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Sword Sworn
Mercedes Lackey

The air inside the gathering-tent was hot, although the evening breeze that occasionally stole inside the closed tent flap and touched Tarma's back was chill, like a sword's edge laid along her spine. This high-desert country cooled off quickly at night, not like the clan's grazing grounds down in the grass-plains. Tarma shivered; for comfort's sake she'd long since removed her shirt and now, like most of the others in the tent, was attired only in her vest and breeches. In the light of the lamps Tarma's clansfolk looked like living versions of the gaudy patterns they wove into their rugs.

Her brother-uncle Kefta neared the end of his sword-dance in the middle of the tent. He performed it only rarely, on the most special of occasions, but this occasion warranted celebration. Never before had the men of the clan returned from the Summer Horsefair laden with so much gold—it was nearly three times what they'd hoped for. There was war a-brewing somewhere, and as a consequence horses had commanded more than prime prices. The Shin'a'in hadn't argued with their good fortune. Now their new wealth glistened in the light of the oil lamps, lying in a shining heap in the center of the tent for all of the Clan of the Stooping Hawk to rejoice over. Tomorrow it would be swiftly converted into salt and herbs, grain and leather, metal weapons and staves of true, straight-grained wood for looms and arrows (all things the Shin'a'in did not produce themselves) but for this night, they would admire their short-term wealth and celebrate.

Not all that the men had earned lay in that shining heap. Each man who'd undertaken the journey had earned a special share, and most had brought back gifts. Tarma stroked the necklace at her throat as she breathed in the scent of clean sweat, incense, and the sentlewood perfume most of her clan had anointed themselves with. She glanced to her right as she did so, surprised at her flash of shyness. Dharin seemed to have all his attention fixed on the whirling figure of the dancer, but he intercepted her glance as if he'd been watching for it and his normally solemn expression vanished as he smiled broadly. Tarma blushed, then made a face at him. He grinned even more, and pointedly lowered his eyes to the necklace of carved amber she wore, curved claws alternating with perfect beads. He'd brought that for her, evidence of his trading abilities, because (he said) it matched her golden skin. That she'd accepted it and was wearing it tonight was token that she'd accepted him as well. When Tarma finished her sword-training, they'd be bonded. That would be in two years, perhaps less, if her progress continued to be as rapid as it was now. She and Dharin dealt with each other very well indeed, each being a perfect counter for the other. They were long-time friends as well as lovers.

The dancer ended his performance in a calculated sprawl, as though exhausted. His audience shouted approval, and he rose from the carpeted tent floor, beaming and dripping with sweat. He flung himself down among his family, accepting with a nod of thanks the damp towel handed to him by his youngest son. The plaudits faded gradually into chattering; as last to perform he would pick the next.

After a long draft of wine he finally spoke, and his choice was no surprise to anyone. "Sing, Tarma," he said.

His choice was applauded on all sides as Tarma rose, brushed back her long ebony hair, and picked her way through the crowded bodies of her clansfolk to take her place in the center.

Tarma was no beauty; her features were too sharp and hawklike, her body too boyishly slender; and well she knew it. Dharin had often joked when they lay together that he never knew whether he was bedding her or her sword. But the Goddess of the Four Winds had granted her a voice that was more than compensation, a voice that was unmatched among the Clans. The Shin'a'in, whose history was mainly contained in song and story, valued such a voice more than precious metals. Such was her value that the

shaman had taught her the arts of reading and writing, that she might the more easily learn the ancient lays of other peoples as well as her own.

Impishly, she had decided to pay Dharin back for making her blush by singing a tale of totally faithless lovers, one that was a clan favorite. She had only just begun it, the musicians picking up the key and beginning to follow her, when, unlooked for, disaster struck.

Audible even over her singing came the sound of tearing cloth, and armored men, seemingly dozens of them, poured howling through the ruined tentwalls to fall upon the stunned nomads. Most of the Clan were all but weaponless—but the Shin'a'in were warriors by tradition as well as horsebreeders. There was not one of them above the age of nine that had not had at least some training. They shook off their shock quickly, and every member of the clan that could seized whatever was nearest and fought back with the fierceness of any cornered wild thing.

Tarma had her paired daggers and a throwing spike in a wrist sheath—the last was quickly lost as she hurled it with deadly accuracy through the visor of the nearest bandit. He screeched, dropped his sword, and clutched his face, blood pouring between his fingers. One of her cousins snatched up the forgotten blade and gutted him with it. Tarma had no time to see what other use he made of it; another of the bandits was bearing down on her and she had barely enough time to draw her daggers before he closed with her.

A dagger, even two of them, rarely makes a good defense against a longer blade, but fighting in the tent was cramped, and the bandit found himself at disadvantage in the close quarters. Though Tarma's hands were shaking with excitement and fear, her mind stayed cool and she managed to get him to trap his own blade long enough for her to plant one dagger in his throat. He gurgled hoarsely, then fell, narrowly missing imprisoning her beneath him. She wrenched the sword from his still-clutching hands and turned to find another foe.

The invaders were easily winning the unequal battle; despite a gallant defense, with such improvised weapons as rugs and hair ornaments, her people were rapidly falling. The bandits were armored; the Shin'a'in were not. Out of the corner of one eye she could see a pair of them dropping their weapons and seizing women. Around her she could hear the shrieks of children, the harsher cries of adults—

Another fighter faced her now, his face blood- and sweat-streaked; she forced herself not to hear, to think only of the moment and her opponent.

