

# ~ The Duchess And The Blacksmith ~

by silverwriter01

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All characters are mine and mine alone. If they look like anybody you know or think you know, you must be dreaming. This story does contain some violence, sexual content, and women loving women. If any of this is not what you like, please try your call again. Copyright 2008

Warning of sorts: My editor and friend, Christy, is in the process of moving (as am I) and is already editing another one of my stories. So I did my best editing this one myself. So if I missed a comma or misused a word, forgive me.

I'd like to thank strawberrypanic from youtube for posting her amv *Freedom*. A tiny clip sparked my muse, whom I also thank.

Questions? Comments? Rude remarks? [silverwriter01@yahoo.com](mailto:silverwriter01@yahoo.com).

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Lou walked beside her horse down an old, dark path. The morning light was barely able to shine through the trees. Some would think she took a great risk to travel alone. Hundreds of men would not hesitate to attack a lone woman, but thousands of men wouldn't hesitate to assault a woman of her beauty. Lou had fair hair, which she kept to a length just below her shoulders, and she had light, crystal blue eyes. Her clothes, which were a simple green tunic, dark breeches, and dark calf high boots, did not show off her figure, but anyone could see she was beautiful. However, Lou was not worried of bandits, robbers, or rogues. She had her sword and that was all she needed. She chatted easily with her chestnut colored horse, who she had named Fritz.

"Well, Fritz, what shall we do today? I figure we'll keep heading down this road until we find a village, then we'll stop. I would like a warm bath, and you could do with a nice grooming down yourself."

Fritz snorted and Lou said, defensively, "Of course I have some gold. I have link of gold rings somewhere. And even if I didn't, I could probably round up a bandit or two for some reward. So stop nagging me about money."

Fritz neighed and Lou snapped, "I'm not getting defensive. I'm good with money, and I'm good with people."

Fritz swung his head to hit Lou on the shoulder with another snort. Lou sighed, "Do you have to bring that time up? It only happened once. Okay twice. You know, you're not a saint yourself. Remember that time..."

Lou stopped talking, and then she stopped walking. Fritz stopped with her. They both sniffed the air and looked at each other. There was no mistaking the smell; Lou had smelled it several times. She leaped upon Fritz's back and urged him into a gallop. She knew what she would see when she arrived, but it didn't make it any better.

The village had been ravaged and burned down. Smoldering ruins were all that remained. There were some charred bodies while others were riddled with arrows. Most had been slashed down by swords. No one had been spared. Lou closed her eyes and gave a long sigh. She would do the only thing she could. She would look for survivors, though she doubted there were any, and burn the others. She wouldn't leave them for scavengers, and perhaps if she burned them, their souls would reach the afterworld.

The smell of death made many gag, but Lou was used to the smell. She didn't like it, but she was used to it. She left Fritz to check among the ruins. She would shout occasionally to see if anyone would answer. She hoped no spirits would. Lou was climbing though the remains of what could have been the blacksmith's shop when she heard a sound. She turned around to see some fallen boards and shingles move just a little. Someone, or something, was alive.

Lou rushed over and started throwing boards aside. She found a slightly burned arm that twitched, and then uncovered the head. Through some blood, bruises, and slight burns, she knew it was a woman. Lou was pleased when she checked for a pulse and found it strong. Lou was startled when the woman's eyes opened, and she saw the brightest pair of green eyes she had ever seen. They then closed as the woman passed out. Lou muttered to the heavens as she uncovered the rest of the woman, "When I said I'd like a woman's company, this wasn't what I had in mind."

Lou was able to move the woman from the remains and into a shelter she had set up. Drawing some water from a well, Lou was able to clean away most of the blood and then bandaged most of light wounds. The woman was very lucky to have survived.

Lou had to remove the woman's clothing since it was covered in ash, dirt, and blood before doing anything. She hadn't blushed though she might have if the circumstances had been different. Lou had studied the woman, briefly, before going to finish her search. The woman was the same size as she, perhaps a few inches taller. She was as muscled as Lou was, but the woman's strength was based in her arms. Lou figured she was the blacksmith or blacksmith's apprentice since she looked to be a few years younger than herself. Lou had gently brushed a lock of auburn hair away from the woman's face. The woman's hair was wild length a little longer than her own. Lou knew that blacksmiths prefer to have long hair or barely any at all.

Lou found no other survivors. She then started collecting wood that hadn't been burned to make a pyre. By the light of the setting sun, she had finished the large pyre stacked with bodies and set it aflame. She went back to Fritz and the unconscious woman.

The woman had woken up, briefly, earlier. Lou had made her drink some water before allowing her to pass out again. There had been a struggle to begin with, but the woman was in no condition to fight.

Lou spent the night catnapping while working on a carrier that could be attached to Fritz. It was two straight poles an arm's length apart with a salvaged blanket wrapped around the poles then stitched together. Lou would take the woman to the next village, providing it hadn't been attacked, and leave her there to recuperate. If the woman was a blacksmith, she would be able to find work easily. She didn't have any broken bones, as far as Lou could tell, but her head had

been hit. Lou had found a bump near the woman's right temple.

At first light, Lou tied the carrier to Fritz and loaded the woman onto it. She wanted to get away from the village and smell something other than death. She led Fritz slowly down the road, knowing that each bump probably caused the woman discomfort. Lou wondered what her name was.

When Lou heard a series of groans, she slowed Fritz to a stop and checked on the woman. Green eyes were open and looking around. The woman started to struggle when she saw Lou, but stopped as if she remembered their last encounter. Lou held her canteen to the woman's lips and let her take small sips. "It's nice to see you can learn. You're in no shape to fight against me."

The woman did have enough strength to glare so she did. Lou chuckled and said, "In case you're wondering, my name's Lou."

Lou waited to see if the woman would reply but she didn't. Lou mused, "Well, I know you're not deaf so are you mute?"

The woman just kept glaring at her. Lou said, nodding, "Okay. You don't feel like talking. I can understand that. We're going to travel a little further before setting up camp. I don't like this area. Don't go away now."

The woman made a rude gesture with her hand that made Lou smile. Lou knew she should be more considerate, considering what the woman had been through, but Lou had seen too much grief and devastation to feel sympathy. She could empathize, but rarely sympathize.

Lou continued on the path for a few more hours until she found clearing next to a stream that suited her. She eased the carrier off of Fritz and let him wander off to drink in the stream. The woman, who had been dosing, woke up at the sudden change of angles.

Lou said, standing over the woman, "Well, Martha, I don't suppose you feel up to eating some food? I can fix some nice gruel for you." The woman glared at her but gave a small nod, which she seemed to regret as she touched her head gently.

"I'll see if I can't find some willow-bark for that headache you got," Lou said as she started making camp. Soon she had a small fire going with some porridge cooking on it. Fritz had found a nice spot to graze and roll around. She searched her packs for the willow-bark she had, which she boiled in some water. She then stuffed the packs behind the woman so she in a sitting position.

"How's that, George? Now you can see around."

The woman tried to swat Lou, but Lou easily moved away. She laughed, "You be a good girl and eat all your porridge, and maybe one day you can hit me."

Lou helped the woman drink the willow-bark tea and then eat her porridge. The woman ate it all.

Lou said, "That's a good girl, Tina."

Lou was walking to the stream to clean the pots when she heard the woman mutter a colorful curse against her. She beamed as she cleaned. Lou ate some jerky and the last of her flatbread. She would have to restock at the next village or hunt soon.

Lou tossed another blanket over the covered woman and then laid down on her spare. She said, closing her eyes, "Goodnight, Fred. Sleep tight."

As if feeling the woman eyeing her sword that lay beside her, Lou said, "Don't even think about it."

Lou awoke in the night at the sounds of someone moving. Lou muttered, sleepy, "You're not going to get far naked, unless you're trying to steal my clothes which might upset me. I'd be glad to give them to you in the morning." Lou heard another soft curse and listened as the woman crawled back the carrier. Lou fell back to sleep with a smirk on her face.

The next morning, Lou made enough porridge for the both of them. The woman was strong enough to feed herself. Lou figured that out when she ripped the bowl out of Lou's hands. Lou said, smiling, "Glad to see you are feeling better, Yolanda."

The woman growled as she ate, ravenously. Lou ate her own porridge with a smile. After cleaning up after themselves, Lou was about to give the woman some clothes when she saw how uncomfortable she looked. It then hit her.

She squatted next to the woman and eased her arm behind the woman's shoulders. She said, "Come on, Phil, there's a bush over there calling your name."

The woman didn't argue much so Lou knew her need had to be great. Together they walked over to the bush and Lou left her to do her business as best she could. When the woman stood up again, Lou helped her back to the camp. After changing and removing some of the bandages, Lou gave the woman her spare set of clothes.

"Might be a bit short on you and tight in the arms. Other than that, they should be an okay fit."

Lou helped the protesting woman put on her clothes, and Lou felt a twinge of disappointment. Even covered in bruises, the woman had a nice figure. Lou then shook the thought out of her head. Knowing the woman wasn't strong enough to walk, she shoved her back on the carrier and tied it to Fritz. The woman must have been exhausted by their morning since she fell asleep soon afterwards. She woke up again around noon and Lou let her drink from a canteen. Lou proceeded to irritate her.

"We really need to think of a name for you. Unless you want to tell me your name," Lou said. She waited for a reply but none came.

"How about Emily?" There was no reply. "Trish? Barney? Gambit? Luna?"

Lou kept calling out names for the next hour. Some of the more ridiculous names received an eye roll from the woman but otherwise, she showed no interest. Lou then used her trump card. "How about Colin or Margo?"

The woman respectably shook her head no. Lou smiled that it had worked. All female smiths could give thanks to Margo, who opened the first school to teach girls how to be blacksmiths. Giving thanks to Margo lead to giving thanks to her mother, Colin, who was the first recorded female blacksmith. Colin was also famous, or infamous to some, in another way. The other reason why Colin was so well known was because she had fallen in love with a princess who returned her feelings. The fact that the couple had a happily-ever-after was what caused their story to be retold so often.

Lou also owed thanks to Colin. Colin's son, Falcon, was one of the greatest knights in history. Lou had had the privilege of mentoring with an old knight who had been tutored by a knight who had been tutored by Falcon himself. Falcon's guard was the hardest to learn, but it was best defensive guard there was.

So now Lou knew that the woman was a proper blacksmith, or blacksmith's apprentice. "Well I got news for you, blacksmith. I'm not a princess. Sorry to dash your hopes." Lou then said, "Well since you're a smith, we'll try smith names. How about Smith?"

The woman shot her an exasperated look. "Okay probably not too original. How about Steel? No, you don't look like a Steel. Silver? No. How about Pewter? No, no. Copper? No, wait, I got it. Brass. That's it. You're name is Brass."

Brass gave her such a look, but Lou was stuck on it. Brass crossed her arms and refused to look at Lou. Lou didn't mind. She continued to chat to Brass and Fritz even though she got no reply. After a few hours of traveling, Lou stopped talking and pulled on Fritz's reins to make him stop. Brass turned her head to look at Lou and saw Lou draw her sword. That caused Brass to start looking around, but she didn't see anyone.

"Come on out. I know you're there," Lou called.

A group of six men came out of the forest around them, all holding swords. They were surrounded. The gruffest looking man stepped forward and gave a toothy grin. "Look at what we got here, fellows. Two nice looking women all alone. And one of them thinks she can handle a man's weapon."

Lou's face gave a hint of a smirk as she said, "I'd like to see one of you so called 'fellows' take this man's weapon from me."

The leader leered at her as he motioned for two of his men to attack. "Try not to hit her in the face too much."

Brass watched, worried, as her rescuer was charged from two sides. Brass saw Lou lift her sword

high in the air, and when Brass blinked, the two men were laying on the ground, bleeding from serious wounds. The other four men stood, shocked. Then the leader shouted, "Get her!"

All four men charged Lou, who danced in-between them. With quick slices and stabs that Brass could barely see, Lou stood while the others lay at her feet. Lou was wiping her sword on the grass when Brass said, "Will you teach me to do that?"

Lou looked up, her blue eyes meeting green ones full of thoughts of vengeance. Lou shook her head, "No. You're a blacksmith, Brass. It's best you stay one."

Brass's eyes widened in anger, "How can you say that after what you saw back there? Didn't you see what those men did? My village deserves vengeance."

