

Property Rites

A Deed of Enslavement
(Excerpt)

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Also by Han Li Thorn

Spike Trap
Rough Copy

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birthday present

The day before Alasha's eighteenth birthday, her life changed forever.

The Matriarch was ill again. Judging by the doctor's grave face and half-disguised warnings, she was even worse than the last time.

After a while, Alasha came to understand that her mother was dying.

It was plain that Lord Jarvin and her brother knew it too, but they didn't speak about it, as if they thought her still too young for such things. When Alasha went to her mother's chamber in the south tower, the guard's words sounded kind enough, but that didn't stop him from turning her away.

"Your father's orders, young miss. I'm sorry."

It was one of the new men, otherwise she might have tried to wheedle her way around him. Otherwise, he'd have known her name.

It's not fair, she thought. It's a daughter's right to bid her mother farewell. If anything, it's the husband and the stepson that should be waiting out here.

Then the door opened and Jarvo was there. "It's all right, Hap. It's fitting that my sister should be present at the end."

"Very good, sir," said the guard, standing aside.

She went past him into the room and approached the big four-poster that had been part of her world for as long as she could remember: she'd been born in that bed, conceived in that bed.

Her father had died in that bed, twelve years before.

Alasha hardly recognized the old lady under the coverlet: her mother's skin was parchment-thin and pale as candle-wax, the wisps of hair so translucent that it would have been flattery to call them white. The Matriarch's eyes were closed under trembling lids, and each breath was a painful straining for air.

Alasha knelt at her mother's bedside, next to her stepfather's chair.

The doctor stood at the foot of the bed, his face grave.

There was an invalid's desk set across the covers, with a silver pen and an inkbottle, and a bundle of vellum that bore the Matriarch's unsteady but distinctive signature. Now, Lord Jarvin took the topmost leaf from the bundle and set it on the side table next to Alasha.

"You must countersign this, girl, in the presence of your mother."

"What is it?"

"It appoints me as your guardian until you are of an age to assume the Matriarchy. Until then, it will be my duty to protect you, to see to the running of the Malkenstorm estates, and to make sure that your holdings prosper."

Alasha studied the deed. Its purpose was unclear: it seemed to consist mainly of a bewildering number of schedules, appendices, and codicils. "I should like to read the rest of the document first."

"It contains nothing but tedious legalities, girl, and there is little time. Your mother is satisfied with it, and our family advocates assure me that it's been drawn up most carefully. If you fail to sign in the presence of the Matriarch, the choice of guardian reverts to the King. That is the law."

Alasha had learned nothing of this law in her studies, but then she'd never expected to be orphaned before her coming of age. The Matriarch was not yet out of her middle-years, and her illness and swift decline had seemed unthinkable when they began, less than twelve moons before.

The dying woman's lids flickered open for an instant, and Alasha saw her mother's dim eyes turn towards her. The Matriarch was looking at her, perhaps for the last time.

She's telling me to sign before it's too late, decided Alasha. Anyway, better that Lord Jarvin should have the management of the estates, rather than some stranger.

She picked up the silver pen and signed her name in the place indicated.

"Don't date it," said Lord Jarvin quickly. "That will be done in the lawyers' chambers."

Once more, Alasha was confused: surely, the signature should be dated when it was made? Reluctantly, she deferred to her stepfather:

this wasn't the place for argument, or the time to add to her mother's troubles.

Later, she came to realize how foolish that had been. Her mother's problems would soon be over forever, while her own were just beginning.

Alasha dreamed of the Matriarch that night, and when she woke she remembered her loss before the fact of her own birthday.

Her mother had always been distant; stern rather than loving and more concerned with Matriarchal duty than maternal affection. The young Alasha had grown up with nurses and tutors as her true parents, and now she felt a sense of bereavement, but not of inconsolable sorrow.

At eighteen, she stood at the threshold of life. She was still three years away from her majority and the assumption of her position among the Xendrian nobility, but from today she could own land and gold, and deposit money with the silversmiths (or borrow, if she had the mind, and be held responsible for her debts). She could even embark on business ventures of her own.

