will you hold your pity in abeyance, so that the truth might be known? If you do not, this foolishness may well be ended upon the moment."

Again was there silence caused by the words of the Selga, a silence which returned a large measure of satisfaction to her. Truly well versed in twisting words was Kalir, yet was there no denial of the truth she spoke. Water was brought me, a wetness which flowed down the burning channel of my throat and returned some measure of strength to me, and then did Ennat briefly touch my shoulder again.

"The first of your trials may well become also the last, Jalav of the Hosta," said she, speaking the words required of her with gravity and clarity. "You will enter the forests hereabout just as you are, without weapons of any sort, and behind you will come many warriors of our clans. Those warriors have been charged to hunt you down, and will do so with all the skill they possess. Only with Mida's aid will you find yourself able to elude them, and this you must do till darkness has fallen. At that time, if you are able, you must return here uncaptured and undetected, else shall the trial be looked upon as a failure on your part. Should you be captured you will be slain, and should you return there will be other trials. How say you?"

"I am to go into the forests, alone and unarmed, to elude all pursuit till darkness, and you ask what I say?" I smiled somewhat at the sobriety of the Keeper, then did I move my eyes to Kalir where she stood, wrapped in smug complaisance. "I say that I will return when darkness has fallen, and perhaps see to a task or three which I now leave undone. No true follower of Mida need fear that return."

"No one of any sort need fear that return," said Kalir, her complaisance undisturbed. "What reason to fear a return which will not occur?"

"Your continued self-possession pleases me, Selga," I said, my half smile widening a bit. "Mida frowns upon giving challenge to the fearful."

"Also does Mida frown upon accepting challenge from the dead," she returned, still undaunted. "Your survival in the forests is impossible, therefore do I look forward to your return--dragged lifeless behind those who slay you. In no other manner shall you return."

Again I allowed my smile to widen, yet rather than reply I turned from her, to look upon Ennat. The Keeper returned that look with a good deal of penetration, perhaps seeing that I spoke only to bring disquiet to the Selga, for the pain and weariness I felt would likely do for me exactly as the Selga wished. No words did Ennat speak upon what she saw, however, for other words waited in their place.

"Once you have reached the forests, our warriors will wait no more than two hands of reckid before following," said she, her sobriety turned to calm. "Should you truly be Mida's chosen, I ask that she guard you as only she may do; should you be other than chosen, I ask that she allow your soul what peace it has earned in your place as her war leader. You may now begin."

Those about me stepped back at the words which signaled the onset of the trial, and I, with what strength and dignity was left to me, turned and made for the edge of the forests across the meadow. Those warriors who watched the proceedings formed an aisle of sorts, one it was considerably easier taking than ignoring. I walked the aisle far across the meadow, beneath the eyes of warriors without number and the gray of the skies, walked beyond the aisle, then entered the forests.

Two hands of reckid, I thought as I looked about, taking myself from the sight of those behind as quickly as I was able. Two hands of reckid to elude the pursuit of countless numbers of warriors, all fresh and alert, all eager to bring down the enemy who had dared to attempt claiming their leadership. Much did I believe that the trial was of Kalir's devising, yet it mattered not. A chosen of Mida might well survive the time, yet the aid of the goddess was unlikely to be given me. Triumph or failure would be mine alone, and yet would failure be punished as though I had been offered aid and had spurned it. This was I certain of above all other things, therefore was it necessary that I make the attempt.

I stumbled past bushes and trees for a very short time, painfully aware of how little distance I had put between myself and the visiting meadow, and then did I see that which caused me to halt, blinking in confusion. A small patch of green cloth hung upon a bush beside a small patch of blue cloth, and the strangeness extended beyond the presence of cloth upon a bush in the forests. The blue was Summa blue, yet the green was Hosta green, a color not easily found in those lands. I remained where I had halted another moment, finding difficulty in believing what I saw, for surely Faris would not have gone against the decision of her sister war leaders to such an extent that assistance would be-

I halted the thought even as I began moving forward again, silently cursing the mindlessness which flowed from my weary and aching body upward. Faris was not alone in wearing Summa blue, and though Wedin and Dotil had not been able to remain by my side, they had clearly not forgotten the vow they had made. I gained the cloth-hung bush quickly, paying no heed to the flashes of greater pain which attempted to claim me despite the life sign I wore, then began to look about. Naught was I able to see aside from the circle made by that bush and the ones it stood with, and for a moment I knew despair; perhaps the cloth had been left as merely a token, a reminder that others stood with me. What aid a token would be I knew not, for even the knowledge that sisters kept me in their thoughts was not sufficient to overcome the ravages of the darkness. I drew my hand across my face to take the sweat from my eyes, and still I saw naught which would be of aid to me. No more than the bushes and the cloth was there, and best would be to remove the cloth before continuing on.

My limbs fluttered with fatigue and throbbed in an echo of the pain I felt elsewhere, yet would I continue on as long as possible, attempting the impossible. I pulled the cloth from the bush, both Hosta green and Summa blue, yet did the blue cloth fall from my uncertain grip and float to the ground some small distance within the ring of bushes. Wearily yet with a certain haste I went to one knee, reached within the ring for the cloth I dared not leave behind-and only then saw the second bit of cloth in green. Seemingly half buried in the grass did it appear, and had I not gone to one knee, I would surely have missed it among so similar a green as the grass. With the difficulty of sweat and weariness-blurred sight in the gray of a lowering fey, truly must it have been Mida's doing that I saw it at all. Now was there truly a need for haste, so that the doings of both sisters and goddess not be undone.

In a gait more like a hobble than that of a hunter and warrior, I took branches and returned the way I had come, then retraced my steps a final time, obliterating those steps and the previous ones as I went. No sign of my passage did I leave, and once returned to the circle of bushes, I threw the branches as far as my rapidly fading strength would allow. Only then did I lift the disguising cover from the pit dug in the ring of bushes, taking great care not to disturb the grass arranged upon the close frame of branches. The pit was twice the depth I required and long enough to allow me to stretch out full length, and briefly did I send my thoughts to my Summa sisters, for the doing must truly have taxed them greatly. All over atremble I eased myself into the pit, then replaced the frame of branches and grass. Surely some of the grass must have been disturbed by my movement of the frame, yet was there naught I might do for it. The two hands of reckid I had been given were surely gone, as surely as the strength I had spent in haste. I fingered the cloth I had taken with me into the pit and attempted to ignore how great the heat and lack of air were, for it was necessary that I listen for those who came behind me. Although the pain I felt began to flash with greater urgency, it was necessary that I make no sound which would draw the pursuit to me.

I lay in the pit upon my back, attempting to feel naught of what had been done to me, attempting to listen for those who came behind, and in such a way did the darkness find me, ending all of my attempts.

The sound of Mida's tears came first, pattering all about and bringing a great coolness to my body. For a moment I knew not where I was, and then did memory return of the pit I had found, the pit which had seemingly not been found by others. I moved somewhat in the damp and wet which had seeped through the covering of grass to reach me, and was greatly surprised to discover that both weariness and pain were no longer mine. The sleep I had slept had been the sleep of healing, a fact also attested to by the great hunger I felt.

With great pleasure I stretched as far as the pit would allow, then did I begin to feel all about me in the dark, seeking that which would surely not have been forgotten by those who had prepared the pit. In a moment my hand touched leather, and a moment later saw me stretched upon my side, taking great bites of the roast kirol which had been left in the leather sack. Also did my sense of smell inform me that daru had been left, yet had I a greater need of the kirol. Healing hunger was a thing which might not be overlooked, and I ate with greater appetite to know that Mida had not truly abandoned me. Much did it seem that I had misjudged the goddess, and yet, how might I not have done so? To fully understand the will of the gods, one must needs be a god herself, and this Jalav most certainly was not. No more than mortal was Jalav, with mortal loves and hates. This would Kalir learn, though possibly not believe, when Jalav returned to the visiting meadow.

Without haste did I finish both provender and daru, and only then did I lift the frame above me somewhat, to see what part of the fey it was. Through the heavily falling tears of Mida, I was able to see that darkness was not far distant, the time I had hoped it would be. With great care did I lift the frame higher and take myself out of the pit, giving silent thanks to the goddess for the strength of her tears. My body and hair were well covered with the mud the bottom of the pit had become, and it would be necessary to wash that mud from me before I returned to the visiting camp. I had no wish to give even the smallest hint of the manner in which I had survived the trial to those who waited, for surely would they consider the matter done with the aid of one other than Mida. They would not see that Mida had aided me as well, and all would have gone for naught. No, the truth was not for those who waited, for truth is at times more misleading than lies.

With the mud finally washed from me, I began my return to the visiting tents. This time were those who searched weary and aching, and she who eluded them well rested and in full health. Not without difficulty did I pass those who continued to hunt me, yet was I as much Midanna as were they, not city slave-woman or male to make my presence known throughout the forest. At times was it necessary to crawl upon my belly, the ends of my hair trailing in the mud, the rain beating upon me as though in anger, yet did I make my way at last to the tent of Ennat. Through growing shadows close about the tents had I crept, yet was I proudly erect when I stepped through the opened tent flap before those who waited; the glare of the animal-fat candles bringing a narrowing to my eyes. At first was there no notice taken of she who stood silently by the opened flap, and then did Ennat look up with a start of surprise.

"Despite the uncertainty caused by the rains," said I, disallowing any other to speak before me, "I believe it must be agreed that darkness has fallen. Is this trial now done with?"

"Hosta, you have returned!" cried Faris, rising quickly to her feet with a number of the other war leaders. "Despite the difficulties you faced, you are alive and unharmed!"

"More than merely alive and unharmed," said Ennat, a wondering to her tone, she making no attempt to stand as did others. "The pain and weariness no longer trouble you, and that after a full fey of being hunted. Surely must the hand of Mida have caressed you, and wrapped you firmly about to shield you from harm. Is it possible to retain any doubt of this?"

"It is more than possible to retain doubt!" snapped Kalir, a true fury upon her, her hands turned to fists at her sides where she stood. "Those who hunted the Hosta were unable to find her track through the forests, therefore is it likely that she was met and taken away by others, most probably a number of those who follow her! Having been tended carefully throughout the fey, she now stands before us with the pretense of full health, yet am I not to be taken in like a credulous Keeper! The Hosta has failed the trial, I say, and must be executed!"

"So I have failed," said I, again disallowing others to speak before me, my gaze solely upon Kalir as I moved from the flap. "There were those awaiting me in the forests you say; very well, what of their track? In what manner did those who leave no track carry me swiftly enough to elude hunting Midanna? Where was I taken? How is it I was able to return without them? And should my full health be no more than pretense, for what reason do you call for execution rather than give the challenge? Speak again to me, Selga, and say that a hand other than Mida's soothed away what you gave."

I stood before the Selga and looked down upon her, finding the fury in her gaze pleasant to meet. A short step back did the Selga take, plain acknowledgment of my own fury, no words coming forth to answer the verbal challenge I had given. This was the manner in which one demanded the leadership of warriors, giving challenge to any who would deny that demand. I stood weaponless and without covering, yet did I stand free, a state Midanna valued above all things save honor.

"Jalav of the Hosta," said Ennat, gently intruding in the quarrel between two war leaders with apology in her tone for the intrusion. I turned my head to look upon her, and saw that the wonder continued to possess her. "In what manner were you healed through Mida's intervention?" she asked, much longing to know in the question. "In your tale you spoke of the many times Mida's blessed aid was yours, yet no true explanation was vouchsafed us. Does she appear before you and lay hands upon you?"

"No, Ennat," I replied, somewhat amused to see that the Keeper retained her place upon the leather. Well might it have been that she had no wish to stand taller than Mida's chosen, and that was indeed amusing. "It is Mida's gift which brings me healing," said I, raising my hand to touch my life sign. "Before my visit to Mida's Realm upon this world, my life sign was of wood, as are the life signs of other Midanna. Not only was its substance changed, it now protects my well-being as well as my soul. Its powers have proven themselves beyond doubt."

"By the Sword and Shield!" breathed Ennat, no longer able to keep from rising and approaching me. Her eyes clung to my life sign and her hand reached out to touch fingers to it, yet did the hand halt just short of the Crystal-like hadat, as though such a touching would be sacrilege. "Surely was it Mida's doing that I failed to see sooner what life sign you wore," said she, raising her eyes to mine. "To have the truth of your words proven in such a manner was clearly necessary, as necessary as the trial which you survived. There still, of course, be no further trials."

"There will be further trials!" came the snarl of Kalir, the sole objection to Ennat's statement. All joined me in looking upon the Selga, who was now even more taken with fury. "Have you, all of you, forgotten that this is a Hosta?" she demanded of her sister war leaders, her furious gaze touching all save Ennat. "Have you forgotten your anger at her insult, Renin? Or your desire to face her, Ludir? Have the Hosta never spilled Samma blood, Tarit, or Sarda blood, Telin, or Sedda blood, Belat? Will the Sarra now greet the Hosta as sisters, Melid? Will the Sidda now crawl to the will of an enemy, Hirin? The trial was survived by trickery, sisters, of this I could not be more certain! We must continue to test her till her perfidy has been exposed!"

"Or till you have succeeded in ending her, Kalir?" asked Renin the Sonna, her tone and expression sour. "Indeed did I find insult at her words, yet was that insult given so that my sisters and I might be spared Mida's anger and punishment. I may look upon one who has such concern for myself and my clan as no

other thing than a sister."

"And my desire to face her is no more," said Ludir the Simna. "Surely would I refuse to do so even should she now accept my challenge, leaving me with great dishonor. As Mida has sent her to us, how might I raise a blade to her, when it has been clearly demanded that I follow her? What once was is now no more, for Mida has shown us her will."

"We have been shown no more than the Hosta's will," said Kalir, her fury having grown cold and deadly, her gaze moving briefly to the others before returning to me. "I cannot and will not believe that Mida would send an enemy to lead us, and so shall I prove to all of you. I, myself, shall face the Hosta come the new light, and when she falls before me, then shall the will of Mida be known! Blade to blade there may be no trickery, therefore shall the contest decide all; till then, I demand that she continue as a captive."

High and angrily proud was held the head of Kalir, she who knew the will of Mida more clearly than any other. Again was there the silence of dismay among the others, for challenge had been given to one it might well be sacrilege to challenge---or one who might yet prove an impostor. Touched again by confusion and doubt, these war leaders knew not where the truth lay, therefore was it my place to show it them.

"Wise indeed is Mida the golden," said I, giving to Kalir a shadow-smile indicating my extreme pleasure. "No more than one Midanna life shall be lost to the sword of her chosen, and that life one of little consequence. Come the new light we will meet, Kalir of the Selga, one war leader to another, skill against skill. Mida will be pleased to speak of your error when you have reached her Realm."

"My First Question to Mida, when I have at last attained her Realm, will be upon the reason for your having attempted so foolish a deception," replied Kalir, no amusement whatsoever to be seen upon her. "As you will have preceded me there, she may well give the answering of it to you. Where is she to be confined for the darkness?"

The last of her words were addressed to those who stood about the tent in uncertainty, those who knew not which way to bend in the gale. Ennat stood and gazed solely upon me, far less uncertainty within her than that which held the others, and when none other answered the demand of the Selga, it was she who took up the spear of challenge.

