

Chapter Three

Ariannah's carraige was waiting at the head of the pier, just outside the royal livery stable. A driver and footman waited at attention beside the opulent grey coach, and a team of white horses draped with Jared's emblem nickered softly in Ariannah's direction as they approached. She broke away from him and went over to them, stroking the muzzle of the one nearest.

"See, they know me. Hello, my pretties. Goodness, you're getting fat, yes you are." She cooed at them, brushing at the nearest horse's forelock. Ian stood uncertainly before the attendants, who made no move to allow him access into the carriage. His head had begun to throb again, and his irritation grew at an exponential rate as Ariannah continued to fuss about the horses.

"Highness." He said.

"Yes, alright. I'm coming."

She moved to his side. As she did so, the footman pushed the step into place and opened the door, face blank.

Ariannah held her hand out before Ian. Ian looked at it, then looked at her questioningly. Ariannah pointedly cleared her throat, and gestured with her eyes from her hand to the open door. Ian gritted his teeth, grasped her hand and helped her up into the coach. He stepped up after

her, sinking into the soft upholstery as the attendant closed the door.

The carriage rocked slightly as the driver climbed into his seat, and then lurched into motion, passing quickly out onto the Queen's Road under a raised portcullis. Ian watched out the windows as two mounted soldiers cantered past on either side to precede them.

Ian stared in unabashed amazement at the city passing by his windows. They followed the road gradually upward, passing out of the waterfront into the city proper. The shops and inns fronting the wide, cobbled street were upscale and shifted slowly in emphasis from those that served the harbor and its merchant traders to those that served the residents of Myr-Istia. Ian could see that the shipbuilders who'd crafted Jared's ship had looked to the city for inspiration. The varied blending of stone, exotic woods, and wrought iron flowed from structure to structure, and everywhere walls of creeping vine laden with floral fireworks softened the hard edges, creating a dream-like effect, like a soft-focus painting.

Ariannah talked incessantly, pointing to various shops or merchant stalls, delineating a lifetime of shopping, purchases, and gifts for Ian's edification. Fortunately, a well-placed syllable here and there seemed to be sufficient

interaction for her.

Though the streets were full of colorfully dressed pedestrians and merchant carts, along with carriages and equestrians, all traffic moved respectfully aside to let them through, many on foot bowing slightly at Ariannah's coach as it passed them by. Ariannah herself was oblivious to it, evidently desensitized after a lifetime of deference.

They passed up out of the merchant district into a residential one, full of palatial homes amidst exquisite gardens, set back from the road. The estates grew in size as they approached the Palace, each more extravagantly constructed and cultivated than the last, yet without any trace of the garish predictability evidenced by noble houses in Southward.

As they drew nigh to the Palace, Ian abandoned any pretense of listening to Ariannah. Immense stone gates were swung wide under a bronzed archway, pressed back against the towering solidity of the perimeter wall. The Queen's Road ran directly through the gates to end in a wide courtyard within, fronting the Palace entrance. Jared's standard flew here also, atop poles set into the arch's apex.

The castle was laid out in a T-shape, the entrance

hall running back from the entry court to the center court. Within the wide circumference of the latter, the twin towers pushed into the sky from the center of the Queen's gardens. Vast, sprawling wings then rambled away to the north and south, all encompassed by the imposing ring of the outer wall.

The carriage came to a halt between the helical columns that supported the vaulted entry to the Palace. The footman opened the door, and placed the step, and Ariannah finished her monologue with,

"Home again, home again. Come along, Ian."

Once again, Ian found his eyes drawn to her pertinent curves as she leant forward to grasp the footman's hand and exit the coach. He forced his gaze to the floor, and then hopped out after her, once again refusing to acknowledge that part of his head. That particular part that was completely oblivious to the balancing desires for intellect, maturity, and socio-economic equality.

The entry court filled the space between the inner curve of the wall, troop barracks to the south, the entrance hall, and gardens stretching away to the north. Armed guards patrolled in pairs at various stations within, and along the top of the wall.