"And maybe one day it will have it, but not through me. I only fight when I have to and kill when I must. These men would have killed us, so I killed them."

"The men who destroyed my village deserve to be killed. Don't you have a soul?" Brass snapped. Brass watched as age slipped over Lou as she replied, "No. I don't. I've been running from it for a year. Let's get moving."

Lou briefly searched the men for anything useful and found a bag of gold coins. She took it without guilt. She then led Fritz onward.

The next two days of travel were quiet. Lou said nothing and Brass made no move to speak. Lou was never so grateful to see a town on the horizon. She then noticed the signs of attack on the town's tall barrack walls. Brass, who was now walking on her own, noticed it too. She sneered at Lou, "Told you those men deserve to die. They are varmints who will stop at nothing."

Lou ignored her and kept walking. She stopped only when she saw a dozen of arrows pointed at herself and Brass. She heard someone shout, "Who goes there?"

"Just two travelers who wish to rest in an inn," Lou shouted back.

"We're not accepting any travelers. Go somewhere else."

"Please," Lou called. "I found this woman buried among the ruins of her village a few days ride south. She needs proper shelter."

There was a moment of silence and then a shout replied, "What village?"

Lou looked at Brass who called out, "Amok."

Lou watched as the large gate opened, and they were allowed to enter. An old man with scars upon his face met them at the entrance. He nodded to both of them. "We worried about Amok. We're sorry about your village."

Brass bowed her head. The man then turned his gaze to Lou. He then eyed her sword, "Can you use that?"

Lou looked down at her sword. "This thing? It's just for show."

Lou knew the man grunted in agreement, but doubted he believed her, especially after the look Brass gave her. The old man said, "The inn is down this street. The stables are right beside it. Tell them Sarge sent you."

Lou nodded and headed down the street he had pointed at. Brass followed reluctantly. They found the inn easily. Lou settled Fritz in the stables first, giving the stableman a few coins to make sure he was comfortable. Then she and Brass went into the inn. It was a cozy little place that was empty except for the keeper and his family.

The innkeeper was asleep behind a desk. He woke up fast when Lou spilled half the bag of coins she had taken off the bandits onto the table. Lou said, "We will take your two best rooms. I'll be staying only for a few days but my companion can stay as long as she wants. Right?"

The innkeeper's eyes grew. He reached for one of the gold coins and bit into it. Finding it real, he nodded, eagerly. "For as long as she wants." He turned and called for someone to take them up to their rooms. Lou took that time to lean across the desk, her face close to the innkeeper's. She whispered, ice in her voice, "If you try to cheat my companion out of her room when I leave, she'll get in touch with me. And you don't want me to come back here after I leave."

The innkeeper gulped and nodded, holding his money close. Lou straightened and said with a smile, "Good. Now I'd like a bath. Do you have a bathhouse around here or do you bring water up to the rooms?"

"We have a bathhouse out back."

Lou smiled again. Soon a young boy appeared to take them up to their rooms on the second floor. They were given rooms right next to each other. The boy left them with their keys. Lou locked her door after depositing her things and headed down to the bathhouse. She found the large wooden building and went into the side with the woman symbol on it. She found a woman filling up a large tub with steaming water. If it weren't for the fact that the pretty woman had a band around her ring finger, she would have invited the woman to join her. Lou enjoyed her bath nevertheless.

As Lou was soaking, the woman took her clothes to be washed. The woman then came back to fill another tub across the room. Lou watched through half-closed eyes as Brass walked in. Brass barely glanced at her before heading over to her own tub. Lou allowed herself to enjoy the view as Brass removed her clothes. The bruises on the blacksmith's toned body had faded to an ugly yellow, new skin was starting to grow under the burns, and most of her tiny cuts were healed. Lou also noticed that Brass was a natural auburn haired woman. Lou then wondered if there was a brothel in town that might have an auburn haired woman. She doubted she was that lucky. She did smile when Brass let out a long sigh as she eased into the water.

Lou soaked in the water until it started to get cold. She then started scrubbing herself clean. Lou finally got out of the water and started drying herself off. She said, "I plan on leaving in a day or two. The innkeeper will let you stay long enough for you to get back onto your feet. I'll leave you with the rest of the bandits' gold. You can buy yourself some clothes and such. Take my advice and forget revenge. Start your life anew." Lou wrapped herself in a large towel and left Brass brooding in her bath.

Lou found her clothes clean and dry in her room. She put them on and strapped her sword to her side. She went to investigate the town. She saw the signs of struggle on the faces of all the citizens. She wondered how long they had fought to keep the enemy at bay. Lou was about to investigate what looked to be a tavern when Sarge stepped into her pathway.

"Find the inn?"

Lou nodded while looking around him, thinking of rum, port, and ale. "Yes, thanks. Nice little place."

"Take a walk with me," Sarge said.

Lou sighed. She really wanted a drink. Sarge stared at her for a moment and said, "Don't move." He went into the tavern and came out with a bottle of rum. Lou beamed, "Let's go, friend."

Lou walked along side Sarge around the town. They swapped the bottle on occasion. Sarge told her of the attack that happened a few days ago and how they had barely held the enemy back. Lou listened as he described the attackers. They sounded familiar to her, but she said nothing. Sarge finally turned to her and said, "I know the likes of you, young lady. You've seen things I've seen. I used to be a sergeant in the king's army, was one for twenty years. I just want to know what you'll do if an attack happens while you're here."

Lou took a swig on the rum, feeling it burn its way down. She finally said, smacking her lips, "That depends on how sober I am, for one. But most likely, I'm not going to do anything unless I have to."

Sarge nodded as he took the bottle for a sip. He then said, "I'm just here to tell you, I'll kill you if I have to."

Lou nodded, agreeably. "The same goes for you."

Sarge grunted in agreement, as he handed her back the bottle. They were back at the inn so she said goodnight and headed up her room. She walked by Brass while going up the stairs. Brass sniffed, smelling the rum on her, and gave her a look of disgust. Lou shrugged and went into her room. She downed the rest of the bottle and collapsed onto her bed. She was soon asleep.

In the morning, Lou shifted her hand to the knife under her pillow. In a quick move, she had flipped the person hovering over her onto the bed. She now hovered over a wide-eyed girl with a



knife by her throat. Lou looked her over. She was fairly pretty. Lou asked, "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

Lou sighed, too young for her tastes. She left the girl up and said, "What are you doing in my room?"

The girl brushed her dress, nervously, "Master Sarge wishes you to report to the top of the wall."

Lou groaned but said, "Tell him I'll be there shortly."

Watching the girl flee the room, Lou thought of her pert bottom for a moment before turning her thoughts to what the old man wanted. She muttered as she washed her face in the basin in the corner of her room, "Old man buys me one bottle and thinks he can order me around. I got news for him; I'm a two bottle kind of girl."

Lou reported to the top of the wall where every guard stood uneasy. Brass was up on the wall as well, glaring out into the field. She looked out and saw the army set up in the horizon. The big blue flags were unmistakable to her.

She said, nonchalantly, "Looks like you have got Vulgerns at your door."

Sarge, who had appeared next to her, said, "Thanks for noticing."

Brass growled as she gripped the top of the wall tightly, "Those are the ones who destroyed my village. So they're Vulgerns? Then I swear I will kill any Vulgern I meet."

Sarge laughed without humor, "Save it for the battle, blacksmith." He then turned to Lou and said, "You look like you've seen these fellows before. Any advice?"

"If they attack, they'll attack your front gate. They're very direct and unimaginative people. They have few archers and you have many, use that to your advantage. But I wouldn't worry too much. Sometimes they just set up camp as a scare tactic and go on their way in a day or two as calm as you please. Now if you'll excuse me, I hear an ale calling my name."

Brass looked like she was going throttle Lou as she walked away. Sarge laid a hand against her arm and said, "Let her be, blacksmith. Poor gal has seen a lot for her age. She just gave me plenty of advice."

"She could be lying to you," Brice hissed.

Sarge nodded, but said, "But I don't think she is."

Lou spent the rest of the day in the tavern, entertaining the female barkeep with some of her stories and colorful jokes. Though some would have thought she had drunk a lot, she really hadn't. Most of her drinks ended up poured into the plant beside her at the end of the bar when

the barkeep wasn't looking. She just wanted to let the town think she was drunk. She put on a show stumbling to the inn and gave a drunken order not to be disturbed. She went up to her room and locked the door.

Lou waited until nightfall before slipping out of her room's window. She scaled down the side of the house on an ivy-covered trellis down to the ground. She then crept along the shadows on the street until she came to a spot below the large wall next to a large tree. She watched the guards walk along the wall for a few minutes before making her move. She climbed the tree quickly to get onto the wall. She quickly climbed over the top of it and down the side, using small holes in the wall as foot and hand holds.

Lou made her way through the field and into the Vulgerns' camp without being seen. Lou shook her head at how easy it was for her to get to the commander's tent in the center of the camp. She used her knife to cut a slit in the back, the sharpened knife sliding through the cloth like butter. She peeked inside and saw the commander leaning over a desk looking at a map. She slipped inside and up behind him. She placed her blade next to his throat.

"What are you doing here, Markus?"

The tall raven-haired man stiffened. He whispered, shocked, "Commander Louisatina?"

Lou rolled her eyes at her name and said, "Yes, Markus. You didn't answer my question. Since when do Vulgerns attack small towns of other countries? When do they attack defenseless villages?" Lou pulled the blade closer to his throat with each question. He stood on his toes to get away from it.

"Commander, it wasn't my doing. It was all done at your cousin's orders."

Lou's eyes narrowed. "Since when does Deacon give the orders?"

"Since you disappeared and we were left without a commander. The king is not old enough for Deacon to become king, but old enough that my majesty can't stop Deacon from taking control of the army."

Lou knew that her cousin, Deacon, was not suitable to hold the throne. She had hoped, in the past, that her uncle would make his daughter his heir, but he had shown signs of favoring her for the crown. Lou did not want to be queen. She had been happy as a warrior, but since she was nobility, she wasn't allowed to stay a lowly warrior. She was promoted through the ranks until she had become commander of all the armies. She just happened to be good at her job as well. Lou hadn't wanted to see any more battles or rule a country so she had disappeared. Things hadn't gone the way she had planned they would. She knew she should have killed Deacon all the times she had a chance, but she had allowed herself to be talked out of it. She couldn't be talked out of this time.

Lou said, pulling the knife a little closer, "I want you to give the orders to pack up and head home. You better be gone by noon tomorrow or you'll regret it. I want you to tell Deacon that I

gave you these orders."

"How will he believe me, Commander?"

Lou took her knife from his throat and watched him let a sigh of relief. When he turned to face her, she slashed her knife twice across his face, cutting an L into his cheek. Markus gasped as he grabbed his face. "Just show him that and he'll know."

Lou slipped out of the tent quickly. She wondered if Markus would call for help but she heard no calls. She shook her head at how much of a pansy he was. Lou went back from the way she had come. She was so relieved to get back to her room unnoticed that she let her guard down when she climbed into her room. She was slammed against the wall with someone's blade biting into her throat. She wanted to laugh at the irony.

Brass growled, "I saw you. You're one of them. You're a Vulgern. I should kill you where you stand."

Lou laughed, quietly, "I don't think you've ever killed anybody, and I don't think you want to kill me."

"You think so?" Brass sneered as she pushed the blade harder, a faint line of blood appearing. Lou pushed back, harder so that more blood appeared, "Yes. If you meant the vow you made this afternoon, you would have killed me right when I climbed into the window. Come on, you can do it. If you want me to die quick, press hard and slice all the way across. If you want me to die slowly, cut deep but not all the way across. That way I'll bleed slowly to death but I can't scream. Come on, you can do it."

Lou waited a full minute while Brass kept readjusting her grip in the knife. She finally tired of waiting. In a flash, she had the knife out of Brass's hand and tossed it across the room. They then wrestled. Lou had skill, but Brass had pent-up anger and misery.

They stumbled back onto the bed and struggled for control. Lou finally pinned Brass's hands. The glare Brass was giving her could melt ice. Lou hovered above her, a few drops of blood dripping from her neck onto Brass. Lou said, "I know you think you want to kill me, but there's that whole thing about me saving your life getting in the way. Besides the fact that you've never killed anyone before."

