

Delphia's Quest

by Amy Murrell-Haunold

Prod stomped into the Pig's Bladder Pub with his usual ill-tempered scowl drunkenly plastered on his face. He stepped on the dog who lay innocently dozing in the sunlit doorway, knocked over the barmaid, threw out two unlucky customers who were sitting at his favorite table by the fire and with a well-roared curse, called for his ale. This was not uncommon behavior for Prod, so it went relatively unnoticed by the rest of the regular clientele, who were only slightly more cultured than Prod himself. Besides, everyone minded their own business at the Pig's Bladder Pub. Trouble was easily found there without deliberately inviting it's attention in the guise of Prod the Barbarian.

The Pig's Bladder Pub was a dark, sleazy hole in the worst part of a disreputable town with the unfortunate name of Sediment, named for it's most valuable local product. Prod himself was only one of a few hundred greasy individuals who made Sediment the foul dump it was, but he was undoubtedly the biggest and the noisiest and probably the meanest.

He stood head and shoulders over everyone and hefted a mighty war axe as big as a child. Nearly every low doorway in town bore a notch from his stone-hard forehead. He was known to pull down entire buildings in drunken rages; not much of a trick considering the town's shabby attempts at architecture.

Underneath the dirt and scars, he was handsome in a rough sort of way. His greasy hair was dark, hiding the dirt well and his jaw was hard, square and usually covered with several days growth of beard. Although generally blood-shot from drink, his eyes were the same scummy green color as the icy sea water in the harbor. Judging by the oft broken nose that had once been aquiline, he was most likely of some noble blood from the wrong side of the blanket. Whatever his lineage, his looks had improved neither his fortune nor his attitude. Prod was ill-mannered.

It was exactly this type of charm-free individual that Delphia was looking for when she boldly strode into the pub, announcing loudly, "I need a man."

Prod didn't feel very inclined to respond to this since he was nursing a hangover the size of a small continent. If the ale he was drinking didn't settle it down soon, he was considering self-decapitation as a possible cure. Besides, he preferred women who screamed and ran from his amorous attentions. At least, that's what he thought he preferred; that's what he was used to.

The man who did try to rise to the occasion found that not only was he not up to the task, he wasn't even tall enough to look her in the eye. He also found himself eating a face full of dirt and dung when she tossed him out the front door and into the street. "I need a man," she repeated, "A real man."

That got Prod's attention as well as his admiration, although he could heft a man twice as far into the dung heap on the opposite side of the street. But he liked a woman who could also put up a fight. This one stood almost as tall as he and had piercing blue eyes; eyes that might wilt a man's best endeavor or warm his blood to boiling. She wore her night-black hair sensibly short, keeping it out of her eyes and away from an enemy's grasp and, of course, the required chain mail armor-kini complete with brass bra. No delicate little flower was she, but sturdy stock like a draft horse with perhaps a few more curves.

She looked around with challenge in her eyes, determination in her stance and smoke up her nose. The pub fireplace was not pulling a draft as usual. She sneezed and continued her solicitation. "I have work, profitable work, for any man strong enough to best me in a fair fight. I pay in gold sturgeons."

It was a tempting offer, sturgeons being pure gold and the most stable coinage on the mainland. "Let's see your gold, wench," called a courageous voice hiding behind his fellows.

She grinned and it was a forbidding grin, full of strong white teeth and deadly intent. She held her arms out wide and invited, "Why don't you come over here and look for yourself."

He didn't, but one of his companions did and promptly found the same muck pile the first contender had sampled. The remaining two decided to challenge the Amazon at the same time. Their cowardice bought them a simultaneous head cracking on each other's pates and the usual face full of maggot-infested real estate. The pub crowd was beginning to thin a little and Prod began to get bored, remembering his hangover.

"There are no men in this town. Your women must breed with the livestock which would explain your ugly faces."

Prod found her inventiveness amusing but one of the nastier locals announced he wanted not only to remove the grin from her face and the gold from her purse, he's take her head from her shoulders to ameliorate the insult to his mother. After he took a little pleasure from her body, he added, sizing her up. He pulled a substantial blade from his belt and advanced slowly on her. Prod watched with interest, recognizing the woman's slightly crouched stance as that of a seasoned warrior. She wiggled her fingers in a come-hither gesture. "Now this is more like it," she encouraged, "Come here and show me what little you have."