Ariannah moved quickly across the flag-stones to the

steps ascending to the Palace entrance, casting her extended monologue over her shoulder as Ian trotted along behind, struggling to take in all there was to see.

Directly above the doorway, just below the eaves, a stone sculpture of a large bird with outstretched wings stared down from its stone perch, eyes seeming to track the observer from all angles. I hate birds, he thought as he passed under.

The entry hall was large and inviting, suffused with a warm glow, late-afternoon sunlight pushing through leaded-glass windows thrown wide on each side. Dark wooden beams rose up along the vaulted ceiling, framing stained glass sky-lights that cast jeweled fragments on the polished stone floor. Ahead the central passage continued, flanked by grand, curved staircases rising to galleries above, additional hallways visible along its length.

Ariannah stopped rambling long enough to wave and voice greetings to several stewards standing at a reception kiosk. They both bowed in response, one replying, "Welcome home, Princess."

Two guards stood at attention to each side of the hallway directly before them, both nodding deferentially to Ariannah as she and Ian walked past them.

They passed along the hallway, past detailed

tapestries, exotic tile mosaics, and everywhere windows standing open to admit fragrant island breezes.

They came at last to the central court, passing out through huge, open doors onto a covered walkway that moved directly onward toward the dual entrances to each of the opposing wings. At each entrance, the stone walk turned left and right, paralleling each wing through lush gardens to end at porticoed entrances set into the base of each tower. Ian's breath caught yet again as he stared up at the twin monoliths rising from the center of the Queen's Gardens. Symmetrical bands of sculpted balconies and huge windows were the only punctuations in the seamless stone surfaces as they ascended into the cerulean sky. He saw that there was a second bridge between the two, this one only a single story above the exquisitely manicured trees.

He almost ran into Ariannah as she stopped abruptly, raising her hand in a wave as she shouted out to a page moving along a path a short distance away.

"Korey! Come here, please."

The page started at the sound of her voice, nearly tripping over his feet as he turned. The tow-headed youth broke into a wide, silly grin at the sight of her, his blush evident even from where they stood. He rushed back toward them, barely escaping painful collisions with the

intervening foliage, displaying a stunning lack of dexterity as he abandoned the paths for a more direct route.

As he approached, Ariannah turned to Ian, and grasped his hands in hers.

"I must attend to some things right now. I hope you will forgive me for leaving you so shortly after arriving, but I too have some arrangements to make. Korey will show you to your rooms, and I'll come get you as soon as I'm done." Ian started to reply, but she turned as Korey, having tripped over a low hedge at the edge of the walk, caught himself just short of a headlong tumble and stumbled to a halt before them. Unabashed, he continued to grin, and spoke in a rush.

"Greetings, Princess. How was your journey? I didn't expect your return so soon. You look wonderful today. I--."

Ariannah shushed him with an impatient wave, though her expression seemed to have an indulgent quality to it.

"Yes, yes, thank you, Korey. This is Ian. He saved my life in Southward, and has been charged by my father to be my Protector. He is an honored guest, and you will treat him accordingly. Please show him to the suite adjoining mine, and provide him anything he requires, understood? Oh, and tell Eya to meet me at my seamstress's chambers..., no,

nevermind, I'll tell her myself. Now, go."

"But, Princess, I was told by--."

"Shush, now, this is much more important than any of your duties. You will do what I require of you."

Korey straightened himself and put on a sober face, gazing at her with an earnest intensity bordering on worship. Ian bit against a smile. Ariannah turned back to him, and said,

"I'll see you soon, my hero. Korey will see to your needs." A quick, coy smile, then she flitted off in the direction of the North wing. Both watched her go, standing still for a moment, each watching her lithe form with not dissimilar intent. Ian broke first, and clapped Korey on the shoulder.

"Shall we?"

Korey started, then blushed an almost terminal red. "Yes. Of course, forgive me. Please follow me, Sir Ian." He moved across the cobbles to the head of a path leading toward the towers. Ian followed.

