

ALANA THE QUEEN

Book Three

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Preface:

"Alana The Queen" completes the three book saga started with "Alana in Bondage". The story is set over barely a three year period so our heroine is still in her teens during this saga.

In volume two, "Alana in Peril" I apologized for making use of two great literary characters created by that great novelist Patrick O'Brien. Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin remain main characters in this installment. I have taken literary license to use another great fictional character of the same period, Richard Sharpe. As the main protagonist in Bernard Cornwell's twenty plus volumes he is a contemporary of Aubrey and Maturin. I thank my good friend Arch Stanton for introducing me to Cornwell and Sharpe. For those familiar with the character I have attempted to keep him true to his calling.

Once again I find that the artwork to accompany this volume is sadly lacking. I again thank Arch Stanton, HdA, Smicga and Runaway for the permission to use some of their artwork.

Chapter One

The Ladies-In Waiting scattered like a flurry of doves.

The High Queen was in one of her “I need to be alone” moods which translated bluntly to GET OUT!

Alana laid back in the scented bath water and tried to relax. It was so much easier when Jack shared the bath with her. His back and neck rubs were what she longed for the most. Well almost the most. But he was doing his “Admiral of the Fleet” exercises and wouldn’t be back for a couple of days so she was alone. Alone as a dozen new ladies-in-waiting would let her be. She longed for Marissa, Illicia, and Mira. But the first two were tending to manors, estates of their own for the time being. Mira had been “adopted” by a Baron’s family and was choosing between multiple suitors so she would have to make do with these new girls.

Krystyana was busy playing the Lady of the Manor for Earl (now full Lieutenant) William Blakeny on land. He indulged her by taking her to sea with him for any voyage longer than a week. Young love!

“Hmmm.” She thought. “Young love. They would be having what? Their three month anniversary?” Married at fourteen for him and thirteen for her. A little young apparently for England but perfectly correct for Branart. Still as her ward Krystyana visited as often as she could.

At least she had Alisande. Her younger sister clung to her as tightly as she could. She had thought her older sister dead along with her father and uncle, so when Alana had reappeared with the might of Jack Aubrey and the Surprise to claim her rightful throne as High Queen from the usurper Michael, she was overjoyed beyond belief.

At only thirteen years old Alisande appeared to be almost a twin of her older sister despite her young years. She had the same golden red hair. Same large green eyes with unbelievably long lashes. Small up tilted nose and perfectly formed mouth. Alana smiled to herself. If she continued to sprout and fill out they would be twins.

Alana continued her solitary meditation. Here she was, barely 17, and Mistress of the mightiest empire in the world. Branart’s navy sailed the seven seas (though it was Jack that had proved there were seven) and established trade and colonies with both the northern and southern continents of the Americas. Strange name but Jack insisted this was the name on the maps so it stood. Of course these major cruises were still performed by the Surprise, now under command of Post Captain Pullings. But the local area was patrolled by galleys under command of competent Surprises, refitted with much more efficient sail. The first of the new sloops were being fitted, which she sighed, was why Jack was not with her.

Then there was to be the second yearly voyage of a number of the old Surprises and other adventurous young men to the area off Bermuda. They would try again to find the rift in time that had brought Jack and his crew here, to Alana's time and world.

The first such cruise had just returned. No portal was discovered but they had actually found a small boat with survivors from a ship wreck in Jack's world and time. He was interviewing the dozen or so men now during his review and she was anxious to hear the outcome.

They had also discovered a strange piece of iron wreckage. It seemed to be from a type of ship that even Jack was unfamiliar with. The wreckage had been found on a small reef. They had just had the time to rummage through it and pick out a few objects. Most important were a number of books. While the majority seemed to be works of fiction a few were scientific and medical. The dates on these indicated they were from a time even further in the future than Jack's. According to the printings they dated from the 20th century. These had been sent by fast messenger and Stephen had been so excited he had actually ridden down at a full gallop (falling off at least a half dozen times) and was ensconced at his University reading through them at a prodigious rate. They included information so advanced that he was virtually unavailable and avidly reading up to twenty hours per day relying heavily on his coca leaves to sustain him.

When he surfaced (and this was hardly ever) he talked excitedly about new techniques in surgery. About "sterile" conditions making infections impossible or at least difficult. Something he called anesthetics which would render even the most radical surgery painless! And an entire body of knowledge about a group of physics called "antibiotics" and "sulfa drugs". Alana had read his brief missals. How they were to redo the sewer systems. This and other basic techniques would cut down the number of infant deaths by more than half. That in and of itself was enough for Alana to authorize the funds.

Jack, when he wasn't performing his duties as King and First Lord of the Admiralty would be personally overseeing and hurrying along the modifications.

This was a hurried and almost frantic activity. In the meantime here she was, soaking in her bath, trying for some solitude. She had invited Queolah and her ladies to dinner that evening and she was eagerly looking forward to their company.

The Mayans were flourishing here in Branart and had managed to keep their culture intact. Alana held the position as an advanced Acolyte in the Ixtabian order though she didn't participate actively in their rites. She knew that it would not take much effort to achieve the position of Senior Priestess, since she was already worshiped by the Mayans as the incarnation of the Goddess herself. But somehow the High Queen of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth using erotic hanging as a means of achieving a higher state of consciousness and exceptional orgasms did not seem to fit her role at the present.

Sighing she alighted out of the recessed tub and toweled herself off. It was nice to do this for her self once in a while. She caught her image in the mirror and gazed critically. Same long golden red hair. Her stomach was still hard and flat. Long thighs and legs, slim and graceful. Her breasts, the same pert uplifted and full shape. It had been almost two years since Gilbert had fitted her out as his mistress, the quintessential Pleasure Girl, but there was no diminution in her figure or face. She could still put every other woman in the land to shame.

Enough traipse around in the nude. She grabbed a robe and sat down to brush her hair.

“You Majesty?” a timid voice came though the door.

“Didn’t I command that I wanted a bit of time alone?” Alana used the tone she only reserved for the young girls who really needed training.

“Yes your Majesty. But you also instructed you wanted to hear about it if King John has been heard from...”

“Is the King back?” Alana jumped up with a thrill in her heart that could not be denied.

“No your Majesty, but he sent a messenger!”

Alana smothered her disappointment. “Have the ladies assist me to receive him!”

With that the room was filled with girls, brushing, primping, applying makeup, and assisting the Queen into her raiment for meeting the public.

Alana always knew it would have taken about a third the time if she could do it herself, but with all the kerchief ties and boning of the girdle and lacings it was simpler just to let the girls do it for her.

Finally arrayed in all her finery she entered the throne room and the messenger was announced. He entered with his hat in hand but before he was allowed to come close he was inspected carefully by the officer of the Mayan marines on duty. Cleared he bowed courteously.

“You majesty, your husband the King bade me give you this message and answer any questions you may have.” He handed the scroll to one of the Mayan guards who inspected it for danger and then handed it to Alana.

Jack’s writing was hurried evidencing his excitement. The shipwrecked men were a number of sailors and soldiers from a Lord Wellington’s expedition, whom Jack had known from his time. There even was an officer of some repute, a Major Richard Sharpe, who both Jack and Stephen had heard of from their time. Jack, in his message, asked her to have Stephen join him. Maturin’s intelligence background was far more involved in Sharpe’s line of work. He ended the message saying they would return in three days time.

Alana immediately sent word to Stephen at the Royal University by messenger, adding an invitation to his wife Marissa to join her while the men were away. Of course, she included Stephen’s daughter Brigid from his previous marriage to Diana Villiers. Marissa loved her as her own. And their governess, Clarissa Oakes lived with them so if Brigid could not come she was sure no hardship would ensue.

The rumors were that Clarissa had an entire of retinue of suitors herself. “If there had been a hundred ladies on board the Surprise we would have had a riot every day” she mused. Something unworldly and exotic seemed to attach itself to a woman from a world and another time away.

Alone with her thoughts she pondered what this new group meant. Was there a continuing portal, a doorway, opened between their two worlds? Was it just one way? It was a confusing and difficult concept for anyone to consider.

Just then her almost identical twin burst through the door. "Alana! Can you please do something about this?"

Alana looked up at her younger sister Alisande. She was 13 and each year became more beautiful.

They were almost the same height, same golden red colored hair, same huge green eyes, pert nose and mouth. The disturbing part was she was turning from that coltish young girl into a full figured woman, the curves beginning to be amply evident. When that happened it would be difficult to tell her apart from her older sister.

"Your escort again?"

"Yes! I can't even go to the privy...no. What does Count Maturin call them? John, without one of them standing outside the door. Honestly, you're even worse than Father!"

This hurried remark made both of them pause. Now both their parents were gone. Alisande was too young to remember their mother. Alana's memories were very vague. She had died when she was only four. They had lost their father when he had led the army to Alana's rescue. Now all they had were each other. When her Cousin Michael attempted to seize the throne Alisande found herself facing the horrible choice of becoming his bride at the age of 12 or face sure death, which ever option strengthened Michael's hold on the kingship. Alana's return had saved her but now she chafed under the careful guard that watched her every move.

"Frustrated Love?"

Alisande nodded petulantly. "It's not as if there is real danger here, inside the castle...anymore!" she added plaintively.

Alana thought back to the two times at Duke Gilbert's castle, a well guarded fortress, when she had almost lost her life due to assassins and kidnappers. Then there was Martin's attempt on her life just before her coronation. But all Ali understood was that she had virtually no privacy and this rankled her.

Still, even with the presence of her constant bodyguards the old spirit of the Court had returned. Ali had a dozen friends and twice that many ladies-in-waiting around her. It was intended that way so she would not brood over the loss of her cousin Rowena and discovery of her own predilection for erotic hanging.

Alana had been seriously thinking of having her travel to be instructed by the High Priestess of the Ixtabian order, Queotach, herself. The delights of the noose tempted Alana every day, and she knew that Alisande was going through similar tortures. It might be better to have her learn all the techniques of the erotic embrace of the rope at the main temple of Ixtab itself on Isle del Muertes.

“Perhaps we can arrange a sea voyage for you to relieve your boredom”, she smiled at the girl.

“To see Gilbert’s kingdom and meet Beaufort and Wyvern?” Ali asked excitedly. She was charmed by the stories Alana told of the great warhorse and huge dog, intelligent beyond belief, who were her personal guardians in Gilbert’s realm.

“I was thinking of a longer trip. To the far side of the world perhaps?”

“The Maya! I could visit the Mayans in Brazil?” Now Ali was up and bouncing around.

“Let me discuss it with Jack. He’ll be home soon.”

Ali looked a little doubtful. Still her brother-in-law Jack Aubrey was the greatest sailor in the world and she was sure he would find a way to make it happen.

“Now tea will be ready in a little while so try to get your ladies together!”

“Yes your Highness” and Ali curtsied with a little smile and ran off.

By afternoon tea the messenger had returned. Stephen was on his way to meet Jack and Marissa would be at the castle for dinner. It would be a little like old times again!

Marissa had been by Alana’s side during her most dangerous and life threatening adventures. These included torture at the hands of the malicious and perverse Duchess Roxanne and capture by the Pirate Captain Martine. She had sacrificed herself a number of times to save Alana’s virtue. Faced with death and debauchery at the Pirate’s hands they had been rescued by none other than Captain Jack Aubrey under command of HMS Surprise and the rest was history.

Still Marissa and Alana shared a sisterhood few had ever faced. Both bore the scars of the hangman’s noose indelibly etched into the delicate skin of their throats and had learned the agony and ecstasy to be found at the rope’s end. They and their companions had been with the Surprise when it discovered the Mayan empire and had been welcomed into the sisterhood of their deity Ixtab, Goddess of the Hanged.

Alana knew that Marissa had never been able to fully embrace the Ixtabian rites. It seemed that only Alisande and she herself found the act of being hanged by the neck an orgasmic pleasure beyond measure. They appeared to share a common ancestral bond that allowed them to endure long periods of hanging that were sure death for others. Not only had this been their succor a number of times, but it had ensconced Alana as the titular head of the Ixtabian order.

The afternoon flew by and before she knew it the Countess Maturin’s coach pulled into the Castle’s gates. Alana greeted her friend with kisses and hugs .

“Alana! Sorry. Your Majesty! You look wonderful!!” Marissa hugged her close. “Yes marriage definitely agrees with you!”

“And you!” Alana responded. Marissa positively glowed. Alana recalled the long nights when she had held her friend, depressed beyond words, sure in her mind that no man

could love a woman who had been despoiled and ill used as she had been. But of course, that was before she had met Stephen Maturin.

Before long they were ensconced in one of the Castle's ante rooms regaling each other with what had gone on since they last met. It had to have been a good three months and for Alana it was far too long.

"You received my letter I'm sure. Jack and I have chosen Victoria and Gabriella if we have girls."

Marissa was suddenly turned quite serious. "Alana are you...?"

"No", she smiled a little ruefully, "but we're quite hopeful soon. As to choosing those names ahead of time...Jack asked me what my reasons were and when I explained he was in total agreement."

Then suddenly both were crying. The original Victoria and Gabriella were Marissa's cousins taken at the same time Alana and she were captured by the Duke DeMornay. Victoria had died during one of the Duchess' perverse games suffering a particularly slow and agonizing death. Gabriella had been set on the rampart with Alana and Marissa nude and bound with hawsers about their necks as warning to the encircling troops that an attack would mean their deaths. Alana had marked that the hawsers were not tied off and had jumped, though bound and noosed, to the safety of the moat below. Marissa had followed but Gabriella had hesitated a second too long and the Duchess had managed to wedge her hawser in a crack in the stone rampart snapping her neck like a twig.

Alana sighed and made a conscious attempt to change the subject.

"I've been invited to the Northern provinces for the summer solstice. Jack wants me to go by sea but the traditional method is river barge. It will be slow and tedious but a relaxing and luxurious trip. The Royal barge is a floating palace. Can you come?"

"I would love to", Marissa replied, a look of pure joy on her face. "Oh..." she looked downcast just as fast. "That's the week Stephen is holding his first Scientific Congress and we are to be at all the functions."

"Oh yes", Alana replied. "Jack will be presenting a number of papers himself. That's just another of the reasons he can't come along. I totally forgot."

"Maybe Illicia or Mira could go?"

"Yes", Alana replied brightening a bit. "It's a shame we can't all go. It would be so like old times."

"No" Marissa replied wryly. "There's no way Jack will allow the kind of 'adventures' we got ourselves into to happen again".

"You're so right", Alana laughed..."so right." And they drank a glass of Madeira to their mutual savior by a captain and crew from another time.

Queolah and her acolytes appeared at exactly the correct time. She now had two junior priestesses and additional girl having been assigned by her home temple in Brazil. In recognition of the more prudish aspects of Branart society Queolah had modified the traditional priestess' garb which left the back, buttocks and legs completely exposed and now wore a lovely halter dress with a low flowing tail, as did all her ladies.

Alana warmly embraced her. In the time since coming on board the surprise for the trip to Branart Queolah had become conversant in english so the three began a banter catching each other up with activities since they had last seen each other. Queolah was an incredible Mayan beauty with dark black hair that flowed to her waist. The tribal kingdom she was from did not affect the broad Mayan nose so her's was straight and long. Ixtabian priestesses were not forbidden to marry, but it was a rare for them to do so. So far Queolah and her retinue had remained single but Alana knew that there were any number of the Mayan Marines and quite a few of Jack and Colonel Howard's officers who were lovesick.

Queolah sat to Alana's right during dinner, Marissa on her left. Bending her head she said in a conspiratory tone, "Two days from now our four new novices will be initiated as acolytes Can we extend an invitation for you and your ladies to attend?"

Men were forbidden in the temple of Ixtab, but Alana had four ladies-in-waiting that were trained in the deadly arts to attend her when she visited. In addition the temple's usual cohort of Mayan Marines would be significantly strengthened by the Royal Contingent.

"This will be the first time for them?"

"Yes. They have practiced in pairs in private but this will be their first public time on the golden cord (the Ixtabian term for their version of the hangman's noose).

"I would be honored" Alana smiled. And the three old friends regaled each other far into the night.

The next day Jack returned and with him both the new Major Sharpe and the men accompanying him.

Chapter Two

Richard Sharpe had come up from the ranks in the army. He started as a private, then sergeant. He received a field promotion to Lieutenant for saving Sir Arthur Wesley's life, but this was a mixed blessing at best. While most officers were gentlemen who paid for each promotion, whether competent at their task or not, Sharpe's position as a Major in the King's Rifles had been earned through sweat and blood.

But he had been wronged...wronged twice! And this had ended with his visit to America.

First there was the bastard Pumphrey. The effeminate little pervert of a man.

He had lied to Sharpe about Astrid and her father Ole who had left them both safe in Denmark. But the father, Ole had been a British agent and Astrid knew all his dealings. With the taking of the Danish fleet and the subsequent return of the British troops Pumphrey had ordered their deaths to be sure that the knowledge died with them.

The father was easy. He had been savaged by the French and his slow recuperation was abruptly terminated by some poison in his medicine.

Pumphrey's men had known what to do next. Astrid, of course, was heartbroken. The blond beauty thought the world of her father and went into deep mourning. The agents waited and the evening after the funeral they struck. Sneaking into her house in the suburbs, they took her in her bed. One held her and smothered her cries while the second tied the noose around her neck. Then both hoisted her from the ceiling beam, enjoying the scene as she struggled vainly at the end of the rope. They had not used a proper noose, and had bragged at how long Astrid had kicked and jerked in her agony, her lovely body silhouetted in her almost sheer nightgown. She had died hard and slow. The maids found her the next morning with a chair kicked over next to her. Suicide the verdict. Tormented by her father's untimely death she had taken her own.

So the bastard Pumphrey had lied about her and her father dying of cholera. And he paid for it with a bullet in the back of the head.

After that it was on to America. That's where Sharpe's wife and her lover had fled to his family's land in Virginia when she realized that Sharpe would have his revenge. And the distance had not blunted his revenge. Both had died under his blade. So it was off for South America with a price on his head. And in that flight came the storm.

He had thrown away that hard earned rank to revenge himself on his wife and her lover in the Americas. Harper and his loyal men had accompanied him but it was Sharpe alone that had extracted vengeance. They were escaping the consequences of that action when the ship they were on was hit by a freak storm and he, his men and a few sailors found themselves adrift in the sole surviving boat. And now he was here. He still had a hard time believing where "here" was. A different world and time? Only when they arrived in Branart and he realized it was not London at the turn of the 19th century did he fully believe.

Their weapons, the Baker rifles and pistols they carried were so far advanced it was frightening. And now he was here at the palace.

On board the sloop Sophie that rescued him Captain Howard had regaled him with the tales of HMS Surprise and her transport to this time and place. About the exploits of Captain Jack Aubrey...now King John the First, and his rescue of the then Princess Alana, now High Queen.

There was not a sailor or soldier who had not heard of the exploits of Jack Aubrey. His actions against the French on the high seas had made every man under service in England proud. But now he was here...in this world, and Sharpe was being taken to be presented to him and the Queen.

Sharpe had taken all this with the same grain of salt as the other stories of the new land and new world a time apart. It seemed as if the entire ship had gone mad since all the crew told the same insane tales. But here he was.

An attendant had been courteous in assisting him in trying to clean his clothing and arranging for a shave and haircut prior to being presented to the King and Count Maturin...and then there he was, in the flesh, the legendary Captain Jack Aubrey...now King John the first.

Alana was struck with his appearance. He was tall. Quite tall, with dark hair and a prominent scar that gave his countenance a slight sneer except when he smiled, which was not often. He gave the impression of a worldly man with a great air of competence about him. Still he retained a soldier's plain spoken effect and this endeared him to all at the table. He had been offered new clothing, since his garb was weathered and worn, but he had refused. He still wore the deep green jacket that identified him as one of the King George's Riflemen.

Prior to the meal Jack and Stephen had shared his resume with Alana and she was duly impressed. She had learned about the Napoleonic wars in Jack's time during her voyage on the Surprise and thought it a bit strange that a line officer, such as this Major Sharpe would have been so well known. But then Jack and Stephen had explained about Sharpe's most noted exploit, the taking of a French 'eagle', presented by Napoleon himself, at the battle of Talavera.

As Stephen had been called upon by the British ministry to carry out intelligence operations deep into Bonaparte's domain, Sharpe had likewise been commissioned to undertake slightly different tasks by General Wellington, though he had known him when he was the mere Sir Arthur Welsey. He led a contingent of Riflemen, armed with the Baker rifle. Far slower to load due to its internal spirals, the weapon was extremely accurate and allowed an expert three times or more the effective range of a musket. These were "Chosen Men" known for their accuracy and guerilla abilities and it was a small group of these he had been marooned with.

At his formal presentation to the Royal Couple Sharpe struggled not to stare. He had known and loved some of the most beautiful women of his time. But none, not even Grace who had died in childbirth with their son, held a candle to this luminous creature in front of him. At first he thought it was the trappings of royalty, but Alana eschewed many of the

trappings of the High Queen. She wore an ivory Grecian gown with long sleeves and low cut bust. Other than the Royal Crown and her wedding ring from Jack, her only other jewelry was her father's ring which had been fitted so she could wear it on her right hand.

Yet she was luminous. Her golden red hair, falling in gentle curls to her waist, framed her perfectly shaped face. Huge, incredibly green eyes. Small upturned nose and a generous mouth. Incredible! But his attention was drawn to her lovely slim neck. It was cruelly and strangely scarred. The individual loops of a rope had been embedded in her fair skin. Yet she carried the scars of what could only have been a slow and torturous hanging, proudly.

But this imperfection left her even lovelier. She was truly beautiful, breathtaking, aching, untouchably beautiful! He immediately became incredibly jealous of the King. But Jack Aubrey could not be a cold aloof monarch. It was simply not her nature. His infectious greeting and good humor filled the room.

Over the actual meal Sharpe shared the strange circumstances that had brought him and his men to Branart. An action off the shores of Bermuda had resulted in their transport being sunk and they had drifted for days until surrounded by a mist. Then they spotted a sail in the distance. It was the Branart sloop HMS Sophia that had effected their rescue and so they came to be here in this time and place.

Midshipman Bonden (Jack's faithful coxswain who had finally accepted a promotion) had brought him up to date on the strange destiny that had befallen him and his men and he had resigned himself to his new reality. As it turned out, he had little to go back to his time and place for, his wife having deserted him for a younger dash of an officer and run off to the colonies. He was coming back from that area when he became entangled in the action that left him and his men adrift.

Alana mused to herself that, given his particular countenance, part of that action might have included the murder of his trollop of a wife and her paramour. This, of course, she kept to herself.

Colonel Howard, also at the dinner, immediately offered Sharpe a commission in the army of Branart, with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and the task of recreating a corps of men with the training necessary to carry on the type of operations his Riflemen were famous for. Sharpe had always been a realist and had come to the heart-rendering realization that his time and his army were over 600 years and a world away. He grudgingly accepted as soldering was all he knew. He asked for appointment for the other six of his men and his sergeant, Harper as his aid. This was quickly accepted.

Then came the sobering task of discussing weapons. The muskets used by the British Navy and her Marines were being replicated in the forges of Branart. These could not compare with the Baker rifles that Sharpe and his men carried. Each of them had kept his weapon and all seven of the weapons had survived. That didn't count Harper's volley gun. Jack was familiar with this, of course, since it was made for naval use. There had been none on the Surprise as it had been found too powerful for use by any other than the largest and strongest of wielders. Harper was one of the very few who could use the weapon effectively.

The entire table listened intently as Sharpe made his case for the rifles. Far more accurate than the muskets being produced. A true sniper's weapon.

In the silence after his presentation Stephen interjected "There are descriptions of weaponry in my most modern books and they support everything Colonel Sharpe has said and more. All the weapons in the next century are rifled."

Sharpe looked up in wonder and Stephen briefly explained the treasure trove of books dating from the 20th century.

"These weapons use a form of sealed cartridge very much like the 'percussion cap', so rare in our time. They also have a mechanism which automatically loads and ejects the spent cartridge so the man can concentrate on aiming rather than loading."

Sharpe looked dubious.

"Colonel, Stephen asked, how many shots can a trained rifleman get off in a minute?"

"At the best, Count Maturin, four."

Both Jack and Howard nodded.

"The rate of some of these 20th century "machine guns" as they are called, is 600 rounds per minute."

This shocked everyone, including Alana. In Branart, prior to the coming of Jack Aubrey and the Surprise, the height of technology a man could carry was the crossbow.

Sharpe shook his head. "My God, if we had one of those at Flanders it would have decimated the French."

"Yes", Stephen agreed. "But it's all our armorer's can do to replicate three pound canons and simple muskets. The engineering for your rifles themselves will take quite some time. These 20th century weapons may take a generation."

Sharpe was clearly intrigued and so was Howard.

"How does one man carry 600 cartridges?"

"Apparently the smaller weapons are loaded with anywhere from 12 to 50 or so. The large ones have boxed ammunition, but even then it takes many boxes to feed one of these monsters."

"Monsters are right", Sharpe agreed. "We thought the seven barreled navel volley gun was impressive."

Again Jack and Howard grunted their agreement. Both had experience with this monster. It had been withdrawn from naval use when it was found it had the tendency to do more damage to the wielder than to his targets.

"There is a diagram of an earlier weapon, used in the later part of our 19th century that used a rotating barrel system which we may aspire to. It was referred to as a 'Gatling Gun'. With your permission, your Majesty, and here Stephen nodded to Alana, I will discuss this

with our head armorer and see if this is something we may put on the timetable to develop.”

Alana smiled, “Of course.” and nodded. Her world had changed so radically in the last two years that she felt dizzy at times, but she full and implicit trust in Stephen Maturin.

The talk went on deep into the evening with the port being passed. As the Reigning Monarch there was never a hint of suggestion that Alana excuse herself from the men’s discussions. To the contrary, she led the discussions in many cases and when she didn’t Jack or Stephen boldly stepped in.

Finally the evening drew to a close and Jack and Alana retired to the Royal chambers. The Royal Mayan Marines guarded every inch of the castle and they were attentive as the Royal couple passed by.

Alone for once, after the servants had prepared the bed chamber, the two talked long about the new arrival, Richard Sharpe, and how his presence might be more of a boon than anyone realized.

Sergeant Major Patrick Harper felt good. Or as good as a full bottle of brandy could make him

When he and Sharpe had been rescued, along with four of his, men they were as good as dead. Ship sunk in a half submerged jolly boat.

But then they had sighted the HMS Sophie

It was from then on the entire world had gone crazy. This was supposed to be 1812. Instead it was 1305. And the world was not the same. Oh the actual earth and sea were the same, and the men manning the Sophie were real. But their tale of traveling through time to end upon another world was insane.

Harper had held his opinions to himself until they had reached London. But London was not there. At least the London he knew.

This was 14th century London. And England did not exist. It was now the Kingdom of Branart. So while Sharpe dined at the castle he got a few bottle for him and his four men and got quietly drunk.

England gone, Ireland gone. No Bonaparte. Nothing.

I was a fine mess and he decided he would leave it to Sharpe to sort it all out. In the meantime they had their brandy...and their Baker’s rifle.

Chapter Three

The next day, Alana set about the planning for the trip up north in earnest. Jack still wanted her to take the new sloop Belona via the sea route but she was just as set to take the traditional barge. Jack did insist that the Royal barge be accompanied by a second barge staffed with nothing but Royal Mayan Marines.

Alana agreed. The Mayan presence had grown in number so there were now over a hundred, all trained by Colonel Howard and his staff so that they were as competent and crack a unit as anyone could ask for.

That afternoon, at the designated hour of 3:00 PM, Alana wrapped herself in a floor length cloak which covered her up to the neck, arrived at the Temple of Ixtab with her four ladies-in-waiting and a full contingent of Mayan Marines. The Marines took their station outside the temple and Alana and her ladies entered.

