

Don't Break the Chain!

Jody Lynn Nye

"Messages for you, my lady," the pink-cheeked page said, falling to one knee beside her.

Lady Doretia reached eagerly for the scrolls. Eighteen years old, with a curious mind underneath her black silk tresses, and a burning intelligence looking out of her bright blue eyes, she was a voracious reader and an avid correspondent. Luckily for her, most of her friends were of the same bent, and the muddy roads that led between their several fathers' fiefdoms were daily filled with pages carrying pages from one of them to another. She popped the wax seal on the first. Lady Zoraida was holding a masked ball at the end of the month. Oh, good. That would give Doretia a chance to wear that strange gown that Great-Grandmama had left her in the will that was open at the sides and showed a daring hint of undergown. Lady Promese had dyed her hair with henna, but the color had come out more purple than red and, "of your courtesy, sister in arms, if you have knowledge of anything that will reduce the color to a mere glow, I would be grateful unto death." Doretia put the letter aside with a mental note to bring it up to the family sorcerer, an ancient man who lived in the tallest tower on the castle walls, and who could be depended upon to keep Promese's mishap a secret. Lady Goana's father was holding a tournament in the first week of spring, and would she like to take part? Doretia certainly would. She scribbled a note of thanks, and sealed it hastily.

The sixth missive she unrolled made Doretia frown. More chain mail. How annoying. She had *begged* her friends not to involve her in any

more! She felt so guilty when she realized she would have to pass the scroll on to another unsuspecting friend, or worse, copy it and send it to several friends. She always thought about throwing chain letters into the fire, even when the instructions promised dire magical consequences. Of an enquiring turn of mind, Doretia wondered what would really happen if she did destroy the letter, and decided her father and six brothers would be irked if she managed to get killed by a mere piece of paper, when they were doing their best to train her to be a proper shield-maiden, so she could get killed in the field of battle beside her future husband. Whoever he would be. Doretia had no prospects as yet, though she dreamed of being wooed by the handsomest warrior, who would shower her with jewels. She picked up the note to put to one side when words on the page caught her eye.

"Please, fair lady, will you not bend all of your efforts unto the freedom of an Unfortunate gentleman? It behooves you to pass along this missive to assist him in gaining his liberty. Do not let the Missive fall to Earth without sending Relief. I pray you, do not Break the chain, upon your Honor. Send it Onward to the next brave lady of your Acquaintance, but add Thy name to the list, so I may know whom to Thank when I have my deliverance. All of these things are vital Unto my Release. Of your Grace fair Lady do not fail!"

Such an entreaty made this an interesting nuisance, though, Doretia thought, reading the words through again. Instead of the usual plea for her to offer a prayer in the name of the first woman on the list (they were always women) or to send a groat to a particular charity, this read rather as if it had been written by a man, a gentleman, in fact, and in extremis. She could almost hear the voice of the writer. It would be deep, resonant, and very cultured. But was the peril true? Doretia had heard of Urbano legends. Those were stories passed along from person to person that were not true but so exciting and so near to the

edge of plausibility that one wanted to believe in them. They were named for the Duke of Urbano, of the southern duchy of Bongiovi, whose tall tales had been charted traveling almost all over the world. Like all of her friends Doretia had shivered with delight hearing the compelling stories, like the one about the old woman who came to the door of a cottager woman who was in desperate need of help with her child. The old woman coddled the babe all day while the mother finished her work. The mysterious visitor stayed for dinner, then left. In the morning the mother discovered the babe had been switched for a changeling.

Everyone swore he or she knew someone who had known the person on whose land the cottager actually lived, but Doretia wasn't satisfied about the veracity of the story. Oh, it made good telling, but it was too circular, too perfect. Out of curiosity she had personally sent out an interesting legend de Urbano she had made up herself, about demons that hid within the privy, and had the satisfaction of it coming back to her no less than eight months later, during the Christmas celebration in the Hall. Everyone also knew an Urbano legend about somebody who had been cursed because he or she had failed to pass on a chain letter. But what if this "piteous gentleman" wasn't real? Most likely he was the brother of one of her correspondents' correspondents, prevailed upon to write out a letter at his sister's dictation to give verisimilitude to a heartbreaking story that would get them all talking.