Brass buckled up against her, trying to throw her off. "Get off of me."

Lou fought back a moan as Brass's hips pushed against hers. The adrenaline rush from the struggle had got her blood pumping and it all seemed to be headed towards her crotch. She really needed to bed a wench and soon. Lou tightened her grip on Brass and said, "I did not attack your village. I did not kill those people."

"But you're one of them," Brass growled.

Lou nodded, her neck stinging as she did. "I don't deny it. I'm a Vulgern. I gave you the opportunity to kill me, Brass. I offered you the chance for vengeance. You didn't take it."

"I hate you."

Lou shook her head, "You hate the thought of me, but you don't hate me."

"I hate you!" Brass shouted.

Lou quickly moved to cover her mouth. There was another struggle, but Lou won again. Lou said, sweat on her brow, "Do I have to tie you up and gag you?" The image made her pause before continuing. "I have a plan that you might enjoy hearing. I can help you get your vengeance. I'm going to take out the man who gave the direct order to attack your village. Would that satisfy you?"

Brass was still for a long time before nodding against Lou's hand. Lou said, removing her hand, "Good. I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon."

Brass said, "I'm going with you."

Lou opened her mouth to argue, but Brass said, "I'm going with you. How else am I to know?"

Lou sighed. She had the feeling that arguing would be pointless. She rolled off Brass to lie beside her. "I should have named you Anvil because your head is as hard as one."

Brass leaned up on one elbow to look at her. She said, frowning as she looked at Lou's neck, "Your neck is still bleeding a little."

Lou said as she closed her eyes, "It will stop sooner or later."

Brass frowned again. She couldn't have this woman bleed to death during the night. She unwrapped the relatively clean bandage from her arm, the cut on her arm nearly healed. She folded it a few times and placed it across the wound on Lou's neck. Lou opened one eye to look at her and then closed it. She sighed and said, "I'm truly sorry for what my people did to yours, Brass. We're not nice people, but we're not that evil or cruel. The man who did this will die, you have my word."

She opened her eyes when she heard a snuffle and looked at Brass. She said, startled, "Hey, no crying. I take it back if you're going to cry." Brass did cry but not in the way Lou expected. They were silent tears that slowly crept down her face. She didn't sob or become hysterical. Lou finally pulled Brass down beside her. She reached down to find the sheet and pulled it up over them. Lou didn't hold her. She didn't know if she would be welcomed. Brass finally said, as her tears were drying, "This doesn't mean I like you."

Lou gave a laugh, "Understood. Don't suppose you want to tell me your real name?"

"Nope," Brass said, a hint of amusement in her voice. She didn't leave the bed, but rolled over and fell asleep. Lou rolled her eyes as she fell asleep as well.

When Lou opened her eyes again, it was morning. She was well aware of the fact that she was spooned around Brass, her arm wrapped around the smith's stomach. She prayed that Brass was asleep as she slowly tried to untangle herself. She didn't want the blacksmith to freak out on her. Lou was washing her face and wiping the dried blood from her neck when a on the door came. Brass sat up as Lou opened the door.

Sarge stood there. He said, "You were right. The Vulgerns are leaving. Unless it's a trick."

Lou shook her head and said, "I don't think so. They might come back, but it won't be for two or three months, I think, if then."

Sarge nodded and then glanced over her shoulder. He smirked and said, "The innkeeper told me he thought you had company from all the thrashing about he heard last night. I'll leave you two alone."

Lou tried not to blush, but failed, as she closed the door. She really needed to bed someone if a simply remark like that made her blush. But at least Brass was blushing a little as well. Lou said, "We have to buy you a horse, not to mention clothes of your own, and we need other supplies. Come on, get ready. We have a busy day ahead of us."

Lou didn't know why she gave in to Brass about coming with her. She always traveled alone, and she certainly didn't need a broody hotheaded smith tagging along, getting in her way. But she had given in and she was kind of looking forward to the trip.

Lou and Brass spent the rest of the day buying supplies. Brass needed a horse, packs, a bedroll, and she wanted a sword. Lou protested, but Brass was firm on her decision. Lou said, as they walked to the town's armory, "People who wear swords ask for trouble. You have to know how to use one, or you'll be in trouble."

"You seem to handle one just fine."

Lou gaped at her. "Do you know how long I've studied swordplay? Since I was old enough to stand a sword has been in my hand or by my side. It takes years to learn how to wield a sword and only seconds to die from one."

Brass shrugged. It was like talking to an anvil, Lou decided. They walked through the town's armory with a rough looking armorer watching them. Lou watched as a look of disgust came over Brass's face as she looked over the swords. She frowned at the armorer, "You sell these to people? You let men protect your town with these pieces of trash? A good blow could break some of the blades in half. Look at that one; you can see the fault line from here."

While Lou agreed with the blacksmith, she didn't want to cause trouble and the angry armorer was about to lose his cool. Lou tried to redirect conversation. "Well since swords are out for

now, how about another weapon? Can you shoot? We can find you a longbow or even a crossbow?"

Brass shook her head while she kept a direct glare with the armorer. "How about a staff? Good tall girl like you could handle a staff."

"I'm useless with wood. I can't make anything from it," Brass muttered, quietly. Lou had to fight back the comment that the only thing she would make with a wooden staff is bruises on other people. Lou looked around and was pleased when she saw maces and battle hammers in the far corner. "How about hammers? You have to be good with a hammer, right?"

Brass spared Lou a glance and gave a modest shrug. Lou fought against rolling her eyes and led her over to the corner. Lou watched as Brass picked up each mace and hammer. Brass grumbled, "At least he can make a decent hammer." The armorer looked a little less angry.

Lou had her eye on one hammer for Brass. It was medium size, weighing about twenty pounds. It was flat headed on one side but the other side had a curved spike meant for driving in-between plates of armor. She was pleased when Brass picked it. They even found a sling that would allow Brass to carry it across her back.

Lou also bought a tunic of mail for Brass. It didn't fit just quiet right, but it was the best she could do in a pinch. "What about you?" Brass asked as she twisted and turned in the mail.

"What about me? Just pay the man," Lou said, handing the blacksmith the bag of the bandits' money. Lou left Brass to pay for her things and went to pack their horses. Brass soon appeared in the stable with her hammer, mail, and one other thing. Lou curiously glanced at the thick roll of leather as long as her arm. "What's that?"

She watched as Brass seemed to brighten. She said as she halfway unrolled the leather, "It's a tool kit. Snips, pliers, chisels, and tiny hammers. It's no where near what I had back in Amok. but I'm glad the armorer had and was willing to sell this."

Lou nodded even though she didn't see why such a kit would cause so much excitement. She guessed you had to be a smith to understand.

Lou showed Brass were to store her mail and how to tie her case across her horse's rump. Lou said, "Let's get this hammer across your back. The sooner you get used to its weight the better."

Lou showed Brass how to attach the sling across her back. She then slide the heavy hammer in place. Brass stood, easily, "I barely feel it at all."

Lou smirked. "Give it some time. We haven't even started training yet. And another thing..."

"Ouch," Brass said as she tilted her head back, only to hit the hammer. Lou laughed, "Don't forget you have a hammer back there. You can knock yourself out if you're not careful. Now get on your horse."

Lou mounted Fritz with ease and watched as Brass mounted up. She succeeded in getting up on the horse but also succeeded in hitting her head again. "Damn it." Lou led the way out of town with a smile on her face.

Lou stopped an hour before sunset to set up camp. Brass had been stretching and twisting on her horse for the past two hours. Lou knew she had to be feeling the extra weight by now. When they dismounted, Brass let out a sigh of relief. She pulled the hammer from its sling and started to set it down.

"Stop," Lou said. "You've just begun. I'm going to show you three basic moves that I want you to repeat twenty times each."

Lou took the hammer from Brass and swung the hammer, flat side down, over her head. She stopped when it was level with her chest. She then turned brought the hammer back up to swing it over her head to the right. The next move was the same except to the left. Lou handed the hammer back to Brass and said, "These three moves are aimed at the head. Now you try."

Brass tried the overhead swing but Lou stopped her before she could try the next move. "You need to put more power behind the swing but you have to stop it when your arms are level. If you left the hammer fall any lower, it takes up time to bring it back up. Time is crucial in a battle. Remember that and try the next move."

Brass swung from the to the right, but she put so much force behind it that she ended up spinning in a whole circle. Lou said, once she had stopped spinning, "Plenty of force, but the rest of your body wasn't prepared for it. You have to plant your feet for the blow but be ready to move once your swing is done. Now practice those moves twenty times each. Oh, and it helps if you imagine someone is in front of you that you are hitting."

Lou heard Brass grumble, "No problem." She chuckled as she started unloading the horses. Brass finished her drills shortly after sunset. By that time, Lou had a small fire going and dinner ready. Brass sat down, heavily, and eagerly took the canteen Lou handed her. Her tunic was soaked with sweat. Lou said, "Take slow sips. You might throw up if you drink too fast after working out so hard."

Brass followed her direction and took small sips. Lou then said, with an evil grin, "I thought you blacksmiths were in good shape. I bet you thought a hammer could never tire you out again."

The look Brass gave her made Lou laugh out loud. When Brass glared at her sword and then back at her, Lou quieted down. She said, poking the fire, "You're probably wondering why I don't practice. I haven't practiced in a long time. Not that I don't need to, but I had no desire to. I didn't care if my skill left me before I decided to take on this mission. But, I suppose I should get back into practicing. I'll practice with you tomorrow morning."

Lou smirked as Brass winced at the thought of more practicing. "Get some sleep, Brass. You'll need it."

Lou banked the fire and rolled up in her blanket. She heard Brass say, softly, "You never told me about the man we're going to kill."

Lou stared out into the dark forest before saying, "His name is Deacon. That's all you need to know for now."

In the morning, Lou shook Brass awake about an hour before the sun arose. Brass groaned but got up. She reached for her hammer, but Lou stopped her. "No. In the mornings, we will practice hand-to-hand combat, among other things. You're in shape, which is good. You also have great arm and shoulder strength. Your body has permanently been changed to show that. This is to your advantage and disadvantage. People will expect you to use your upper body in a fight. We'll make sure they regret that assumption."

Lou then spent two hours showing Brass the basic moves. She showed her how to punch soft areas with closed fists and hard areas with open fist. She said, "In a fight, your hands are your most vital weapon. Don't damage your hand with a closed punch to the face when an open one would do just as well."

After a quick breakfast, Lou watched as Brass packed and saddled her horse to make sure she could do it properly. Satisfied, she reminded Brass to put on her hammer and then rode off. She heard Brass say, "I really do hate you."

They rode at a steady fast pace to the southeast. Brass asked, once, "Where are we going?"

"Vulgea."

"Is that where we will find Deacon?" Brass asked. Lou nodded. Brass was a little surprised at the short answers Lou was giving her. She thought that woman could talk forever.

"So Vulgea is to the southeast?"

"No. It's actually do east."

"So why are we going southeast?"

Lou snapped, "Why all the questions? I think I liked it better when you were quiet." Brass clamped her jaw shut and they rode in silence for the rest of the day.

They camped near a stream. Brass ached all over but she wasn't going to let Lou know that. Lou showed her a new move, an undercut swing with the hooked in, and told her to practice it and the moves from yesterday thirty times each. Lou watched for a while, correcting her stance or swung a few times before leaving. She headed off into the woods and reappeared about the time Brass was done with her practice. From Lou's sweat soaked tunic, she figured Lou had practiced as well. Brass felt a little better knowing she wasn't the only one who was going to be sore.



Lou was out of breath. She scolded herself for getting so out of shape. She had practiced complex sword maneuvers for the past hour and she was shocked to find how slow she had gotten. Deacon had been in good shape when she left, she was sure he had only improved. She walked over to the stream and pulled off her tunic. She dunked it into the water and squeezed it partially dry. She wiped all the sweat off her chest before washing the tunic again. Ringing it dry, she slung it over her shoulder and walked back to camp.

Brass had saw Lou walked towards the stream, but paid her no mind as she stretched her sore arms and back. She was surprised when Lou sat across from her and she was presented with two lovely breasts with pink nipples hardening from the cool wash they had received. She fought not to blush and when she lost, she stood and walked to the stream herself. She had seen Lou naked before in the bathhouse, but it had been different somehow. She wondered how long it had been since she had sex. She figured it had to have been almost a year since that traveling caravan stopped in her village for a week. With it came a chocolate-skinned rider and so she had left with it. The rider had had nice breasts, too, with dark nipples that she had given her sole attention to for an entire evening.