She parried his thrust with the dagger, and made a slash at his neck. The fighting had thinned now; she couldn't hope to use the tactics that had worked before. He countered it in leisurely fashion and turned the counter into a return stroke with careless ease that sent her writhing out of the way of the blade's edge. She wasn't quite fast enough—he left a long score on her ribs. The cut wasn't deep or dangerous, but it hurt and bled freely. She stumbled over a body—friend or foe, she didn't notice; and barely evaded his blade a second time. He toyed with her, his face splitting in an ugly grin as he saw how tired she was becoming. Her hands were shaking now, not with fear, but with exhaustion. She was so weary she failed to notice the circle of bandits that had formed around her, or that she was the only Shin'a'in still fighting. He made a pass; before she had time to realize it was merely a feint, he'd gotten inside her guard and swatted her to the ground as the flat of his blade connected with the side of her head, the edges cutting into her scalp, searing like hot iron. He'd swung the blade full-force—she fought off unconsciousness as her hands reflexively let her weapons fall and she collapsed. Half-stunned, she tried to punch, kick and bite (in spite of nausea and a dizziness that kept threatening to overwhelm her. He began battering her face and head with massive fists.

He connected one time too many, and she felt her legs give out, her arms fall helplessly to her sides. He

laughed, then threw her to the floor of the tent, inches away from the body of one of her brothers. She felt his hands tearing off her breeches; she tried to get her knee into his groin, but the last of her strength was long gone. He laughed again and settled his hands almost lovingly around her neck and began to squeeze. She clawed at the hands, but he was too strong; nothing she did made him release that ever-tightening grip. She began to thrash as her chest tightened and her lungs cried out for air. Her head seemed about to explode, and reality narrowed to the desperate struggle for a single breath. At last, mercifully, blackness claimed her even as he began to thrust himself brutally into her.

* * * *

The only sound in the violated tent was the steady droning of flies. Tarma opened her right eye—the left one was swollen shut—and stared dazedly at the ceiling. When she tried to swallow, her throat howled in protest, she gagged, and nearly choked. Whimpering, she rolled onto one side. She found she was staring into the sightless eyes of her baby sister, as flies fed greedily at the pool of blood congealing beneath the child's head.

She vomited up what little there was in her stomach, and nearly choked to death in the process. Her throat was swollen almost completely shut.

She dragged herself to her knees, her head spinning dizzily. As she looked round her, and her mind took in the magnitude of disaster, something within her parted with a nearly audible snap.

Every member of the clan, from the oldest grayhair to the youngest infant, had been brutally and methodically slaughtered. The sight was more than her dazed mind could bear. She wanted most to run screaming to hide in a safe, dark, mental corner; but knew she must coax her body to its feet.

A few rags of her vest hung from her shoulders; there was blood running down her thighs and her loins ached sharply, echoing the pounding pain in her head. More blood had dried all down one side, some of it from the cut along her ribs, some that of her foes or her clansfolk. Her hand rose of its own accord to her temple and found her long hair sticky and hard with dried blood. The pain of her head and the nausea that seemed linked with it overwhelmed any other hurt, but as her hand drifted absently over her face, it felt strange, swollen and puffy. Had she been able to see, she would not have recognized her own reflection, her face was so battered. The part of her that was still thinking sent her body to search for something to cover her nakedness. She found a pair of breeches—not her own, they were much too big—and a vest, flung into corners. Her eyes slid unseeing over the huddled, nude bodies. Then the thread of direction sent her to retrieve the Clan banner from where it still hung on the centerpole.

Clutching it in one hand, she found herself outside the gathering-tent. She stood dumbly in the sun for several long moments, then moved zombie-like toward the nearest of the family tents. They, too, had been ransacked, but at least there were no bodies in them. The raiders had found little to their taste there, other than the odd bit of jewelry. Only a Shin'a'in would be interested in the tack and personal gear of a Shin'a'in—and anyone not of the clans found trying to sell such would find himself with several inches of Shin'a'in steel in his gut. Apparently the bandits knew this.

She found a halter and saddlepad in one of the nearer tents. The rest of her crouched in its mind-corner and gibbered. She wept soundlessly when it recognized the tack by its tooling as Dharin's.

The brigands had not been able to steal the horses—the Shin'a'in let them run free and the horses were trained nearly from birth to come only to their riders. The sheep and goats had been scattered, but the goats were guardian enough to reunite the herds and protect them in the absence of shepherds—and in any case, it was the horses that concerned her now, not the other animals. Tarma managed a semblance of her whistle with her swollen, cracked lips; Kessira came trotting up eagerly, snorting with distaste at the smell of blood on her mistress. Her hands, swollen, stiff, and painful, were clumsy with the harness,

but Kessira was patient while Tarma struggled with the straps, not even tossing her gray head in an effort to avoid the hackamore as she usually did.

Tarma dragged herself into the saddle; another clan was camped less than a day's ride away. She lumped the banner in front of her, pointed Kessira in the right direction, and gave her the set of signals that meant that her mistress was hurt and needed help. That accomplished, the dregs of directing intelligence receded into hiding with the rest of her. The ghastly ride was endured in complete blankness.

She never knew when Kessira walked into the camp with her broken, bleeding mistress slumped over the clan banner. No one recognized her—they only knew she was Shin'a'in by her coloring and costume. She never knew that she led a rescue party back to the ruined camp before collapsing over Kessira's neck. The shamans and healers eased her off the back of her mare, and she never felt their ministrations. For seven days and nights, she lay silent, never moving, eyes either closed or staring fixedly into space. The healers feared for her life and sanity, for a Shin'a'in clanless was one without purpose.

But on the morning of the eighth day, when the healer entered the tent in which she lay, her head turned and the eyes that met his were once again bright with intelligence.