"To confine one who is likely Mida's chosen is not a thing to be honorably done by Midanna," said she, speaking comfortably as that one among the clans who is closest to the goddess. "Jalav of the Hosta-who may well soon be Jalav of the Midanna-Will you accept the hospitality of our clans for this darkness, given freely despite the unavoidable hesitation we feel? Never before have we been faced with a decision such as this, therefore do we ask your forbearance till the matter of challenge is done."

"Indeed is this matter unlike any to have gone before it," said I, pleased that it would not be necessary for me to refuse confinement. It was not then possible for me to accept such a thing and still retain what standing I had achieved in the eyes of the other war leaders, a fact undoubtedly well understood by Kalir; for no other reason would she have suggested such a thing. "The hospitality of the clans is an honor I accept with pleasure," said I, "an honor which shows the true generosity of the clans. Further words may be spoken between us once challenge has been answered. "

"If challenge is answered!" snapped Kalir, nearly beside herself with rage. "To allow this Hosta freedom of the camp is to allow her to run from challenge once all eyes are no longer upon her! The new light will show the truth of my words!"

Fury took the Selga from the tent in broad strides, a departure which left a silence tinged with

embarrassment behind. Midanna were not wont to give such insult even to those who have been challenged, most especially not once the challenge has been accepted. I kept my eyes from the flap Kalir had used as though I knew naught of what she had said, and Ennat breathed a sigh in gratitude.

"I must give apology for having naught save a male's tent to offer," said she, as though no interruption had occurred. "Should you prefer to remain here, as my guest, it will be my honor to have you, yet do I feel that the privilege of solitude has been earned by you. Will you speak your preference?"

"A tent of males will do me well enough, should the males themselves be kept from the giving," said I, showing to Ennat a small grimace. "I have, of late, been given far too generous a number of males."

Ennat colored somewhat at my comment, exchanging quick glances with those others who stood about, yet was she relieved despite her embarrassment at what Kalir had done. Her embarrassment would have been considerably greater had I asked a place in her own tent, for the final challenge had not yet been answered. To say I would send Kalir to Mida's Realm was not to do the thing, and should I somehow fall instead, the Keeper would be left with the shame of having sheltered an enemy and a liar. To accept the hospitality of all the clans would be to spread the shame and thin it, so that none would feel it more than any other.

"I will have my clan sisters see to the emptying of the tent," said Faris of the Summa, something of amusement to be seen in her eyes. "Should the males have no other tasks they must see to, they will be given the opportunity of pleasing my warriors, a far more difficult task than the last they were ordered to. Should they not prove pleasing, they will regret it."

With a nod to me did Faris take herself out of the tent into the darkness and still-falling rain, and Renin of the Sonna gestured to the leather we stood upon.

"As Ennat has offered you our hospitality and you have accepted," said she, "perhaps you will sit awhile and take daru with us. There are certain points in your tale I would have you speak more fully upon, such as the city of males which was taken by you and your warriors."

"And Mida's Realm upon this world," said Ennat, an eagerness in the gaze she looked down upon me with. "Greatly would it please me to hear further upon that glorious place."

Words came from the others as well, words of true interest and encouragement, therefore did I take seat upon the black leather and accept a pot of daru from the male who brought it me, then began to speak more fully upon the things I had done and seen. Perhaps two hind passed in such a way, the daru warming me to these warriors who would soon be sisters, and then did Ennat hold up a hand to stem the latest queries which were about to be asked.

"Sisters, it is my duty to remind all here that a challenge will be answered with the new light," said she, looking about from one war leader to the next. "Would it not be best if the war leader Jalav were to go now to take her rest?"

"Ennat, she is not a warrior-to-be," laughed Ludir, looking upon the Keeper in amusement. "The Hosta will have no difficulty in answering the challenge."

"Most especially as it is Kalir she faces," said Renin, a brief sourness crossing her features. "Had I been Selga, she would long since have forfeited the second silver ring, and her life as well. Much do I believe that her tongue has kept her sword more often idle than any other war leader known. I continue to find wonder that she brought herself to give challenge."

"Her skill is not so poor that it might be discounted entirely," said Faris, who had long since returned from

her errand, bringing with her my breech. My weapons continued to be absent, nor did any remark upon their whereabouts. They would be returned to me with the new light, and thereafter would they remain with me without question-were I to be victorious. "Kalir earned the second silver ring as did we all," said Faris, "facing the one who was war leader before her. Do any believe that Adiln was so poor a warrior that the doing was a mere nothing?"

"Adiln was a warrior of skill," said Renin, her words slow and grudging, yet not to the detriment of Adiln. "I would not take the worth of the doing from Kalir, yet do I continue to see her as-less."

"As we have none of us faced her, we find the matter difficult to judge," said Ludir, sipping from her pot of daru, her form sprawled lazily upon the black leather. "Perhaps the Hosta and the Selga have met in clan battle?"

"Not in the kalod I stood as war leader," said I, finishing the daru in my own pot. "Before that, while still a warrior, my clan and the Selga met with Adiln as war leader. Adiln, it seemed to me, was indeed a warrior of skill."

"Therefore would it undoubtedly be wise of all to seek their tents," said Ennat, rising to her feet to look about her once again. "She who sleeps beyond first light may well find the battle done when she finally arises-or the best of it already begun."

"Should it be the Hosta who sleeps past first light, we have naught to fear," said Ludir with a laugh, yet did she first sit and then bring herself to standing. I, too, rose, as did the others, for it was clear the Keeper desired solitude, and we all had already swallowed much daru.

Those eight war leaders who remained insisted upon accompanying me to the colorless male tent which had been made mine, before trotting away through the heavily falling rain to their own tents. I shook Mida's tears from my hair as I looked about the now-empty tent, seeing that no more than two candles had been left alight when the males had been taken from it. In no manner was it as fine as the tent which was mine among my own clan's home tents, nor was the green of the Hosta to be seen on any part of it; nevertheless did the tent seem to welcome me, as one who would soon be fully one with those about her, one who occupied the tent by right. A goodly amount of provender and a skin of daru had been left for me, undoubtedly by the Summa who had taken the males, and in truth was I more greatly pleased to see the provender than the daru. Drink had I had aplenty in the Keeper's tent, yet provender had not been offered me. Undoubtedly was it the distraction of my tale which had caused the oversight, yet was I pleased to have it so easily corrected. I walked to the place the provender had been put, sat myself before it, then began to heal my hunger.

When I'd had all I wished, I took a swallow or two of the daru, then extinguished the candles and lay myself upon the tent floor. The sound of heavily falling rain was pleasant to hear in the silence of a tent in darkness, and it was my intention to lie listening to it the while I considered how quickly I would take these clans of Midanna from their visiting place to the city of Bellinard. Best would be to leave as quickly as possible, and yet was it necessary to recall that Aysayn undoubtedly led the Sigurri toward the same destination. I knew not whether it would be wisest to seek out the Sigurri or attempt to avoid them, for I knew not how warriors in large numbers would rub along with males of their sort. I moved somewhat upon the tent floor, attempting to gather my scattered thoughts. Of a sudden the tent felt extremely close, bringing a leadenness to my body as well as to my mind, and although I strove to turn to my side and then rise to my knees, I was unable to do so. Upon my back I continued to lie on the tent floor, all beginning to move slowly about me, and then did the darkness grow deeper.

". . . sleeps as deeply as we wished her to," came a very soft voice, drawing me part way out of the darkness which surrounded me alone. "I will take her life sign now, and then are you three to carry her to

the village. When all is seen to, return to your tents and speak not a word upon what was done."

"As you command, Kalir," replied another voice, equally as soft yet not equally as sure. "As you say she is an impostor we shall not doubt you, and yet the other war leaders . . . "

"Are fools!" snapped the first voice, fury to be heard. "It has been left to my efforts alone to see to the honor of us all! Take the low sednet from my sight as quickly as you are able!"

Murmurs of obedience came as hands touched the leather of my life sign, and then did all hearing slip from me again.

Again the darkness receded somewhat as the wet, half-mud of the ground struck me, bringing me a far-off sense of pain. The sound of gandod-hooves came, lessening quickly as though there were those who rode away, and then were there large hands upon my arms, turning me to my back.

"Well, well, the wenches have cast out another," came the voice of a male, one who seemed well pleased. "Though this one seems older than the others, also is she considerably more comely."

"This torchlight shows little beyond mud and rain," said another male voice, one less pleased than the first. "For what reason was she not brought during the light, as were the others, and for what reason is she unbound?"

"What need to bind one whose senses are afloat?" asked the first male, his hand to my face attempting in vain to shake me to full awareness. "When she has returned to herself we will have the usual difficulty with her, therefore shall we ourselves bind her. It will be some feyd before she is tamed."

"I will see it sooner than that," said the second, great annoyance in his tone. "I will not have this village disrupted with screams and weeping and refusals, as it has been in the past. Come the new light . . . "

The voice, so very full of insinuations, ceased to beat against my ears as I was lifted from the ground, for again the darkness had come to claim me.

CH 11. Unexpected escape-end unexpected bathe

I lay bare upon the dirt floor of a wooden dwelling, my wrists bound behind me, my ankles tight with leather, fury flooding me so strongly that I rolled about, attempting to free myself. When my senses had returned the new light had already come, the new light of a fey I was to have faced challenge. I knew at once that it was Kalir who had seen to my absence, and had she then been before me and I free, I would have attacked even had I been weaponless and she well armed. My hair snarled beneath me as I fought the leather which kept me from seeing to a matter of honor, leather which belonged to those of the village I had been given to. Clearly had they been given other times those who were not able to be true Midanna, those who were brought to the dwellings of males so that they might be taught to serve as city slave-women. Now did these village males believe me to be one such, and had bound me to keep me from running from them in terror at the thought of my new life. No terror of that sort gripped me, yet did my soul shrink in horror at the thought of continuing unable to answer the challenge which had been given me. I lay bound among those who thought me theirs, those who had no knowledge of the visiting place I had come from. How then, even when I had freed myself, was I to return from whence I had come? The trail of those who had brought me was long gone beneath the relentless rains; how was I to return to face challenge? These were the unanswered demands which set me to thrashing about, yet did the thrashing bring no answers.

Perhaps two hind passed into the new fey, and none came to look upon their captive. The room I lay in contained three small windows, high in the wooden walls, useless for escape yet large enough to show

that Mida's tears no longer fell. All along one wall stood large round wooden holders of some sort, the contents closed well within so that the liquid might not flow free unintentionally, yet not closed so tightly that I was unable to detect the odor of unbrewed daru. Large was that amount of daru, nearly enough for all of those who normally dwelled in a village of this sort, and I knew not why it would be kept so in a single dwelling. Strange were those of villages, nearly as strange as those of the cities, all as strange as males were no matter where found. Again I moved upon the dirt floor, attempting to control my growing annoyance, and the latch upon the single door rose as the door was pushed open. Males entered, four mature males and three who seemed not long come to the state, and beyond them was not the open of trees and skies, but another, larger room of the dwelling. The lack of sight of the open brought me sudden, unreasoning anger, causing me to struggle again as the males closed the door behind them and came to stand above me.

"Enough of that foolishness, girl," said one of the males, the annoyance in tone and eyes bringing me memory of his voice in the darkness. The second male was he, one who had little patience for screams and weepings and refusals, a thing easily to be seen in the sternness of his visage. Square-faced was he, dark-haired and dark-eyed, no larger than I yet a good deal broader.

"Release me at once!" I snapped, sending my anger to this coldly disapproving male with both voice and eye. "I am a warrior of Mida, a thing you should be well familiar with, male! Release me or face the consequences which will surely come."

"You are now no more than a wench of this village, girl," replied the male, scorn and a greater annoyance showing strongly in his eyes. "You have been sent away from those other wenches forever, for you have not proven worthy of remaining with them. We, however, shall not send you away, for there shall ever be uses a female may be put to. You will be taught to obey and to serve your betters, and these things you will learn quickly if you wish to avoid punishment. How long have you known the use of men?"

"Your understanding is as deep as that of all males," said I with a sound of disdain, paying no mind to the question which had been put to me. "I am not a cast-off, proven unworthy of warriorhood, I am a war leader who has foolishly allowed herself to fall victim to one who fears to face her. You do not now concern yourself with warriors-to-be who shall never be, male. I am a full warrior and war leader, one who will take vengeance for any insult now offered me."

"You are a young female bound helpless at the feet of men," said the male, the remorselessness in his tone turning him blind to any other view of the matter. "No matter what place you held before, no matter how high you believed your position to be, you are now no more than any other wench in this village, and in many ways a good deal less. This truth you had best accustom yourself to, girl, else shall your kalod here be filled with naught save pain."

"The girl is surely frightened at having been abandoned by her own, Filosel," said another of the males, his voice soothing, his manner kindly. "Perhaps it would be best if we were to leave her in peace for now, so that she might become accustomed to her new lot."

"This arrogant varaina feels no fright, man," said the other, scornfully. "See the silver rings in each of her ears, confirming the boast of her former importance. One such as she feels no fear of men, for ever has she had armed wenches behind her when she faced them down. It has not yet come to her that she no longer has such overwhelming advantage, nor has she been taught the true strength of men. You must recall that war leaders take, never are they, themselves, taken. She is not untouched, as were the others, therefore may she be quickly taught her new place. Would you have us leave her to her arrogance, and thereby increase the difficulty of whichever man of our village claims her?"

"Perhaps you are correct," sighed the other male, a faint sadness in him. "It would indeed be considerably

more cruel to allow her to believe she may have her own will here as she did in her former life. It simply disturbs me to look upon her so, naked and bound, for she greatly resembles my own daughter."

"This one is daughter to no man," said Filosel abruptly. "Is there shame in her eyes for the manner in which her entire body has been exposed to the sight of men? Does she agonize over such exposure, knowing well what the sight of her is likely to cause a man to do? No father had she to speak of these things to her, therefore must she be taught by other means the need to cover herself at all times. We avoid much difficulty, both for ourselves and the wench, by doing as we now do."

"Your wisdom is the reason for your position as our headman, Filosel," said the other, his acquiescence now complete. "It would disturb me considerably more if my girl were to see this one so unconcerned over such shameful behavior. She must not be allowed to set a bad example for the young and innocent."

"Then we may begin with no further delay," said the male Filosel, a heavy satisfaction now upon him, an anticipation of enjoyment glittering in the dark of his eyes. "You must know, girl, that to show yourself to men in such a brazen fashion is to invite the rousing of their lusts and passions, a doing which will bring you no pleasure and considerable pain. These young men will teach you the consequences of exhibiting yourself, for they will do what any young men would do, given such provocation. The man who chooses you for his own will do more, for you will belong to him and he may do as he wishes with that which belongs to him. Think upon how you may please him, in the hind to come, so that he will not allow such a thing to be done to you again-and may perhaps be persuaded to give you pleasure rather than punishment. The time spent will not be wasted."

With a nod of his head and a glance, the male then gathered the other three older males and led them out. Then, the three who had been left grinned down upon me.

"Oh, see how large her breasts are," said one with light hair and eyes, his words nearly a croon as his gaze caressed me. "Never before have I seen breasts so large!"

"Never before have you seen breasts of any sort," retorted a second, this one dark of hair and eye, who wet his lips repeatedly beneath an unwavering gaze. "The whipping we were given for attempting to watch the women and girls bathe in the stream kept us both from it."

"That was when you were boys," said the third, who seemed somewhat older than the others. "Now that you have become men and will soon seek women of your own, you must know what you are about with them. Look here."

