No women rode in Arlbeth’s army. A few of the bolder wives might be permitted to go with their husbands, those who could ride and had been trained in cavalry drill; and those who could be trusted to smile even at Nyrlol (depending on how the negotiations went), and curtsy to him as befitted his rank as fourth sola, and even dance with him if he should ask. But it was expected that no wife would go unless her husband asked her, and no husband would ask unless he had asked the king first.

Galanna would certainly not go, even if Perlit had been willing to go to the trouble of obtaining leave from Arlbeth (which would probably not have been granted). Fortunately for the peace of all concerned, Galanna had no interest in going; anything resembling hardship did not appeal to her in the least, and she was sure that nothing in the barbaric west could possibly be worth her time and beauty.

A king’s daughter might go too; a king’s daughter who had, perhaps, proved herself in some small ways; who had learned to keep her mouth shut, and to smile on cue; a king’s daughter who happened to be the king’s only child. She had known they would not let her; she had known that Arlbeth would not dare give his permission even had he wanted to, and she did not know if he had wanted to. But he could not dare take the witchwoman’s daughter to confront the workings of demon-mischief; his people would never let him, and he too sorely needed his people’s good will.
But she could not help asking—any more, she supposed, than poor stupid Nyrlol could help going mad when the demon-mischief bit him. She had tried to choose her time, but her father and Tor had been so busy lately that she had had to wait, and wait again, till her time was almost gone. After dinner last night she had finally asked; and she had come up here to her rooms afterward and had not come out again.

“Father.” Her voice had gone high on her, as it would do when she was afraid. The other women, and the lesser court members, had already left the long hall; Arlbeth and Tor and a few of the cousins, Perolith among them, were preparing for another weary evening of discussion on Nyrlol’s folly. They paused and all of them turned and looked at her, and she wished there were not so many of them. She swallowed. She had decided against asking her father late, in his own rooms, where she could be sure to find him alone, because she was afraid he would only be kind to her and not take her seriously. If she was to be shamed—and she knew, or she told herself she knew, that she would be refused—at least let him see how much it meant to her, that she should ask and be refused with others looking on.

Arlbeth turned to her with his slow smile, but it was slower and less of it reached his eyes than usual. He did not say, “Be quick, I am busy,” as he might have done—and small blame to him if he had, she thought forlornly.

“You ride west—soon? To treat with Nyrlol?” She could feel Tor’s eyes on her, but she kept her own eyes fixed on her father.
“Treat?” said her father. “If we go, we go with an army to witness the treaty.” A little of the smile crept into his eyes after all. “You are picking up courtly language, my dear. Yes, we go to ‘treat’ with Nyrlol.”

Tor said: “We have some hope of catching the mischief”—one did not say demon aloud if one could help it—“and bottling it up, and sending it back where it came from. Even now we have that hope. It won’t stop the trouble, but it will stop it getting worse. If Nyrlol isn’t being pricked and pinched by it, he may subside into the subtle and charming Nyrlol we all know and revere.” Tor’s mouth twisted up into a wry smile.

She looked at him and her own mouth twitched at the corners. It was like Tor to answer her as if she were a real part of the court, even a member of the official deliberations, instead of an interruption and a disturbance. Tor might even have let her go with them; he wasn’t old enough yet to care so much for his people’s good opinion as Arlbeth did; and furthermore, Tor was stubborn. But it was not Tor’s decision. She turned back to her father.

“When you go—may I come with you?” Her voice was little more than a squeak, and she wished she were near a wall or a door she could lean on, instead of in the great empty middle of the dining-hall, with her knees trying to fold up under her like an hour-old foal’s.

The silence went suddenly tight, and the men she faced went rigid: or Arlbeth did, and those behind him, for she kept her face resolutely away from Tor. She thought that she could not bear it if her one loyal friend forsook her too; and she had never tried to
discover the extent of Tor’s stubbornness. Then the silence was broken by Perlith’s high-pitched laughter.

“Well, and what did you expect from letting her go as she would these last years? It’s all very well to have her occupied and out from underfoot, but you should have thought the price you paid to be rid of her might prove a little high. What did you expect when our honored first sola gives her lessons in swordplay and she tears around on that three-legged horse like a peasant boy from the Hills, with never a gainsay but a scold from that old shrew that serves as her maid? Might you not have thought of the reckoning to come? She needed slaps, not encouragement, years ago—she needs a few slaps now, I think. Perhaps it is not too late.”

“Enough.” Tor’s voice, a growl.

Her legs were trembling now so badly that she had to move her feet, shuffle in her place, to keep the joints locked to hold her up. She felt the blood mounting to her face at Perlith’s words, but she would not let him drive her away without an answer. “Father?”

“Father,” mimicked Perlith. “It’s true a king’s daughter might be of some use in facing what the North has sent us; a king’s daughter who had true royal blood in her veins....”

Arlbeth, in a very unkinglike manner, reached out and grabbed Tor before anyone found out what the first sola’s sudden move in Perlith’s direction might result in. “Perlith, you betray the honor of the second sola’s place in speaking thus.”
Tor said in a strangled voice, “He will apologize, or I’ll give him a lesson in swordplay he will not like at all.”

“Tor, don’t be a—” she began, outraged, but the king’s voice cut across hers. “Perlith, there is justice in the first sola’s demand.”

There was a long pause while she hated everyone impartially: Tor for behaving like a farmer’s son whose pet chicken has just been insulted; her father, for being so immovably kingly; and Perlith for being Perlith. This was even worse than she had anticipated; at this point she would be grateful just for escape, but it was too late.

Perlith said at last, “I apologize, Aerin-sol. For speaking the truth,” he added venomously, and turned on his heel and strode across the hall. At the doorway he paused and turned to shout back at them: “Go slay a dragon, lady! Lady Aerin, Dragon-Killer!”

The silence resettled itself about them, and she could no longer even raise her eyes to her father’s face.

“Aerin—” Arlbeth began.

The gentleness of his voice told her all she needed to know, and she turned away and walked toward the other end of the hall, opposite the door which Perlith had taken. She was conscious of the length of the way she had to take because Perlith had taken the shorter way, and she hated him all the more for it; she was conscious of all the eyes on her, and conscious of the fact that her legs still trembled, and that the line she walked
was not a straight one. Her father did not call her back. Neither did Tor. As she reached the doorway at last, Perlith's words still rang in her ears: “A king’s daughter who had true royal blood in her veins... Lady Aerin, Dragon-Killer.” It was as though his words were hunting dogs who tracked her and nipped at her heels.