

**Rescue**

*Marie Brown*

Smashwords Edition

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Cinnamon heard the sound first, as usual. She flung her head up and snorted, ears pricked.

"What is it, girl?" Kell patted the mare's neck and strained her own hearing. Nothing, of course, just the gentle sighing of the chill breeze as it passed through sodden leaves and over drenched grass. The mare halted of her own will, ears trembling as she analyzed that distant sound, then she moved into a canter, smoothly covering the ground faster than most horses could gallop.

They'd traveled a good distance, probably a quarter mile, when Kell finally heard something over the sound of her Great Horse's hooves: a girl screaming. Her heart leaped into her throat and she loosened her shortsword, hardly more than a big knife, in its scabbard, then checked the strap securing her bow to the saddle. Yes, ready to do its job and release the bow quickly if needed.

She could see the disturbance ahead now, and urged Cinnamon to move faster, faster. Mounted men crowded around a fallen figure. Some of her tension eased. With the men still mounted, the chances of rape decreased dramatically.

"Hold!" Kell yelled. Her horse plunged into the group and the other horses, startled, shied and tried to scatter. She reined Cinnamon in a tight circle and halted her between the mounted men and the sobbing, whimpering figure of a young woman, hardly more than a girl, below. The men—*Shandar gentlemen?*—fought their horses to a standstill and stared at her in shock, completely incongruous in their sodden finery atop their fine blood horses.

"You have no business here, Ranger." The oldest of the lot, the one best dressed, recovered first. "Move away from our lawful prey."

"I'll determine what's lawful here, thank you very much."

Cinnamon fidgeted, snorting. At her feet, the girl's sobs eased a bit and Kell saw a hint of movement, yellow mixed with mud. "Will you kindly tell me what's going on?"

"Fugitive retrieval." Oh, cold, cruel man! It showed in his eyes, steely grey in the light of the overcast day, and sounded in his hard, controlled voice. Always one with an eye for horses, Kell noticed the firm grip he kept on his plantation walker's foamed mouth and the beast's pinned ears, the ropes of lather on its neck. Poor thing. "Now step aside."

Kell favored him with a cold look. "As you pointed out, I'm the Ranger here, and I'll thank you not to order me about in my own jurisdiction."

One of the younger men made a small, startled movement, holding out a hand as if to ward off a blow, and several of the others shifted in their saddles, glancing at each other. Their horses sidled into a tight knot, as though the riders thought proximity to each other would provide protection from the Law.

"Yes, that's right, you lot are out of Shandar now. That village over there," and she jerked her head backward to indicate the first outbuildings of Rebka, suddenly brilliantly visible as the setting sun broke through a clear band in the clouds, "is a good half day's ride from the border of Shandar Province. This girl is now under my protection. Will you please tell me her crime, that I may know if she needs to be jailed or not?"

"It's disgusting!" One of the younger men burst out, only to be silenced by a look from his elder.

"The fugitive broke a long-standing law of the Shandar Province, one which prohibits congress between members of the same sex."

Kell's dislike, which she'd struggled to contain on the off chance that the girl really *was* a criminal, abruptly blossomed into full-fledged disgust. She *despised* Provincial prejudices. "You poor, prejudiced bastard. The girl is well free of your restrictive culture and your insanely strict penalties. Now take your fancied butts back to Shandar, where you and all your foul kind belong."

Not very professional, perhaps, but these bastards would *burn* this poor child on the ground at Cinnamon's feet. She struggled upright, an unlovely sight covered in mud with damp hair clinging to her face, but with hope shining through the fear and the marks of tears.

Kell had time to take in the look of cold calculation on the older man's face before he shouted, "*Get them!*" The younger men whooped and spurred their horses forward, drawing their swords in an uncoordinated but enthusiastic attack.

Cinnamon reacted before Kell did, lunging forward herself with a squeal and a strike. Kell

whipped out her sword and risked a glance at the girl. Fallen back to the ground, tangled in her long yellow skirt, face full of panic. . . Kell ducked a wild swing from an adversary, heard Cinnamon's hooves connect with someone's thigh, saw five weapons, those absurdly long and slender rapier-things favored by Shandar men, heading her way, felt a flicker of fire on her shoulder.