Her lips parted. "Where—?" she croaked, her voice uglier than a raven's cry.

"Liha'irden." he said, setting down his burden of broth and medicine. "Your name? We could not recognize you, only the banner—" He hesitated, unsure of what to tell her.

"Tarma," she replied. "What of—my clan—Deer's Son?"

"Gone." It would be best to tell it shortly. "We gave them the rites as soon as we found them, and brought the herds and goods back here. You are the last of the Hawk's Children."

So her memory was correct. She stared at him wordlessly.

At this time of year the entire Clan traveled together, leaving none at the grazing grounds. There was no doubt she was the sole survivor.

She was taking the news calmly—too calmly. There was madness lurking within her, he could feel it with his healer's senses. She walked a thin thread of sanity, and it would take very little to cause the thread to break. He dreaded her next question.

It was not the one he had expected. "My voice—what ails it?"

"Something broken past mending." he replied regretfully—for he had heard her sing less than a month ago.

"So." she turned her head to stare again at the ceiling. For a moment he feared she had retreated into madness, but after a pause she spoke again.

"I cry blood-feud." she said tonelessly.

When the healer's attempts at dissuading her failed, he brought the clan elders. They reiterated all his arguments, but she remained silent and seemingly deaf to their words.

"You are only one—how can you hope to accomplish anything?" the clanmother said finally. "They are many, seasoned fighters, and crafty. What you wish to do is hopeless."

Tarma stared at them with stony eyes, eyes that did not quite conceal the fact that her sanity was

questionable.

"Most importantly," said a voice from the tent door, "you have called what you have no right to call."

The shamaness of the Clan, a vigorous woman of late middle age, stepped into the healer's tent and dropped gracefully beside Tarma's pallet.

"You know well only one Sword-Sworn to the Warrior can cry blood-feud," she said calmly and evenly.

"I know," Tarma replied, breaking her silence. "And I wish to take Oath."

It was a Shin'a'in tenet that no person was any holier than any other, that each was a priest in his own right. The shaman or shamaness might have the power of magic, might also be more learned than the average Clansman had time to be, but when the time came that a Shin'a'in wished to petition the God or Goddess, he simply entered the appropriate tent shrine and did so, with or without consulting the shaman beforehand.

So it happened that Tarma was standing within the shrine on legs that trembled with weakness.

The Wise One had not seemed surprised at Tarma's desire to be Sworn to the Warrior, and had supported her over the protests of the Elders. "If the Warrior accepts her," she had said reasonably, "Who are we to argue with the will of the Goddess? And if she does not, then blood-feud cannot be called."

The tent shrines of the clans were always identical in their spartan simplicity. There were four tiny wooden altars, one against each wall of the tent. In the east was that of the Maiden; on it was her symbol, a single fresh blossom in spring and summer, a stick of burning incense in winter and fall. To the south was that of the Warrior, marked by an ever-burning flame. The west held the Mother's altar, on it a sheaf of grain. The north was the domain of the Crone or Ancient One. The altar here held a smooth black stone.

Tarma stepped to the center of the tent. What she intended was nothing less than self-inflicted torture. All prayers among the Shin'a'in were sung, not spoken; further, all who came before the Goddess must lay all their thoughts before her. They must be sung, not spoken; further, all who came before the Goddess must lay their thoughts before her. Not only must she endure the physical agony of shaping her ruined voice into a semblance of music, but she must deliberately call forth every emotion, every memory; all that caused her to stand in this place.

She finished her song with her eyes tightly closed against the pain of those memories.

There was a profound silence when she'd done; after a moment she realized she could not even hear the little sounds of the encampment on the other side of the thin tent walls. Just as she'd realized that, she felt the faint stirrings of a breeze—

It came from the East, and was filled with the scent of fresh flowers. It encircled her, and seemed to blow right through her very soul. It was soon joined by a second breeze, out of the West; a robust and strong little wind carrying the scent of ripening grain. As the first had blown through her, emptying her of pain, the second filled her with strength. Then it, too, was joined; a bitterly cold wind from the north, sharp with snow-scent. At the touch of this third wind her eyes opened, though she remained swathed in darkness born of the dark of her own spirit. The wind chilled her, numbed the memories until they began to seem remote; froze her heart with an icy armor that made the loneliness bearable. She felt now as if her soul were swathed in endless layers of soft, protecting bandages. Now she saw through eyes withdrawn to view a world that had receded just out of reach.

The center of a whirlwind now, she stood unmoving while the physical winds whipped her hair and clothing about and the spiritual ones worked their magics within.

But the southern wind, the Warrior's Wind, was not one of them.

Suddenly the winds died to nothing. A voice that held nothing of humanity, echoing, sharp-edged as a fine blade yet ringing with melody, spoke one word. Her name.

Tarma obediently turned slowly to her right. Before the altar in the south stood a woman.

She was raven-haired and tawny-skinned, and the lines of her face were thin and strong, like all the Shin'a'in. She was arrayed in black, from her boots to the headband that held her shoulder-length tresses out of her eyes. Even the chainmail hauberk she wore was black, as were the sword she wore slung across her back and the daggers in her belt. She raised her eyes to meet Tarma's, and they had no whites, irises or pupils; her eyes were reflections of a cloudless night sky, black and star-strewn.

The Goddess had chosen to answer as the Warrior, and in Her own person.

When Tarma stepped through the tent-flap there was a collective sigh. Her hair was shorn just short of shoulder length; the clansfolk would find the discarded locks on the Warrior's altar. Tarma had carried nothing into the tent, there was nothing within the shrine that she would have been able to use to cut it. Tarma's Oath had been accepted. There was an icy calm about her that was unmistakable, and completely nonhuman.