Her ladies were dressed in plain white dresses. When Alana dropped her cloak she wore the traditional garb of an Ixtabian Priestess. The garment was a shimmering white which had a halter neckline cut down the sides so it barely covered the wearer's breasts. The broad belt cinched in her already tiny waist. The skirt, if it could be called such, swept down in front almost to the floor. The most striking aspect of the attire was that it left the entire back of the wearer completely exposed. To someone coming up from behind it could appear that except for the belt around her middle, the wearer was entirely nude. This was further highlighted by the matching high heeled slippers which tilted the wearer forward and gave a provocative sway to the hips which exacerbated the whole.

Anyone spying the Queen of Branart so attired would have marveled. If anything, the charms that had held her in good stead as Duke Gilbert's supposed Mistress the year before on the continent, had even grown more impressive. All the observers in the temple wore similar garb, the only difference being the acolytes were an ivory color as opposed to the white of the priestesses and the glowing white of Queolah the high priestess.

The inner courtyard was used for public worship. The main hall had a number of trestles about 20 feet across. The middle trestle had four "golden cords" with Ixtabian knots prepared with foot tall stools beneath them.

As Alana took her place, reserved for her nearest Queolah, she felt a touch on her arm. To her amazement Marissa smiled and joined her. The rest of the priestesses and acolytes joined them in a semicircle around the cords.

The four young novices were escorted out. Each had gone through preliminary preparations in private. Each had quaffing of a pre-measured dose of the elixir. The insertion of the rounded anal plug and Stephen's polished urethral plugs blocking the flow of feces and urine so their "sacrifices" would not be sullied in any way.

Three were dark haired girls, two with black hair and the third with hair so dark brown it could only be distinguished from black on direct comparison. They had the dark skin and willowy form of the Mayan people. The fourth girl was tall, fair and blond.

“A convert from here in Branart” Alana remarked to Marissa.

She was quite a pretty girl with large deep brown eyes and straight nose.

Each moved up before a pre-selected stool and removed her shoes. With a hand from an assistant each mounted a stool.

Then came a moment of silent reflection as each approached the Goddess in her own way.

Then the moment came when each girl, one by one, dropped the knotted “golden cord” over her head and adjusted it around her neck so that the knot was located just behind the right ear. Then, one by one, each took the running end of the cord which was attached to a hook on the trestle and took up the slack. This was adjusted by each girl to her preference, but Alana noted that all were on their toes, heels in the air, taking the slack completely out of the tight rope.

Alana, during her training, had learned how the golden cords were woven and how carefully they were pre-stretched so that there would be virtually no play when they were tied.

She looked up at the mural of Ixtab on the wall. The Goddess was always depicted as a lovely young woman cupping an erect nipple with one hand, kneeling completely nude with a tightened noose around her neck. The sundial before the mural indicated that in a moment it would be noon, the time for the ceremony to take place.

As the sun’s movement caught noon, a small chime rang. Almost in unison the four girls kicked over their stools hanging themselves. Simultaneously Queolah nodded and an acolyte flipped the glass.

Now would come two minutes of intense concentration, viewed by the onlookers and experienced by the novices. Everyone expected some movement by the girls since the very kicking over of the stools started them swinging and spinning in motion on their ropes.

Two had their fists clenched. One held her hands clasped behind her. The blond girl did her best to let her arms and hands just rest by her sides.

Alana watching the tableau of twisting girls before her found her mind traveling back to that horrible day years before when she found herself at the end of the hangman’s knot. Accused of attempted murder and sentenced to die in a country far from her home with absolutely no evidence to prove she was of royal blood.

Her mind traveled to all the hangings she had witnessed, the bodies twisting slowly from their gibbets, the males with turgid erections, females with bursting nipples and blood encouraged sexes. For a time it had seemed each crossroads and gallows tree had this horrible fruit dangling from it. It was a combination of the sadistic nobles in the area combined with the curse of the Norsemen and Celts with their predilections for hanging their victims. All this combined to create a black horror in the depths of her soul. A horror that had only been mitigated by the discovery of the cult of Ixtab and its disciplines which

took the noose from an object of slow and agonizing torture and death to a means to higher consciousness and erotic delights beyond measure.

She came back from her reveries to the attention deserved by the girls now swinging slowly on their individual nooses. Other than slight twitches and fluttering of their feet there was none of the wild kicking, clawing and tearing at the knots one would expect from the slow dance on the noose. Each had a composed look. The thin fabric of their haltered downs did not hide their darkening nipples. All followers of Ixtab removed their body hair so as their slight gowns whipped in the breeze their pubic areas were exposed and it was obvious that each was very aroused from the engorgement of their sexes and the dripping of erotic fluids down their legs.

Then the chime sounded and attendants rushed to support the girls and remove the nooses. Now came the time everyone held their breaths. One by one the new acolytes opened their eyes and came back to this world, smiling and excited from their first public devotion to the goddess.

Her formal responsibilities over for the time being, Queolah invited Alana and Marissa to her private quarters for refreshments.

“There will be much celebrating tonight.” Queolah smiled. Her English had improved immeasurably in the last years. “Solia is our first convert from your country on this shore, though we have three more studying.”

“She’s very pretty” Marissa observed.

“Yes. And she has learned the disciplines quite well. She will be an excellent addition to our little group.”

“How many are there here now?” Alana queried.

“Counting you and your four ladies, your Majesty, we make up 14.”

Alana smiled. She knew that virtually none of her ladies’ husbands truly understood the nature of the worship of Ixtab, at least as far as their wife’s involvement went. And with the exception of Illicia all of them bore the scars of their torture or near execution by hanging in the past. Illicia had been very judicious and used the aloe balms with great intensity so she did not bare the rope burns that made the rest a select small secret society within the Ixtabian and Branart communities.

“Your Highness...” Queolah started.

“Please, as I have insisted in the past in this place we will not use titles” Alana remonstrated.

Queolah bowed her head in acknowledgement. “I understand you will be taking a trip up North in the next week or so.”

“Yes. One of the obligations of the Monarch that I have been remiss in fulfilling” Alana sighed.

“May I send an acolyte to accompany you? I know that your four ladies are excellent protectors and you honor us with the service of our nation’s warriors as Marines but it would be our privilege.”

“Actually I have heard from Mira this morning. Apparently she is tiring of the attentions of the young men who seek her hand and she would really enjoy a trip on a river barge.”

Marissa looked at her with a smile. “Now I’m envious. I get to sit in a lecture hall and hear innumerable papers and discussions on the recent revelations from the last voyage of the Surprise and you’re on a cruise.”

“Just one of the perquisites of being Queen!”

As the evening drew to a close Alana said her goodbyes. Stopping by the new acolyte’s rooms she warmly congratulated them. They were absolutely stunned when they realized that the High Queen had witnessed their ‘graduation’ and was personally addressing them.

She and Marissa said their goodbyes to Queolah at the entrance to the temple as the Royal Marines formed around their charge. The officer of the platoon was very concerned.

“Your Majesty” with a bow. “We have the carriage...” as the Royal conveyance pulled up.

“If it will not be too great a burden Captain I would prefer to walk.”

The officer bowed and with a series of commands the men split into two parties. The first arrayed themselves in front, behind and around the Queen and her retinue. The remainder scouted ahead and covered the approaches to assure that no assassins or snipers were waiting in the shadows.

The walk back to the Castle was totally uneventful, but all the Marines breathed a deep sigh of relief as soon as the Queen was within the gates.

Jack had waited up and as Alana shed her cloak he whistled softly. “A truly magnificent gown and worn for an old married woman.”

“You live dangerously my love” Alana responded arching an eyebrow.

“Yes I suppose taking the Cacafuego with the Sophie would be nothing compared to this battle.”

Alana laughed merrily as he took her in his arms. It would be a good night.

Chapter Four

As the day approached for departure Alana grew more restive. She hated leaving Jack and Alisande. Jack for his part, was ready to drop all his responsibilities. His new idea was to forget the barge and take Branart's first sloop, named Sophie after his first command, up and around the northern shore, but Alana would have none of it.

She had had to endure weeks with him being gone at sea. Now he could handle his responsibilities and let her fulfill her traditional role.

Lord Queon, head of the Mayan contingent was quite insistent on heading up the Royal Marines on the trip. She managed to quash his fears and allowed his second in command the privilege, which the young man so rightly deserved.

The day arrived and the Royal Barge was decked out in garlands, red and gilt. The sailors from the ships in port had insisted they do the setting up of the barge and they were given the privilege of outfitting it. Only the Barge Master himself was allowed on board both boats as they were fitting out.

The Royal Barge was a huge contrivance. Over 250 feet long and twenty five feet across, it had sleeping accommodations, dressing area, kitchen and dining area, as well as enough room for provisions, a crew of six and a twelve man guard contingent.

The second barge, half its length was devoted to the accompanying security force of twenty Royal Mayan Marines.

Alana's ladies-in-waiting made themselves busy for almost a full week to get her apartment fitted out and ready for her, with Mira overseeing the entire operation. Alana had chosen a half dozen of her most devoted ladies in addition to her four bodyguards. They were not necessarily the prettiest or the most witty but they were extremely competent and devoted to her.

The day of departure Lord Queon and Colonel Howard toured the barge themselves to assure its security. What they didn't know and couldn't divine was a charge of black powder had been secreted into the very bowels of the barge itself and another of like size in the escort vessel.

Jack saw Alana off and their parting embrace was not as stately or royal as might have been expected.

In silence the craft cast off and the barge men guided it up the tributary toward its destination five days to the North.

It was a silent and very boring journey for Alana. Without Jack, Alisande and her companions at court the trip was just one long silent coast. Mira kept her company and her presence was the only thing that brightened the tedious voyage. Still every few miles a village turned out to cheer Branart's High Queen and she would wave and smile.

On the third night, warm and unusually still, Alana had trouble falling asleep. "I should have taken Stephen's sleeping draught" she thought. Instead she walked up on deck.

Mira heard her get up and grabbed a throw. She knew Alana hated to be shadowed but she felt very possessive of her. Ever since Alana had placed her in her service she had been personally beholden to the woman who would be High Queen. Back then she was the Mistress of Duke Gilbert who only claimed to be a Princess. Alana had always been extremely kind.

After all Mira had been a peasant girl, running from a husband who wanted her dead, with the marks of his attempted hanging raw on her throat when she sought refuge at the Duke's castle. Illicia had stumbled across her trying to salve her wounds and since Alana and her retinue had almost suffered the same fate, brought her to the Princess' attention. Once Alana heard her story she simply "adopted" her into her retinue. She had been with her at the end of the campaign against the Duke DeMornay. She had mourned with her when the news came of the death of her Father the King. She had accompanied her on her attempted voyage home and capture by the Pirates. Then came the impossible rescue by Captain, now King Jack, the discovery of the Mayans and Alana's return to Branart and coronation as High Queen. Very heady stuff for a provincial peasant girl.

Alana had made her a lady and a peer of the realm and which had included a significant estate. She found herself a prize sought after by literally dozens of young nobles, with a good four pressing her intensely. This trip was just what she needed to cool their ardor.

As Alana strolled up to the bow Mira went to the farthest position aft on the barge where she had a clear view of her and patiently waited.

Hastily the Officer of the Watch ran up to Alana and stationed two Marines no more than a dozen feet from her. Alana had on her peignoir and a light robe, but neither was necessary in the warm still air.

"Certainly" Alana mused. "Imagine the gossip if the High Queen toured her Royal barge at night completely nude."

She smiled at the young Mayan officer and was gazing up at the night sky when a twinkling light caught her attention. Actually it was a number of lights on the surface of the water. She had heard of the firefly insects along the river and her assumption was that they were its source. As she was about to point this out to the young officer they felt a gentle bump along the side and both looked around.

Men with darkened faces were swarming over the side.

The officer cried out giving the alarm and his men whirled. The next few moments were chaos.

It seemed as if dozens of dark shapes were invading the barge. The Mayans on deck were desperately outnumbered. But the officer's call brought the royal guard to full alert. Unfortunately they had only limited access to the deck and the invaders had these well bottled up.

Mira had begun to doze when the officer's call brought her to instant attention. She was looking in shocked amazement at the scene unfolding in front of her when a cord was dropped over her head and tightened. The garrote was of thin stuff designed to do the utmost damage and strangle the victim quickly.

She reacted instinctively using the skills learned on the Surprise. Her attacker was standing behind her as she sat at the stern. She whipped her elbow back and caught him in the groin. He expelled a grunt and the garrote lost its tension. She was able to partially turn and claw his face. Being attacked in both areas the villain moved backward and toppled over the side dragging Mira with him. In the water he lost grip of the garrote and Mira popped to the surface. Her robe, though light, was just an impediment and she stripped it and her nightgown off and kicked strongly to the barge. She thanked providence that Alana had insisted that all her ladies take up swimming. The stern trailed a man rope for just this type of situation and she used this to haul herself aboard.

The fight on the deck was desperate. She could not make out Alana at the front but there were a mass of attackers concentrated there. The royal guards were trying to make their way on deck and behind her she heard the alert as the barge with the aft guard was mobilizing to come to Alana's aid.

She looked around for a weapon and seized one of the barge poles. Screaming she attacked the nearest villain from the rear. She caught him solidly on the top of his head and he dropped senseless. She reached for his weapon, a short sword and kept moving. The noise in the bow had muffled her approach and attack so she was able to cut the next man down without warning. She then threw herself at the number who had blockaded the aft ladder and were holding the royal guard below deck. This time one or two had turned to see what was going on and called the alarm.

Now she found herself on the defensive with two or three coming at her. What they thought about a lovely slip of a blond girl, completely nude and soaking wet, attacking a half dozen of their party must have been interesting, but she didn't have the time to contemplate. She met the first man, blocking him quickly in order to dodge the thrust of the second. The third man, partially jostled by the first, tripped and literally bowled her over the side. Again she was in the water.

Alana at the bow, found herself behind the officer and her two guards attacked by a furious swarm of villains. She was furious with herself by being taken so unawares with her only weapon the garter knife Stephen had gifted her. The press of men pushed her small force to the very front of the bow.

All three of her defenders were wounded when there came a tremendous tumult and a series of Mayan war cries. The Royal Guard had battered their way up and out of the hull and were setting upon the villains.

Now the tide was turning. As the guards poured up the stairs the second barge came up quickly and Alana realized if they could just hold on a short while longer they would be safe. The head of the assassins also realized that his men had missed their opportunity. He lit his powerful grenade and dropped it into the hatch. just above the planted charge. He dove over the side and struck for shore.

The next moment the grenade went off detonating the reserve of gunpowder in the hull of the barge and a long shattering explosion destroyed the Royal craft. The resulting explosion ignited the charge in the second barge.

The shattering explosion blew Alana and the young officer off the bow and into the river just ahead of the wreckage falling from the sky. The force of the charge literally tore the clothes from their bodies and hurled them forward. The splinters tore the air around them and a large one pierced the young officer through the side while another glanced off Alana's head and rendering her unconscious.

As fate would have it the same blast blew Mira clear of the aft rail and sent her hurtling into the water a dozen feet or more from the mass of flames that had been the royal barge.

The young officer was stunned and mortally wounded. Still he dove after Alana and pulled her onto a piece of wreckage and they floated downriver with the devastation from the explosions trailing behind them. The young officer fought his condition and desperately kept Alana afloat as they drifted further. He was mortally wounded and his strength was waning but with his last effort he pulled Alana until she was free of the water on top of the wreckage then expired.

The wreckage drifted through the night drifting further and further downstream from the explosion site until it was not even a memory.

The morning brought a lovely summer's day, the shining sun and bright blue sky a stark contrast to the previous night's violence. In mid-morning Alana stirred. Her head felt like a split melon and she moaned as she turned over. She found herself naked and on a piece of wreckage up against the bank of a strange river, with a handsome young man's dead body next to her. He had many strange tattoos but other than that she could not make anything out about him. Try as she could, she had no idea how she came there. Next she realized not only did she not know the person lying dead next to her but she had no idea who she was or where she was.

The explosion had been heard by a nearby village, shattering windows and shaking the foundations of the dwellings. Its eruption had lit the night sky for miles around. Curious river folk had hurried to the scene dodging still falling debris but all they found was wreckage and body parts. The only survivor was a young blond girl blown clear of the wreckage and found on the near bank totally unconscious. It wasn't until late the following morning that one man recognized part of the Royal Seal of Branart.

A messenger was sent off at a gallop and within a day King John himself with an entire army was at the site. At his bellow orders the Royal Marines searched all the surrounding area bringing pieces of the wreckage and bodies to a central point. Viscount Maturin himself examined every body part and the horror became evident. Queen Alana herself had been the target and they were searching for her remains.

The only survivor, Mira was still unconscious and Stephen feared that she might never recover.

The search went on for the better part of a week, but just bits of wreckage and assorted body parts were collected. At first, no identification of any of the other ladies in waiting or Alana herself could be made. But then Stephen was brought a hand with a distinctive ring. It belonged to one of Alana's body guards.

After a full week Jack had to sadly conclude that the terrorists who had set the bombs had agents in the barges planting the main charges and when the fuse was lit everything and everyone, including his beloved Alana had been blown to smithereens.

In deep mourning he returned to Branart and personally told Alisande that her only family, her beloved older sister was dead. She was inconsolable.

The facts were at 13, it would be a year before she could assume the title of High Queen. Branart had no provision for child monarchs.

Sadly he returned to Castle Branart and assumed the position of Regent until Alisande could achieve majority and receive her coronation. It was the least he could do in the memory of his beloved Alana.

Stephen was extremely concerned for his old friend. He had been almost positive that Jack would not have remarried after losing Sophie, but his infatuation with Alana quickly turned into a deep and abiding love. Add to that the fact that they were perfectly matched in temperate and taste and it was indeed a match made in heaven,

Now she was gone and he was at a loss. A true quandary.

Then there was more upsetting news. While the majority of the officers and men were taken up in the search a fire had broken out and the remaining officers and men and all the volunteer brigades had rushed to contain it. Damage was minor though it seemed for a time as if it would engulf the nearby structures and start the city aflame.

When all was under control they learned that it had been a ruse, a diversion and Michael was gone. He had been injured in the escape but no trace could be found of him. Now Jack not only had to sustain the loss of his beloved wife, but her usurper was on the loose. A usurper that now had a true claim to the throne of Branart.

Chapter Five

Alana quickly discovered her injuries. Her head ached and the dried blood and fierce pain of the contusion on the back or her head left her dizzy. Then there were the numerous bruises and wrenching that made every movement painful beyond belief. She groaned as she started to sit up.

“Hey lookee what we got here!” an excited voice called.

“It’s a girl. A naked girl!” a second voice called.

Alana tried to focus on the voice but the pain made it difficult. She heard movements in the bush.

“Yep, she’s naked alright.”

“Who’s the bleeder next to her?”

“He’s dead for sure.”

“Well what do we do with her?”

“Nice body.”

“Yeah swell tits!”

“No pubbys!”

“She looks right dazed!”

“Who do you belong to girl?”

Her mouth was full of wool, tongue stuck to the top of her mouth.

“She’s addled. Look at the blow she took to her head.”

Gingerly she reached back and found the mass of fresh and clotted blood.

“Well if she lasts she’ll be worth something.”

Then the largest of the men reached down and took her arm. He hauled her up over his shoulders. She moaned and promptly passed out from the pain.

When she came to she was lying on a cot. There was bandage on her head. She moaned and tried to move. The motion made her ill and she lay prostrate.

“She’s awake!”

“There there my love” a woman’s voice crooned. “Here. You have yourself a drink and then some of the broth. All you bastards stay away!”

A hand lifted her head and a cup of water quenched her thirst. Then another cup with a thin soup was fed her. This exhausted her and she went back to sleep.

The next time she awoke and old woman was sitting next to her. She found she had been tied to the cot but her head hurt less.

“There you are my love. Awake again are we? You’ve been in and out for three days now.”

“Who? How? Where?” These were thoughts rather than vocalizations but she must have uttered them as the woman responded.

“We’re in the main house. You’ll be right as rain soon. Just you wait and see.”

Another cup of water and some more thin soup which despite her pounding head she drank readily.

She tried to think but the fact was she had no idea how to go about phrasing the riddles she was faced.

Aside from the kindness of the old woman the men were brutes. They talked and laughed among themselves about the joys they expected when she was recovered enough to “service” them. In the next few days a number of them tried but the old woman beat them off.

“She’s a looker alright. That golden hair. And those magnificent tits!”

“She’s got the long legs I like. Strange though. Not a hint of body hair.”

“Right you are. Pussy is as bare as a babe’s.”

“Make’s it right tempting don’t it?”

“Old woman says it will be a week or so before she’s well enough to be up and around.”

“I don’t care about that! Just as long as she can lay on her back!”

Then came the general laughter

Horrific nightmares came every night. Often she found herself with her wrists bound behind her, completely naked or nearly so. Sometimes the protagonist was an evil looking man with three day’s growth of beard. In others it was an oily looking man in blue. He would reach down to feel between her legs. Other times it was a debauched woman. Sometimes she was whipped, other times threatened with piercing. More often though she was hanged. Hanged by the neck. Hanged slowly to prolong the agony. So slow and drawn out that the agony of her hanging seemed to last forever.

Sometimes she stood bound and noosed and a man hanged next to her, kicking in his agony, his large penis achingly erect. Other times she was bound and helpless as Norse raiders broke down the door to a hut where she waited helpless.

The nightmares came two or three times a night leaving her wracked and sweating.

Days spent in bed, nights with terrifying nightmares.

Finally the bandages came off and the old woman pronounced her whole shaking her head. There would be no holding the men back.

Sure enough the leader and two of his men came into her small room a few minutes later. Alana fought but the three overpowered her. She found herself tied by her wrists to a ringed bolt in the wall.

The other men grinned and left the room leaving the headman alone with her. He undid his codpiece and the stink of his unwashed body filled the room.

Grinning he moved toward her and grabbed her ankles his penis erect and throbbing. She voluntarily parted her legs.

"You want this don't you?" he leered. "You're a horny little bitch!" Moving up he reached for her breasts.

She drew her right knee up and caught him in the groin.

He jerked back. Using every bit of liveness in her body she wrapped her legs around his neck and twisted as hard as she could. She was rewarded with a crunching noise. His face empurpled almost immediately. He thrashed but in a few seconds was still.

She flipped his body back over and maneuvered his knife out of his belt with her feet. It took some doing but she was finally able to bring it up where she could reach it and loose herself.

There was singing and carousing in the rest of the house and she knew that she would never be able to leave by the door. She stripped the man of his tunic and dropped it over her head. It only came down to her hips but it would have to do.

She moved to the only window in the room. Small and wedged shut. Using the knife she pried it open and climbed out. She made her way as quickly as possible away from the noises that indicated habitation. She headed into the forest where the verge and undergrowth would hide her tracks. She fled until exhaustion overcame her. She covered herself in leaves and dropped into a coma like sleep.

Morning found her with a headache and body pains. Almost immediately an inner voice told her that she was being watched.

"Morning pretty pretty!" a lilting voice called.

Alana jerked up and stared around.

“Don’t be alarmed. I won’t hurt you.”

She looked up and above her, in a tree, sat a young woman with light silver hair and piercing blue eyes.

Alana reached for her knife simultaneously throwing herself from under the tree.

“Please! If I’d wanted to hurt you I could have done so easily while you slept.” This was followed by another lilting laugh. “Besides, other than that perfectly horrendous jerkin you’re wearing what do you have that I could possibly want?”

Alana scuttled back and looked about wildly for escape.

“You look badly abused. Why not let me get you breakfast and something a little more generous to wear?” The blonde girl gave her a winning smile.

Something inside of Alana trusted her, as if there was a common bond they both shared. Almost a sisterhood. But she was still wary.

“Just follow me. My place is a short ways from here.” The blonde girl jumped lightly to the ground. She had a grey jumpkin and short grey skirt revealing long and shapely legs. She set off not even looking back to see if she was following.

Alana picked herself up and looked after the girl, who turned at last and called, “At least there’s good hot food!”

That idea of a hot meal found a waiting response and Alana followed her still cautious.

They walked for about 20 minutes with the blonde girl looking behind her occasionally to see if Alana was still behind.

Their path wound its way into a secluded grotto. As they traveled further into its depth Alana made out a rock surrounded pool that seemed to bubble to itself. Finally she could make out a door, almost covered by the verge into what looked like the hill itself. The girl reached for an unseen latch and opened it and bid her enter. The interior had windows, but opening on to what she could not see. The interior was bright and welcoming. There was a glowing hearth and a number of rooms exiting off the main central room. It seemed huge and Alana was taken by the smell of herbs and what she came to know as incense.

“Here” the girl called, ladling a cup out of a bubbling pot on the hearth. “This will warm you up!”

Alana took the cup shyly. It was filled with a savory stew that started her mouth salivating immediately. She drained it greedily in two or three gulps. The girl held out a brimming ladle and filled the cup again.

“My name is Pannait. I live here on my own. The woods and dales are my home and I call the forest friend. Who are you?”

"If I could say I would be glad of heart", Alana responded between gulps. "I found myself along a river a fortnight ago and have been desperately trying to recall any fragment of my past." A tear crept down her cheek. "I cannot remember my name or my origin."

"I can see your bruises and abrasions from here" Pannait replied. "Here". She handed her a large bath sheet and a jar of bathing salts. "That's a warm water pool outside. Let it bath you and restore your spirit."

Alana took the items and exited to the pool. It was deliciously warm and she gratefully stripped off the fetid jerkin and dipped herself in. The warm water was soothing beyond belief. She dropped beneath the surface and let it thoroughly drench her hair. The wound at the back of her head was still painful but by careful use of the bath salts she was able to get her hair clean for the first time since she had regained consciousness on the bank of the river.

"That's a nasty wound" Pannait's voice said behind her. Alana whirled to find the girl seated on a rock watching her. "How did you get it?"

"I have no idea" Alana responded truthfully.

"A wound like that to the head could be responsible for your inability to remember your past." Pannait held out a mug of something cold. "This is my own cider. It will relax you. When you're ready I've left some more suitable clothes right here" she said pointing next to the rock. "I'll wait for you inside."

As she got up Alana called "Wait! This is very kind and generous of you. Do you always take in strangers this way?"

Pannait smiled. "I was watching you for the better part of the morning. I'm a good judge of character and keep my own counsel." She turned and went back to her dwelling.

Alana relaxed again, sipping the cider and letting the warmth of the pool infuse her body.

When she came back into the underground dwelling Pannait was reading next to the fire. It was a large book with cardinal leather covers. She looked up as the door opened.

"You'll be wanting sleep after your bath." She nodded to a sleeping alcove to the right of the great room. "It's a comfortable bed. Rest and we'll talk later."

The bed called to Alana, but first she approached the girl. "I cannot thank you enough for your kindness and generosity. It truly leaves me speechless".

Pannait smiled. "I'm sure you will be able to repay me some day." She returned to her reading.

Alana entered the alcove and found a fresh cot smelling of herbs and spices ready for her. She closed the drape, pulled the sheet over her and was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Her dreams, since awakening on the riverbank, were jumbles of images filled with pain and horror. Fire and explosions. Unnumbered images of torture and death. They had left her shaking and horror stricken night after night..

This night was very different. She found herself on silken sheets. The room was candle lit with the fragrance of perfume. The man came to her gently as she lay on her stomach. His lips caressed her back shoulders and neck. She turned to kiss him and felt his hands on her breasts, her nipples hard and she thrust herself at him. He spread her wide and then was inside her. She met him movement for movement as he plunged deeper and deeper.

She reveled in his hardness. In his command. In his dominance.

He covered her face and neck with kisses.

She could feel him as he reached his climax...but not for her. Aroused and dripping she was so close.

"Please. Please!!" she begged like the meanest slave or Pleasure Girl.

She wrapped her legs around him and threw her arms around his neck locking him to her as she ground herself mercilessly into his presence. He rolled over and then was on his feet taking her with him as if she had no weight at all.