This third male crouched beside me, the his eyes amused, and put the flat of his hand to my belly. I moved in anger against the leather which held me still for so insulting a touch, and the young male laughed.

"Wenches are aware of the nearness of a man no matter where they are touched," said he, speaking to the other two yet looking only upon me. "The softness of their skin will draw that touch and they, as though caressed intimately, will prepare themselves to receive him."

His hand upon me was completely unmoving, as inert and unknowledgeable as his words, his eyes seeking the heat which he clearly believed would quickly begin to rise. Though I no longer wore my life sign it was as though I retained it still, for I felt no desire for these clumsy, gawking children of villages. Was it their intention to raise interest in me, they would be some time in the doing.

"She scarcely seems prepared for us, Lediaid," said the darker-haired male, bending somewhat where he stood beyond where the male Lediaid crouched, his tone greatly unsure. "Where are the indications of arousal I have heard spoken of?"

"She seeks to put us off, Saladur," replied Lediald, his words filled with a greater assurance than his eyes. "She fears what we mean to do, you see, and uses that fear to keep arousal from her flesh. We, however, shall not allow her to continue on so. You and Nergalis may also touch her, in any manner you please."

Greatly elated seemed the two younger males, and eagerly did they come nearer to where I lay before going to their knees and putting hands upon me. Easily might it be seen through the colored cloth of their body wraps that their own excitement was high, yet was I given naught save annoyance through their gropings. For a hand of reckid did the touching continue with naught save panting to break the silence, and then did he called Lediald speak.

"Now do I see the truth," said he, his voice rough with need and embarrassment. He had forced his hand between my thighs, the grin of anticipation he had worn full with regained confidence, and at that point had he attempted to lock his gaze to mine. Although I could not deny the faint trace of moisture such a touch produced within me, the heavy scorn to be seen in my eyes had deeply wounded the male. "This backward forest wench continues to be filled with arrogance," said he in a growl, his free hand coming to my breast to give me pain with the tightening of his fingers. "She has not yet been shown what men are able to do to her, therefore shall we show her-upon the moment!"

Roughly did the male push aside the other two, move to my ankles, then begin to remove the leather upon them with short, angry movements. When he at last pulled the leather from me I attempted to kick at those who looked upon me as theirs, yet were they prepared for such a doing and quickly captured my just-freed ankles. The male Lediald put himself between my widely held legs, opened his body wrap, then approached me to thrust within. His attempt to give me further pain was only partially successful, for my body quickly saw to its own protection. Much did I anticipate a doing such as the one of the males of the clans, or that of the Sigurri males who had brought me to the Caverns of the Doomed, therefore did I attempt to brace myself against lengthy assault; consider my surprise when these village males, first Lediald and then the others, each found release in no more than a matter of a few reckid! When the last of the three withdrew after a performance barely begun, I looked upon each of them, no more than a few kalod younger than I, and could not hold back my laughter. So here was the reason for the dissatisfaction of village and city females! To be bound to males of such inadequacy was reason for a great deal more than dissatisfaction! I threw my head back and laughed as I had not laughed in some time, and that despite the vengeance I knew the males would take. The pain my amusement would bring me was scarcely to be regretted; far better to show these useless, foolish males my true opinion of them.

Indeed were the three taken with shame and anger, yet was the pain I had anticipated scarcely brought forth. A few pinchings and slaps were produced, and much growling and complaints, however such feeble attempts were unable to diminish my amusement. Again and again did the three touch me all about, attempting to raise my desire and their own, yet even their own arousal refused to come forth. The more earnestly they made the attempt, the more steadfastly did their bodies refuse them, much as though they were captured males among the clans who were filled with great fear. Such males were useless without the sthuvad drug having been fed them, and so did these males prove to be to themselves. Hind passed in the time of their attempts, hind filled with shame and frustration for them, boredom and discomfort for me, yet little else of any sort. The males could not bring me to desire for them, nor themselves to desire for me; the two younger did indeed come to tears and the third to cursing, yet naught else occurred. When at last, in heavy misery-filled silence they sat back from me and hung their heads, I became aware of the weariness which filled me. The dragged sleep I had been given had not been restful, therefore did natural sleep have little difficulty in finding me.

The sound of the opening door brought me awake, also bringing me surprise. Darkness filled the dirt-floored room I lay in, a darkness now breached by the candle held by one of those who entered.

Four males were there, the same four elder males who had come earlier with the younger three, and beyond them was I able to see the greater illumination in the larger room, and hear the low mutterings of many males in converse. I sat up as quickly as my still-bound wrists allowed, only then realizing that the leather had not been replaced upon my ankles, and the four males halted to look down upon me.

"As the greater part of her arrogance has already been seen to, we may now give her to whichever man desires her," said the male who held the candle, he who was called Filosel. The satisfaction in his voice was thick indeed, yet was I unable to comprehend the reason for its presence. Had he not spoken with the younger males who had been left to see to me? Had they not told him of the failure they had found in their task? Two of those who accompanied Filosel came forward to raise me to my feet, and he who had held my left arm put his hands to the leather about my wrists. A brief moment saw the leather gone, yet the pain of movement would not be so easily seen to. I moved my arms forward for the first time in many hind, and the male Filosel chuckled.

"The pain of punishment remains with her," said he, far more pleased with that thought than the fact that our eyes were level, one set to the other. The pain he saw upon me came from no source other than the movement of my arms, and the snort of disdain I gave sound to removed a good deal of his satisfaction. Curtly he gestured to those who had raised me to standing, and again were my arms grasped, this time so that I might be forced after the male with the candle, who had turned to lead the way to the larger room from which they had all come.

The second room of the dwelling was indeed larger than the one which had held me since I had awakened. Many candles sat in sconces hung upon the wooden walls, illuminating the many small wooden platforms at which sat more than five or six hands of males. These males sat cross-legged upon the dirt floor with tall pots of unbrewed daru in their hands, and the sound of converse ceased when I was pulled before them. Many eyes took in my form, and the manner in which my breasts moved as I attempted to rub the pain from my arms, and then did the sound of their muttering return at a higher level. He who was called Filosel took the flame from the candle he held with a single breath, then brought one hand up in a gesture of silencing.

"You now see the wench before you," said he when the greatest part of the sound of others had ceased. "She will be given to the most deserving of you who has no woman of his own. What number of you find interest in her?"

A bare moment of hesitation passed and then, by ones and fives, did the seated males all put arms in the air. A great laughter arose from this doing, as though they made sport of the male Filosel, yet did Filosel show a smile of amusement and shake his head.

"Never before have I seen so large a number of men in this village without women of their own," said he. "Shall I fetch those who believe they have men here before putting the question again?"

"No!" came the shouts of many males amid much laughter, and then were many arms withdrawn till no more than four were left. This number was more to Filosel's liking, and again he nodded.

"You men each have need of a woman, and find desire for this one," said he, looking one by one upon the four. "You must know that she is wild yet, and badly in need of taming. Should any of you not feel up to such a thing, you may withdraw your request."

"Withdrawal is scarcely a thing to be considered with a wench such as that," said one of the four, a large, brown-haired male filled with amusement. "First does one contemplate penetration, and only then, after a good deal of doing, is withdrawal to be considered."

Laughter rose all about at the words of this male, heavy laughter filled with ridicule for she who stood

before them. Anger rose in me at such foolishness, and I straightened as I looked upon the male who had spoken, sending the sharpness of my gaze to him.

"Your concept of a good deal of doing must surely be the equal of a full three hands of reckid," said I, allowing a lazy drawl to come to my voice. "Village males are clearly capable of no more of a doing than that--else would they be accepted for service to Midanna."

Now was there a growl of insult to be heard from the seated males, and Filosel turned in fury to glare upon me. Before he might speak, however, the seated male who had last spoken rose angrily to his feet.

"So, you believe yourself still in a position to command men and give them insult, eh, wench?" he demanded, his own head held high as he spoke. "For too long have we found it necessary to accept the sneers and posturings of savage females, a doing which is no longer necessary with you! You will be taught to go to your knees before men, to serve them without complaint, to speak only when spoken to, and then with naught save deference! In such a manner shall we regain some of our own, with one of theirs to teach the meaning of humiliation to!"

"Humiliation is easily given to a captive, male," said I, taking no note of the blaze of fury in his eyes as I folded my arms across my chest, the word "savage" twisting me about within as ever it had done. "Not as easily accomplished is the regaining of one's honor from those who have taken it. The facing of an armed warrior would accomplish this end for you, yet have you clearly the stomach for no more than the facing of unarmed captives. Never will you regain any part of that which you have so easily given up, male, no matter the pain and shame you see fit to inflict upon others. Only in honorable doings does one find honor itself, a thing those in this village have yet to learn."

"How boldly speaks the brave Midanna, seeking to shame those she cannot hope to best," sneered the male above the growlings of fury and anger which rose all about, and then did he draw the dagger which hung belted at his waist. "Let us see how quickly words of apology may be made to come, words which may come quickly enough to save the tongue which speaks them. A tongueless woman takes only a little pleasure from a man, while giving him the priceless gift of her endless silence. The trade is one none here would refuse, I think."

Now were there shouts of agreement as the male slowly began to approach me, moving past those who urged him on with high-burning approval. I quickly unfolded my arms as he neared, knowing he had not spoken in jest, yet was I seized again by those who had pulled me from my original room of capture. Each of my arms was taken by a male, an attempt to hold me still for that which would be done by another of their number, and abruptly did I recall each of the other times the strength of males had held me so. ***!rile were males, intent upon no other thing than the shaming of warriors and the giving of pain, and without thought did the brightly blossoming fury within me take up the teaching I had been given. The ball of my sharply upswinging foot caught the male grasping the dagger in his manhood, bringing a scream to his throat as he dropped the weapon to clutch at himself and fall to the dirt of the floor. With barely an instant between movements did I lower my right leg and then kick out again, this time with my heel into him who held my right arm. That male, too, bent with a muffled shout, already having released my arm, the arm which moved with fisted hand and great speed toward the male on my left. Into the throat of the male did the fist go, the elbow prepared to follow in a backswing, yet did the second blow prove unnecessary. As my right arm was released so, too, was the left, allowing me to jump for and take up the dagger of the first male. Hands reached for me amid great shoutings and cursings, hands I slashed at blindly as I fought my way free of all those about me, and then did I stand with a wall at my back, a dagger in my fist, and a snarl of continued rage in my throat, looking upon a scene of chaos.

All about, males stood and shouted in fury, shaking fists and glaring in blood insult. Those three I had

seen to with my new learning continued to writhe upon the ground, the first emptying himself, the third struggling to bring breath into his body. Two other males held hands to bloody gashes, the leavings of the dagger I now had my fist wrapped about, and a hand of others stood nearer than the rest, seeking to gather their courage to leap upon me. He who was called Filosel stood among the five who attempted my recapture, and truly livid with rage was he.

"You filthy savage!" he screamed, trembling with the strength of his emotions. "To attempt to give a savage the benefits of a civilized existence is to be spat upon for the effort, without any thought of gratitude whatsoever! Now will we take your arrogance with your life, and throw your corpse where it most belongs-with the beasts of the forests! Slay her!"

A snarl of agreement came from those he stood among, and all began to approach me at once, spread out so that it would not be possible for me to reach them all with the dagger. One or two might fall to me, perhaps even three, but the others would surely break through despite the weapon I held. My fingers tightened about the hilt as I crouched lower, determined to take as many with me to the final darkness as possible, and then there came another voice, carrying easily above the din of the village males.

"If it is gratitude you wish, you may have mine, providing you now halt where you are," it said, causing the males before me to whirl about. "I will be extremely grateful if we need not take the lives of any of you, for we have come for something other than slaying. Your village has no need of a captured hadat, while we desire no other thing. Release the wench to us, and we will take her and go. "

"The wench?" demanded Filosel in outrage, the while I stared gape-mouthed at him who stood in the opened doorway at the far side of the room. No other than Aysayn was it, he who was called Sigurr's Shadow, he who now brought the Sigurri warriors to battle with the strangers. A large number of black-clad Sigurri warriors were to be seen behind him, all of whom stood taller than any village male, all of whom stood armed with sword as well as dagger. A smile of amusement touched Aysayn at the gawking stares from all about, and he raised his blond head beneath them.

"Who are you?" demanded Filosel. "What do you do here in our village? And for what conceivable reason would you wish the possession of this she-savage?"

"I do not care for your use of the term 'savage,' " said Aysayn. "The wench you thought to do with as you please is precious to me, a sister warrior I value most highly. I recommend that you step away from her, and that right quickly."

A brief moment did Aysayn look about himself, his light eyes hard and without warmth, his left hand caressing the hilt of his sword, and then did he begin walking toward me, directly through the village males. No more than an instant did they hesitate and then were they backing from him, opening a clear path between us, casting uneasy glances upon the Sigurri who quietly entered to stand before the door. At last did I feel free to straighten from my crouch, and again Aysayn smiled as he halted before me.

"I see Chaldrin has been engaged in teaching," said he, having glanced at those who littered the ground. "I must be sure not to challenge you again, for I value the life you returned in the Caverns. Have they harmed you?"

Despite the lightness of his tone, his pale eyes glittered with the query, his palm again at the hilt of his sword. So strange was it, this concern from one who was only male, this support against those who were also male. Sister had he called me, aloud and unashamed before strangers and followers alike, a doing to make a warrior feel equally strange.

"I am unharmed," I allowed, looking up into the light pools which looked down upon me. "Had your arrival been delayed it might perhaps have been otherwise, yet was your arrival not delayed. No other

than they, themselves, have been harmed."

"Had it been Mehrayn in my place, a great number more of them would have found harm," said he, putting a gentle palm to my face. "Were you brought here in naught save leg bands, or have you a covering to fetch?"

"My breech was about me when I came here," said I, and then did I look at Filosel. "That one is the likeliest to know the whereabouts of it. "

"Have her covering brought at once," said Aysayn to Filosel, and that male made haste to gesture another to Aysayn's bidding. That other male moved quickly into the second, smaller room, and again Aysayn looked upon me. "Also is your life sign no longer hung about your throat." said he, a small narrowing to be seen about his eyes. "Is it, too, now in the possession of those in this village?"

"My life sign is in the possession of another," said I, and the coldness in my voice caused disturbance among the village males. "She it was who was to have faced me in challenge at the new light of this fey, a war leader of Midanna who first gave challenge, then made certain that that challenge would not be answered. When I find her, she will discover that it would have been best to face me and fall the first time."

"A not unreasonable attitude," agreed Aysayn, looking upon the male who had made haste to fetch my breech. I took the breech from him and put it on, and Aysayn gestured away the hovering male, who backed quickly with great relief. "When we leave here we may, if you wish, ride directly to the visiting place," said Aysayn. "It is perhaps two hind in distance from this village, and there we may take our rest for the balance of this darkness."

"You know the location of the visiting place?" I asked sharply, jerking my head up to stare at Sigurr's Shadow. "How is it possible for you to know such a thing, and how was it possible for you to come here? I had meant to speak of this at a later time, without these others about, yet now"

"Your original thought was sound," said Aysayn. "We may speak more easily as we ride."

Though I truly wished to continue questioning him, I was able to see that Aysayn had reasons of his own to withhold his replies. With that in view I tied on my breech quickly, retrieved the dagger I had taken, then began moving wordlessly toward the door. No more than two steps had I taken, when Aysayn's hand came to my shoulder.