After a few moments, as they walked along beneath vine-laden arches and exotic hardwood trees, Korey slowed to fall in step with Ian, his brow furrowed with some obvious inner conflict.

"Sir Ian, I'm sorry. I know that Princess Ariannah

told me to take you to your suite, but... the First, he instructed me to bring you to him as soon as you arrived. I didn't expect the King's return so soon, and I live to do the Princess's bidding, but...." He trailed off, the hand-wringing in his voice stopping just short of the pertinent extremities. Ian was confused.

"But what? How can someone be asking for me? I've only been here an hour. Who is the First?"

"The First Mage. His name is Estuvius, but it angers him sorely to be called by anything save the First. And bad things happen when he is upset, which, unfortunately, is a lot of the time."

Korey stopped speaking as they passed from the gardens through the columned entrance to the North Tower. The foyer was dark, but airy, lacking the windows of the previous sections of the palace. Charm-lamps glowed their unflickering blue-white, illuminating intricate murals painted upon the gray stone walls. Ian had no time to gawk, as Korey moved quickly through the room to the only other door. He had only impressions of depictions of Myr-Isle's history, with a sort of over-arching matriarchal presence behind it, though he couldn't even articulate in his own head why this should be apparent to him from a few glances. His mental voice threw up its hands, completely

disenchanted with all of this strangeness, and told him to let it know when life returned to some semblance of normal.

A tall, double-width stone portal, closed upon an almost invisible center seam, stood before them, with a series of symbols above the casement. The one to the far right glowed an incandescent red. Ian watched intently as Korey pressed his hand to a small concavity set into the wall at the side of the portal. The glowing symbol flashed brighter, then extinguished, and the next lit up. This immediately died, and Ian watched as the symbols lit and darkened, running from right to left, until the last at the far left glowed brightly. Ian started as the doors slid apart silently, revealing a small chamber within. Korey entered, and turned, waiting for Ian. Ian followed his example, turning also to face the open door. Korey then pressed a similar hollow on the inside of the doorway, and the doors slid shut again. Korey spoke a single word, "Top.", and Ian suddenly felt his stomach drop in his belly. He swallowed slowly, refusing to voice his fear or his complete lack of understanding as to why they were standing in this room that produced such unpleasant sensations. He had the sense of motion, but could not confirm this for the lack of windows. Korey seemed to sense his discomfort, and cheerily piped,

"It's a lift. It moves us from one level of the tower to another. It's perfectly safe."

"Yes, yes, Korey. Of course it is. I'm quite familiar with such things. My journey is starting to catch up with me, is all." Ian dismissed the young page with a wave of irritation, all the while trying to contain his sense of wonder at the youth's statement. Magic was an unexplored country to Ian, and his exposure to it beyond that which was basically public utility was virtually non-existent.

Korey mumbled an abashed apology, and proceeded to study the progressive illumination of symbols above the door, similar to those outside the little chamber, with particular intent.

After a few moments, Ian's stomach caught up with the rest of him, and the doors slid open. Instead of the foyer, the doors opened onto a short hallway leading to a single door, made of simple, unadorned wood. Korey practically leapt out of the small room into the hallway. Ian forced his body into motion, still reeling at the implications of the scenery change. Unwilling to acknowledge his lack of experience, Ian kept a straight face and an unhurried step as he exited the small room, with only a small flinch as the twin doors closed quietly behind him, and followed the youth toward the door at the end of the hall.

They reached the door, and Korey raised his fist to knock. He hesitated for a moment, glancing side-long at Ian standing beside him, but then seemed to square his resolve, and moved to strike the wood.

Before his knuckles made contact, the door flew inward on noiseless hinges, revealing a rather startling figure beside a cluttered desk in the chamber beyond.

"I heard you the first time, confound you! Break down the door, why don't you? I'm not deaf."