She considered what to wear. For her birthday, she would normally have chosen her favorite gown: tailored from deep blue silk that brought out the green of her eyes, with long rustling skirts and a flattering bodice, but today there was propriety to consider.

The mourning period must be observed, she thought. I will wear black.

Alasha couldn't find her slippers, so she crossed the icy stone floor of her dressing room barefoot and on tiptoe.

She opened her wardrobe and confronted emptiness.

Her gowns, her undergarments, her shoes, her riding clothes and boots – all were gone. Someone had been in her room and taken everything away.

All that was left was a light shift, suitable perhaps as an underbodice for a serving girl, but in no way appropriate for the future Matriarch.

There was a folded note lying on the shift. It was too dark to make out the spidery writing, so Alasha took the parchment into her bedchamber and drew the curtains back from the frost-rimed window. As the winter light streamed in, she saw that the trinkets, bottles and

books from her dressing table were all gone as well.

She had to read the note through twice before her mind grasped its meaning, and then her hands started to tremble.

Stepdaughter,

You will understand that the previous contents of the wardrobe were unsuitable for your new station. You are to clothe yourself in the garment provided and attend me in my rooms.

Leave the nightgown in the bedchamber; neither gown nor bed belong to you any more.

It would be best for you to attend me directly you wake up.

Lord Jarvin

Alasha didn't even touch the shift. She threw the chamber door open and stormed off towards her stepfather's rooms in the south tower, the nightgown swishing around her ankles and the flag-stones cold against her bare feet.

"It's too late to back out, girl. I saw you sign the document myself, and since you're eighteen now, you are bound by its terms."

"So that's why you told me not to date it."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You can't possibly expect anyone to believe that a girl of your breeding would sign a legal document and then fail to date it."

"The witnesses know when it was signed."

"The doctor and my son both checked the time carefully, and they agree that it was after midnight. No one will believe your fantasies. You are mine now, to dispose of as I will. Signed and delivered by your own hand. Your mother's castle and lands are mine, too, and Jarvo's after me."

"My brother would never agree to this. You won't get away with it."

"We already have, girl, and it was Jarvo who came up with the idea. He knows that you're only his stepsister, even if you seem to have forgotten. Now. You were instructed to leave the nightgown and to put

on the shift provided. You may disrobe now, and then return to the chamber for one last time to collect the proper garment.”

Alasha simply shook her head and pulled the warm gown closer about her body. She would die before she went through the castle unclothed.

Or would I? she wondered. Why is the idea of going naked through the torch-lit passages so enticing? Why have my loins become warm at the thought of it? Would I tremble and hurry, keeping to the shadows, or linger so that a passing guard or a servant might see me?

She felt her nipples stiffening and loosened her grip on her garment, letting the tightly stretched fabric fall away before her reaction could betray her, but Lord Jarvin was already staring at her chest with a knowing smile.

“I didn’t expect you to be sensible, girl. I didn’t expect you to accept what you so obviously desire. Perhaps what you really want is to learn the hard way, eh?”

He rang a small silver bell, summoning two of the new guards into the room.

“My new slave girl seems to be in need of some help with her clothes,” he said. “Would you be so kind as to assist her? After that, I’d be grateful if you would accept her as a guest in your quarters for an hour or so. Entertain her as you will, but leave her intact.”

One of the guards stood in front of Alasha, while his comrade seized her arms and twisted them behind her. She struggled until he jerked her elbows upward with cruel force, making her gasp with pain. After that, she stood still, glaring at the guard who was drawing the lacings out of her nightdress, not quite able to believe that someone could be doing such a thing. The garment went slack, held up by no more than the faint friction of silk on skin, and then he reached forwards and brushed the fabric away from her shoulders so that it fell away, catching at her twisted elbows.