"You need not take that weapon with you," said he, gesturing toward the dagger I held. "I was advised to bring sword and dagger with me, for your own would not be available. It seems I was correctly advised."

"Advised!" I repeated in exasperation. Allowing the single word to stand for all, then, I turned my eyes toward the male from whom I had taken the dagger, held it by the point for throwing, then raised my arm. The male, who continued to lie painfully curled upon the ground, saw the movement of my arm, paled even further than he already had, then hid his face and head with his own arms. Surely did he believe that I meant to return his weapon by embedding it in his flesh, yet only males such as he acted so toward those who were unarmed. The dagger struck the ground and entered it with the force of my throw, half blade deep not far from the quivering male, and then I was able to turn for the last time and leave that place. Aysayn followed behind, chuckling, and none sought to bar our way.

Without was the darkness fresh and clean, the air sweet despite the fact that the rains had been gone for many hind, perhaps even for the entire fey. I took the swordbelt and dagger given me, donned them and mounted the kan indicated as mine, then rode beside Aysayn before his Sigurri as we left the village. No

longer did I wait than till we had chosen our direction through the forests, and then did I turn to the dark form who rode to my left.

"Now you may speak, and I would have you do so quickly-brother. In what manner were you able to know of my need-and the place I had been taken?"

Though I was unable to see Aysayn in the darkness of the forests, I was, in some manner, able to feel his amusement at the difficulty I had had in calling him brother. I had not had such difficulty with Chaldrin. yet was Chaldrin not the same as Aysayn. I had not spoken the word untruthfully, yet were my feelings for Chaldrin entirely different from those I felt toward Sigurr's Shadow.

"Simply said, my knowledge came from a man called S'Heernoh, a-Walker who rides with two of my warriors and one of yours," said Aysayn, the dark form of his face turned toward me. "I was told that the mist which covered the Snows when you and he attempted to walk them disappeared as suddenly as it had come, after you had been gone a short time. He walked the Snows alone, discovered the difficulty you would have, used the Snows to discover our location in the forests, then all four rode to intercept our host. As luck would have it we were nearly upon them without knowing of it, and at their urging we all continued on, then I with a small number of my warriors rode to your assistance. There is more to come, this S'Heernoh believed, yet was he still uncertain as to the specific difficulty to be faced. He had not had the time to pursue what he had seen only glancingly, yet has he now been given the time. He will surely have more to speak of when we have returned."

Though the male was no more able to see me than I him, I nevertheless nodded to acknowledge his words in the midst of my distraction. Apparently S'Heernoh's contention had been correct, and the Snows has been barred to me over some particular unforeseen circumstance. My time of capture in the village had not been unduly harsh, although I had been given pain by Kalir's males, I felt that the time of difficulty was yet before me, perhaps in what S'Heernoh had only glimpsed. I would speak with him as soon as we returned to where they waited, and then perhaps the last of the mist would be blown away.

"I have not had the opportunity to ask sooner, therefore shall I do so now," said Aysayn, breaking gently into my thoughts. "Mehrayn and Chaldrin-were they left some place other than where the four who came to us were left? For what reason did they fail to remain together?"

"Mehrayn and Chaldrin insisted upon accompanying three Midanna warriors," said I, taking a deep breath of the air of forest darkness. "As free males are not permitted to enter Midanna lands, it was necessary that they beg to follow a war leader, giving each his word that he would obey her in all things. At this moment they undoubtedly give pleasure to whichever warriors chose them for the darkness, for they are bound to be obedient in such a way."

"Mehrayn?" said Aysayn, a slowly dawning delight in his voice. "He begged to follow a war leader and gave a vow of obedience? He now gives pleasure to a wench who commands him, her will above his? I do not mean to doubt your word, wench, yet this I find somewhat difficult to believe."

"In no other manner was he able to accompany me, and insisently did he refuse to remain behind," said I with a shrug. "His manner of service during the last of our journey was somewhat short of acceptable, yet do I feel that the punishment given him did much to correct the fault."

"Service," laughed Aysayn, true enjoyment in the sound, and then did he abruptly lose his amusement. "You-gave him-punishment?" he asked, a certain disquiet in the words. "You could not have-What sort of punishment was he given?"

"By my command, Chaldrin switched him for insolence," I replied, puzzled by Aysayn's sudden concern. "Was I to allow him to continue in insolence, in defiance of my authority? It was he who insisted upon

giving oath to a Midanna; was I to allow him to believe the doing was idle?"

"Ah, Sigurr, now must you truly give her your protection," said the male with a sigh. "You have erred, my girl, in believing Mehrayn a man who might be done in such a manner. I have no doubt that his feelings for you drove him to make such a desperate vow, and those feelings are undoubtedly unchanged. The point he is sure to dispute with you is the difference between a man who yearns to follow and obey a woman, and a man who takes desperate measures to follow and protect a woman. The two are not the same, sister, which I fear you will learn when once this matter of your leadership is done. You should not have given him a slavey's punishment."

"The punishment of a male who follows her is the right of any warrior," I insisted. "Had Mehrayn wished to be kept free of it, he had only to keep his vow unspoken. It was not I who demanded that he accompany me; on the contrary, it was my will that he remain behind. His absolute refusal to agree to such a thing caused his distress, a typical stubbornness of males. Had he remained with the others, he would have gone unpunished. "

"You gave him punishment for disobeying you when he was free to do as he pleased?" Aysayn asked very softly, a clear attempt to keep insult from the words. "I had thought you possessed of a greater sense of fairness than that. And he could not have remained behind and also remained unpunished, wench. To see the woman of your heart ride off alone into great danger is a harsher punishment for a man than any other might conceivably be. Were you unaware of that truth?"

"Then it would seem he has little cause for complaint," I replied stiffly. "That he was allowed the lesser punishment is scarcely a point for contention-should such foolishness be looked upon by him as truth. The final truth he must learn is that I am a war leader of Mida; any male who wishes to follow me must do as Mehrayn has given his word to do for only a short time: absolutely unquestioning and with absolute obedience. It is then my privilege to allow or disallow the thing."

"You have come to the decision to drive him from you, then," said Aysayn, a deep sadness clear in the heaviness of his tone. "I believe you know as well as I that Mehrayn would find it impossible to live such a life. What you have failed to take into consideration, wench, is that the Sword is unlikely to allow matters to rest so. Do you deem it wise to give him no choice save to carry you off?"

"Such a choice is scarcely likely to be allowed him," I replied in a mutter, weary of the topic of conversation. "That I am Mida's is deterrent enough; that he is now also Mida's is more to the point, for she will allow him no such doing, no more, perhaps, than the thought of it. And I am not one who takes the male of another without let and without challenge. The male Mehrayn has done well putting himself beyond all mortal females. May he joy in the state."

In seeming confusion did Aysayn attempt to speak further upon what had been said, yet was I determined to have no more of it. Our kand found difficulty in picking their way through the darkness of the forests, therefore did increasing the pace we held to cause all to give greater attention to where we rode than to speech. We were indeed a pair of hind from where the balance of the Sigurri waited with Ilvin and S'Heernoh, and more than once during our journey through the darkness did Aysayn mutter the deeply felt wish that Mehrayn were immediately available to resume his place at the head of the Sigurri host. The movement and disposition of so many warriors was seen to effortlessly by the Sword, awkwardly and with much effort by the Shadow. Had Mehrayn's need to ride ahead not been so great, never would Aysayn have attempted even temporary leadership-words, I felt, which were an attempt to reopen already closed issues. I gave my attention to the forests all about, to the distant screams of hunters and the desperate scurrings of prey, and allowed my silence to speak for me. No longer was Jalav plagued by a need for males, a blessing far too long in the coming.

The end of our journey saw us nearly to the visiting place, at a location which had been deemed by Aysayn to be of sufficient distance from the clans that battle would not be provoked by male presence. I saw at once that his concept of sufficient distance was scarcely adequate to keep the outlying sentries from learning of their presence, and although they had come to that place just after darkness had fallen, I was greatly surprised that battle had not already been joined. I looked frowningly about as we rode through many, many sets of resting Sigurri warriors up to the fire where those of my former traveling set awaited, seeing no sign of any who should have been at the least keeping the intruders under observation, then had my attention been forcibly taken by S'Heernoh's extreme agitation.

"Lady Jalav, you must make the utmost haste!" he cried, striding swiftly to the side of my kan, Ilvin and others following angrily in his wake. "The Snows have shown me an unbelievably large gathering of those gray-clad followers of the Oneness-who at this very moment attack the tents of the wenches you would have follow you!"

"What foolishness do you speak?" I demanded, looking down upon him without dismounting. "The gray-clad ones are cowards, and totally without skill. Were they so witless as to attack Midanna, they would none of them survive."

"They attack with countless jars containing Sigurr's Breath!" snarled the Sigurri Gidain, he who had also been of my traveling set. "The jars are thrown down and broken near the wenches and in their tents, freeing the vapors which the wenches have no knowledge of. One breath and the strongest warrior falls senseless, easy prey to those who wear moistened cloth over noses and mouths! The vapors are insufficient to slay them, merely do they render them senseless! Those followers of abomination have come for slaves, and Dotil and Wedin are among those marked to be enslaved! We must ride to their assistance at once!"

Stunned understanding came to me then, for I well remembered the cavern of the gray-clad males and the scent I had detected which Chaldrin had named Sigurr's Breath. It had been for the vapors that the males had chosen the cavern, and those others mentioned at times by the gray-clad ones we had encountered were those who had come ahead, together and prepared, for the taking of a large number of the females they sought to serve them. Now they attacked Midanna warriors with their coward's weapon, and those warriors fell before them! I spoke quickly to Aysayn, bidding him gather a larger force than those few who had ridden with him to the village, then turned again to Gidain.

"For that reason has their attack only just begun?" I demanded, aware of the manner in which Aysayn roused set after set of his encamped males, and sent them running to their kand. "Their arrival in this place must necessarily have been much sooner than ours. For what reason did they fail to strike sooner?"

"Clearly must the rains have kept them from it," said S'Heernoh, speaking when Gidain scowled in lack of knowledge. "The moisture of heavy rains would render the vapors harmless without the tents, and as for within-" His shoulders moved uncertainly. "-Within they should have had no difficulty whatsoever, no matter the presence of rain without. "

"Save that in the rains," said I, "the tents could not be approached without alerting the sentries, who were themselves beneath the tears of Mida and therefore untouchable by the vapors. Should even a single sentry have been able to cry a warning before being slain, the entire camp would have been roused and the males would have found death rather than slaves. This darkness must surely be the first without the tears of Mida since the arrival of the males."

"You are surely correct, lady," said S'Heernoh, his upturned eyes showing awareness of the fact that he alone now remained before me. Ilvin and Gidain and Rinain, the second Sigurri warrior who had ridden with us, had seen how quickly Aysayn's force formed, therefore had they run to their own kand to

prevent their being left to watch the departure of others. "You must guard yourself in the coming encounter, lady," said S'Heernoh, his voice soft with an odd manner of concern. "Certain victory has not yet been determined for you, therefore must you be alert for a-slip in the Snows."

"I will be sure to guard myself amid these large numbers of males, S'Heernoh," said I, smiling somewhat as I loosened my blade in its scabbard, my kan dancing about with the hurry of all those about us. Then did I recall the questions I had for the male and began to speak the first, concerning the circumstance which I felt was yet before me, however the hurry of the Sigurri had at last produced results and all were prepared to ride. S'Heernoh stepped back with a hand raised in farewell as Aysayn regained my side, therefore did I turn from questioning and begin the short journey to battle.

From the camp Aysayn had chosen, the ride to the visiting tents was a matter of reckid. We left our mounts among the trees and ran forward afoot, finding that the followers of the Oneness had left no sentries of their own. Among the tents themselves chaos reigned, for some few warriors had not been taken by the vapors and attempted to do solitary battle with those who outnumbered them so greatly. Many, many Midanna lay unmoving, some in pools of their own blood, some already giving use to those who had captured them despite their lack of awareness. Much did it seem as though the gray-clad males were everywhere, therefore was it unnecessary to choose a place of battle; battle was brought to us as quickly as we appeared, a wildness and rage gripping those who hurled themselves upon us. For each three males who were empty-handed save for a sword, a fourth stood about with a torch as well, therefore was the area well lit for the slaying which we quickly became a part of.

Odd indeed is the passage of time, scarcely ever flowing at a uniform rate, indeed, upon occasion, flowing at more than a single rate. In the midst of the joy of battle does one find this dual rate, the speed with which one's sword moves to guard one's flesh and end one's enemy amid the well-nigh leisurely flow of the battle itself-at times does individual combat slow to the rhythm of graceful posturing, and the balance of battle all about grows frantic with haste. The battle we joined then contained little joy, therefore was there naught of the smooth flow which brings pleasure, naught of equal meeting equal. Little more than butchering was there, causing the time to sit heavily upon us, quickly taking even the vengeful anger from us. I hacked and thrust my way through clamoring gray-clad males till I stood beside a lone, embattled warrior, a Sarda by the violet of her covering, her own blood and that of others smeared here and there upon her. Alone she had been able to do little more than hold her own; with my blade beside hers mere defense became concerted attack, and those who thought to end her were themselves ended, instead. With the last gray-clad male upon the ground, I quickly told the Sarda that those who wore black were allies and friends, therefore were they not to be set upon once battle was done. Oddly did she look upon me, as though I were returned from Mida's Blessed Realm, and then was she gone to aid others. I had no understanding of the reason for her strange manner, yet had I also no time to consider the point. There were others about the wide-spread camp in need of assistance, and this I began to see to with all haste.

Much time passed with no less difficulty, the manner of battle fought by the gray-clad males sufficient to turn the stomach of any true warrior. Rarely, after their initial attempt to overwhelm, did any of their number stand and face what came, save for the times when many of them were able to fall upon considerably fewer of ours. Many torches were quickly extinguished by intent, so that the gray-clad ones were more easily able to slip away in the humid, overcast darkness. The torches were relit by the Sigurri, and then did we pursue the craven males deeper into the camp, at times pausing to fight, more often cornering and slaughtering. Well covered were we with the sweat of effort and frustration, yet did we continue to press the followers of the Oneness, so that they would not have opportunity to slay in anger those they would be unable to bring away with them as slaves.

Ivlin had at first attempted to remain beside me, yet had she quickly gone off to spread the word of

Sigurri assistance to those warriors who still stood. Gidain and Rinain, those two who had ridden with our set, had led a number of their brothers toward the not easily distinguished blue tents of the Summa, clearly seeking Wedin and Dotil. Aysayn, leading half our number, had taken the direction opposite to mine, leaving the balance of his warriors to prowl in my wake as I sought further prey. All about were there the unmoving bodies of warriors, most having been clearly taken from their tents, all seeming without life though most undoubtedly survived. The sight brought even greater upset to the Sigurri than it did to this Midanna, and wordless snarls accompanied their eager seeking of gray-clad enemies. For what reason they felt so, I knew not, the strangeness of Sigurri grew with each new thing one learned of them.