Brass shook the thought her head. Now the crotch of her pants felt tighter. Brass washed her own tunic in the stream, after dunking her head in it. Squeezing it as dry as she could, she put it back on even though it was still wet. When she got back to the camp, Lou had dinner ready. They ate in silence and fell asleep in silence.

In the morning, Lou woke Brass before sunrise again. Brass got ready for hand-to-hand combat, but Lou ordered her to pack the horses. Brass was about to slide her hammer in place but Lou told her to put it on her horse. Lou then showed her a series of stretches for her legs. Lou then said, Fritz's reins in her hands, "Now we run."

Brass bit back her groan as Lou took off down the road. She followed with her horse. They ran for a few minutes before Lou slowed to a steady walk. Just when Brass had thought she had caught her breath again, Lou took off running again. They continued this for the next hour before Lou mounted her horse. Before Brass mounted hers, Lou remaindered her to put on her hammer. Brass gave her a vicious glare but did as she was told. The grin Lou gave her only made Brass angrier.

They traveled the southeast road until the road turned another direction. Then they headed through the forest, but Brass had noticed the forest had been thinning the further they traveled. A few hours before the sunset, they came upon a great lake. Lou said, "We'll camp here."

Brass was amazed by the view. The lake seemed to go on forever and in the distance, she could see start of mountains. Brass was filled with a sense of awe that was destroyed when Lou spoke. "Unload your horse, it deserves a rest. Then take your hammer and practice your moves. Thirty times for the past moves I've shown you and then I'll show you another move."

Brass did as she was told though her arms and shoulders were killing her. They screamed in protest as she pulled out her hammer. She wanted to bury it Lou but decided that would get her nowhere. She was halfway through her moves when her strength suddenly gave out and she

dropped her hammer right onto her toes. She cursed loudly and ugly as she hopped around on one foot. Lou came over to see what had happened and tried her best to muffle her laugh.

Lou squatted in front of Brass, when she sat down, and said, "Let me take a look at it." Lou eased the boot off Brass's foot and looked at her reddening toes. "Can you wiggle them?" Little toes wiggled briefly and Lou grinned, "Well, they don't appear to be broken. Just watch where you drop your hammer next time."

Brass lost it. She yanked her foot away and stood up, painfully. "Who in the hell do you think you are! You work me to exhaustion and have the nerve to laugh at my pain!"

Lou stood as well and shrugged. "You wanted to come along. No one said it was going to be easy. I'm just making sure you can survive once we get to Vulgea."

Brass shouted, "I don't even know if you're taking us to Vulgea! When I don't speak, you poke fun at my misery! When I do speak, you tell me to shut up! You are the most infuriating woman I have ever met and the next time I swing my hammer, it will be at your head!"

Lou could see Brass was very angry. Lou also knew that Brass deserved to know more than Lou was willing to tell her. She was about to apologize and tell Brass more about what was going on when she saw Brass pick up her hammer. Brass gripped it in both hands and growled, "You could be lying to me, and leading me on a wild goose chase. You could be the one responsible for my village's destruction."

Lou backed up a step as Brass moved forward. "Hey now, you need to calm down. I told you the truth when I said I knew who caused it and that I was going to kill him."

"I've been working my ass off for you and you laugh at me."

Lou said, holding up her hands, "That wasn't nice of me, I know. I'm sorry about that. You're angry and your toes hurt. How about we sit down and have a nice cup of tea?"

Brass swung at her but missed on purpose. She didn't want to hurt her, only put some respect into her. Lou frowned at the situation. Things were better when she had kept them lighthearted and silly. Perhaps that's what they needed now. She dashed in and wrestled the hammer from Brass. Brass put up a fight, but she was tired. Quickly disarmed, Lou grabbed Brass's wrists and started pulling her towards the lake. She had spotted a deep area near their camp that looked nice for a fall.

"What in the world do you think you are doing?"

Brass dug her feet into the ground but she was pulled forward. Soon they were at the lake's side with the dark water on one side of them. Brass looked at back at Lou, anger in her eyes, "You can't be serious. You want to play games at a time like this?" Lou grinned and fell back into the water. Since she had a hold on Brice, Brass fell in with her.

The water was cold. Brass surfaced to find a wet, grinning Lou staring at her. Brass growled as splashed water at her, "I hate you."

Lou laughed as she splashed her back. They were soon wrestling in the water, but with no intent of real malice. Lou was dunked under the water several times, but she was able to swim underneath Brass and pull her down a time or two as well. Then they finally got of the lake, they were a sight. They were soaked to the bone from their head to their boots, or boot in Brass's case, but they were laughing.

Lou made a warm fire so they could dry out their clothes as they sat, wrapped in their blankets. Lou said, as she stared into the fire, "I should have told you more about what was going on. You deserve to know. I was once a commander of Vulgea's armies, and Deacon is the prince of Vulgea. The old king is weakening so Deacon is taking more control of the country. He always wanted power, and now it seems he wants more power and land. He attacked your village, and probably others, because they are the furthest from your capital. He will slowly try to take over all that is around us. He must be stopped, and I will stop him."

Brass got the feeling there was more to the story but she didn't push. She was surprised Lou had shared so much with her. Though Lou joked and was full of sarcasm, she didn't seem to share a lot of what was inside of her.

Lou then said, pointing to where they could barely see the mountains in the fading light, "On the other side of those mountains is a desert. We got southeast to go around it. For one, it's dangerous to go into the desert without proper supplies, and two, there is a monarchy there that you do not want to know. It's best to stay away from Trines' desert and especially so from the Lady of Trines."

The blacksmith was silent before a moment before she said, "My dad and friends used to call me Bay. What my mother called me, I will never tell."

Lou grinned, "Well, Bay, what your mother called you couldn't have been worse then what my mom called me. I'll tell you if you tell me."

Bay shook her head. Lou grinned, "I never met a blacksmith called Bay. There's so many ways I could think of why you got that name."

Bay only gave a tiny smile and laid down to go to sleep. Lou followed her actions and stared up at the starry sky. She was glad she had thrown them into the lake. She thought Bay was a weird name for a blacksmith, but knew she couldn't talk. Lou was a weird name for a duchess.

The next morning they practiced hand-to-hand combat and since they were on better terms, the morning went a lot better then the one before. They then started traveling around the large lake.

Lou said, "I've traveled around this lake once before. I was told I visited the ocean when I was child, but I don't remember it. To me, this is the ocean."

"My mother was born in an ocean village. She traveled inland as soon as she was able to leave. Said she hated the smell and the endlessness of it. But she did come to miss it," Bay said. "I've never seen it, but I'd like to."

The night Bay asked, after training with her hammer, "How do you handle having your hair so long? In the forge, I would just tie mine back, but it's still a hassle if I do that now."

Lou looked over at Bay, who was messing with her wild tresses. She ignored the fact that she loved when women were covered in sweat and flushed. "I used to long to cut all my hair off when I was training growing up. I was never allowed to. So it's was just something I learned to bear."

"Well I don't have to bear it," Bay said, picking up her knife. She opened her kit to pull out her sharpening stone. After sharpening it to her liking, she grinned. "Say goodbye hair."

Lou watched in mixed opinions as Bay cut off locks of her hair. She was amused by the sight but also saddened. She had liked the blacksmith's long hair. It showed a wilder side of the quiet woman. Bay asked, as she cut it as close as she could, "Will you help me shave it?"

Lou laughed, "You trust me that much?"

Bay looked at her and said, seriously and simply, "Yes."

That stopped Lou's laughter and she nodded since she didn't trust her voice. She shaved Bay's head as carefully as she would hold a newborn baby. She said afterward, as Bay kept rubbing her hand over the smooth skin, "It's rare I say this but you are one of the few who look good bald as they do with hair." The faint blush Bay gave her as well as the thanks was worth more than a trip of a nice brothel to Lou.

Lou and Bay traveled for another week around the lake. They either ran or trained in hand maneuvers in the morning and trained with their weapons at night. Bay was curious as to why Lou never let her watch her sword practice, but didn't push the matter. Bay was pleased when Lou gave her compliments on her improvement, and tried harder when she made mistakes. As they traveled, Lou would do most of talking. She told stories and jokes. Bay had heard several colorful jokes in her lifetime, but some of the ones Lou told made her blush while she laughed. Bay liked to listen, but when she had something to say, Lou listened.

One day, Lou let them camp early so that she could do some fishing. "I'm tired of dried jerky or the hares we catch," She complained. "I want something else."

Bay watched in great amusement as Lou fished. She wasn't very good at it, but she had fun failing. Lou would get a fish, but in her excitement, would jerk so hard it came off the line. Bay had to finally step in if they wanted anything for dinner. She soon had more fish than they needed, and said, cheerfully, "I caught them so that means you get to clean them. You better get started."

It was Lou's turn to grumble, "I hate you." Bay laughed all the way back to camp.

Bay was practicing a few of her swings when she noticed two people walking towards their camp along side the lake. She kept her hammer in her hands and hoped Lou would appear soon. Bay relaxed, slightly, when she saw it was two women, with large packs, walking towards her. Both were tall with brown hair while one was more broad shouldered then the other. They favored greatly except in age, so much so that Bay was willing to bet they were mother and daughter.

"Hello," The younger woman greeted. Bay nodded. The woman then said, holding up her hands, "We're not going to cause you any harm. You could put down the hammer."

Bay hesitated. It felt like a trap. She was never so glad when Lou walked up, holding a string of cleaned fish and a handful of grass. Lou said, nonchalantly as she walked to their fire, "You might want to do as she says, Bay, or you'll find an arrow sticking out of your chest, and mine."

Bay lowered her hammer to the ground, looking around. Lou said, "There are two women in the forest with two long bows pointed at us. They're probably mother and daughter by the way they both hold their bows incorrectly the same way. There are two others with them, a young male and female who have no relation."

"How do you know that?" The older woman snapped.

"That's easy," Lou said. "I snuck up behind you before coming here to cook our fish. You're not a danger to us."

Bay wished Lou wouldn't insult people who had arrows pointed their way. She watched as two blonde women with bows came out of the forest. The younger looked livid. "Do you still think we are not a threat to you?" The younger said, her bow pointed straight at Lou's head.

Lou barely spared the woman a glance. "I said you weren't a threat. You could kill us if you wanted to, but I don't think you will. Therefore, you are not a danger."

The older blonde woman laughed, "That one has a bit of hunter in her."

"Oh, great, just what we needed," said the older brunette. "Another hunter."

"Better a hunter then a carpenter," retorted the older blonde. "Though the tall one looks to be a carpenter."

"I am not a hunter. I am a warrior," Lou corrected as she pulled out a pan from one of the packs and a pouch of fat which she used to grease the pan. She then started cooking the fish over the fire. She tore the grass, which Bay could now see was herbs, and sprinkled it over the fish.

"And I'm a blacksmith," Bay corrected as well.

The younger brunette said, "Well I think it's time for an introduction. My name is Rowan, and

this is my mother Ash."

The older blonde lowered her bow and said, "I am Audrey and this is my daughter, Laura." She then turned and said, "Come on out."

Bay watched as two others walked from the forest. One was a teenaged girl and the other was a teenaged boy. The boy had darker skin than the others so she wondered where he came from.

Rowan said, "That is Willa. We are from a place called..."

Laura interrupted, her bow still raised, "They don't need to know that."

Bay was amused at the glare the two women exchanged. She figured, considering how their mothers had glared at each other, it was a family rivalry. Rowan finally turned her attention back to Lou and Bay, "And this is our friend..."

Rowan was interrupted again but this time by the boy. "We've met already, Rowan."

When he started walking towards Lou, Bay raised her hammer again. He didn't look like the type who could cause any real harm, but she didn't want to take any chance. As she raised her hammer, Laura's bow turned towards her.

Lou gave the boy her complete attention and gasped as she stood. "Alexander?"

Alexander bowed, slightly. "Commander Louisatina."

Lou winced and she heard Bay start to laugh. "Louisatina?"

