The summer months of the horse fair were hot and busy. After Tor was paid for her horses by Siris and the ranger, she paid Jason his portion. She heard no more from him after that. It was what she preferred. She hated his company. Hated him. He had mistreated her since she was born, since she could remember. She had never done a thing to deserve his animosity but she had it anyway so she gave him the same.  
  
She only saw Bret once more before he had to leave. He grinned as he sauntered up to her, the bay mare he had purchased following close behind. "She's a pocket horse, it seems," he chuckled. "She's a doll. I love her. She's already set herself up as boss of my string." He seemed proud of that.  
  
"Good to know you like her," Tor replied. "Are the rest of the rangers looking to buy? I've got plenty more to sell."  
  
Bret frowned a little at this. "A few of my brothers might, but they're not as well paid as me." He grinned again. "I'm one of the best around. I catch more wanted men on average than almost any other ranger."  
  
Tor was impressed in spite of her annoyance with the man. "Oh? But that doesn't tell me if your brothers want to buy."  
  
Bret rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "They would, but they're hoping to get married soon. Each has his eye on a pretty girl. So, they're taking whatever the paper-pushers give them. And right now the paper-pushers like the price of your brother's horses."  
  
Tor frowned at this. "His are beautiful, I don't disagree. But they are not built and bred for the kind of work and lifestyle a ranger leads. They'll go foul in the mountains or snap a leg if they step in a hole. You're going to run them ragged and they'll be useless for anything other than dog food in a few months."  
  
Bret held up his hands. "Trust me, I know. I tried to tell the paper-pushers this but they've worked out a deal with Jason. It's why I bought my own string from you. I realize how good your horses are. I see that they're what should be out carrying a ranger. But it's not me you have to convince. It's the paper-pushers and they think they know all."  
  
Tor scowled and felt a shaft of disappointment lance its way through her. "I realize mine are not dirt cheap, but you get what you pay for. My horses are an investment for someone who wants a good, sturdy work horse that will last them for years to come."  
  
The ranger took her hands in his and looked at her. Tor realized for the second time that he was at least as tall as Jason. It was startling the difference in the two men. Jason used his height to try and intimidate her and never let her forget he was bigger and stronger. Bret had never once. Tor never felt small next to him.   
  
She blinked and realized Bret had been speaking. "What? Sorry, I was lost in thought." She quickly pulled her hands from his.  
  
Bret grinned. "I was saying that I realize that. Maybe after I don't go through two strings a year, the paper-pushers will see what I already know and will come asking you for a contract. It's renewed every summer, you know."  
  
"Every summer? Well maybe I'll get their business next summer." She glanced around, seeing that a lot of people had already packed up and left. "There's less than a week until the fair is over."  
  
"I'm surprised you haven't high-tailed it yet," Bret said. "The next big fair is a little further north."  
  
"Trust me, if I could have, I would have been long gone. But I have to stay until Jason leaves." She sighed.   
  
"I guess you have a close bond, huh? I mean, if you're waiting around for him until you leave," Bret said. "By the way, where's your little human? He's usually perched on your shoulder scowling at me."  
  
"Ha! Yeah, no. I don't stay because I love Jason. I stay because my father's will stipulates that I have to keep my herd within sight of his." She scowled. "I hate it but I don't know of a way out of it. And Eric is back in the wagon. He was feeling poorly this morning."  
  
Bret arched a brow. "From that tone of voice, I take it you and your brother don't exactly get a long."  
  
Tor snorted. "That's a very mild way of putting it. Let me put it to you this way, if he ever does anything wrong and I know about it, I'll happily report it to you and let you haul his ass off to jail where he can rot."  
  
Bret laughed aloud. His laugh was large and booming and startled Tor with its intensity. "Tor Keller, you are some kind of woman. You know that?" He took her hand and brushed a kiss across it. "I have to go now. Thank you for the mare and the conversation."  
  
Tor's face flushed from her chin to her hairline. She yanked her hand back as if she had been stung. "Oh shut up and go away, will you? You're running off my potential customers."  
  
Bret continued laughing as he took his mare and walked away. "Until next time, Tor Keller!"  
  
Tor shook her head and sighed. "Crazy man," she muttered. She turned back to the mares that were milling about in her sales pen. Two were grazing from the flake of hay she had given them and the remaining four were dozing. She smiled slightly and headed back to her camp. She passed by Jason's on her way and saw them breaking down and loading things up.   
  