Ian could sense Korey frozen next to him, like a jack-hare caught by the hunter's lamp, as he stared at the old man now moving toward them across the floor-tiles.

He was well beyond his third score in years, but had an air of robustness and vitality about him. He was clad in a tattered and stained wool robe of some undefinable color, which swirled around him as he strode toward them, his sharp, gray eyes glittering in the ambient light cast from several huge, open windows across the cluttered room. His gait was somewhat uneven, which could be due to the fact that he wore a soft, blue slipper on his right foot, and traveler's boot on his left. Yet his most distinguishing feature had to be his shock of white hair. On one side of his head, it stood near to straight out in long, irregular tufts, and on the other, it was shorn to a fine fuzz on his

spotted scalp. He ignored Ian and concentrated directly on Korey, shaking a long finger at him.

"Korey," he snapped, "I told you to bring the Princess's new Protector here as soon as he arrived. If you can't follow such simple instructions, I shall be forced to turn you into a gerbil as a disciplinary measure." And with that, he slammed the door in their faces.

Ian blinked.

Korey's hand remained outstretched.

Several seconds passed.

Then the door flew open again. The old man grasped Korey's outstretched hand, and unceremoniously yanked him into the room, waving Ian into the room with the other. Ian moved through the doorway, and the man slammed it shut behind him. In a blur, he spun Korey into a choke-hold, and, to Ian's alarm, a dagger appeared in his free hand, coming to rest at the base of Korey's throat. He spoke in a rasp.

"Did anyone see you come up here, lad?"

"I...I...."

"Speak up!"

"I...made no effort to conceal my comings or goings, First. I suppose anyone might have seen us."

"Then I suppose you may be missed were some mishap to

befall you. More's the pity." He spun the boy free, and the dagger disappeared as quickly as it had come; Ian wasn't sure whether it was into a fold in his robe, or into thin air itself. Korey, in a so-far uncharacteristic display of dexterity, had used his momentum to artfully interpose several pieces of heavy furniture between himself and the Mage, who turned and smiled charmingly at Ian.

"Would you care for some tea?" He asked brightly.

Ian hesitated for only a moment.

"No, First. Thank you, though."

"Korey?"

"N-nuh-no, First, thank you."

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I help myself to some." He said in a quite rational tone, smiling at them.

"Of course, First." Korey replied in the placating tone of one who obviously had more than a passing familiarity with this particular blade's edge.

The First stood there smiling, and looking expectantly at them. And continued to stand, doing the same, for several long moments. Ian raised his eyebrows in a quick glance at Korey, who seemed to swallow the fear in his throat in response.

"Umm, First?"

"Yes?"

"You were going to get yourself some tea?"

"Good heavens," he exclaimed, "what on earth would I do that for? I hate tea. Really, Korey, I'm amazed that you remember to take one breath from the next."

He shuddered, then slapped the near-bald side of his pate several times in rapid succession. He rushed to the nearest window, and then paused to draw the dregs from the depths of his lungs in several stentorian hawks, before explosively expectorating the results out into the blue sky beyond. He immediately turned toward Ian, and marched over to him, circling him, scanning up and down with a sudden intensity. He mumbled to himself all the while, "Good, good, yes. Hmm. Difficult to say, yet."

Ian looked again at Korey, whose return look seemed to communicate "don't make any sudden movements", with a hint of "better you than me".

The Mage suddenly stopped in front of Ian, reached up, and began to probe about on Ian's scalp with both hands.

"Does one side of your brain get very hot sometimes?" He asked, his white brow furrowed in concentration.

A response rose unbidden to Ian's lips.

"Only if I wear half a hat."

The First drew suddenly away from him, his face contorting in fury.

"Are you mocking me? DO YOU DARE TO MOCK ME?"

Ian stretched out his palms toward the man, not liking his chances of making the door before being transformed into a gerbil.

"No, no, First. My apologies. I would never presume to do such a thing."