"Enough, Cinnie!"

She dragged the mare's head around and pointed her at the girl. "Girl! Get up, now! Your hand!"

Kell made the grab on the first try, pulling the girl up over her saddlebow with a grunt, spinning Cinnamon around in another of those wrenchingly tight turns.

"Hear this, men of Shandar," she yelled, voice seething with anger. The confused jumble of youths halted and looked at her, while the older man glared ineffective hatred from his detached observer's position. Poor things, didn't even know how to work together, getting in each other's way. Too bad. "You are *out* of your jurisdiction. You have attacked and wounded a Ranger. And you have caused harm to one seeking protection from cruel and repressive laws. Now I suggest you haul yourselves right back over the borderline between our countries, or I assure you, I will get Guard assistance and bring your worthless carcasses in to stand trial. And I also assure you that with the evidence of *this*," she squeezed her painful shoulder, "you will not get away with your freedom. Which is it to be?"

"Very well, then," the leader said. "You win this one. This girl is not worth any trouble. I wish you joy of her and her foulness."

Despite the distinct sense of anticlimax, Kell felt relieved when the men turned and rode away. Six against one were I good odds, no matter how uncoordinated and inept five of the six were.

Keeping an eye on the departing riders, Kell patted her prize on the back. "You can sit up now, if you like. That can't be comfortable, where you're at now."

"Are they really going?" The girl spoke in a soft voice, her accent as pronounced as the men's. She lifted her head and brushed hair out of her eyes.

"Yes, they are," Kell nodded, although she still continued watching the riders.

"I thought they would never give up. Am I really safe now?"

"Safe from your pursuers, at least. Beyond that, who knows what tomorrow holds?"

Kell helped the girl struggle into an upright position, with her skirt bunched up awkwardly and her pantaloons-clad legs settled on Cinnamon's shoulders.

"Do you have a name? I can't keep calling you 'girl' all the time."

"My name is Shanya," she replied. Kell noticed the lack of family name and smiled to herself. The girl already began to dissociate herself from her past. Not that everyone put much stock in family names, but stuffy Shandar reckoned a person's worth by who they were related to. Of course, some family names were worth claiming. . .

"And I'm Kell Ardantin, Shanya. I think they're really leaving. How would you like to head into town and get cleaned up a bit, maybe have some supper?"

"I haven't eaten in two days," Shanya said, wistful. "Food would be wonderful."

"Let's go, then." None of the Provincials carried a bow, so Kell felt reasonably safe turning her back on them. She pointed Cinnamon towards the town and nudged her into a walk. "Did they hurt you? Are you in need of medical attention?"

"Not badly. Just bruises, I think."

"Good." Kell rubbed her shoulder. She didn't think she required medical attention either, but now pain seeped through the remains of the adrenaline rush. "The inn it is, then. C'mon, horse."

A collection of buildings clustered together somewhat haphazardly around a large green square to form the small village of Rebka. The inn rose above the others, by far the largest and most conspicuous. Like so many rural inns, it served many purposes: meeting house, courtroom, hospital, shelter in time of need, and basically any use the villagers could think of. Large and solid, built of deep red brick at least three hundred annums ago, the inn was the only building in Rebka boasting the Ancients' plumbing, making it all the more popular with its indoor privies and steaming hot showers in wintertime.

Now, with harvest just begun, the inn stood nearly deserted. Most villagers remained in their fields, working dilligently to reap what they had sown in spring's gentle warmth before the damp weather ruined it all. Kell steered Cinnamon to the stable, unsurprised to find it vacant. She dismounted and helped Shanya down, offering support as the girl staggered sideways.

"My legs! Oh, I feel terrible," Shanya said, clinging to Kell's arm until she found her balance.

"From riding astride?" Kell remembered that women only rode horseback on sidesaddles in the Province.

"I don't think so," Shanya replied, considering. She rubbed her leg. "No, I believe it's more likely from all the walking and running. I've been travelling two days now, you know."

"No, I didn't know," Kell said, although she'd guessed such a frail-seeming young girl couldn't have been running for long. "Will you be able to stand on your own? I need to see to my horse."