Against the wall hidden by a drape dangled the noose, thick and waiting. Pregnant with its promise of release. As she clung to him he slipped it over her head and tightened it expertly behind her ear. Then the slack was gone and she felt the insistent tug of the noose now as she thrust against him.

"Yes! Oh yes!!" she pleaded her vocalization impeded by the pressure of the noose.

Now she also was at the cusp. Ready to explode.

She felt him reach up and unwrap her arms from around his neck. In a trice he had a cord wrapped around them and they were firmly bound behind her back.

Now the pressure of the noose was much greater. Her only leverage was from her legs wrapped around him. But this did not impede her in the least. Despite the noose's bite she continued to pump up and down engulfing his rigid erection.

She realized that his support, his arms around her were mitigating the noose's bite, but as they both approached orgasm she knew what he must do.

She felt him stiffen and as he poured himself into her and she came in an intense explosion that almost left her senseless. As her climax reached a crescendo she realized he was no longer holding her breath. While her legs were no longer wrapped around him and without their purchase she no longer had any succor from the rope, There was no breath. No remitting of its choking grasp. As she came her legs dropped from around him and as he withdrew she found herself, as she had expected, hanging inches off the ground dripping his cum and her fluids as the noose did its final work and darkness spiraled in.

She awoke gasping. The bed clothes soaked. She drew air deep into her lungs.

This was a new vision and it shattered her. Here she was the willing victim asking...no begging, to be hanged.

She dropped back heavily and again found a troubled sleep.

A second dream that night held the image of a man's handsome face, smiling and winking at her. A man she knew she loved, but no other recognition. She started awake but the image fled. This time she had a very difficult time getting back to sleep.

Chapter Five

The next day Pannait smiled over breakfast. "Have you had any success in remembering your past?"

"No" Alana replied truthfully. "Just a jumbled bunch of images with no continuum at all."

"How about a name?" Pannait asked with another smile."

"No. Nothing", Alana responded ruefully.

"Well we will have to call you something. How about Noni? It's short for Noncette."

"What does it mean?" Alana asked.

"It's an old Elvish word that kind of means 'nothing' which might do for the time being."

"Well then Noncette or Noni it is" Alana smiled back.

"I need to go to the village to get some things" Pannait went on. "Why don't you just take your ease for the day and build up your strength?"

Actually Alana was looking forward to easing back into the steaming pool and letting it bake her aches and bruises so she readily agreed.

Pannait returned in the early afternoon.

She set down her bundle as Alana looked up from the book she was reading.

"This is fascinating. I guess I've never heard of or forgotten the ancient history of Branart. The descriptions of the Elvish lords, Trolls, Gnomes Faeries and the rest. I guess I always thought they were just fairy tales for small children. But this volume gives them a history as rich and varied...like an entire world forgotten. Where did you get it?"

Pannait gave a little smile. "The few books are my only bequest from my parents. I was pretty headstrong as a child and when I struck out on my own the three volume work was the only thing my father left me. They lost them so it's the only remembrance I have of them."

"Your father must have been very learned to have such an excellent library!"

"So he was. I only wish I could have appreciated how learned at the time".

Alana set down the book and helped unwrap the parcels in the bundle.

One was a package of fabric. Soft stuff in rose and scarlet that made her sigh, "What lovely material!"

"I bought this for you. We will make you a blouse and skirt so you will have something to wear to the next gather. It's only a week from now so we have our work set out for us." Alana let a tear slide down her cheek.

Pannait smiled at first but this soon turned to a troubled frown.

Alana asked her about her day.

"I'm afraid evil is afoot. The High Queen has been killed, and King John is acting as regent until her younger sister reaches majority. But the usurper Michael has escaped and he has taken residence in the local duchy. Before the Queen's return the local Barons had been mean and pernicious. They used their authority with an iron hand. Whippings, tortures and executions were a common occurrence. That all changed when the Queen was crowned. But with her death and his Highness Michael ensconced locally tyranny has returned."

Trying to be understanding, Alana listened attentively but nothing connected.

"Noni, you bear the marks of gallows" Pannait reached out and tilted Alana's chin up. "Those are cruel and deep rope burns. Do you recall them at all?"

"I have no idea" Alana responded as she traced the marks with her finger.

"Hangings were quite popular up until the High Queen took the throne. The old Baron had one or two a month. There were at least a half dozen professional hangmen traveling the countryside."

Alana noticed Pannait now wore a troubled expression. As if trying to lighten the subject, she smiled "I think we could both stand a session in the hot water spring!"

In a short while both were up to their necks in the bubbling warm water.

"Here" Pannait urged, let me wash your hair. There is still some dried blood from that nasty wound."

Alana gratefully complied. Her fingers were gentle but still the knotted hairs around the wound were recalcitrant. They soon yielded to Pannait's ministrations.

Turning around, Alana urged, "Now it's my turn."

Pannait ducked her head and turned her back and Alana set herself to working out any tangles. She immediately noticed the strange scars at the top of Pannait's ears, scars that had been covered since their first meeting by her long silvery locks. She touched the right ear gently and Pannait jumped.

"I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed. "Are the wounds still painful?"

“No” she replied. “It’s just been a long time since anyone’s seen them.”

Pannait turned around and reached over and gently touched Alana’s head. “Does it still hurt?”

“Yes. It’s still tender back there”

“You took quite a blow.”

“I just wish I could remember how it happened. All I remember is waking up on the bank of the river completely naked with these oafish brutes ogling me.”

“You haven’t told me the full story.”

So Alana recounted the little history she could remember.

“You killed him with your hands tied using just your legs? That takes quite a bit of skill. You must have been trained as a warrior.”

“If you say so. It seemed to just come naturally.”

“Remind me to stay on your good side.” Pannait exclaimed ruefully. “Well let’s get ourselves dried off and start working on your outfit.”

Chapter Six

The King received word of a councilor ship from the continent hours before it docked. It flew the flag of the recently elected King Gilbert, Alana's savior and benefactor on the continent. Jack knew no matter how badly he wished for peace and his solitary mourning he would have to prepare to meet the dignitaries in the proper fashion.

He called Alisande to him.

"Alisande, these are representatives of King Gilbert, your sister's former master on the continent. When you rule it will be important for him to be your closest supporter."

Alisande, still barely suppressing the tears any time she was reminded of her sister nodded. "Of course, Uncle Jack. I will make ready to receive his ambassadors."

An hour later an ambassadorial aide from Gilbert was lead into the throne room and approached. Tall with long brown hair, she was quite a lovely girl but that escaped Jack's notice . He found it hard to keep his attention on anything now that Alana was gone.

The girl came to a respectful distance and bowed. She then opened the scroll she carried and read, "King Gilbert sends warmest greetings to Her Highness Queen Alana and the Royal Court. May I present the documents and letters of His representative, Lord Wyvern."

The papers were transferred and Jack recalled the name. This was the name of dog! The huge intelligent dog that had been Alana's companion and had saved her life any number of times! Could it be?

Sure enough entering the throne room at a slow measured pace with his head in the air was the largest dog Jack had ever seen!

He was as tall as a horse but much wider, with long gray and white fur. He had lively blue eyes and wore a blue vest like garment with gold braiding and a number of military decorations. He advanced in a stately manner, sat on his hind legs and barked a number of times.

The ambassadorial aide interpreted. "Lord Wyvern regrets his late arrival but many duties to King Gilbert have delayed him. He wishes both you and the Queen long life and health and begs to introduce his daughter, the Lady Wylene. He wishes her to be of service to the High Queen as a guard for the Royal Household."

A second dog entered. She was red and white smaller version of her father wearing a red vest. She advanced and sat next to him.

Despite his amazement Jack was able to respond. "We greet Lord Wyvern and Lady Wylene with all the honors due their high station. We are very grateful for the services Lord Wyvern rendered our late Queen during her time on the continent."

Lord Wyvern might have had difficulty responding but he understood every word. He quickly asked for clarification through his interpreter.

Jack responded sadly that Queen Alana had been killed in a barge explosion six weeks before. The great dog looked stricken. He and his daughter raised their heads and emitted a heart rendering howl in mourning for the dead Queen.

After a solemn moment of silence Wyvern explained that King Gilbert had finally consolidated his hold on the continent and had released the great dog for the trip. His presence was meant to act as a continued link between Queen Alana and King Gilbert. Lady Wylene, his daughter, was being presented as a permanent member of the Queen's household. She had been trained as a governess and guardian for the royal family if and when the need arose. Her primary purpose was as a bodyguard for the Alana and her sister Alisande.

At this revelation Alisande, in the background, burst into tears. Jack choked back his own emotions.

Over the next hour Wyvern listened intently to the events of the last year. Gilbert had informed him of Alana's rescue by Aubrey and the Surprise, but the details had been few up until now. The story continued on with the discovery of Sharpe and his men and the wreckage from the future.

Finally came the details of the fateful barge cruise and explosion.

Through his interpreter Lord Wyvern again expressed his regrets and asked for details following the tragedy. Jack related the subsequent events ending with Michael's escape and the problems in the north. He went on to explain that he had decided to send a special force under Colonel Sharpe to try to track the renegade down.

Wyvern immediately offered his services to assist in tracking down the malefactor. It was obvious with his tracking skills and sense of smell he would be a valuable asset.

Sharpe had watched the goings on as the ambassadorial ship had been greeted. The doings didn't involve him so he concentrated on working with his men to make sense of what their new role would be.

Harper had recovered from his binge. Hagman and Harris were recovering. Perkins and Thomas were in better shape.

The reality of being the only six Riflemen in a largely 14th century army was almost beyond imagination.

The Baker rifles they possessed were now invaluable. The smiths were permitted to examine them and the full turn scribing on the inside of the barrels, but they were being challenged by replicating simple muskets.

Sharpe and Harper agreed that it would be best to concentrating on training skirmisher skills to the army rather than hoping for technology to catch up.

Howard and his Marines were training the basic troops in the Branart army. It was agreed that Sharpe would concentrate on a select force of Mayans. These Mayan 'Marines' had been taught the basic skills by Howard and his men on the voyage over on the Surprise. They even had the rudiments of the language.

Their appearance was daunting. None were as tall as Sharpe or Harper but they were all well conditioned and had been taught to use their muskets. They eschewed bayonets for incredibly deadly looking weapons with black razor sharpened flints along their length. These they wielded with incredible ferocity.

Coming from a more indigenous society they had a basic intuitiveness for guerilla warfare so it had made it easier for them to appreciate the basics of the tactics Sharpe and Harper were instructing. They would make excellent skirmishers.

Then came the summons to the throne room and Sharpe found himself being introduced to the two huge dogs. He had heard the stories of the Queen's adventures with the huge dog but now he was faced with the reality and this strained his credulity.

The ambassadorial assistant brought out Wyvern's spelling board on rolled parchment. Once this was unrolled, Wyvern greeted the Colonel and explained his great love for Alana and his desire to do anything he could to protect her younger sister. In the meantime Wylene had moved to Alisande's side and sat down. Little did anyone know she would be the Princesses' constant companion from then on.

Jack looked on the give and take with a grave expression.

"Colonel Sharpe. You and your five men are the only trained Riflemen in this age. And without your weapons to copy it will take years for us to replicate their design and the training you could provide. But Sharpe...Sharpe", the words seemed to quiver. "Alana is gone and the only legacy I have, the only thing I have promised is to protect Princess Alisande. While Michael lives that will be impossible. I'd be deeply beholden to you if you would track him down and kill the bastard!"

This raw emotion shook Sharpe. This was not the Captain Jack Aubrey of legend. No this was a simple man who had lost all that he had loved in life. Sharpe thought of Theresa and her death. Nothing could be done to bring the Queen back but he could extract revenge!

He turned to the huge dog and, as strange as it was, thanked him for his assistance and then assured the King that they would start their search on the morrow.

"Majesty with your permission I will leave Hagman And Harris . Harris had not recovered from an illness and Hagman might not be able to keep up, at his age. Besides, with their knowledge they can be the start of your own company of Riflemen. I'll take a force of those Mayans we have been working with. That, with Harper, Perkins and Thomas, with Lord Wyvern will give us a guerilla force to strike with."

"As you say Colonel. I will trust your judgment."

Sharpe took his leave and the meeting drew to a close.

Retiring into his private chambers, Jack sat with his port and contemplated Alana's life before she met him. She found herself no more than a Pleasure Girl, but under the protection of this gigantic dog and a mighty war horse named Beaufort. According to her recounting it was Beaufort himself that saved her from perishing on the gallows. Tears came down his cheeks as he recalled her halting and graphic description of her hanging that day. She didn't even know how long she had dangled at the rope's end, but by all reports it was longer than an hour.

He looked up at her portrait over the fireplace. The painter, of excellent repute had her hair, eyes and lovely continence just perfectly, and he could make out the slight tracings of the cruel rope burns on her throat. The artist had wanted to exclude this detail but Alana had insisted that it be included.

Next to her was his portrait. And true to his calling the artist had captured all (well at least most) of his visible battle scars. They made an excellent match.

Chapter Seven

The week had passed quickly and Alana had enjoyed the ability to work with her hands. She realized quickly she was not the best seamstress but with Pannait's assistance she made herself a comfortable outfit with a loose off the shoulder blouse, colorful sash and medium length skirt. Despite the residuals from her injuries she was looking forward to the gather in the faint hopes that something there would jar her memory.

It took a good hour to make their way to the meadow from Pannait's grotto, but the sights and sounds filled the air with a forced gaiety. Something appeared wrong. People were trying too hard to have a good time.

Pannait made a few inquiries as they walked. The local Baron had been enlarged to the status of Count with the right of High Justice restored. It appeared as if King Michael had resumed control of the Northern provinces and was shoring up his support.

That would have been neither here nor there if the local Baron did not have a number of grudges with local townspeople and a fondness for executions. A crowd had formed around the central square and the gallows was being put to use. Three men had been beheaded and a couple of nooses dangled open and ready.

Alana looked on with disgust at the headless corpses.

"Poachers" Pannait whispered. "The Baron likes his fresh meat."

"Has it always been this way here?"

"No. Good Queen Alana put a stop to all executions and rescinded the right of high justice to the Royal Court in Branart for charges of murder and treason and such. But with her gone..."

They passed the central square and came to a strange arrangement at the foot of the gallows. A young girl with long brown hair her wrists bound behind her was kneeling, barely covered, before what appeared to be the shrine of some sort.

"Condemned to hang for theft" Pannait murmured.

"She doesn't even look like she's more than thirteen or fourteen!" Alana gasped.

"I've heard of these shrines popping up but it's the first one I've seen" muttered Pannait.

"Who is it they pray to?"

"That's good Queen Alana. She was said to have been hanged and survived a number of times. Now the condemned pray at her shrine for a quick death!"

Alana looked at the little shrine. Yes there was the figure of a woman with one hand outstretched. A noose around her throat was looped around her left arm and she had a benevolent look on her face.

The girl was wrenched to her feet by the hangman. She was truly not more than a child.

“Wait!” Alana called. “Is there any appeal to this little one’s sentence?”

“None” the hangman replied gruffly as he pulled the girl to the gallows steps. In a second he had her on the stool and noosed. As a pap to the crowd and a bid for tips he ripped her simple covering exposing her small breasts and pubic hair.

“What is her fee?” Alana called.

“A silver crown!”

“Pannait” she whirled. “Do you have that kind of money?”

Pannait reached behind Alana’s ear and plucked out a silver crown and handed it to her. “Off course for you, Noni.

The hangman was about to tip the stool over sending the crying girl to her death when Alana called “Here ! Here is her fee!!”

A general note of disappointment went through the crowd. The beheadings were fine, but watching this slip of a girl dance long and hard on the rope was to be the day's highlight.

The hangman bit the coin to check its worth. “Who are you? Ain’t seen you around here before.” He observed.

“My name is Noncette. I am visiting my friend Pannait who lives nearby” and she nodded in the other girl’s direction.

The sheriff grunted and smiled lewdly. “Well I have no idea what you’ll do with this baggage. Probably steal you blind or slit your throat when you sleep!” Saying this he removed the noose, set the girl on her feet and untied her arms and wrists.

The first thing she did was grab the tattered fabric and cover her nakedness. She dropped to her knees in front of Alana thanking her for saving her life.

“Come child” she said soothingly, “You’re safe now.”

“Well” Pannait grumbled. “It could get expensive taking you to fairs. Besides which now what do we do with her?”

Alana helped the girl to her feet. “I’ve had enough of the gather. If it’s alright with you I’ll take this little one back to the cottage and clean her up. I’ll see you later.”

The young girl was still on her knees. “Oh thank you mistress! Thank you!! I will serve you forever! I knew if I said a prayer to Sainte Alana a miracle would happen!”

“Enough child. Enough!” Alana remonstrated as she aided her to her feet. “What is your name?”

“Lila, mistress.”

“Well I’m called Noncette, or Noni for short. Now come with me and we’ll get you cleaned up.” She started to lead the girl on the path out of the village to the distant cottage. “How did you end up in that horrible predicament?”

“My mother, father and brothers died of the fever and I couldn’t work the farm alone so I came to the village with hopes of finding a place as a maid or kitchen worker. No one would hire me so I finally just sold myself to whoever would pay the price of a meal. The last man claimed I had picked his pocket and on his word I was condemned to hang. That was a ten-day ago but they wanted to wait for the gather to make it a real occasion. They said that all that Sainte Alana could do was grant an easy death but I knew she would save me, and she did! She sent you!!”

“I’m almost in the same situation that you are. But I don’t know my family. I was taken in by my friend Pannait out of the goodness of her heart and now I’m further indebted to her since she loaned me the money to pay for your fee.”

“Then I will serve both of you. I will be your slave for life!”

“Enough!” flared Alana. But somewhere in her hidden past this struck a cord. A time when she would have given anything, become the meanest of servants, done anyone’s bidding no matter how disgusting or gross, to escape a similar fate. Her hand unconsciously went up to the scars on her own throat and a chill ran through her

As they left the village and followed the forest trail Alana noticed the girl’s shivering and her arms folded pulling what was left of the rag she was almost stripped of across her budding breasts. For the first time became aware of the girl’s lack of clothes.

“I must be addled” she thought. “Where are your clothes?”

“They stripped me at the jail and walked me through the town to the gallows in this rag they ripped to pieces” the girl replied quietly.

Alana dismissed the notion of trying to go back to the village. The folks there were none too happy about missing their opportunity to watch a girl dancing on the rope. “Well we certainly can’t go back for them now!”

She slipped out of her skirt and placed it over the girls head. It covered her completely but still needed to be held up on some way or it would drop around her ankles. She added her sash to hold the cloth in place. Alana tugged on her blouse. The material barely covered her ending very high up on her thighs. She felt uncomfortably exposed in the rear and an observer would note that the lower curves of her shapely buttocks were open to view. Still they were in the forest now and the chance of being observed was slim.

Slim but still possible. Three toughs who had been waiting for the promised show on the gallows that day had followed the girls into the forest, Once they judged they were out of

hearing of the village two took off to go around them and cut them off. The third began to approach them from the rear.

Alana sensed the movement around her and whirled to meet the man coming up from behind, pushing the girl protectively behind her.

“No need to get testy” the man called with a leer on his face. “Just wanted to see if you were friendly like.”

Alana instinctively knew that this was quickly going to turn bad and eyed the man's belt knife hungrily. She cursed herself for not asking about weapons before taking off that day with Pannait.

She sized up the situation and correctly determined that they were about to be set upon from both front and rear. She decided to do the one thing that these beasts were not ready for. She attacked.

The man's eyes went wide as the golden haired girl rushed at him screaming and caught him in the midsection with her knee. He went down scrambling for his knife.

Lila screamed and Alana was up and starting to turn to check out a new threat when a large man grabbed her from behind pinning her arms behind her with one arm and locking his other around her throat. With a lurch she found herself off the ground and being strangled helplessly.

“I like it when they struggle like this”, the man grinned. “I can hold you up here for a long time. Long enough to choke the ‘no’ out of you. Turn it into a yes.” He squeezed his arm tighter around Alana's throat and she writhed against him as the pressure became too intense. Her feet danced a foot off the ground.

The first man was still on the ground with the air knocked out of him but the third came up and pushed Alana's blouse up exposing her completely. His hands roamed over her breasts and tweaked her nipples as she struggled against the horrible pressure slowly strangling her. He reached down fascinated by her completely hairless body and started to finger her when she drew her legs up suddenly and kicked against him with all her might. The third man went backwards falling over the first still on the ground. The force of her kick sent her backward against the man choking her, but not upsetting him. Her mind whirled trying to come up with some defense before he strangled her unconscious.

Lila up to then had been paralyzed with fear, but seeing Alana's struggles she picked up the largest branch she could find and hit the man with the choke hold as hard as possible over the head. He staggered and loosed his grip on Alana's arms. He still had her around the throat but she gripped his forearm and writhed bringing her legs up and back catching him in the groin. This loosened his grip and she fell forward. He grunted and bent over in pain. Lila took this opportunity to hit him again and he fell senseless.

Alana grabbed his belt knife and whirled to meet the second man catching him squarely in the diaphragm. He fell over gushing life's blood.

The first man stumbled to his feet and, taking his companions for dead, turned and ran.

Alana watched him go and turned to the moaning man who had been choking her. She calmly took the large branch from Lila and hit him over the head three times assuring herself he was dead after the third blow.

This done she turned to the girl who was on her knees sobbing.

“Not a good day”, Alana murmured. “Not a good day at all.” She knelt down and gathered the girl in her arms. “Help me. We’ll need to get these men hidden quickly if that other one returns with help,”

Lila looked up, her eyes streaming. The fear was still in them but she nodded.

Alana found a dirk on the second man and was wrapping his belt around her to carry the weapons when a commotion came toward them.

“Quick!” she turned to the girl, “Can you climb?”

The girl nodded.

Alana pointed to a tree a few yards away. “Get up into the branches and don’t come down for any reason. If the worst happens follow the path for a half mile and wait by the large red rock. Pannait will be back before dark.”

The girl seemed paralyzed but a shove from Alana sent her off to the tree and up into its foliage before a half dozen men appeared on the trail led by the man she had knocked down.

Ludicrous she thought. Here I am facing down a crowd, half naked. She belatedly realized that tying the man’s rope belt around her waist had hiked her already short blouse around her hips.

The half dozen men charging up the trail were faced with an unreal scene. Two men lay dead in pools of blood. Over them stood a slim beauty literally half naked, her long legs and loins totally exposed holding a dirk and hunting knife calmly watching them.

“That’s her!” shouted the first man.

“Let me understand”, the second in line replied. “This half naked wench attacked the three of you as you were just taking a walk in the woods. She alone managed to kill these two here?”

“No. She had that other girl with her.”

“The slip of a girl the sheriff was going to hang? The two of them attacked you? The three of you?”

The first man looked very sheepish.

“It’s all a lie”, Alana responded. “I was taking the girl home when the three of them accosted us with rape and murder on their minds. It was fortunate they were as clumsy as

they were stupid or our ravished bodies would be buried in shallow graves never to be found.”

“Where’s the other girl?” the first man shouted indignantly.

“She fled when you attacked.”

“That’s a lie”, he countered.

“So again”, the other man noted. “This half naked girl lay in wait and attacked you?”

The first man looked down and mumbled something unintelligible.

Just then another group of men appeared. They looked as ill favored as the first three and it was plain they were companions of the original group. They had two crossbows and one carried a rope with a noose tied in it.

“She’s a murderer!” one cried. “Let’s string her up!”

The second group started to muscle their way toward Alana and she hefted her weapons gauging where the first threat would come from.

“Wait!” called the older man leading the first group. “We have justice in this duchy, for whatever its worth. And we don’t hang women without a hearing.”

The second group muttered and the two men with crossbows kept them trained on Alana.

“What’s your name girl?”

“Noncette.”

“We’ll have to take you back for a hearing.”

“What kind of a hearing can I expect with all these men conspiring against me?”

“Would you rather we just hanged you from the nearest tree?”

“You can try!” She responded by flipped the knife in her right hand for throwing. One of the crossbow men loosed his bolt. It grazed her left shoulder and she followed it with her knife throw burying it to the hilt in the second crossbowman’s chest.

This shocked the crowd. Alana didn’t wait. She turned and ran for the thickest part of the forest.

Now there were three dead men in the path and this gave the pursuers pause. Still the first man wanted blood and at this urging they charged after her.

Alana drew them deeper into the forest, away from the girl.

After the men were gone, Lila climbed down the tree and, despite Alana’s instructions, hurried back to the village. She had to find the girl named Pannait!

Alana had a reasonable lead on the pursuing men and found a suitable tree. She followed her own counsel and headed up into its branches. The men rushed by calling to each other to be sure they covered the ground. None of them looked up.

Alana climbed down but realized that in her hurry she was completely lost. She knew she would have to backtrack and find the path to the cottage, risking running into another pursuing group.

As she moved cautiously parallel to the route she did hear someone coming in the distance. She found another tree and climbed up waiting with the dirk handy.

A lone figure approached and looked straight up at her.

“Not bad, but I would have picked one with a few more leaves”, Pannait smiled.

“Not enough time”, Alana responding climbing down as fast as he could.

“Nice outfit!” Pannait grinned with an appraising eye. “New fashion? Going nude from the waist down?”

“It gave the men a moment’s pause”, Alana responded.

Pannait smiled. “Remind me to tell you later why you have no body hair”, she chuckled.

Alana blushed. Of course it was true. She had never shaved or used depilatories. Her legs, arms, pubic area had always been free from any hair or stubble. .

“I have your girl on a circular path to the cottage. I’ m just glad no one knows its location as we certainly could expect visitors considering your handiwork. When we get back there you’ll have to give me a blow by blow.”

“Fair enough. Just lead the way.”

Chapter Eight

Stephen sat across from Jack in the security of his private study.

“I heard the Queen speak of the great dog a number of times, but his physical presence astonishes me!”

Jack quietly drank his port. “Well”, coming out of his reverie, “Wyvern or Lord Wyvern as we should call him will be a great boon to Sharpe in tracking down that bastard Michael.”

“Yes” Stephen responded. “And his daughter will be an additional level of protection here for the Princess. Or should I say, her Majesty. She will take the throne at fifteen, if I am not mistaken.”

“Yes. Almost two more years. I know in my heart, without any further proof, that it was Michael’s supporters who killed Alana. Stephen, I am sure that bastard will make an attempt on Alisande’s life as he is next in line for the throne.”

"I agree. Of course these matters need to be checked carefully. It is highly possible that the wretch Michael may feel he has a current legitimate claim to the throne."

"Have the Lord Marshall attend us" Jack called. "He will know, or at least know how to find out."

"With Alana gone", and here for the first time Stephen heard his friends voice break, "if it were not for Alisande I do not believe I would be able to continue to reside in this time and place. I would take the Surprise and head for the Bermudas."

"Your ethics preclude you from leaving the child."

"Yes. Alana loved her deeply. She's a sad and winsome little thing. All her family now dead and gone."

"I know. She and my Brigid are close friends. Perhaps you could send her to us and she could stay under the supervision of Mrs. Oakes."

"Yes. I am sure Clarissa would look after them both. With the added protection of a group of Royal Marines and that huge dog Wylene it might do. Get her out of the line of fire, so to speak."

"Your devotion to her would mean that you would have to maintain your rule for the better at least two years just to be sure she could ascend to the throne."

"I will do more than that. I will hunt that piece of human waste down and kill him myself, if I can."

The two old friends poured over a set of maps and talked deep into the night

Sharpe was likewise engaged in a late night meeting with Colonel Howard.

"I only started with five men and that's counting Harris and Hagman. Neither of them capable of traveling. That just leaves me two not counting Harper."

"I'll see you get a contingent of the best Mayan Marines."

"Those buggers? Crazy hair and tattoos all over. Can they even shoot?"

"Aye. Each and every one of them can handle a musket."

"But can they get off three rounds a minute. With only a dozen or so, and so out numbered, we'll need volley fire to be effective."