Lou glared at her, "There is nothing wrong with my name. But, Alexander, please call me Lou. I'm no longer a commander."

Bay lowered her hammer again and moved to the forgotten fish. She found something to stir them with to keep them from burning. She said, "And my name is Bay."

Laura said, finally lowering her bow, "Yeah, nice to meet you. Let's get back to back to the part where you two know each other."

Lou was still so amazed that Alexander was in front of her, and not under his mother's thumb, that she didn't answer the question. Alexander did the honors. "Commander Louisatina once visited my mother's palace. She was a temporary ambassador overseeing a treaty between Trines and Vulgea."

Lou nodded. "I'm surprised with how much work we got down while we were there. Your mother threw a party every night. I don't know if I'll ever forget them."

Alexander's eyes widened as he made a gesture with his hand urging Lou not to talk any further.

Lou saw his companions' eyes darken with angry when she mentioned parties, especially Rowan and Laura's eyes. Lou said, as it dawned on her, "Ah, I get it. You were slaves."

Bay winced at the lack of etiquette Lou had. Before most of the group could blink, Laura was in Lou's personal space. She said, slowly, clearly, and firmly, "We are not slaves."

Lou said, their eyes level, "You're not going to be happy until we prove which one of us is the best, are you? Let me answer that question for you. I could kill you at this very moment. I might die since you have five companions who would want to get revenge, but you still would be dead."

Lou then stepped away from Laura and turned her attention to the rest of the crowd. She laughed, "Now who I want to see fight is the tallest among us fight. Blacksmith versus carpenter. That would be a fight to see."

It was easy to tell that Rowan and Bay were the tallest. They glanced at each other, sizing the other person up. Rowan gave Bay a corner grin, and Bay nodded in return. They knew they would have to wrestle, sometime.

The six were invited to camp with Lou and Bay. They accepted. Lou watched as Audrey and Ash argued bitterly while making dinner, but it did not stop them from doing their work. She was amused how they worked seamless together despite their bickering. They acted like a married couple to her. She would say the same about their daughters except for the fact they weren't speaking to each other. Besides from a few hostile glares and words, they hadn't even interacted with each other at all. She asked Willa and Alexander about it as they went to gather firewood for both of their fires.

"Are Rowan and Laura having a fight?"

Willa looked at her, amused. "Rowan and Laura are always fighting. Except they used to shout and bicker like Ash and Audrey. Now they don't even talk to each other unless they have to. I think I liked it better when they were shouting."

Lou nodded as she formed a wild theory in her head. She figured Rowan and Laura liked each other, but didn't want to admit it. Their verbal fighting was just a way of blowing off some sexual tension. She figured since they were slaves of Lady Trines, and good looking, they were entertainment at one of parties. Performing allowed them to do what they longed to do, and then a fight happened afterwards. They were now not talking to each other because they were afraid of love. Lou paused to look up at the heavens and prayed they would never make her fall in love. It made you do stupid things. It was better to have a hating relationship like Bay and she had.

Lou chatted with Audrey and Ash over a shared dinner of fish and quail Audrey and Laura had shot. "So how far are we from the Grengots' Mountains?"

Lou thought. "I'd say about two months of traveling. Is that your tribe is?"

"A few days south of it," Ash replied.

Audrey said, with a grin, "We could always use another hunter."

Lou shook her head. "I'm a warrior, not a hunter."

Audrey said, softly, looking into the fire, "We could use a few of them."

Lou barely saw the move by the light of the fire, but she saw Ash squeeze Audrey's thigh.

Rowan and Bay argued over which was more important, metal or wood. Laura sat far from everyone as possible, brooding. Willa and Alexander sat close together, whispering. He whispered, "Don't you find it funny?"

"What?"

"At how Lou favors Laura. Same shade of hair, both with blue eyes. Rowan and Bay both are crafters and share green eyes."

Willa looked at the four of them and said, "But they are different. Lou and Bay have lighter eyes than Laura and Rowan. Bay has auburn hair, what little of it there is. They are also different in temperament. Lou appears to be as carefree as Rowan is, and Bay looked as serious as Laura when we first arrived."

Alexander shook her head. "But Lou and Laura both share the same first letter in their names. If you asked me, the creator of this world made it so we would meet and did so out of humor." Willa shook her head and went back to eating her dinner. Alexander was just full of theories and ideas. She thought it was cute.

Lou awoke in the morning to sounds of struggle. She jumped to her feet, sword in hand. She then stopped and watched, amused. Bay and Rowan were wrestling as if they were bored adolescence children. She joined the crowd of onlookers to watch. Ash had the look of a slightly annoyed, exasperated mother while Audrey, Willa, and Alexander were placing wagers. Laura, on the other hand, looked angry with her arms crossed. Lou was only amused.

The pair wrestled for almost half an hour. Once, when Bay was dumped into the dirt, Lou called out, "You're not going to let a carpenter get the best of you, are you?"

Bay growled, tackling Rowan, "I hate you, Louisatina."

"Well there's no need for name calling," Lou grumbled.

The fight finally ended when Rowan flipped Bay onto her back and had her hands pinned above her head. Lou blinked in surprise. She hadn't seen that coming, and she didn't know how Rowan had done it. Lou was able to figure out two things from the move Rowan had made. The first being it was a move she had learned from her mother since Ash had a tiny smile on her face



while she shook her head. The second being that Rowan had used that move on somebody else in the group. Lou watched as Laura went from angry to furious.

"If you're done playing, can we please get going? Some of us want to get home."

Willa said, watching Rowan help Bay off the ground, "You sure are in a hurry to get married, Laura."

Lou watched as Laura blushed in embarrassment, and Rowan flushed with anger. She decided that there was just too much drama with that group, and it was best each party got on their way. The groups said goodbye, wishing each other the best of luck.

Bay looked back. The others were out of sight. "If we didn't both have missions, I would have liked to camp with them a few more nights."

Lou said, "Well we're not in a rush, but they seemed to be. There was also just too much drama in that group. I'm sure Ash and Audrey are sleeping together, and Rowan and Laura want to be."

Bay nodded as she adjusted her shoulders. Lou was making them walk, and she had ordered Bay to carry her hammer. Bay then stopped as something Lou said hit her.

"What do you mean we're not in a rush?"

"Deacon already knows I'm coming," Lou said, stopping as well.

"What do you mean he already knows you're coming?" Bay asked, getting upset.

"I sent him a message."

Bay gasped, "What happened to the element of surprise?"

Lou shrugged as she started walking again. "I do regret Alexander having to leave so soon. He used to be a decent swordfighter. It would have been nice to get in a round of practice."

"You didn't answer my question," Bay growled. "And what do you mean decent swordfighter? He looks like a stiff breeze could knock him over."

"Rule number 302: Don't judge a book by its cover."

Bay started after Lou. "You still didn't answer my question."

Lou glanced back at her with a grin, "Really? I thought I did. Oh well."

"I really do hate you," Bay said as Lou laughed.

They traveled for another week, the mountains slowly getting closer. Just when Bay thought the

lake would never end, they came upon the source. It was a medium size river that flowed down from the closest mountain. Bay looked up, trying to see the top of mountain, but found she couldn't. "How did they cross those giants?"

Lou looked up. "There are old mountain trails littered across those mountains. But few trails to the top. I hear there's always snow on top of the mountain."

"I've never seen snow," Bay said. Lou laughed. "Well I'm afraid you won't see any in Vulgea. At least not until a few more months."

They traveled along the foot of the mountains for another two weeks. Bay asked, one day as they walked, "How much longer till we reach your country?"

Lou looked surprised. "You mean I didn't tell you? We've been in Vulgea for the past two weeks. The mountain range is Vulgea's eastern border. The Huga makes up part of our border as well."

"The Huga?"

Lou really did look surprised then. "The lake. You mean I didn't tell you the name of the lake?"

Bay really wanted to be angry with Lou, but she couldn't. The more she traveled with Lou, the more she learned how absentminded her companion could be. Lou remembered told her what was important, but assumed she had already told her the little things.

Bay sighed, ruefully. "You're just getting old, Louisatina. It happens."

Lou stood with her mouth open, watching Bay walk on. She finally protested, walking fast to keep up with her, "I'm not old. I'm only a few years older than you."

"Whatever, Louisatina."

"I hate you," Lou said. She then looked at her horse, "Am I old, Fritz?"

Fritz neighed and she frowned. "Who asked you?"

Bay, and the horses, laughed at her. Lou had told Bay she could name her horse, but she refused. Lou got the feeling Bay didn't want to get attached to anything so she left the horse unnamed. Bay did take good care of it, but she didn't connect to it like Fritz and Lou had.

The next day, as they traveled, Bay remarked that they didn't seem to take any of the roads or well-worn pathways. Lou replied, "That's because I'm famous in these parts. Wouldn't want to get mugged by fans now would we?"

Bay rolled her eyes. "Sure, Louisatina."

Lou would have stomped her foot if she hadn't been on Fritz. "It's not fair that you know my real

first name, and I don't know yours. Tell me."

Bay laughed, "No."

"I hate you."

The next day, Lou said, "We're about day's ride from the capital."

"That's good right?"

"Well, yes and no. It's just going to get a lot harder from here on. We're going to need help to get into the capital. They'll be looking for me."

Bay retorted, "Well they wouldn't be if you hadn't told them you were coming."

Lou ignored her and looked around. She finally pointed in a direction, "It's that way."

"What's that way?"

"The Countess Olivia's castle. We'll need her help to get into the palace. Getting into the capital is easy, but getting into the palace is hard."

"And who is Countess Olivia?"

Bay was surprised when Lou blushed, slightly. Bay was surprised when she felt a seed of anger develop in her mind. She knew she wasn't going to like this Olivia one bit.

"So you're taking us to your lover's castle? Want to get in a quickie before you do what you promised to do?" Bay had meant for it to be a joke but it came out harsh.

Lou felt a sting from Bay's words, but she joked it off. "Well if you knew Olivia, you wouldn't be asking that question. That woman is an irritating, sexy rabbit, but a sexy rabbit nevertheless."

Bay fought the urge to smack Lou, and just followed her through the thin woods. Little did she know just how accurate Lou's description was. They traveled for two hours before the land cleared out and on a large green hill was a castle. It was the biggest castle Bay had ever seen, but Lou stated the palace was ten times as large. The castle was three levels tall and the size of Bay's village. The walls were made of white sandstone which Lou told her came from the desert. The castle had a large wall surrounding it with a large black metal gate for the door. Inside the wall, besides the castle, were the stables, the blacksmith's forge, the guard's barracks, and servant's quarters.

"No moat?" Bay asked, almost disappointed. This was her first castle after all.

Lou laughed, "No. Moats are old fashion. A wonderful defense but it was found castle with moats had more diseases and deaths. The reason is people tend to dump their excrement into it to

make it worse for invaders, but that only breeds disease."

At the surprised look Bay gave her, Lou said, defensive, "I was once a commander. I had to know lots of stuff to keep my army safe."

Bay rolled her eyes, but Lou ignored her. She rode towards the large black gate, and Bay followed her. At the gate, a man shouted down from the top, "What do you want?"

"Tell the Countess that Lou wants to see her."

The guard laughed. "Go away, peasant. The Countess would want nothing to do with the likes of you."

Bay watched as Lou seemed to straighten in her saddle. Even Fritz seemed to straighten up. She watched as Lou took on a regal look. Lou said, her voice hard and cold, "Guard, you will tell the Countess Olivia that there is someone here who wishes to see her or you will regret ever being born."

The guard threw a bucket of slop over the wall. He missed but some splattered onto Fritz and Lou's pants. The guard laughed again as did many others. Unlucky for him that Lou had already drawn a crowd. The captain of the guards came to stand beside the laughing guard. He looked down and stared in surprised. He shouted, "Is that you, Lou?"

The guard stopped laughing. He started to look afraid. Lou nodded, curtly. The captain shouted, "Open the gate."

Bay was worried about the hard look in Lou's eyes. She had never seen that before. Even when Lou killed those bandits, she hadn't seen such a look. This had to be Commander Louisatina, and not Lou.

The captain of the guards met Lou at the entrance. With him was the guard who had threw the bucket of muck. Lou glared down at the now trembling guard. She got down from Fritz, Bay did as well, and glared at him for a full minute. Just when Bay thought she was going to unsheathe her sword and strike the man down, Lou merely growled, "You will groom my horse, and my companion's horse, until they are spotless. You will do so under the careful watch of the head stableman. Is that understood?"