No one in this clan had been Sword-Sworn within living memory, but all knew what tradition demanded of them. No longer would the Sworn One wear garments bright with the colors the Shin'a'in loved; from out of a chest in the Wise One's tent, carefully husbanded against such a time, came clothing of dark brown and deepest black. The brown was for later, should Tarma survive her quest. The black was for now, for ritual combat, or for one pursuing blood-feud.

They clothed her, weaponed her, provisioned her. She stood before them when they had done, looking much as the Warrior herself had, her weapons about her, her provisions at her feet. The light of the dying sun turned the sky to blood as they brought the youngest child of the Clan Liha'irden to receive her blessing, a toddler barely ten months old. She placed her hands on his soft cap of baby hair without really seeing him—but this child had a special significance. The herds and properties of the Hawk's Children would be tended and preserved for her, either until Tarma returned, or until this youngest child in the Clan of the Racing Deer was old enough to take his own sword. If by then she had not returned, they would revert to their caretakers.

Tarma rode out into the dawn. Tradition forbade anyone to watch her departure. To her own senses it seemed as though she rode still drugged with one of the healer's potions. All things came to her as if filtered through a gauze veil; even her memories seemed secondhand—like a tale told to her by some gray-haired ancient.

She rode back to the scene of the slaughter; the pitiful burial mound aroused nothing in her. Some outside force showed her eyes where to catch the scant signs of the already cold trail. No attempt had been made to conceal it. She rode until the fading light made tracking impossible, and made a cold camp, concealing herself and her horse in the lee of a pile of boulders. Enough moisture collected on them each night to support some meager grasses, which Kessira tore at eagerly. Tarma made a sketchy meal of dried meat and fruit, still wrapped in that strange calmness, then rolled herself into her blanket.

She was awakened before midnight.

A touch on her shoulder sent her scrambling out of her blanket, dagger in hand. Before her stood a figure, seemingly a man of the Shin'a'in, clothed as one Sword-Sworn. Unlike her, his face was veiled.

"Arm yourself. Sworn One." he said, his voice having an odd quality of distance to it, as though he were speaking from the bottom of a well.

She did not pause to question or argue. It was well that she did not, for as soon as she had donned her arms and light chain shirt, he attacked her.

The fight was not a long one; he had the advantage of surprise, and he was a much better fighter than she. Tarma could see the killing blow coming, but was unable to do anything to prevent it from falling. She cried out in agony as the stranger's sword all but cut her in half.

She woke, staring up at the stars. The stranger interposed himself between her eyes and the sky. "You are better than I thought—" he said, with grim humor. "But you are still clumsy as a horse in a pottery shed. Get up and try again."

He killed her three more times—with the same non-fatal result. After the third, she woke to find the sun rising, herself curled in her blanket and feeling completely rested. For one moment, she wondered if the strange combat had all been a nightmare—but then she saw her arms and armor stacked neatly to hand. As if to mock her doubts, they were laid in a different pattern than she had left them.

Once again she rode in a dream. Something controlled her actions as deftly as she managed Kessira, keeping the raw edges of her mind carefully swathed and anesthetized. When she lost the trail, her controller found it again, making her body pause long enough for her to identify how it had been done.

She camped, and again she was awakened before midnight.

Pain is a rapid teacher; she was able to prolong the bouts this night enough that he only killed her twice.

It was a strange existence, tracking by day, training by night. When her track ended at a village, she found herself questioning the inhabitants shrewdly. When her provisions ran out, she discovered coin in the pouch that had held dried fruit—not a great deal, but enough to pay for more of the same. When, in other villages, her questions were met with evasions, her hand stole of itself to that same pouch, to find coin enough to loosen the tongues of those she faced. Always when she needed something, she either woke with it to hand, or discovered more of the magical coins appearing to pay for it; always just enough, and no more. Her nights seemed clearer and less dreamlike than her days, perhaps because the controls were thinner then, and the skill she fought with was all her own. Finally one night she "killed" her instructor.

He collapsed exactly as she would have expected a man run through the heart to collapse. He lay unmoving—

"A good attack, but your guard was sloppy." said a familiar voice behind her. She whirled, her sword ready.

He stood before her, his own sword sheathed. She risked a glance to her rear; the body was gone.

"Truce. You have earned a respite and a reward," he said. "Ask me what you will, I am sure you have many questions. I know I did."

"Who are you?" she cried eagerly. "What are you?"

"I cannot give you my name, Sworn One. I am only one of many servants of the Warrior; I am the first of

your teachers—and I am what you will become if you should die while still under Oath. Does that disturb you? The Warrior will release you at any time you wish to be freed. She does not want the unwilling. Of course, if you are freed, you must relinquish the blood-feud."

Tarma shook her head.

"Then ready yourself, Sworn One, and look to that sloppy guard."

There came a time when their combats always ended draws or with his "death". When that had happened three nights running, she woke the fourth night to face a new opponent—a woman, armed with daggers.

Meanwhile she tracked her quarry, by rumor, by the depredations left in their wake. It seemed that what she tracked was a roving band of freebooters, and her clan was not the only group made victims. They chose their quarry carefully, never picking anyone the authorities might avenge, nor anyone with friends in power.

When she had mastered sword, dagger, bow, and staff, her trainers appeared severally rather than singly; she learned the arts of the single combatant against many.

Every time she gained a victory, they instructed her further in what her Oath meant.

