

ELVENBANE

THE HALFBLOOD CHRONICLES

Book One: Elvenbane
Book Two: Elvenblood
Book Three: Elvenborn
Book Four: Elvenbred

HALFBLOOD CHRONICLES BOOK 1

ELVENBANE



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**DEDICATED TO: THE FANS
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**



1



SERINA *Daeth. I am—Serina Daeth.* Serina clung to her name as the only thing she was still certain of, the only thing the sun could not burn away from her. The sun—it was high overhead now, beating down upon her, trying to evaporate her.

Hot—she'd never been so hot. It was hard to think, hard to remember that she must keep moving. She couldn't see her feet under the swollen ball of her belly. She felt them, though, every step an agony. But it would be worse if she stopped.

Her throat and mouth were so dry; there was nothing left from the dew she'd drunk this morning, lapping it off the rocks like an animal.

I am Serina Daeth. I am—

Ah, gods, that it should come to this.

A few months ago she had been Lord Dyran's favorite. A few *days* ago she had hopes of hiding her pregnancy until the damned brat was delivered. She had planned to get rid of it, then return to the harem to give that bitch Leyda Shaybrel exactly what she deserved. She couldn't have told Lord Dyran what Leyda had done to her, but she could have found some way to bring her down. Leyda had enemies; *all* the women of the harem had enemies. It was just a matter of making common cause until Leyda was ousted ...

But Dyran returned from Council unexpectedly, and Leyda was waiting ...

I will live, I will return, and I will find a way to make her suffer—

Lord Dyran had found their rivalry amusing, and encouraged it, by promising Leyda any number of things, but keeping Serina in the number-one position. When Leyda failed to oust Serina as favorite, and realized that Lord Dyran had no intention of replacing Serina, she had not given up. Undoubtedly she had turned to sabotage.

She must have. How else could I have conceived?

She must have substituted all of Serina's food for a month with that intended for the elves. That had been several months ago, just before Lord Dyran went off to Council—

The Council lasted eight months. Would that it had lasted longer! I would have been free of this burden, and none the wiser!

Lord Dyran had left before Serina realized she was pregnant.

As soon as she knew, she had been in a panic.

To be pregnant with an elf-lord's child, a halfblood, was a death sentence unless the lord was very lenient. And even if Dyran didn't kill her, he'd have cast her off.

That would be as bad as death. To be given to some underling, or to the fighters as a breeder—or worst of all, given to Leyda as a servant—

No, never, not after what she had been, all she had fought to achieve—

All she had fought to achieve ... for so long, and so hard ...



Serina pinned an errant strand of russet hair back in place, and surveyed her image in her silver-rimmed mirror critically. She nodded a little, and turned her attention to her makeup. She was in competition with the best, and that left no room for anything other than perfection.

The current standard of beauty in Lord Dyran's harem—as set by the style of his favorite—was for an ethereal, innocent, fresh look. Serina knew very well what Rowenie was using as a model, even if the other girls hadn't figured it out yet. She was trying to be as elvenlike as possible, fashioning herself after the highbred maidens she'd seen being paraded before Lord Dyran in hopes of a marriage alliance.

That meant pale gold hair worn loose, or garlanded with artificial flowers made of gemstones; creamy rose-and-white complexions; wide,

childlike blue eyes; sylph-slim figures. Serina went counter, wildly counter, to that standard. Her hair was a fiery red; her eyes so dark a violet as to be nearly black, and seething with carefully controlled emotion. Her mother called her figure “generous,” but that was an understatement, and said nothing about the slim waist, kept that way by years of dancing lessons, the hips that could distract even hardened gladiators from their practice, and the high, proud breasts that did more than distract them, to the point that her father had forbidden her the practice ground since she was thirteen.

Serina smiled at her reflection, and examined the smile with careful detachment. It would do. She kept the smile, and continued to examine her own handiwork, tossing tiny brushes down on the floor beside her when she was finished with them. The drudges would clean it all up as soon as she was gone.

While the other girls being groomed as concubines bleached their hair, dusted their cheeks with powder, and starved themselves to fit into the delicate skirts and tunics Rowenie Ordone favored, Serina flaunted her differences and learned to enhance them. She found rinses that made her hair even more lustrous and vivid, and painted her lids with purple and violet to bring out the color of her eyes, and brushed rose across her cheekbones. She kept up her dancing lessons and exercised in secret, adding tone and strength to her limbs. And she sought out the teachers of the bed-secrets, and begged extra lessons. Sooner or later Lord Dyran would tire of pale and ethereal, of coy and delicate, of dainty and timid. The Lord was *not* noted for steadfastness. And when he tired of the cool Zephyr, Serina was determined to catch him with Flame.