Alasha was half-naked now. The guard smiled and licked his lips, making no effort to hide his lust. She looked down at her bared breasts, hating the way her traitorous nipples basked so proudly in the rosy flush that spread around them. She felt her cheeks burning, too – from the outrage and shame at being stripped, but also because of her other

responses, and her inability to disguise them.

The man in front of her wrapped his fingers about her throat, tilting her face upwards. He squeezed – gently enough so that he didn't quite hurt her, firmly enough to leave her in no doubt that he would if she showed any fight. She held herself quite still, and his comrade released her elbows for a moment so that her garment dropped away completely.

The guard let go of her neck, and his gaze followed the nightgown to the floor as it puddled around her ankles in a silken cascade. He let his eyes drift slowly back up over her exposed body, and grinned even more broadly. His teeth were stained, and riddled with crooked gaps.

Alasha had never been naked in front of a man before. Sometimes, alone with her dressing-room mirror, she'd wondered whether the body she saw reflected there would be pleasing to male eyes.

From the men's sharp intake of breath, she understood that it was.

The soldier grasped her left arm while his comrade maintained his grip on her right elbow. The whole thing seemed rehearsed, as regular as the new-fangled Marlish clockwork toy that had been in her room until last night.

These two have done this before, she thought.

Together they marched her out of her stepfather's apartment and down the stone steps towards the barracks.

Alasha struggled with three conflicting emotions.

The first was fear, of these men and of what they meant to do to her. She had led a privileged life, full of literature and astronomy to balance the archery and fencing lessons, but growing up in the Matriarch's northern fastness had offered little in the way of male society. Even so, the castle's library was well stocked. Alasha had no illusions about what would happen to a friendless girl who turned up naked in a barrack room.

The second emotion was embarrassment. She'd known some of the castle guards for as long as she could remember, and she was dismayed that they might see her like this.

The third was hope, because while the soldiers she knew might embarrass her, they surely wouldn't let anything really bad happen. They'd just laugh and enjoy the sight of her, as if she were a pretty serving girl. They'd probably still be joking about the time the Matri-

arch appeared bare-arsed in the barracks when they were old and toothless and wheezing over their beer in some dingy tavern, but that wasn't such a bad thing, either.

In fact, she found the thought almost gratifying, in a perverse sort of way.

Her captors dragged her down the final flight of steps. If her fantasy was to come true, there had to be some soldiers that she knew – some of the old guard who'd served the Matriarch for years – beyond the iron bound barrack doors.

There weren't.

There were only new faces, the ones recruited over the months by Lord Jarvin.

As Alasha's dreams of rescue crashed around her, she understood that these were the castle guards, now, and that her stepfather had sprung his trap only after every man whose loyalty was in doubt had been replaced.

Hope was gone, and in its absence, fear became irrelevant. All that was left to Alasha was the shame of being naked before these soldiers, because every man who cared to look could see every part of her body. The most humiliating thing of all was that they might see how hard her nipples were, or sense the warmth that she felt taking hold between her legs.

Even as Alasha squirmed with embarrassment, some more detached part of her was still observing, impressing the sights and smells of the barracks into her memory. She already knew that she would relive this scene in her imagination, once whatever this place held in store for her had been done.

The light was dim, filtered by mean, grimy windows, so that it was hard to make out details. The reek of tallow mingled with the fragrance of leather and aromatic smoke, and with the harsher scents of male sweat and harness oil. She took in the hard pallets on which the men slept, the cramped dirtiness of the room, and the packed earth of the floor.

"A birthday present from Lord Jarvin," said the man at her left. "Eighteen today! We've got her for an hour. Seeing as we're the ones that fetched her, we get first dibs. The rest of you can draw lots."

He brushed his knuckles over the hardness of her nipples, and then let his hand descend to her loins, where he pressed his fingers against her sex. Alasha tried to twist away from him, but his comrade held her still.

“Don’t worry, lads. This one’s warm and willing. Plenty to go round, eh?”