"They can get off two with no problem."

"Well Harper and I will see what these "Marines" are capable of in the morning. Now what about that dog?"

“I’ve heard Queen Alana’s tales about that canine first hand. With what we saw at court today you may have to take his interpreter with him.”

Alana brought Lila back to the cottage and had her take a long soak in the hot spring. Pannait insisted on going back to the village and seeing what kind of trouble they could expect.

“I’ll find you something to sleep in” she concluded. “Best to see if Pannait has something old you can wear.”

She carefully opened the bottom drawer in a cupboard in Pannait’s bedroom. Sure enough she found a large blousy thing that would do for the girl until something suitable could be found. As she pulled it out she could make out a heavy object wrapped in it. Carefully unwrapping it she found it was a locket and chain. The clasp was broken so it popped open and the portrait of a man with dark beard and mustache was revealed. Alana examined it for a short time then carefully placed it back in the drawer.

She brought the blouse back out to the girl and barely had it on her and lay in her cot before she was fast asleep.

Alana waited up well past dark and into the night until she heard a stumbling shuffling noise followed by a thud. She hurried outside and found Pannait trying to pick herself out of the shrubbery surrounding the cottage.

“Here, let me help you” and she pulled the almost unconscious girl to her feet.

“It’s been a really good night! Should have stayed in!” Pannait responded.

Alana helped her to her cot. She grabbed a couple of covers and made herself comfortable on a set of chairs in the front room as both her charges slept deeply.

Alana woke with a start. Something was moving silently in the room. She rolled out of her chair and to the place Pannait kept her weapons and grabbed a throwing knife. In one fluid motion she came up in an underhand throwing position and checked herself. Lila, startled, was padding around the newly lit fire and straightening up. She looked terrified.

“So sorry” Alana apologized. “I didn’t realize...”

That was enough to wake Pannait who started then bent over holding her head in both hands. “Here”, Lila placed a steaming cup in front of her. “My mum would give this to Dad when he’d had too much the night before.” Pannait took it gratefully.

“I think you need a long soak”, Alana looked down at her with a pitying eye and helped her out of her clothes and up to and into the hot spring.

As she slipped in Pannait winced. “They’re totally mystified as to where you two disappeared to. Have no idea which way to look. Best you forget about heading to that village for a long time.”

“Whatever did you do?” Alana queried.

“Overindulged in my two greatest weaknesses, drink and cock!”

Alana realized it was the drink talking so she just slipped in next to her.

“Never guessed did you that you had a drunken man craver for a friend? Hah! Friend...”

“You’ve been the best friend someone could ever have” Alana replied quietly.

“Just lonely...lonely...” She became quiet. Then, “ You had to see the portrait to get the girl her nightshirt. He was handsome wasn’t he?”

“The picture? Certainly!”

“Only one I truly loved. But it was drink and cock, drink and cock...”

They sat in the bubbling pool while Lila brought towels and cool drinks.

Finally Pannait looked her in the eye. “Noticed the scars on the ears. Of course you would! His idea...”

Alana just sipped her juice and waited.

“I gave up my people and my inheritance for drink and cock!”

Then Pannait turned serious.

“My parents were wood elves. High up and noble. Fully turned ears and all. But not me. Noble not me. I had an itch and a thirst. Elves have sex for reproducing being too bothered thinking and imagining and philosophizing to scratch poor Pannait’s itch. But men. Glorious men! With their big cocks who could do it again and again. Now that would scratch an itch just fine! And wine, whiskey, mead and beer. Just fine in between beds!”

“Our two worlds didn’t intersect very often. But once I had a taste for men I hunted them down. My father’s library gave me the spells I needed so I indulged myself frequently. Finally went off on a two month tip, came back and they were gone. Gone! All that was left was this cottage and those few books. They had locked the bridges closed and without the additional spells I was exiled. I’ve tried for an eternity but they’re totally gone!”

Alana tried her best to follow her.

“So now, if I’m on my own, I can fully indulge. Drink and cock! Drink and cock! And then he came along. Welmit! Damn him! Dark, big, strong and a cock like a horse. Screwed me six ways of Sunday and I loved it! He had a plan. A lovely plan to make money.”

For the first time she tore off her choker. Pannait bore the same rope burns as Alana!

“Did you know how hard it is to hang an Elve? Full blooded Elves can dangle for a day and a half before they cop it on the rope! It’s a game with us. Increases the sensation, the very few times we do it!

“He was a Hangman and he had a plan. I go into a town as tarty as I can be and get good and drunk. Mix it up. Then he comes in with his warrant. ‘To be executed on the spot’ it says.”

“Now most folk know that an elve can last a goodly while on the rope but none of them realizes its hours. So he takes reservations. Who wants to screw a beautiful elve as she slowly hangs by her neck? Cunt or ass, or both! They lined up. I hang in my scanties and he gives them their turns. After all are done I finally ‘die’. He waits until dark, cuts me down and we live high and wild. Sure it was uncomfortable but I got fucked so many times it was almost worth it. And the money! Must have done it dozens of times. That’s how I got this” she said pointing at her rope marks.

“Did it once too often. High official of this town seen our act before visiting relatives in the west. Arrested us and sentences both of us to death. Me laddie dies on the rope next to me, that wonderful cock all proud and spurting as he goes. And me...me they fuck, ass and cunt time and time. And I let them...until the bugger comes up. The one who made us. I waited until he was deep inside. Then I contracted my cunt crushing his cock. But he couldn’t scream. I was crushing his guts with my legs wrapped around him.”

“Always kept these two nails” showing Alana the third and forth nails on her left hand, now seeing for the first time their length and peculiar shape. “These two sharp as a knife. When he was dead and they was pulling on my legs I cut myself loose. Killed the sheriff’s men and it’s been back here in the woods for me.”

“How long?” Alana managed.

“We’re long lived. I imagine that was about a hundred years ago. Trimmed my ears to fit in. Painful but necessary But haven’t seen another elve in all that time, except for you of course.”

“ME?”

“Oh I’m absolutely sure you’re not full blood. Probably a grandsire or great grandsire. But you have the looks. And your scars tell me you survived a long hanging sometime in your past.”

Alana clutched her throat. Now she was more than truly confused. No past except for some grandmother or great grandfather who was an elve? This was sheer madness!

A noise made her turn. Lila had been sitting quietly and was sobbing under her breath.

“Come here child!” Alana stood up and held the girl. “Here, we all need a good soak.”

Once Lila was sorted she turned back to Pannait who was now snoring and it would be a while before she got to the bottom of this barrel.

After a while and with Lila’s help she got Pannait in her cot and sat down to do some serious thinking.

The evidence didn't lie. Sometime in her past, fairly recent past, she had been hanged and survived. Along with that she had the scar on the back of her head from whatever the blow was that took her memory. The abrasions and bruises had healed.

Now she undraped and studied herself in the mirror. Tall, with golden red hair. Large green eyes, small nose and pert mouth. Long neck. Rather large pert breasts. Tiny waist. Flat stomach. Long thighs and shapely calves. She brushed back her hair and looked carefully at the shape of her ears. She turned back and forth. At just the right angle she thought she could make out a little upward tilt. No! That was simply impossible.

Pannait was asleep on her side, her hair pulled back. Yes. Those were scars on the top of her ears.

Thoughtfully she went over to the shelf that held Pannait's sumptuously bound books, took the nearest and set it down on the table, and started to leaf through it. In the earliest pages there were portraits of elves! All beautiful all with curved and pointed ears.

She could not read the text. Ancient elfish of course. But she slowly paged through admiring the printing and the engravings.

Hours later Pannait stirred.

"Oh when when, when will I ever learn?" came the moan.

"Feeling any better?" Alana asked looking up from her book.

"Death warmed over...but still death."

"I've been searching around for some wonderful stuff I recall called coffee but Lila's not familiar with it and you don't seem to have a stock. It's perfect for what ails you!"

"No. Nothing can cure what ails me." Pannait responded despondently. "I told you everything didn't I?"

"Just about."

"What you must think of me..."

Alana came over and took her face in her hands. "I think you are one of the most generous wonderful souls I have ever met. I will forever be grateful to you and will be always in your debt. You will be my friend for life!" and gently kissed her on the forehead. Then both broke down in tears. Lila listened from her alcove and sobbed along.

Chapter Nine

The boat moved constantly under her searching toes. Never stable never sure, it shifted and forced her higher often.

The hawser around her neck kept her on the balls and toes of her feet constantly. The line around her wrists bound them securely behind her back. As the tide went out the boat dropped. Not all at once but bit by bit. It would drop then come back sometimes higher sometimes lower.

Now it had taken to dropping out from beneath her completely for long seconds at a time leaving her hanging with her toes pointed down desperately waiting, hoping for its reappearance and reprieve.

She fought and she fought hard.

It was the least she could do. Mara and Anna had fought. Mara had fought to bring her head above water, wrists tied to the alternate ankle. She had fought against all odds and finally as the last air bubbled from her tortured lungs she floated still and naked beneath the lapping water.

Anna had sat on the chair, with the leather thong around her neck braced as the iron backed bible was twisted by the bailiff, tightening, strangling, and then releasing. Letting her get sips of air than snuggling up again and leaving her strangling her legs kicking her bound hands grasping for nothing. She had taken much longer. Practically all morning. Just until it was time for the tide to turn. With a final twist that caused her beet red face to virtually explode the bailiff had finally strangled her and she went limp.

Then it was her turn. Naked and bound. Standing on the little skiff tied to the end of the pier. Noose around her neck snug at high tide. As the tide went out the skiff dropped and the noose tightened.

Tests. They called them. Tests for witchcraft.

Tests designed by that bastard the baron because their farm sat on the one piece of land he wanted for his windmill. Damn him. And with her death he would get it.

The skiff dropped again and she hanged. The pressure became too intense and her straining toes found no purchase. But she had to fight. Had to!

As he and the men moved North Sharpe increasingly relied on Wyvern to keep them away from unnecessary contact. They would send a man, Edwards or Milford under cover into a town to get the news and feel out the situation.

The last few villages had been clearly ill used. The whipping posts and stocks had been in place and there was an air of brutality that stemmed from a clear influence of Michael's

administration. Their path led them now around broad inlet where the northern sea intruded on the countryside.

A medium sized fishing village served as the local meeting place and Wyvern checked it out. He came back clearly upset. Brutal and sadistic things were going on. Sharpe, dressed in traveling clothes with Harper, Edward and Dale slowly rode into the village to get the details.

The town folk were sullen and unresponsive. As they worked their way to the waterfront they saw a gathering. The town bailiff or sheriff was at its center.

“Well the two are finished and the third will be done soon” Sharpe heard him declare.

As they came upon the scene he was greeted with a gruesome sight. An unclothed woman was floating face down in the shallows, her wrists tied to either ankle, clearly drowned. Small children threw rocks at the body.

As they came closer they found another grisly sight. Another young woman tied naked to a chair. Dead. Strangled with a tong attached to what looked like an iron plated book. Sharpe was vaguely familiar with these customs. In the era of witch hunts an accused would be throttled by turning an iron backed bible with thong attached a set number of time. If she survived she was innocent. Strangled to death she was witch.

They came down to the wharf itself and the final exhibition. A young woman stood on a floating skiff tied to the wharf. She was bound and noosed with the end of the rope tight at the top of the wharf. It was obvious the tide was going out and with it the skiff sank lower and lower. She stood on the tips of her toes now with every eddy, every dip of the small boat challenging her ability to keep from hanging. As Sharpe watched the boat dipped with the tide leaving her dangling on the rope for 5 or 10 seconds then came back up again and gave her a respite.

Her wrists were tightly bound behind her. Her knees and ankles also tied. Her long dress had been slit and pulled back so her body was exposed . She was young but well endowed and the crowd was enjoying her nudity as well as her agony.

Sharpe rode up to the bailiff.

“What did these women do?”

“Witches the lot. Bunch of still born animals and crop blight. Needed to get rid of them bad.”

“Who has the right of high justice here?”

“The Baron actually, but he gives me the right to do in witches as I see fit.”

“And who grants the Baron this right?”

“The king of course!” The bailiff looked up at Sharpe carefully examining him

“Which king is that?”

“Why King Michael of High Tor of course” he responded.

Sharpe’s throwing knife was out in a flash and the blade caught the tight rope as the girl dangled helpless, slicing it through and leaving her in a faint at the bottom of the boat.

“Who gives you the right?” rumbled the bailiff, motioning for some of the town toughs to join him.

Sharpe shook off his cloak and pulled his pistols. “I am Colonel Richard Sharpe of His Majesty King John’s Royal Marines! Your authority is null and void.” He nodded at Harper. Edwards and Milton swiftly got the girl from the boat, slicing her free and helping her onto Sharpe’s saddle.

“The army is moving north. Any further witch hunts or other executions will be considered murder if authorized under the usurper Michael’s warrants. You have been warned!”

Then he and the two men whirled and galloped out of town.

After they were certain they were not being followed Sharpe reigned in and lay the girl down. She was breathing easily with a raw red mark around her neck from the noose. He pulled her dress over her loins and breasts to give her some modesty and pulled a flask of brandy from his kit. He dribbled this into the girl’s mouth and she came to coughing.

“Where am I?”

“Safe with friends.”

“My sisters?”

“I’m afraid you were the only one who survived.”

“They did it. Those bastards did it! Oh I saw them kill them. Those miserable...” and she trailed off crying.

Sharpe gave her his handkerchief. “Why did they take a set against you?”

“The Baron wanted our homestead for a new windmill and when we wouldn’t give it up accused us of witchcraft after poisoning his own stock!”

Wolford had made up a quick hot soup and brought a cup for the girl.

“Here” Sharpe ordered. “You need this.”

She took it gratefully sipping the hot liquid slowly.

“Do you have relatives nearby. Someone you can stay with?”

“My sisters were all I had.”

“Well you’ll have to come with us.” He regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth. Twelve rangers moving quickly with a couple of pack animals was one thing. A young girl as baggage was another.

“Can you ride?”

“Yes. A little.”

“We’ll make room for you on one of the pack animals. Now finish your soup and we’d best be on our way.”

“May I ask your name kind sir?”

“Sharpe...Colonel Richard Sharpe of King John’s Royal Marines. And you are?”

“Dena...just Dena.”

Sharpe looked at her torn clothes and bare feet.

“We can fit you out with some travel boots and I’ll have the men get you a needle and thread. They were not kind to your dress.”

For the first time the girl noted that her garment was ripped from neck to hip and blushed.

“Pretty little thing”, he thought. “Though I don’t make her a day over 17.”

Just then Wyvern made his appearance. The girl stifled a small scream of fright as the huge dog came over and sniffed her.

“It’s alright. He’s with us...or better put, we’re with him. This is Lord Wyvern.”

Wyvern took to her immediately and she hesitatingly held out her hand for him to lick.

“Good dog. You must be the biggest dog in the world. Good Lord...”

“Ah” Sharpe interrupted. “Lord is his title. Wyvern is his name.”

Dena’s face was pure puzzlement.

“It will get clearer as we go along.”

“Won’t be any further problems here if Wyvern’s taking a liking to her.” Sharpe mumbled to himself.

A needle and thread with a few minutes during the rest allowed Dena the time to repair her dress so that her modesty was not in danger. One of the men found a pair of soft boots for her, though they were rather large.

Sharpe placed her on one of the pack animals.

“You’ll stay with us until we find the right venue for you.’

“How far?” She asked

“We’ll see. I just want you to be safe.”

Chapter Ten

That evening Alana made a simple dinner. She and Pannait talked deep into the night.

Pannait explained some of details of Elven lore and then her conclusion that Alana had Elven blood in her background. She had the perfection of shape that came from the cross breeding of humans and elves. Elves were tall and slim and she had the height and coloring but was far more voluptuous. She clearly had some of the recuperative power. And she had obviously survived a long hanging in her past. Finally, as she had previously noted, in just the right light her ears had a slightly elvish tilt.

“Well now that I suspect my ancient heritage” she sighed, “I wish I knew my past.” She slept poorly that night.

The next morning Alana awoke to hear Lila busying herself with creating breakfast.

“Where’s Pannait?” She asked.

““Went to sit up in the tree”, the girl explained. “Something’s bothering her.”

Alana wound her way up the hill to the ancient tree and could see Pannait staring off in its upper branches.

“Interested in some breakfast?” she called.

“Morning Noni.’ She called down, but did not take her eyes off the horizon.

“What’s so fascinating?”

“A rider. Looks like an officer of some kind, and three or four men. Leading a line of girls tied together in a line. Doesn’t look right!”

“Alana climbed up. She could barely make out the group but the dust indicated that there were a number being herded.

“I think I’ll find out what this is about”, Pannait surmised and led her down the tree. “Could have something to do with your little set too.”

Sharpe was concerned about the girl. It did not bode well for her to continue with his team. They would have to move and move fast. When the time came to take Michael and she would be just a burden to them. Camp followers had their place but not in small guerilla teams.

Still she did her best to be unobtrusive and keep up without complain. On the trail his men were solicitous but she did not ask much. And in the evening she helped with the fire and food.

The first night she had begged a needle and thread and had gone into the bushes and carefully repaired her dress. Going over the hurried stitches of earlier in the day. From then on they had looked after her like a little sister. Sharpe made sure her bed was next to his near the fire just to be on the safe side. Of course now that she was under Wyvern's protection she had naught to fear from any of the men or anything along the trail for that matter.

In a couple of days she became a part of the expedition.

In the cottage Alana watched as Pannait slid a long knife and short throwing blade into her boots and strapped a short sword around her,

"Wait!" she held up her hand. "I'm going with you!"

"I can do this on my own" Pannait replied.

"Just give me second. I want to stretch my legs!"

Alana slipped on a pair of garters and slid throwing blades beneath them. She pulled a hunting knife from its scabbard and slid it in her waistband behind her back.

Pannait gave her a long look. "If this group is looking for you or the girl, or even if they know about the three you killed, they'll snatch you up in a second. You're quite noticeable you know."

"Then I will stay off the road and keep to the verge. I'll just shadow you to be sure nothing happens."

Now Lila was truly alarmed.

"Now you just wait her love. It appears Noni and I are going to see what the ruckus coming up the road is about."

Pannait led the way down the almost invisible path to the intersection with the main road.

"I'll walk out up a ways. Just taking the air."

She hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when they heard the sound of the rider and the group following. In another couple of minutes the group came into view. It was an officer wearing a blue standard that made Alana start. She had seen it before but she could not remember when. But it chilled her to the bone.

Following him were two pike men at the head of the column, then eight or nine girls wrists tied behind them and linked by a neck rope, followed by two more pike wielding soldiers.

"I know a couple of those girls from the village and nearby holds" Pannait muttered almost to herself.

"Halt you!" called the officer and cantered up to them with the two pike men scurrying to keep up.

"Good morrow sire", Pannait curtsied. "May I be of assistance?"

He appraised her thoughtfully.

"Yes, you'll both do nicely. Take them!"

The two pike men stepped forward ominously.

"Why?" cried Pannait. "What did we do?"

"The King and his lady need a fresh group of girls and you'll do fine" the officer said with a leer.

The first pike man leveled his weapon at Pannait. "Come on you" he motioned. "we got a nice comfortable space for you end of the line."

In a second Pannait was under his guard and her boot knife was in her hand. The guard stared stupidly as she drove it into his bowels.

"Hey!" the second guard called moving forward. Whatever he meant to say next was lost in the gurgle as Alana's throwing knife lodged in his gullet.

"Guards!" called the officer pulling his sword.

Alana saw Pannait move toward him and concentrated on the other two pike men running up the line of girls. She chose the nearest on her side and as he came in range slid the second throwing knife out of her garter. The guard, alerted by the flash of the blade brought his pike up on a defensive move. Alana flipped the blade underhand sliding to her right and it caught the man just under his ribs and up into his chest cavity. He pitched forward dead before he hit the ground.

She heard horse's noises behind her but couldn't afford a look as the last pike man came around the head of the shrieking girls and lunged at her. She dodged his thrust and slid the hunting knife into her grasp.

The pike man swung his weapon and she dodged, rolling under the staff and slashing upwards slashing him along his left side.

The man grunted in pain and swung around to meet her again. She timed his swing and threw the blade burying it in his chest. He continued to spiral and Alana afforded herself a look behind, as Pannait, now on the horse's back slit the officer's throat.

Alana heard the cry from the girls and whirled to see the falling guard swing up his pike in a last curving thrust. She dodged a little too slowly and the heavy side of the staff caught her glancing blow on the head. She went down hard.

Chapter Ten

“Here Noni” the voice was gentle but insistent. “Let me freshen your cloth”

Alana’s head spun with light as her eyes flickered. Lila was placing a moist wash cloth on her head.

“There love” Pannait called and came into her vision. “You had a nasty bump. Took everything I had to cut loose those screaming mimi’s and get them to put you on the horse to carry you back here.”

Here was the cottage. She could make out the sobbing of a number of girls in the background.

“I had to leave you to Lila and go back to strip the men and bury their bodies. Maybe a few days before someone comes to look for them, but I had to cover their tracks a far way back to it won’t lead to us. Seems you’ve been napping the whole time”

Alana reached up. The left side of her temple was exquisitely tender.

“Let’s get some of these herbs down her.” Pannait instructed Lila.

The girl lifted a hot mug and put her arm under Alana to help her up.

“Ugh!” Alana grimaced as she smelled the concoction.

“Now Noni, don’t be a troublesome patient. I’ve got nine girls to sort out right now” Pannait retorted.

Then the blinding flash of memory hit her. Faces, people, experiences, memories of a lifetime flooded in.

She gently moved Lila’s cup away and pushed herself up. “I know Pannait” she said calmly. “I finally remember.”

Pannait looked over her shoulder.

“I’m not Noni. My name is Alana Cordant. I am the High Queen of Branart!”

Pannait looked at her solicitously. “Poor love! That was a worse blow then I thought.”

“No!” she replied forcefully. “I’ve been High Queen for just over a year. I married Jack...oh my poor Jack! What must he think? I was on the boat. The river barge the last I can remember. Then I woke up on the bank and then you found me!”

Pannait was looking at her curiously.

“It’s been what? Months now? I need to get back!”

She started to push herself into sitting position and swing her legs onto the floor when Pannait rushed over and grabbed her shoulder. “Did that blow rattle your brains so badly that now you’re hallucinating?”

“Listen Pannait, my father was Philip the first. My mother was Roselle of Delay. I had accompanied my Uncle on an ambassador trip to Verderale where I let myself be robbed and drugged. I ended up in a miserable coastal berg a day’s sail away. When I came to I made my way to an Inn and got something to eat. There was a handsome rogue, a Poet, who played for me. I ordered him some food. That’s when I realized I had been robbed. In the argument that followed the Poet cut a purse and the man grabbed me by mistake. I knocked him on the head with a water pitcher and the Poet pulled me out. Something went very wrong and when I came to I was manacled and kneeling and the man I knocked was sentencing us both to be hanged as thieves and would be murderers. The bastard was not only the local magistrate but the nobleman of those counties. The poet and I were bundled into a cart and I remember arguing with the man driving, the bailiff... to no avail. He had us at the gallows in no time and finished a pair kicking there. He auctioned off our clothes and hanged the Poet. It took forever for him to die. Then it was my turn. My fee was six gold crowns! The only one interested was a whoremaster but when he touched me I kneed him and spit in his face. He paid an extra silver crown for the bailiff to let me die slow. He hanged me. That’s how I got these marks, or at least one set.”

By now everyone, Pannait, Lila and all the sobbing girls were staring.

“It took longer than forever. My wrists were manacled and I kicked in agony swinging on the rope. They said I must have danced for an hour before I lost consciousness. Then Gilbert, Duke Gilbert and his wonderful horse Beaufort saved me. He carried me away. I was naked except for my stockings. He couldn’t get the manacles off. Jammed they were, and over the next few days he fought Norsemen and Celts to get back to his land. I saved Krystyana. She became my ward. There was death and agony and murders all about, but we finally came to his lands. He had a hard time believing I was a Princess. Just like you! Sounded too farfetched. But he kept me as his personal Pleasure Girl, his mistress...though he didn’t press himself upon me...and I lived at his castle for almost a year. Wyvern! That was his huge dog and my protector. And Illicia. The horror of the mines! And the attack of the evil Duke! Oh my God! That standard! It was the Duchess!! Of course, they never found her body!”

“My father finally came for me with Gilbert. They defeated the Duke and his mercenaries, but Father was killed in an accident. I flew home in a small fast oared bark but we were taken by pirates. Illicia, Krystyana, Marissa, Mira and I. Held for ransom. Then my bastard cousin Michael made a deal with the Pirates to kill us all so he could hold the throne. We were doomed. But then Jack...my wonderful Jack with the golden hair from another time and place, saved us. I was chained and drowning when he swam down and pried me loose. Then the trip to Brazil and the Americas aboard the Surprise. Finding the Mayans and realizing that we were in my time and place and there may be no way back. He and Stephen concocting the plan to sail back and take the castle with the Surprise’s long guns. Overthrowing Michael, but Martin almost murdered me. Then my coronation. And elevating Jack to First Lord and Duke of Summerfield. And his proposing. He proposed, we were quickly married and now this!”

Alana had been holding her head in her hands and she looked up at Pannait's penetrating gaze and the amazed look of all the girls around her.

She stopped at their open mouthed stares.

Pannait narrowed her eyes. "Noni, you've had a more serious blow than I thought. You can't be serious in all this? You! The High Queen of Branart?"

"Pannait, if I do have Elvish blood wouldn't that partially be responsible for this?" she pointed at the rope scars on her neck. "Would a normal 16 year old survive over an hour hanging by her neck...or feel the erotic embrace of the noose?"

Again Pannait just stared then slowly shook her head.

"I can't prove anything now" Alana cried, "but we have to get these girls sorted out and then I must go South!"

"Well that's the first thing you've said that's reasonable. I've been talking to the ones who aren't so hysterical they make some sense. Apparently the usurper Michael has followers up here in the North and has set up his court at High Tor on Islette. And he has taken a Mistress/cum Queen...and they say she was a Duchess. He has reinstated virtually universal capital law, which is why the gallows have been springing up like weeds and they are in need of new 'servants' so these sweeps of soldiers have been picking up all the young comely girls to 'serve'."

"If it is the Duchess I know she has her own plans for the girls. She uses slow hanging and strangulation to milk them of their love fluids we she uses in her magic...her sorcery. She revels in slow torture and even slower death!" Alana cried.

"All these fluff heads want to do is return to their homes. Seems to me that it will make them targets again and those who come to check on the first soldiers will certainly get their information out of them and sweep them up, if not hang them from the nearest tree."

"I'm ready to travel!" Alana responded swinging her legs down.

"No. Not after the way that blow rattled your brains! Let me head to the village and find out what's going on, who is on our trail and see if there's some place to stash these girls. You help Lila keep them in check!"

Alana got to her feet. "If the Duchess left men in the village they could take you before..."

"Noni please! I am an elfe. I can sense a trap. I'll find out what's going on and be back before you know it."

Alana shook her head. "It's not Noni. It's Alana. But you're right. We'll wait."

Pannait silently disappeared down the trail.

Alana silently took stock. The blow had rattled her enough to both return her memory and stagger her now. Truthfully she couldn't have accompanied Pannait. She could barely stand.

Now that her story was interrupted the girls began their wailing again and it was all Lila could do to keep them in some sort of order.

With a little of Pannait's herbal remedy Alana dropped into a fitful sleep.

She was shaken rudely awake.

"Oh please Mistress! Your Highness!! Please wake up! Please!"

Lila was persistent.

Finally Alana was able to drag herself to consciousness.

"It's the girls Mistress! Half of them have taken off!!"

"Where?"

"They've gone back to their homes near the village for sure!"

Alana looked over. The remaining girls were sound asleep.

"What time is it? How long has Pannait been gone?"