The man nodded quickly, thankful to still have a head to nod with. The guard took the horses while the captain ushered them inside the castle. Bay was rather proud that Lou hadn't cut him into pieces, but any other thoughts other than awe and wonder soon disappeared. The so-called foyer of the castle was incredible. In the grand hall, you could see all the way up to the ceilings with its' arch domes and long columns of alabaster. There were large tapestries on the wall and servants scurrying everywhere. Bay was amazed while Lou looked slightly bored. Both travelers winced when a high pitch, nasal voice cried, "Lou, you've come back to me!"

Bay and Lou turned to look up the grand stairwell. There stood the most beautiful raven-haired

woman Bay had ever seen. She made angels look like mere mortals, and the revealing slip she wore would make angels become devils for a chance to be with her. Bay thought that no woman in the world should look that good, should be that perfect. Then the woman spoke again.

"Lou, darling I've missed you so much."

Bay was barely able to contain her wince. That woman's voice was only slightly less annoying than nails raking over glass. The look Bay gave Lou said it all. "How in the world did you sleep with that woman?"

In reply, Lou briefly ran her hand across her lips that meant, "I gagged her."

Bay rolled her eyes but had to admit that would make having sex with her much easier.

When Olivia was down the stairs, Lou went forward to greet her. Olivia said, "Why don't we take this to my private parlor?" Olivia then gave Bay such a look that Bay's body was confused. She was torn between becoming aroused and fearing for her life. Olivia looked like she wanted to eat her alive. "Your friend can come to."

Lou and Bay followed the Countess back up the stairs into a private room. The moment the door was closed, the Countess threw herself on Lou, kissing her wildly.

"Oh my love" kiss "I've missed" kiss "you so. Don't" kiss "ever" kiss "leave me" kiss "again!"  
Long kiss.

Bay was amazed a woman could kiss that long and say that much all in one breath. Lou was finally able to peel Olivia off of her. "Olivia, we're here on important matters. Fun time is later."

Olivia looked very disappointed. She even pouted but finally nodded. She sighed as she started straightening her clothes, "So why are you here, darling?"

Lou opened her mouth to speak, but Olivia raised her hand. "Hold on, sweetie. If this is going to be about violence or conspiracy, I must have my tea first. I'll have my handmaid send up some."

Olivia went over to a corner of the room where a long golden rope hung from the ceiling. She pulled on it twice and then back to stand near Lou. Bay thought she would have been standing in her if she got any closer. Olivia asked, rubbing against Lou, "So who is your friend?"

Lou took a step towards Bay, as if meaning to give a proper introduction, "This is Bay. She's a blacksmith."

Bay felt awkward as Olivia started walking around her. Olivia said, licking her lips, "I've never had a blacksmith before. Those arms...I would love wrapped in them. And your hair, I love the length. It feels so interesting when I do this."

Bay shuddered as Olivia ran her hand across the back of her head, but Bay didn't know if she

shuddered because it felt good, or because she did not want this woman touching her. The length of her hair was past the prickly stage and into the stage where it felt good to be rubbed. She glared at Lou, who looked thoroughly amused.

"I would love to rub your head, especially if you were between my legs. I couldn't grab hold but I could do this," Olivia said. She then used her nails to scratch from the top of Bay's head to the back of her neck. Bay sucked in a breath of air. It had hurt but felt good at the same time. She was grateful when she heard the door open behind her.

"Your tea, my lady."

"Place it on the table."

Bay turned to look at the woman who just entered. She gasped and when the woman looked up from her job, she gasped as well.

"Jasmine?"

"Oceania?"

Bay had never thought to see the woman in front of her again. It had been two years ago when she had went to her country's capital for a vacation, and had an encounter with a visiting ambassador's maid. Those two nights had been very enjoyable.

Olivia laughed, "It seems my little pet knows your pet, my pet."

Lou looked back and forth between Bay and the maid. "So it seems."

Lou decided she did not like the maid one bit. She had the body of a youthful girl, but looked to be in her twenties. Lou did not like her strawberry blonde hair or dark hazel eyes one bit. Lou tried to justify her dislike. The maid knew Bay's real name, and she hadn't.

Jasmine soon got over her shock and soon threw herself at Bay. Bay caught her, surprised, and found she held a woman just as hungry as the Countess. She found herself being kissed, bit, nipped, and felt up all at the same time.

Lou was confused when she felt a shot of anger go through her body. She hadn't been bothered when Olivia had touched Bay, so why was she upset watching this other woman do so?

Olivia watched them with half-closed eyes. She said, softly to Lou, "Wouldn't you like to share a bed with them? Can you just see us all on a bed? I would love to see you with your smith. Two strong bodies covered in sweat and passion, hips rolling, backs arching, gasping for air. I wonder which one of you would be on top?"

"Enough," Lou said, sharply. She really needed to bed someone and soon. The image Olivia created left her damp and craving more. She hadn't planned on bedding Olivia while she was

here, but now she was sure was going to have to. "Olivia," She growled, warningly.

Olivia sighed. "Jasmine let the smith have some air and pour me a cup of tea."

The maid reluctantly pulled away. Bay reached up to feel her neck. She was sure she would have lovebites there tomorrow if they weren't already showing now. She looked at Lou but only found Commander Lou standing in her place. She was almost glad to see the professional woman since she needed to catch her breath.

Olivia took her cup of tea from Jasmine and sat down in a plump overstuffed chair. She motioned Jasmine to give the others a cup and said, after taking a sip, "So what is the mission this time, darling?"

Lou accepted the cup offered to her but placed it aside. She said, "I merely want to enter the palace, and visit someone."

"Hmm," Olivia said. "You came all the way back to Vulgea just visit someone? Would that someone be Deacon?"

"Why do you think I'm here to see Deacon?"

Olivia gave a high-pitched laugh. "He has the whole country on the lookout for you, pet. He's under the impression you are going to kill him."

"I am."

Olivia stopped sipping her tea to stare at her incredulous. She set her cup down on the table beside her and gasped, "I know you dislike Deacon and heaven knows he's not fit to be king, but that's no reason to kill him. How can you kill your own cousin?"

"Cousin?" Bay interrupted. She turned to stare at Lou. "You never said he was your cousin."

Lou shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter? How can you think it doesn't matter?"

"Because he's already dead to me," Lou said. "I promised to kill him and when I made that promise, he already died in my mind. I always keep my promises."

Olivia muttered to no one in particular, still in shock, "She does at that."

Bay was beyond annoyed, beyond frustrated. She snapped, "So what does that make you, a princess?"

Olivia snapped out of her surprise to answer for Lou. She stood, walking over to a large colorful curtain on the wall. "No, she's not a princess. I give you Louisatina, Duchess of Vulgea and

Commander of the Vulgern Armies." She pulled the curtain back to show a large oil painting. Olivia said, looking up fondly, "I ordered this to be painted when you left."

Lou groaned while Bay's jaw dropped. It was a painting of Lou in full decorative armor with war ruins behind her and a look of battle lust on her face. The artist was able to capture Lou perfectly, but Lou was not flattered.

Jasmine said, "You do look grand, Commander."

Bay snapped out of her daze. She said, clearly upset, "You're a duchess and the commander. So what else have you haven't you told me? "

Lou said, defending herself, "I told you I was a commander."

"But not the commander of the whole country. You certainly didn't mention the part of being a duchess," Bay snapped, almost shouting.

Lou snapped back, exasperated, "I'm *not* a duchess or a commander. Not anymore. I'm just Lou." Lou shot her painting a look of disgust before storming out of room. She called back as she walked off, "I'll be in my room if it's still there."

Olivia pouted as Lou stormed off. She then gave Bay a look that made her wince. "Are you happy now? With Lou being so upset, there's no way I'll be able to enjoy my afternoon orgasm."

Olivia stood and strolled out of the room. "Jasmine, show your friend to a guest room and report to my room at once."

Jasmine sighed, disappointed. "Yes, my lady." She took Bay by the arm and started leading towards a room. Bay stopped her. "Jasmine, show me to Lou's room. I need to talk to her."

Jasmine bit her lip, torn between orders. She finally nodded and took Bay up the stairs and down a hall. She pointed to a door and left her. Bay took a deep breath before knocking on the door.

"Not now, Olivia, I have a headache."

Bay opened the door and said, sticking her head in, "I don't think that excuse would stop her."

Lou shot her a glare. Lou was sitting on a large four-posted bed. The bed was the grandest thing in the entire room. There were few items on the wall, just an old shield and a few old swords. There were a few books on a desk beside a window, but that was it. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Well I want to talk to you. How could you keep something so big from me?"

"It's not like you tell me everything either Oceania," Lou said, accusingly. "Does it matter that Deacon is my cousin?"



"Yes," Bay snapped.

"Why?"

Bay faltered. "Because."

Lou rolled her eyes. "It doesn't matter does it? I promised you I would kill him and I will."

Bay sighed. "It's just hard for me. The man who destroyed my village and killed my friends is your cousin. It's almost like..."

"Like I'm him," Lou finished, sadly. "But I'm not. I knew you would think this way. That's why I didn't tell you."

Bay pinched the bridge of her nose as a headache started to form. She complained, "None of this is as easy as I thought it would be. It doesn't feel right anymore. The longer I'm with you, the more I forget why we're together in the first place. You are going to kill a man for me. I hate him, or the idea of him, but he's your cousin. It would be like killing you and as much as I hate you, I don't want that."

Lou was touched, though she didn't show it. She said, laughing without humor, "Revenge is never easy. You're a good person, that's why this feels wrong to you. You would never be able to kill Deacon, not in cold blood at least. I could."

Bay walked over and sat beside her. She asked Lou, "Why does he deserve to die? Why not the army who did the actual slaughtering? Why not their commander? Why not your king?"

Lou said, looking at her, "Because Deacon is cruel and evil. Bay, I'm using you as an excuse. I said I was going to kill Deacon to get revenge for you, but I'm actually cleaning up a mess I left behind. I knew what Deacon would do when I left. I abandoned my responsibilities because I was tired of them. I left a whole country in the hands of a demented ruler. What happened to your village was my fault. What kind of person does that make me?"

Bay replied, meeting her look, "I honestly don't know. It's not up to me to answer that, I think. But I do think you are a good person. You wouldn't have pulled me from the ruins and gave my people a proper funeral if you weren't."

They looked away as the moment got too intense. Lou finally offered, "I'll tell you about my life if you tell me about yours."

"All right, but there isn't much to tell. My mother was a blacksmith from a village on the Sea of Nortia. She said it was really an ocean. She must have missed it, even though she said she hated it, because she named me after it. My father, who was another blacksmith, called me Bay because he had met my mother in a guild gathering in a bay town a few miles from my mother's village. They fell in love and moved to my father's village, Amok. I was born and I grew up. All I ever wanted to be was a blacksmith. My parents taught me all they knew, and I obtained my

journeyman's license. I was all set to travel when my father died. Soon after my mother died. It was hard on me, but I knew they were at peace and together. I couldn't leave my village without a smith so I stayed where I was. Until the Vulgerns came."

Bay stopped, her eyes burned but no tears came. Lou hesitated before asking, "What happened?"

Bay swallowed before speaking. "It was a regular morning. I was working on hinges for a barn door when I heard screaming. I ran outside to see what the matter was. Riders were swooping down the road. Some shot bows; other used their swords. The ones with torches started setting fire to all the houses. A foot soldier saw me as he was setting fire to my forge and attacked me. We fought. Me with my bell hammer and him with a knife. He drove me back into my shop. I don't know how long we fought but the roof was in flames. Beams started falling from the ceiling. Just as I was able to knock him out with my hammer, a beam fell and hit me on the head. I fell and others boards fell on top me."

"I'm surprised I'm alive. I was sure I would have burned to death or the smoke would have killed me. I remember there being a strong wind that morning, maybe that's what blow the smoke away so I could breathe. Most of my shop was stone so only the roof caught on fire. I guess I am lucky, but I don't know."

Lou wanted to hug her, but was afraid she would be rejected. They were quiet for a moment before Bay said, trying to act brighter, "Now it's your turn."

