

*Part I - Newt and Day*

CHAPTER 1

*I won't go back to my master. I'll die first.*

But the slave-tracker was close.

Sleepless for two days, starving for three, Newt shivered in the chill waters of the swampy fens and peered at the young farmer through a screen of overgrown ferns.

*He's my only chance. But can I trust him?*

The farmer sat on a wooden stool in front of a barn, his negligent posture proclaiming his ease as he ate his frugal dinner of *chika*-cheese and bread. Newt's mouth watered.

A large black dog lay at the man's feet, tongue lolling. Newt crawled closer, observing with her enhanced senses.

The farmer was not a Sellian, who were mostly thin, small, and red-haired. This man had a muscled torso and wide shoulders. His long hair was the color of ripe wheat. Although he was dressed like a farmer in a wool tunic and worn leather boots, he had the scent of a lord. *Fresh soap and a hint of cinnamon, like my first master . . .* Probing with that other sense, the one that had no name, Newt felt strength and something else, something rare. *Honor?*

Too close . . . the dog had noticed something. She drew back but the dog let out a loud, baying bark.

The man was on his feet in seconds, his eyes narrowing, hands going to the sheathed daggers that hung at each side of his waist. "Whoever's out there--show yourself!" He sounded as though he were accustomed to issuing commands.

The dog barked again. From much too near, the slave-tracker's horse answered with a whinny. The man turned his head, alert to the new noises, and frowned.

Newt forced her stiff legs to stand and raised both hands in a formal position of entreaty. She hadn't spoken for days, so her voice emerged as a hoarse rasp. "Please! The slave-tracker's after me!"

For a long moment they stared at each other. The man made his decision without hesitation or useless questions. Throwing open the barn door, he gestured. "In there. Get under the hay."

Shaking, Newt dived in. The horse neighed again, closer this time. *The tracker knows I'm here.* As an oil-coated torch burns when held to the fire, her entire body flamed with despair.

Still, the hay was deliciously warm. If torture and death hadn't lurked on the other side of the barn door, she could almost have fallen asleep.

"You there! Farmer!" The Sellian slave-tracker's arrogant voice resounded in Newt's ears.

Newt peered out through a knothole, taking in the wasp-thin tracker in his blood-red cloak. The dog sniffed at the tracker's boots and growled.

The young farmer folded his arms. "I am Lord-Guard Rulaborn. What is your business here?"

The slave-tracker leaned over his horse's neck. "I am seeking an escaped slave."

Looking down his prominent nose, Rulaborn said, "There are no slaves here. Leave my land."

Newt shivered as the tracker curled his lip. "I am commissioned by my guild to search for escaped slaves without let or hindrance. I am looking for a slave with black hair and a missing finger on the left hand." The tracker reached into his saddlebag, drawing out a silver box. As he flipped it open, two thin white worms raised their blind heads, swaying in the breeze.

"Here we are, my lovelies," the tracker crooned. "Tell me where to find what I seek."

Newt drew in a sharp breath and clutched her magic stone on its leather cord. *I am not here. I am no one. Nothing here but an empty barn.*

The worms moved back and forth, their heads pointing to the fens, then straight up to the sky, and finally in opposite directions.

"Inconclusive again," the tracker snarled. The box shut with a sharp click. He leaned down toward Rulaborn. "I think you know more than you're telling me. If you will help, there is a rich reward. The High Autarch himself is taking an interest in this slave."

Stifling her gasp, Newt wondered at this news. The High Autarch, the ruler of all Sellia--why was he concerned about an innkeeper's slave escaping?

Rulaborn seemed unimpressed as he said, "Slavery is a deadly pox on Sellia, and you slave-trackers are like crows come to pick the corpse."

A globule of spit landed near Rulaborn's boots. "Lord-Guard! A worthless title from a worthless land!"

"Perhaps you would like to say that again, while we face each other with dueling knives." Rulaborn's tone held no emotion, but his expression looked hard and dangerous.

The tracker shook his gloved finger in the other man's face. "You must report to the village headman if you see or hear anything from this slave. The law requires it!"

"I asked you to leave my land." Rulaborn's right hand went to the hilt of his dagger. "I never ask more than once."

The tracker clucked to his horse and they left, heading away from the fens. The dog's menacing growl seemed to speed the slave-tracker on his way.

"Good Zirka." Rulaborn resumed his seat.

Hardly daring to believe the tracker had been routed, Newt relaxed into the hay.

*I must remain alert. The tracker may be trying to trick me. He might return.* But the hay was too soft, too warm. Consciousness fled.