She corrected a smudge of deep violet above her eye with a careful fingertip and stood up, smoothing the soft panels of her wine-velvet gown. Let Rowenie keep to her pale pastel silks, all flutters and lace. They made almost anyone else look like a pale-pink lettuce, or an over-blown cabbage rose. It would not be much longer before the Lord demanded spice instead of sugar.

Serina edged the stool in front of her dressing table back with a careful foot, so as not to tear or crease her gown. There wasn't much room in this little cubicle; just her bed, stowage beneath it for undergarments, a hanging rack for gowns, and her dressing table, mirror, and little stool. But it was more room than she'd had with her mother; just

a little closet hardly large enough for her bed. And she intended to have more, soon.

She left her little cubicle, keeping to a graceful, swaying walk as though the Lord himself were watching her. After all, who was to say that he was not? The elven lords were all-powerful, and it might well be that the Lord would choose to spy on the unguarded moments of his harem. Her father claimed he did so with the gladiators.

She glanced at the tall, green-glass water clock in the center of the indoor courtyard as she pushed aside the curtain to her cubicle to show that she was gone. Sunlight streamed in through the frosted dome of the skylight above; by the level in the glass delphin's tail, there was plenty of time before the Lord made his daily visit to his concubines. In fact, most of the curtains still hung across the doors of the little swans' cubicles, showing that the younger concubines were either still asleep or disinclined to leave. Serina was a "little swan," a girl in her first six months of office. In fact, she had only begun her post as concubine a week ago. Most girls did not survive the initial six months; most were ignored, and after a mere six weeks were sent down to the breeders, to become the living rewards to the Lord's most successful gladiators.

Serina's own mother was one such; and *she* had been lucky. Jared Daeth was the most successful ever of Lord Dyran's hundreds of single-combat fighters. He had won so many duels for the Lord that he had stopped counting, and only the odds makers kept track. Ambra had been his reward on his retirement, still unbeaten, to become a trainer; he had taken to her, and she to him, and the Lord had indulgently agreed to allow them to pair perm`anently.

Most of the girls rejected by the harem-master were given to any successful fighter who wanted a woman, and few of those men were as gentle and kind to their women as Jared. Serina had seen some of them the morning after; bruised and sometimes bloodied, weeping—and on one, never-discussed occasion, dead. Often the girls were bred once a year to the best, to produce more fighters for the Lord's stables. Once their bearing days were past—provided that repeated childbearing had not killed them first—they became the drudges of the Lord's household; the laundry-women, pot-scrubbers, cleaners and sweepers, often in service to that very harem where they had enjoyed a brief place in the sun.

This worked in odd ways; many of the little swans, certain from the beginning that they would never catch the Lord's eye, made their demands as infrequent upon the drudges as possible. They chose garments only of white, or some other color easy to clean, garments with little or no ornamentation. They asked for nothing out of the ordinary; they cleaned their own cubicles. Serina knew that the laundresses cursed her for her vivid scarlet, purple, and emerald gowns, and the sweepers for the disarray in which she left her quarters. She didn't care. At the very worst, Lord Dyran *had* noticed her; she'd seen to that, running to do his bidding before the servants themselves could react to his orders, offering to dance anytime he looked the least bored or distracted, or dancing even when he had not called for it, anytime the musicians played. She had seen his eyes upon her, and the eyes of some of the other elven lords he had entertained as guests. At the very least he would give her away to a visiting lord, should one admire her. At the best—

At the best, she would supplant Rowenie.

She would never, *ever* even permit herself to contemplate a future as a breeder and drudge. That was tantamount to anticipating failure. She would not fail.

And success would bring luxury not only to herself, but to her mother and father. With luck, *they* would be allowed to become overseers at one of Dyran's distant breeding farms, far away from the Lord's capricious whims.

She crossed the carpeted floor of the courtyard, carpet that mimicked the grass she never saw anymore. Her bare feet made no sound in the deep pile of the carpet. All slaves went barefoot, except those who had to work outside the manor. When, as a child, she had asked why, her father had laughed. "How far can you run on bare feet?" he'd asked. She'd never figured out the point of the joke.