Shanya nodded and released Kell's arm, standing unassisted while Kell put Cinnamon into a stall.

Kell fell into the familiar routine of caring for her horse, hindered little by the pain in her shoulder. Off with bridle, saddle, and light horse armor; hang gear carefully on appropriate racks; groom horse. . . She was in the process of rubbing Cinnamon down, humming softly to herself, when Shanya spoke up and brought her back to reality.

"You seem to get along well with your horse."

Kell nodded, then realized the girl probably couldn't see the motion, as she stood on the other side of the tall Great Horse. "Yes, she and I have been together for a long, long time. We know each other well."

"I've never known a horse at all," Shanya said wistfully. "My family had them, of course, but young ladies are never encouraged to fraternize with livestock."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Kell said, ducking under the mare's neck. Shanya stood at the mouth of the narrow tie-stall, every inch a lady despite her bedraggled appearance. "Horses are wonderful creatures. So are a lot of other animals." Kell patted the mare's neck and hung the now damp rubrag on a hook made for that purpose. The mare ignored her, focusing instead on munching her way through the generous armload of hay in her manger. "Well, that's taken care of. Let's go inside and get you cleaned up too."

She started to hoist the saddlebags containing her personal gear over her injured shoulder, then thought better of it. Why strain herself unnecessarily? "Shanya? Would you mind?"

Shanya looked puzzled. Kell held the pack out to her. She gazed at it for a long moment, then comprehension dawned. "Oh! You want me to carry it! But—"

She stopped, swallowed hard, then took the saddlebags.

Kell led the way to the inn's main entrance, slowing her normally vigorous pace out of deference for her companion. Inside the door, she looked for a familiar face. Seeing none, she gathered a deep breath into her lungs and let loose with her best imitation of an angry bellow. "Innkeep!"

Shanya flinched away from the yell. Two people, concentrating on their dinner, barely noticed. Then a noise of banging and swearing emerged from the kitchen, followed by a tall, red-faced woman wiping soapy hands on a battered apron.

"Kell!" The innkeeper's face lit with a huge smile and she crossed the room to greet the Ranger with a tight embrace and a solid kiss on the lips. "Kell! You've been away so long!"

After another kiss as solid as the first, she pulled away from the grinning Kell to peer at Shanya with bright, curious eyes. "And what's this you've brought, eh? Or should I say, who's this."

"Maisie, could you be any wetter? You've soaked my surcoat!"

"Oh, pish! I know as well as you do what the weather's been like these last few days, wetter'n wet and upsetting all the farmers with drowning out the harvest. I hear tell there's some of 'em out there with priests, even, praying over the grains, those as don't have that handy blowtorch thing the magickers came up with. Now tell me about this lovely lass."

"The Ranger Kell rescued me," Shanya spoke up for herself. "I was. . . escaping from Shandar Province. I was caught and nearly returned to that dreadful place when suddenly a Ranger appeared,

spouting Law in the faces of the retrieval posse."

"That'd be our Kell," Maisie said, wrapping an arm around Kell's shoulders and squeezing.

"Yes, well, we're in need of a bit of attention now, Innkeep," Kell said, shifting her sore shoulder. "A room, a bit of soap and some undisturbed time in the shower house? And if you've got it, some willowbark, both tea and powder. I'm out."

"Here now, who's hurt?" Maisie released Kell and inspected Shanya more closely. "Not you, missy, not that I can see. Kell?"

"Shoulder," Kell said, rotating it gingerly. It hurt. "Nothing much, just a bit of a jab. Those bastard Provincials and their scrawny little pigstickers—er, sorry, Shanya."

Shanya looked more concerned than offended. "Why didn't you say you'd been hurt?"

"It's not much, like I said. My mail's intended to stop broadhead arrows, not those ridiculous little pointy things."

"Right, then, off you go," Maisie said. "Kell, take your usual room, and when you're back down I'll have soap for you. Shower house will be free until about an hour from now, so no real hurry."

"Wonderful. Thanks, Maisie. Will there be food afterwards? Poor Shanya hasn't eaten in two days."

"Food!" Maisie threw up her hands in consternation. "Yes, but only if I get back in the kitchen *right now*. I'd nearly forgotten supper."