Still, it was a chain letter, which carried with it the possibility of a curse. But to whom could she send it? The list at the bottom of the fraying parchment contained the list of nearly every friend Doretia had. Almost with relief she saw that Lady Fomentia du Ryott, her best friend, hadn't seen it yet. Doretia picked up her shaved quill and prepared to address a wrapper to Fomentia. She stopped and chewed at the top end of the pen. Should she? It was a temptation, to get it fairly out of the castle

and into the hands of someone who would appreciate it, but she hated to promote these wretched things. The words at the top caught her eye again.

" . . . Of your Grace fair Lady. . . ."

This wasn't at all like the other chain letters she had received over the years.

Doretia stuffed it into the tapestry bag hanging among her bed curtains with her other correspondence, but that didn't put it out of her mind. She couldn't stop thinking about it. The plaintive tone of the missive stayed with her through the day's sword practice, through siege-breaking exercise, and through her cooking lesson, causing her to burn a pastry case and collect a scolding from the castle cook. The oddest thing was that the gentleman pleaded for help, but didn't give her any directions for finding him.

Her six brothers laughed at her for lending any credence to a nonsense letter. Doretia laughed along with them, but as soon as she was finished with her education for the day she set out to find the sender. After dinner she dispatched pages with urgent queries to all the ladies on the list who were her acquaintances. All of them came back with puzzled replies. They could be of no help. Well, best to go back to the earliest person to pass it along. The first name on the list was Princess Radamanta of Hermetica, the next kingdom west of her home realm of Oligarch. Doretia had never been there, although her elder brothers had. It was a wealthy nation, but rumored to be cruel. Perhaps there really *was* a gentleman in distress. There was no harm in asking the

princess if she knew anything more about the letter she had sent on its way.

Doretia's father had smiled gently upon his dreamer of a daughter, but more importantly had given his permission for her to go on quest for the gentleman in peril. She strapped on her new chainmail, with the lioness worked into the breast, and the sunburst on the back of the coif in bronze links, got her squire and a few of her friends together, and rode westward toward Hermetica.

The journey felt more of a riding party than a serious enterprise. The fall weather was very fine. At the manor house in the fiefdom that marched beside Doretia's they picked up Lady Delia Catisson, who guided them on a color tour while they rode through the western forests. It was so nice Doretia was nearly distracted from the object of her quest. The friends caught up on gossip, laughing over their various romances, travel, and hobbies. About two years before Zoraida had bought a Junior Enchantress's kit. She was very keen on making progress as a wizardess, and read their futures in the runes whether they wanted to hear them or not.

"Here's yours, Dory," Zoraida said, holding up a handful of ivory plaques in her small palm. "You will marry a mystery man."

"They're all mysterious," laughed Lady Goana FitzAnsarts, who was wed to a burly redhaired northerner.

Doretia shook her head. "I'm not ready to fall in love," she said.

"No one's ever ready," Zoraida said. "It just hits you like a ton of bricks."

"That's not a very mystical observation," Promese protested. Her very purple hair was carefully covered by a hood.

"I'm only at the fourth portal," Zoraida said, mildly. "I guarantee I will become much more obscure in my line of pater sometime in the next twenty-six lessons."

In spite of her will telling her firmly that the fortune was only a guide to what could happen in her future, Doretia's imagination insisted on creating a mysterious gentleman whom she would save, and would be so grateful that he would share his throne with her, and shower her with gifts and praise. She snorted. Ahead lay her real future, riding into Hermetica after a fantasy.

"Border crossing," she alerted the others.