The courtyard of the little swans gave out on a similarly carpeted, white-walled corridor lined with the doors—real, wooden doors, not curtains—leading to the quarters of the full-fledged concubines. Most of the doors were still closed, as well. The concubines had their own bathing rooms, and did not have to use the common room shared by the little swans. Serina had made it a point to be up, bathed, dressed, and in place well before the rest, again on the off chance Lord Dyran might be watching. For one thing, she enjoyed having the bathing

room all to herself. She got to pick and choose among the soaps and oils laid out, and never found herself with a shortage of towels. For another reason—why not? She had little else to do.

A single shimmering curtain of light divided the concubines' quarters from the great hall where Lord Dyran took his ease; a visible reminder of the elven lord's magic power. It was completely opaque and of silvery color, over which ever-changing rainbow hues crawled and flowed. Neither light nor sound passed the wall of liquid iridescence, and Serina felt a tingle and a hint of resistance as she passed fearlessly through it. Her father had told her that these curtains could be set to stun, or even kill, but that had never happened in his lifetime. She supposed the curtain was there to prevent intruders from entering the harem—she couldn't imagine anyone wanting to escape it.

As usual at this hour of the morning, Serina was alone in the hall. She didn't mind; among other things, it gave her the opportunity to prowl the place and look for any changes that the Lord might have made overnight. He was given to using his magical powers to effect changes without warning. The most drastic had been the time he had caused an entire jungle of plants to spring up overnight, seemingly rooted in the floor. Rowenie had been delighted and the entire harem had played at being shepherdesses all day—Dyran had even indulgently created a sheep or two. The next day, the plants were gone.

Serina blinked in surprise as she looked about. There was one very obvious change this morning: The marble mosaic floor was no longer patterned in a delicate, pale green with pastel flowerets. Now it was a cool, deep blue, of lapis lazuli, with no patterns at all. The cushions placed in piles at the edge of the room had likewise changed to deeper, vivid colors. Up on the dais at the end of the room, the Lord's couch was still the same; thickly upholstered in his house colors of wine-red and gold, but the favorite's cushion was now a wine-red to match. The white, unembellished walls remained the same, but the domed, frosted skylight above them now had a center inset of vivid stained glass in an abstract pattern of reds, blues, violets, and emeralds. Serina could dimly see cloud shapes moving through the clear colors, and made out a colored pattern cast by the light through the glass on the dark blue, gold-veined floor.

Serina fingered the textured gold of her collar as she gazed about, wondering what this change meant. Had the Lord finally tired of pastel prettiness? Did that mean he was ready for richer fare?

A whisper of sound alerted her to the presence of someone else in the room. She whirled, startled, at the sound of a footstep behind her.

The Lord stood, poised on the threshold of the entrance behind the dais, waiting for her response. He was wearing his house colors, in an elaborately draped silken tunic, one hand on his hip, the other resting on the bejeweled hilt of his dagger. His hawklike face seemed calm, but she could see in his eyes that he was curious about her—or her reaction to the changes he had made.

Serina sank immediately to the floor in a graceful curtsy, her skirts falling around her, as if she knelt in a pool of her own heart's blood. She remained that way, head bent, staring at the velvet softness of her skirts, as the Lord's slow footsteps told her that he approached her.

"You may rise, my swan," came the indulgent, velvet-soft voice.

My swan! she exulted. *That means he's promoted me!*

She obeyed, rising as slowly and gracefully as she had bowed, her gaze rising past the strong, athletic legs in tight leather breeches and wine-colored suede boots; past the casually unbuttoned tunic, with gold embroidery winking at her from the collar. She continued to raise her eyes after she stood erect, bringing them up to meet his emerald ones in full challenge, instead of keeping her chin modestly down as Rowenie would have done.

"So, you have a spirit with fire." Lord Dyran chuckled, his thin lips forming a smile. "I like that. Do you wear my colors thinking to flatter me, my swan?"

"Is that not my purpose, my lord?" she replied immediately. "Is not all I think and do for one purpose only, and that to serve your pleasure?"

"Would you truly serve my pleasure?" He did not wait for a reply, but seized her wrist and pulled her toward him, bringing his mouth down demandingly on hers.