The old man's fury evaporated instantly, and he moved over to the desk and began to jot down some notations on the sheafs of parchment scattered over its top, muttering, "Half a hat. Hmm, half a hat. Intriguing. Half. A hat. Most intriguing."

He stopped and looked up from his notes.

"Not conclusive. Must be sure, you know."

He paused for a moment, and then asked,
"Cannot be seen, cannot be felt, cannot be heard,
cannot be smelt. It lies behind the stars and beneath the
hills. Ends life and kills laughter. What is it?"

Korey furrowed his brow, and Ian heard him speak under his breath.

"I think both sides of my brain are getting hot."

The First remained focused on Ian, who hesitated only because the simplicity of the riddle seemed like a trap.

"The dark, First."

The Mage's eyes widened, but before he spoke, a

blackbird fluttered in the window and came to light on a stack of books which were perched precariously on the edge of a shelf set into the wall. The books fell off onto the floor with a thump and a puff of dust. The bird seemed unperturbed by this, and merely hopped down the length of the shelf, swooped over to the desk, and perched upon a stack of parchments, cocking its head to look directly at Ian.

This distracted the Mage, and he moved to the desk, grabbed a handful of crumbs from one of the many dining plates scattered about, and started to hand-feed the bird, Ian forgotten in the face of this new development.

Ian waited for a full minute, resisting the urge to leap onto the desk and relieve the bird's neck of the weight of its head (as he remembered the dagger). As it became apparent that the old man was not going to resume his impromptu riddling session, Ian's irritation overcame him.

"First, will there be anything else?"

The First started at the sound of his voice, turning his head to glare balefully at Ian and Korey.

"Are you people still here? Off with you. I'm far too busy to pass the day in idle chatter. Why does everyone insist on badgering me?"

Ian looked at Korey, who spared no return glance, just broke for the door in just slightly less than an all-out sprint. Ian followed, as the Mage continued to rant.

"No one ever comes to see me." He batted his head again, then scratched his cheek vigorously. "Why won't they leave me alone, confound it! As if my time is worth nothing."

As the door closed behind them, they heard the First call after them, "Korey, when the new Protector arrives, he'd better find his way here with alacrity, young one, or your days with only two legs are numbered!"

Korey didn't stop until he was at the lift door. He pushed at the hollow at the side of the doorway in frantic repetition. The doors slid apart finally, and he practically threw himself into the small chamber. Ian followed close behind. The doors slid shut again at Korey's rapid prodding, and his muttered, "Second." was little more than a croak.

Once again, Ian's stomach decided to lag behind, though the sensation was not so acutely unpleasant this time. Korey seemed to calm fairly quickly. As the symbols reached the end of their lateral trek and the doors slid apart, Korey spoke.

"I...uh, I will show you to your rooms, now, Sir Ian."

Ian nodded without comment.

The doors opened this time into a different chamber than the one they started out from. This one was full of windows, with shimmering, gossamer draperies fluttering in the breeze (Ian decided he would hate to be the one responsible for opening and shutting the palace windows. It was probably a full-time task.). He could smell the gardens outside.

To the left were several ornate doors, all closed, and to the right a tall, frescoed arch, beyond which stretched the lower skybridge, linking the two towers. Korey set a brisk pace across the room, under the arch, and across, leaving Ian little time to stare out the long series of windows (also open, Ian noted) at the dusk-lit greenery stretching away to the palace walls.

Korey seemed to come to himself as they reached the entry to the other tower, and slowed once again to match step with Ian. Ian put on his most nonchalant expression as Korey looked up at him, as if previous events were commonplace and not worth discussing. Korey spoke as they passed along a wide hallway leading toward the tower's center.

"So, Sir Ian, you are really an honest-to-goodness Protector?"

Ian decided that it was time to re-assert that part of himself that had been woefully absent since this madness had begun. He rubbed mental hands together.

"Well, yes, Korey, I'm in the security business. That does involve some personal protection. But my training covers a wide range of expertise. I don't limit myself. Men in my trade consider personal protection more of a meal-ticket than a high-line assignment."