She caught sight of her younger brother Mick and hailed him. The meek man walked over to her, glancing over his shoulder briefly before giving his sister his attention. "What is it?" he asked.  
  
"What's up your backside?" Tor asked, surprised with his snippy tone.   
  
"Sorry, Jason has me busy running this way and that." He rubbed his face tiredly. "I haven't had much sleep. We're breaking camp and planning to leave tomorrow morning."  
  
"Why do you tolerate that? You don't have to do what Jason says," she reminded him. "You owe him money from your sales and nothing else."  
  
Mick shrugged. "I don't sell much. My few horses run with his."  
  
"You let him boss you around and you owe him nothing," Tor said. "Honestly, where's your Keller backbone?" She gave him a dirty side-eyed look.  
  
Mick flushed with shame and embarrassment. "Sorry. I just don't like dealing with all the paperwork and stuff. It's easier to let Jason handle it all."  
  
"And in return you're practically his body servant," Tor snapped. "Get over your laziness and get your head in the real world. No one will take care of you for free. Someone always wants something in return. And Jason will want everything he can work you for. Then he'll dump you and forget about you." She ran a hand through her hair. "Think carefully before you give your life over to Jason. Hell, for all you want him to do, I would help you out without making you run around like a servant."  
  
Mick shrugged. "He's the oldest," he said. He flinched when Jason bellowed his name above the din of breaking camp. "Sorry, Tor, I gotta go." He hurried off to do whatever it was Jason had ordered him to do.  
  
Tor sighed and shook her head. "One day I'll get us out of this mess," she told him as he walked away. "One day."   
  
She headed back into camp and gave the order to break down. "We're heading out. Don't ask me where. It's wherever Jason's libido takes us." Several of the men in her camp laughed. "Let's get rolling. He wants to leave in the morning which means I want to leave after lunch. I don't want to see anything but the pinprick asses of his toy horses."  
  
The men laughed again. All of them were loyal to Tor. A few of them had worked for her father and chose to work for her after his passing. Many of the things Jason did left a sour taste in their mouths and they wanted no part of them. So they chose to work for the Keller they thought best followed their late boss's ideals.   
  
They had the camp packed up and ready to roll by supper. The cook prepared a big supper. "Breakfast and lunch will be cold," he told them. "So I can get out ahead and have your supper ready by the time you show up."  
  
Tor nodded. "That's fine. Thanks." She checked on Eric. The poor human was curled up on a fold of the blanket, absolutely miserable. She brushed a knuckle across his face. "You're warm but not as warm as you were this morning. Did you eat anything?"  
  
Eric shook his head. "No," he muttered miserably. "I haven't had the appetite."  
  
"Did you drink any of the water I left for you? Dehydrating is easy when sick and will keep you sicker for longer." She took the bowl he had vomited in and rinsed it out before setting it back beside him.  
  
"A little," Eric said. "I'm just so tired. I don't want to move."   
  
Tor pursed her lips. "Do I need to take you back to the human doctor? The lands are fenced now and easy to find."  
  
Eric shook his head. "No. I'll be better in a day or two. Don't worry about me." He wrapped himself up in the blanket.  
  
Tor sighed and stroked his back. "Can't do that when you're puking your guts out and running a fever." She rolled him out of the blanket and into her hand. She lifted him up to her face to get a better look at him. "Poor thing. You need a bath, too. A nice hot one to sweat out all that crud."   
  
She fixed him a hot bath and let him soak. The next afternoon, they rolled on. Eric was a little better and Tor's worry abated. The days flowed one into another. Lands melted into one another. Trees and hills and cliffs all became one. Word flowed back that Jason picked up a new bimbo. A day later, the gossip came that she got motion sick easily and messed up Jason's wagon with vomit everywhere.   
  
Tor thought that might be the best thing she ever heard. She chuckled as they headed through a low valley. "Best day ever," she murmured. "Hopefully she pukes *on* him next time."  
  
They camped in the valley that night and exited it the following morning. Another day of riding and driving the horses before they came to a stop. Tor was surprised when she saw how close Jason's camp was. Larson came riding up, a big grin on his face.  
  
"The bimbo can't handle the rocking of the wagon. She got sick again. So Jason's stopped and had a lean-to thrown together for her to rest in," he told her.  
  
Tor shook her head. "She must be something for him to spend this much time and effort on her. Alright. Let's stop then. We'll set up camp here until Jason decides to move on."