"Well, then, don't just stand here," Kell grinned, shoving her old friend towards the kitchen. "Get busy!"

Kell set off for the stairs, Shanya following quietly behind with the saddlebags. The "usual room" was the second on the left, a smallish rectangular room taken up almost entirely by a bed with a deep feather mattress. A window above the headboard overlooked the stableyard. A predominately red rag rug lay on the floor at the foot of the bed. And best of all, from Kell's point of view, an armor and weapons rack occupied the corner behind the door.

"Put the bag on the bed, please," Kell said, ignoring Shanya's flicker of annoyance. Out here in the real world, the girl was going to have to get used to being addressed informally and told what to do, that was all there was to it.

Shanya dropped the saddlebags with ill-concealed relief. Kell rummaged through them, removing her loose sleeping shift and trousers, both made of undyed flaxen fibers. Then she found her towel, a luxurious linen affair she carried with her everywhere, and her brush.

She tucked her possessions under her arm and looked at Shanya. "Ready?"

"I believe so."

"Come on, then."

The shower house occupied a place of honor in the courtyard, closest to the back door of the inn and farthest from the manure and refuse piles. The outside shared the red brick construction of the inn, with slate tiles lining the inner walls and a floor of wooden slats worn smooth by thousands of bare feet over the annums.

Shanya gazed at the showerhouse, with its weird arrangement of pipes and stoves and drains, with bewildered eyes.

"I—forgive me, but what is this place? I've never seen anything like it."

Kell blinked. "Really? Surely Shandar hasn't eradicated *all* of the Ancients' knowledge, have they?"

"I know nothing of the Ancients, nor of this showerhouse," Shanya said, with dignity.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to speak ill of you or your culture, I'm just astonished. Did you at least have indoor plumbing?"

"Yes, that we had. But this," Shanya gestured at the overhead pipes, "is completely unknown to me."

"Ah, I see. Well. Easier shown than explained, in this case. The workings of the showerhouse are rather difficult to understand if you're not an engineer. I know it took me forever to figure it all out, and I only know how it works now because I had to help fix a broken one once. But enough talk, get undressed and we can clean up."

Kell set to peeling herself out of the multiple layers of her working uniform. Blue woollen surcoat first, damp and redolent with the smells of horse, sheepswool, and harsh dye; followed, carefully, by ringmail shirt. She hung the mail on a wall hook and inspected the right arm critically. Yes, indeed, there was a tear in the leather, smack in the middle of one of the rings. Damn those rapiers, anyway, with their slender points. The damaged mail was followed by padded hood, gambeson, arm guard, linen shirt. . . she paused in the act of unlacing her boots. There were no other articles of clothing on the wall hooks beside her own. She straightened, scratching her back where she'd had an itch all day. "Shanya? Is something wrong?"

"Not really," Shanya said, red-faced and frustrated. Kell smothered a laugh when she saw how the girl had contorted herself in an effort to undo her buttons. "I'm just not used to doing this without assistance."

"Very well, then," Kell said, smiling, "I shall assist you."

Still wearing her breast band, boots, pants, and underpants, she started to move Shanya's hair out of the way, then paused. "A moment," she said, reaching for her brush. "I'll detangle you first, so you don't catch a chill sitting around in your skin before the hot water warms things up. And let's sit on a bench. It'll be more comfortable for both of us that way."

Despite the tangles and ground in dirt, Kell could see the remains of an intricate braided design. She started at the ends, treating the hair like a badly tangled horse tail. "How'd you ever manage—oh, wait, you didn't do this yourself. You Provincials and your 'dents." Short for indentured, the ruling class frowned on the term, but the 'dents themselves preferred it over "slave," a more accurate descriptor of their condition.

"Our indentured folk were always treated well," Shanya said, spine stiffening, her tone cool.

"Oh, I'm sure they were, and I'm sure they were all happy as little lambkins to be working for you day in, day out. I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, understand. It's just that most of the world outside Shandar Province doesn't think too highly of slavery, no matter what you call it."