One of those things was that her body no longer felt the least stirrings of sexual desire. The Sword-Sworn were as devoid of concupiscence as their weapons.

"The gain outweighs the loss," the first of them told her. After being taught the disciplines and rewards of the meditative trance they called "The Moonpaths," she agreed. After that, she spent at least part of every night walking those paths, surrounded by a curious kind of ecstasy, renewing her strength and her bond with her Goddess.

Inexorably, she began to catch up with her quarry. She had begun this quest months behind them; now she was only days. The closer she drew, the more intensely did her spirit-trainers drill her.

Then one night, they did not come. She woke on her own and waited, waited until well past midnight, waited until she was certain they were not coming at all. She dozed off for a moment, when she felt a presence. She rose with one swift motion, pulling her sword from the scabbard on her back.

The first of her trainers held out empty hands. "It has been a year, Sworn One. Are you ready? Your foes lair in the town not two hours' ride from here, and the town is truly their lair for they have made it their own."

So near as that? His words came as a shock, ripping the protective magics that veiled her mind and heart, sending her to her knees with the shrilling pain and raging anger she had felt before the winds of the Goddess answered her prayers. No longer was she protected against her own emotions; the wounds were as raw as they had ever been.

He regarded her thoughtfully, his eyes pitying above the veil. "No, you are *not* ready. Your hate will undo you, your hurt will disarm you. But you have little choice, Sworn One. This task is one you bound *yourself* to, you cannot free yourself. Will you heed advice, or will you throw yourself uselessly into the arms of Death?"

"What advice?" she asked dully.

"When you are offered aid unlocked for, do not cast it aside," he said, and vanished.

She could not sleep; she set out at first light for the town, and hovered about outside the walls until just before the gates were closed for the night. She soothed the ruffled feathers of the guard with a coin, offered as “payment” for directions to the inn.

The inn was noisy, hot and crowded. She wrinkled her nose at the unaccustomed stench of old cooking smells, spilled wine, and unwashed bodies. Another small coin bought her a jug of sour wine and a seat in a dark corner, from which she could hear nearly everything said in the room. It did not take long to determine from chance-dropped comments that the brigand-troupe made their headquarters in the long-abandoned mansion of a merchant who had lost everything he had including his life to their depredations. Their presence was unwelcome. They regarded the townsfolk as their lawful prey; having been freed from their attentions for the past year, their “chattels” were not pleased with their return.

Tarma burned with scorn for these soft townsmen. Surely there were enough able-bodied adults in the place to outnumber the bandit crew several times over. By sheer numbers the townsmen could defeat them, if they'd try.

She turned her mind toward her own quest, to develop a plan that would enable her to take as many of the enemy into death as she could manage. She was under no illusion that she could survive this. The kind of frontal assault she planned would leave her no path of escape.

A shadow came between Tarma and the fire.

She looked up, startled that the other had managed to come so close without her being aware of it. The silhouette was that of a woman, wearing the calf-length, cowled brown robe of a wandering sorceress. There was one alarming anomaly about this woman—unlike any other magic-worker Tarma had ever seen, this one wore a sword belted at her waist.

She reached up and laid the cowl of her robe back, but Tarma still was unable to make out her features; the firelight behind her hair made a glowing nimbus of amber around her face.

"It won't work, you know." the stranger said very softly, in a pleasant, musical alto. "You won't gain anything by a frontal assault but your own death."

Fear laid an icy hand on Tarma's throat; to cover her fear she snarled, "How do you know what I plan? Who are you?"

"Lower your voice. Sworn One." the sorceress took a seat next to Tarma, uninvited. "Anyone with the Talent and the wish to do so can read your thoughts. Your foes number among them a sorcerer; I know he is responsible for the deaths of many a sentry that would have warned their victims in time to defend themselves. Rest assured that if *I* can read your intentions, *he* will be able to do the same, should he cast his mind in this direction. I want to help you. My name is Kethry."

"Why help me?" Tarma asked bluntly, knowing that by giving her name the sorceress had given Tarma a measure of power over her.

Kethry stirred, bringing her face fully into the light of the fire. Tarma saw then that the woman was younger than she had first judged; they were almost of an age. The sorceress was almost doll-like in her prettiness. But Tarma had also seen the way she moved, like a wary predator; and the too-wise expression in those emerald eyes sat ill with the softness of the face. Her robe was worn to shabbiness, and though clean, was travel-stained. Whatever else this woman was, she was not overly concerned with material wealth. That in itself was a good sign to Tarma—since the only real wealth in this town was to be had by serving with the brigands.

But why did she wear a sword?

"I have an interest in dealing with these robbers myself," she said. "And I'd rather that they weren't set on guard. And I have another reason as well—"

"So?"

She laughed deprecatingly. "I am under a *geas*, one that binds me to help women in need. I am bound to help you, whether or not either of us is pleased with the fact. Will you have that help unforced?"

Tarma's initial reaction had been to bristle with hostility—then, unbidden, into her mind came the odd, otherworldly voice of her trainer, warning her not to cast away unlooked-for aid.

"As you will," she replied curtly.

The other did not seem to be the least bit discomfited by her antagonism. "Then let us leave this place," she said, standing without haste. "There are too many ears here."

She waited while Tarma retrieved her horse, and led her down tangled streets to a dead-end alley lit by red lanterns. She unlocked a gate on the left side and waved Tarma and Kessira through it. Tarma waited as she relocked the gate, finding herself in a cobbled courtyard that was bordered on one side by an old but well-kept stable. On the other side was a house, windows ablaze with lights, festooned with the red lanterns. From the house came the sound of music, laughter, and the voices of many women. Tarma sniffed; the air was redolent of cheap perfume and an animal muskiness.