We had carried our stalking to the shadowed tents of Selga gold, when a somewhat different sight greeted us. To one side of the unmoving Selga warriors lay the equally unmoving bodies of five males, each clad in the colorless coverings of males who followed warriors. These males, however, might scarcely be looked upon as merely slumbering—they had been thrown into a heap and their throats had then been opened, spreading the red of gore all about and upon them. The restless torch I held high above the five showed this clearly, also showing that neither Chaldrin nor Mehrayn were among them. I gave silent thanks to Mida for so great a boon, then wordlessly called the cursings of stupidity down upon my own head. Mindlessly I had believed that the two Sigurri would be in no danger, for I had forgotten that they wore no weapons which might be wielded against the gray-clad faith, and had not thought upon the obvious fate of any males found among the Midanna. My fist closed so tight about the hilt of my sword that an ache came to my fingers, yet I heeded it not as I quickly looked about. It would be necessary to search each of the many Selga tents, yet would I continue on till I had found-

"Look!" cried one of the warriors who accompanied me, drawing all eyes to the direction in which he pointed. "They think to elude us, and have even taken some of the wenches!"

Indeed had the Sigurri spoken true. A distance from us in the darkness, only just discernible as shadows among the tents, a knot of males hastened away in the hopes of losing themselves and the burdens they carried, clearly intending flight with that which they had come for. The Sigurri immediately took to their heels in pursuit, full gladness upon them, undoubtedly thinking I followed in all haste. In other circumstances I would indeed have followed, yet was there another task first set to my hand. I turned with the torch I carried, went to the first of the tents, then began my search.

Uncounted numbers of empty and only-Midanna-filled tents were behind me, with all battle sounds a good distance off, when I emerged from between tents toward those I had not yet investigated, to find an unexpected sight. More than a hand of gray-clad males, one holding a torch, attempted to corner a single male in colorless clan covering so that they might end him. Swords were tight in the fists of the gray ones the while their prey was weaponless, yet were there three gray-clad bodies upon the ground, mute testimony to the skill of him they wished to end. Wide leather was wrapped tight about the wrists of the broad, dark male, no more than a scratch or two marking his body, and desperate was the silence of those who surrounded him, the points of their swords weaving about in search of an opening to his vitals-

So large a number should surely have been able to best a solitary one, yet had Chaldrin taught them great respect for his skill.

I thrust the butt of the torch I carried into the earth, then moved forward quickly toward the knot of those who sought to take the life of my brother. None had yet seen me, therefore did I raise my voice in the Hosta war cry as I neared, causing them to whirl about to face my attack. The paling of their visages was clear even in the light of the single torch, and then I was upon them, slashing all about with the strength of my anger. My edge took two in quick succession, drawing forth shrieks of mortal agony, and then did I

beat aside the blade of a third and bury my sword in his belly, finishing him with a gurgling of quickly ended terror. No more than a moment did it take for me to wrench my blade free of the flesh it was buried in, yet that single moment saw many things occur. One of the remaining gray-clad male turned tail and ran, for Chaldrin had used the distraction of my attack to bend and arm himself from one of those who lay at his feet, preparing himself to join my attack. Two more hastily attempted to halt the Sigurri, and he who held the torch came swiftly nearer, a doing I had scarcely expected. More often did these gray-clad ones flee than close, and as I hastened my effort to free my sword from the stubbornly grasping flesh in which it was buried, the free arm of the torch male rose high and then came swiftly down, a shattering sound following the motion. At my feet lay the shards of some missile thrown by the male, and even as I looked upon them, all else faded from sight.

"Are you able to make the effort to awaken, girl?" came a soft voice, reaching to me in the nothingness in which I lay wrapped. "No more than a small part of the vapor reached you, therefore should you by now be able to throw off its effects. Here, the taste of this may aid you."

A finger was thrust in my mouth, the liquid it was covered with reaching my tongue, the taste of cooled, brewed daru immediately bringing feeble movement to my inert blood. I stirred, became aware of the lenga pelt I lay upon and the near-leadenness of my limbs, and then were my head and shoulders raised and a skin put to my lips. I drank from the skin of daru, swallowing carefully, and only then was I able to open my eyes. In the dim glow of a not-distant fire was I able to see Chaldrin, his arm about my shoulders, his hand holding the skin of daru. I took a final swallow then drew my head back, and Chaldrin lowered me once more to the pelt.

"It will be another moment or two before full life returns to you, girl," said he, one big hand smoothing the stray hair from my face. "I will, however, give you thanks now for having returned my life to me. It would soon have occurred to those sons of foulness to come at me together, rather than urging one or two of their number ahead of the pack. Had you not taken their eyes from me for sufficiently long so that I might take up a weapon, I would not have been able to finish the last of them after you fell. Should one pause to think upon it, the wisdom of the vow I gave to accompany you will prove itself quite evident. Had I not given that vow, you would not have been about to aid me in my time of need."

Chaldrin's familiar chuckle sounded as I attempted to speak, yet had the last of the vapors not released me to a sufficiency for such a thing. I moved about upon the lenga pelt, striving to drive off the slowly receding lethargy, and Chaldrin recapped the skin he held, then put it aside.

"By cause of the debt I owe you, wench, I shall now take my leave," said he, looking down upon me soberly from where he crouched beside me. "I have no doubt that this will prove for the best, therefore do I go with a gladness within me that has for some time been lacking. Your happiness is mine, sister, and for too long has such a state eluded us both. This forced slowing is my gift to you; see that you take full advantage of it."

His hand came to my hair for a final time, the touch very gentle, and then he rose out of his crouch and turned away. It came to me then that I lay in a dwelling of some sort, for Chaldrin crossed to the door and departed by it, pulling it firmly to behind him. I had no understanding of what then occurred, yet did I know that I had no wish to remain where I had been left, in a place so very much enclosed. I struggled with greater strength, twisting my hair all about beneath me, then forced myself to sitting upon the pelt.

"Go slowly, wench," came another voice, a deep voice I knew all too well, a voice which was clearly within the dwelling with me. "The vapors will release their hold upon you more easily with gentle first movements. You may accept my word that I know whereof I speak."

The whirling brought to my vision cleared slowly as I sat unmoving upon the pelt, both arms locked tight

and palms to the fur. Had I not sat that way I would surely have fallen, yet the clearing of my gaze did naught to quiet the churning of my thoughts. Mehrayn sat in the dwelling in which Chaldrin had left me, his wide back against the wall opposite to where I lay, his knees drawn up and his forearms resting upon them. He gazed upon me across the space which separated us, past the hearth which stood to my left and his right, and foolishly it came to me that he no longer wore the colorless clan covering which he had undoubtedly been given. He sat clad in the black body cloth of Sigurri, yet no weapons girded his waist.

"I, too, had a taste of those vapors," said he, frowning. "The jars were thrown into the tent Chaldrin and I were giving service in, catching the wenches completely unawares. Though startled, he and I were able to hold our breath till we reached the tent flap and threw it wide, yet was I mistaken in believing that I might then breathe freely. One breath and the darkness took me, leaving Chaldrin to defend both of us alone. When I awoke he told me he had felt no difficulty of any sort, which brings me to believe that his kalod in the Caverns, constantly surrounded by traces of the vapor, have given him a good deal of immunity to attack of that sort. He might well have left me to my fate, escaping easily from those who had no true wish to face him, yet his honor forbade that. Truly and endlessly honorable is the man I gladly call brother."

The male he spoke of I called brother, too, although I doubted his honor. Had the male not left me there, with another male I had no wish to be with? Had he not used the difficulty which had come to me during battle on his behalf to bring me to a place I would not have come while fully conscious? No, such things were not the doings of one who was endlessly honorable, and most certainly would there be words between the male and myself over the thing when once we faced one another again. I took my palms from the lenga fur and discovered that the strength was rapidly returning to my body, therefore did I go to my knees, then forced myself erect. I was still dizzy, but less so, and quickly did it pass into nothingness. With this in view I began to move toward the door Chaldrin had used, in the process making another discovery. The sword and dagger I had been given were gone, leaving naught upon me save my breech and leg bands. Had I not doubted Chaldrin earlier, I would surely have done so then.

"You need not waste the effort, wench," came the voice of Mehrayn, following me to the door while the male himself remained unmoving. "It may not be opened save from without, a doing Chaldrin will see to with the new light. This abandoned farmstead has been closed tight with wood, perhaps against the return of the former occupants. There are matters to be discussed between us, and I will see them discussed without interruption."

My hand upon the door latch proved the truth of the male's words, for pull as I might, I could not make it move. And there was clearly no other means of departing from the dwelling. Wood did indeed cover both of the windows, and naught was there to batter at it with save the dust upon the floors. None would return to that place, I knew, for those warned off by Midanna returned at peril of their lives. The anger I felt grew greater still, therefore did I retrace my steps to the window which was not far from where I had lain. Perhaps a loosened corner might be found, through which I would find it possible to.

"I am more than aware of the fact that you have not yet acknowledged my existence, wench," said Mehrayn, a growing trace of annoyance in his tone. "Best would be that you do so quickly, for what patience I had has long since been spent. We are here to exchange words and reach an understanding; attempting to hold to a childish silence will avail you naught."

I tossed my head to rid myself of the strands of hair which attempted to circle my arms, finding the dim cool of the dwelling less pleasant with each passing hand of reckid. My task among the enemy clans had not yet been completed, yet had such a consideration failed to keep the males from doing as they wished. I turned from the window and made again for the door, thinking there might perhaps be a board loose there which the males had overlooked, yet was I halted perhaps three paces from my goal.

"Enough of this!" snapped Mehrayn, his big hand on my arm pulling me about to face. his now evident anger. I had not heard him rising from his place at the wall, yet was it equally true that I cared not what he did. "You will not leave this place till you have gained my permission," he growled. "Therefore need you waste no further time upon fruitless search! Come and sit with me, for there are many things we"

With cold anger I used the knowledge given me by Chaldrin to pull my arm from his grip with a single thrust. Startlement flared briefly in his green eyes and then did the anger return. His hand came again to seize me, much as I had thought it would, yet when I attempted to block the seizing arm and deliver a kick as I had been taught to do, naught else occurred as expected. In some manner was my block avoided and my kick itself blocked, and then was I whirled about, both of my wrists taken, and my back up against the front of the male with his arms wrapped tightly about me. In fury I struggled against being held so, attempting to strike backward with my head and also to kick backward, yet were these attempts avoided as easily as my first.

"Your lessons have not yet been of along enough duration, wench," said Mehrayn, breathing somewhat heavily against my struggles. "Your ability continues to remain a bit short of the necessary point where my own abilities and greater strength would be negated, therefore may you consider that avenue of escape closed to you as well. Now we will have our discussion, with no further foolishness from you."

With deep satisfaction did the male then force me toward the furs I had awakened upon, paying no mind to my struggles and snarls. Indeed my lessons had been too few to allow me to fare well against one with equal knowledge but greater strength, yet had I had to make the attempt. Had I been able to reach the male with but one well-placed kick the matter would have ended differently, however the kick had not been delivered therefore was I delivered instead, to the fur and down upon it. Once there I was not released, rather did Mehrayn lie behind me, continuing to hold me with strength, facing toward the wall. Upon our left sides did we lay, his body close against mine.

"Too long has it been since I have held you to me, wench," he murmured, his lips close to my hair. "Well do you deserve to be beaten for keeping us apart so long, yet am I unable to consider such a thing the while my arms are about you. Also am I forced to admit that the fault was not entirely yours."

I made no answer to the words the male spoke, nor was I touched by them. Jalav had no need of males, most especially not one of the sort who held her.

"Do you hear me, wench?" Mehrayn pursued, shaking me somewhat. "I shall not blindly lay the entire burden upon you for I am far from guiltless, and have unquestionably given you a good deal of provocation. My actions were thoughtless and cruel, and now I can only ask your forgiveness. It is this which I desire above all other things, this which I have brought you here for. Will you forgive me?"

I could not keep the sound of scorn from escaping my throat, so outrageously mindless was the foolishness Mehrayn spouted. Had the male no understanding of any sort? Did he think me as mindless as he? I moved in annoyance against the arms which held me, turning my wrists in his hands, feeling the hesitation which touched the body pressed to mine.

"I-am unsure of the manner in which to interpret your response," said he after a moment, his tone now cautious. "Are you perhaps attempting to indicate that your forgiveness is already mine?"

"Ah, Mida, now do I truly begin to doubt your wisdom," said I, filled with an exasperation which was to a great extent disbelieving. "Although you likely desire no more than the use of his body, surely you would prefer a male with some vestige of intelligence? Would not the presence of one such as he be a greater embarrassment than any pleasure he might give?"

"By the gods!" exclaimed the male in outrage, no longer attempting the coaxing tone he had previously

used. "What have I said to you, wench, of the manner in which I am to be spoken of to the high ones? And for what reason do you speak such words? Surely you cannot continue to believe that the goddess has claimed me?"

"None with eyes and a mind might believe otherwise," I returned with cold abruptness. "Release me immediately, male for there continues to be tasks I must see to for her whom we both serve."

"Now do I believe I begin to see," said the fool of a male quite slowly, and then did he begin to move me about, so that I was turned to face him with my wrists held behind me, his leg over mine so that I might not kick. No more than one of his ridiculously large hands was required to hold my wrists, therefore was the other free to ease the twistings of my hair where I lay beside him, his fire-lit face taking no note of my increasing anger.

"I see now that my brother was both correct and incorrect," said he when I was settled to his satisfaction, his gaze now fully upon me. "It was Chaldrin's belief that your coldness and refusal to heed me was rooted in jealousy, as was that-punishment you had me given. As I had foolishly sought to hurt you with my doings with Dotil as you had hurt me with your rejection, Chaldrin felt it would be best if I were to apologize for my 'cruelty' and allow you to forgive me. Now is it clear that I asked for forgiveness upon the wrong point--and that the root of your jealousy lies elsewhere."

"Perhaps it will some fey be possible for males to understand that their lacks may not be found in Midanna," said I, the scorn having once again grown heavy in my voice. "Midanna do not covet the possessions of others, for they are possessed of the skill to take that which they wish. Should Mida smile upon them, their efforts will meet with success; should her smile be withheld, they will find her Blessed Realm or perhaps the final dark. No other than a male would stand about shivering in fear and with desire for that which he has been forbidden by another to touch."

"I believe I have spoken before upon the foolishness of arrogance when one is in the power of another," said Mehrayn, annoyance attempting to alter the evenness of his tone just as insult hardened his gaze. "Much does it seem that you speak so to a purpose, the purpose perhaps being that the pain normally given you for such words is needed to feed the hatred you require to survive in captivity. The captivity I mean to keep you in is unlike any you have ever experienced, wench, unlike any you are able to imagine. It will contain laughter rather than pain, joy rather than despair, pleasure rather than agony. It will be shaped to cause you to yearn for it rather than freedom, and will call you back to it no matter how far away matters of responsibility send you. It is without doubt a true captivity, yet will you come to desire it as strongly as I already do."

He then lowered his lips to briefly touch my unresisting ones, the sobriety he showed deliberately seeing naught of the bewilderment he had bred in me. In Mida's name, the soft words he had spoken had brought me a greater sense of dread than any pain he might have given, greater fear than any I had felt since my time before the male god Sigurr! How certain the male seemed that it would be possible to bring me to such a captivity! How was one to escape from such a thing?

"That, however, is a matter to discuss at another time," he continued, smiling faintly at the wide-eyed manner in which I now watched him. It was not possible to truly understand the doings of one who served Mida, nor might one know with certainty what their next actions might be. "The topic currently under discussion is dual in nature," said he, "touching as it does your contention that I have been chosen to serve your goddess, and my contention that jealousy sends its snarling vapors to fill you with cold savagery. The two points are in reality one, and this is what I mean to show you."