* * *

At the border between Oligarch and Hermetica, two sets of guards faced one another over the dashed line painted on the road. Recognizing the distaff arms of several Oligarchical houses, the green-and-gold-clad guards on Doretia's side of the line stood aside and saluted them with honor. The black and red livery of Hermetica marched forth to block their path.

"Names?" the taller guard boomed, his voice coming from all the way inside a barrel chest. Doretia was almost knocked off her horse by the force of it.

"Lady Fomentia du Ryott, Lady Promese Bro Cann, Lady Zoraida Stouffe, and I, Lady Doretia Tortia, request permission to enter the fair land of Hermetica," Doretia replied.

"And you wish to pass into these lands in search of *what*?" the human hurricane asked.

"Well, I received this letter," Doretia said, reluctantly. It sounded silly now that she said it out loud. She had to show it, then wait while the two guards sounded it out between them. Soon, they returned it to her.

"You're welcome to look for your missing gentleman," the guard boomed, as if he couldn't believe it. His companion snickered into his collar. "Although I think you're looking in the wrong place. You'd be better off down south in Bongiovi. You know," he said, nudging his comrade hard in the ribs, "Duke Urbano's place?"

He thought he was witty. Doretia stiffened her back and kept her chin up as she rode forth at the head of her party friends.

"I want to know how it comes that I didn't get this letter," Fomentia

appealed to the other women behind her. "If Dory doesn't like them, send them to me! But I don't understand: if she doesn't believe in them, what are we doing here?"

* * *

The castle of Hermetica loomed up out of the forest before them, great towers of dark gray stone blocks with dark red pennants fluttering from the walls and turrets.

"Nice color scheme," Promese exclaimed. "Now, my father has paid no attention to me when I tell him that gold is no color to wave above yellow aggregate. Go for orange or green, I begged him. But, no-oo-oo," she said, glumly. "Monochrome."

"I am so glad that my mother understands color theory," Caramelle said, sympathetically. "Red granite and white-so classic."

"But it always looks as though you're waving a flag of truce," Goana giggled.

"This place looks as though it's always in a state of war," Doretia said, frowning. But she chided herself not to make something out of nothing. The castle didn't really feel sinister, more forbidding and remote, like church at Christmas.

"I wonder if her parents are really strict," Fomentia whispered as they rode into the well-kept cobbled courtyard.

The hilarious discussion rang off the walls. The guards in smart maroon jupons saluted the women, and sprang forth to help them dismount.

"Her Highness, Princess Radamanta, will be pleased to receive you," the steward informed them, and escorted them with dignity up the stairs between the heavy-based towers and through the black, iron-banded doors.

* * *

"A gentleman in distress, here?" Radamanta asked, throwing back her head and letting out a tinkling laugh. Doretia noticed the merriment never got anywhere near her eyes. She disliked her on sight, but forced herself to listen politely to the princess of Hermetica. After all, their countries were not at war, and had not been for decades.

No one would ever have thrown the insult "monochrome" at Radamanta, for all that it suited her appearance. A tall, elegant girl in her early twenties dressed in ochre damask to suit her light golden-brown hair and a golden skin, she looked like she knew how to handle herself in a dining hall or a battlefield. "I doubt that there is a gentleman in distress anywhere within my father's kingdom. We are a happy people."

"But," Doretia said, producing her scroll, "isn't this your signature here on this letter? Don't you remember sending this on?"

Radamanta reached for the letter and read it. Her eyes flashed

dangerously, but she tossed it back to Doretia with a dismissive smirk. "I've never seen that. That is not my signature. I have so much correspondence I have a scribe who handles all unimportant documents for me," she said, flicking a careless hand toward a meek, little, balding man who sat near the window at a writing desk. He favored the visitors with a wan smile. "Doubtless he signed it and passed it along. It's nothing. I had the prayer to St. Expedita last month."

"So did we," Lady Zoraida said, with a longsuffering grin. Radamanta nodded.