Daysart Rulaborn leaned back as though nothing had happened, watching the tracker depart until the man was out of sight.

"Lie down," he commanded Zirka in a low voice. The dog turned away from sniffing at the barn door and lay at his feet.

He wondered what had possessed him to help the creature who had emerged from the swamp. Hair tangled with sticks and leaves--peasant clothes, so covered with filth that he couldn't tell what was homespun cloth and what was mud--and the odor . . .

He'd been reluctant to let it into his neatly swept barn. Except that it had taken up the position of entreaty, a plea that had to be answered by a Queen's Bodyguard. How had an escaping slave known the customs of nobility?

The queen was dead, her bodyguards dead or, like himself, exiled.

For three years, Day had lived alone on his small farm, raising enough crops to feed himself and his dog, tending his chika herd. Three years of carrying water from the river, planting in the spring, harvesting in the fall. Selling his excess vegetables in the market during the summer. Discussing the weather and its effect on crops with his neighbors.

But for two years before that, Day had been one of the Queen of Ardua's Bodyguards.

In the thousand mornings and evenings since his old life had disappeared, Day had never forgotten his true calling for one moment.

When he figured a sufficient amount of time had passed, he opened the barn door and went to the largest mound of hay. Although the creature had hidden well, he found it in a few moments. It slept on as he lifted it in his arms. He found it lighter than he had expected.

Day carried the creature into his house, looking doubtfully at its face. Underneath all the dirt, the features were small and delicate, the chin pointed. He eased the waif into a chair. Startled, he became aware of rounded hips and a narrow waist.

Frowning, Day turned to the banked fire. Using the poker, he exposed the hot coals and fed in some kindling until the flames blazed up. He added a log then turned back to the woman he had saved.

Still asleep. Day wondered when she had last slept. Or eaten.

He called Zirka and ordered, "Guard her." The dog lay at the foot of the chair, staring at the woman, pointed ears cocked.

Day went out to the barn. He filled the chika-cart with buckets, then adjusted the harness to fit his own wide shoulders. A grim smile came to his face as he dragged the heavy cart to the river. Once he would have considered the mundane task embarrassing, an insult to his standing as a Queen's Bodyguard.

Now it was merely another farm chore.

He filled the buckets then stood for one moment, panting from the labor, and admired the play of sunlight on the swiftly moving river.

The same river flowed by the city of Wendel in his own country of Ardua. He'd been able to see it from the narrow window in the Bodyguards' bedchamber. Spring days had found the entire court on barges, floating down the river to the countryside for picnics and hunts.

*Stop it. No use thinking about days that are gone forever.* With a shake of his head, Day donned the harness again.

Back at the house, Zirka looked up at him and whined.

"Stay." Dragging the copper wash-tub in front of the fire, he emptied the buckets into the tub, hoping his guest would awaken. But she slept so soundly, he wondered if she had fainted from hunger and fear. At last he went to her and touched her shoulder.

She leapt to her feet with a suddenness that made Zirka growl. Day read terror in her eyes as she stared up at him.

She fell to her knees. "Please don't hurt me," she begged

Rulaborn helped her to her feet. "You're safe here."

Safe? How could she be safe, with the slave-tracker prowling for her? Panting, Newt sank

into the chair and looked around the stone-walled room, scrutinizing every piece of rustic furniture--two chairs, table, low chest, and bed--the lack of windows, the uneven pine floor. Sometime in the past, she had lived in large rooms. But the memory eluded her.

“Your house is small,” she said.

“Not compared to a four by four prison cell.”

Taken by surprise, Newt made no further comment. She watched as he put greens and cheese in a bowl, then sliced an apple and added that as well. Was it possible he was going to feed her? She tried not to stare at the food, but couldn't suppress a gasp of pleasure when he handed her the bowl.

“Eat as much as you like,” he said. “You look hungry.”

“My gracious thanks,” she managed to answer before she tore into a wedge of apple. His eyes flickered with surprise at her words.

He pulled the other chair close to her. “My name is Day Rulaborn. What is yours?”

“I don't know.”

He stroked his short golden beard and frowned. Fearing his displeasure--perhaps he would take the food away!--she hastened to add, “I remember nothing before my slave days. My first master called me Honey and Kissy-face and Pretty-toes. But then his father sold me. My second master called me Get to Work and Hurry Up. When he wasn't beating me he was making me *zatch* the customers at his inn, so I ran away. I'm trying to reach Ardua. People say there's no slavery there.” She took a big bite of the chika-cheese. It had a strong flavor, welcome after so long without food. “When I made my way into the swamps, I decided to call myself Newt. I don't remember any other name.”