She fell silent, working at a difficult, mud-caked knot, and Shanya did not reply. The state of 'dents in the Province touched a sore spot in Kell. She'd helped her fair share of runaways evade capture, unofficially, of course. Officially, the Law bound her to return indentured servants to Shandar when she caught them. She rather thought Headquarters disapproved of the policy, but she wasn't about to challenge it and draw attention to herself. Instead, she continued her clandestine helping of runaways. Strange that this time she helped a runaway lady, one of the privileged class, instead of a 'dent with no realistic hope of ever fulfilling the terms of her "contract" and winning freedom legally.

"There, that should do it," she said, giving the detangled hair a satisfied pat. She rather thought the stuff would be a light blond once clean, rather than its current muddy color. "Your hair is so fine, it's like cornsilk. It must be hard to take care of."

"Yes. But I've always had help."

Kell sighed and moved the hair away from the row of infinitely tiny buttons stretching down Shanya's back. "Yes, I know. Here go the buttons. I don't suppose you have a hook for these things?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I didn't pack properly before my journey," Shanya said, a flash of irony entering her soft voice.

"Well, next time you decide to run away and start a new life, plan it better," Kell said, only half humorously, as she teased a button loose from its tight loop. "While we're speaking of it, what did happen to send a delicate thing like you running for the border?"

The muscles in Shanya's shoulders jumped and twitched as she fought to keep them from hunching forward. "I didn't want to get married," she muttered. Kell continued releasing buttons. After a moment's silence, Shanya took a deep breath and told her story.

"My father announced two and a half days ago that I'd been promised to his best friend's son. We were having a luncheon on the veranda, in the midst of a house party. He didn't tell me anything about it, just made the announcement, then sat down and asked my mother to pass the salt. I was completely shocked. Once I recovered the ability to move, I ran to my bedroom and cried. What my

father said—it meant my life, the only world I knew, was ending! Married to some man I didn't even know, forced to bear children I'm not ready for. . . My indentured girl tried to calm me, but I couldn't stop crying for a long time. Then my father sent for me. Lila tried to make me presentable, she really did, but I know the redness showed in my eyes and blotches must have covered my cheeks. I went to the library, as ordered, and *he* was there too. My father demanded I greet my promised husband appropriately. I made myself do it, walk right over to that near-stranger and take his hands and say hello, promised. Then he—"

She broke off. Kell fought free the last three buttons and flexed sore fingers.

"He said," Shanya continued, voice wavering, "He said, 'She's not much to look on, but I'm sure she'll do.' And that made me burst into tears again, and when my father asked why I was crying I told him I didn't want to marry *him* at all. And my girl, my Lila, she'd been waiting right outside the door. She ran in and held me, then helped me walk out of the library and back to my own safe room. And later that night she helped me sneak out, with some bread and cheese. I ran and ran. I don't know how far I ran and walked, but I made it here. And then they caught me. Father said that Lila had confessed to sharing my bed for annums. I shudder to think—"

"Wait a minute," Kell interrupted. "Your *father* was one of those men?"

"Yes. He was in charge."

"*Thtock!*" Shanya flinched away from the profanity, but Kell didn't care, gripped by sudden fury. "*Melanto bela thtock!* Your own father, and he was going to, to *burn* you—"

Outrage choked her voice off. Abruptly, she wrapped her arms around Shanya's middle and held her fiercely, burying her face in that fine, dusty hair. "Your own father," she muttered, around a lump of emotions. Then she released the startled girl.

"Right, then," Kell said, regaining control of herself. The betrayal of family. . . unthinkable, but over and done now. "You're free now, of buttons as well as oppression. So peel out of that filthy clothing and I'll show you how the showerhouse works."

Kell moved briskly to remove the rest of her own clothing. That tightly controlled, ice cold old bastard was this sweet innocent's father? The thought made her guts tremble with a combination of illness and rage. How could he sit there on his fine blood horse and condemn his daughter to death by burning for something that he *knew* never happened? Kell had no illusions about that confession. The poor 'dent, Lila, had been tortured until she was ready to confess to any number of imaginary sins. And that *thtocken* bastard sat there smugly, with his worthless confession, and condemned his daughter to death. Not to mention how he watched unmoved while young snots beat his fragile, helpless daughter into the mud. Or had he helped?