"Let me introduce you to some Bellorian steel, you contemptuous piece of dog meat," the man offered, his grin rat-trap sharp.

"Oh, no need, little man. Bellorian steel and I are old friends. I have one just like that," she smiled at him, "only bigger."

She whipped out a broadsword slightly longer than her arm. How she had managed to

hide it behind her brief costume was a mystery. Customers ducked and ran for the walls or out the door as she whirled it in front of her like a windmill with an attitude.

Delphia laughed, gesturing rudely at the man who cursed and swung wildly at her. It was over before Prod had time to finish his last swig of ale. He ducked to miss the man's blade as it embedded itself in the wall over his shoulder. The man lay on the floor with the woman's sword pressed firmly into his groin and his dignity in shards as he begged for his manhood. "You have no manhood, spineless loudmouth," she spat at him and gestured towards the door with her head. "Get out while you're still intact. And leave the little blade. You shouldn't be permitted to play with anything sharp lest you injure yourself. I can always use it to pick my teeth."

She never moved her blade and he had to crawl to slither under it and out the door. Prod decided this humiliation had gone on long enough. He belched loudly and wiped the residue off with the back of his hand. "How much gold?" he asked in an appropriately jaded tone of voice.

She turned to look at him, appraising his potential in the pub's dim light like a shortsighted horse trader at market. "You look big enough to do the job. Thirty sturgeons, to start. Seventy more when the job is finished. That makes one hundred in case you cannot count." she explained sweetly.

Slowly he rose to full height, growling, "I count one noisy and annoying kitten. I want the thirty for besting you. I'll let you know if I want to work for the rest."

"You move with the speed of an elderly snail and smell like you drink for a living, but if you think you're man enough, Ox, I'm waiting."

She fell into her fighting pose again.

"I beg of you, take this into the streets where you'll have more room!" pleaded the pub owner, coming out from around his bar.

Prod looked down at him the way a lion looks at dinner and the man quailed but held his ground.

"Sensible idea. Trouncing men is thirsty work and I may want a drink later," said Delphia. "Shall we?" she gestured with her sword towards the street where a crowd, sensing blood, had gathered for the kill.

Prod grunted and sauntered out sluggishly, deliberately turning his back on her. He waited in the middle of the street, careful to put the sun behind him. The day was bright and barely cool. She wasn't intimidated and moved to position herself slightly to one side, out of the sun-ward angle, resuming her slightly crouched stance.

Prod laughed softly. Kitten with claws and a seasoned fighter no doubt. He slid his axe from the thong that held it to his back and took a similar crouched posture, holding the handle with two hands. She made the first move, obviously hoping to end

it quickly. It was a feint, which he countered quickly with a speed that belied his earlier movements. Feint, parry and thrust. Again and again. Then, suddenly, his foot shot out and Delphia found herself bottom first in the dirt, her broadsword under the barbarian's foot and his axe at her throat.

She gasped for air, sweat running into her eyes. "Are you going to lop my head off or did you want to hear my proposition? You'll have to let me up if you want your thirty gold pieces."

Prod was wild-eyed and equally sweaty, almost ready to strike the killing blow when he abruptly pulled back the axe and took a deep breath, relaxing into his usual slouched posture. The crowd, seeing this, gave a disappointed murmur and began to disperse. "What's to prevent me from taking all your gold right now, girl?" he asked with a lazy smile, leaning on the haft of his axe.

She gave him a wide-eyed innocent look and stood up, dusting off her backside. "Surely, you aren't stupid enough to think I'd be stupid enough to have it with me. Besides, why would you settle for a third when you can have it all, be fed free for a week, well equipped with both weapons and a new horse and have a good time breaking heads while you're at it?"

She was right. Jobs this good didn't come along every day. He nodded and held out his hand. "I'll take the thirty now."

Delphia pulled a small purse from her cleavage and tossed it to him. That little armor-kini certainly held a lot of secrets, he considered, hefting the bag to determine its weight.

"I have an encampment in the woods. Let's have a drink and I'll explain what I need." She gestured in the direction of the northward road out of town. "I'm Delphia of Sylvania by the way. And you?" she asked, picking up her sword and sheathing it.