Day stared at her, his blue-green eyes bright with something she didn't recognize. Using that other sense, she studied the emotional waves emanating from him and found compassion. Shocked, she gazed back at him. Compassion was not something she had encountered often in her three years as a slave in Sellia.

“As soon as you finish eating, you'll take a bath,” Day said.

“I don't need it. I'll go back to the swamp before dusk.”

Day shook his head. “I brought the water all the way from the river, and you are going to bathe in it.” He spoke pleasantly enough, but she knew from his tone that he meant it. “Besides, you can't sleep in my clean bed while you're so dirty.”

Newt lowered her head to hide her disappointment. She'd hoped Day was different from the lustful men she'd known during slave days.

Strange, though--she'd sensed no arousal in his emotional waves. She shivered. Sometimes, when sexual arousal was not present, cruelty replaced it.

“You know the tracker's looking for me,” she said. “I've got to keep moving.”

“You need to eat, bathe, and sleep. Rest for one night. You can be on your way before dawn.”

She considered his words, then nodded. Two days without sleep was difficult, but if she tried to make it three, the hallucinations would begin.

Hearing the noise of many hooves against the ground, she jerked and turned her head.

“Calm yourself. My chikas are returning.” He went to the door. “Stay inside. I don't trust the herd-boy to keep quiet about you.”

Perhaps it would be a good time to get into the washtub. She was still hungry, but she knew what would happen if she ate too much after going without for three long days. Putting the bowl on the table, she eyed the knife, wondering if there was any way to steal it when she left.

Although she hated the thought of thieving from a man who had been kind to her, she needed a weapon to defend herself from the tracker.

And if the tracker proved to be stronger than she, the knife would be her last resort. She would never return to Borchert's inn.

She sucked in her breath as she peeled the dirty rags away from her back. Perhaps a bath was a good idea, although she knew she'd be filthy again tomorrow when she went back into the fens. Traveling through the swamps was her only hope of avoiding the tracker. Too many people might remember her if they passed her on the road.

She lowered herself into the washtub, shivering with cold and pain as the water flowed over her. Holding her nose, she ducked completely under, letting the water cover her hair.

She reemerged as Day entered. He gave her an approving look. "I'll get soap." He went to the shelves and cut a piece from a gray block. Bringing it to her, he asked, "Need help?"

She sensed only his mild curiosity, so she nodded. She leaned forward in the tub. "My back."

He gasped. "How did this happen?"

"I told you, my master beat me. How bad does it look?"

"Bad enough." She felt a feather-light touch across her neck. "Some of the cuts are old and healed, while others look fresh. I'll clean them. I've got a salve, too, that I use when the chikas' teats are sore."

She winced as the soap moved across her back. But his reaction distracted her from the agony of having her wounds touched. He was suffering too, uncomfortable and disconcerted by her misery. Unlike Borchert, Day experienced no titillation from her pain.

"Bend your head down. I'll wash your hair."

She obeyed, too exhausted to protest. His hands were gentle on her scalp. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensual stroking of his fingers. No one had ever touched her with such tenderness. Perhaps zatching with him would not be too terrible.

He fingered the leather cord around her neck. "What's this?"

Newt clutched the smooth white stone. "Jewelry." She didn't trust him enough to reveal that it was a magic stone. He looked skeptical, but said no more.

When Newt finished bathing, Day gave her coarse cloth to dry herself. He put a sweet-smelling ointment on her back that soothed the sores. Opening the wooden chest, he brought out a white linen shirt. Newt held it up to the firelight, admiring the tight weave. Didn't he know how much money this would bring in any marketplace? Even her first master, the pampered son of a wealthy banker, had worn nothing so well-made.

"Get into bed." Day went to the fire and knelt down with the poker. Newt lay on the straw-stuffed mattress, shifting when a coarse straw poked her through the bedding.

She dreaded what lay ahead. No matter how many men she had to zatch, she always feared to take on a new one. In the beginning, it had hurt. Now, after the birth of her little girl, the pain was more mental than physical. She hated being used as a convenient receptacle for men's lust and cruelty.

Still, Day smelled nice. That alone was a huge consideration. She hoped he'd be gentle.

"May you sleep sound," he said. She sat up in bed, amazed to see he was lying by the fire, Zirka stretched out beside him.

She was too astonished to guard her tongue. "I thought you would make me zatch you!"

He raised himself on his elbow. "I would never force myself upon any woman. Go to sleep."