"Wow! What else do you do?" Korey's eyes were wide.

"Due to the sensitive nature of security work, propriety dictates that I can't divulge the details of much of what I'm involved in. Suffice it to say that I've engaged in rescues, expeditions, clan-wars, all sorts of covert missions, you understand."

"That sounds exciting." replied Korey, as they passed several branchings, and continued on. "My brother is a member of Buchard's first detail. I'm trying to get him to teach me swordcraft, but he's very busy. Have you killed many men?"

"Now, now, Korey, a professional takes no pride in the number of men he's killed...but yes, many."

"Wow."

He was silent for a moment, and Ian decided he'd had enough tagging about after people he didn't know, even if

he was in a strange land.

"The Princess's chambers are on this level?", he asked in a studiously disinterested tone.

"Yes, they're up here at the end of this hall to the left. She's got sculptures of sea-hounds on the doors to her suite. Have you ever met any famous adventurers, like in the stories?" Korey asked, turning the conversation back to his interest, gazing at Ian with awe.

"Some, but most of them swore me to secrecy. Listen, Korey, you seem like a bright lad. Can I enlist your aid? I have a sense about people and I feel I can trust you. I desperately need your help. Can I count on you?"

Korey nodded emphatically, eyes so wide that they looked ready pop out of his skull.

Ian stopped, and took the boy's arm, looking about dramatically to see if they were being observed. He then drew the youth into a shadowed alcove sheltered from the charm-lit hallway, in which water cascaded down the sides of a stone fish that rose above a fountain-pool. To the merry accompaniment of burbling water, he spoke in a whisper.

"I need you to hold on to this."

He pulled from his pocket a smooth, blue stone the size and color of a larkin's egg. Korey frowned.

"What is it?"

"To speak its name would be to unleash the horrifying power contained within."

"Oh. Um, it doesn't look horrifying. It looks a bit like a larkin's egg."

"Ah, therein lies the danger. The unknowing possessor would underestimate its lethal force and unwittingly destroy himself and everything around him for a quarter-league. That and the fact that the owner of the stone would gladly torture and kill anyone to get it back."

"K-k-kill? You mean you don't own it?" Korey's horror-filled eyes sparkled with the half-light reflections off of the falling water.

Ian stepped back and gasped.

"What kind of monster do you take me for?!"

He quickly stretched out a hand and put it on Korey's shoulder, dipping his chin and closing his eyes for effect as he paused.

"I'm sorry. You don't know the history of the stone as I do, or you wouldn't ask such a thing. I forgive you."

"Then who does own it?"

"Shhhh, you fool!" Ian said at the top of his whisper, squeezing the boy's shoulder hard. "They hear everything! To mention their name out loud would bring them here in an

instant, and then they would once again possess the stone. And then, 'Woe to you, oh Earth, and Sea....'. Is that what you want?"

Korey shook his head violently.

"Good. Then I can count on you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take the stone and hide it in a secret place that only you know."

Korey's eyes squinted in thought, then widened once again.

"I'll hide it in th--."

"No! No, don't tell me. If I know where it is, then they could extract that information from even me. I could not stand, though I'm ashamed to admit it. None could."

Korey gulped, and nodded.

"Whatever you say, Sir Ian. I'll do just like you say."

"Good. Now, we must never mention this to anyone, not even the Princess, understand? It would put her in the gravest peril that even I may not be able to protect her. We must go on with our lives as if everything were perfectly normal, and you did not possess one of the most lethal destructive powers known."

"Uh...."

"Don't worry, my young friend, the stone is almost perfectly safe as long as you leave it alone and make no mention of it to anyone. A day will come when I need the stone back, so I can see it into the hands of those who have the power and knowledge to dispose of it. When I need it back, I will speak a word of secret, letting you know it is time to bring it to me."

"What is the word?"

Ian frowned his disappointment.

"If I told you, it would no longer be a word of secret, now, would it?"

"But...."