Lou shook her head as she sighed. "My father was the king's brother. He was the Duke and commander of all the armies. My mother was a lower noble, but called the most beautiful creature in all the land. The king longed to marry her, but as a king he could not marry a low noble. So my father married her and they conceived me. I was always being torn in two directions growing up. My father wanted me to be a commander like himself while everyone else thought I should be the greatest and prettiest duchess in all the land. When my father died in battle when I was five, I decided to honor his memory and become a commander."

"I trained hard all my youth. I had several instructors in the arts of weaponry, tactics, and war. I wanted to be the best commander. The only person I ever really socialized with growing up was my cousin, Lila the princess of Vulgea. She wanted to be able to train like me, but her father wouldn't allow it. So she studied how to be a great ruler instead, even though she knew her older brother, Deacon, would receive the crown. However, as I trained through the ranks to commander, the king started taking more interest in me. I led his forces to victory every time and he started dropping hints he wanted me to take the crown after him. That was just something I could not do. I liked being a commander, a warrior, but I was being forced to a politician more than a warrior every year. So I ran away and Deacon took over in my place. That was a year ago. I've just been traveling ever since."

They were silent again. Finally, Bay said, clapping her hand against Lou's leg, "Well, Duchess, I don't think you were made for the life of a noble or a commander. However I will say that painting of you does make you look like quiet the warrior."

Lou fell back onto her bed, groaning. "Did you see that thing? The artist has obviously never seen a battle. I was wearing a chain helm for heavens' sake. No one wears chain helms unless they want to be digging links out of their skull after one good blow to the head. And did you see that armor? The chest plate had a compartment for my boobs! It's so ridiculous. No real armor has places to put your breasts in. A good female warrior binds them down."

Bay lay back on the bed with her, laughing. When she finally sobered up, she did say, "You're right about the armor. Adding breasts to a chest plate would only weaken the metal, allowing things to penetrate it easier."

"I'm always right, Oceania," Lou teased.

Now it was Bay's turn to groan. "I don't know what my mother was thinking. But it's better than Louisatina, Louisatina."

"You'll pay for that," Lou growled, playfully. She started tickling Bay, who was very ticklish, but so was Lou. Bay retaliated and soon, their sides ached and they were out of breath. They lay side by side for a while before Lou stood up. She said, "The day is still young. You are a blacksmith and I've never seen you make anything. There's a forge here."

Bay laughed at Lou's randomness. She leaned up on one elbow and asked, "And what would you like me to make, my duchess?"

Lou cast her a look but said, "Anything. Nails, horseshoes, anything. I've never seen you make anything."

Bay retorted, "Well you're a warrior and I've never seen you use your sword."

"Yes you have. I used my sword on those bandits."

Bay protested, "I don't remember much. I was injured and tied to the back of a horse. And you never let me watch you practice while we traveled here."

Lou said, "So if I want to watch you forge something, you have to watch me swordfight?" Bay nodded. Lou sighed, but went over to the desk's chair where she had hung her sword belt. She drew her sword from its' sheath and turned back to Bay. She said, balancing the sword on one finger, "You would like the craftsmanship in this blade. It's perfectly balanced and the blade holds an edge longer than any other sword I have ever wielded. The maker is sadly gone, but this sword is a masterpiece."

Bay had always admired Lou's sword so she nodded in agreement. Lou flipped the sword up into the air and catch it easily as it came down. Lou said, flexing her shoulders, "Keep your eyes on me if you can."

Bay sat up so she could watch better as Lou slowly started moving through a series of positions. Bay watched as Lou started moving faster and faster. Cutting, spinning, slashing, thrusting,

dashing. To Bay it looked like a lethal dance, and she was mesmerized by it. After a few minutes, Lou stopped. Her last move was a bow to Bay. Lou had barely worked up a sweat, but Bay was breathless and flushed.

Bay stood, uneasy. She said, her voice tight, "Nice. Let's go see if we can find that forge." She started out the room and Lou followed her, belting her now sheathed sword to her side. She was curious about Bay's reaction. She had seen the look before on other women, but surely Bay didn't feel that way about her. Bay hated her and she hated Bay.

In an hour's time, it was Lou's turn to be mesmerized. They had found the forge and the old smith had reluctantly let Bay take over part of his forge. He only did so when Commander Lou glared at him. He was surprised to find the youngster knew what she was doing. Granted she was only making a spearhead, since he had been working on an order for a dozen of them.

If Bay was nervous because Lou was watching, she didn't show it. When she slipped on a leather apron and one thick leather glove, she seemed to be a completely new person. She stood straighter, more confident. She took the bar of red-hot iron out of the furnace with a set of tongs and set it on the anvil. With a hammer in the other hand, she went to work.

Lou watched Bay, feeling breathless and flushed but she blamed it on the heat from the furnace. Though she knew Bay was doing her job, to her it seemed like an art. Bay labored over the spearhead: hammering it, heating it, shaping it, cooling it, and finally sharpening it. As the old smith gave a grunt of approval, Lou found it hard to speak. She finally said, before heading back into the palace, "Good job." Bay had seen her face before she had fled. She was sure she had imagined it. Lou couldn't possibly feel that away about her. Lou hated her and she hated Lou.

Lou stated, later, they would spend a week at the castle. The princess's birthday was coming up and with all the celebration, security would be lax. That's when she would attack.

Bay enjoyed her days at the castle. She worked with the old smith most of the day in exchange for some metal and forge time for a project. Nights were the hardest for her. At dinner, she watched Olivia all but sit in Lou's lap and try to feed her. She would watch as Olivia led Lou up to her room, and she felt angry for some reason. Feeling the need to retaliate, she allowed Jasmine lead her to her room at night. She would spend a few hours pleasuring Jasmine and while she got damp, she found she couldn't come from Jasmine's touch. That only caused her to become frustrated.

Lou lay naked on Olivia's bed. She was close, Olivia's skill insured that, but she couldn't come. Finally, Olivia sat up and wiped her mouth. "What's wrong?"

Lou frowned as she sat up. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just stressed."

Olivia licked her lips before saying, "That's a possibility, but I don't think that's the reason. This is the first time in the past few days you've allowed me touch you. You should be a ball of sexual frustration waiting to explode."

"I am ready to explode," Lou groaned.

"That means it's me," Olivia said, seemingly undisturbed by the fact. "Are you attracted to men now?"

Lou looked almost outraged. "You know better than that."

"So that leaves only one other possibility. She is very attractive."

"What? Who?"

Olivia giggled. Lou, now used to Olivia's voice again, did not wince. "Your blacksmith of course."

"I'm not attracted to her," Lou protested. When the Countess gave her a look, Lou amended her statement. "Okay, I am but that doesn't mean anything. I'm attracted to a lot of women."

"Are you in love with all those women?"

Lou gasped, staring at Olivia incredulously. "Love? Love? Who said anything about love? I hate that woman. She hates me back."

Olivia laughed again, enjoying Lou's clueless behavior. "Call it whatever you want, but even my handmaid can see the attraction between you too. She states your blacksmith leaves her room each night just as unsatisfied as you leave mine. Perhaps, tomorrow night, you should go to another room."

The next night Bay watched as Lou went to her room, alone. Olivia had taken another to her room. She wondered if Lou had been turned out in disfavor, or if she had tired of the Countess. She hoped for the latter. She was glad when Jasmine didn't offer to go to her room tonight because she didn't know how she could refuse politely. When Bay started to her own room, she toyed with the idea of going to Lou's room. She thought they could talk or something. However, she chickened out and went to her own room.

She entered her room and jumped when she saw Lou standing in it. "You just scared a year off my life, Lou."

Lou grinned, "That makes you closer to my age."

"No way, Grandma," Bay jested. She closed the door behind her, and asked, "So what are you doing here?"

Lou tried not to fidget. She said, making a motion towards the door, "I can leave if you want."

Bay say, quickly, "No. You don't have to go. Stay."

Lou stopped. They were quiet for a while, looking at everything but each other. Bay finally broke the ice, heading towards her bed, "I have something for you. It's what I've been working on the past few days."

Lou started protesting. "You shouldn't have done that, Bay. I don't deserve anything."

Bay pulled out something from under her pillow and held it secret-like in her hands. Bay ordered, "Close your eyes and don't peek."

Lou laughed but did as she was told. She felt Bay come to stand near her and then something slipped over her head. "You can open them."

Lou looked down to see what was hanging from her neck. While the cord was a plain dark leather, the pendent that hung from it was what incredible. It was a steel shield that came to rest at the top of her cleavage. On top of the shield was wielded a tiny yellow hammer that crossed with a silvery sword.

Bay said, nervous, "The hammer is made of brass and the sword is made of silver. I rounded the edges of the shield so it wouldn't stab into your skin. I...thought you might like it. Something to remember me by, when this is all over."

Lou touched the pendent softly. She said, softly, looking up, "It's beautiful, Bay, but I don't need anything to help me remember you, Bay. And I have nothing to give you in return."

Bay flushed at the compliment and said, "You already gave me my life back. I would have died if you hadn't come along."

They stared at each other for a breathless moment. Neither knew who moved first, but in the next moment, they were kissing. Lou was sure her body was acting on its' own since her arms had somehow wrapped around Bay's neck. Bay's hands had found their own way to Lou's hips, pulling her closer. Bay wasn't sure if she was the one who groaned, but she knew it was Lou who had whimpered when she pushed her leg between Lou's.

Lou tugged on the bottom of Bay's tunic and pulled it off when Bay raised her arms. Tossing it aside, she brought her hands back down to run along Bay's strong, blacksmith arms. She was surprised by the sudden desire to bite them. After her own tunic soon discarded, followed by both of their breeches, Lou pushed Bay back onto her bed and lowered herself on top of her. Their hips ground together as they kept their eyes on each other.

Lou swallowed as the urge to confess came over her. "Bay?"

Bay, who had been busy running her hands over Lou's strong hips and firm buttocks, stopped at the serious tone in Lou's voice. Bay watched as the closest thing to fear crossed Lou's eyes. She asked, concerned, "What is it?"

Lou said the first thing to come to her mind. She had meant to use different words, but it came

out as, "I hate you."

Bay looked stunned. She started to feel confused and hurt when she realized what Lou was trying to say. She then softly smiled and replied, "I hate you too."

Bay flipped their positions, claiming Lou's lips in a long kiss as she did. Her thigh between Lou's, she rolling her hips in time to the pulse between her legs. Lou had moved her lips down to Bay's neck, and then broke away all of a sudden. She said, urgently, "Stop, stop. I'm going to...it's been too long...stop."

Bay grinned down at her as she merely kept rocking her leg against the abundant wetness she felt down there. Lou's blue eyes took on a desperate look before they could no longer stay open. Lou clawed desperately at Bay's shoulders as she came, crying out. Bay was awestruck.

Lou rode against Bay's thigh until she started coming down from her orgasm. She let out a long breath and looked up at the smug Bay. Bay said, pleased with herself, "It's best to get the first one out of the way. I have a lot more planned for you." She brought a hand to cup one of Lou's perfect breasts, her thumb teasing a hard pink nipple. She looked down to admire her hand there and at her pendant that lay between Lou's breasts. She then looked back up.

Lou grinned, flipping them over again, pinning Bay's hands "You'll have to wait until I'm done with you." "Since when do you give the orders?" Bay asked, tugging at her wrists. Lou merely grinned again. "Since I'm the duchess and you are the blacksmith." Lou took Bay's hands and urged them up to the top of the bed. Wrapping Bay's hands around two of the rungs, Lou whispered in her ear, "You might want to hold on for this." Bay shivered as Lou moved down her body. She was grateful to have something to hold onto before it was over.

Lou slipped out of Bay's embrace shortly before dawn. She gathered her clothes and went to her room. Olivia was already waiting there with a smug look on her face. "I knew the two of you loved each other."

Lou didn't even bother to argue. She merely asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes. My fastest horse is waiting outside. If you ride hard, you'll make it in time to sneak into one of the wagons going in with food for the princess's birthday party tomorrow night. Are you sure you want to do this, Louisatina?"

Lou checked her sword before sheathing it, "Yes."

Bay awoke late in the morning. First she stretched, feeling sore in places she didn't know existed. Lou had worn her out last night. She suddenly realized she was alone in bed. Sitting up, she looked around. She wondered if it was all a dream, but the marks on her body said it wasn't. Bay was smiling at the bite marks on her arms when a feeling of horror crept over Bay. She knew why Lou was gone.