"As you see, it's but a tall tale someone thought up and decided to pin my name to, to give it an air of truth."

Doretia felt her cheeks burn red. "I am so sorry to have troubled you, Your Highness."

"Not at all!" Radamanta said, smiling kindly upon her with a haughty air that made Doretia's hand itch for the pommel of her sword. "I'm happy to meet shield-sisters from our neighboring kingdom. Perhaps since you have come all this way you will stay with us this evening for dinner and entertainment. Our cooks are very good, and we are expecting a peddler who sells magic crockery! It should be most amusing."

Fomentia's eyes gleamed. "Oh, do let us stay, Dory. I should like to see such wares."

"Come and meet my friends," Radamanta said, stepping down from her throne. She led them to another grand chamber lined with tapestries, where several young women sat, doing embroidery, polishing armor, and talking. Their shrill voices rose to the beamed ceiling. "Daddy and Mummy have been up at the north border fighting the barbarian hordes for three months now, so we have the castle all to ourselves."

"Isn't that nice?" Zoraida said, rolling her eyes at Doretia.

Under the vaulted ceiling of the great hall Radamanta introduced them to her friends one by one. Doretia found herself thinking as she shook hands, 'I can take her. And her. And her. Not her, though.' She wished she had brought her brothers along to back her up, then was ashamed. A Tortia afraid of a brawl?

"This room would be wonderful for a brawl, I mean, ball," Doretia stammered.

"It's been used for both," Radamanta said, placidly.

"I had heard some three months ago you were engaged to be married, Your Highness," Doretia said, sitting down on a bench near the fire. She hoped it sounded as if she was pumping for an invitation. Radamanta took the bait and smiled in that superior way of hers.

"Indeed, yes. Well, there's some things to be settled yet that are not to

my satisfaction," the princess said, her hazel eyes flashing. "The engagement ball will be held when my betrothed and I come to certain terms over the marriage. I'll be sure to send you all a scroll."

"Thank you," Doretia gushed.

"We'd be pleased to come," Fomentia said.

For all Doretia's misgivings, Radamanta was a good hostess. The food was superb and was well served. Over the dinner the ladies gossiped as if they had known one another for years, talking about betrothals, parties, battles and travel.

"I was engaged last year," said Lady Trapezia, a muscular maiden with long blonde braids, "but he had these old-fashioned ideas about my not fighting any more. It took a while, but we came to an arrangement."

"How droll," Radamanta said. "I always believe in maintaining my advantage, and I insist upon agreement."

"Who is your affianced, Your Highness?" Goana asked, from her end of the long table. The Oligarchans were, Doretia noticed, not near the fireplace. Radamanta's hospitality extended only so far.

"Prince Felxin of Catania," Radamanta said, proudly. "Catania is just

south of here, you know."

"What's he like?" Fomentia asked. "Is he handsome?"

"How about you, Lady Doretia?" the princess asked, skirting the question. "Are you wed?"

"No, not yet," Doretia said, with a smile that hid her discomfort. "Half my friends here are married, and half are engaged. I am the lone holdout. Lady Zoraida was recently married. Her wedding was quite marvelous. All the décor was green, just fancy!"

Radamanta looked pitying, which made Doretia like her even less. As a welcome relief to the intrusive line of questioning, the peddler arrived. Touper showed off his goods, handling each urn and jar to its best advantage in the torchlight. The well-scrubbed peddler was most persuasive.

"See here, ladies, how well these containers close," Touper said. "Each of these crocks will keep a mort of meal or grain fresh throughout the winter. An there be no weevils in the grain to begin with, there will be none able to gain access through the seal at any time." Doretia and the others giggled at the rude noise the flexible wax-and-leather seal made when it clamped onto the top of the sample jar.

"The journey need not be a total loss," Doretia told Fomentia as she

paid over three coins for several crocks. "This will be a good present to help our cook forget what an awful pupil I am."