But Serina had planned for this moment from the very instant she entered the harem. Rowenie would have shrunk away with artificial shyness; Rowenie would struggle a little, feigning modesty. Serina did nothing of the kind. She molded her body against his, running her hands over his body in the ways she had been taught, returning the demands of his kiss with demands of her own. She had no idea how *he* felt, but *she* was on fire with need, her loins burning, when he broke away from her and put her at arm's length.

He looked as cool and calculating as before; he shook back his long, white-gold hair over his shoulder as he released her, and smiled a little as he rubbed his square chin with a long, graceful hand. “My Lord Ethanor admired Rowenie at dinner last night,” he said, after a long moment. “I gave her to him.”

It took Serina a few heartbeats for his words to sink in. When the meaning of them penetrated, she stared at him, not daring to speak, but afire with wild surmise.

“Such diligence as yours in my service should be rewarded,” he continued, when he saw that she understood him. Then he held out his hand. “Come, my swan. I would like you to see your new quarters. Then—after a suitable interval—we shall reveal your new status to the rest of the flock. Hmm?”

She shivered with excitement and anticipation. And a little dread. Lord Dyran’s tastes were said to be somewhat exotic ...

But she was trained for that, and a life of luxury and power awaited in return for what he demanded. He would not damage anything so valuable as the concubine who alleviated his boredom.

And he was waiting for her reply. “After a suitable interval,” she said, placing her hand in his. “Of course, my lord.”



For one short moment, she relived her triumph; then she was back, her body still placing one foot in front of the other, like a mind-controlled slave.

Every bit of exposed skin burned with a torment that had passed beyond pain long ago. It was so hard to think So hard to remember who and what she was, and why she should keep fighting to stay alive.

I am Serina Daeth, daughter of—daughter of—Jared Daeth. Trainer of gladiators to Lord Dyran—



Little Serina perched on the edge of a bench high above the arena, up in the shadows where the lesser elves sat when the Lord entertained. The arena itself was not very large; it probably didn’t seat more than four or five hundred, and the floor, covered with soft sand, could not hold a combat involving more than four men. This was strictly a dueling

arena, meant for challenge-combat and not much else. It was a sign of Lord Dyran's wealth that he maintained his own arena. It was also a sign of the number of challenges he played host to; either his own, or those arranged for others. Like the other rooms of the manor, it was lit by day by a large, frosted-glass skylight. The seats immediately surrounding the combat area were covered in leather padding; those up here were simple wooden benches. Nevertheless, humans never took these seats when there was a real combat underway.

But the combat in the arena today was strictly for practice, though it was performed at full speed, and with real, edged weapons. Good weapons, too, straight from the Lord's forges.

Jared had taken his daughter to see the forges today, as a part of her education in the reality of being bound to Lord Dyran, and she had been suitably impressed with the fires, the heat, the smoke, and the huge, brawny men and women who worked there. Most valuable of all of Lord Dyran's slaves, the forge-workers received attention and reward even above a successful duelist.

"We have a good lord," Jared had said in his stolid way. "Good work is rewarded. The Lord could ignore us, or treat us like cattle; many lords do. Just you remember that, girl. All benefit and all reward come from Lord Dyran."

The iron from which steel blades were made had to be pure; it was smelted ten times to remove any contaminants before it underwent the final process of smelting with charcoal and air to make it into true steel. Then, when it had undergone that transmutation, the smiths took it and made it into the weapons for which Lord Dyran was famed. No few of the elven lords came to Lord Dyran for their weapons, or so Jared told his daughter.

For the fighters of the elven lords' armies, they made fine swords, spear- and axe-heads, and tiny, razor-sharp arrowheads that could not be pulled from a wound, only cut out. For the duelists, however, the gladiators and other fighters, the weaponry was far different—weapons meant to wound rather than kill. Chain-flails, maces, short, broad knives, metal-barbed whips, tridents—all meant to prolong combat, all requiring great skill in the handling.

The two fighters in the arena now, practicing under her father's careful eye, were armed with gladiatorial weapons. One had a trident, the other, a chain-flail; both were also armed with knives.

The exchange seemed to be an even one; the red-haired giant with the chain-flail managed to stay out of reach of the trident points, while the swarthy man with the trident avoided having his pole fouled by the chains of the flail. Serina watched them with wide eyes, remembering that she had seen one of the breeder women taken from the red-haired man's cubicle this morning, her face a mass of bruises.