Bay busted into Olivia's private chambers. She didn't care that Olivia had something strapped to

her hips and had one of her maids straddling her. Olivia said, barely glancing at her, "I'm kind of busy, dear. Come back later, unless you'd like to join us."

Bay growled, "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"You know who!" Bay shouted. Olivia sighed and whispered to the naked maid on top of her. The maid nodded and eased herself off of Olivia's lap. Bringing Olivia a silk robe, she then disappeared into a side room.

As Olivia slipped on her gown, she said, "Lou has gone to fulfill her promise to you. She's probably already halfway there."

"We've got to stop her. She could be killed! I don't want revenge anymore. I just want her to come back."

Olivia said, rubbing her hand over the tent her gown made in her lap, "There's no way to stop her. She'll be back tomorrow morning. Tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

"And what if she's not?"

Olivia paused and said, sadly, "Then we'll have heard the news of Commander Louisatina's death."

Bay cursed every word she knew. Olivia heard her say, in-between the curses, "I hate you so much, Louisatina."

Olivia shook her head. "What a strange couple." Olivia then turned her attention back to her maid as she reappeared. "Did you get what I asked?"

The maid showed the item to Olivia and Olivia grinned. "I think you're a big enough woman now. Let's see how it fits."

Bay stayed in her room all day, praying to everyone and everything she could think of. All she wanted was Lou to come back safely. She hoped her prayers would come true.

Lou was surprised at how easy it was to creep into the palace. Security had really went lax since she left. If she was still commander, someone wouldn't be able to do what she was doing now. It was easy to creep into the prince's room while everyone was in the grand hall. She waited in Deacon's closet until Deacon came up to his room, his golden tunic shining brightly as his gold crown against his golden hair. He was the kingdom's golden prince, but she knew he was black inside. She watched as he took off his crown and pulled off his tunic. She was able to see the L she had sliced into his back the last time they had fought.

"I knew you would come, Lou."



Lou stepped out of the closet as Deacon turned around. He smiled, darkness in his own blue eyes. "I've been waiting for this day."

"Well, it's here."

Deacon drew the golden-hilted sword from his side and said, "I hope you are ready to die."

"After you."

Bay was on pins and needles. Tomorrow morning and afternoon had faded into night, and still no word. Olivia kept telling her that no news was good news, but Bay knew that wasn't always the truth. Deacon could have killed Lou and did away with her secretly. Bay had just started rebuilding her life. She didn't know if she could do it again.

Bay jumped up at the sound of commotion coming from the great hall. Her knees protested after kneeling on the hard, stone floor for so long, but she ignored them. She lurched into the hallway and stopped at the top of the stairs to look down. Her knees then give out then, but in relief. On a stretcher between Olivia and a light brown-haired beauty was Lou. She was bandaged and unconscious, but the look of joy on Olivia's face let Bay know she was still alive.

Bay got to feet again and rushed down the stairs. She came to a skidding halt at Lou's said, and asked, breathless, "What happened?"

The brown-haired one said, "Let's get her to her room before I tell what happened."

When Lou was tucked into her bed, still unconscious, the other woman introduced herself. "My name is Lila, and you must be Bay. She wouldn't stop talking about you before the doctor drugged her to sleep so he could tend her wounds without her getting in the way. You'll learn she dislikes doctors, and professional cooks."

A little calmer now, Bay was able to see the resemblance between Lou and Lila. She asked, "Is Lila your real name or a shorter one like Lou uses?"

Light blue eyes that looked like Lou's sparkled. "I'll never tell."

Bay laughed, "Well can you at least tell me what happened?"

"Of course. It was a horrible thing. My cousin Lou received word of an assassination attempt against my brother and myself. She tracked them all the way back to Vulgea. She entered Deacon's room to fight off an attacker, but my brother jumped in as well. Two against one should have been easy but this attacker had supernatural powers. Deacon was killed and my cousin injured. Guards rushed to Deacon's room at the sound of all the commotion, but it was too late. The attacker had already fled. Lou was able to tell us what he looked like and that she had wounded him with her sword. From her description, we were able to tell it was a rogue sent from one of the countries at war with us. We'll find who killed our prince."

Bay didn't know how to feel. Lou had kept her promise and she was now free of the crime. Bay asked, looking at Lou, "That means you're going to rule right?"

"Maybe. My father will want to look into the matter of Lou becoming queen."

Bay shook her head. "Lou won't be here for much longer." She then paused, "Unless she wants to stay here. Then I'll stay here as well."

Lila laughed, "I wouldn't worry, blacksmith. I get the feeling that she'll want to personally track down the person who killed her cousin as soon as she's better. It will probably take years, even decades, to do so."

"Decades," Bay agreed. Lila looked Bay over and said, "You should rest. You look like you haven't slept in days."

Bay rubbed her eyes. "I haven't. Last night I was praying and the night before that..." Bay stopped talking as she suddenly blushed. Lila laughed again, "I get the idea. Why don't you lay down with her?"

Bay didn't argue. She laid down beside Lou and closed her eyes. She didn't hear the door shut as Lila left.

When Lou awoke, she was pleased to see Bay beside her, an arm wrapped around her lower waist. Lou frowned when she saw the top of chest covered in bandages. She really did dislike doctors. Anybody who wielded a blade but was not a warrior, worried her. That's why she didn't like doctors, or cooks.

Lou moved a little to stretch, but that tiny move caused Bay to jerk away. She growled, tightening her grip of Lou, "You're not going anywhere ever again without telling me first."

Lou laughed but regretted it as her chest ached when she did. "You'll have to let me wander off sometime."

"Sometime, but not soon," Bay replied. She leaned up on one elbow to look down at Lou. She looked okay, except for the bandages across her chest. She placed a quick kiss on Lou's lips. "I hate you. Now tell me what happened."

Lou said, looking down at her chest, "Well, you saved my life. That and the fact I was really lucky four times."

"What?"

Lou nodded, "I had beaten Deacon pretty badly but was trying to make myself kill him. I hesitated and he took that moment to grab a dagger and stabbed me in the chest, right into my heart."

Bay gasped, but Lou said, "But you saved me. The dagger glanced off the shield you made me, which I had over my heart. I'm lucky you came into my life. I'm lucky you hated me enough to make this shield for me. And I was lucky to have been wearing it."

Bay couldn't think of what to say. She, instead, placed her hand over Lou's heart and smiled when she felt the shield through the bandages. She then asked, "Wait, how did you get lucky the fourth time?"

Lou said, "I was lucky my trainers taught me to bind my chest before a fight. If my boobs hadn't been bound down when the dagger slipped, my whole nipple could have been sliced off. It's just a slice now. Granted it's deep, but nothing to disfigure me too badly. I hope you don't mind scars."

Bay looked at Lou in wonder. She finally said, shaking her head, "I don't mind scars. I'm glad your nipple was saved."

"I am too. I recall how much you liked them."

"I do like them." Bay leaned over Lou again. "And I really, really, really hate you." For ever really, she said, she gave Lou a kiss. Lou sighed, happily, "I hate you too."

Bay asked, laying back down, "So what are we going to do from here?"

Lou said, "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

Bay thought before saying, "Well, I do have a journeyman's license. I'd like to travel. I want to see snow and the ocean. I want to learn new techniques from others. How does that sound to you?"

"Sounds like a plan," Lou said, happy at the idea.

"And then..."

"Then?" Lou nudged.

"Then when we're tired of traveling, maybe we can find that tribe of dramatic people. Maybe settle down if we want. They said they might need a blacksmith and a warrior."

"Okay," Lou agreed. "But only if that Rowan and Laura have settled down together. They'll be hell to live with if they haven't. They need to learn to discuss their feelings like we do."

"Yeah. I hate you."

"I hate you too."

*Ten years later*

"You almost got it, Sawyer. Just remember to keep your feet in the right position and your sword arm firm."

"Okay, Auntie Lou," The brown haired, dark blue eyed eight year old girl said as she tried the move again. Lou nodded as she went on down the lines of other children. When she got to Rohan, she shook her head. She reached out and shook the six-year-old child's shoulder a little. "Loosen up, Rohan. You're as stiff as a carpenter."

The blonde haired boy said, defensively, "I'm wanna be a carpenter. Just like Mama and grandma and Aunt Willa."

Lou laughed. She then looked up at the parents gathering and knew it was time to dismiss class. "Class dismissed."

All the children ran to put up their play swords and then to their parents. They wouldn't ever become an army, but they would make it hard on those who wanted to take over the Tribe. Lou still couldn't get over the fact she was a teacher. When Alexander had mentioned the idea of adding classes at the school three years ago, she hadn't thought it would happen. But the Tribe's school now taught more of history and physical education program. Alexander taught the history and helped her with the physical part. They also spent part of the weekends teaching adults to defend themselves.

"Mama!" Sawyer and Rohan cried. Rowan was there with their three year old attached to her leg. Rowan laughed as she hugged her other two children. Lou walked over to where they stood and Rowan asked, "How bad were they today?"

"Horrible. You should chain these animals," Lou said in a serious voice. "Especially the one you got attached to your leg. She's going to be the wildest one of them all."

Ashley gave a shy smile before hiding her face in her mother's pants leg. Rowan laughed and then asked, "Will you and yours be joining us for dinner tonight?"

Lou was about to answer when she spotted hers. "Let's ask the wives what they think."

Rowan turned to see Laura and Bay walking towards them. It was amusing to see two of the toughest women in camp with baby carriers on. Of course it was more amusing to see Bay with two of them on.

"Lou, could you take Oliver while I check Lila?"

Lou took the rear carrier off of her wife and hooked it on herself. The strawberry haired babe opened his bright green eyes to look at his mother and gave a toothless grin. As she smiled back, Oliver wrapped his little hand around her shield pendent and went back to sleep. She placed a kiss on top of his head and turned her attention back to the others. Bay was telling Laura that they would be glad to go to their home for dinner that evening, and Sawyer and Rohan were trying to get Ashley to let go of Rowan.

If Lou had to blame anyone for the conception of the twins, besides herself, Bay, or the shaman, she would blame Ashley. Bay was there in the room with Rowan when she gave birth to Ashley. After watching her friend go through the ordeal of giving birth, Bay decided she wanted to do it too. Lou hadn't been keen on the idea until she held a tiny Ashley, wrapped in a soft blanket, in her arms.

Lou smiled at the scene before her. They were her family now, her home. While Bay had joined the Heartwood clan and Lou the Timber Wolf, they were a clan of their own. She wasn't a hunter and Bay wasn't a carpenter. Bay was, in fact, the only blacksmith the Tribe had ever had. It had taken the past five years to get her forge to the place it was now, but it was a grand forge full of apprentices. Bay was almost obsessed with her forge. Lou was sure if the forge could rub the blacksmith's tired shoulders every night, make her scream when she came, and now help take care of the twins, Bay would have chosen to marry the forge over her. Lou had forced Bay to take time off and away from the forge when she was pregnant. Bay kept trying to sneak off to her forge, but Lou had been on top of her like a mother hen. Lou had said their children would probably already be born with hammers in their hands so they didn't need to be born in a forge as well.

Lou shook her head at the bunch Rowan and Laura had. She had thought three would have been plenty for them, but Laura had announced she was pregnant shortly after Bay had. She could already imagine the trouble her children would get into with Grifton, who was named after Laura's father. Lou hoped Bay was happy with two, but knew she would agree to go see that shaman again if Bay wanted more. She didn't trust that shaman. She was too much like a doctor if you asked Lou. She was also worried she might be the one who carried the baby. Rowan and Laura had each had two apiece and Lou didn't know if she could go through with carrying and squeezing out a baby.

Lou looked at her auburn haired woman as she fussed over their auburn haired daughter while she patted her son's back gently. Bay had let her hair grow out over the past few years. It was longer and there were some grays in it, but she was still beautiful to Lou. It was hard to imagine almost a decade ago she had dug through charred ruins to find her.

Bay and Lou eventually got around to saying I love you, but only after their children were born. They didn't want the twins to get confused and think their parents actually hated each other. But every now and then, one or the other would slip.

"I really do hate you."

And the other would reply, "I hate you, too."

The End

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