"It's just before dawn, Mistress. Pannait has been gone all the night. She should have been back long ago!"

"Not good" Alana muttered.

She dragged herself out of bed and with a will that surprised even her, dressed in tunic, leggings and short boots. She armed herself to the teeth including knives and short sword.

"Now I'm going to take the same trail Pannait would return on. If she's on her way back I'll find her. Then we'll try to help those idiot girls!"

"If I'm not back by the morning next you dress yourself up in the finest clothes and makeup, take the reserve of money and make your way South. Buy a horse and travel the back roads to Branart. Find any officer and give them this". Alana hurriedly scribbled a note verifying the girl's bona fides. "It will get you to Colonel Howard or Commodore Pullings and they will take it from there!"

Lila sobbed and threw her arms around her.

"No. No. You must be strong now. All our lives depend on it!"

Silently she took off. The pre-morning coolness helped her head and she moved quickly down the trail. It took her an hour to reach the knoll above the village and in the early morning light what she saw filled her with dread.

She saw at least a dozen horses bearing the Duchess' barding near the inn. But where was Pannait?

She cautiously moved closer as the small village stirred from the night.

As quiet as a mouse she approached the inn. The back door opened and a small boy scampered out to the barn. When he opened the door she could make out at least a dozen strange horses inside. This was a full occupation.

The boy had grabbed a bag of oats and hurried around the front. She made her way slowly to the windows in the back and listened. The innkeeper and his wife were up and hurrying about with breakfast.

"No good! It's a crime. Hanging those girls! And doing that to them before and during!"

"They claimed they murdered five guards!"

"All they can prove is that the officer and four men are missing!"

"Yes, but those girls did steal back into the village and they claimed that the other girl and her friend did kill those men. And that other girl. Half naked killed three men. There was a bunch of witnesses to that!"

"Seven slight girls against four soldiers and an officer and that one supposedly killing three" the wife snorted. "That's absurd!"

"Well just as long as they leave and let us be!"

"And do you believe that Priest? The one the Duke imported? He was supposed to give those girls solace before they died. Instead he tells them they're doomed to an eternity of pain. How did he put it? They were doomed to have to endure the last few moments of their agony on the rope for eternity for their sins. Now that was a crime!"

A shout from the dining room roused them to action and they carried the food and drink forward.

The conversation chilled her to the bone. She moved around the buildings toward the crossroads where the hangings took place.

The sight shook her badly. The soldiers had erected a triangular gallows and from it seven nude girls dangled hideously. Each one's neck had stretched and her straining toes dangled just inches from the gallows floor. Someone had thrown a bucket or two of water on the platform to clean off the urine and feces from the dead girls' bladders and bowels. A nodding guard sat on the gallows steps.

Alana moved closer and finally could make out the girls' features. The six they had rescued swung gently, eyes closed and faces composed as if in sleep. That always surprised her. No matter how devastatingly agonizing their hanging once death took them their faces bore an almost angelic calm. The seventh however, was quite different. Her teeth were gritted and her face, a deep crimson bathed in sweat seemed to be in deep concentration. Where the other girls had hanged with only their wrists bound this figure

had her knees and ankles tightly tied. And even though she hanged a good foot off the gallows floor her ankle rope was tightly tethered to a ring set into the wood.

As she came closer Alana could see clearly Pannait was still working her chained wrists behind her. Her nipples were hard and erect. Her pudendum was engorged and erotic fluids coursed out of her and dripped down her bound legs.

“What did she say? Twenty four to thirty six hours? Looks about right!” she mused as she got closer still.

The town had not stirred except for a few animals and the business at the Inn.

Alana watched cursing as three drunken soldiers came out of the nearest domicile.

They moved to Pannait’s trembling writhing body and commented with wonder that she was still struggling.

“Ain’t normal.” One very drunk ginger haired fellow proclaimed. “Should have been dead hours ago. Must be one of them elves.”

Meanwhile one of his friends had gotten a small stool and placed it behind Pannait’s shuddering form. Standing on this he dropped his pants and Alana watched in horror as he plunged his erection deep into Pannait’s rectum.

He pumped hard and she could see Pannait's grasping hands desperately trying to claw at him. He stayed away and a short time later cried out as her came deep in her bowels.

“Who’s next?” he called as he pulled out.

“Not for me” said the second. “Not interested. Had my fill with those six others” opined the third and laughing he led them back to the inn.

It took a few more minutes for the guard to make himself comfortable and nod off again. As his snores reached her she approached silently.

Alana crept onto the platform and slid a hand down Pannait’s thigh as she passed. Her hand came away covered in cum. “I’ll never doubt her stories about her erotic hangings again”, she mused as she slipped up behind the guard and in a thrice slit his throat from ear to ear. She held him for his brief struggle then left him slumped as if asleep.

Quickly she moved to Pannait, slacked the rope holding her ankles and grabbing her around the waist sliced the rope hanging her. She dropped heavily to her feet and her knees buckled. Alana laid her down and unknotted the noose. The marks were terrible. As she did Pannait opened her eyes, and her grimace faded. “Took you bloody long enough!” she whispered hoarsely.

“I’m an Elve. No one can catch me!” Alana jibed back. “Did you have a good time? Came what? Six, seven, a dozen times?” as she sliced the ropes from her knees and ankles.

“None of your bloody business!” came the croak. “See if the guard has the key to these manacles!”

Alana searched but came back with nothing. "I've been there before. You'll just have to escape with your wrists bound behind you." she whispered with a mocking smile. "I've had plenty of experience with that!"

"All right! Let's go!!"

As they climbed down Pannait looked back at the six naked girls still hanging from their nooses. "They died slowly, thoroughly raped and ravaged. We need to kill all those bastards!"

"Later", Alana responded. "Let's get you home safe right now."

They had gone no more than a hundred yards when the alarm sounded. "Must be another group wanted one more chance at you and found your guard."

They moved faster, Alana breaking trail for Pannait to follow nude and bound.

Suddenly they heard horses on either side.

"This ways the ravine down to the river" Pannait whispered. "We might be able to lose them."

Then they came to the ravine. It had a sharp slope with grassy patches all the way down to the river running a hundred yards below. As they prepared to jump a half dozen horsemen followed by a dozen footmen surrounded them.

Alana didn't hesitate. She slipped her throwing knife into an overhand position and put it directly into an officer's eye.

Pannait looked behind. "We could try to ..." and Alana kicked her feet out and launched her feet first down the grassy slope toward the river. Then she turned and met the soldiers' threat.

The closest had a sword. By the time he came near enough her second throwing knife was embedded in his gut.

She drew her sword.

The next in line had a pike. Moving under and in she ran him through cleanly and was onto the next two. Both were clumsy swordsmen and Alana gave silent thanks for Stephen's superb training. In a few seconds both were down. She jumped into the brush with the rest following. As she twisted and turned to find escape she suddenly found herself with a horsemen on either side. Both had their swords drawn and used the horses to hem her in. She slipped under one mount cutting his belting and watching the horseman slide helplessly. The other shouted and she was again surrounded. Two pike men came at her. She dodged the first and skewered the second but then she went down under the crush of four more. They took all her weapons and a soldier reached down with a blade to slit her throat.

“No!” came the order. “This bitch is responsible now for the death and disappearance of ten of our men. We’ll let his liege decide her fate.”

“How about the other one? Want us to go after her?”

“We got a few bolts after her and may have hit her before she was swept away. Likely drowned with her wrists manacled and all.”

“Alright, let’s go back to town.”

Alana was swiftly bound and gagged and led back to the town on a neck rope.

Once back in the village the rest of the troops were assembled and a donkey cart was drawn up. Alana was tossed unceremoniously into the back.

“How do we tell Her that we only brought this one back when she wanted close to a dozen?”

“Well the good news is the bitch killed Sir Ricard, who was given the order. As far as we’re concerned he bungled the whole thing!”

Alana was trussed like a fowl about to be roasted. The gag in her mouth tasted like old leather and lying at the bottom of the donkey cart she couldn’t see a thing. The road was hot and dusty and even when the men stopped for a meal break she wasn’t released. After all the men had their meal and rest two soldiers untagged her and gave her a drink of water and a mouthful of bread.

Chapter Eleven

It took Pannait days to recover from her ordeal. First the hanging, then the near downing in the river at the bottom of the grade Alana sent her down. Then having to make her way manacled back to her cottage. She thought at first it was deserted but Lila jumped from the bushes and hugged her.

"I was sure you both were dead. When no one came back. I was sure you were dead. But where is Alana?"

Pannait gasped for water and Lila slowly gave her a long drink.

Haltingly she related the horror of what had transpired over the last few days.

Using a hammer and cold steel, Lila bashing it with all her might, it took the better part of an hour before she was free of the manacles.

Lila almost carried her to the hot spring and bathed her tenderly, finally manhandling her to her bed where she fell into a deep sleep.

For three days she barely woke for food and water.

Then it was another forty eight hours before her strength returned.

That morning she awoke, put on her traveling clothes, as many knives and swords as was practical and prepared to leave.

"No!" Lila cried. "I cannot just stay here and wait for you. You and Alana are the only two people who have ever shown me any kindness. You must let me go with you!"

'No. Where I must go you can't begin to follow.'

Lila explained Alana's final instructions. Pannait went to a hidden spot in the cottage and returned with a sack of gold coins. "Here. Dress in the finest clothes and use these liberally. Make your way south and find the forces of Good King Jack. Tell him his wife is alive and held by the traitor Michael and bid him follow me as soon as her can with as large a force as he can muster! Use the note Alana left. He will recognize her hand."

Lila wept bitterly but nodded. She changed her clothes to the best traveling outfit Pannait had, taking an extra set in her knapsack. She secreted the money in two places and armed herself with knives and a short sword.

Looking in the mirror she used some of the eye makeup she had seen Pannait make use of and some of the lip color. It made a remarkable difference. Finally she took her long hair down from its usual bun and let it flow down her shoulders. It was quite long and gave her a mysterious look.

First business was to get as far south as she could before buying a horse.

She kept to the narrow woodland trails and bypassed the first two villages she came to.

The third had soldiers in it ransacking so she slipped around the guards and realizing she would not make another habitation by dark made sure she was out of touch with the rabble and made a small camp.

She made a very small fire and just a little soup for dinner and lay on her sacks fast asleep.

“Well look here!”

A voice started her awake. She jumped up to find herself standing next to one of the biggest men she had ever seen. She hardly came to his chest. His face was rough and craggy and he wore elvish armor with designs she had never seen before.

“What you doing here little girl?”

“I’m on my way south to visit relatives....’

“I be your relative. I be your husband!” A massive hand reached out and swept her to the creature’s chest. She tried to struggle as a huge hand fondled her breasts.

“Tiny but nice! Let’s see legs!”

Holding her like a toy he tore off her dress and underclothes. Lila had worn her mistress’ garters and stockings and high heeled shoes. A mistake for long walking but she had a set of traveling boots she was going to shift into. Now all she had left was her tunic which came down to her hips and her stockings leaving her pubic area and buttocks exposed.

“Nice ass!” the giant admired. “Pretty little cunt. Yes, I be your husband.”

With that he took a rope and wrapped it around Lila’s wrists and hauled her up over a branch so her feet kicked a good two foot of the ground.

She cried and screamed but knew no one could hear her. She tried to kick the giant as he grabbed her hips from the rear. He just flipped her shoes off leaving her hanging in her stocking feet

The he parted her buttocks with his thumbs and she felt his massive penis drive deep into her rectum.

She screamed in agony but he just grunted.

“Tight. Real tight. Like em tight!”

Lila kept crying and screaming for what seemed like an eternity until the giant grunted twice and she felt him ejaculate deep in her bowels. He pulled out suddenly invoking a moan from the suspended girl.

He left her hanging by her wrists as he busied himself with some task.

As she recovered from the rape she realized she was not alone. A half dozen shapes were around her. As her vision cleared she realized they were all young women who had been hanged by their necks, their bodies in various states of decomposition. She let out a cry.

The giant laughed. "Girls like wild game. Best to hang. Strangle slowly. Keeps juices inside. Then leave hanging for few days so they nice and gamey."

Lila tried to turn her head to look away from the dangling girls and caught the body parts slowly roasting over an open flame. All she could do was gasp in horror.

The giant came up to her and leered. She was enveloped by his stinking breath. "You good ass fuck. Better than the last bunch Probably just short while but I let you live. Trade you place I know for gold. They like ass fuck."

Then he cut her down and tied her wrists behind her followed by her knees and ankles.

Lila cried herself to sleep.

The next morning the troll, as she had come to think of him, tied a loose slip knot around her neck and undoing her ankles and knees fed her some porridge and water and made to set off down the trail leading her. She begged him for shoes so he found her traveling boots and she slipped these on.

The path was not difficult and thankfully no one else was on it. Lila was by nature a modest girl and walking along a wooded path nude from the waist down with her wrists bound behind her was a new height of humiliation.

They walked for a good hour and soon came in sight of a coaching inn.

"This place. They love good ass fuck here."

Before they came too close the troll used some of her things to clean her up, wiping off the residuals from his sodomy the night before and trying to undo the damage that had been done to her makeup. He had her remove her boots and replace them with her stylish high heels.

Satisfied he started to lead her to the door. She set herself and fought as hard as she could.

"You come or I hang you here!"

"No! Please no. Not like this...not half naked. Please let me cover myself." She begged and cried.

"You my slave now and if I want you naked...you naked!"

With that he ripped her upper garment down the front exposing her small but shapely breasts. Her protests futile and the neck rope choking her she finally let him lead her in to the inn.

More than a dozen men turned to watch the huge man-thing bring in a lovely young girl with her breasts tantalizingly exposed by her ripped upper garments and totally nude from the waist down save for stockings and stylish shoes.

With her wrists bound Lila could not try to shield herself so she just looked down until she was led to the bar. The troll lifted her up so she sat on the bar top and he pulled her neck rope up and over a protrusion in the ceiling tying it off to the bar's rail. If she just sat straight up there was no problem but if she slipped off the bar she would hang for sure.

The bartender came over and a hushed discussion ensued. The troll laughed, barking suddenly.

He turned to Lila. "No entertainment tonight. Plenty of whores in back room so no need ass fuck but no entertainment. He pay good to watch you dance."

She spoke up for the first time. "I can dance but I've never been paid."

"Wrong kind of dance" the troll laughed.

He whistled for the attention of the men in the bar. When all eyes were on him his giant arm swept Lila from the bar top and she dropped hanging by her neck her feet swinging a good foot off the barroom floor.

The men cheered wildly. Watching a bare assed lovely kicking and twitching her end on the rope was a sure way of livening things up.

Lila's eyes snapped shut and her teeth gritted. The rope bit into her neck behind her left ear and she swung her legs desperately trying to find some purchase. Her shoes flew off her feet with her struggles and her stockinged toes danced a good two or three inches above the bar rail and nothing else was available. Her heels drummed against the bar and her hands clawed in desperation as the noose tightened its grip and she realized that she was doomed to hang half naked for the perverse pleasure of these degenerates.

Suddenly she felt a huge hand fondling her. Large fingers sliding in and out as if to bring some kind of sexual pleasure to the horrific agony she was experiencing.

Without her knowledge a smallish shrew of a man had slipped up behind her with a quirt and as the troll masturbated her he slashed her across her bare buttocks evoking a howl from the crowd. Despite her agony she jumped from the slash. He continued slashing her again and again, turning her round perfect globes into a striped concourse of pain.

Lila's head was exploding, her throat crushed and her breast a furious burning hell desperate for an inkling of breath. She was kicking furiously but with no conscious effort, just a reaction to the excruciations she was experiencing.

A man in a dark green uniform with silver accents stepped out a back room and was rewarded with the sight of the young girl slowly hanging for the pleasure of the crowd. Drawing a pair of horse pistols he fired the first and split the rope hanging her. She dropped heavily to the floor, gasping for breath. For a second the man slowly surveyed the room. He holstered the discharged pistol and drew his massive cavalry sword.

“What capital crime did this girl commit?”

“She my slave. No need crime. Me sell for dance. You make trouble.” The troll growled and started toward the man in black.

Out of the shadows more than a dozen others appeared, each carrying a rifle or musket. The majority of these had the facial tattoos of the Mayan nation and their distinctive hair styling. They appeared to the crowd to be demons materializing out of the dark.

The men and whores panicked. The only one who didn't was the troll who growled and reached for the blade at his side. The man in black met him stroke for stroke. It was a furious match, but Richard Sharpe had taken stronger opponents with his blade. He took a battering, but with a furious parry and a thrust he found the soft spot under the troll's ribcage and spited his heart.

Lila was coughing the whole time desperately dragging air into her oxygen starved lungs. When she was able to look around the troll lay dead and the man in green was kneeling over her.

“Alright Miss?” he wore a very concerned expression. “Looks like you'll have a bit of a rope burn there.”

“Thank you, good sir” Lila managed to croak. She tried to get up but her bound wrist prevented it. Sharpe leaned over and slit the cords on her wrist so she brought her hands before her and rubbed them gratefully.

“Might I beg a covering?” Lila asked pulling her ripped bodice across her and nodding to her nakedness below.

Sharpe's cloak was off and draped over her nudity.

“May I ask the name of my savior?”

“Colonel Richard Sharpe, King's Rifles.”

“May I ask which King?”

“The only true King of Branart, Good King John!”

“Thank God, Colonel. I was sent to find the King's forces. Queen Alana needs your immediate help!”

“I'm sorry Miss, but the High Queen Alana is dead, killed in an explosion on the river seven months ago.”

“No! Absolutely not! She survived and saved my life and has been living in the North Country. A blow to the head took her memory but it has returned.”

Sharpe looked at her dubiously.

“Do you have any proof of this?”

Lila fumbled in her tunic. "Here!" She thrust the paper in Sharpe's hands.

Sharpe peered at the writing. "I am unfamiliar with the Queen's hand but we will soon know. Call for Lord Wyvern."

One of the Maya climbed a tree outside and gave a low long whistle.

Within a few moments the huge dog appeared. He was accompanied by a young girl with long brown hair.

"Wyvern, this girl tells us Queen Alana is alive and this note is from her. Do you recognize the writing?"

Wyvern peered at the paper and sniffed it cautiously.

He whined and whimpered then made a number of pawing and scratched symbols on the ground.

"Do you have anything else of the Queen's with you?"

"The troll stole my bag. If it's on his horse there may be..."

Lila ran outside to the troll's baggage. Yes! There was her bag.

"She may have handled this bag of coins and I'm sure she wore this scarf."

Lila held them out to the huge dog.

Again he sniffed cautiously.

Then he raised his head and let go a combination of barks and howls. A cry of pure joy! He scampered around like a puppy.

"Well that tells it", Sharpe admitted. "If Wyvern is convinced she must be alive!"

"I can take you back to where we parted", Lila said excitedly.

"Good. Good. Wyvern can certainly track her from there."

"Letoc", Sharpe turned to the head Maya. "Send your fastest runner with this." He hurriedly wrote out a report. "Have him take it directly to Colonel Howard or if he's not there, King John himself. And have him pass the word as he goes. High Queen Alana lives!"

"Have Howard and the army meet us at," and he perused a map, "here at Piccoet! We'll try to affect a rescue on our own."

Letoc called his man and in moments the message was off.

Harper came up silently. "On our own? The fourteen of us against all of Michael's northern armies? I admire your idea of fair odds."

Sharpe took stock for a moment. He still had thirteen of his men and Wyvern. He alone was enough to tip the odds in anyone's favorite. But now he had two women to deal with! Strange that both of them wore the same rope burns the Queen herself bore. There was something very weird about this whole business. But that was someone else's to reason out. He had to get on the trail and fast.

They redistributed the last pack animals' goods and placed Lila in line with Dena. Both girls were shy but fascinated that they each bore marks of the noose. Once they were situated, Wyvern following Lila's directions took off eagerly in search of Alana.

Chapter Twelve

They traveled for hours in the afternoon until Alana heard the calls of sentries. The cart rolled over a wooden surface she took for a gate or drawbridge of some kind. Her limited perspective made out the gray walls of a fortification. Once inside it took a fairly short time until the cart came to a halt.

“Come here you!” she heard the call as hands dragged her bound legs off the cart. She watched impassively as the soldier cut the ropes on her knees and ankles and set her on her feet. Two other guards waited and grabbed her by the arms.

It was a large castle with battlements and fortifications. Her heart sank with the sight of the flags and decorations, a bastardization of Michael’s and the Duchess’ colors.

She was dragged through the castle entrance, down corridors and up stairs until they reached an ante room. Straining she could just make out the shouted conversation on the other side of the door.

“And you mean to tell me you lost ten men and brought back only one girl?” a furious woman’s voice bellowed.

“It was Sir Ricard’s doing, your majesty. He was responsible for the entire debacle. We only followed his orders.”

“Enough!” an imperious man’s voice ordered. She recognized it as her cousin Michael. “Bring in the trollop and let’s have a look at her!”

The doors were flung open and she was dragged in. Hands pressed down her head and after going past dozens of courtiers, ladies in waiting and guards she was flung to her knees.

“Raise her head and let us see her face!”

Alana’s hair was jerked and she looked into the faces of her two worst enemies.

Michael had aged badly and had a patch over his left eye. The Duchess Roxanne, however, was as beautiful as their last meeting. Black hair, piercing blue eyes and a regal bearing.

Further contemplation was ruined by Michael’s choking gasp.

“You! It’s you! You should have been dead three times over!! Ungag her!”

Rough hands undid her gag and she looked up in defiance.

“First that incompetent idiot of a pirate. Then that fool Martin. Then a plot that destroyed both ships and tore a hundred others to bits and you stand here!”

“My dear cousin” Alana spat back. “Wonderful to see you too!”

“Well my dear” the Duchess oozed, “So nice to have you to home again. But where is your royal raiment? You look like a common slut. But I guess after your time on the continent that’s what you’ve become, isn’t it?”

“Roxanne!” Alana responded refusing to use her title, “I wondered how you saved your hide from my father and Gilbert. Hidden up here in the rocks? How noble of you.”

The Duchess’ eyes blazed. “Michael has a claim on you of course. But we have business we never finished. It’s a shame you don’t have that trollop Marissa with you. You both had such talent.”

“Yes my dear cousin” Michael chimed in. “My consort here has entertained us at many a banquet with tales of your sexual talents and abilities. And such capacity for the noose. It’s just incredible!”

Alana just glared at him.

“I understand” the Duchess continued, “You married a man from another place and time. He is now acting as regent for that little sister of your’s. My darling’s troops will soon right that wrong.”

Alana screamed her rage. “Untie me and let it just be between the two of us you bitch!”

“No. Not just now. But maybe at some point...”

“Now my dear cousin I have plans for that whelp of a sister of yours. But in the meantime we need to make you at home here in your new domicile” Michael smiled. “Take her to the tower and look after her needs.”

“You miserable bastard! This time I’ll personally see to both of you!” Alana cried over her shoulder as she was dragged out.

Strong hands manhandled her down to the lower levels. She was stripped of her clothing and her bonds were replaced by steel manacles and left her shivering in a cell.

The next morning she was awakened by the jailers. One grabbed her head and the other pried her mouth open and dosed her with hellbore. Once her senses were dulled she was taken by a half dozen young girls to the bathing area where they carefully shampooed her hair and scrubbed her completely. They then perfumed and costumed her as a Pleasure Slave. Black velvet corset, leaving her breasts and pubic area exposed. Long black stockings and matching heeled shoes. Black tape and gloves. They rouged her and made up her eyes and colored her lips. Then they delivered her drugged and helpless to the Duchess’ “play” area.

Alana could barely make out her surroundings but the Duchess’ voice cut through her drugged state.

“Well if it isn’t our High Queen? Or is it Santa Alana? I find those little shrines quite odious. I suppose the slime we condemn to the slow noose on the gallows find some consolation

in their fantasy. What about you my dear? What will you take consolation in when it's your turn?"

Alana tried to respond but her head was full of wool and her tongue felt thick. Nothing came out.

"Michael has asked for you first so hoist her by her wrists!"

The guards removed the manacles and chained her with her wrists overhead to a pillar.

"Ah my dear cousin!" Michael's odious voice cut through her drugged senses. "So nice to have you at our disposal."

Once again Alana's voice failed her

Michael barked a command and she felt the bonds on her wrists pulling her up until she was on her toes.

"Perfect. Perfect."

She felt his presence behind her.

"I decided your high rank deserved a silken cord."

He looped the silk rope around her neck. Slowly he tightened it, prepared to enjoy her agony as she strangled helplessly. He kept the tension up alternating the pressure as he felt her body tense and release. Alana's nipples turned hard as small rocks. Her erotic juices flowed unbridled as the strangling cord did its work.

He switched the tension to one hand and then used the other to coat his erect penis with her vaginal secretions. Then he slammed it into her clenched anus. With a barked laugh he tightened the rope and pummeled her until he penetrated her sphincter and plunged his erection deep into her anal sheath.

Alana cried out in a purely involuntary strangled tone. Michael laughed hideously as he plunged deeper into her and alternately loosened and tightened the choking cord.

Alana felt like she was being torn in two but she was totally helpless against this vile intrusion. The anal rape was far worse than the smooth contour plug used to avoid any inadvertent leakage during the Ixtabian rites. She tried to call on her Ixtabian disciplines but the pain made it difficult. Finally she attuned herself to the tightening of the cord and her senses overrode the pain and she began to climb into the higher dimensions of consciousness and pleasure Ixtab promised.

Michael appeared puzzled. He pounded into her relentlessly. Finally he took the rope in both hands and pulled her head back mercilessly. Her head swam as the colors exploded in her brain bringing her to the brink and exploding in an almost catastrophic orgasm as he exploded deep inside her. Only then did he release the cord and let her slump against the pillar virtually unconscious.

As her senses returned she found herself silently sobbing. The combination of pain and exposure left her as humiliated as that first time she was stripped nude on the gallows. Michael's semen flowed out of her distended anus.

"Unbelievable" he muttered in her ear. "My dear cousin, you do have capacities which are truly exceptional!"

Then he turned to the entourage in a loud voice. "Thank you my dear cousin. First time you've been ass fucked, correct? You're very tight and the added spasms from the strangling just made it even more thrilling." Michael smirked as one of the Duchess' female sex slaves knelt before him and used her mouth to clean him.

"I don't like the idea of your being drugged, though. My lady here...", motioning to the Duchess, "firmly believes you will do us harm any way you can so I had you dosed. I believe there is another way we can control your desire for revenge. Of course it would be perfect if we had your little sister as a hostage to assure your cooperation. Since this isn't possible just yet", he chuckled, "let's try to give you some incentive."

"Bring in the children!"

Two lovely little girls, not more than seven were ushered in. They were identical twins with blue eyes and long blond hair, clinging to each other terrified. Their only distinguishing features were a blue head ribbon for one and red for the other.

"These sweet things are about seven years old. They have not been tortured or ravished, but they will be here for all your little sessions", smiled the Duchess. "If you try to do anyone any harm we will enjoy killing them slowly." Her trilling laugh chilled Alana to the bone.

"Now take these little darlings back to the nursery and take this ass fucked bitch back to her cell."

Alana fully came to her senses back in her cell, her wrists manacled, her anus on fire and cum leaking down her thighs unmercifully.

A guard pushed a bowl of gruel under the cell door. Even this poor stuff made her realize how hungry she was. Next came a bowl of water. With her hands locked behind her she came to the sobering conclusion that she would have to eat and lap up the water like a dog. If she didn't eat or drink would they just let her die? No. They wanted her to last as long as possible. She knew that her torturers' wanted both she and Alisande dead. With the picture of her sister in her mind moved over to the bowls and resigned herself to eating like an animal just to keep her strength up. After eating the meager rations she slumped on the bed of straw and fitfully slept.

The next day she awoke to another scraping and a fresh bowl of water and small dish of gruel appeared. She downed these as quickly as possible. A few minutes later a guard unlocked the cell and two others muscled her down to the bathing quarters where she was stripped bathed and her hair brushed out by the slaves.