Again his hand came to smooth my hair, the faint smile still upon him, and then did his hand go to my arm and side, stroking with great gentleness. My muscles flared instantly in an attempt to break his grip upon

my wrists and push him from me, yet despite the gentleness of his caress, his grip had not loosened.

"How smooth and warm your skin is, wench," he murmured, as though unaware of my attempt to break free. "It gives me endless pleasure to touch you so, and ever shall it be the same. The same pleasure was yours with me, till I asked a boon of your goddess and was granted it. Who is it you thought to challenge for the possession of a-male?"

I gave no answer to the abrupt, disturbing question, more concerned with wishing away awareness of his warm hand upon my flesh, yet he nodded as though I had spoken.

"No Midanna need feel jealousy over that which she might take with the skill of her swordarm," said he, "yet how is a wench to pit her skill against the will of a goddess? That which your lady takes for her own is denied to those who follow her, no matter how greatly that thing is desired by them. So strongly did you feel upon the matter that you considered the unthinkable, the challenging of a god, for I had been put beyond your reach and you could not bear the thought. Indeed did it seem that I had contributed to the disaster by bringing myself to the attention of the goddess and then refusing to take myself from the area of her attention. Despite your upset you knew well enough that it was impossible to challenge the gods, therefore did you withdraw all indications of interest in me, in accordance with the will of your goddess. However, the deep, burning jealousy you felt remained, as well as the conviction that I had given myself willingly to another, one you might not face in challenge. For this reason was I given so painful and humiliating a punishment, for having spurned you and chosen another."

I closed my eyes against his sober green gaze, unable to speak, unable to halt the ache which rose to fill every part of me. I knew not the reason why males ever brought such pain to a warrior, pain beyond that which their chains and leather and lashes brought. Far easier to bear was the touch of lash, and again I knew not why it was so, only that it was.

"Jalav, my beloved, are you unable to see that this is not so?" he cried, suddenly releasing me so that he might hold me to him with all the strength in his arms. "Never would I choose another before you, sooner would I see my soul irretrievably lost! Though you have come to expect no other thing than pain from men, I would give you the brief pain of death before I would give you the agony of turning from you when you would face the gods for me! And never, never, never would I find it possible to give you death! I have not spurned you-nor has your lady denied me to you."

In some manner had my arms circled him as his circled me, yet did I continue unable to speak. So deeply had the male touched me that I no longer knew right from wrong, true from false, honorable from dishonorable; no more was I aware of than my great need for him, my endless desire for him. The will of a male mattered little to a Midanna, yet to know that he felt for me what I felt for him! The withdrawal of a blade from one's flesh brings less easing!

"You have as yet made no comment upon my next contention, wench," said he, one hand gently astroke upon my back. "As you now believe I have not turned from you, so must you believe that your lady has not denied me to you."

I shook my head against the chest I held to, knowing that this, at least, could not be. Mida might well require my skill and health to see her will done, yet was her continuing anger with me clear. Denial was to be my lot for so long as she willed it, likely to the end of my feyd.

"Ah, Sigurr, it is my unfortunate fate to be enmeshed to my soul with a woman who will not listen," said Mehrayn with a sigh, his words more respectful than his tone. "Your time of late has been more than well-filled, wench, therefore do I bid you to pause now for a time of consideration. Well might it be that I was kept from you before your approach to those other wenches, yet I fail to see how this might be

looked upon as absolute, unending denial for all time. Rather than agreeing that I was chosen by your lady for her own, I contend that was merely kept from distracting you from your task, a thing I could not keep myself from attempting. The goddess, in her wisdom, knew I moved as I did only through being unable to halt myself, therefore was I given aid rather than censure. The thought was given to you that I had been chosen to serve the goddess you, yourself, serve, and so were my helpless efforts halted by your refusal to heed them. Though it was not my determined intention to stand myself in your path, I found myself helpless to do other than that very thing. The manner in which I was brushed aside was gentle indeed, and devoutly do I thank your lady for having shown such compassion. I am led to believe that she has found a small fondness for me within her, likely by cause of my having acknowledged her in the manner I did. Although your task continues in some part unfinished, I have been allowed to bring you here and speak to you in this way, a thing which could not have been done without her let. Are you still able to deny her continuing love for you-and her clear permission for the joining of our hearts?"

The question he spoke fell silently into the maelstrom of my thoughts, whirling around and away to that land of confusion which was my usual dwelling place. Surely had I thought that Mida was displeased with me, at times that she meant me ill, yet the words that Mehrayn had spoken now gave me pause. Well might it be that he had the right of it, that he was correct and I in error, that my certainty at the time was no more than temporarily necessary so that my task might be properly seen to. Again I shook my head against the male who held me, yet this time from another cause.

"I have suddenly been denied the ability to think in any manner resembling clarity," I protested, raising my head to look upon the broad face of him. "How am I to know the truth or falsity of these things, to judge their merits or defects? How am I to be aware of what I do, when my thoughts are filled with naught save the male beneath my hands and the body he presses against mine?"

"These are the sole things you are meant to be aware of," said Mehrayn with a soft laugh, taking my face in both of his great hands. "It was for this reason that I was taken from your side, so that you might be undistracted in your dealings with those who were once your enemies. For this darkness you need think of no other thing, for you have been given the permission of your lady to do so. I am yours alone, Jalav, just as you are mine, and best would be that you accustom yourself to this truth. You have held me in capture for too long a time without giving me a similar capture, and I will no longer allow it."

His lips came to mine then, the touch no longer gentle nor brief, and truly was it capture which he brought me to. Never before had I felt such a thing, no desire approaching it save the one I had known when Ceralt had first attempted to make me his. Had I not even then ridden in the name of Mida, hers to do with as she willed, surely would I have been taken in a similar capture by the dark-haired High Rider of those who were called Belsayah. Surely was there unexplained magic within these two males, the red-haired and the dark, magic which ensnared a warrior and turned her helpless in their arms. The lips of Mehrayn burned fiercely against mine, effortlessly turning me helpless, and nearly was I unaware of the fact when he put me to my back and crouched above me. His hands took my breech and threw it from me, and then was his body cloth gone as well, naught remaining to bar our desires one from the other. He thrust deep as I welcomed him with joy, and then were all further considerations as one with the darkness.

CH 12. With forces joined---to battle the gods

The new light had not yet appeared when Chaldrin came, unbarring the door he had earlier barred, rousing Mehrayn and myself from a deep, dreamless sleep. The white-clad male had been sent by Aysayn, the Shadow also sending a plea for Mehrayn's presence. The Sigurri legions were in need of disposition, and Aysayn had no wish to attempt the thing again. Mehrayn took my lips a final time, found and donned his black body cloth while asking Chaldrin to remain with me till I had returned among the

tents of the Midanna, and then was he gone, off to see to a duty which had too long been neglected. His final glance had been for me, an unspoken promise that he would return as soon as he was able, and in some manner was my distress increased by the doing. I sought out my breech where it lay perhaps two paces from the faintly glowing hearth, donned it quickly, then left the dwelling for the soft darkness which comes just before the light.

"So, sister, you have used the darkness to return happiness to us both," said Chaldrin, halting me with a hand upon my shoulder, just without the dwelling. The weapons which Aysayn had given me were there, yet would I have gone past them without sight had Chaldrin not halted me. "Happiness alone, however, is scarcely sufficient for your safety in the forests, my girl. You must take care not to grow lax in the presence of your body's recent satisfaction."

"Satisfaction was scarcely the sole thing I was given," I muttered in answer, keeping my eyes from the male as I took the swordbelt and closed it about me, then set the dagger in my leg bands. "Should you have come to add your punishment to Mehrayn's for my having given you anger with my actions, best would be that you see to it at once. There are tasks I must soon be about, and I cannot long delay their beginning. "

"You would have me attempt your punishment the while you stand armed?" he asked, his amusement clear from the chuckling produced by him. "Surely, had you made such an offer before taking up that swordbelt, I would have"

His words broke off as I tore away the swordbelt and threw it from me, his silence filled with shock as I sent the dagger after the sword. The ache within me was as deep as it had been when Mehrayn had first spoken of the matter, and I put one hand to my middle against that ache, feeling the moisture which filled my eyes. So horribly unthinking had been my actions, so mindlessly uncaring of consequences had I been!

"No, wench, it cannot be that you weep!" said Chaldrin, shocked, and then were his arms about me, holding me to him with one hand to my hair. "You must tell me what the Sword did to you in punishment," said he, a growl beginning in his throat. "That punishment was due you is undeniable, yet to bring one such as you to tears-! I must know what was done!"

"He-spoke of my intention to bring hatred to you and him," I whispered, clinging to the male in an attempt to throw off the trembling which had seized me. "He knew I had done as I did so that you and he would be pleased if my life were lost attempting Mida's task, yet did he ask what I would have done had I succeeded in breeding hatred within the two of you-and then had lived. It came to me then that never again would I have known the strength of his arms, the unending pleasure of his use, never again would I have known the glorious soul-sharing of the presence of a brother by my side. My life would then have returned to the emptiness it once was, Chaldrin, only then I would have known the exact magnitude of my loss."

The tears continued their trail down my cheeks, yet was I beyond berating myself for so weakling a doing. In memory had I returned to my time with Ceralt, one who had, in full awareness, done as I had attempted to do. Only then was I able to fully understand the complete meaning of what he had done, the strength which had been required to provoke the hatred of one he would have given his life for. I had no doubt that Ceralt would have given his life for me, for he had attempted to give even more with his actions, doings which brought even greater pain than they gave. His words had shown that he knew full well the loss which would have been his had he not found death, and yet he had been willing to accept that loss so that I would be spared the pain of his ending. How blind I had been to see naught save his doings themselves, naught save the shame and humiliation given me! How small were those things when compared with what he, himself, must have suffered, and yet no word of pain had ever passed his lips!

"Ah, wench, you have been harshly punished indeed," sighed Chaldrin, stroking my hair in an attempt to give me comfort. "To be shown the true meaning of one's actions, to be forced to face the barrenness of one's existence without those one cares for-I much doubt I would have had the strength for such a doing. The Sword has clearly forced himself to it for your sake-so that you will not consider such a thing a second time."

"Also was I given other punishment," said I, finding something of the comfort Chaldrin sought to give. "To have left me entirely unpunished would have been to have left me to naught save considerations of might-have-beens, Mehrayn said, and also had he no wish to leave his own resentments unresolved. His second doing was both more and less painful than the first, yet did it serve to take from him the angered memory of my own doing."

"Which was the reason for your having offered me my own turn with you," Chaldrin observed, understanding clear in his voice. "You had no wish to leave me with memories of anger which might fester and eventually drive me from you. I value such consideration more than I am able to say, girl. What was the manner of the Sword's second doing?"

"He-beat me," I replied, of a sudden more than eager to end the discussion. I attempted to move from Chaldrin's arms, yet did the male continue to hold me to him with a chuckle.

"I find it fascinating that embarrassment may be felt as easily within you as fear may be felt in the body of another," said he, the dark shadow of his face looking down upon me. "I need no longer ask of the sort of beating you were given, for it was surely the sort he was given himself. Did he bring forth a switch to use?"

"He had no switch," I replied with disgust. "Nor would he have used one had one been easily to hand, he informed me. I would likely find the need to stand in challenge with the new light, said he, and he had no desire to see me ended by cause of an inability to move with my usual speed."

"Therefore did he use no other thing than his hand," Chaldrin concluded with a nod. "I, too, am mindful of the challenge you face, and would also be willing to forgo the use of a switch. Are you prepared to receive the same punishment from me that you received from the Sword?"

In memory I felt again the weight of Mehrayn's hand, returning to me what he had been given, felt again the silent tears which had streamed down my cheeks at the growing ache in my bottom. Sooner would I have faced the whip Chaldrin had once beaten me with, for the whip had brought pain only to my body, none to my pride, yet was I unable to request near-crippling pain in place of humiliation. There was indeed a challenge I would likely need to face, and the accomplishing of Mida's tasks held far more import than even the preservation of my pride.

"Chaldrin may do as he wishes with this Midanna," I said at last, looking down from the eyes I was not yet able to see. "The debt I owe him is large, and the manner of settling it may be the choice of none save him. Do as you must, brother. There will be no challenge between us at the end of it. "

Well prepared was I for accepting that which was necessary, yet was Chaldrin briefly silent, then did he raise my face to his again.

"No debt of any size stands between us, sister," said he, his fingers steady beneath my chin. "That my life remains mine through your recent efforts may not be denied, and a doing such as that excuses much. What remain between us are bonds of love, a form of love uninvolved with bodily doings, a form of love which allows feelings of annoyance and exasperation to exist along with it. Never did I feel true anger with you, girl, merely exasperation, which calls for no more than a small punishment to banish it entirely. This punishment I will postpone till exasperation touches me again at some doing of yours, and only then

will I demand the right you have freely given me. Yet must I also give you clear warning: should you again involve yourself in such destructive foolishness, you will keenly regret having given me leave to do you as I would. I feel Mehrayn has the right of it, and I will give you the same as you received from him, yet not with so light a touch."

"You would not-consider the use of a whip in its stead?" I asked in a very small voice, feeling greatly diminished by what Chaldrin had said. Never had I known that such a thing as the love between us might be, and in its presence I felt absurdly small and undeserving. Many new things had recently been presented me, things which would require the passing of my continued confusion before they might be evaluated. "It had not occurred to me that there would come a time when I would look upon the whippings and lashings I had been given, as great kindness," I muttered.

"A lashing as kindness," said Chaldrin with much deep-throated chuckling, his arms releasing me at last. "No other wench I have ever known would see it so, but they were not Midanna. And no, girl, I would not consider the use of a whip in place of the punishment promised you. Had I learned naught else about you, still would I have learned of the ease with which you put away the lessons of a whip. Pain is turned into a determination for revenge by you, and I would not have you do the same with what lessons I attempt to teach. The gentler punishment will be sharper by cause of its gentleness, and the lesson will be learned. Take up your weapons, now, so that we may return to the camp of tents."

"I must think upon all these strangenesses I have been presented with," said I with something of a sigh, going to the weapons I had previously thrown from me. "It may perhaps prove true that one is in better state when in the capture of enemies, than when in the care of brothers. Also do I continue to believe that questions such as that would not have arisen had I been wise enough to keep from being enmeshed in the doings of males."

"It was not meant that you be kept from the doings of men," said he with further chuckling, watching as I replaced the weapons. "You must learn to deal with such things, and also to accept graciously what lessons are taught you. We who care for you will assist you in these things."

"Mida protect me from the assistance of males," said I, speaking very softly, yet did Chaldrin hear and allow his amusement to grow. We left the vicinity of the dwelling surrounded by his deep, gentle laughter, and no other thing than thought upon what lay before me kept me from a suspicion that I had in some manner enchained myself more thoroughly than had been done to me by any who called himself enemy.