"Prod of nowhere and no one," he answered, following her down the road, "I've heard of you. And your quest," he told her. "Lost your intended. My guess is we're going to retrieve him."

"You guess correctly. Prince Fil was part of my fee for ridding Sylvania of a rather unsightly dragon infestation. Half the treasury and the prince's hand in marriage. He's handsome enough for being spoiled and stuffy. I have a limited time to produce an heir or I lose the entire package. His original betrothed has kidnapped him, knowing she only has to hold him for a few months and I will lose all claim. So I need him back fast. By the way, when did you last bathe?" she asked him.

"Bathe?"

"Yes, bathe. You know, get wet with water and soap. Remove dirt and stench and those filthy rags you're passing off as clothing." He shrugged. "A while ago, I think."

"Well, you'll bathe today. I don't want you scaring the horses. Or tipping off my enemies that we're coming. There's a pond close to my encampment that should be big enough and definitely wet enough."

Prod did not always appear to have been awarded a full compliment of brains but he was not stupid. He wasn't sure if he'd been insulted but he knew an opportunity when he heard it. "It's been so long, I'm not sure I remember how. You'll have to help."

Delphia stopped dead in her tracks. He smiled benignly down at her. Her blue eyes had gone glacial and she returned his smile with a somewhat nastier version. "Are you really so dense that you can't remember personal care or are you so incredibly stupid as to suggest that I attend to your extremely personal needs? Either way, you are tactless and blunt and I've maimed men for less. But, I'll be happy to direct you from a comfortable place on the shore. I don't mind seeing men naked especially if they are well equipped. I assume you can take directions. You do know what all your body parts are called, don't you?"

Prod frowned. This was not what he had in mind. He didn't especially like clever women. They were trouble. They were annoying. And they made him think too much. Right now he was thinking this might not have been a good idea in spite of the gold.

As it turned out, Prod declined Delphia's offer of help and bathed himself while she absented herself saying she needed to gather more firewood. What he lacked in skill he made up for in enthusiasm, splashing and dunking with the abandoned delight of a five year old. He was shaving his beard with his axe when she returned with enough wood to last several days "Will we need all that tonight?" he asked through tensed lips as he ran the razor-sharp edge over his jaw.

Delphia dropped the wood, explaining, "No, but where we're going, we may need some so we'll pack what we can find," and she squatted down to stack it in a little more orderly fashion.

Dusting off her hands, she looked up to examine what the wash had left behind and found herself staring into the same face that just days ago had promised to marry her. The same face that had mocked her as he rode away with a troop of his former betrothed's cavalry. The same face she was going to haul back by the scruff of his snotty neck and tie down in his royal bedroom if she had to in order to produce the required heir. Prod was Prince Fil's double. Or mostly, disregarding his scars and the slightly displaced nose.

She affected what she hoped was a casual air. "Well, you clean up better than expected. Tell me, have you traveled much? Ever been to Sylvania? Or did your mother?"

"I've traveled some. I'm told my mother was Sylvaniaian but moved here to live with a sister when I came along since no man would claim me. I've never been there myself. Why?"

"No particular reason," she lied, deciding not to mention the resemblance just yet. "You just have the look of a Sylvanian about you and I wondered what your background was. It'll help us move through Sylvania easier if you don't look too foreign but it won't help once we get to Jerzee where Fil has been taken. The Jerzees are short and blonde and we will be unfortunately noticeable."

Prod only grunted as he pulled his still damp hair into a horsetail at the back of his neck and secured it with a strip of leather cut from the shirt she'd provided him.

As it turned out, unfortunately noticeable was an understatement. The short trip along the Sylvanian border had been unremarkable. They rode hard, stopping only to rest briefly and eat until they crossed into Kam's Den, a river port in Jerzee. The looks they received could have struck fear into the hearts of anyone less determined than Delphia and anyone less dull-witted than Prod.

"I do not understand," began Prod as they rode at a walk through the narrow, cobbled streets.

"That does not surprise me," commented Delphia with her sweetest smile.

He scowled at her, something he'd been doing a lot lately, as he deflected a stone pitched anonymously from an alley. "Then, oh wise one, explain to me why we ride boldly into this town for all to see. Why do we not avoid the town and go in secret to the Princess's estate?"