Again they dressed her as a Pleasure Slave, this time in a red corset and stockings and matching heels. In the mirror they applied rouge and lip coloring. With her wrists manacled

behind her she knew that she could do a limited amount of damage, but she would have to wait for the correct moment. Then the thought of the little blond twins stabbed her and she let herself be taken away.

This time she was taken to the Duchess' chambers. A large room with no windows lit by torches and candles. A half dozen young girls lounged about in various states of undress. Then the Duchess herself entered. She wore a transparent black gown with long sleeves, black stockings and her favored high heeled shoes. She smiled at Alana as she took her "throne" in the center of the room.

"So nice of you to join us my dear." She nodded her head and two guards brought the small twin girls in. They were bound, blindfolded and sobbing.

The guards thrust them to their knees and stood behind them with drawn swords

"You miserable murdering pederast!" Alana cried.

"Nothing will happen to these darlings as long as you remember your manners. Now let's make you a little more comfortable."

Two additional guards muscled her to the floor. One of Duchess' playthings came forward carrying a belt arrangement which she strapped around the struggling Alana's waist. Attached was a center strap with a large pendulous plug that the guards inserted in Alana's bruised and tortured anus with her screaming and fighting all the time. There was a second plug that they inserted in her vagina and then the leather tong holding both was fixed in the front so that neither could be dislodged. Next the girl brought out two shiny screw objects which she laughingly attached to Alana's erect nipples tightening them until she had to bite her lip and tears coursed down her cheeks.

"Good. Now she's ready!"

Alana was dragged to a wooden seated contraption in front of the duchess. It opened like a box and she was forced to kneel in it. It closed around her leaving only her head above. One of the girls obligingly came and pulled her long honey blond hair out and draped it about her face.

"Felicia. You say you're the bravest. You go first."

Felicia was completely naked. She strode to the box and sat down, straddling Alana's head, her shimmering vagina stretched wide just inches from Alana's lips. Then she thrust forward with her hips burying Alana's face in her steaming pudendum.

Alana tried to turn her head but the girl had grabbed her hair and held fast. She thought about sinking her teeth into her, tearing her clit off, but the sobs of the little girls made her rethink her plan. Instead she clamped her mouth and eyes tightly shut. The girl rubbed herself against her for what seemed like eternity, her juices soaking her and dripping down her neck. She reeked of her cum. Then finally with a scream the girl came and dropped back giving Alana a chance to draw deep breaths.

"Roan. Blindfold her!" A girl came up and put a black cloth around Alana's eyes.

“Now you won’t have to worry about which of us you’re servicing.”

Alana heard another pair of footsteps and felt a weight sit down on the box. She barely had time to take another deep breath when hands gripped her head and another reeking pussy again covered her face. This time the girl stayed planted on her and rubbed for long minutes. Alana tried to breathe through her nose but the pressing flesh was too much. She finally had to open her mouth and it was instantly filled with female flesh. The sensation of suffocation was quite different from the pressure of hanging and her Ixtabian disciplines were of limited use. In a short while she was reeling and choking from the suffocation. Then with a cry and shudder the girl came and sat back.

Alana’s mouth gaped open but before she recovered another pussy encompassed her. She tried to twist free but each time the girl above had a firm grip on her hair and pulled her deep into her gushing pudendum.

She became so light headed that the suffocating perversion caused her to lose count of just how many women used her. Time and again female hands pulled her head forward until every part of her face was numb.

Then came the command, “Enough...for today.”

Guards unlocked her and dragged her half comatose to her cell, the ordeal over for another day.

Chapter Thirteen

The next day, amazingly, they let her rest. She was carefully bathed and creams were applied to reduce the soreness of her face and the bruising of her anus. From a small window in her cell she could see the garden where the children played. Accompanying the two little blonde girls were two brunettes and two with black hair, and a gaggle of small boys. None seemed to be over seven. Alana sighed. If her compliance allowed these little ones to live she would do it, but there still had to be a way to get her revenge.

She lay quietly in the night going over the torture she had experienced. Why hadn't her Ixtabian disciplines been more effective during the last torture? She had actually hanged by her neck for much longer than either of these sessions. Surely the lack of air and strangulation cum suffocation must be almost identical.

She knew that concluded that it was her inability and not her training. When she hanged as part of the rite of Ixtab she was able to concentrate solely on the sensations of the rope around her neck and her body and mind's reaction to the hanging. In the last session, forced to give oral pleasure to all those women she had become too obsessed with hatred, torment, sexual degradation. She would have to come to a different place if the Ixtabian disciplines were to assist her in the coming days.

The bathing girls spent quite a while making Alana up the next day. They even undid her manacles hands fetters so she could wash herself. Once dried off they carefully brushed and curled her golden waist lengthened red hair. Then they dressed her in her black outfit, corset hose gloves tape, etc. and the guards tightly manacled her wrists behind her.

This time when she arrived in the "playroom" both Michael and the Duchess were there. A cowed young woman knelt on the floor completely nude, her wrists bound behind her.

"Ah cousin, so nice of you to join us. This young woman has failed to be of service in a time of need. She's about to suffer a suitable fate that I wanted you to witness since we are contemplating this for your end"

The girl, a lovely black-haired thing with her hair tied up in a tight curl looked up in terror. One of the Duchess' girls with dark red hair in a flimsy transparent gown which came down to her waist approached on her very high heels. She carried a peculiar leather object with what looked like a horse's tail attached. As she came up the girl shook her head violently back and forth begging for mercy. Her pleas went unheeded. The red head, with the help of a guard placed the leather apparatus over her head. It was a very tight fitting mask out of supple kid leather that laced up the back. A leather gag stifled the hysterical girl's cries. With the lacing tightened it fully covered the girl's head and neck.

Alana immediately understood the torture. The kid leather wrapped so tight had no nose or mouth apertures. With the back and neck laced so tightly encompassing the girl's head, she would slowly suffocate.

For the first few seconds the girl simply shook her head back and forth. Then she tried to reach the mask with her bound hands. This being impossible she began to squirm and kick

as her air ran out. Her struggles grew more frenzied as the lack of oxygen threw her into paroxysms of agony. She finally ended on her stomach kicking her legs and feet in vain until she shuddered and lay still. Alana estimated it took about four minutes for her to die.

“Have her removed“, the Duchess commanded. “We’ll leave the mask on when we hang her from the gallows outside of the castle so everyone can appreciate the immensity of her crime.”

“And just was that?” Alana spit.

“I had taken her anally“, sighed Michael, “and she would not lick the shit from my cock“.

“Yes that suffocation was her punishment“, sighed the Duchess, “but for you it’s simply as long a torture as we can manage.” She motioned and the two little girls were brought in crying and holding each other.

“Now it’s your turn, or would you rather we see how long it takes these little darlings to suffocate?”

The guards pushed Alana to her knees and a blond girl approached with a black kid mask and the belts with the dildoes. The hair on this mask almost matched Alana’s honey blond perfectly.

Alana looked over at the two little girls and took a deep breath as the belt was strapped on. The vaginal plug was bad enough but the anal plug caused her already bruised anus to scream with pain. She bit her lip to hold back the cries. The girl next attached the nipple clamps tightly and then the hood was fitted on. There was almost no room in the mask, especially as the back laces were tightened. Then the girl wrapped the strap around her neck and cinched it. Alana was now in a suffocating world of her own.

Here her Ixtabian disciplines came to the fore. If Pannait was correct they would be enhanced by her Elven heritage. She held that last clean breath for what seemed forever allowing her muscles to relax and not fighting the hood or her bonds. She was vaguely aware of the voices surrounding her, blocking them out as much as possible so they did little to interfere with her concentration.

“She’s stopped breathing!”

“She’s just slumped over!”

“Is she unconscious already?”

“Why didn’t she struggle?”

She allowed her breath to eke out slowly. There was just room for one more partial lungful.

“This is ridiculous! Look at the clock! She’s dead I tell you.”

“She can’t be! Have it removed now!! If we killed her so soon the price you will all pay will be terrible!”

She felt the strap around her neck loosen and the laces pull apart. The suffocating mask now off her face she allowed her head to loll back and filled her lungs. She stared at Michael and the Duchess.

“Just look at that pool of cum”, Roxanne spit. “I should have known that she could withstand this test easily.”

Alana realized she was kneeling in a large pool of her own erotic fluids.

“How long did she last?”

“Most girls die in four minutes. She was over 20...absolutely amazing!”

The Duchess came over to her and grabbed her face. “We’ll just have to try you on the gallows soon and see if you can extend your record.”

Alana resisted the urge to spit in her face.

The plugs were removed harshly. Alana could not restrain a cry as the anal plug was removed. It was covered in blood. The guards pulled her to her feet and took her back to her cell. They were not as rough or harsh as they had been before. She seemed to have earned a new found respect.

When the news of her successful ordeal was passed among the bathing slaves they gently and carefully looked after her. In her cell a new soft mattress was provided and decent food and drink.

“I guess I must have proved my status”, Alana admitted ruefully as she took the newly provided blanket and curled up to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day was another day of rest. The bathing girls again treated her kindly being careful to clean her badly bruised and bloody anal area. Her guards provided her with her first hot meal and a good wine.

“Wouldn’t the two up in their throne room just spit if they knew”, she thought to herself.

The following day the girls again dressed her in her black outfit and the guards pinioned her wrists behind her. But instead of taking her to the “playroom: as she had come to know it they brought her to what turned out to be Michael’s ante room.

The Duchess’ girls were waiting. Her heart sank when she saw that the plugs on the strap were even larger. The vaginal plug felt as if she was being split in two, but that was nothing compared to the anal plug. This time she could not hold back and cried out in her agony. Laughing at her tears they placed face down on a couch in the middle of the room. They crossed her ankles and bound them securely. One of the girls approached with a silver ring about two inches in diameter with leather straps attached. The king’s guards pried her mouth open and the ring was inserted with the straps tied behind her head, effectively forming a ring gag. One of the girls approached with a wide leather strap and looped it around Alana’s neck then taking the loose end, slipped it in the bindings around her ankles. She was joined by another girl and the two pulled Alana’s ankles back until she was pulled into a cruel bow with the tips of her stockinged toes almost touching the back of her head, the leather strap biting deep and effectively strangling her. She cleared her mind and began her Ixtabian disciplines .

Now Michael approached her, his naked penis obscenely erect. As Alana slowly strangled from the strap he thrust his erection deep into her open gaping mouth. He plunged deep down her throat adding to the choking agony of the strap. Back and forth, deeper and deeper his erection plunging into her throat as her face turned from a deep red into an almost purple bursting blue.

Finally he came, filing her throat and oral cavity with semen. As he came he released the strap on her ankles and the strangling leather loosened. Alana flopped forward gasping for breath with Michael’s cum bubbling and draining from her gaping gagged mouth.

“Now that was just excellent my darling cousin. We may do that again in the near future. Perhaps you will learn to use your tongue with a little more control. The sooner I cum the faster you’ll be released from your bonds.”

She heard the Duchess’ laugh from behind her and they left the room together.

Her cell guards came for her releasing her gag and untying her ankles.

She found herself too weak to walk. One of the guards lifted her in his arms and carried her down to the bathing room. They released the manacles on her wrists and the female slaves rushed to attend her. They gently undid the harness and carefully as possible removed the plugs. This time the pain was too much and she lost consciousness. They

stripped her of her costume and did what they could for the bruising of her lips mouth neck and ankles.

When they had treated and bathed her. The cell guard again picked her up gently and placed her on her mattress and pulling the blanket over her.

When she came to the pain was intense. This form of strangulation was much worse than hanging. Between the pain of the gag, the pressure of the bend in her body, her anal and vaginal distension and the humiliation of her oral rape she had been unable to effectively employ her Ixtabian disciplines. Lying there she sobbed bitterly. They were going to use her in every humiliating way possible before they killed her. She was sure of it!

In the quiet of her cell she heard one of her guards bring her food.

She felt his hand reach for her and she tried to pull away.

“Please Highness! Let me help. It’s hot soup and the best wine. It will fortify you!”

She allowed the arm under her shoulders and she felt the cup of soup at her lips. She slowly sipped the rich broth then gratefully drank the offered wine.

“Thank you” she croaked. “They’ll punish you if they find out.”

“Right they will...if they find out. They pay us and have our families...but it’s not right what they’re doing. Just not right!”

Then he laid her back on her mattress, arranged her blanket and let her sleep.

Again she was given a day of rest. Sitting in her cell she knew that they were just giving her time to regain her strength so they could try another form of torture on her.

The following day she was again dressed and make up applied Once again her wrists were pinioned behind her.

When she was brought to the playroom she was turned over to the king’s guards. As they led her into the room she immediately recognized the item in the middle of the room. A garroting chair with a large anal phallus shining with lubricant.

She looked at the expectant faces around her and walked to the chair with every bit of dignity she could muster.

“Ah dearest cousin. Recovered from our little oral experience have we?” Michael chortled. “Guards seat her!”

The two massive guards spread her legs and forced her down onto the anal phallus. It plunged deep into her abused rectum and she cried out involuntarily. Her wrists were fastened behind the pole and her ankles to each side of the chair with straps.

“I’m going to enjoy this”, sighed the Duchess as a guard dropped a thick strap over Alana’s head and around her neck fastening it behind the pole. He inserted a two foot long iron rod

inside the loop and began to turn it quickly until it brought Alana's neck sharply to the back of the chair. Now with every partial turn the strap bit into her neck slowly choking her.

Despite the agony of the anal intrusion Alana tried to focus all her concentration and energy in her Ixtabian disciplines.

As the strap tightened she fought to ignore the pain of the strap and concentrate on the pressure causing the heightened explosion of colors in her mind and inner vision. As the strap cut off her breath she felt the familiar stirrings . Despite the pain she allowed the teachings of Ixtab to permeate her fully and allowed herself to turn the agony into ecstasy coming repeatedly.

She hardly noticed the decrease then increase in the pressure of the garrote. Her body gratefully took in the air when it was allowed but her thoughts fought to center on the higher level of consciousness and the state of erotic bliss waiting for her.

She had no idea how long she had been in the chair when she was released.

Her consciousness returned to the present with her slumped over and the Duchess' voice came to her. "...is ludicrous! Look at the fluid pouring out of her. She must have cum a dozen times! She's still breathing but I wonder if there's anything left of her mind?"

With that Alana roused herself and snapped her head up staring her in the face with a malignant look that forced the woman to take an involuntary step back.

"Take her away!" Michael ordered.

The king's guards unstrapped her and lifted her free of the anal post.

Despite her resolve she cried out as she was lifted free of the anal plug and tears of pain rolled down her cheeks.

Still this time she managed to stand on her feet and hobbled out of the room to her cell guards waiting for her. Their looks of horror speared her more than her agony and only then did she realize that she was bleeding copiously from her anus.

As soon as they were away from the royal apartments one of the guards swept her in his arms and they carried her down to the bathing area where the slaves cried out in their shock and dismay.

Once out of her manacles they gently stripped the corset and stockings from her and placed her in the hot baths. Gently soaping her. Helping her out of the bath they dried her and applied a soothing salve to her badly abraded anus. They dressed her in a white gown and the guards brought her hot food and wine.

Alana asked for a mirror. What she saw caused her to shudder. Her neck was a mass of red, blue and purple bruising completely overwhelming the scars she had borne for the last two years. She was amazed that other than the soreness in her jaw she had no visible damage from the oral rape two days before. As she lay on her mattress in her cell she realized that whatever the salve was the girls had used it was numbing the pain in her anal area and with the wine she was able to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Michael sat up in bed drinking another glass of port, musing over the last few days activities. Roxanne was languidly orally pleasuring him and as he came she looked up and smiled. "We're wasting a valuable resource in Alana", she commented.. "I have never seen any woman with such an erotic response to strangling or the noose. Her fluids fairly gush from her!"

"You want her as a permanent plaything, don't you?" Michael snorted. "It's impossible. I've been remiss in letting her live this long. Bad enough I have to deal with her snot of a sister."

"But you do have a valid claim to the throne until she reaches majority."

"Bah. With that sailor so popular acting as regent we will have to take the throne by force. And this time I won't make the same mistake. Alisande will die the day we defeat him and his forces."

"But as long as no one knows that Alana lives..."

"Every day she takes another breath is a threat. I've let her live this long as a sop to you."

"Thank you my love."

* * *

The next day Alana was brought down to the playroom completely nude except for her manacles. "No day of rest this time" she thought. Her attendants ruefully handed her over to the royal guards.

As she entered the playroom she was greeted with the sight of an old acquaintance. A gibbet with a slow noose dangling from it over a concave surface below. The hanging frame the Duchess had used on her what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Alana. So nice of you to join us. Michael so wants your head sent back to the capital on a pike. But I have convinced him to let us have a little more time together."

She walked with as much dignity as she could up to the Duchess. Roxanne was wearing a black and red outfit and carrying a quilt.

"Oh my! Just look at the bruising on that slender throat of yours. I'm not sure you can stand an extended hanging. But that is your expertise, isn't it?"

Alana resisted the urge to spit in her face preferring to concentrate on her Ixtabian disciplines.

The guards dragged her to the platform and cinched the noose around her neck. As before, her ankles were tethered to each side pulling her to the tips of her toes and

opening her legs to the ministrations of the Duchess' playthings. This time they spared no effort. All off the girls used their tongues, fingers, dildos and rectal plugs to violate her for what seemed like eternity. Her eyes closed as the last one finished.

For the entire time since she had been noosed she had employed every discipline she had been taught and had allowed her consciousness and sexuality to float free. Now, when the Duchess gave the signal and the platform dropped, she allowed herself to become one with the noose.

Her disciplines had taught her not to struggle. To accept the noose's embrace as a lover's caress. The pain from its pressure and the lack of breath became secondary. A minor irritant as the explosion of consciousness and the multiple orgasms washed through her like a tide.

To the onlookers she appeared as peaceful and composed as the most beautiful sleeping nymph. The only betrayal of that fact was the crimsoning of her face and the slight jerking of her pelvis as each climax consummated.

The minutes ticked by and copious amounts of erotic fluids flowed from between her legs.

The Duchess was torn. Her malicious nature wanted to leave her to die on the rope but she was torn. If she released her she could to tap those precious fluids again and again for as long as Michael allowed.

When the clock indicated that she had been hanging for three quarters of an hour she ordered Alana released.

The guards released the mechanism and Alana dropped to the waiting arms of the Duchess' girls. They quickly removed the noose and felt for a pulse. They were startled and frightened when her eyes snapped open and she spit in the nearest girl's face.

"So it is true, my dear. You did survive over an hour on that original gallows. And such copious amounts of cum. Have her taken back to her cell!"

Alana was released to her cell guards, and they gently carried her to the bathing slaves who did their best to comfort her after her ordeal.

Again hot soup and wine were brought and the guards gently helped her to eat and drink.

Late that night, the noise of her cell door opening awakened her. Two of the Royal Guards bound her wrist and ankles and left her kneeling on the stones.

"My, my! Look at this. A mattress and blanket. And a shift to sleep in. My servants have been far too kind", the Duchess cooed.

Alana's throat was far too sore from all her abuse to respond but her look of hatred was enough.

"I wanted to have this private little meeting. Just the two of us. I know of your adherence to that pagan goddess Ixtab and the disciplines her hanging whores have taught you have extended your capabilities beyond belief. Belief that is for a mere human. I know of only

one kind of being that can spend that amount of time hanging by her neck and survive. She has to have Elven blood. Elves can survive many hours hanging by their necks. They actually use hanging as part of their mating ritual.”

Alana just stared at her.

“Yes I know this personally as my grandmother was a full blooded Elve. Which is why I use the noose to test all my girls. The ones without Elven blood die in a few minutes. Those where it has been diluted too much die soon kicking in agony on the rope. But the ones with stronger blood lines can survive ten minutes or more.’

‘And then there is you. You must have significant Elven blood in your heritage. I only know of one woman who has survived as long as you have at the noose’s end, I know her intimately. It’s me.’

‘I’ve been attracted to you from the first sight. Was it our blood calling to each other? Michael is right, you know. It would be better for him to have you beheaded and your head returned to the capital on a spike. But your love juices, your cum...it’s the strongest potion I have ever found, including my own. I’m torn between letting you continue to be my slave...perhaps even my lover...and letting him kill you. After all there can be only one Queen of the Noose.’

She laughed and turned on her heels the royal guards slamming and locking the door.

Alana finally moved to the mattress and lay bound on her side.

Pannait had said she must have and Elvish heritage. But from where? She knew her mother came from a royal line that traced its roots back to antiquity. But Elvish? Her father’s line had no taint of Elvish blood in it. How did this come about?

Her reverie was broken by the door unlocking. Her cell guards entered and gently untied her. They brought her another blanket and small pillow.

She nodded her thanks and after they had left nodded off to a troubled sleep.

* * *

Pannait slowly made her way northeast until she found herself overlooking the redoubt that Michael had chosen as his castle.

Her senses told her that Alana was alive so she knew she was a prisoner in that vast pile of stone.

She watched the comings and goings and the castle routine for a week and then made her breach. Stealthy as a shadow, none of the guards had any inkling she had entered the castle and had made her way to the deepest levels.

She sensed Alana’s presence. Her instincts told her the corridors and staircases to take and which to avoid. Finally she came to the underground dungeon beneath the tower. The cell guards were asleep when she stole the keys and crept by.

Touching each door she found the right one and fitted the key. It would turn. But first she lubricated the hinges with oil then turned the key and opened the door silently. Or so she thought.

A figure huddled under blankets on a mattress started up and stared at her.

"It took you long enough..." came the croak. Pannait rushed forward and took Alana in her arms.

"I'm so sorry, love! Oh! What have they done to you?"

"What haven't they done?" Alana replied hoarsely.

"It's time to get you out of here!"

Pannait helped her to her feet guiding her out of the cell.

Alana wasn't as quiet as the Elve but they made it past the guards and began their escape from the labyrinth.

Pannait sensed the strength coming back to Alana as they climbed upward. If they could just get to the eastern wall she knew they could escape.

But, as they crossed a rampart a corroded piece of stone gave way crashing to the level below and alerting the guard. An alarm bell rang and in her heart Pannait knew all was lost. Alana smiled at her.

"Give me a dirk!"

"In your condition?"

"I just may surprise you!" And Alana took the weapon.

Back to back they faced the inevitable.

The first rush of guards was pitiful. Four died before they knew who they faced.

Pannait led Alana along the rampart, still hoping to make the eastern face when a dozen more rushed them. This time Pannait counted for five and Alana finished them with her dirk before they drew back in confused retreat.

The two figures ran along the rampart until a body of men, two dozen strong, faced them. Pannait drew her throwing knives and flung them as fast as her aim would allow and another six guards died. But before the pair could follow up their furious attack over a dozen crossbow men appeared. Looking around they found they were surrounded by over forty with all their bows aimed carefully. But that was not the worst. Six had muskets. They looked nervous but had the weapons primed and aimed. Looking around, Alana realized to her horror that there were at least four carronades on the ramparts. Muskets and cannon? Smugglers of stolen goods! Still the men looked nervous and Pannait hefted her sword.

"Thank you love", Alana croaked softly. "I won't let them take me again!"

She steeled herself for the arrows and bullets as she hefted the dirk.

“Wait!! Hold your fire!”

The Duchess appeared behind the wall of men carefully screened and shielded.

“Alana! You seem to have forgotten our bargain!”

She motioned two guards out of the way to expose the two twin girls, naked bound and noosed. Each was in a guard’s grasp on the edge of the wall. One small push and both would hang.

“Damn!” Alana muttered.

“Are they yours?” Pannait queried.

“Yes, in a manner of speaking”, Alana whispered.

“You win!” she croaked and threw down her dirk. Pannait’s joined her.

Royal guards rushed forward to disarm the pair and manacle them together.

Once they were secured the Duchess moved closer.

“Bring your torches closer! Much closer!” she ordered.

The bright light played on Pannait’s face.

The Duchess’ hand moved up to push her hair off her ears and exposed the scars.

“I thought it was impossible! Are you a half breed or full blooded Elve?”

Pannait didn’t reply.

“I’ve heard half breeds born with the ears but they’re rare. No I make you for a full blooded specimen. One of your kind hasn’t been captured since days of old. And you risked everything for Alana! You must be lovers.”

“I wish” muttered Pannait.

Alana turned and stared at her in amazement.

“It’s true. I’ve fancied you from the moment I saw you.”

“But you loved.....”

“Never really liked girls until you.”

“Ah sweet love”, the Duchess chortled. “Such confessions! Well let’s get you down to dungeons and in chains. I need my beauty sleep. It portents to be an auspicious day tomorrow.”

Pannait and Alana were stripped and placed in the same cell but chained by their wrists to facing walls. The royal guards made sure their ankles were tightly manacled.

“Quite a rescue”, Alana croaked.

“Save your voice”:, Pannait rejoined. “From the bruising on your neck you’ve been hanged and strangled almost continuously and tomorrow is going to be terrible.”

And terrible it was.

The two were brought down to the playroom where an arcane gallows was rigged with two slow nooses. These were not tied off, but through a weighting arrangement, ended up as the two ends of the same rope. Beneath were wooden platforms on two large blocks of ice.

“This should be fun” laughed the Duchess.

The pair were placed on the wood platforms and the nooses tightened behind their opposite ears. Then the weights on the mechanism were adjusted to equalize the pull of the noose on each one. As the ice melted the blocks of wood would slowly drop forcing them to the tips of their toes and then hanging them.

Both tried their fetters but their wrists and ankles were secure.

There was enough play at the beginning for Alana to turn to Pannait and whispered another apology.

“Totally my fault”, she replied. “Charging in like that.”

The guards came forward and caned them until both cried out.

“No talking!”

The room was warm and the ice melted quickly. In a half hour both were on the balls of their feet and minutes later on the very tips of their toes. Both of them hanged almost exactly together Alana losing her tenuous grip on the platform first.

Alana knew Pannait could survive far longer on the rope than she could. During the long ordeal leading up to the actual hanging she had practiced her Ixtabian discipline and when she finally hanged she greeted the familiar sensations like old friends.

Again the courtiers and the Duchess’ girls were amazed. Even Michael was impressed. Neither struggled or kicked in their agony. Instead they looked as if they were peacefully in repose despite the horror of the noose.

Once both hanged the servants moved the ice blocks and platforms out of the way and receptacles were placed under their dangling toes. Both gushed erotic fluids in truly prodigious amounts. The Duchess and her group were thrilled.

“How long will you let them dangle?” Michael queried.

“Alana’s record is at least 60 minutes but the Elve should last far longer. We won’t see your cousin start dancing until the very end, but the Elve...who knows?”

Slowly the moments ticked by approaching an hour and Alana knew she could not last much longer. Despite her disciplines her need to free her hands and tear the noose off was almost unbearable. Her chest burned with a fire as white as the sun and her face slowly transformed from Ixtabian bliss to a grimace of excruciating agony.

Once the agony broke through she fought to restrain herself. Alana had always believed that after her training at the Temple of Ixtab, if death was at the end of her ritual on the rope, it would be a seamless transition into oblivion. She was almost shattered when her discipline broke down. She wanted to fight the manacles, to kick and struggle to find purchase when none existed. But slowly she fought down the pain and agony and re-established the higher consciousness of Ixtab rather than fall into a raging torment of mindless pain and agony.

Her body reacted with its own mind. What had been a significant stream of erotic fluids now became a virtual torrent! The hour mark had long passed when the bright lights exploding in her vision started to dim...and then the pressure disappeared!

Strong arms grasped her and laid her on the floor as the noose was removed. When her eyes could focus she found herself looking at Pannait lying next to her. The Elve’s face bore none of her agonies and her eyes opened to focus on Alana with loving concern.

“Oh please Michael. I know you’ll let me keep the Elve, but the two are a matched set! Can I keep her alive just a few more days?”