"Isn't this nice?" Radamanta asked, bearing down on them. With her long bronze hair falling over the shoulders of a gown the same color, their hostess gave the impression she was wearing armor even though she wasn't. "You will find these of good value. My father's cook swears by them."

"It is kind of you to let us stay," Doretia said. She toyed with a container small enough for unguents or cosmetics. "How cunning the design, intended to keep in what one wanted to keep in, and keep out what one wants to exclude. Almost like a . . . prison for freshness."

"Indeed," said the princess, with a haughty smile. "It is our intention to promote modern designs. We also hosted a smallclothes party here last month. It's a shame. I don't think the peddler will be back. He didn't seem satisfied with our order."

"You should invite the tapers and candlestick trader," Fomentia said. "*He* was good fun."

"He is to come next month," Radamanta said. "I believe in encouraging modern conveniences and luxuries."

The exhausted potter left with an emptied cart and a well-filled money

pouch. As it was well past midnight, Doretia and her friends were invited to stay in the guest chambers. The Oligarchans sat together for a while in the grim stone chamber assigned to Doretia, combing one another's hair. The only window was an arrow slit high on the wall, and no exit but the door, which had locks on both inside and out. The second door she thought led to the next room was the privy. The chamber would make a good prison, Doretia thought, and probably had.

"Keep alert," she warned her friends, when they bid her good night.

"Oh, for what?" Fomentia asked, cheerfully. She was *so* young, Doretia thought. But Zoraida and the others knew what she meant. The ladies of Hermetica seemed friendly, and yet Doretia didn't like the place at all. Perhaps it was bad magic affecting her mood. In the dark she thought she heard the cry of a soul in torment.

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"And now you are sure there is no gentleman in distress lurking here, you can be on your way," Radamanta said, bidding them farewell the next morning from the front stairs. "How nice all the same that chance brought us together."

Doretia was now feeling stupid that she had dragged everyone along with her for a fool's errand. "Well, I had to find out for myself," she said, hiding her face in her horse's mane. "Sometimes there's magic in these things, and I didn't want to let it drop . . . you know, maybe a curse . . . ?"

Radamanta laughed at her more than with her, she thought. "Oh, you just fell for a Legend de Urbano, didn't you? Pity. Well, how nice of you to come. Goodbye."

Doretia couldn't look at her friends. They said nothing as they readied themselves to go. She busied herself strapping her purchases into her saddlebags. Their departure from Hermetica would be quiet and subdued, not at all like their noisy arrival.

In fact, it was so quiet that when Radamanta, her friends and servants had gone up the stairs and shut the great black doors, a small voice at their feet could be heard.

"Ladies? Of your courtesy, ladies, I beg a moment of your attention . . ."

Doretia froze. It was the voice from the scroll, without a doubt, just as resonant and cultured as she had imagined it. But where?

"Over there," Fomentia said, pointing to a low grille no more than six inches high at the base of the castle wall.

Doretia stared at it in amazement. She hadn't seen it when they'd first ridden in, but they-or Doretia had-been impressed by the height of the towers, not their foundations and, if truth be told, the lot of them had been making enough noise to drown out an invasion.

With a glance at the stairs to make certain the princess really was gone, Doretia sidled over to the wall. She could just see a shadow in the low room. A slim shadow, with a heroic profile and a strong jawline that momentarily clove the darkness. Doretia gasped as she felt her heart turn over. She heard the clank of chains as the figure raised his hands to the window. They were long, beautiful, strong hands.

"If you could see your way to assisting me, ladies?" the warm voice asked.

"It's the gentleman from the scroll!" Fomentia shrieked with delight. "Why, he was here after all!"

"Sh!!" Doretia hissed. "Yes! And we're going to get him free." She pulled her chainmail coif up over the back of her head and drew her sword. "First I'm going to have a word with Radamanta for lying to my face and making me feel like a fool. Onward and upward, ladies!"