"Is this place what I think it is?" she asked, finding it difficult to match the picture she'd built in her mind of the sorceress with the house she'd led Tarma to.

"If you think it's a brothel, you're right." Kethry replied. "Welcome to the House of Scarlet Joys, Sworn One. Can you think of a *less* likely place to house two such as we?"

"No." Tarma almost smiled.

"The better to hide us. The mistress of this place and her charges would rejoice greatly at the conquering of our mutual enemies. Nevertheless, the most these women will do for us is house and feed us. The rest is in our four hands. Let's get your weary beast stabled, and we'll adjourn to my rooms. We have a great deal of planning to do."

Two days after Tarma's arrival in the town of Brother's Crossroads, one of the brigands (drunk with liquor and drugs far past his capacity) fell into a horsetrough, and drowned trying to get out. His death signaled the beginning of a streak of calamities that thinned the ranks of the bandits as persistently as a plague.

One by one they died, victims of weird accidents, overdoses of drugs, or ambushes by clever thieves. No two deaths were alike—with one exception. He who failed to shake out his boots of a morning seldom survived the day, thanks to the scorpions that had taken to invading the place. Some even died at each other's hands, goaded into fights.

"I dislike this skulking in corners," Tarma growled, sharpening her swordblade. "It's hardly satisfactory, killing these dogs at a distance with poison and witchery."

"Be patient, my friend." Kethry said without rancor. "We're thinning them down before we engage them at sword's point. There will be time enough for that later."

When the deaths were obviously at the hands of enemies, there were no clues. Those arrow-slain were found pierced by several makes; those dead by blades seemed to have had their own used on them.

Tarma found herself coming to admire the sorceress more with every passing day. Their arrangement was a partnership in every sense of the word, for when Kethry ran short of magical ploys she turned without pride to Tarma and her expertise in weaponry. Even so, the necessary restrictions that limited them to the ambush and the skills of the assassin chafed at her.

"Not much longer," Kethry counseled. "They'll come to the conclusion soon enough that this has been no series of coincidences. *Then* will be the time for frontal attack."

The leader, so it was said, ordered that no man go out alone, and all must wear talismans against sorcery.

"See?" Kethry said. "I told you you'd have your chance."

A pair of swaggering bullies swilled ale, unpaid for, in the inn. None dared speak in their presence; they'd already beaten one farmer senseless who'd given some imagined insult. They were spoiling for a fight and the sheeplike timidity of the people trapped with them in the inn was not to their liking. So when a slender young man, black-clad and wearing a sword slung across his back entered the door, their eyes lit with savage glee.

One snaked out a long arm, grasping the young man's wrist. Some of those in the inn marked how his eyes flashed with a hellish joy before being veiled with cold disdain.

"Remove your hand," he said in a harsh voice. "Dog-turd."

That was all the excuse the brigands needed. Both drew their weapons; the young man unsheathed his in a single fluid motion. Both moved against him in a pattern they had long found successful in bringing down a single opponent.

Both died within heartbeats of each other.

The young man cleaned his blade carefully on their cloaks before sheathing it. (Some sharp eyes may have noticed that when his hand came in contact with one of the brigand's talismans, the young man seemed to become, for a fleeting second, a harsh-visaged young *woman*.) "This is no town for a stranger," he said to no one and everyone. "I will be on my way. Let him follow me who desires the embrace of the Lady Death."

Predictably, half-a-dozen robbers followed the clear track of his horse into the hills. None returned.

When the ranks of his men narrowed to five, including himself and the sorcerer, the bandit leader shut them all up in their stronghold.

* * * *

"Why are these—ladies—sheltering us?" Tarma demanded one day, when forced idleness had her pacing the confines of Kethry's rooms like a caged panther.

"Madame Isa grew tired of having her girls abused."

Tarma snorted with scorn. "I should have thought one would learn to expect abuse in such a profession."

"It is one thing when a customer expresses a taste for pain and is willing to pay to inflict it. It is quite another when he does so without paying," Kethry replied with wry humor. Tarma replied to this with something almost like a smile. There was that about her accomplice—fast becoming her friend—that

could lighten even her grimmest mood. Occasionally the sorceress was even able to charm the Shin'a'in into forgetfulness for hours at a time. And yet there was never a time she could entirely forget what had driven her here...

At the end of two months, there were rumors that the chieftain had begun recruiting new underlings, the information passed to other cities via his sorcerer.

"We'll have to do something to flush at least one of them out." Kethry said at last. "The sorcerer has transported at least three more people into that house. Maybe more—I couldn't tell if the spell brought one or several at a time, only that he definitely brought people in."

A new courtesan, property of none of the three Houses, began to ply her trade among those who still retained some of their wealth. One had to be wealthy to afford her services—but those who spent their hours in her skillful embraces were high in their praise.

"I thought your vows kept you sorcerers from lying," Tarma said, watching Kethry's latest client moaning with pleasure in the dream-trance she'd conjured for him.

"I didn't lie," she said, eyes glinting green with mischief. "I promised him—all of them—an hour to match their wildest dreams. That's *exactly* what they're getting. Besides, nothing I'd be able to do could ever match what they're conjuring up for themselves!"

The chieftain's sergeant caught a glimpse of her spending an idle hour in the marketplace. He had been without a woman since his chief had forbidden the men to go to the Houses. He could see the wisdom in that; *someone* was evidently out after the band, and a House would be far too easy a place in which to set a trap. This whore was alone but for her pimp, a beardless boy that did not even wear a sword, only paired daggers. Nor would he need to spend any of his stored coin, though he'd bring it to tempt her. When he'd had his fill of her, he'd teach her that it was better to *give* her wares to *him*.