“Every day she takes another breath is too long for me. I intend to have her continually before we use that new beheading machine we received from the continent!”

“We’ll see. We’ll see”, murmured the Duchess.

This time the guards were more creative in their bondage. The girls were placed back to back with their wrists chained around each other’s waists. Then their ankles were tethered spread apart to rings on the dungeon floor.

Chained this way they were left for the evening. Alana had recovered enough to realize that the next day could likely be her last. Pannait thrashed at her bonds but both were chained implacably.

After a short doze Alana awoke to the feel of Pannait’s fingers slowly working their way down to her clitoris. She stiffened.

“Please”, Pannait begged. “let me do something to ease this torture”. Alana felt her stroke her clitoris. She sighed. “No” she said in a resigned voice. “I’ve had my fill of that kind of ‘love’ from the Duchess and her ladies. I love you as a friend Pannait, but not that way. Please stop.’

Pannait sighed and moved her fingers away. Alana leaned against her and the two dozed during the night.

Chapter Sixteen

The next day dawned and, to her utter amazement, her old guards came and escorted the two of them to the bathing area, tears in their eyes. The slaves, also in tears, bathed them as tenderly as possible given their bonds. They slathered creams and salves on Alana's abrasions and did the same for her empurpled throat.

She looked at herself in a nearby mirror as they finished their ablutions. The sight shocked and amazed her. She felt utterly careworn and aged. Instead it was as if the fresh girl of 16 on her way to an amazing adventure in Verderale stared back at her. The same except for the hideous bruising on her throat. She saw Pannait's approach in the mirror and felt her body close.

"I'm sorry", she mouthed.

"I know", the Elve replied. "Your Jack is the only love of your life!"

She bent her head to the Elve so their foreheads touched. "Can you accept that I love you deeply as a sister?"

"Yes", Pannait sighed.

Alana sad smile reminded Pannait that she might only have hours, or minutes remaining. If there was just something that could be done!

The slaves spent a long time preparing them carefully brushing Alana's long golden red hair. They dressed her in the finest velvet corset with long black sheer stockings. The guards removed the manacles so long black gloves could be fitted. They used all their skills highlighting her eyes and reddening her lips. Finally they loosely tied a black tape around her neck and fitted on her black high heeled shoes.

"King's orders" one murmured.

Pannait was likewise made up but she remained completely nude.

Then, with their wrists manacled tightly behind their backs they were turned over to the King's Guards. Instead of the Duchess' playroom they were taken directly to Michael's throne room.

Dozen's of nobles, including the Duchess and her girls, were present to watch as the two lovely girls were brought in .

Before the throne a gallows had been erected. It was only about eight feet tall with a short stool beneath. Dangling from it was a traditional hangman's noose but made of silken rope.

"Ah cousin, we have made all preparations for your dance recital. In regard for your supposedly noble station I have ordered a silken noose. Charming don't you think?"

Alana's malicious look was all he got in return.

Enwrapped in his royal cloak Michael stood. "Noose her!" he commanded.

The guards took Alana's arms but she shook them off. She strode to the gallows with her head up and stepped on the stool. An executioner with a black hood cinched the noose behind her left ear and tightened it then took up all the slack forcing her up on her toes.

"Now tie her ankles!"

The executioner forced Alana to cross her ankles making it difficult not to sag on the noose which was already crushingly tight. Alana steeled herself. She kept a picture of Jack and Alisande in her mind and slowed her breathing starting the Ixtabian discipline.

She was ready for the execution to kick away the stool when Michael strode forward and dropped his cloak, revealing his erect penis.

"Pull her legs up!"

The executioner had bound her crossed ankles and now jerked them up. Alana felt the full force of the noose as her toes left the stool. The executioner pulled her legs up behind her until her body was pulled into a bow shape a good two feet off the floor. He then tied them to her manacled wrists and left her.

She presented a unique picture. The noose was slowly strangling her. Her bound wrists were tied to her ankles leaving her in an almost perfect bow with her legs spread.

Michael came forward and gazed into his cousin's face. He knew she was trying whatever discipline she had learned to deal with her hanging. Her face was serene but her pudendum was literally soaked with her cum.

He jammed his penis deep into her soaking vagina.

Alana's eyes flew open at the penetration. He started by grabbing her hips and pushing himself in deeper and deeper. Then he started pumping.

She had only one thought. "So this is how I will die. Hanging by my neck with this bastard raping me."

After a few seconds Michael shifted his grasp from her hips to her shoulders and with every thrust pulled down so that the pressure of the noose increased tenfold.

Alana concentrated on the Ixtabian disciplines to become one with the noose and let her consciousness float, but the pressure on her wrists and ankles, along with Michael's pounding and pulling her downward made it difficult. She concentrated on the noose and its effect and soon found herself floating in sexual ecstasy.

Michael became frustrated. She was literally flowing with cum but none of his ministrations evoked the response he expected. She looked almost beatific as he took his time, spending long minutes fucking her. Finally he came with a look of disgust and pulled out of

her. His fast deflating cock dripped her love juices and his cum. He motioned for one of the Duchess' girls who rushed forward and began to suck him clean.

Meanwhile Alana still hanged. Her face retained an almost angelic calm. A literal flood of her love juices combined with Michael's cum poured out of her. The internal voice from the hanging did not let her hear Michael's next command and she was chagrined when the executioner cut the rope holding her ankles to her wrists then gently released the hanging rope set her on her feet and removed the noose.

He supported her as she stood there gasping trying to clear her head.

"Clean her up and bring her back this afternoon", Michael ordered, "and my dear, he turned to the Duchess, "one of your aphrodisiacs. I want to be fully ready for my cousin's afternoon session!"

The guards untied Alana's ankles and carried her by her arms to her cell guards outside. Pannait tried to comfort her on the way out but was muzzled by a stinging slap across the face.

Alana was taken back to the bathing slaves who again stripped her and carefully bathed her. When they were finished, they dressed her again and the guards returned her to the throne room.

Her voice spent all Alana could do was glare.

This time the only change in the arrangements was that there was a taller stool under the noose.

Once again the executioner stood her on the stool and noosed her.

This time he removed her shoes before crossing her ankles and tying them tightly. He had not cinched up the noose taking up the slack which puzzled Alana but his next actions explained her new situation, He undid her manacles and instead tied her hands in front of her. He then pushed her into a slight crouch and tied her wrists by a stout rope to her ankles. He now cinched up the noose making sure all was tight.

Michael came forward, completely naked, his penis rigid in anticipation. It already glistened with anticipation. He moved behind Alana and suddenly drove it deep into her anus.. At that moment the hangman pulled away the stool. Alana found herself hanging again. This time her bound wrists pulled her crossed legs up and allowed Michael full and complete access to her unprotected rear. He drove deeper into her anus reaching up for her shoulders and pulling down as he plunged in again and again His actions tightening the choking rope.

Once again Alana prepared herself with the Ixtabian disciplines. Michael's cruel sodomy made it difficult but she was surprised to find that she had adapted . Soon the ecstasy of the noose overcame all her discomfort and she found herself orgasming continuously. Michael continued to pound his way into her rectum, deeper and deeper into her colon as he increased the pressure on her neck by pulling down on her shoulders. She heard a cry in a far off echo and Michael climaxed deep in her bowels. He pulled out and signaled the hangman to cut her down.

She lay on the ground gasping and he came around to where she could see him.

“I have a new toy for you tomorrow. It is from the continent. It is called a guillotine. You will be bound to it and I may allow all my nobles and guards to have you front or rear as they see fit. When all my people are satiated by your quim and ass I will have anyone who would like cum on your miserable face until it's drenched. Then and only then will I have your head sliced off and sent back to your pitiful little sailor and your cunt of a sister.”

All Alana could do was spit on his feet.

That night she again was chained to the wall of the cell.

Pannait spent the entire night sobbing while Alana spent the night thinking of Jack and Alisande, cursing the day she ever decided to take that river voyage.

The next day she was again carefully bathed coiffed and made up. Each of the girls cried copiously as they tended her. Instead of her usual whorish outfit she only was clad in her garters and stockings. Her guards manacled her hands behind her as gently as they could. As they took her up they brought Pannait to witness the execution.

Michael and his court were in fine fettle. Drink and revelry was the name of the day. One didn't often get to watch a beautiful queen debauched and beheaded.

This time they had a kind of wooden horse erected with the noose dangling above it. They dragged Alana to the contraption and she could see the two phallic posts at the top of the horse. It soon became evident what was in store for her. A man on either side tied a rope around each ankle. The executioner tied the noose tightly behind her left ear. At Michael's command the winch attached to the noose tightened and slowly Alana was dragged off her heels and onto her toes. She knew what to expect so she had begun her Ixtabian discipline well in advance. The cinching rope found her waiting almost gratefully for its embrace.

Michael had the executioner stop at that point leaving Alana on the very tip of her toes, reveling in watching her face darken from the suffused blood trapped by the noose.

After a minute or two he gave the signal and the winch pulled her twisting in the air. Now the two men grabbed the ankle ropes and the executioner swung the rope on its gimble over the horse. As Alana struggled with the grip of the halter as they positioned her above the horse. Then the rope was slowly slackened. As her body dropped the two men kept her legs apart on each side of the horse and the executioner guided her over the wooden dildos until they were perfectly positioned above her vagina and rectum. Then he gave the signal and she dropped onto her impaling posts. As the noose's bite lessened Alana took in a breath of air and fought back a scream as she was almost torn in two.

The men on either side tied her ankles to the horse, leaving her straining toes a good six inches in the air. Before she could regain her breath the executioner had the noose tightened again so she was pulled up her head at an angle. Now the entire room held its breath as the ex-queen struggled like an impaled animal held upright by the tightening rope.

Michael left his throne and came up behind her riding crop in hand.

“Look how erect her nipples are. You’re right my dear. “This last to the Duchess. “She truly enjoys her torture.” He savagely swiped the quirt against her buttocks enjoying each twitch of agony.

“Enough! Release her. It’s time she paid her debt to me in full.”

The executioner released the tension of the rope and Alana sagged down on the horse the dildos penetrating even further. Then the men released her ankles and using stools lifted her off the now soaked dildos.

When they placed her on her feet she saw her ultimate fate. The guillotine was before her.

“A gift from an admirer on the continent. It’s said to be able to decapitate a person in a trice.” grinned Michael. “I had it modified so the victim herself controls her fate.”

Michael looked over his shoulder. “My dear Duchess, you said one of your girls needed to be taught a lesson.”

“Why yes my love. Mara here has been tiresome of late.”

A petite blond girl at the Duchess’ side looked up in horror.

‘Oh no, your Highness. Please, not me!’ she screamed, terror in her eyes.

“Guards,” the Duchess purred, “strip her and strap her down.”

The burly guards grabbed the girl who screamed in pure horror.

They dragged her to the guillotine, kicking and fighting, tearing her gown and undergarments from her, leaving her only in her garters and stockings.

They easily twisted the sobbing begging girl’s wrists behind her and tied them. They pushed her forward on her knees and one grabbed her long hair pulling it forward so her neck fit into the stocks and sliding the top down so she was held immobile.

As the girl cried piteously they spread her legs strapping them to either side of the platform leaving her completely at the mercy of her torturers.

“Now comes my brilliance”, Michael laughed.

The headsman came up and took the lanyard for the blade. The girl was crying and pleading when he lifted her head and forced the lanyard into her mouth then took off the bolt holding the blade.

The girl’s teeth clamped down in an agonizing grip as her eyes rolled in terror.

“See my dear“, Michael smiled to Alana. “As long as she holds the tether she delays her fate.”

He had an hourglass moved in front on the guillotine in the girl's plain sight.

"There now Mara. Just a bit of a test. Surely you can hold that tether for five minutes', the Duchess cooed.

The girl's face was already dripping with tears as sweat broke out on her brow from the concentration on holding the tether.

Michael turned to one of his nobles. "Baron do us the favor of encouraging the young trolop."

The Baron slowly walked up to the straining girl, a quirt in his hands.

He moved out of her sight behind her. She whined piteously. Then with a full handed sharp blow he landed the quirt between her spread legs and deep into her exposed quim.

The girl screamed, or at least started to. As her mouth flew open the blade dropped, neatly beheading her and sending her open mouthed staring head rolling on the floor. The entire royal court applauded and cheered.

The Baron had further plans. The girl's mouth was still agape when he fitted his erection through her severed neck and out her mouth, cackling in insane lust.

"Now", Michael called, "my dear Alana it is your turn. But don't think you'll just have to deal with the onslaught of a quirt. No my dear". He stood and exposed his erect member. "I shall make you squeal one way or another."

The King's guards forced her forward. They pushed her to her knees then pulled her head forward and clamped her neck securely in the stocks. Alana found the stocks to be tight, but nowhere near as confining as a noose. Her breasts hung down the nipples barely touching the back of the frame.

The guards moved behind her and wrenched her legs apart placing them in fetters on either side of the frame. She was now bleeding from her anus and soaking from her impalement and open to be debauched by anyone.

So this was to be the final humiliation, she thought. Raped and beheaded at the same time.

Michael called the executioner forward to check the blade. He wanted no chance it would fall until Alana had been debauched as many times as possible. As the executioner approached the blade he reached up and checked its tether. Grabbing the leather end he dangled it in front of Alan's face. She shut her eyes and clamped her jaw. He had to muscle her mouth open to finally get the tether implanted in her teeth.

Michael went to move behind her when Alana opened her mouth wide, releasing the tether, willing the blade to fall and end her torture. She was steeled for an impact, but none came.

"Somehow my dear I thought you might take that avenue." He had the real tether in his grip. "No you will be debauched and taken as many times as I desire and when the time is

right I will let this loose and personally set your head on a pike at the front gate before it is sent South”.

Chapter Seventeen

For the first time Alana found herself on the verge of tears. She steeled herself for the assault.

One of the great glass windows on the eastern side of the throne room shattered with an immense roar. Immediately a large hunting knife flew through the window and imbedded itself deep into the side of the track for the guillotine's blade.

Michael dropped the tether but watched in frustration as the blade was blocked by the knife. The headsman reached up to loose the knife when a shot, clean and true, caught him in the middle of his forehead and sent him backwards in a reeling crash.

Then a huge gray and white tornado of howling snarling terror leaped into the room.

Alana had braced herself for the rape and death she was sure would accompany it, but when the room exploded she could hardly see what was happening. Held in the stocks she had very limited view.

Wyvern tore into the Royal guards flinging them about as toys. Any who raised a crossbow or musket was immediately cut down by a shot.

As Wyvern took his revenge on anyone left carrying a weapon, four men in dark green and black uniforms climbed through the window weapons leveled.

The tallest clad in a green uniform of another time spoke. "I am Colonel Richard Sharpe of Her Majesty's Rifles! Surrender or die!!"

At that moment a dozen more guards entered the room. Again shots cut down the most dangerous and when three of the green clad Riflemen turned toward them the rest faltered.

Most of the Nobles just stared in amazement but Michael and the Duchess took the diversion to slip behind the throne and down a hidden stairway.

Sharpe grabbed a robe off the throne and approached the female figure still implacably bound and held by the guillotine.

"Sorry to be tardy your Majesty." He carefully undid the stock holding her neck and undid the tethers on her legs. He looked around angrily and a servant brought the key for her wrist manacles. With her wrists free he gently laid the cloak over her shoulders. Even as a hardened veteran of many battles the scarring, bruising and abrasions on her throat made him shudder.

Alana looked into Sharpe's eyes. Her voice was no more than a whisper. "Thank you Colonel."

Then the entire hall was shattered by a scream of pure terror. All looked in the direction of the sound as Wyvern appeared carrying the twisting and screaming Duchess in his jaws. A tender grip but of iron.

He brought her to Alana and dumped her at her feet, then spun around to face the entry way on guard against any new arrivals.

“We are a bit outnumbered Colonel” Alana whispered.

“Yes your majesty, but we’ve horses a ways off and will travel light.”

His men took charge of the Duchess. From the shattered windows the Mayan Marines led the exit, muskets and pistols ready..

“May I suggest it’s time to go, your Majesty?”

“I wish we could have gotten Michael!” she whispered urgently.

“I know but it would take a long time to find him in this warren and we need to get you safe!”

“Pannait! Where’s Pannait?” she spun around looking for the Elve.

“Not to worry love”, the voice came from behind her.

Sharpe turned and used the key to release Pannait’s manacles.

“Now you there. You two stinking whores”, he pointed his finger at two of the Duchess’ girls. “We don’t have time to send for fresh clothes so take off your gowns.”

With a slight growl from Wyvern the hysterical girls obeyed.

Pannait helped Alana into a white gown and a blue for herself.

The two women held each other for a few seconds, and then Alana turned to Sharpe and whispered, “This is my dearest friend, the Lady Pannait. Please consider her as one of my personal retinue.”

“Well Colonel it is a pleasure to meet you” Pannait smiled, “but you’re right. Time to take our leave!”

“Right! Bind that whore!” The Riflemen quickly trussed the Duchess gagging her so she could not cry out.

With an alacrity which surprised everyone still in the room Sharpe’s men assisted Alana, Pannait and their prisoner out the window, to be followed in a bound a second later by Wyvern.

“Colonel” Alana whispered as the soldier in green helped her up a section of crumbled wall, “they have cannons on the parapets!”

“Had your majesty, Had. We took them and spiked them on the way in!”

In the darkness just outside the light of the castle’s glow Dena and Lila were waiting.

Alana was practically speechless when she saw Lila. She hugged her close. “You did it didn’t you?”

“Yes your Majesty!” She looked over her shoulder. “This is Dena. Colonel Sharpe saved both of us!”

Alana smiled at the other girl. Then Sharpe’s voice cut through the reunion. “Time to move your Highness!”

It took ten stressful minutes for the party to make its way back to the hillside on the eastern side of the castle. The Mayans had to “motivate” the Duchess a number of times to move as fast as they needed.

The castle’s defenders had responded in a lackluster fashion to the attack. Most of their senior officers had been in the throne room and had been ripped asunder by Wyvern’s furious attack. When they heard the tale of the monster dog carrying off the Duchess they found it took longer than usual to man their stations. Finally the spiked canon meant the escaping party only had to endure an occasional musket shot as they made their way around the danger and headed south.

Wyvern led the way, and Sharpe and the Mayas kept everyone moving. They had left their mounts on the other side of the hills and had made the long approach on foot so as to take the castle totally by surprise.

At the first short break Alana traded in her slippers for a spare pair of low cut boots. She came up face to face with Sharpe and looked him in the eye. “Did anyone survive the explosions of the barges on the river?”

“Yes your majesty. The Lady Mira followed you on deck and she is alive though gravely injured. She did not regain consciousness for weeks and when she did she had no memory of the disaster. She was devastated by the loss.”

“No one else?”

“No one.”

“The King?”

“Soldiering on. He is an excellent Regent and uncle, and has taken the full burden of ruler ship on his shoulders. But there is no joy left in his life. He truly believes you are dead and the loss has deflated him.”

“Does he know?”

“I sent back a messenger. One of the fastest Mayans. Asked him to send the regular army straight here.”

“My baby sister, Alisande?”

“Well but very saddened. Almost inconsolable at your lost.”

They found the horses where they were left. One man would have to ride with the additional burden of the Duchess but Sharpe had “borrowed” a couple of mounts along the way for Alana and Pannait.

Sharpe turned to Harper, “Let’s have some food. It will take some time for the bastards to organize so with Wyvern and the sentries we should be alright for the night.”

Wyvern had cleaned himself. For a dog as large as a horse this took some doing. Feeling more like his old self he presented himself and bowed before Alana.

“Wyvern, My wonderful Wyvern. I dreamed that somehow you would find me.”

The spelling rug was rolled out and Wyvern started the story with his and his daughter’s arrival months ago. Sitting in the hollow of his shoulder Alana looked like a small child as he spelled out his adventures.

Alana was thrilled to hear that Wylene was guarding her sister.

Wyvern related that he liked Colonel Sharpe and the rest of the men, and they worked superbly as a team.

He hated Michael from the terrible things he saw. The executions strewn all over the countryside infuriated him, especially the little children. King Gilbert on the continent had done away with capital punishment except in extreme cases of murder and treason. The roadside gallows had disappeared. There were still none in the south, but they had sprung up like weeds here in the north.

Alana waited patiently but what she really wanted to hear was a full report on Jack and Alisande.

Wyvern finally gave as detailed a report as he could. Jack was clearly almost crushed by her loss, but he had thrown himself into the defense of the realm for Alisande’s sake. They were both healthy and well protected, at least as far as he knew.

He had sent back Gilbert’s ship with a request for assistance, and specifically had asked for Alana’s mount Starfire, now Lady Starfire,. She was the daughter of Beaufort, Gilbert’s extremely intelligent horse. Except it was now Lord Beaufort.

It all came tumbling out and Wyvern had never learned to spell so he always wrote out his messages phonetically. But Alana was used to his iteration since she and Illicia had taught him to communicate.

After about an hour of back and forth she heard a discrete cough. She started to turn when Wyvern spelled, “Shrp hs bn wating lng tym”.

Sure enough Colonel Sharpe was waiting patiently behind the huge dog.

“Good evening Colonel.” Alana smiled warmly in her half whispered voice “I can’t tell you how grateful I am for your very timely arrival.”

“Majesty. It’s Wyvern who did it. That last few hours he practically dragged all of us insisting that you were in extreme danger. And he was the one who scouted the entire castle and found the vulnerable spot on the eastern flank.”

“Your men did amazing work with their marksmanship.”

“I’d like to say it was myself and Harper responsible, but it was the Mayan Marines who actually did the sharp shooting. We saw the predicament and knew we would have to infiltrate as soon as possible. Of course with Lord Wyvern here...”

He was interrupted by a soft “wurf”. Alana turned back to the board while Wyvern signed “2 shrp just wyvrn!”.

“He insists you drop the Lord” Alana chuckled.

“Yes he’s told me before, but if you had informed me a year ago I would be attacking a Castle with a handful of Mayan warriors and a giant dog well... I would have just ordered another round of drinks. Speaking of which, I have some good brandy here and wanted to know if you’d care...it might help your throat.”

“Yes. Oh that would be wonderful! The guards there at the end would sneak me some wine. But a good brandy, would be just marvelous.”

Sharpe poured the brandy and as they drank he studied the woman he had rescued in the light of the small fire. Amazingly she did not look so much a woman as a young girl. He remembered her clearly in her royal raiment and she had appeared more mature, more regal. Now she was just a young woman who felt safe for the first time in months.

He face was unlined and he remembered her physical assets as he freed her from the guillotine. Then the realization hit him. Astrid, Joanna, Theresa, Jane, even Josefina...all the women he had loved...yes loved...over his lifetime. None held a candle to this woman’s beauty or grace. This struck him like a physical blow. Was it some kind of magic or spell? No. she was real and the beauty and charm she possessed was almost palpable.

He tried to analyze. She had Theresa’s spirit and strength of character. In the short time with her she displayed Astrid’s grace and kindness. He compared her physical attributes mentally with Jennifer. Her long golden red hair made Jennifer’s looks almost brassy by comparison. Josefina’s beauty was centered in her huge expressive eyes. Alana’s eyes, those huge green eyes, so full of expression. Her perfectly formed face and chin. Nose...mouth and despite being subject to the most demeaning and horrible tortures the bearing of a true Queen. The picture of her bound completely nude strapped to the guillotine, brought a stirring. Trim. Well formed, incredibly long legs, very tiny waist, firm and erect breasts...and not a hair on her body. Totally nude as a young child.

Yes...she was by far the loveliest woman Sharpe had ever met and he could see why the King was absolutely smitten with her and devastated at her loss.

Blown up, shipwrecked, tortured, raped, hanged...and yet not a sign of it, save for the horrible wounds on her throat. It left him wondering what kind of steel made up the core of the High Queen of Branart.

He poured her another drink.

"I've got that bitch trussed up for the night. Tomorrow we'll have to see about getting additional mounts. We won't make the time necessary to avoid pursuit if we have to drag her all the way. And certainly the alarm will have spread."

Wyvern signed "Ryt. I wl patr." And bounded off.

"I will have your meal served at your pleasure, Highness. After that I have field beds with clean linen and blankets ready for you and Miss Pannait."

"Oh please Colonel. I am sure Pannait would be as amiable as I am to sup with you and your men." She rose up gracefully and he wondered at her presence and bearing as she turned to the fire and found her friend seated avidly talking with the men.

As she approached all the men and the girls jumped to their feet, the men at strict attention.

"Please ladies and gentlemen, be seated. Colonel Sharpe has been kind enough to invite me to dinner and I look forward to joining you."

She turned to Pannait. "You look like you're recovering love. Are you treating the men well?"

"Very well", and a slight pause, "Your Highness."

Alana looked down. With that one phrase she realized her relationship with Pannait would be forever altered. "Thank you" she murmured.

Everyone returned to their places but the conversation simply stopped. Each of the men was in awe of being in the Queen's presence...and all were affected by both women's grace and beauty. Being common soldiers they were extremely cowed by any lady much less royalty and a favored guest. Sharpe himself came from common stock in England and had no talent for dealing with small talk or Royal personages.

As they ate, however, Alana, in her whispered voice, began to ask questions about the country, current affairs and about the men themselves. It had been far too long with absolutely no information so she was just a gush with inquiries. And while all the men tried to simply answer "Yes Your Highness" or "No Your Highness" to every question it was impossible. Details had to be given. Alana was careful to ask the Mayans about their people, Lord Queon and Queolah especially. They were even more quiet than Sharpe's men, but they were happy and quite proud to explain that the High Priestess had commanded that fires remain burning for at least a year in the Temple of Ixtab as a beacon for her sister the Queen to find her way back to her people.

Pannait chimed in where appropriate but it was obvious both Dena and Lila were rendered almost mute by the royal presence. Finally by the time they were banking the small fire the men were at least partially satisfied that their Royal guest might be vaguely human.

After the meal Alana stood a short distance away and looked up at the stars for a long time. She realized how much she had missed them locked in her dungeon. Engrossed she heard a soft cough and turned to find Sharpe standing a discrete distance away.

Sharpe had found himself watching his Queen intently during the meal and in the soft night air her slim figure outlined against the blaze of the night sky seemed a even more tall and graceful.

"I missed them so badly in that miserable place" she whispered looking back at the stars.

"Um....evening Your Majesty. I brought these for you" he stumbled.

He held out a throwing knife and one of the rifle's sword-bayonets. 23" long with a well shaped handle it made an effective short sword. He followed it with a finely made gentleman's pistol. Its ball was not large but it would kill just as surely in a close fight.

"Thank you", Alana smiled. She took the blades and admired them under the light of the moon.

"Stephen...Count Maturin gifted me with a small finely honed throwing knife my first day on the Surprise. It saved my life. I lost it on that infernal barge. This will take its place" gesturing to the small weapon. She slid both under the broad sash of the gown at her waist.

Then she took the pistol and admired its construction.

"I thought you and the Lady Pannait might like one each. I gave her it's double just now. You can easily carry it on your person. We will rig a brace of horse pistols on the saddles for both of you."

"Thank you Colonel" Alana appraised him with a frank look. "I'm afraid you and your men have seen me at my very worst". She looked down suddenly struck with the fact that this man had seen her spread and naked.

Sharpe suddenly looked away clearly embarrassed. "I took an officer's oath to you, Highness. My men have also taken oaths. Anything we saw in that castle will be buried with us. Never fear."

Alana looked up and smiled. "I was sure of that Colonel. This imprisonment brought back frightening memories of my time on the continent and in the clutch of pirates. And no woman wants to be thought of in the manner you found me."

Sharpe had of course heard the fantastic stories of Alana's misadventures as a Princess and her ordeals. He had discounted them heavily but listening to her now he re-evaluated.

"In four days time we will be in sight of Porquet. Our courier was to have reported this as our rendezvous. Hopefully King John and the army will be awaiting us."