There was a chorus of deep guffaws. The guard brought his fingers to his nose and inhaled extravagantly, taking her most private scent deep into his lungs before licking it from his fingertips. “Sweet and fresh, too. Mind you lads, her cunny’s untouched and Lord Jarvin wants it kept that way, understand? No one’s to plant any seeds in her belly.”

One of the soldiers searched through a iron-bound chest until he found a strap that might once have held a piece of armor in place, but now they made it serve as a slave collar. They tied her wrists behind her back with a length of rough cord that they secured to a harness ring looped onto the collar, so that her wrists were hoisted halfway to her shoulder blades.

“Put her on her knees,” said the man at her left.

Soldiers surrounded her, jostling for a better view, and rough hands forced her to kneel. She resisted only for an instant: there were too many of them, and they were too strong. Collared and trussed as she was, Alasha knew she would have been helpless against any one of them.

The man stood in front of her and opened his breeches. The prim and flaccid diagrams in her anatomy books hadn’t prepared her for this, and she couldn’t help gasping at the sight of his engorged sex. He stood close to her and his man-scent filled her nostrils. She tried to squirm away.

Even as she struggled, she felt what had been warm and moist becoming hot and drenched, felt an unfamiliar itching between her thighs. *It can’t be the stench of him*, she thought, but there was no denying it. The scent of the man before her, the constricting bonds at her neck and her wrists, and the rough sensation of callused hands against her soft, naked skin – all these were more exciting to her than she would have believed possible.

Which was wrong. *Everything about this is wrong.* She slid her knees closer together, trying to hide the tell-tale wetness between her legs, wishing her hands were free so she could cover her treacherous breasts.

Fingers twined in her hair, pulling her head backwards and tilting her face towards the male sex that stood proudly in front of her.

“No,” she started to say, and he took advantage of her open mouth to push himself between her lips.

His taste and texture shocked her as much of the hard invasion of her mouth: the skin was velvet-smooth and flavored with salt that must come from his sweat, and with a yeasty sourness that she tried not to think about.

“Suck my cock, whore.”

She tried to shake her head, denying what was happening as well as his command. *I should bite him,* she thought, but she knew she wouldn't do that. Not while she was so helpless, not while there were so many of them standing ready to take revenge.

Her mouth was full, yet less than half of him was inside.

“You can either suck my cock, or I can fuck you, like this.”

He pushed himself deeper, all the way to the back of her throat. The hands in her hair held her immobile as the soldier rammed his sex into her mouth and filled her nostrils with his overpowering scent.

Alasha gagged on him, tasting the bile rising in her gorge, but the man pushed past that, pushed until her face was buried in the wiry hair that covered his belly. She had no choice but to swallow his sex.

He held that position for much longer than she could bear. She heard mewling noises, and was vaguely aware that she was making them herself. Her breath whistled desperately through her nostrils, overlaying the drumming of her ankles and calves against the hard-packed earth of the floor.

Then he was out of her throat and back in her mouth. “Suck me, whore,” he said again.

This time, she obeyed, using her lips and her tongue – tentatively at first, because she didn't know what he wanted, and had to learn by listening to his responses and sensing the way he moved.

He was getting more excited, so she seemed to be pleasing him.

Against her will, that thought pleased her, too.

The speed of his strokes increased along with his arousal. It was becoming harder to keep her tongue dancing on the spot that seemed to please him so, to stop her teeth from snagging his velvet skin – and any hurt she did him would surely be viciously repaid. Her jaw began to ache from being forced open for so long, from the unaccustomed effort of accepting such a thing so deep into her throat.

Please let it be over soon, she prayed, though she had no idea of how much time a man might require to spend in a girl's mouth. The soldier showed no sign of wanting to slow down, or stop. On the contrary, the rhythm he adopted seemed to outpace her racing heart, and his cock plumbed her more deeply with each stroke, until it seemed to challenge even the depth of her humiliation at being used like this.

Just when Alasha knew she couldn't bear it any longer, her abuser gasped and went still for a long moment, before giving a final thrust that was even deeper than before. She sensed the pleasure-spasm of his climax, and tasted the hot seed that he pumped past the root of her tongue.