She led him up the stairs to her room above the inn, watching with veiled amusement as he carefully bolted the door behind him. But when he began divesting himself of his weaponry and garments, she halted him, pinioning his arms gently from the rear and breathing enticingly on the back of his neck as she whispered in his ear.

"Time enough, and more, great warrior—I am sure you have not the taste for the common tumbings that are all you can find in *this* backward place." She slid around to the front of him, urging him down onto the room's single stool, a water-beaded cup in her hand. "Refresh yourself first, great lord. The vintage is of mine own bringing—you shall not taste its like here—"

It was just Kethry's bad luck that he had been the official 'taster' to a high lordling during his childhood of slavery. He sipped delicately out of habit, rather than gulping the wine down, and rolled the wine carefully on his tongue—and so detected in the cup what he should not have been able to sense.

"Bitch!" he roared, throwing the cup aside, and seizing Kethry by the throat.

Kethry's panic-filled scream warned Tarma that the plan had gone awry. She wasted no time in battering at the door—the man was no fool and would have bolted it behind him. It would take too long to break it down. Instead, she sprinted through the crowded inn and out the back through the kitchen. A second cry—more like a strangled gurgle than a scream, which recalled certain things sharply to her and gave her strength born of rage and hatred—fell into the stableyard from the open window of Kethry's room. Tarma swarmed up the stable door onto the roof of the building, and launched herself from there in through that window. Her entrance was as unexpected as it was precipitate.

Kethry slowly regained consciousness in her bed in the rented room. She hurt from top to toe—her assailant had been almost artistic, if one counted the ability to evoke pain among the arts. Oddly enough, he hadn't raped her—she would have expected that, been able to defend herself arcanelly. He'd reacted to the poisoned drink instead by throwing her to the floor and beating her with no mercy. She'd had no chance to defend herself with magic, and her sword had been left, at Tarma's insistence, back at the brothel.

Tarma was bathing and tending her hurts. One look at her stricken eyes, and any reproaches died on Kethry's tongue.

"It's all right," she said, as gently as she could with swollen lips. "It wasn't your fault."

Tarma's eyes said that she thought otherwise, but she replied gruffly "You need a keeper more than I do, lady-mage."

It hurt to smile, but Kethry managed. "Perhaps I do, at that."

Four evenings later, all but three of the bandits marched in force on the inn, determined to take revenge on the townsfolk for the acts of the invisible enemy in their midst. Halfway there, they were met by two women blocking their path. One was an amber-haired sorceress with a bruised face and a blackened eye. The other was a Shin'a'in swordswoman.

Only those two survived the confrontation.

"We have no choice now," Kethry said grimly. "If we wait, they'll only be stronger—and I'm certain that sorcerer has been watching. They're warned, they know who and what we are."

"Good," Tarma replied. "Then let's bring the war to *their* doorstep. We've been doing things in secret long enough, and it's more than time this thing was finished. Now. Tonight."

Her eyes were no longer quite sane.

Kethry didn't like it, but knew there was no other way. Gathering her magics about her, and resting one hand on the comforting presence of her sword, she followed Tarma to the bandit stronghold.

The three remaining were waiting in the courtyard. At the forefront was the bandit chief, a red-faced, shrewd-eyed bull of a man. To his right was his second-in-command, and Tarma's eyes narrowed as she recognized the necklace of amber claws he wore. He was as like to a bear as his leader was to a bull. To his left was the sorcerer, who gave a mocking bow in Kethry's direction.

Kethry did not return the bow, but launched an immediate magical attack. Something much like red lightning flew from her outstretched hands.

He parried it, but not easily. His eyes widened in surprise; her lips thinned in satisfaction. They settled down to duel in deadly earnest. Colored lightnings and weird mists swirled about them, sometimes the edges of their shields could be seen, straining against the impact of the sorcerous bolts. Creatures out of insane nightmares formed themselves on his side, and flung themselves raging at the sorceress, before being attacked and destroyed by enormous eagles with wings of fire, or impossibly slim and delicate armored beings with no faces at their helm's openings, but only a light too bright to look upon.

Tarma meanwhile had flung herself at the leader with the war cry of her clan—the shriek of an angry hawk. He parried her blade inches away from his throat, and answered with a cut that took part of her sleeve and bruised her arm beneath the mail. His companion swung at the same time; his sword did more than graze her leg. She twisted to parry his second stroke, moving faster than either of them expected her

to. She marked him as well, a cut bleeding freely over his eyes, but not before the leader gashed her where the chainmail shirt ended.

There was an explosion behind her; she dared not turn to look, but it sounded as though one of the two mages would spin spells no more.

She parried a slash from the leader only barely in time, and at the cost of a blow from her other opponent that surely broke a rib. Either of these men was her equal; at this rate they'd wear her down and kill her soon. It hardly mattered. *This* was the fitting end to the whole business, that the last of the Tale'sedrin should die with the killers of her clan. For when they were gone, what else was there for her to do? A Shin'a'in clanless was a Shin'a'in with no wish to live.

Suddenly she found herself facing only one, the leader. The other was battling for his life against Kethry, who had appeared out of the mage-smokes and was wielding her sword with all the skill of Tarma's spirit-teachers.

Tarma had just enough thought to spare for a moment of amazement. *Everyone* knew sorcerers had no skill with a blade—they had not the time to spare to learn such crafts. Yet—there was Kethry, cutting the man to ribbons.