"Fear not. The mores of this are new to you. Nevertheless, you must go quickly. I can find my own way from here. Don't fail me, young Korey. My life and the lives of many rest upon you."

Ian pulled Korey out into the hallway, spun him back toward the way they had come, and nudged him into motion. Korey rushed away, face set in his new task.

"Fare you well, my friend," Ian called after him.
"Guard yourself, and your charge."

Korey disappeared around a bend in the hall.
Ian smiled satisfactorily, and turned back to their former path.

"Now, time to see what we can see." He murmured quietly to himself, and moved down the hall toward the Princess's chambers.

The hall ended at an intersection not much further up, and through one of the ever-present open windows there, Ian saw that the sun had now been swallowed by the western island hills. He took the left turning, following its inward curve, until he came upon an ornate door set into the outside wall. Carved upon its face were bas-relief depictions of sea-hounds surging through heavy seas.

Well-met, and about time, he thought to himself. He put his ear to the door, confident that his approaching footfalls had been turned aside by the dense wood of the door, were anyone inside, listening.

Silence.

He pulled at the catch, which lifted silently. He grasped the handle, and began to ease the door open, somewhat surprised at the lack of guards, or at least a lock, on what he assumed were the Princess's private chambers.

The door moved easily, on well-oiled hinges. He leaned forward, and....

The door jerked open, pulling him headlong into the room. He stumbled forward, tripped on a rug, and fell head-

long, smacking his head against a low table. The room spun momentarily, and old injuries reawoke, adding their voices to this newer choir in his head. He looked up, and saw Ariannah looking down at him, one hand on the door handle, and the other raised to her mouth in a half-hearted attempt to stifle her laughter.

Ian got to his feet as nimbly as he could, keeping his expression neutral in the face of his pain and embarrassment.

"Very good, Princess. You have passed the awareness test. I'm glad to see you are not one of those completely oblivious royals who don't see the knife until it's hilt-deep. I'll be testing you this way from time to time, as a precautionary measure." He brushed at his tunic in what he hoped appeared as an absent manner, struggling to stay upright as his head regained its equilibrium.

Ariannah pushed the door shut, and then threw herself on a plush couch, pressing a hand to her forehead, and giving herself over to a most undignified fit of full-throated laughter that was nothing like the irritating giggle Ian had come to know and hate. She held her other arm about her ribs, as if there were a real danger they wouldn't be able to contain it.

Ian watched her with one eyebrow raised.

She finally spluttered and giggled to a halt, running a hand through her raven tresses as she sat up. Her smile remained, and her eyes flashed with mirth as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Ian. I shouldn't laugh so, but you...it defies description." She paused, and motioned him to sit down in a chair across from her. Ian noticed that her bubble-headed, spoiled, little-girl speech and mannerisms were also suspiciously absent. Alarm bells began to sound in his head.

He sat, and Ariannah leaned toward him, taking his hand in both of hers, and she appeared to struggle to put on a sober expression.

"I've been waiting hours and hours to be able to tell you that you...you, Ian,...are the single luckiest person ever to draw a breath. This morning, I saw two of the most amazing spectacles I have ever witnessed. You are indeed a charmed individual." She giggled several times before regaining composure.

"What are you talking about?" asked Ian, feigning a puzzled look, but knowing with a grift-man's certitude that he'd been had.

"I'm thankful you fell where you did. Both times. I am alive, and so is my Father. For that I thank you, though it's not as if you had much choice in either matter."

Ian said nothing, waiting for her to continue. His face did not belie his inner fuming, which was growing quickly, fed by anger and damaged pride.

"So, here you are. Welcome, and all that. But, if you'll excuse me, it's time for me to explore my new-found freedom." Ariannah dropped his hand, and stood, reaching behind her back and beginning to undo the ties of her shift, moving toward a semi-translucent silk changing-screen, embroidered with several examples of the local flora. Ian caught a flash of bare skin as she passed behind it, delaying his response by a few moments.