And she knew already that *she* was destined to serve these men, or others like them—unless she managed to save herself from that fate.

“Your fate is in your own hands,” Jared had said. “Always remember that, girl. Make it your first concern to please your Lord, because no one else can make any difference to you.”

The slave-master had already remarked to Ambra, her mother, just how fast she was growing, and how she was going to have to go into training soon. Serina knew what that training was for; Jared had explained it to her with blunt words; explained the difference between a concubine and a breeder. And he had hammered home the lesson that any change in her fate lay only in Lord Dyran's hands and her own diligence.

She had seen already how true his words were. Only last year they had taken her older brother Tamar away, sold or given him to another elven lord who had admired his fragile grace. Her younger brother Kaeth was being trained now in the assassins' school, taken there two weeks ago, when his agility had been uncovered during a foray on the Lord's fruit trees.

She had cried when Kaeth left in the hands of his trainers, and her mother had taken her aside, into her own room, and sat her down on the edge of the bed; told her sternly to dry her tears. “The lords rule everything,” Ambra had said, without pity, but with tears shining in her eyes, tears that Serina sensed she dared not shed. “We are fortunate in having a lord such as Lord Dyran to rule us. He rewards us well for good service; there are lords who reward no one and nothing, and punish as their whim leads them. If Kaeth does well, he will be rewarded. He *deserved* to be punished for stealing fruit, and instead he is being given a wonderful chance. He *could* have been killed out of hand. That is the difference between our Lord and others.”

“But *why*?” she had cried. “*Why* do they rule us? Who said they could? It isn't fair!”

Another parent might have cuffed her; might have said: "Because that's the way it is." But not Ambra.

"They rule us because they are strong, and powerful, and they have magic," she said, and Serina sensed a resigned sadness in her words. "We are weak, and the gods gave us no magic at all. The lords live forever, and our lives are short. If we are to prosper, we *must* please the lords, for the gods love them, and despise us."

"But *why*?" Serina had wailed.

Ambra only shook her head. "I do not know. There are those who say that the lords are the children of the gods; there are those who say the lords are demons, sent by the gods to punish or test us. I only know that those who please them live and are rewarded, and those who do not, die. It is up to Tamar and Kaeth now, to please their lords. As you must please Lord Dyran, and those he sets over you. Nothing else matters, and neither I, nor your father, nor your kin or friends can help you. They can only hinder you. If you would rise, you must do so alone."

Serina remembered that, and remembered the glimpse she'd had of Lord Dyran this afternoon, when he had come to see how the training of his fighters was progressing. She'd watched as her proud, stern father bent until his forehead touched the ground; how the other fighters had knelt in obeisance. And how Lord Dyran had seemed a creature out of a tale; tall, haughty, clothed from head to toe in cream-and-gold satin, and cream-colored leather, so supple and soft-looking that Serina had longed to touch it. How he seemed to shine, taking in the light of the sun and sending it back out redoubled. He was so beautiful he made her breath catch, and she had thought, *He must be a child of the gods* And the woman with him, like a jewel herself, made Serina ache with envy. The woman was clothed in the softest silks Serina had ever seen, and laden with a fortune in gold chains. Gold chains formed the cap that crowned her golden hair, gold chains depended from the cap and flowed down her back, golden chains circled her neck and arms, and held her cream-colored dress closely to her body at the waist. She was magnificent, nearly as beautiful as the elven lord beside her, and Serina wanted to be wearing that dress, standing in her place.

She recalled how Lord Dyran had taken an imperfectly made sword that her father had brought to him in complaint, and bent it double, then bent the doubled blade back on itself a second time. That

strength took her breath away once more, and sent little chills over her. What would it be like to have that strength—or be the one for whom it was gentled?

Then he had the smith who made the blade brought to him. All he had done was stare at the man for a moment, then make a little flicking motion of his hand—but the man had bent over double and had dropped screaming to the ground, and had to be carried out. No one protested or lifted a hand to help him. She had heard later that the Lord had cast elf-shot at him; and that should he ever again pass an imperfect blade, the tiny sliver of elf-stone lodged in his chest would lash him again with the same agonies.

Serina wondered; if her father sent out a fighter judged to be “imperfectly trained,” would the same thing happen to him?

She shivered as she realized that the answer was “yes” and that no excuses would be accepted.