Delphia affected a bored tone, ducking a splash of wash water deliberately dumped from a upper window. "Why? Because they expect me and they expect that I will try to slip in unnoticed. This bold action will confuse them. I do not exert myself on stealth when it is unlikely to succeed and unnecessary."

Prod kicked his mount into a little jump, just in time to avoid a hastily flung rotten cabbage. "They will have time to prepare their troops."

"Someone who looks like me has been causing trouble on the border north of here. The Princess's troops are there, watching for me," answered Delphia with a little grunt as she fended off a knife wielding thug with a well-placed boot in the face.

"And she will send for them when she hears you are here."

Delphia nodded. "Yes. And when they are riding hard for the estate, they will meet up with my elite troop, the Ladies of the Club, who will delay them just long enough. Better they should know I am here and fear what I may do next."

"And what do you do next?"

Delphia pulled her horse up and turned it into a courtyard. "Dinner. And perhaps a bath. For you. And for me. The horses are beginning to smell better than either of us."

Saying that, she dismounted in front of the Ass's Ankle Inn and tossed the reins to the waiting stable boy.

It was late when a warm hand on his mouth woke Prod as low "shhh," breathily whispered in his ear warned him. He could see the moon hanging low on the horizon as he quickly dressed; quietly following Delphia down to the stables. A large man, close to his size had just as quietly slipped into the bed he'd vacated and Prod assumed a woman who generally looked much like Delphia was probably occupying her quarters. The stable boy was waiting with their horses, cloths tied to the animals hooves to inhibit the sound of their departure.

They rode hard, stopping only to remove the muffling cloths before charging onward toward an ever-lightening sky. By the time the first bright rays of sunrise crept over the hills, they were climbing the rocky walls of the pass that guarded the estate of Princess Penelope of Nowork, the once betrothed of Prince Fil.

Prod kept expecting to hear a challenge as he hauled Delphia up over the edge at the top but the only sound was that of fitful snoring. The guards were still deep in their cups, almost empty flasks dribbling into a small stream at their feet. Prod sniffed. Bellorian ale. Strong stuff. He sometimes used it to clean his war axe. Delphia gave him a small smile. He didn't bother to ask how she'd arranged it; he just grabbed them by the scruff of their necks and dragged them to the edge.

The guards came awake with a start, screaming when they realized they were being dangled over the rocky chasm they were supposed to be guarding. Prod admonished them, "Best stop kicking. You won't like it if I drop you right now."

They froze, eyes rolling, screams stifled in their throats.

"Life or Death, gentlemen. Your choice," Delphia informed them, never one to carelessly dispose of life. "One of you will carry a message to the Prince and then be permitted to leave with a gold piece as our reward. The other will leave immediately, empty-handed, and will not return, knowing how the Princess rewards failure. Or perhaps you both can fly?"

Both men volunteered to leave unrewarded as Delphia expected, not wanting to face the Princess so they chose one and gave him the gold in advance, promising another coin if he lived to return. They complied meekly as Prod directed them to help him turn the huge catapult inward to face the estate. Then Prod lowered both down in the baskets that were usually used to scale the heights, Delphia in advance to make sure her messenger didn't cut and run before earning his gold. He was sniveling quietly as he made his way toward the great house.

Nowork Estate was as well fortified as a country house could be, but it was no castle. It sat on cliff overlooking the sea and the pass was the only way in. But the cleft that

protected them became the trap that held them in. Delphia sat on her horse waiting at the mouth of the pass when the house came awake. Archers appeared on the roof walks and shutters were drawn on the forward facing windows. She almost laughed at the embarrassing futility of it. They could clearly see the catapult that had once faced outward was now aimed toward them; loaded, cocked and ready.

The messenger who had been standing outside the front door of the great house suddenly turned and ran. Behind him an archer stepped forward, arrow nocked and bow drawn, ready to deliver the Princess's gratitude for his message. Delphia cursed as her mount danced beneath her, sensing her hesitation. Should she save him? Perhaps, if she were in the Princess's delicate little shoes she'd have done the same. The man had fallen asleep, drunk at his post. But had the Princess any sense, she'd have taken the man back for now, needing all the live bodies she could get to guard Prince Fil. Delphia disliked stupidity as much as she disliked waste.