A startled gasp and a gentle touch broke into her private simmering anger. Shanya stared at the wound in Kell's shoulder, running her fingers lightly over the abraded skin.

"I—you said you were wounded. Somehow I hadn't realized you were actually bloodied in my defense. I thought perhaps a bruise—" she shrugged, awkward and uncomfortable.

Then it was Kell's turn to gasp. Shanya's fair skin showed a faint but clearly visible network of bruises along her right side, with red spots scattered about where the blows must have struck with more force.

"You've got some real impressive bruises there yourself, missy," she said, then shook her head vigorously, trying not to notice the lithe beauty of the naked body before her eyes. "All these injuries aren't getting any younger. Into the shower we go."

Kell showed Shanya where to stand, then pulled the appropriate levers and opened the proper valves. Shanya yipped with surprise when the overhead pipes rumbled, belched, then began emitting a coarse spray that covered half the showerhouse. Kell stood under the spray and used the soap Maisie had provided with abandon. She felt unclean inside and out from dealing with Shanya's father.

The hot water washed away the afternoon's tensions along with the dirt. By the time they were both clean, Kell felt ready to skip her meal and go directly to bed.

But she didn't. She needed to think of Shanya now, so she made sure the girl got a good, solid meal into her, despite Maisie's teasing at her mother hen behavior.



Upstairs, Kell looked at the bed, then at her armor, then at the bed.

"Damnation," she muttered, then fished her elemental stick out of her saddle bag and uncapped it. A small, steady yellow glow emerged from the end, lighting the armor nicely. "Shanya? Will this light bother you?"

Shanya perched on the end of the bed and regarded the magical object with a combination of trepidation and curiosity. "I think not. What are you doing?"

"I have to clean my armor," Kell sighed again. "Take care of your armor, and it will take care of you, and all that joy."

"That is such a strange concept to me," Shanya said, leaning forward to watch. "A woman with armor. In fact, your whole situation is foreign to me. You are a woman, and yet you are a Ranger, which even I know means you are a representative of Law and your orders must be obeyed."

"Only in my jurisdiction," Kell pointed out, wiping each link of the chain mail carefully with an oiled cloth. No water could be left behind to cause weakness and rust. "And I'm also a historian, and a messenger, and a few other things as well. Have you given any thought to what you'll do, what you'll become, now that you're free?"

"Maybe I'll become a Ranger."

Kell snorted and gurgled, trying to stifle the urge to laugh. "Sorry, Shanya, I'm afraid it's not very likely. Unless, of course, you study your pretty little behind off for a few annums and put in some serious time working with horses and weapons."

"What exactly do Rangers need to know?"

"Well, the laws and customs of all the civilized lands, for a start. Horsemanship—you know we enforce the Law wherever we go, and it takes horses to get us there. History. Strategy. Weapons—you may not realize Rangers work fairly close with the Guard at keeping the trade routes safe. And some of us are historians."

Shanya said nothing, but the look she wore made Kell chuckle.

"Yes, I said historians. Some of the Rangers, myself included, descended from a particular individual, the first messenger when the first group of settlers branched off from Eirian an Age ago. The First Goddess gave him a blessing and a charge, to keep an accurate history and make certain that people never forgot history's most important lessons. She also gave him an archive like Her priestesses maintain, that can only be accessed by his direct descendants."

"Archive?"

Kell grinned at Shanya. "Now promise me you won't try to burn me for heresy."

"I promise."

"The archive is magical. It's a spell that we use to store history."

Shanya looked uneasy, but intrigued. "A spell. Making you a magic-user. And you spoke of the First Goddess, another heresy. And furthermore, that woman downstairs, the innkeeper, she kissed you and you didn't strike her down for it. Are there any more disturbing secrets about you that would get you burned alive back where I came from?"

"Hardly secrets," Kell said complacently. "There are many reasons why Rangers are not welcome in Shandar. But we weren't talking about me, we were talking about you. What do you fancy doing, now that you know being a Ranger is out?"