“If you would rise, do so alone,” she heard in her mind, and recalled the gold-bedecked woman at Lord Dyran’s side, watching the smith writhe in agony at her feet, her face impassive.

The lesson was there, and easy to read.



Rise alone and fall alone. If he had cared half as much for me as he did for the purity of his blades—but I was less than a blade, and he had a replacement standing ready.

As she took each step, each breath in agony, there was a hotter fire burning in her mind. Once Lord Dyran had grown tired of her, she was of less use than one of his pensioners. And he no longer cared what happened to her.

The pensioners—once she had scorned them; the weak in power, or elven “lords” fallen on hard times, who had lost too much in the ever-renewing duels. The duels were *fought* by their trained gladiators, but they represented very real feuds, and the losses incurred when their fighters lost were equally real ...

Twice as pathetic were the sad cases whose magic was too weak to accomplish more than self-protection. Though these “pensioners” could not be collared, they could be coerced in other, more subtle ways. They often served as overseers, as chief traders, and in other positions

of trust. They were neither wholly of the world of the High Lords, nor pampered as luxuriously as the treasured slaves, such as concubines and entertainers. Serina had pitied them, once.

No. Better to fall, she thought, than eke out a miserable, scrabbling existence like theirs ...

Better to have reigned at least for a little while; to have stood at Lord Dyran's side, and answered to no one but her master ... to have feared only purely mortal trickery. Unlike the pensioners, whose every action was a move in a game they did not understand.



“So,” Dyran said, regarding the top of the trembling overseer's head, as the elven subordinate knelt before him. “It would seem the quota cannot be met.” He was all in black today, and the milky light from the skylight overhead made his hair gleam like silver on his shoulders. He had a look about him that Serina knew well, a look that told her his mood was a cruel one, and she hoped he would appease it on the person of his overseer.

“No, my lord,” the elven overseer replied, his voice quavering. There was nothing in his appearance—other than his clothing—to tell a human of the vast social gulf between himself and Dyran. His hair, tied back in a neat tail, was just as long and silky, just as pale a gold. His eyes were just as green, his stature equal to Dyran's. Both had the sharply pointed ear-tips of their race, and both appeared to be fighting men in the prime of life. The overseer wore riding leathers; Dyran fine velvet. But there were differences between them not visible to the human senses; differences that made Dyran master. “There have been too many injuries, my lord, to—”

“Due to your neglect,” Dyran reminded him silkily. Serina saw that his goblet of wine had warmed, and replaced it with a chilled one. He ignored her, all his attention bent on his victim.

The overseer blanched. “But my lord, I *told* you that the forge chains needed—”

“Due to *your* neglect,” Dyran repeated, and settled back into his ornately carved wooden chair, steepling his long, slender hands before his chin. “I'm afraid I'm going to have to teach you a lesson about caring for your tools, Goris. I believe you have a daughter?”

“Yes, my lord,” the overseer whispered. He glanced up briefly, and Serina noted that he had the helpless, hopeless look of a creature in a trap. “But she is my only heir—”

Dyran dismissed the girl with a gesture. “Wed her to Dorion. He’s been pestering me for a bride, and *his* quota has been exceeded. We’ll see if his line proves more competent than yours.”

The overseer’s head snapped up, emerald eyes wide with shock. “But, my lord!” he protested. “Dorion is—”

He stopped himself, and swallowed suddenly, as his pupils contracted with fear.

Lord Dyran leaned forward in his seat. “Yes?” he said, with venomous mildness. “You were about to say—what?” He raised one eyebrow, a gesture Serina knew well. It meant he was poised to strike, if angered.

The overseer was frozen with terror. “Nothing, my lord,” he whispered weakly.

“You were about to say, ‘Dorion is a pervert,’ I believe,” Dyran told him, his voice smooth and calm, his expression serene. “You were about to take exception to the fact that Dorion prefers human females to tedious young elven maids. As do I. As you finally remembered.”

“No, my lord,” the overseer protested, barely able to get the words out. Serina noted that he was trembling slightly, his hands clenched to keep from giving himself away.

Dyran held him frozen with his eyes alone, a bird helpless in the gaze of a deadly viper. “You would be correct to believe that Dorion prefers his concubines to insipid little elven maids. Nevertheless, Dorion intends to do his duty and breed an heir, however distasteful and depressing that may be. As I did. And *you* have a suitable daughter. Nubile, of breeding age. Barely, but close enough. Nubile is all that Dorion requires; frankly, I think he *might* even prefer it if she were unwilling. You *will* wed her to Dorion, Goris. See to it.”