Zoraida grabbed her sword and spell book. The others followed with weapons drawn, their faces grim. Doretia just thought they might take Radamanta by surprise. But the princess had a few words prepared for them as well.

The door flew open, and Radamanta stood at the top of the stairs in full bronze mail. She pointed her sword at Doretia and her friends.

"Take them all! I don't want any of them getting word out to Catania!"

"Hermetica!" her warrior friends shrieked.

Oh, well, after that, what was there to reply but, "Oligarch!" Doretia rushed upward into the fray.

And was immediately beaten halfway down the stairs. The clash that followed was virtually out of a textbook. Radamanta was every bit as terrifying a fighter as she was a hostess. She was several inches taller, had the longer reach, and her skills as a swordswoman were unmistakable. It looked as though Doretia's quest would end not only in failure, but defeat in battle at the hands of a woman who not five minutes before had been her hostess.

Then, Doretia realized with a shock that Radamanta *had* been trained by the numbers. Every move came straight out of books, with no variation. Doretia's attempt at a Valvlol undercut was answered by the Bellatrix thrust and riposte. Any Fermor hack attack was followed by the Rancour spin and parry. Radamanta did it all perfectly, as did her muscular friends. But that was their downfall. Doretia felt for the first time as if her six brothers *were* there behind her. Assuring her battles never went the way the teachers told her they would, they constantly threw every alternate situation they could at her during sword practice, until she stopped reading the manual, and started reading her opponent. Radamanta was an only child. Doretia felt sorry for her.

Backing in a circle around the cobbled yard, Doretia began to throw in

variations in her attack. After a Drakeney thrust she stepped left instead of right, or double-thrust before leaping back. Her ploy flustered Radamanta. The princess's perfect golden complexion flushed with an unpleasant red hue, rendering her orange. She began to make mistakes.

To Doretia's left and right, her friends were catching on to the same tactic. Goana screamed the war cry that had made her house feared throughout the known kingdoms.

"Scar their faces!" she screamed, leaping with sword held high at the large blonde maiden, who recoiled, throwing a mailed arm up before her face. Fomentia's sword licked out like a snake. The Oligarchans formed a solid line of flashing metal that drove the Hermeticans backward, up the stairs, into the castle, and on up toward the guest room. Zoraida hurried up and stood behind the door. As soon as Radamanta and her warrior women were safely inside, she threw the lock and spelled the door shut. At once the Hermetican women started pounding to be let out, and Doretia heard a voice behind the door begin a weird keening. Zoraida cocked an ear. The hasp started to slide.

"They've got a Junior Enchantress in there, too," she exclaimed. "Hurry." She started chanting. The lock slid back, just in time.

Doretia didn't waste a moment. "Find that scribe," she shouted.

The little man came out of his hiding place in the audience chamber without hesitation. Doretia thrust the letter at him.

"Did you send this?"

"Yes, madam," the wretched man said, jumping at the sound of the banging from above. "The prince was so kind."

"Prince?" Fomentia asked, opening large eyes at the scribe. "Prince Felxin of Catania. They'd be betrothed by now if it wasn't for her greediness. It was all very unfair." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "She's very unreasonable. I knew she wouldn't ever let him go. So he wrote the note and I sent it. Was that wrong?"

"Not at all," Doretia assured him. "Take us to him."

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The gaoler did not need a sword at his throat to open the cell door in the noisome prison beneath the castle tower. The sound of chains clanking began when the gaoler preceded them in with his lantern. The captive prince had risen to greet his rescuers.

Felxin was a head or more taller than Doretia, with smooth black hair, green eyes like a cat's, broad shoulders tapering down to a slim waist, and a smile as bright as a cathedral full of candles. In his prison he had still kept himself in shape, neat and clean, no easy task when burdened with a hundredweight of iron chain fastened to his neck, wrists and ankles. He was more handsome than Doretia could ever have dreamed. She staggered backwards, feeling like she'd been hit in the stomach by the arm of the family quintain.