The beginning brightness of the new fey was already returning color to all things about us when we reached the first of the tents. Somewhat disturbing was it to see Sigurri warriors all about, yet was their presence greatly necessary. Few more than two handfuls of Midanna remained untaken by the vapor of the gray-clad males, therefore were they in need of assistance in seeing to their sisters. All about the various colored tents did the two groups labor, tending those in matching clan colors. Two sets had been arranged in the midst of the tent areas, one of those who merely slept deeply-and one of those who had been sent upon the journey to Mida's Realm. Some of those who had stood guard had been slain, and some of those who had not been taken by the vapors, and sight of those who had had their lives uselessly thrown away before they might be spent to better purpose, turned me more than grim. Slowly did I pace from tent area to tent area, looking upon those who were no more, seeing again the gray-clad ones in my mind's eye, bitterly regretting that those gray-clad faith were no longer before my sword. Much pleasure would there have been in further burials of my blade, yet did I refrain from visiting the area in which were held those of the craven horde who had not been able to flee the Sigurri, yet feared to face them. These had thrown themselves upon the mercy of the males, thinking to be carried back to the land of the Sigurri and perhaps consigned to the Caverns of the Doomed, yet had I already spoken with Aysayn and seen the matter settled otherwise. Those gray-clad ones who stood in capture would be gifted to the

Midanna when they awoke, a gesture of friendship from warriors to warriors. Also would they be given the body of the very young Sarda, she who had been captured by the males and made to show them the place of visiting. Her body gave evidence of what she had been made to endure, of what had finally broken her and made her agree to the demands of the males. She had not survived the doing long, which was much of a blessing; also would no single invader survive to regret his doing, yet would their regret be keen the short while they lived.

Ilvin labored with those clans who had none awake to begin with till there were some few from each who had been roused, and then did she come to join me as I paced about; Chaldrin and Aysayn already moved silently in my wake, feeling my fury over those who had been slain and wisely saying naught. Mehrayn joined us as well when those Sigurri who had fought and labored through the darkness had been replaced with those who had slept, and with him was S'Heernoh, deep upset in the dark eyes which rested in an overly sober countenance. In soft words was I told by Mehrayn that S'Heernoh's upset was caused by his belief that an earlier warning would have lessened the number of Midanna lives which had been lost, therefore did it become necessary that I take a moment to speak with the male. Quietly did I point out that an earlier warning would have done naught to alter matters, for those two who were able to direct the Sigurri legions in their entirety were unavailable, Mehrayn with the Midanna, Aysayn with myself. Also did I point out that no warning of any sort would surely have been an even greater disaster, therefore was the male foolish to berate himself over a doing which had seen more lives saved than lost. When I put my hand to his shoulder and asked if the male S'Heernoh meant to anger a war leader with further foolishness, the male smiled his faint, odd smile, met my gaze with the warmth he had so often shown, then shook his head. No words were spoken by him, yet did his manner lead me to believe that he had taken my own words to heart.

The light of the new fey was bright and high before the greater number of Midanna were awakened. Dotil and Wedin, having themselves fallen prey to the vapor, were late in joining my set, and with them walked Gidain and Rinain, the two Sigurri who had sought them out the darkness previous. Throughout the darkness and what new light had passed had the two male warriors remained with the Summa, and the manner in which they joined my set brought a frown to the face of Ennat the Keeper, who had awakened long enough before that she was then able to stand beside me.

"Those, I presume, are the Summa who rode with you," said she, her frown continuing in evidence.

"Those males who accompany them-do they follow the Summa? They continue to bear arms and to wear their own colors, and they fail to walk respectfully behind or to one side-yet is there some shadow of a look about them which suggests they follow warriors in some manner."

"They neither follow nor demand to be followed," I said, knowing my words would do little to soothe the Keeper. "The males, too, are warriors, and in some manner have they joined with the Summa which takes from none of them and gives to all. It is not a thing I am able to understand, Ennat, for these Sigurri are unlike any males I have ever come across. To take one in capture would be much like taking in a Midanna in capture, yet is there no hesitation within them over giving a warrior her due. Should Mida add to your wisdom and some fey bring you understanding of ones such as they, I would be greatly in your debt if the understanding were shared with me."

"And with me," said Renin of the Sonna as she joined us, the yellow of her clan covering less bright than it had been. "I awoke thinking it would be necessary to give my life in defiance of my captors, then found that those would-be captors had already been driven off, and by those who attended me. Gently and with respect was I tended, as though clan sisters saw to my well-being, and when I was once again able to stand without assistance, my weapons were returned to me." Greatly disturbed did Renin seem, though she disallowed much outward evidence of it, and she shook her head as Ennat and I looked upon her.

"With my weapons returned to me I was left to my own devices, save for a single one of those males.

When the others had gone he approached me alone, then spoke of how pleasing he found my golden hair and green eyes. He, himself, was dark-haired and dark-eyed, and suggested that if I found him equally as pleasing, he would come to me when the unsteadiness from the vapors had entirely left me. In no manner did he ask to follow me, nor was I commanded to follow him; I had no true understanding of the exact proposal made, yet did he make no effort to halt me when I walked from him in confusion. These males are clearly free, Hosta; for what reason do they not begrudge our own freedom, as do other free males?"

"I know not, Renin," I made admission with a sigh, finding her confusion a true match to mine. "I, too, have sought an answer to that question, yet does the answer continue to elude me. All Midanna know of the strangeness of males, yet these males go well beyond that."

"Perhaps-perhaps they have so little doubt upon the question of their own abilities, that they need not diminish others to be certain of their own selves," suggested Ennat, her tone greatly unsure, the frown still in possession of her. "No true warrior finds the need to take the glory of another before her own glory may shine forth, and these males have much of the sound of warriors to them."

"They are unquestionably warriors," came another voice, heralding the approach of Faris of the Summa, who was accompanied by the Simna was leader, Ludir. Already had Melid of the Sarra and Tarit of the Samma joined us the while Renin spoke, and all eyes turned to the newcomers.

"Their battle skill, at least, is sufficient to give them the name of warrior," said Ludir, a sourness to the words she spoke. She and Faris halted before the balance of us, and Faris attempted to swallow down amusement.

"My sister Ludir is scarcely pleased to find it necessary to make such an admission, and for that she may not be faulted," said Faris, silently sending me some part of her amusement. "I had come to the tents of the Simna to see if Ludir had awakened as yet, and was presented with an unexpected sight. A Simna warrior had awakened abruptly without the strengthlessness which had held the balance of us, looked about to see males without number, and suddenly recalled the attack of the darkness. Springing to her feet she took the sword of a male before he knew what she was about, sounded the Simna war cry, then attacked those she believed were enemies."

"Attempted to attack those she believed were enemies," corrected Ludir, her sourness undiminished. "Those of my warriors who were sufficiently awakened to be aware of the true state of affairs were as yet unfit to attempt halting her, yet it soon became clear that the males had no need of our aid. They most of them quickly threw themselves from the path of her blade, and then did one, with a black shoulder stroke, move forward to engage her with his own weapon. More than once was the male nearly spitted, for he made no attempt at attack of his own, yet his skill kept him from an ending till three others of his males were able to throw themselves upon the warrior the while her attention was engaged by him who stood before her blade. The three bore her to the ground, removed the weapon from her fist, then held her the while her sisters were called to speak with her. I, myself, went forward with difficulty to speak praise of my sister's bravery in attacking those she thought to be enemies, and unbelievably found myself joined in the giving of that praise by him who had held her blade, he of the black shoulder stroke! Never before have I heard a male speak praise of a warrior's skill, save that he wished to follow her, and this the male did not ask! Merely did he speak the words of praise, and no other!"

"Perhaps it is in such a way that males such as these ask the thing," suggested Faris, her amusement greater at Ludir's heavy indignation. "Jalav will surely know, for one of those who followed her here bears a similar stroke of black upon his shoulder. I see the male now bears arms, Jalav, as does the one in white. Have they been given your permission to take such a liberty?"

I turned my head to glance at Mehrayn where he stood in converse with S'Heernoh and Aysayn, and also at Chaldrin who stood beside Ilvin, looking down upon her attentively as she spoke words which seemed difficult for her. The presence of the Hitta had seemed to provoke more growls of displeasure than the presence of males, yet had none seen fit to give her challenge-as yet. I then returned my gaze to Faris and smiled faintly.

"The males both follow me and do not follow me," said I, well aware of the close attention the others gave my words. "He of the white covering has vowed to his god to accompany me and stand beside me for as long as life is left to him, for he was bested by me with swords and now believes our fates intertwined. Chaldrin has great skill with the sword he wears, greater than any of the males who once followed him, yet has he little need of it for he also has great battle skill without weapons. He has already begun the teaching of this skill to myself and the Hitta and the Summa, for he dislikes the thought of our being without it. He is another who joys in the skill of warriors, and joys also in the thought of adding to it."

In silence did the eyes of the war leaders and Keeper leave me to go to Chaldrin, and many of those eyes, were filled with curiosity and the beginnings of greater interest. No male who followed a Midanna was allowed weapons, for he might some fey allow the presence of a weapon at his side to encourage him to deny the will of a warrior. That Chaldrin might not be disarmed even with the removal of his weapons was somewhat disturbing to those about me, yet their curiosity and interest clearly showed a greater respect toward me, for allowing him to follow me in any manner whatsoever. I had not intended to provoke such feelings within them, however the words I would have added to those already spoken were halted by Faris.

"And the other?" she asked, returning all eyes to her. "Has the other also sworn an oath to his god? His service was stranger than that of the white-clad male, for I tasted them both from curiosity. The red-haired one showed no reluctance in giving service to a warrior, yet the use of a war leader was not equally as pleasurable. He dislikes being taken upon his back, I think, as though disturbing memories come to him with the position."

"Indeed does he dislike it," said I, the sudden amusement I felt broadening my smile to something of a grin. "Those with black strokes upon their shoulders are war leaders to their males, and he is war leader to those war leaders. Once, in his own dwelling, I took him so, upon his back with my dagger at his throat. He could not deny the pleasure he felt, yet did he vow vengeance upon me for doing him so. Greatly amusing are males when they are so highly incensed."

"Scarcely amusing," said Faris, neither she nor the others joining my laughter. I had thought to distract them from Chaldrin with tales of Mehrayn, yet for some reason the ploy had not affected them as I wished it to. "These males are too large and well made-and too skillful-for their anger to be dismissed so lightly, war leader. The red-haired male is war leader to all of his males, a war leader of war leaders, and yet you speak lightly of having taken him against his will. In what manner did he take his vengeance?"

"He-took no vengeance," I replied, attempting to show naught of my upset. "He followed after when I left his city, bringing others of his males, and kept my life from being taken by those gray-clad males who held Wedin and Dotil. When I fell senseless from the poisoning of my wounds, he tended me till Mida brought me healing. His vow of vengeance was no more than jest, for he dislikes being forced to the service of a Midanna."

"And yet he allowed himself to again be used in such a way, and without protest," said Ennat, her dark eyes upon me with sober calm. "A war leader of war leaders, he nevertheless took no vengeance, tended you in your need, and allowed himself to be used so that none might say you led a free male to our lands. You speak unknowingly in error when you say he does not follow you, Jalav of the Hosta. It is simply

that these males follow like no others who follow Midanna, both he and the white-clad one. You command deep loyalty in odd places, war leader, as the chosen of Mida rightfully should."

"She is not the chosen of Mida!" rang out another voice even as my thoughts whirled with the agreement to be seen in the eyes of the war leaders. I had not expected so effortless an acceptance, and indeed was it not meant to be so. Kalir stood not far from our set, her chin high, her feet widespread, fury blazing in her eyes from the words she had clearly heard Ennat speak. Deliberately had I avoided seeking out the Selga, as what lay between us was meant to be settled in the presence of her sister war leaders and Keeper; although not all of the war leaders had as yet made an appearance, enough were present to see the thing properly done.

"Kalir of the Selga, your actions have disgraced us all!" said Ennat at once, anger seemingly causing her to again forget her place as Keeper. I had been asked what circumstances had kept me from appearing to face challenge, and my reply had filled Ennat with the rage of humiliation. "To force the helplessness of sleep upon the one you challenged, and then to give her over into the capture of those of a village-your actions speak clearly enough of your cowardice, as well as your lack of fitness to be a war leader of Mida! "

"There was no cowardice in doing such things to one whose blood would have sullied my blade!" snapped the Selga, deliberately seeing naught of the shocked outrage evinced by her sisters. "It was my determination that another trial was called for, therefore did I see to it. Well pleased am I that that trial, too, was circumvented, for it has now become clear that I have been chosen by Mida to end the impostor. When her foul blood covers my blade and she lies lifeless at my feet, then will it be equally clear to all of you that Kalir is the chosen of Mida, not some worthless Hosta!"

"I now see the direction in which the lellin wings," said Faris to me in a soft voice as I loosened the blade in my scabbard. "Kalir wishes the leadership of all the Midanna to be hers, and will dare anything to see it so."

"Her wishes are of no consequence," I said, feeling the anger and battle desire rise up in me. "Should one wish a thing, one does not sully that thing with acts of dishonor. It is completely fitting that the final thing she dares is to face me.

"She wears the sword and dagger given you by Mida!" exclaimed Tarit with great indignation, the first words ever addressed to me by the Samma. "Will the weapons not give her Mida's blessing as well?"

"Mida's blessing is in the skill of the arm wielding the weapon, sister, not in the weapon itself," said I, giving answer to Tarit in a voice that easily reached Kalir. Unwavering was the gaze I sent to the Selga, and higher did her anger flame when I stepped out toward her.

"Mida's blessing is indeed in the arm which wields her weapon!" snarled Kalir, nearly beside herself. "Also is it to be found in the great magic of her sign, the life sign which once was yours and now is mine! I, too, was born beneath the sign of the hadat, another clear indication that Mida has called to me! She may perhaps have used this one to carry the life sign to me, yet now is it mine and her life as well! The mother of all has spurned you, Hosta trash; behold the one fated to lead her Midanna in your place-and behold the beginning of your own ending!"

Rabidly did Kalir scream out these words, and her fist rose high with the leather of my life sign clenched tight therein. The crystal hadat gleamed in the brightness of the fey's light, drawing my eyes, forcing me to wonder if the words spoken by Kalir were indeed truth. Much had I felt that Mida was displeased with me, and this, perhaps, was to be the time of her taking another chosen. A chill of dread touched me at the thought, for Kalir would scarcely see to the freeing of the Hosta once battle with the strangers was

done, and then dread was thrust aside by the fires of rage. Should Mida take another as chosen, that other would not be Kalir! A craven was Kalir, unwilling to face me in battle without the sword of Mida before her, thoroughly unfit to be called Midanna, not to speak of chosen. First would this Selga and I cross blades, and then would the matter of chosen be seen to.

"You continue to mean to face me!" said Kalir as her eyes gave her knowledge of my decision, a good deal of disbelief in her voice. "I hold all of Mida's gifts and you hold none, and still do you mean to face me! You are the greatest of fools, Hosta, even greater for this than for believing you might bring males here among us! First will I see to you, and then will I send my warriors against these males, for true Midanna can wish no part of them. All of you will fall, and it is I who will see to it!"

I drew my sword at the venom Kalir spewed forth; however, the Selga was not yet prepared to do the same. Rather than draw and step toward me she took my life sign, opened the leather, and drew it on over her head. No attempt did she make to pull her dark hair through the leather, instead she grasped the crystal hadat and pressed it to her breast. Her face wore a look of great triumph-and then did all those about us cry out in fear at her scream of agony. Smoke arose from her hand and breast, a gentle graying which was then quickly lost in the flames which engulfed her, flames which seemed to arise from her very body! The screams of her agony rose higher and higher, freezing me in the deep-set shock where I stood with slackened jaw and slackly held sword, and then was the sword snatched from me by Ennat, who strode past where I stood, to Kalir. The heat of the flames nearly made her flinch back, yet determination brought her forward again, and with a single swing did she cut the head from the Selga.