The overseer went white-lipped, but nodded; rose slowly and painfully to his feet, and turned to leave.

“Oh, and Goris—”

The overseer turned, like a man caught in a nightmare, his face gray with dread.

“See to those forge chains yourself. You have enough magic for that.” The elven lord smiled sweetly. “That is, if what you have told me is true. Barely enough, but that will do. If you show you are willing to

exert yourself on my behalf, I might arrange for your daughter to be divorced once she breeds.”

Dyran laughed as the overseer plodded to the door, his head bowed, his shoulders sagging. Serina knew why he laughed. If Goris had “just barely” enough magic to mend the forge chains, that meant that he would be lying flat on his back with exhaustion for weeks afterwards, and be unable to use what magic he did have without suffering excruciating pain for a month or more.

As for Goris’s young daughter, the elven overseer Dorion would undoubtedly bed her as soon as he wed her, and keep bedding her lovelessly until she conceived, then abandon her for the arms of his concubines.

Dyran reached for his wine and waited for his seneschal to bring him the next piece of business. Serina refilled his goblet as soon as he removed his hand from it. She had no pity for Goris’s daughter. If the girl wanted to succeed, she would have to be as ruthless as any other elven lord or lady. If she could not manage that, she deserved what came to her.

Goris doesn’t know that his forge chains were sabotaged. That was one of the many advantages of being at Dyran’s side constantly; when the damage was first reported, Serina had been privy to the report, and to the knowledge that they had been weakened by magic. The saboteur might even have been Dorion; for the moment, however, Dyran chose to assume it was the work of one of his rivals on the Council. It might well have been; that kind of sabotage was typical for the Council members, as well as those who aspired to Council seats. It was just one more move in the never-ending cycle of feuds and subterfuge.

It was a game that Goris and Dorion would have played, had they been equal to it. But their weak positions and equally weak magic ensured that they would always be in the service of a stronger elven lord. Only one thing stopped the elven lords short of outright assassination of each other: Births were so rare among them that an elven pair might strive for decades before producing a single child, and once wholesale assassination started, the perpetrator would find himself on the top of *everyone’s* list as the next victim.

With an entire world to plunder, one would think that the overlords would despoil and move on. But the elven lords did take a reasonable amount of care with their properties—which sometimes made Serina wonder at this unusual restraint. They did not take an equal

amount of care with their human resources, however; humans birthed often, and there were always more slaves on the way when the current batch was used up. Only the special, and the skilled, were valuable.

"If you would rise, rise alone."

Serina was very careful to keep herself counted among the "valuable."

She was proud of Dyran; already in the past few months he had eroded Lord Vyshal's power by planting a rumor with just enough truth to be believed that he was thinking of divorcing his current lady and arranging another marriage. He had traded information on the vices of Lady Reeana for that bit of news. And he had managed to buy out the entire iron ore trade secretly, making himself the sole possessor of the most vital component of steel production. Now even his competition would have to come to him—or else tax themselves and their resources in discovering new deposits of the mineral.

But his most recent triumph was his own marriage, an amazingly fertile marriage, that had produced an unheard-of set of twins.

The next business was with the overseer of Dyran's farmlands. Since Branden was a depressingly honest sort, and there was nothing more boring than listening to a recitation of weather and expected harvests, Serina allowed her mind to wander.

Lady Lyssia Serina's lips curved in a slight smile. Lady Lyssia, Dyran's espoused, then divorced, wife had never been any threat to *her* position.

V'sheyl Edres Lord Fotren had a daughter, Lyssia by name. And unwedded, despite her father's position in Council and wealth as the supplier of the finest trained gladiators to be had. Lyssia had taken a fall from a horse in her childhood, and as the result of that fall, was possessed of just enough wit to feed and clothe herself and play simple games. In short, though physically in her early twenties, she remained at the age she had been when she took the fall: about five.

Not the most exciting of conversationalists—unless you're willing to listen to her babble about her dolls.

Because of that flaw—and because those who knew of it often assumed that the defect in her mind was the result of breeding and not an accident, she had never been considered as suitable material for marriage. But she was her father's only child; despite many attempts, he had never been able to produce another to supplant her as heir. Those of elven blood lived long, but not—as the humans

believed—forever. Her father, beginning the long, slow decline into elven old age, had been growing quietly, but increasingly, desperate.