And then he was finished with her, turning away as if she was of no further interest. A rough hand seized her jaw, holding her mouth shut, and a finger and thumb clamped her nostrils closed. The hands in her hair tipped her head back until she was looking up at the circle of lustful faces that surrounded her.

I will remember these men, she thought, *and I will have vengeance*.

The seed ran deeper into her throat, and there was no choice but to gulp it down. When it was gone, they let go of her head.

Please let it be over now, but she knew that it wasn't; her stepfather had sentenced her to an hour of this. The man who had held her arms as she was undressed looped his fingers through her collar and led her to the end of one of the rough pallets.

He guided her to her knees and bent her over the end of the straw-packed mattress. Alasha co-operated, hating herself even as she did so, but knowing that resistance would only make things worse.

There was another reason to co-operate, too, one that she tried to push away but that remained lurking in a dark corner of her mind. She had tasted something that would have been inconceivable an hour ago, and despite herself, she wanted more. Now there was a yearning

between her legs where she needed a man to plunge his sex, and a burning in her breasts that she knew could only be quenched by a man's rough fingers, or his sharp teeth.

It should be a man of my choosing, though.

She stiffened and moaned as the soldier behind her forced his hand between her thighs and ran a finger along the line of her sex. There seemed to be no choice but to open her legs for him. He chuckled softly, and his watching comrades sniggered. Now his fingers were inside her secret lips, compelling her to rock back and forward to the rhythm they dictated.

Oh, please don't. Stop. Oh, please don't stop. Please keep doing that for a few more heartbeats, for a few more minutes, please keep doing that until I'm ready for you to stop.

But his fingers weren't there any more, they were at the tops of her thighs, trailing through the slickness there. Alasha whimpered and tried to push her sex towards his hand again, but he was gone, he was moving upwards. His palm caressed her breasts for a moment and then he was smearing her own taste and secret fragrance over her nose and around her lips.

"Lick me clean."

The thought of tonguing the soldier's dirt-stained fingers disgusted her even more than the idea of tasting her own juices, and she kept her mouth firmly closed. Someone grabbed her wrists and twisted them brutally between her shoulder blades, until she whimpered and started to lick the proffered hand.

As soon as he had finished with her mouth, he pushed her face down into the rough mattress, so that her female scent mingled with the mustiness of old straw and the sharp reek of unwashed male. Alasha started to weep – perhaps because of what was happening, perhaps because of what she was discovering.

His fingers were back between her legs again, coaxing more wetness from her and carrying it back to his loins, carrying some of it to her most private place where she felt it returning to her in a shameful anointing, circling the tight entrance behind her sex.

As soon as Alasha realized what he meant to do, she went rigid and started to buck against the pallet. *No. Not there. Don't touch me there.* She

tried to twist aside, but a strong hand pressed down between her shoulders, forcing her back down against the soldier's cot.

She heard the man behind her spit, and felt his hard fingers rubbing more saliva between her buttocks.

"No," she said.

His hand dipped to her sex again, and she shuddered with a mixture of revulsion and desire.

"Shut up, you randy little slut. Don't try to pretend you're not gagging for this."

She felt his cock pressing against the tight opening that should have been hers alone, and tensed herself, ready to deny him with all her strength.

He increased the pressure steadily, together with the pain. Alasha tried to keep herself clenched against his invasion but it was no use; his cock was breaching her defenses, sliding through the lubrication he had applied, too slippery and too strong and too hard for her to resist. He reached around and touched her sex again, and her body went rigid even as the orifice he was using finally yielded to him fully. After that, she lay defeated under his strength, unable to do anything other than weep as he transfixed her again and again, filling her with a defiling fire that grew more intolerable with every thrust.

It took far too long for the man to empty himself. When he was done, she remained kneeling at the foot of the bed, too stunned even to raise her head, feeling nothing except for the searing pain he'd left between her buttocks and his cooling seed trickling down her thighs.