Prod's arrow hit the bowman square in the chest. He crumpled and the messenger safely raced past Delphia, to hide behind a rock. She tossed a coin to him as he gave a grateful nod to Prod high above, then he scampered away like a rock squirrel.

Prod's actions had spoken loudly to the people hiding in the big house. Only a Sylvanian Jumbow could reach that distance accurately and it took the mighty arms of the giant Sylvanians to bend them. Jerzee archers who had stood boldly, now hid and guards cowered safely behind shuttered windows and barred doors.

Delphia rode out, stopping just short of the maximum distance a Jerzee arrow could do damage and planted a yellow parlay flag tied to a pike. None would dare ignore the rules of parlay. After a short time, a window set in the middle of the second story opened on the handsome, brash smirk of Prince Fil. Delphia rode forward, within shouting distance, but it was Fil who spoke first. "I see you've missed me, my dear. Sorry I had to leave so abruptly. I'm afraid I have, shall we call it, a pressing engagement?"

He languidly dabbed with a lacy handkerchief as he leaned on the window sill. Delphia smiled back. "And I'm afraid your father, the King, has canceled your engagement. You have twenty-four hours to make up your mind to come home peacefully. Or we will come in and get you."

Pushing Fil out of her way, the lovely and spoiled princess shouted out the window, shaking her fist at Delphia. "Just try, filthy commoner! My personal guard can hold you off until the rest of my cavalry arrives," bluffed the beautiful Princess with a saucy toss of her blond curls. "Then they will rip you to shreds and leave you in the dung heap where you belong."

"Oh my, what nasty words from such a beautiful mouth. I quake, my lady. Do not make threats you cannot back up. Your cavalry is busy on the border. I have seen to that." "I have sent a messenger. They will be here soon. We can hold you until then."

"A day too late, I fear. It is two days to the border. The rest of my troop will be here tomorrow morn and you cannot hold them. As I have said, you have 24 hours to reconsider. Send Prince Fil out and you will still have enough dowry to tempt some other into bidding for your pretty and useless little hand. Oh, and, by the way, that pouty little scowl you wear when you aren't getting your way is rather unattractive. You should be careful how often you use it."

Delphia shot her a wicked grin and whirled her horse about to race back to the pass, retrieving the parlay flag in an impressive display of horsemanship as she went.

Prod patted the catapult sadly as he passed it, sorry he hadn't had the chance to fire it at least once that long and quietly boring day. It was full night and their replacements, the couple who'd taken their beds at the inn, arrived to take up position on the heights. He was amazed to see the man who looked near his height was actually a woman in body armor, one of Delphia's elite troop, no doubt. Delphia led the way down the rocky cliff to their horses below. Once again they muffled the horses hooves as they rode a narrow, almost nonexistent trail leading down to the sea.

It took all Prod's considerable strength to pry open the hidden sea door in the cliff below the house. The tunnels leading up from the bolt hole were dark and thick with dust showing long disuse. He grumbled quietly, "Why don't we just wait for your troops to arrive tomorrow and take him then?"

A little brawl and pillage exercise would be preferable to all this sneaking around, he thought privately. Delphia was consulting a small parchment map. "Because there are no troops arriving tomorrow. At least, not mine. I lied. They'll be resting easy tonight, thinking we'll do nothing until tomorrow."

Prod scowled. "What else have you lied about?"

Delphia smiled brightly and he saw the lie in her teeth reflecting in her eyes as she lit two small torches. "Why, nothing else. Not exactly, anyway. Let's go. This ends at the kitchen yards."

They began the climb up a narrow, winding staircase cut right into the rock. She led swiftly, dousing their lights before creeping around the corner that brought them out onto the courtyard fenced with a stone seawall. There were no shutters on the windows at the back of the house, so sure were the occupants of their safety from that angle. Delphia and Prod silently climbed to the second story, creeping along a decorative ledge and peering into windows until they found Prince Fil alone in the last room.

Prod almost snorted in disgust. The man slept with a candle lit like a frightened child in his nursery. It occurred to Prod that without Delphia at his side, Fil would have a hard time holding on to his kingdom when his father died. He'd be doing the man a favor dragging him back this way.