Tarma traded blows with her opponent; then saw her opening. To take advantage of it meant she must leave herself wide open, but she was far past caring. She struck—her blade entered his throat in a clean thrust. Dying, he swung; his sword caving in her side. They fell together.

Grayness surrounded Tarma, a gray fog in which the light seemed to come from no particular direction, the grayness of a peculiarly restful quality. Her hurts had vanished, and she felt no particular need to move from where she was standing. Then a warm wind caressed her, the fog parted, and she found herself facing the first of her instructors.

"So—" he said, hands (empty, for a change, of weapons) on hips, a certain amusement in his eyes. "Past all expectation, you have brought down your enemies. Remarkable, Sworn One, the more remarkable as you had the sense to follow my advice."

"You came for me, then?" it was less a question than a statement.

"I, come for you?" he laughed heartily behind his veil. "Child, child, against all prediction you have not only won, but *survived!* I have come to tell you that your aid-time is over, though we shall continue to train you as we always have. From this moment, it is your actions alone that will put food in your mouth and coin in your purse. I would suggest you follow the path of the mercenary, as many another Sworn One has done when clanless. And—" he began fading into the mist "—remember that one can be Shin'a'in without being born into the clans. All it requires is the oath of *she'enedran*."

"Wait!" she called after him—but he was gone.

There was the sound of birds singing, and an astringent, medicinal tang in the air. Tarma opened eyes brimming with amazement, and felt gingerly at the bandages wrapping various limbs and her chest. Somehow, unbelievable as it was, she was still alive.

"It's about time you woke up." Kethry's voice came from nearby. "I was getting tired of spooning broth down your throat. You've probably noticed this *isn't* the House of Scarlet Joys. Madame wasn't the only one interested in getting rid of the bandits; the whole town hired me to dispose of them. My original intention was to frighten them away; then *you* came along. By the way, you are lying in the best bed in the inn. I hope you appreciate the honor. You're quite a heroine now. These people have far more

appreciation of good bladework than good magic."

Tarma slowly turned her head; Kethry was perched on the side of a second bed a few paces from hers and nearer the window. "Why did you save me?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Why did you want to die?" Kethry countered.

Tarma's mouth opened, and the words spilled out. In the wake of this purging of her pain, came peace; not the numbing, false peace of the north wind's icy armor, but the true peace Tarma had never hoped to feel. Before she had finished, they were clinging to each other and weeping together.

Kethry had said nothing—but in her eyes Tarma recognized the same unbearable loneliness that she was facing. And she was moved by something outside herself to speak.

"My friend—" Tarma startled Kethry with the phrase; their eyes met, and Kethry saw that loneliness recognized like. "—We are both clanless; would you swear blood oath with me?"

"Yes!" Kethry's eager reply left nothing to be desired.

Without speaking further, Tarma cut a thin, curving line like a crescent moon in her left palm; she handed the knife to Kethry, who did likewise. Tarma raised her hand to Kethry, who met it, palm to palm—

Then came the unexpected; their joined hands flashed briefly, incandescently; too bright to look on. When their hands unjoined, there were silver scars where the cuts had been.

Tarma looked askance at her *she'enedra*—her blood-sister—

"Not of my doing." Kethry said, awe in her voice.

"The Goddess's then." Tarma was certain of it; with the certainty came the filling of the empty void within her left by the loss of her clan.

"In that case, I think perhaps I should give you my last secret." Kethry replied, and pulled her sword from beneath her bed. "Hold out your hands."

Tarma obeyed, and Kethry laid the unsheathed sword across them.

"Watch the blade." she said, and frowned in concentration.

Writing, as fine as any scribe's, flared redly along the length of it. To her amazement it was in her own tongue.

"If I were holding her, it would be in my language." Kethry said, answering Tarma's unspoken question. "Woman's Need calls me/As Woman's Need made me/Her Need must I answer/As my maker bade me.' My geas, the one I told you of when we first met. She's the reason I could help you after my magics were exhausted, because she works in a peculiar way. If you were to use her, she'd add nothing to your sword-skill, but she'd protect you against almost any magics. But when I have her—"

"No magic aid, but you fight like a sand-demon." Tarma finished for her.

"Only if I am attacked first, or defending another. And last, her magic only works for women. A fellow journeyman found that out the hard way."

"And the price of her protection?"

"While I have her, I cannot leave any woman in trouble unaided. In fact, she's actually taken me miles out of my way to help someone." Kethry looked at the sword as fondly as if it were a living thing—which, perhaps, it was. "It's been worth it—she brought us together."

She paused, as though something had occurred to her. "I'm not sure how to ask this—Tarma, now that we're *she'enedrin*, do I have to be Sword Sworn too?" She looked troubled. "Because if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not. I have very healthy appetites that I'd rather not lose."

"Horned Moon, no!" Tarma chuckled, her facial muscles stretching in an unaccustomed smile. It felt good. "In fact, *she'enedra*, I'd rather you found a lover or two. You're all the clan I have now, and my only hope of having more kin."

"Just a Shin'a'in brood mare, huh?" Kethry's infectious grin kept any sting out of the words.

"Hardly," Tarma replied answering the smile with one of her own. "However, *she'enedra*, I am going to make sure you—we—get paid for jobs like these in good, solid coin, because that's something I think, by the look of you, you've been too lax about. After all, besides being horsebreeders, Shin'a'in have a long tradition of selling their swords—or in your case, magics! And are we not partners by being bloodsisters?"

"True enough, oh my keeper and partner." Kethry replied, laughing—laughter in which Tarma joined. "Then mercenaries—and the very best!—we shall be."

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