Vaguely, as if from a great distance and through someone else's eyes, Alasha was aware of him wiping himself off with a rag and buttoning up his breeches.

"Right lads," he said. "Who's next?"

2

slave ring

At the end of the hour, Alasha felt light-headed from sex, and pain, and perhaps from relief that her ordeal was over.

The two grizzled soldiers who escorted her back up the stairs had been unlucky with the casting of lots: her allotted time in the barracks had passed before they could take a turn with her.

Perhaps that was why they handled her so roughly as they pulled her into an alcove just off the main stairway.

“Don’t worry, pretty one. The youngsters won the lot-drawing today, but there might still be time for you to have a real man, eh?”

Alasha hoped with all her heart that there wouldn’t be.

The taller of the men hurried up the stairs and returned a few moments later. “It’s all right. Lord Jarvin’s busy with the notary, recording this one’s title. There’s plenty of time.” He turned to Alasha. “We’re not brutes like the others, girl. We let our women decide what they want. So, what’s it to be? Arse or mouth?”

Her heart sank and she felt tears springing to her eyes again, but she looked at him numbly and shook her head. *I won’t give him the satisfaction*, she thought.

“I’ll choose, then. Your arse. Don’t upset yourself, it’s not that you haven’t got a pretty mouth, but your sweet little wriggling peaches are something else.”

They laid her across a stone bench and the soldier plunged his sex into her. She was still slick from the others, and the ring of muscle that might have guarded her was exhausted, so he entered easily. Almost before he’d finished, his comrade was pulling him off, desperate to take his own turn.

As the second man moaned and bounced up and down behind her, Alasha heard footsteps on the stairs. A servant came into view and froze for a moment as he took in the tableau of the slave girl and the two guards.

It was Fryc. The man had served her at table almost every day since before she could remember, and had teased her as a little girl when she explored the kitchens where he worked. Alasha went rigid, her horror that he should see her in this condition even stronger than the pain of what was being done to her.

There wasn't so much as a spark of recognition in his eyes: all she saw there was resignation, and perhaps a hint of fear. The old servant looked away and hurried on up the stairs, as if this sort of thing had become commonplace in the castle.

Perhaps Alasha wasn't the first girl he'd seen being used by Lord Jarvin's new men.

Fryc carried on up the stairs. Alasha watched him go, trying to pretend that the thing going on behind her and inside her was happening to someone else, that she was just an observer. The servant glanced back before the staircase took him out of sight, then paused to watch from the shadows until the guard finished his business and let her rise stiffly to her feet.

"Come on, girl," he said. "You'd better clean yourself up before you appear before Lord Jarvin."

They led her up the stairs, following Fryc for a while, and into a small chamber where there was a stone cistern, a bucket, and a cloth. Both men watched as she started to clean herself.

"Ever had a noblewoman before?" asked the tall one.

"Never," said his companion.

"Well, you still ain't. She's just another slave girl, now. Is it a pleasant change, slave girl? You'd never have tasted cocks like ours if you was still a noble."

Alasha said nothing as she rinsed the cloth as best she could in the bucket, and used it to wipe away the man-seed that had dried around her mouth and on her breasts, and the mess that they'd left smeared between her buttocks.

She waited until they were gossiping again, and not looking at her, before she cleaned her own stickiness from between her legs.

Lord Jarvin left Alasha to cool her heels for some considerable time.

For some reason, waiting outside his rooms made her feel even more naked than being displayed for the pleasure of the guards in the barracks. It was certainly colder here. She thought longingly of her woolen gowns, and then of the nightdress that had been stripped from her. Even the thin shift that she'd rejected so casually earlier would have been better than nothing.

It might be icy, standing here unclothed among the great stones of the south tower, but at least there was a temporary safety: she was unlikely to be molested in the Lord's own vestibule. Alasha shivered as she considered how it would have been if she'd been condemned to wait in the barracks; the two men who'd brought her here were not the only ones who'd been left unsated.