The sound of agony ceased abruptly then, and also did the flames immediately recede from blackened flesh. Headless body followed bodiless head to the heat-shriveled grass of the ground, and Ennat looked down upon it in silence for a moment before turning to send her gaze to those who had not yet found themselves able to utter a single sound.

"There are many times when the will of Mida is unknown, few times when it is made unarguably clear," said she in a strong voice which nevertheless shook some small bit. "We have all of us been blessed this fey by having her will shown to us so clearly, taking from our shoulders the burden of the necessity to judge truth from lie. All of us have seen the life sign given by Mida hanging passively and protectively upon the breast of the Hosta; need we ask any further questions upon the point of who Mida's chosen might be?"

No single voice rose to give disagreement to Ennat's words, and truly do I believe that most were unable to utter a sound of any sort. All in view of the Keeper's tent had witnessed Kalir's manner of ending, and nearly all were surely filled with the same illness which attempted to twist my insides free. Death comes to us all, with some fortunate enough to find it in the midst of the glory of battle, yet none I had ever met had earned an ending such as Kalir's. To be consumed alive in the flames of sacrilege, to have no least hope of defending oneself! the illness rose up with even greater force within me, sending me down to one knee, sending the flames of imagination racing through my own body. The heat I felt was sickening, there in the brightness of Mida's fey, and nearly was I overcome completely.

"Jalav, what ails you?" came Ennat's voice as though from afar, and then were there hands upon my arms, and exclamations in the voices of males.

"Her flesh burns as though she, too, were afire!" came the voice of Mehrayn, a wildness in it. "How does this come to be? What are we to do for it?"

"Perhaps water," said Chaldrin, the hand which was surely his tightening upon my arm. "We must immerse her in water, and drive this fever from her!"

"No!" said another voice, one which seemed like S'Heernoh's, yet was it filled with greater authority and force than it had ever held. "The life sign, we must replace the life sign upon her, to quiet its agitation! If we fail to do so, she will not survive!"

With the sound of many voices and presences about me I attempted to force open the lids which had closed over my eyes, yet to no avail. The illness and flame heat rose higher and higher within me, and then came a touch which brought the ending of darkness.

Dim was the candle-lit interior of Ennat's tent, close in the warmth of the fey which had not advanced far from the time the darkness had taken me. I had awakened to find myself upon the sleeping leather of the Keeper, my life sign returned to its place about my neck, all illness and flame heat gone from my flesh. I had sighed with relief at their blessed absence, then had raised myself to sitting to look about at those who filled the tent.

"Mida sees to her own," said Ennat, smiling in satisfaction as she came forward with a pot of brewed daru for me. "I had no doubt that you would be returned to full health, Jalav of the Midanna."

"I, too, had no doubts," said Chaldrin, who sat to my left, "yet am I greatly relieved to see you awake, sister."

"And I," said Mehrayn, looking upon me from his place to my right. Much did it seem that he wished to touch me, yet was he aware of the life sign I wore, the life sign which would take the pleasure from his touch. "Do you hunger, wench?" he asked, keeping his light eyes upon me. "You slept the healing sleep only for a short while, yet have you ever wakened from it with hunger."

"I know not whether my hunger stems from that or from not having fed in some time," said I, sipping at the daru to quiet the inner rumblings Mehrayn's words had brought forth. "What ever the cause, hunger is most certainly with me."

"Allow me to see to the fetching of your provender," said Ennat, crouching to put aside her own pot of daru before straightening again. "Your presence honors my tent, Jalav of the Midanna, and I would see the honor continue for a while."

Her warm smile lit her way from the tent, and for a long moment no other word was spoken. Mehrayn and Chaldrin and Aysayn and Ilvin and Wedin and Dotil and I; all of us sat unspeaking, and nearly unmoving.

"To think that that nearly was done to Ladayna," said Aysayn at last, a tremor of illness passing through the dark eyes of him. "Had she not only taken her life sign, had she attempted to put it about her neck-"

"Surely Sigurr guarded her and kept her from it," said Mehrayn, attempting to soothe his brother's upset. "We none of us know the full power of the sign given by the gods, yet were we all guarded from it. None were harmed-save that one who sought to steal the power for her own. Even my wench now sits before us restored to health."

"For which we all thank the gods," said Aysayn with a nod, producing something of a smile.

"Nevertheless, as soon as our battle with the coming strangers is done and I have returned to the city, Ladayna will be taught the true meaning of punishment. Never will I forget the sight of those flames rising from the female's flesh, consuming her with agony... !"

"Brother, enough!" protested Chaldrin, his eyes upon the trembling which had come to my hands. I, too, would never find the sight of Kalir's ending leaving me, and this was an added burden I must carry: never again to allow another the touching nor taking of my life sign. The true blame for the doing was mine

alone, for had I sought out Kalir before she awakened and reclaimed the life sign, it would not have been able to do her as it did. Had I not been so pleased to be free of the thing, had I not been so foolishly unconcerned—Abruptly I emptied the pot of daru I held, put it aside, then removed my life sign, angrily pulling it free of my hair before wrapping its leather about the hilt of the dagger in my leg bands. That dagger was the one given me by Mida, the matching sword lying to the right of the leather I sat upon, neither showing the least harm from having been upon Kalir at the time of her ending. It gave me little surprise to see it so, for the weapons were also possessions of the goddess, as was the life sign I wrapped about the hilt of the dagger. Although I must surely keep that life sign from the hands of others, I would not allow it to bind me to it, taking all of pleasure from my life, leaving naught save duty and lack of feeling. Little enough of pleasure was allowed Mida's chosen, and this little I would not permit to be taken from me!

"It was my intention to thank you earlier, sisters," said I to Wedin and Dotil, deliberately seeing naught of Aysayn's embarrassment and the faint dismay of Chaldrin and Mehrayn. No more was to be spoken upon the matter of my life sign, and this the males quickly understood.

"For what do you thank us, Jalav?" asked Wedin, raising herself from the floor leather to take my emptied pot and turn toward the fire with it. "Little aid were we able to give you, with our sisters guarding us so closely. They feared we would be branded traitors, you see, and had no wish for so dishonorable a fate to touch us."

"It must please you to know that the love of your clan sisters is yours," said I, smiling my thanks for the refilled pot which Wedin brought me. "The tale of your escaping from observation long enough to build the pit must truly be one to be told and retold."

"Pit?" said Dotil as Wedin reclaimed her place beside her. "What pit do you speak of, Jalav? We built no pit, nor were we able to escape from our sisters. They bound us in leather to be certain of this, and we were unable to free ourselves."

"And yet there was a pit in the forest," said I, speaking slowly and sipping at the daru in an attempt to clear the renewed confusion from my thoughts. "In the trial I was put to, with the pursuing warriors no more than a pair of reckid behind me, pain and weariness curling me nearly to the ground—a covered pit in a ring of bushes was my salvation, taking me from the sight of those who hunted me, allowing me the time of rest and healing I would not survive without. Also was there provender in the pit to heal my hunger—and bits of cloth in Summa blue and Hosta green to guide me to this haven. And you say you have no knowledge of it?"

"Not we," said Wedin, exchanging looks of deep mystification with her sisters. "Perhaps the males—?"

"I know naught of any pit in the forest," said Aysayn with a shrug, looking to Ilvin. "Likely we rode at the time with this wench and the others with her, attempting to reach this place."

"And the Sword and I were otherwise engaged," said Chaldrin as Ilvin nodded her agreement with Aysayn. "Even had we known of your need, girl, there were too many seeking the service of those who followed you, to allow us the opportunity for such a doing. We, also, know naught of it."

"Surely it was the doing of your lady," said Mehrayn, and this time his hand came to touch my hair. "As your need was so very great, she took what measures she could to see to it."

"Perhaps," I allowed, not caring to speak my thoughts more fully. Never before had Mida given me even half so great an amount of assistance, and I could not bring myself to believe she had this time done so. Where the pit had come from I knew not, yet was this no more than one mystery among many.

"And were you greatly pleasing to those who demanded your service?" asked Ilvin of Chaldrin, an evil leer covering her face. "A male such as you among the Hitta would have been drained to the final drop before being allowed the sleep of exhaustion."

"I think, wench, I must show you how far a distance it is to my final drop," said Chaldrin with calm pleasure, looking upon Ilvin the while Mehrayn. Aysayn and the Summa laughed. "Never yet have I done so, yet surely has the proper time now arrived. You will have the feyd you require before needing to take seat again upon the back of a kan."

"You intend, for once, to pleasure me fully?" Ilvin asked with a look of delight, and then did the leer return to her. "Indeed is such a doing more than past time, for in all other respects you appear quite hardy. Afterward, when you find yourself unable to walk, I will even fetch provender to you."

"Perhaps a short taste of the leather first," said Chaldrin against further laughter, his tone now musing. "An insolent wench fairly begs for taming, and I am not a man to ignore the pleas of a female. At darkness, then, eh, wench, and in a place none will disturb us?"

His dark-eyed gaze rested fully upon Ilvin, and she, despite the continuing laughter all about her, forbore to reply. She knew not whether the male spoke in jest, and behind her own gaze undoubtedly lay the memory of the strength of Chaldrin's arm, yet her words of provocation had been spoken and could not be recalled. I saw the question come into her eyes upon the wisdom of also speaking words of apology, yet that decision would not be easily made by her. If she truly desired the use of Chaldrin, which she had not had in some feyd, she would find it necessary to meet with him at darkness. At that time would she either speak in apology or accept what punishment he gave, and I knew not which she would choose--or whether she would not choose another thing entirely. The matter lay between two warriors, and between them would it be seen to.

The next moment saw Ennat returned with my provender, and full welcome was it to the hollow within me. Mehrayn growled out his disgust with me for not having seen to the need sooner, for the manner in which I fell upon the provender spoke eloquently of how great that need was, and Ennat fell again to frowning. The Keeper seemed outraged that a male would speak so to Mida's chosen, yet merely did she swallow daru till I had fed my fill, and then did she suggest that I be allowed a time of uninterrupted rest. To my annoyance all those who sat with me agreed at once, and before I might voice another preference, the last of them was gone through the tent flap. I had little interest in either rest or solitude, yet it seemed I was destined to have both. I took up my pot of daru and leaned down to one elbow upon the sleeping leather, unsure of whether I felt annoyed or amused. When I finished the daru I would leave the tent, and then would all of those who followed me see how little need I had for rest.

"My lady war leader." The soft words spoken at the tent flap drew me to sitting once again, for S'Heernoh had entered with as little sound as he ever made. He smiled when he saw the greeting in my eyes, and bowed his curious bow.

"Once again you have returned to health, and once again I am well pleased," said he. "Are you in great need of rest, or may I speak with you?"

"My need for rest exists only in the minds of those who have just departed here," I replied, gesturing with the daru. "Come and sit with me, S'Heernoh, so that I may thank you once again for your aid."

"I believe I have already said that thanks are unnecessary," said he, coming forward to take seat not far from me. "I would not have interfered, save that the meaning of what I had seen upon the Snows came to me then, and I had no doubt as to the proper course of action."

"You saw--all this--upon the Snows?" I asked, dismayed. "For what reason did you not speak of it

sooner?"

"For the reason that I had no understanding of what I saw," he replied, his now unsmiling face giving indication that once again he felt the weight of responsibility upon his shoulders. "There were two female hadat, and flames through both of them, and truly did I believe that the black-rimmed golden glow which moved from one to the other indicated an event of pure symbolism. In such a manner are certain events hidden from us, cloaked in symbolism we cannot hope to penetrate. Only at the last was I able to see that the black-rimmed golden glow-your life sign-must be returned to you, else would the flames consume you as well. One path showed as much, a path I had only caught a glimpse of before being forced to return. I had spent too long a time studying the main path, you see, attempting to make sense of it."

"And this, I have no doubt, was that which I was kept from seeing myself," I said with a nod of understanding. "Had I seen to female hadat, I would have at once suspected another Midanna in the thing, and known that the black-rimmed golden glow could only be my life sign. Black for Sigurr and gold for Mida, and in no manner would I have allowed the thing to occur. Were you able to see the reason so foul a happening was necessary?"

"I saw naught of such a reason, yet it might well be too soon for it to be seen," said he, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Also might the reason be clearly before us, such as the manner in which these wenchers now follow you without question. Upon the Snows such a reason is at times regarded as sufficient, no matter the manner in which mortal men regard it."

"I dislike such soulless lack of feeling," said I with a grimace of distaste. "We must make an effort to disassociate ourselves from the Snows, to remove the hold they seem to have upon us."

"Remove the hold of the Snows?" he echoed, seemingly taken with great confusion. "Jalav, the Snows have no hold upon those of this world, rather are they shaped by the doings to be found here. The Snows are no more than the times coming to be, an advance reflection of that which we, ourselves, will cause. They have no strength to shape our lives."

"Then what of those things that are so firmly fixed that no other paths appear at that point?" I demanded, beginning to grow annoyed with the lack of understanding in the male. "What of those things which are shielded from us so that we may do naught to avoid them? It is this which we must disassociate ourselves from, this slavery to the will of the Snows!"

"Lady, I have no words with which to speak to you," said the male with his faint, odd smile. "My words or lack thereof are entirely irrelevant, for I will certainly follow where you lead. I have no desire to do aught else. Would you have me tell you of what else I saw upon the Snows?"

"Indeed," said I, curious as to what this might be. "It was my understanding that you had not the time to remain and see what more there was."

"This I saw but a short time ago," said he, "when you lay in the sleep of healing. I walked the Snows to be sure no other pitfalls lay in your path, and saw the place we travel to from here. Large is that city, and filled with many more of your wenchers-and when we arrive there it will also be surrounded by many men."

"Males?" I frowned, looking sharply upon the Walker. "What males? In what numbers?"

"Many men in large numbers, yet not so large a number as you now lead," said he, his voice attempting to be soothing. "Some are led by a blue male gando, and more are led by a large white lanthay. The lanthay is accompanied by a red flame and a winged revro."

"Galiose?" I asked in shocked disbelief, knowing the blue gando might be none other than he. "And Telion and Lialt and-Ceralt?"

In a whisper did the last name come from my throat, and I sat unmoving as my hands trembled about the pot of dare I held. My warriors in Bellinard were to be besieged by Galiose and Ceralt? And I was to appear with greater numbers and end the siege? By attacking? Ceralt?

"Jalav, your war leaders press for an opportunity to speak with you," said Ennat from the tent flap, her frown now for S'Heernoh. "They would hear more of the gods we soon ride to do battle with."

"Gods?" I echoed, so deeply awestruck that I knew not what she spoke of. "We do not ride to do battle with gods, merely with strangers from the skies."

"These strangers are enemies of Mida, are they not?" she asked, looking upon me with puzzlement.

"What other thing than gods might be those who come from the skies and are enemies to a god? Would our aid be necessary against mortals?"

The words hung between us as they also echoed in my mind, and slowly did I come to realize that Ennat spoke no other thing than truth. The enemies of gods were indeed gods themselves, and yet the thought had never before occurred to me.

I rose to my feet to stand tall amidst all the confusion I felt, tossing my head to free my arms of the strands of hair which nearly bound them. I rode to Bellinard to battle the gods-and also-perhaps-one who was no god at all.