Which was where Dyran entered the picture. He despised the women of his own race, preferring to seek his amatory adventures in the talented and trained arms of his concubines. But *he* needed an heir; and more, with an alliance to Lord Edres, he would be in a position to arrange many duels, supplying the means and the weapons with absolute impartiality for those who kept no fighters of their own.

He presented himself as a suitable mate; Lord Edres was ready to take an overseer for the girl by then, and risk having a grandson with weak magic. Dyran must have seemed god-sent. The contract was set up to be fulfilled once two living children had been produced; one to be Dyran's heir, and one to be Edres's.

Dyran intended to fulfill that contract as quickly as possible, and he was one of the few elves whose magic worked on the level of the very small as well as the very large. Any powerful elven lord could call down lightning; Dyran could knit up a bone, and more, if he chose. And using his powerful magics to enhance his own fertility and that of the girl, he mated with the child with the same indifference as one of his gladiator-studs. The experiment succeeded so well that he had kept the means of it secret, to be used at some later date. At a time when most elves were satisfied with one child in a decade, Dyran fathered male twins upon her. One went to her father's house as a replacement heir, much to the Lord's relief. The other came with Dyran, to be lodged with all due pomp in the nursery.

The concubines were not permitted to enter the nursery, so Serina had never seen the boy. The child's nurses were all human, but so carefully bespelled that they could not even think without asking permission of the Lord. Guards just as carefully bespelled stood sentry at every possible entrance. Only when the boy was able to protect himself—which would be at age thirteen or thereabouts, if his powers were as strong as his father's—would the protection end. Meanwhile, his every moment would be overseen, and every need or want would be attended to. He would *not* be spoiled; spoiled children rarely survived the cutthroat competition of elven politics. But he would be carefully educated, carefully nurtured, carefully prepared—

And he would live in luxury that made Serina's pale by comparison.

Not that it mattered to Serina; the mother was hardly a rival for Dyran's fickle affections, nor, in an odd way, was the son. Dyran *cared* nothing for his son, except as a possession, the all-important heir, and that was where his interest in him ended. There had been a brief flurry of activity when the child was brought to the manor and installed in the nursery; after that, everything went back to normal. And that was all Serina knew or cared. Thanks to the drugs in every human concubine's food, *she* would never be pregnant, except at the Lord's orders, and then only by another human.

Still, keeping Dyran's attention could be terribly wearing ...

She found herself eyeing one of the Lord's elite guards; a handsome brown-haired youngster, firmly muscled, with a strong chin and earnest dark eyes, and young enough that he might not be so hardened a beast as some of the gladiators. In general, the guards were more personable than the duelists, though they were just as well rewarded, and just as proud of their status. There were weeks, months, when Dyran was away, that time sat heavy on her hands, and the nights, especially, seemed to take forever to pass. No elven lord took his concubines with him when he traveled; that would be insulting the hospitality of his host. No matter how indispensable Serina *thought* she had made herself, in the end, it seemed, she could be done without ...

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to find herself a handsome young stud and have herself assigned to him, to gracefully slip into retirement Perhaps if she pleased Dyran enough, when he tired of her, he would permit her to have a mate of her own choosing. A youngster like that, perhaps, fresh enough to be pliant to *her* wishes—

Demons! What was she thinking? Fool! That was a certain way to be supplanted!

She strengthened her resolve never to even think of being replaced. It would be better to die than become a breeder.

And as she schooled her expression into that sensuous smile Dyran liked, she swore that she would keep Dyran's interest, no matter what it took.



A stumble over something hidden in the sand brought her to her hands and knees, and brought an end to her drift into memory. Memory that was kinder than reality ...

ELVENBANE

She tried, and failed, to get to her feet, as the sun punished her unprotected back.

It would be easy to give up; to lie in the sand and wait for death. She wondered why she had ever thought death preferable to disgrace and displacement. Death was no easy slide into sleep—it was the parched pain of a dry throat and mouth, a need for water driving out all thoughts, the agony of burned and blistered skin.

I will not die. I will not! I am Serina Daeth, and I will live and have revenge!

So she began to crawl, with the same mindless determination with which she had continued to walk. Somewhere out here, there must be shelter, water. She would find both. Someone must live out here. She would buy their aid, with whatever it took.

But it was so hot ...

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