Before wrapping herself in the blanket on the field cot Alana went over to where the Duchess Roxanne was bound for the night.

The woman had been made as comfortable as her bonds would allow and the soldiers had made her a bed of soft leaves and provided a blanket for her. She started as Alana approached. Her gag had been removed after those first hours but she had saved her vitriol. Now it returned.

“Our roles have been temporality reversed, but that will soon change. You have a long way to go before Michael’s long arm cannot reach you. He has other supporters besides that incompetent Martin!”

Roxanne referred to an assassination attempt a few days prior to Alana’s coronation when her cousin Martin and a giant named Targ had tried to kill her by hanging her in her apartments and making it look like a suicide or failed erotic hanging. Only Stephen’s gift of that honed blade had saved her at the very last.

“Yes, Martin had his chance. But there won’t be one for you. You know we impaled all your girls at the Duke’s Castle, except for one that was beheaded. I have to admit that I did take my vengeance for you out on them. This time it will be only you that is condemned. If it were up to me would come up with something creative like drawing and quartering. My husband is by nature a merciful man and I’m afraid your end will be quick and easy. There will only be limited justice for the hundred’s you tortured to death!”

Roxanne looked away and Alana just turned on her heel and returned to her cot near the fire.

About ten minutes before the guards were set for the evening watch Wyvern returned. The scouting parties were out but the nearest would take half a day or more to reach them. Too much damage had been done to Michael’s officer corps. Still there was a considerable force to the south and they would have to make their way by it if they were to meet the main body of the army.

As she started to lay down she heard singing. An unfamiliar song but beautiful. She immediately recognized Sergeant Harper’s voice leading.

Here’s 40 shillings on the drum
To those who’ll volunteer to come
To list and fight the foe today
Over the hills and far away

O’er the hills and o’er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
King George commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

When duty calls me I must go
To stand and face another foe
But part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away

O'er the hills and o'er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
King George commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

If I should fall to rise no more
As many comrades did before
Then ask the pipes and drums to play
Over the hills and far away

O'er the hills and o'er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
King George commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

Then fall in lads behind the drum
Colors blazing like the sun
Along the road to come-what-may
Over the hills and far away

O'er the hills and o'er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
King George commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

Alana got up and sought out Sharpe.

“What a lovely song.”

“We call it ‘The Rifleman’s Song’.”

“Jack has spoken of your monarch King George.”

“Our former monarch, your Highness. We’ve taken our oath to you.”

Alana smiled and looked away.

“Best get some rest, Majesty. It will be a long day for us tomorrow.”

“Thank you Colonel.”

The two field cots for Alana and Penny were set up as near to the small fire as safe and Wyvern immediately laid himself down between the two. Alana slept peacefully without nightmares for the first time since she had found herself on the riverbank without memory.

Chapter Eighteen

Everyone was up before dawn. Alana gratefully took a cup of really good coffee to clear her head.

Wyvern had set off to check the progress of the search parties and by the time they had the camp cleared he returned. The parties had made little progress during the night but the force in the south was clearly alerted. It consisted of at least a hundred men and officers and some were armed with muskets.

Saddling his horse Sharpe led the party off at a good pace. He truly despised riding but speed was of the essence. Wyvern steered them around various obstacles but it was obvious that they were caught in a pincer between the two parties.

That night Sharpe laid out the problem graphically.

“We’re cut off. We can’t go north and the only way south is through this pass. Their main southern force is there. “

“This is the only high ground for miles I think the only thing we can do is fortify our position here.”

“Lord Wyvern.” The huge dog softly wuffed. “You must break through and reach the army. Let them know we’re cut off and tell them to break through. “

Wyvern nodded. He spelled out “I wl go bt dnt wnt to leve Alana.”

“I know my dear Wyvern but we need you to bring help. If you leave now the sooner we will be safe.” Alana hugged the huge dog.

He licked her hand and whirled into the darkness south.

Sharpe led the group to the crest of the tallest hill in the area that night.

“Great!” he thought. “Holding a small hill with eleven men and four women. How did I ever get into this?”

Alana appeared beside him in the darkness.

“Colonel, Pannait and I will take our place along with you and your men. Dena and Lila can be instructed on reloading.”

“Your Highness you must let me and my men do the fighting. We cannot endanger you further.”

Even in the moonlight he could see her smile.

“Colonel, I have been trained in firearms. I have been in much worse danger than this. Forgive me, but I have spent so much of my life at the mercy of my enemies with the cruelest of intentions that I will fight them with my bare hands if necessary.”

Sharpe grinned ruefully. “Not necessary Majesty. He went to his horse. He pulled the horse pistols from their holsters.

Alana took and held one in each hand sighting down the barrels as Stephen had taught her. “Extra flints wadding and shot?”

“Right here.” He handed her the packages as she stuffed the huge pistols ungainly in the sash of her gown.

“This is my best sword.” He pulled the great dueling blade given to him in Spain from its sheath.

“No. No Colonel but thank you. That great sword is far too heavy for me. A standard saber will do.”

He smiled and got a spare from one of the pack animals

That night Alana again slept soundly with Pannait and the girls around her.

The next morning the lookout signaled.

The valleys around the hill were swarming with Michael’s men just out of musket range, but within easy range of the rifles.

Sharpe had chosen the best positions for his men. He took up the center with Alana and the other ladies on the crest of rocks behind him and waited. The Duchess lay bound and gagged at the very top behind an outcropping of rocks.

Alana smiled at Pannait and cut her long gown off at the hip. “Perhaps this might make them look once too often?” she grinned at Pannait. It gave her all the maneuverability she needed. Pannait smiled and did likewise.

Sharpe knew that the best strategy would be to let a small group of attackers get within the range of his rifles and cut them down. This should give the rest pause and allow his men to reload. Then concentrating fire on the thickest group picking each batch off as they struggled up the hill.

The attack came just as he predicted. Sharpe’s riflemen picked the attackers off one by one. After a half dozen or so had died trying to snake their way up the hill they retreated.

It was just before noon before the second attack came. This time they came in mass charging up all sides. Sharpe’s riflemen fired and reloaded as fast as they were capable. When they were within 60 yards he gave the command for the Mayans to open fire with their muskets. Alana and the girls passed up fresh loaded weapons as fast as possible, but it became obvious that the rush would reach them.

Sharpe's men drew into the ring of stones at the crest of the hill as the screaming mass of Michael's soldiers withstood their withering fire and, whipped on by their officers closed the distance.

At close range Sharpe gave the command to fix bayonets. Sharpe's riflemen fixed their short swords and screaming, met the charge. Over their heads Alana's and Pannait's pistols their toll. And then it was a melee.

Fighting shoulder to shoulder the Mayan marine's and Sharpe's riflemen stood their ground. Alongside them Sharpe wielded his cavalry saber cutting through the mass of men before him

This was his moment. As always his rage went cold in a fight. The fear might harass him before the fighting began, but once in the mix he fought with a precision that was lethal. It seemed to him the very passage of time slowed, so that he could see clearly what every enemy intended.

A man to his right was drawing back a pike, so that threat could be ignored because it would take at least a heartbeat for the pike to come forward and meanwhile a bearded man in front was swinging down a sword. Sharpe twisted the point of his own blade into the man's throat then whipped his blade to the right to parry the pike thrust, though Sharpe himself was looking to his left. He saw no imminent danger, looked back to the right, flicked the blade up into the pike man's face, looked front again, then shouldered the pike man, driving him back so that he fell against a boulder. Sharpe raised the sword and with both hands drove it down into the man's belly, roaring his defiance as he did so.

"Kill them! Kill them all!"

Pannait took her position in front of Dena and Lila while Alana stepped forward.

Sharpe wanted to cry out and have the Queen return to her place behind him but Alana was at his side. She whirled and thrust, sword in one hand and knife in the other.

"They are not using their firearms", Alana observed to herself. "They mean to take me alive."

Time slowed to a crawl. She parried one stroke sending her knife deep into a soldier's side then danced back from a side stroke that could have cut her in two. A blow to the back of the sword wielder's head struck him down and she had just enough time to block another coming up from behind him.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a man coming up on Sharpe's blind side. An underarm throw of her knife caught the man in his chest as Sharpe whirled to watch the dying man rush past.

She blocked another when a blade thrust past her, catching a second assailant in mid thrust skewering him. Pannait yelled in triumph as she pulled her blade out and met another.

Men were fighting and dying around her and the air was thick with dust and blood.

The press of attackers drove the remaining defenders to the very crest of the hill.

Sharpe bounced into Harper just as he fired his tap loaded rifle.

“God save Ireland but there are a lot of them!” Harper exclaimed with a rueful smile

Dena and Lila had reloaded a pair of pistols each and fired them at close range. The report knocked both girls down, throwing them back. The result brought down at least two of the attackers and filled the small area with smoke. In the confusion Alana and Pannait caught their breath and stood close enough to touch. When the smoke cleared they had attackers all about.

Alana knew Sharpe and Harper were at her back but she could not see any of the other men. As on the Pirate ship an age ago, it seemed only she and her ladies stood against the throng.

“No!” she thought. “Not again!” She reached for the small pistol with her left hand still holding her sword steady against the crowd.

Behind her came a tremendous explosion and then the sound of something crashing. Harper had fired his massive seven barreled volley gun, creating a mist of blood and carnage in front of her. Then he and Sharpe leveraged a boulder at the top. They had planned this as a last resort and as it came crashing down it started a veritable landslide.

Alana heard a loud grunt and watched out of the corner of her eye as they leveraged another boulder right past her into the group of men that tried to take the place of the decimated group.

The confusion and destruction was terrible. It was even worse behind where the entire hillside appeared to be in motion.

Sharpe grabbed Pannait and motioned her to follow. Harper grabbed the two girls blackened and deafened by the pistol shots and the explosion that followed.

Alana hesitated. She found the bound form of Roxanne partially hidden behind a rock, the look of triumph already on her evil countenance. She looked the Duchess directly in the eye. The woman laughed maniacally. “It will soon be my turn again. I will find that little slut of a sister of yours and do things to her even you cannot imagine!”

Alana deliberately aimed the small pistol. Horror filled Roxanne eyes. The bullet caught the Duchess right in the middle of her forehead killing her instantly.

Alana gave a deep sigh and yielded to Sharpe’s call following the second boulder down the hill. At the bottom there were moans and utter destruction. Alana turned to find only Sharpe, and Harper. Pannait was bloodied but on her feet. Lila and Dena looked blackened and shocked, coughing from the debris.

Alana searched the hill for the rest.

“They didn’t make it” Sharpe muttered. He had a sword thrust through his shoulder but he and Harper had their rifles and the volley gun.

There were some shouts from the top of the hill and for the first time she heard a musket shot ringing off a rock nearby.

“It is time to get out of here!” She followed Sharpe into the bush his arm inside his tunic as a makeshift sling.

Without their horses the going was rough. Even the seemingly invulnerable Harper had been injured so it became necessary to find a resting place and tend to them.

“I started with four of my best men. Perkins and Wilson are gone.. Now its just Harper and me. But those Mayans. Just incredible. After their muskets were emptied they had these clubs with that black sharp stone.”

“Obsidian” Alana interjected as she bandaged him.

“Obsidian set into it. What an incredible amount of damage they can do. The bunch of them howling like beasts must have terrorized Michael’s men and gave us the chance to tip over the boulders. Died to the man.”

“It is their belief that Mayan warriors who die are escorted directly to paradise by their Goddess Ixtab”, Alana explained. “It’s their greatest honor, to die in battle.”

“I’ve never seen braver men! And if they rest in paradise tonight...”

“Don’t worry Colonel. Ixtab is a gracious Goddess I’m sure she took your men with them”, Alana smiled.

Then Pannait was next to her. “You need tending to yourself” she muttered.

Only then did Alana realize that she had been wounded three times herself. A graze on her hip, shoulder and left arm. “I didn’t even feel them”, she wondered.

Once first aid had been performed they took off at their fastest pace. They kept to the deepest part of the forest where a mounted party would have found tracking virtually impossible and their pursuit would have to be on foot.

They moved steadily, if not quickly until evening arrived and the women made a small cold meal.

It was while they were eating that Wyvern found them.

He had learned to manage his communication in the years following Alana’s training but he was so excited that nothing made sense. Finally Alana interpreted his bouncing and whining. It was Jack! Jack and the whole army were coming up as fast as they could.

Alana’s heart flew to her mouth and she was torn with opposing desires. She wanted to run and throw herself into his safe and waiting arms. But she immediately grabbed their only polished mirror and began to try to brush her hair and arrange herself. Pannait watched for a minute and then calmly came over and took the instruments out of her hand.

“Here, let me do that. Your hair is like mine. Elves have good hair. It doesn’t tangle.”

“But look at my hands and my neck. My fingernails are cracked and split and all I have is a purple mess where my throat should be” she cried.

“Here, let me use by sash. It will make a perfect scarf. That’s better. Now love look at me.”

Alana looked up.

“The last thing your Jack is going to notice is your fingernails”, and she laughed.

Alana smiled.

“Colonel” she called in her half whisper. “Let’s go to meet the King.”

Just then Wyvern growled deep in his throat.

‘Men coming up behind us’, Sharpe observed and pulled his pistol as Harper took his place along side him, cocking his seven barreled weapon.

“Lt me hv thm”, Wyvern spelled and bounded toward the group following them.

Alana smiled and she and the group moved down the trail toward the approaching army.

The officer in charge of the party trailing Alana was confident that they were close. Most of the rescue party were dead. The remainder injured so they could not move fast. He urged his men on. Promotion and reward would follow their capture or death.

As they entered a small clearing, they heard a heart stopping howl out of the darkness. Then a swirling gray and white mass was on them literally tearing men limb from limb. Muskets fired off in confusion but no order could be gained. The officer drew his sword but stared dumbly as his entire arm disappeared, torn off at the root. Then he was sailing and hit a tree trunk hard. His last thought was they were being devoured by a demon from hell itself.

By that time his men had panicked and were running for their lives.

Wyvern wuffed softly to himself and set back down the trail after Alana.

Alana’s heart was in her mouth. She heard the horrific screams behind her and was sure Wyvern was doing his worst.

Then the cloud of dust from Jack’s column was in sight and within the hour she could make out the details.

Jack led the army on his large charger at a full gallop.

“Not very dignified for the King” she smiled to herself, “But he’s still my Jack.”

She set out to meet him running as fast as she could with only Pannait fast enough to keep up. The two approached at what could only be described as a furious rate. Jack was

off his charger so fast Alana was sure he had been dismounted. He grabbed her around the waist, swung her up and around and smothered her in kisses. It was everything she dreamed their meeting would be.

Chapter Nineteen

Brigadier General Sir Richard Sharpe looked at the strange man staring back at him in the mirror.

Much more braid. Gold medals for bravery and a special jeweled award for rescuing the queen. "Defender of the Crown". A title as a Peer of the Realm and an estate. Sir Richard, now charged with creating a full regiment of Her Majesty's Rifles, if the technology limitations could be overcome. The poor boy from the South of London had done pretty well for himself.

Still it was a pain to have to wear the full uniform, even if he had designed it himself. The dress uniform had so much gold on it that he reflected light like a mirror. But the standard uniform would be the green he had known and loved.

This was a special occasion. He had been invited to a private dinner. Just he and the King and Queen and their guests. Amazing.

He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from a lapel, snapped his shako under his arm and turned to the page who nodded.

He struck his staff on the floor three times opened the door and cried, "Brigadier General Sir Richard Sharpe!".

Sharpe strode through and made his bow.

Alana nodded to the page to close the door.

"Richard" she cried and rushed to him her arms outstretched.

"Your Majesties" Sharpe responded, clearly taken aback by the Queen's rush.

But Jack was right behind her, pounding him on the back.

"All those court functions and ceremonies were no way to thank you" Alana cried. "We had to see you in alone to get away from all the pomp."

"Come! Come! We have a prodigious roast, some pheasant, duck, some excellent lobster and I believe a roast lamb" cried Jack "and a fine claret that King Gilbert sent over!"

"There was a movement behind Sharpe and he looked around to find Wyvern at his back wurfing happily. He reached out and patted the huge dog. "Good to see you too lord Wyvern!"

Wyvern shook his head. He was too fond of the new General and seriously did not want Sharpe using his title.

Another movement caught Sharpe's eye during the greeting. It was Gilbert's new "ambassador" and gift for the rescued Alana, her mount Starfire. "Have to remember" he thought, "Lady Starfire. Don't know her well enough not to use the title."

A beautiful red mare with white markings Starfire and Wyvern had been set up with apartments in the Royal Residences.

"General" and he turned to see Alisande approaching. My God! She was almost her sister's twin! Every month, as she grew into womanhood, the two seemed to be getting more identical.

Then another huge beast approached.. Almost identical to Wyvern, but for some red markings.

Of course, Sharpe thought. This must be Wyvern's daughter Wylene. Alisande's protector.

"General Sharpe! You look so fine in your new uniform!" Alisande gushed enthusiastically.

"Why thank you Princess!"

"Come Richard let's sit."

"Yes you must let us toast your status as a peer of the realm!" Jack's face was all smiles.

"Majesties, I'm afraid you do a poor soldier too much honor!"

Alana just laughed gaily.

Sharpe looked at the grand monarch before him. She was lovely beyond compare. Over the last few weeks her throat had healed as much as it would and the scars from her hangings would always be an odd offset to her ethereal beauty. His mind's eye, however, would never forget helping her to her feet from the guillotine and being treated to the vision of her completely unclothed bound and helpless, and all the more beautiful for it.

His mind unbidden turned to the campaign against Michael. It was going well and there was less and less of a need for the populace to turn to the hope of "Santa Alana" as they were led to his now diminishing number of gallows throughout the north.

"Ah the dashing Sir Richard" a tinkling voice with a lilt familiar to Sharpe came from behind him.

He turned to see Pannait in a lovely champagne colored gown .

"Lady Pannait". Sharpe bowed. "You are radiant this evening."

"Thank you Brigadier".

“Come let’s get started” called Jack. “The Viscount Maturin and his lady will be joining us after dinner and we would not want to keep them waiting.”

Sharpe was bemused. Both Wyvern and Starfire joined the party at the table. Wyvern was served a great bowl of soup while Starfire received a full platter of greens. He could see from the corner of his eye that Wylene stayed on guard watching Alisande like a hawk.

“Maybe she’s not too sure of me”, he thought wryly.

“Sir Richard, a toast”. Jack rose. “To the only man who could possibly have succeeded against impossible odds.”

“Here here!” all responded.

After the drink Jack remained standing. “We are building a monument to the brave soldiers who died on the precipice that day. Their names will be remembered forever.

Voices came from the window. Voices in a melody not well known in this world. Alana shushed everyone to listen. Sharpe smiled as he heard Harper’s distinctive brogue leading the men in the familiar refrain, but it had been altered.

Here’s 40 shillings on the drum
To those who’ll volunteer to come
To list and fight the foe today
Over the hills and far away

O’er the hills and o’er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
Queen ‘Lana commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

When duty calls me I must go
To stand and face another foe
But part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away

O’er the hills and o’er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
Queen ‘Lana commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

If evil stalks across the lad
I’ll neither hold nor stay me hand
But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away

O’er the hills and o’er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
Queen ‘Lana commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

If I should fall to rise no more
As many comrades did before
Then ask the pipes and drums to play
Over the hills and far away

O'er the hills and o'er the main
Through Flanders, Portugal and Spain
Queen 'Lana commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

Then fall in lads behind the drum
Colors blazing like the sun
Along the road to come-what-may
Over the hills and far away

O'er the hills and o'er the main
Over mountains, valleys, hills and plains,
Queen 'Lana commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away

Alana quickly looked down, tears in her eyes. In her heart she knew it was the greatest honor these men could have paid her.

Jack beamed and Sharpe gave one of his rare smiles.

Chapter Twenty

The battle had gone on for four days

Michael's forces had a strong redoubt but the pounding of the great guns and the incessant sniping had taken their toll. Slowly at first, then in a continuous stream his forces had either been edging away in small boats or just surrendering.

He felt himself turning into a mad hermit encapsulated by the circling force under now General Howard and overseen by Jack personally.

Increasingly desperate, with virtually no hope of succor, he hit upon a last ditch plan. His skill with a sword was well known. He would challenge the pretender "King John" to a grand duel, one such as fought by the champions of old. One on one. When the men in both armies saw him chop this errant sailor to bits they would all rally to him and overturn that trollop and restore him to his rightful place.

He sent his most trusted aide with the challenge.

Jack received it gravely. This was no private missal. The news of it spread through the ranks like wildfire.

"No need to give it any credence, sir" General Howard argued. "It's a desperate ploy by a beaten man!"

"One on one. A fight to the finish!" Jack muttered.

Stephen sat across the tent, a look of intense thought on his brow.

"How adept is this Michael?"

The old line generals responded. Extremely. Possibly the best swordsman in the land.

Listening to them recount Michael's prowess made Stephen extremely uneasy.

While Howard and the men who knew Jack were universal in the counsel to dismiss this last ditch effort the majority of the officers, old school they may be, gave it credibility. Finally Jack dismissed the council until the morning and only Stephen remained.

"Jack, my dear friend. You are no Prince of Swords."

"I've held my own on the field of honor and in battle."

"I've been beside you in both situations and cannot argue that you can certainly do both. On the deck of any ship you are the master of the boarding party and deadly to the nth degree...but we're talking about what appears to be an extremely skilled swordsman, trained in the art of dueling. How long has it been since you faced a single opponent on the field of honor?"

Jack snorted but in his mind he realized it had been almost ten years.

“These are learned skills that do not diminish with time!”

“My friend, though you are no longer portly or dissolute from shipboard life, you are approaching middle age and Michael has a good ten years on you!”

“Stephen, I cannot let this go unanswered. The old guard see it as an honorable challenge and he makes apt reference to the heroes of old with references that match both our cultures.”

“Rubbish! He seeks the only way to possibly save his miserable skin!”

The argument raged into the early hours of the morning, but in the end Stephen realized that Jack was absolutely set on doing this mad thing.

Stephen knew there was only one person who could stop him and she was hundreds of miles away under the protection of Brigadier Sharpe and the newly formed Queens First Rifles. He sought out Wyvern and sent him for Alana.

Despite all of Stephen’s and General Howard’s counsel Jack sent his acceptance for the duel and set it for 1:00 PM that afternoon.

Michael received the news with a smile. Time for the poseur to die!

The scene for the duel was the broad field outside of Michael’s redoubt and two great tents had been set up to house the combatants.

Jack stripped down to shirt and breeches was flexing his sword arm, blade in hand. Only Stephen sat morosely in his presence.

A few lunges and parries later he smiled. “There you see! I haven’t lost a beat!”

Stephen just sighed and eyed the accoutrements.

“You know Jack you were the one challenged. You could have insisted on pistols.”

“Pistols are not the hereditary weapon here in Branart. I would have been seen as taking an unfair advantage”. He turned and poured himself a cup of claret.

Stephen weighed a mace from the wall display. “I suppose so brother.”

Then with a swift turn he clubbed Jack behind the ear. He went down completely out.

“Now for the cruelest blow brother!” and he brought the club down on his ankle hearing the bone break cleanly.

“General Howard! Commodore Pullings! Lord Queon! The King has injured himself.”“

The crowd rushed in.

“He was practicing his lunging miss-stepped over the stool and fell forward on the table. I’m afraid he has broken his ankle and rendered himself unconscious!”

The diagnosis was swiftly confirmed by the other medical men in attendance.

The old guard’s consensus was that Michael would never accept a delay.

“Then he will have to accept me as his second!” Stephen said with finality.

It was a dazed and hurting Jack that came to a short time later to find himself confined to a cot on the field of honor with Stephen in his shirt and breeches flexing his sword.

“How?” Jack started to get up, but the pain in his ankle brought him up short.

“You tripped over a low stool, catching your head on the table and breaking your ankle. No way you can fight a duel concussed and with that shattered fibula. It is casted but it will be weeks before you can bear weight. I will have to stand second in your place.”

Jack became deathly silent. As soon as they were alone he turned on Stephen. “You did this. You somehow conspired to disable me didn’t you?”

“Jack? Forsooth. Would I deprive my closest and dearest friend of his just revenge? Never!”

The call came from outside.

“Call the servants” Jack commanded. “Take me out so I can see this contest.”

Michael was in a blue funk. Deprived for the moment of his revenge on Jack he could at least destroy this upstart doctor everyone held in such high esteem. Finishing off a last glass of wine He stepped forward with his seconds onto the field of honor to be met by Stephen’s seconds, General Howard and Commodore Pullings. Lord Queon remained back with Jack.

Alana had received the news from Wyvern and immediately set off for the Castle and battleground. Sharpe hated horses but even on his new fine charger, a gift from King John himself, he barely could keep up with the Queen’s Starfire.

Finally drawing parallel to the flying roan he called out for Alana to slow her pace. She slowed marginally and he pulled closer.

“Your Highness, this is madness. We cannot get there in time.”

“Starfire can!” Came the retort. Alana looked around to see Wyvern on her flank. “Brigadier, bring up the men as quickly as you can. With Wyvern and Starfire I’m protected from virtually anything.”

Anything but a bullet Sharpe thought. Harper galloped up beside him, his horse foaming. "Patrick, bring the men up as quickly as possible. I will try to stay with the Queen!"

Then it was off again, in an impossible race

* * *

Short, almost emaciated, with a pronounced stoop, this doctor looked more like a syphilitic or tubercular patient to Michael's eyes. He gave him no more than two passes.

Stephen watched Michael carefully. The strutting back and forth. The swing of the blade in a semi-nervous motion. He could handle himself but he was not unbeatable

The officer called the two together and read the complaint. When he called for the principles Stephen answered in Jack's place. The officer looked over at Michael who responded with a disgusted look, It will do for now.

Abjuring them that peace could still prevail, both indicated negatively and he stepped back.

Each saluted and the duel was on.

Michael's first impulse was to overwhelm his frail opponent with a whirling onslaught. When each of his blows was easily blocked or parried he stood back appraising.

Decent defense, he thought. Now to try some more subtle moves.

Stephen cautiously met his opponent's new attack judging his footwork (excellent) and swordplay (equally so). This would be a real challenge.

Michael continued on the attack, pass after pass.

His aggression was met competently but with no flare or undue show of concern. He was beginning to get frustrated.

"Have to slip past his guard", he asserted.

The next pass he did just that and by all rights should have caught the little scrawny bastard flat footed. Somehow he dodged the lunge at the last minute.

Very frustrating!

The next pass he did a double feint but instead of striking home felt the slash of his opponent's blade across his left forearm.

Pulling back he stared stupidly at the blood dripping down his arm.

Unthinkable! How could this have happened?

He shook his head to regain his concentration. Then the odious little man was attacking. Attacking!

He met the attack with a solid defense, then whirled at an opening.

This time Stephen's blade caught him on his right shoulder.

Now his incredulity turned to shock and fear.

Stephen circled his prey his eye glinting as he measured the man's growing fear and hysteria. One more pass.

They met with a fierce shock and their blades became a blur.

Then it was over. Stephen's final thrust had caught Michael up under the breastbone and through the heart. He dropped and it was finished.

Now came the cheering and there was Jack, on one leg, supported by Pullings and Lord Queloh, smiling ruefully.

"Sorry Jack. I only meant to disable him...to leave the final part to you, but I slipped and he charged at the same time...he came directly onto my blade."

"The Queen! Make way for her Majesty, the Queen!"

Alana rushed up, armed with pistols, sword and knives, followed closely by Sharpe, his huge cavalry blade drawn and ready.

She looked at Stephen, disheveled but intact and Jack supported by Pullings.

Wordless she came up to Stephen and kissed him gently.

"What can I do, say or promise that will ever be able to recompense you for what you have done?" she asked with tears in her eyes.

Stephen bowed graciously. "It was the least your loyal subject could do for all your kindnesses. Now about those new sewers...."

The End