She covered herself again, wondering what kind of strange man she'd fallen in with. She'd never known one who wouldn't take advantage of a helpless woman. Being passed from man to man had made her feel raw and dirtied. The fetid swamp-mud had been clean compared with that. Borchert used to offer her to guests at the inn as casually as he'd offer an additional mug of beer. Few had ever turned him down.

Time passed. Despite her exhaustion, Newt was unable to fall asleep. She heard Day turn--perhaps sleep was eluding him as well.

"Is the floor uncomfortable?" she asked.

"I've slept in worse places."

"The bed is large enough to share." When he didn't answer, she went on, "I find it hard to sleep, knowing you're lying on the hard floor."

His long hesitation made her think he would refuse. Finally he said, "All right," and joined her on the bed.

She closed her eyes and tried to find ease, but her conscience nagged her. He had saved her from the slave-tracker. Why withhold the one thing that could repay him? So many men had taken what she had to offer; one more wouldn't matter.

She reached out to stroke his sword-of-joy, but had managed only one soft touch when he caught her wrist in a firm grip. "What are you doing?"

She murmured, "All men want to zatch. You saved me and I'd like to pay my debt."

"It is forbidden for me."

Staring at him, she exclaimed, "Forbidden! What do you mean? Who forbids?"

"I am a lord-guard of Ardua. Does that mean anything to you?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes Arduans came to my master's inn. They were as willing to zatch as any other man."

He stroked his beard, a thoughtful expression on his face. "The Queen of Ardua has twelve lord-guards who protect her person from harm. The lord-guards are chosen from every province of Ardua, all of them strong young men within five years of the Queen's age. After they are chosen for this great honor, they take an oath to remain celibate. When the Queen reaches twenty-two years of age, she selects one to be her husband."

All this sounded very strange to Newt. Why would any man choose celibacy? Even the holy monks who roamed Oldtown were eager to sample the wares of the Temple prostitutes. "When the queen marries, does celibacy end for the ones not chosen?"

"No. If the queen's consort dies, the queen chooses another husband from the lord-guards. Or she may become displeased with her first husband, send him away, and choose another."

"But the Queen of Ardua is dead," Newt said. "A man who saw the execution told us at Borchert's inn. They shortened her."

He winced. "Yes, the queen was beheaded. But my oath still stands."

"You keep oath to a dead woman?"

His tone contradicted her statement. "I keep oath to what I was and what I still am."

"I don't understand."

He sighed. "Being a lord-guard means being chosen out of thousands of others. There are competitions--tourneys--tests of skill. Finally, from the last hundred, the queen, hidden behind her veil, walks down the line of young men and selects the honored twelve. It is the greatest ceremony of the queen's reign." He ran a hand through his hair. "From the day I was born, it was all my father wanted for me. He helped me become the kind of man who would be selected. I

succeeded. I cannot turn my back on that.”

“Then it must have been difficult for you when the Thousand staged their coup.”

“Difficult! Nothing in my life had prepared me for that. I have fought in wars since I was fourteen years old, but never against my own people.” A long pause, then his distress broke over her like a wave crashing onto the shore. “When it was over . . . well . . . I was in the Fortress awaiting execution. My mother managed to bribe the right people, and I was allowed to go into exile instead.”

“And you have stayed here ever since?”

“There was nothing to return to. The Thousand took care of that when they executed my queen.” He put his hand to his forehead as if to hold back his pain. “I saw it from my window in the Fortress. Her long hair was down--I had seen it like that only once before. She stood straight, chin raised, facing her doom with high courage.” The fire had died down; it was too dark now to see his expression. But his voice was full of anguish. “I had sworn to protect her--but there was nothing I could do but watch her die.”

“It’s so sad they killed her like that.” But she couldn’t help but think that an execution might be preferable to some of her own experiences.

“They feared her powers.”

Newt lay back against the pillow. She’s been wondering why Day had helped her. In her experience, people never helped each other without an ulterior motive. Now she understood that by saving her, Day was assuaging a portion of the guilt he felt for failing his queen.

He seemed to be an honorable man. Would she be safe with him throughout the night? Would the slave-tracker return? Sleep took her while the questions whirled through her weary mind.

Day remained wakeful. His response to her attempt at seduction had been automatic--his oath was never far from his mind. Still, her enticing touch had awakened old appetites. The young lord-guards were encouraged to sow their wild *ofitas* in the years between coming of age and taking their oaths to the queen. None of them had been virgins. If the girls in their native villages hadn’t seen to that, the ladies at court certainly had.

She was a lovely woman, once she’d washed the mud off. He liked her dark eyes and short, curly black hair. He’d thought at first she was barely out of childhood, but after seeing her in the washtub, he’d reassessed. Her breasts and hips were womanly. She had to be in her mid-twenties, about his own age.