Like two shadows flickering through moonlit trees, they slipped into the room and silently seized their prize, dragging him from the bed in one swift move. From behind, Prod kept his massive hand clamped over the Prince's mouth while holding down his arms. Delphia trussed him with strips cut from the satin bedsheets like a festival pig ready for the spit. Fil was as big as Prod but soft and flabby with no power in his struggles. Then Prod whirled the Prince around to shove a gag in his mouth and found himself looking into a face so similar to his own, it shocked him into momentary paralysis. Fil stopped struggling in surprise. They stared at each other and then at Delphia who grinned, "Quite a resemblance, isn't it?"

She shoved in the gag before Fil had a chance to say or yell anything, tying it not too ungently. Prod hefted Fil over his shoulder while she grabbed the candle and the prince's clothes. He was her intended after all and didn't need the added humiliation of being dragged back in his bedclothes.

Again she scanned her little map and then went to scabble behind a large wall hanging. The hidden door swung easily so she held it as Prod toted the once again struggling Prince into the dark entry that led to an even darker stairway down.

They came out again into the courtyard and crept through the shadows towards the seaward bolt hole by which they'd entered earlier. Delphia was reaching through the greenery for the half-hidden opening when behind her came sounds of a scuffle. There was a brief, very muffled scream of complete terror and then an awful thudding sound from far below. Delphia froze, dreading what she might see behind her.

"Oops."

She looked back. Prod was empty handed. Delphia almost choked on the words. "What happened?" she gasped quietly.

'He slipped."

"Slipped? What do you mean, he slipped?"

"He started wiggling again and he slipped. I judge he's been eating rather well lately."

She turned to the wall and peered over. "If you've damaged him, you clumsy oaf...oh, no."

She stared over the wall at the crumpled mess below. It wasn't really that long a fall, but poor Prince Fil must have hit head first.

Prod craned his neck a little from behind her. "I saw a melon that looked like that once."

Stifling a little scream of frustration, she slugged him in the upper arm as hard as she could and hissed at him, "That wasn't just my fortune you let slip out of your hands, idiot! It was the rest of your pay, too! Exactly how am I supposed to get an heir with

him in that condition?"

Prod was rubbing his arm where she'd punched him. "Well, maybe if you went down there real fast, before he cools off...ouch!"

This time Delphia stomped on his foot. Although not usually given to hissy fits, she'd had enough of Prod's casual outlook on life. "Useless. Less than useless, you clod. Come on. You're thrice-blessed and damned lucky I have a backup plan. Get down there and get him before someone else sees that he's dead. By the Goddess, I despise men. You are an anathema!"

Prod followed her lazily, somewhat bewildered as he pondered the meaning of the word 'anathema.' He kept hoping someone had heard them so he could get in at least a little fighting, but, sadly for him, the Princess's guards were as sound sleepers as their lady. He wouldn't give two coppers for what she'd do to them come morning when she discovered Fil was missing.

Delphia decided on a predawn funeral, deep in the forests of Northern Jerzee. It was simple, tasteful, and unattended by any other than herself and Prod. It had the added attraction of being completely hidden from future discovery. Prod climbed a bank from a quick wash in a river, grave-digging being dirty work. He was finding being clean and sober gave him a different outlook on life. Delphia held out Prince Fil's clothing to him. "Put these on," she directed.

Prod took them, eying her suspiciously. "Why?"

"It's my backup plan."

The usually dull-witted Prod found his newly sober brain could make connections he'd never realized were within his grasp. "You can't possibly think you can pass me off for that over-dressed, foppish, soft, baby-faced lap dog, do you?"

"I do. I will."

"I won't do it." Prod dropped the clothing.

Delphia snatched them up. "I just cleaned those, dolt. You dropped him, so you can just take his place. Besides, you look just like him."

"Maybe when I was a child. But not now. And my nose never did. No. I never bargained for this."

Delphia gave him a disgusted look, hands on hips, attempting to look more imposing than she really was. "If you don't, we don't get paid. I want Sylvania and I mean to have it. If you had done your job, we wouldn't be having this problem. But you dropped him and now we have to have a replacement. At least temporarily."