The door opened and a well-dressed man emerged, carrying a ledger. *He must be the notary, and that book contains the record of my enslavement,* thought Alasha. *Now I am in the property registry. There can be no escape.*

That was the first moment that she truly comprehended what had been done to her. Everything else – being forcibly stripped, even being taken by the soldiers in the barracks and the alcove – could have happened to anyone who fell into the wrong hands.

Now, she was different. Only slaves had the title numbers of their deeds inscribed in the registry. Only the owner could have the record struck off.

The notary glanced at her as he left. His eyes were devoid of human recognition, as if he saw her only as something to be cataloged and recorded in his books. She wasn't used to that: ever since she had grown into a woman, she had seen male interest – ranging from the polite to the openly smitten – mingling with the respect that men always showed. To be displayed so brazenly without being desired was galling to some feminine part of her.

It's his profession: he must see slave girls naked like this all the time, she thought. *Or perhaps he prefers boys.*

"Your Master is waiting for you," said the notary. "You may go inside now."

Alasha pushed the heavy door open and entered her stepfather's study for the second time that day.

“I trust you enjoyed the society of my soldiers?”

Alasha chose to say nothing.

“Why so quiet? You’re usually such a talkative girl ... has something happened that I should know about?”

“You know very well what happened.”

“Indeed I do. I’ve had a full report from the sergeant. I understand that you enjoyed the experience rather more than I anticipated. A shame: that wasn’t part of my plan. Still, I shouldn’t complain if you seek to make the most of your new station.”

“My station is to be future Matriarch of this castle.” Even as she spoke, Alasha knew that her words were hollow.

“Alas, no. The indenture that you and your mother signed has just been notarized. I imagine you saw the gentleman on the way out. Perhaps not, though: it’s hardly your place to watch the comings and goings of people of quality, is it?”

“My place is as your liege-lady, as my mother was.”

“I should have you whipped for that. In fact, I think I will. You have an appointment at the smithy, girl. If you’re there within five minutes, I’ll reconsider.”

Prudence struggled against pride: *he’ll have me taken there no matter what I do; at least if I go myself, he might not have me whipped...*

Pride won. She wouldn’t give the usurper the satisfaction of submitting so easily. “You have no right of command over me, stepfather.”

“We shall see,” he said, as he rang his hateful bell.

The smithy was warm and dim, both heated and lit by the great forge. The forge boy working the bellows couldn’t tear his eyes away from Alasha’s body. *He doesn’t know me either, she thought. He only knew the fine clothes and the deference I was owed.*

Casa the smith recognized her straight away. Alasha almost wished she hadn’t, because anonymity was her final refuge, but it was comforting to see a friendly face.

“Wait outside,” Casa told the guards. “I will call you when I am done.”

“Lord Jarvin’s orders are that we wait with the slave.”

“And wait you shall, but outside. This is delicate work, and I need room to breathe.”

The guards muttered about being given orders by a woman, but the smith made it obvious she wouldn't start until her smithy was clear, and in the end, they left.

“I am truly sorry that it's come to this, Lady,” said Casa.

“Don't take any risks for me, Casa. I have been stupid, and now I must pay.”

“There is not much I can do anyway, except refuse to tag you.”

“No. They'd just throw you out, and find a new smith. In any case, I'd prefer it done by someone I know.”

“Then I do it with a heavy heart, Lady.”

Casa took a length of cord and measured around the innermost joint of Alasha's ring finger, the finger that she'd carelessly assumed would bear a wedding band some day. Then the smith selected two matched halves of a bright iron ring from a wooden box, and placed them in the fire.

“It has been many years since such a thing has been done here. Long before my time,” she said grimly. “An evil fate brought me to this place, I think.”

The smith set some tiny pieces of metal type in an ancient-looking press, and when the ring was hot enough, she took one half up with a pair of tongs and set it between the clamp's jaws before pulling the long handle down with all of her heavy-set strength.

“It is numbered,” she said, shortly, as she set the work back in the fire. “Now we must do our best to protect your finger from the heat.”