"So all of that before was an act?" He asked in a neutral tone.

"Oh, my hero. I feel more free of the oppressive thumb of royal obligation with you than with...oh...twenty of Buchard's men." This wafted up from behind the screen in the spoiled princess tones.

"Ah."

Ariannah stuck her head out from behind the screen. Ian saw the robust swell of one breast below the curve of her perfect neck, and struggled desperately to focus on her words.

"It's not so bad for you, you know. At any rate, for the first time, there are no guards outside my door. Daddy

must really have been impressed by your deeds. As presented, of course." She grinned again as her head disappeared. "He must have felt you were a sure wager."

"Aren't I?" He asked, more in irritation than anything else.

"I suppose that would depend on who you asked." She replied. "And how you asked."

"How cryptic of you."

Silent moments passed, and then Ariannah stepped out from behind the screen, and Ian stared in amazement at her garb.

She wore close fitting black leather pants and vest, beneath an open, loose tunic that did nothing to hide her form. High boots, and a silver belt defined the rest. Ian felt, to his credit, that his eyes protruded no farther from their sockets than her breasts from the tight bodice.

"I'll take that as a compliment, then." She said, noting his reaction, then moving to the side of a tall, wooden wardrobe next to the open window, through which Ian could see that full dark had fallen.

She felt along its side, and a small section slid open. She reached into the hollow behind, and removed a long knife in a black-cloth sheath. She pushed up one sleeve, deftly strapped the dagger hilt-down, and then

shook her arm to cover it.

"What is all this about? The clothes, the knife. Where are you planning to go?" Ian asked, still sitting in his original seat, not quite sure what to do. Throwing Ariannah out the window had occurred to him, but he rejected it as rash, and pointless, since they were only a single story above the gardens. Pity.

Ariannah didn't even spare him a look.

"Don't let it concern you. I think it would be a bit much for you to handle in a single sitting. Suffice it to say, I'm going out." She went around the room, dimming the charm-lamps with a sweep of her hand. "You can stay here, and...do...whatever it is that Protectors do when they're not...um, protecting. Your rooms are one door down. I told Eya that I was not to be disturbed tonight, which means you won't be, either."

"You are somewhat difficult to protect if I'm here, and you are not."

She laughed again, and turned to face him from in front of the last bright lamp, near the window.

"I don't need you to protect me. I'm sure you understand the nature of this arrangement now. All you have to do is sit back, enjoy life in paradise, and cover for me when necessary. Otherwise, just stay out of my way."

"Why in the world should I do that?" asked Ian, knowing the answer but deciding to have it all out before him. "Why shouldn't I just go to your father right now and tell him what you intend to do?"

Ariannah rolled her eyes at the apparent stupidity of his remark, and turned to wave a hand over the last globe, dimming it as well.

"Oh, stop. Then I would really have to get creative. Let's see. An attack. Hmm, yes, an attack on my person just as soon as we were alone. No, wait, your detailed description of the horrid, lascivious things you had planned for me, as you attacked me. Maybe--."

"Alright! Alright, I am perfectly clear on your meaning."

She grinned, and then turned and leapt lightly onto the open sill, grace and dexterity evident in even that small movement. She hesitated as he stood, calling for her stop.

"Wait! What if something happens to you? Then my head will roll. I'm sure Buchard would gladly accommodate me on that score."

"Peace, my hero. It's not like this is the first time I've ever done this. See you in the morning. Oh, and leave this window open."

And with that, she was gone into the darkness.

Ian rushed to the sill, and peered out. He saw a dark form move away from the deeper shadows directly below. She had obviously dropped to the ground rather than having climbed down.

A flood of thoughts and emotions coursed through Ian in the span of a few short moments, every one of them dark and angry. The irony was not lost on him, considering the fact that he'd known people imprisoned for no worse than what Ariannah was doing to him now. The debate ended quickly. His good health was inextricably interwoven with hers now.

Ian swung himself onto the window-ledge, and then dropped in pursuit.