He gave her another withering look but she continued. "Hear me out. You and I go

back to Sylvania. We'll bandage your face and say you were injured in the struggle to free you. At a suitable time, we'll remove the bandages, showing your scarred but recognizable face. In the meantime, we marry, produce an heir and then you can die of a mysterious illness. Or get lost on a hunting trip. Or be martyred in a war. Anyway you want. I'll arrange for funds to be made available to you when you get over the Sylvanian border. Half the treasury at the time you leave and your child will inherit a kingdom."

"My scars are too old."

"We can make them up to look newly inflicted."

"I don't act like that pompous ass," he persisted, sullenly.

"Your head injuries will have affected your brain," she argued, thinking silently that she wasn't half wrong.

He didn't answer immediately, shifting from foot to foot as he considered. She could sense he was being persuaded so she threw in her best card. "Prod, think about it. For the Goddess's sake, open your eyes! Did you think your resemblance to Fil was a coincidence? Your father must have been the king and you must have been born around the same time as Fil. That's why your mother left Sylvania--so there wouldn't be any contest about Fil being the rightful heir and that's why no man would claim you. If you'd grown up as his bastard brother, the troops would have supported you over that spoiled brat. You aren't really deceiving anyone. You'll only be taking what's rightfully yours in the first place."

"And if they catch on, we may be dead right."

Delphia grinned, "They can try. I think between you, me and my troop, we can make the border with a good portion of the treasury before they can make a decision about what to do. Besides, what makes you think Sylvania's troops care about Fil? He was so popular, they wouldn't even come along to bring him back. They'll welcome a Prince Fil with your skills to lead them."

"How do we explain those skills?"

"Obviously, your head injuries will have finally knocked some sense into you and you'll begin to work with the arms master. You'll learn quick; a natural warrior, just like your father. Prod, does a man who cares about his son give him away to the first woman who comes along and bests a teensy little dragon? The King will be too proud of you to question anything. And maybe we can start a little war against Jerzee for treating you so badly. Trust me, being rich and powerful is going to be fun."

It sounded good. Try as he might, Prod couldn't come up with a better reason not to attempt the switch. No matter how deep the trouble, he believed in his ability to fight his way out of anything. Besides, he wanted a chance to meet the man who wouldn't claim him. He grunted assent and took the proffered clothing. In the dawn's rosy light,

Prince Fil rose from the dead and Prod the barbarian was never seen again bending his elbow at the Pig's Bladder Pub.

Queen Delphia stretched lazily in the warm sun at the edge of the castle's practice yard and shifted her daughter, Altoona, to her other breast. The child sucked as greedily as her older siblings had; each one strong and healthy with their mother's piercing blue eyes and their father's strapping build. King Fil came to sit next to her, shouting encouragement to his heir, Prince Penn, named for his grandfather, the late King Penn of Sylvania. Penn was battling the twins, Little Fil and Pitt, using a wooden practice sword against their wooden play pikes. "I'm glad you won the war in time to see your father before he passed on," Delphia remarked as Fil gently stroked his daughter's tiny head before dropping a casual kiss on his wife's cheek.

"As am I," he commented, "else I'd have never known just how cunning the old fox really was."

Delphia's eyes widened in alarm. "Did he...?"

"Yes, he knew all along. Didn't ask what had happened to the real Fil, but I explained it was an accident and he seemed satisfied. Apparently, my mother was one of the queen's handmaidens and he was very fond of her. The old biddy had her sent away when she found out mother was carrying the king's child. He tried to find us but was forced to be discreet and, well, we were long gone by that time. I was the elder, so the kingdom should have been mine by rights anyway. Told me he was confident the kingdom ended up in the right hands."

Delphia smiled her agreement. Just then, the boys ran up, each claiming victory and demanding their father proclaim them the king's champion. Delphia mused as she watched her husband settle the dispute and distract the princelings by beginning a discourse on proper warfare. She'd have never believed the drunken lack-wit she'd found in that rat's nest of a pub would ever have become the gentle father and judicious king who sat next to her.

"Can we have a story, father?" asked Penn.

"Oh, yes," the twins echoed, each clamoring for his favorite tale. "Let's have the story of how we took Jerzee."

"No, let's hear how father defeated the Yourkans!"

"I have a better tale for you, little ones. A new story. Let me tell you how your mother defeated a dragon to win me for her mate and then rescued me from the scurrilous, kidnapping Jerzees. I call it The Story of Delphia's Quest. Once upon a time..."