"A ton of bricks?" Promese asked, shaking her purple locks knowingly.

"Two tons," Doretia breathed. The handsome prince knelt at her feet.

"My lady, thank you for your courage. Not everyone has the fortitude to face down Radamanta."

"Oh, he's dreamy," Fometia squealed. Indeed he was, Doretia thought, and wrenched her mind away to the matter before her.

"Why is Radamanta holding you prisoner?" she asked.

Felxin shrugged his broad shoulders, causing the hanks of gray chain to clatter a protest. "She wanted to rule my country as well as her own, and yet would not allow the same courtesy to me. I can admire independence in a woman, but she must have all or nothing. I am prepared to stand side by side with my queen, not a step below her." Doretia regarded him curiously. He sounded almost too good to be real. A man with whom she didn't have to fight for equality. He made a sour face. "She not only wouldn't break off the engagement, but locked me up until I should give in."

"But couldn't you fight free of her?"

Felxin looked abashed. "She's by far the better sword, and you don't have to know her long to find out how underhanded she can be. She tricked me. Now she holds me by stealth, by chain, and by magic." He shook his bonds. The crowd of ladies keened in sympathy.

"We'll free you right away," Doretia said. She seized the chain hanging from the collar around his neck and started searching along its lengths for the locks. It had none. The bad magic she had suspected was here. She drew her sword. Cold iron would dispel an evil charm. She took aim, preparing to strike. The prince's cry arrested her. He clasped his hands.

"No, fair lady, don't! If you break the links the magic backlash will kill me. It's a chain of logic, and cannot be opened by force."

Doretia frowned but dropped the links. "We can't break them. We can't unlock them. What will free you? It said nothing in your letter."

"The letter!" Felxin exclaimed. "Do you have it?"

It was still in her belt pouch. Doretia took it out.

"Complete the conditions of the letter, I beg you." Felxin looked around at their faces. "Has anyone got a pen?"

"A pen!" said Delia. "You need a locksmith."

"In this case, a pen is mightier, and less fatal," Doretia said, suddenly understanding.

"Take mine," the little scribe said, holding out a quill dripping black at the tip. Doretia hadn't even seen him take out a bottle of ink. She made a mental note to take him with her-someone who was a quick draw like that would be of value in her menage. With a flourish she wrote her name beneath the last one on the list, Promese's, and waited. Nothing happened.

"Nothing happened," she said, disappointed. "What did I do wrong?"

"It's a chain letter!" Felxin said urgently. "You must pass it along."

"But there's no one else . . ." Doretia began, then smiled. But there *was*. She thrust the document at Fomentia, who seized it happily.

"At last!"

There was a flash and a boom in the small cell, as all the chains binding Felxin burst apart and fell to the floor in a rain of individual links. Felxin flexed his wrists and stretched his shoulders.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "Thank you, thank you, good lady."

A yelp came from above, accompanied by the sound of metal falling on stone. Zoraida came running down the stairs.

"You will enjoy this," she said, a catlike smile on her face. "Radamanta and all her gang are now clapped in chains. It just happened."

"The curse recoiling," said the prince. "How perfectly apt." He took Doretia's hand and kissed it. "My lovely rescuer, I owe you my life. How can I thank you?"

"Um," said Doretia, looking up into his shining green eyes. Her brain seemed to have frozen. "I, uh, liked your letter. You write so nicely. Perhaps you could write to me again someday?"

"She's not affianced," Fomentia called over her shoulder, teasingly. Felxin's beautiful eyes widened with interest.

"No?" he asked. "Then, first I might write to your father, to ask if I might call upon you."

"Any time," Doretia told him, wondering why she felt so breathless, as if

her perfect-fitting mail was suddenly too tight. Felxin swept her into his arms and kissed her warmly on the lips. She fell back, gasping in surprise, but not at all displeased.

"I am so sorry, fair lady," the prince said, with a twinkle in his eyes. "It was a chain reaction."