“I don't understand. Surely the ring is not to be set on me straight from the forge?”

“Not red-hot. But the two halves must be joined. The pegs will not fuse into the sockets if they are cold.”

She placed a filigree tube over Alasha's finger. “This will help to keep the ring from burning you as I put it on. After that, you must thrust your hand into the quenching trough straight away.”

“But that will seal the ring in place forever.”

“That is so. But remember that the wires will not shield you from the heat for long. We have no choice in this, Lady.”

Alasha nodded, and the smith took one half of the ring from the fire and set it in an iron form that rested on the anvil. Then she lifted the other half in her tongs, and glanced at Alasha.

“Wet your hand first, Lady. Best close your eyes as soon as your finger is in place. Let me do my job and then let me plunge your hand in the water. If you flinch, I may hurt you with the hammer.”

Alasha dipped her hand in the quenching trough, and looked at her unadorned finger for one last time before putting it into the form. She heard the hiss of steam and felt her finger burning even before she had time to close her eyes, but she gritted her teeth and held her hand steady.

She heard the chink of the top half of the ring dropping into place, followed by the clear ringing of the smith’s hammer, and then her hand was deep in the icy water, the tube was gone, and the unfamiliar heaviness of the slave ring was tight around her finger.

She opened her eyes and looked at the homely face of the smith. “Thank you, Casa.”

“I fear there is more, Lady.” The smith went to a shelf, and took down an iron harness of some kind. “You might be glad in some way to wear this, though I do not like its design.”

“What is it?”

“It is a chastity belt, made to preserve the virtue of a lady’s womb,” she said. “Alas, it is intended to offer no more protection than that.” Casa shook her head sorrowfully, fingering the large ring that opened towards the rear of the device.

“You’re to lock this thing on me?”

“I fear so, Lady. I am truly sorry.”

“It’s as I said, Casa: better that this should be done by a friend.”

The smith took the belt, and locked it around Alasha’s waist and between her legs. “I am to hold the key for Lord Jarvin,” she said.

“What’s the purpose of this belt, Casa? I know that my stepfather’s soldiers will obey him in this matter...”

“I am sorry, Lady. I have heard that you are being sent away.”

“Where? Why?”

“I do not know where. As to why, I would guess that Lord Jarvin sees you as a threat. He seeks to pull your fangs while staying within the law.”

“My fangs are not to be pulled by a ring and a belt. I will return. I hope we’ll meet again then.”

“I hope so too, Lady, though I do not know how long I will be able to stay here.”

There was a banging at the door. “You’ve had long enough,” called the guard. “Send her out, or we’ll find another smith. One who works faster.”

“Goodbye, Casa.”

“Goodbye, Lady.”

As Alasha left, the last thing she saw was the astonished O of the forge boy’s mouth, as if he only now realized that it was the Lady of the castle who had been in his smithy, and whom he had just seen enslaved.

Alasha stood in the courtyard, shivering in the thin winter sun as her stepfather talked with the caravan master. Lord Jarvin didn’t attempt to move away, or even to lower his voice. *He must want me to hear how much he’s selling me for.*

There were three mule-drawn wagons standing in the snow, with their drivers lounging lazily in their seats. A dozen or so mounted soldiers – mercenaries, going by their varied weapons and armor – provided the escort. The trade goods of the caravan were chained behind one of the wagons: a long coffle of slaves, the males at the front, the females following.

In the days of the Matriarch, traders such as these hadn’t been welcome in the surrounding lands: Alasha knew of such things only from books. There were slaves working on the farms and in the castle, of course, but they were treated more like indentured servants and certainly weren’t traded like cattle. That sort of thing still happened elsewhere in Xendria, but not here in the north, not since people like her mother had come to power.

Things were to be different from now on, it seemed.

The caravan master turned to her, and walked around her slowly before putting his hand under her chin and tilting her head up towards him. “Open your mouth.”

Alasha considered the ugly whip that was coiled at his belt and