"I hardly know," Shanya replied. "I hadn't planned on leaving, after all. If I had, I would have worn clothing better suited to travel." She picked distastefully at her soiled linen shift, donned once again after her shower. "And I would have brought a brush. May I borrow yours?" Kell nodded and handed it over. Shanya began brushing her long, still-wet hair. "What do you suggest? Is there anything in particular an unskilled female can do in this strange world I've entered?"

Kell winced, picturing some of the unsavory jobs desperate women turned to in some cities. "Perhaps Maisie needs some help around the inn. If nothing else, she could teach you how to live out in the real world, with no 'dents and no man to protect or smother you. Perhaps Scholastica? You'd be safe there."

"Safe? How many dangers are there out here?"

"Countless." Kell surveyed her work with a critical eye, then racked her armor and capped her

light, satisfied. "Life is dangerous out here, Shanya, and don't ever forget it. There are unscrupulous people in the world that would do very unpleasant things to you. But that's not a good thought to take to bed, and I'm tired. That willowbark tea Maisie made for us is doing me a world of good. Is it helping you any?"

Kell waited a moment to let her eyes adjust to the darkness, then moved to the bed. She found the edge of the coverlet, yanked it aside, and stretched out with a sigh.

"Yes, it is," Shanya said. Fabric rustled, hit the floor with a soft plop. Kell's heart missed a beat and she deliberately turned on her side, facing the wall.

She heard Shanya slip into the bed, but no sound of fabric sliding against the bed linens. Then she felt Shanya press up against her back, long and warm and naked.

"Hold me?"

"What—" Kell's voice squeaked, and she cleared her throat. Her heart pounded at least twice as fast as normal. "Shanya, what are you doing? Go to sleep, little girl."

The last two words were addressed more to Kell's own conscience than to Shanya.

"I'm not very interested in sleep. Are you? You can't try to pretend you're not interested in me. I can feel your heart pounding, and your breath racing."

Kell clenched her fist in the sheet, tense all over. Damn the girl, of *course* Kell was interested in her! But she also knew how shameful acting on that interest would be. "Yes, and I can feel you trembling with fear. Go to sleep, Shanya. I don't expect you to do me any favors in return for standing up for your rights. And I certainly don't want to take advantage of an innocent."

Shanya laughed, a surprisingly bitter sound. "Innocent? Yes, I am indeed innocent of the crime they condemned me for. But I want to know what it is to have congress with a woman, someone who is soft and gentle, not like one of those brutish men." Her soft voice quivered with emotion. "Don't you understand? They were going to *burn* me, let me die screaming in agony, without ever knowing if what I was dying for was worth it. I've never even been kissed, let alone loved. Why deny me this knowledge?"

"Because you're so *young*," Kell cried out from the bottom of her heart. "You're beautiful, believe me, but you're so young, so innocent. How do I know you even really want me, when I'm sure you're too innocent to know what true desire really is? And, and, you're under my protection, for First's sake. It would be wrong, terribly wrong, of me to seduce you."

Shanya giggled. "But you're not trying to seduce me. You're laying there tense as a board and letting me make a complete fool of myself." Then her voice became serious and she snuggled closer, resting a tentative hand on Kell's breast through the thin fabric of her sleep shirt. "Kell, I like you, and I admire you. I want to be with you because I trust you, not because I'm some brainless ninny with a case of hero-worship. I don't think I'm in love with you, I don't expect you to take me under your wing. I just want to know what it is to hold a woman in my arms in love. I could be tied to a horse right now, hauled over the border into the Province like so much grain, and staked up in the middle of a twenty foot circle of wood to watch my father drop a lit torch on the pile with a smile. You saved me from that fate. Don't you think it worth saving me from ignorance, as well?"

"You're thinking clearly," Kell said, wondering. "You really mean it. You're young, yes, but you just gave me a clear, mature argument that makes me feel so much better. . ."

Kell sighed, feeling the conflict within drain from her muscles. She turned within the circle of Shanya's arms and touched the uppermost right arm gently. "You're not in too much pain?"

"Kell, I feel no pain at all right now," Shanya whispered. "All I feel is tingly all over. Are you going to show me what to do with this feeling?"

Kell traced her fingers up the bruised arm very lightly, up the graceful neck, and found the girl's jawbone, stroking it with her thumb. "Yes," she said simply, then captured Shanya's lips with her own.

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