He knew the type of establishment her master owned . . . there was an inn like it two villages over. The coarse barmaids were willing to lift their skirts for anyone with a few coins. He tried to imagine Newt in such a place. With her delicate features and cultured voice, she must have seemed like a lily growing in a dungheap.

Shifting in the bed, he turned away from the warm woman beside him. When he finally drifted off to sleep, he dreamed of the night that remained a special jewel in his memory. Once again he stood by the sparkling waters of the queen’s fountain, hearing the faint strains of a lute player in the distance, breathing in the queen’s perfume as she came to stand by his shoulder. He’d held his breath, thrilled to be alone with her, terrified she would leave before he spoke of what was in his heart.

Only this time, instead of the words she’d actually spoken, she looked at him with Newt’s eyes and pleaded, “Help me!”

The disturbing image remained with Day as he rose before dawn and prepared a sack of food for Newt--bread, cheese, and some of the ripe apples from his orchard.

She couldn't remain at the farm. Eventually one of the villagers would see her, and the slave-tracker would hear about it and return, probably with some of the headman's strong assistants to back him up.

He stood by the bed, looking down at her. Tendrils of her short hair lay against her smooth cheeks and her pale lips curved upward, as though she were dreaming of something pleasant. A peaceful life in Ardua, perhaps, unmarred by beatings and abuse.

He didn't know why his heart ached when he looked at her. Except that courage always moved him. She'd been starving, but she hadn't asked for food; exhausted, but she hadn't asked to stay. She hadn't asked him for anything except a temporary hiding place.

He had to do more than merely send her on her way, alone.

Newt woke, panicked that she'd overslept. She'd planned to slip back to the fens before the sun rose.

Rising from the bed, she pushed her wayward curls away from her face. She looked for Day and spotted him at the table, bent over something. As she approached, she saw he was looking at a map. "Good morrow, Newt." He pointed to a spot on the map. "The port of Clemens is a hundred miles to the northeast. I'll take you there in the chika-cart."

She stared at him. Was it possible she would have this strong, handsome man as her companion, to aid her on her journey? Surely he didn't realize the danger. "No! You don't understand the risks."

Day went to the chest, handing Newt a homespun gown. "Here you are. The last farm-owner's wife left this behind." He raised an eyebrow at her. "I don't fear the slave-tracker. He won't challenge me--not by himself."

While the beige dress had twice as much fabric as she needed to cover her slim body, it was still preferable to her slave rags. She pulled the sash tighter to take in the extra material and tried to dissuade Day from his plan. "But if the slave-tracker catches you helping me, he'll have you imprisoned."

Day grinned, his sparkling eyes crinkling at the corners as he finished making another sack of provisions for the road. "Then I'll just have to make sure we don't get caught."

She sighed, realizing she wasn't going to be able to change his mind, but impressed in spite of herself with his cheerful courage. He opened the door. Peeping over his shoulder, Newt was relieved to see it was still dark outside. Day looked around, then motioned her to follow him.

Day's herd was comfortably lodged in the barn. The chikas looked up from sleep, blinking their large eyes as Newt entered with the candle. One of them raised its long neck and made a noise like a person grumpy at being wakened, which made Newt smile.

"Lightfoot and Graynose, I think," Day decided. He showed Newt how the back of the cart pulled down, revealing that the floor of the deep cart was false. A second bottom, a foot farther down, was the true one.

"The farmer who owned this land before me must have supplemented his livelihood by smuggling," Day said. "And I can't blame him. I've had a thin time of it, these last three years, trying to feed myself and raise a little extra to sell in the market."

Zirka looked up at her master and whined. "We'd better take her with us." He stroked her ears. "Peto will look after the rest of the chikas, but he may not think to care for Zirka."

Newt examined the cart. Once they reached Clemens, Day had generously promised to buy her passage on a ship to Ardua. As soon as the ship made it to the open ocean, she would be a free woman.

She climbed into the false bottom. Day peered in. "Are you comfortable?"

"It's better than running through the swamps all day." Newt heard thumps above as Day loaded something into the cart. After a few moments, the odor of ripe apples filled her senses.

The road was uneven leaving the farm, and she soon felt new bruises join the old ones as she bumped against the floor of the cart. The sores on her back throbbed. She shifted to her side, stifling a moan. After another few miles, they must have reached one of the Forerunners' roads. The cart rolled more smoothly now, and Newt fell into a doze . . .

Only to be awakened by the sound of pounding hooves pursuing them.