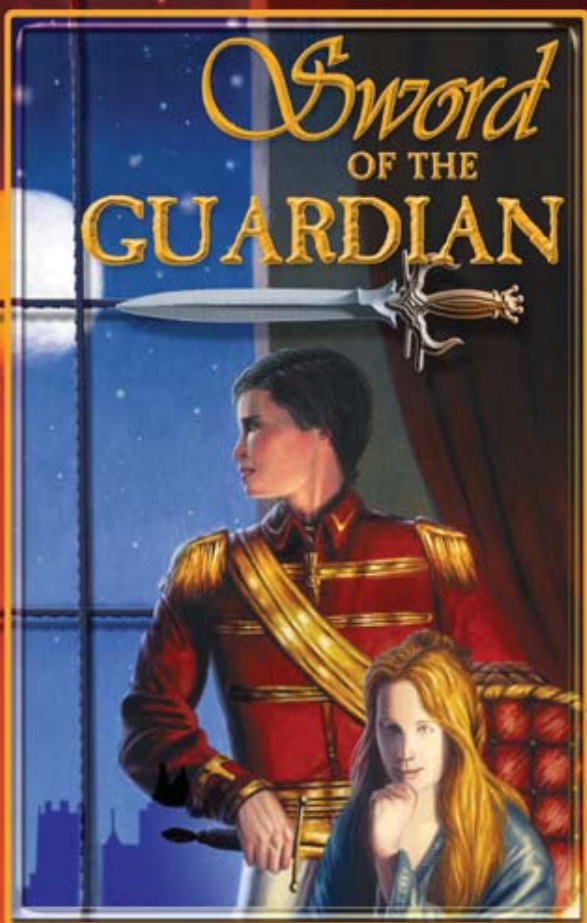
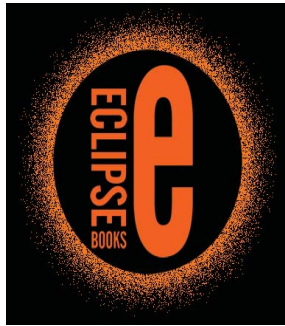


Sword
OF THE
GUARDIAN



MERRY SHANNON





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SWORD OF THE GUARDIAN

A LEGEND OF ITHYRIA

by

MERRY SHANNON



2006

SWORD OF THE GUARDIAN

A LEGEND OF ITHYRIA

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CREDITS

EDITORS: JENNIFER KNIGHT AND STACIA SEAMAN

PRODUCTION DESIGN: STACIA SEAMAN

COVER ART: TOBIAS BRENNER (WWW.TOBIASBRENNER.DE)

COVER DESIGN BY SHERI (GRAPHICARTIST2020@HOTMAIL.COM)

Acknowledgments

Fifteen years ago, a starry-eyed eleven-year-old sat down at her desk and scribbled out the first few pages of a fantasy tale. Like most of her stories, it was filed away and never finished, and the characters it contained—princesses, acrobats, priestesses, and slaves—were all but forgotten. *Sword of the Guardian* began as a way to revisit these old friends. But this time around, the world of Ithyria has developed into a place much brighter, much richer than those first simple opening scenes. The Goddess and Her people seem to have taken on a life all their own now, and I look forward to dropping in on them many more times in the years to come.

My deepest gratitude to all my friends on Livejournal who watched the progression of this story, some of whom have been reading my work for many years. Without your continual support and inspiration this book would not have been possible. Special thanks to the members of the old Refuge, who were the first to make me believe I might actually be good at this writing stuff.

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Dedication

For Laura
You have all of me, Princess

CHAPTER ONE

At our Divine Lady's command I, Qiturah, Honored Mother of Verdred Temple and most reverent scribe to the Goddess Ithyris, have taken up quill and ink to chronicle the events leading up to the dark days of the recent Monderan Rebellion. Far more than a mere account of the times, this is the story of a princess and her champion, of a love that changed the course of our history, and of the eternal battle between darkness and light that will forever define this world.

My tale begins, as many do, with a journey...

The kingdom of Ithyria had entered the Firstmoon of its nine hundred and ninety-sixth winter when the Goddess Ithyris began whispering to Her Daughters of a grave threat to the royal house. Hoping to prevent a tragedy, the Honored Mother Qiturah set off one bright spring morning for the palace of Ardrenn, a royal birthday her excuse for the rare visit. For a full day and night she and her traveling party rode, bareback according to priestess tradition, across the meadows of the Verdred countryside and into the forests of Olsta province. Little did the priestesses suspect that they were about to witness a blow struck to the very heart of the kingdom.

Signs of the Goddess's warning were already manifest in a growing civil unrest that plagued Ithyria. Qiturah knew she was not the only one who feared the King had lost the love of his people. King Soltran Novaris was sovereign by marriage only; it was Queen Talia, his late wife, who had been heiress to the royal house of Rane. Until their son Daric was old enough to take the throne, Qiturah could see no hope of a return to the peace and harmony of former times.

With a sense of deep foreboding, she stared up at the four border towers that marked their passage from Olsta into the capital province of Aster on the second day of their journey. Ithyria's greatest hope lay in Crown Prince Daric, who was everything that his father was not. Handsome, intelligent, and above all, honorable, he had already demonstrated a gift for diplomacy and leadership that proved the royal blood of Rane ran strong in him. The Prince and his twin sister, Shasta, were about to celebrate their sixteenth birthday, and Qiturah was looking forward to seeing them at the festivities.

She supposed King Soltran would stage another of his costly banquets, with fantastic entertainments and exotic foods imported from far and near. While no one in the kingdom would begrudge the Prince and Princess their rightful birthday feast, Qiturah had heard grumbles about the King's extravagance. Too many Ithyrians would spend another winter starving.

It was not for the Daughters of Ithyris to interfere in politics, but as Honored Mother of Verdred, Qiturah was one of the most revered spiritual leaders in the kingdom. She could no longer ignore the widespread suffering of the Goddess's people. In the north, barbarian tribes from the mountains of Dangar attacked villages and temples without reprisal from the provincial governments. Throughout Ithyria, greedy nobles violated laws with impunity, preying upon the people under their protection. They taxed produce unfairly, then seized lands when tenants couldn't pay, killing or indenturing any who resisted.

These raids left countless orphans, who flooded the temples in search of sanctuary and food. Those who came were fortunate. The rest were at the mercy of the corrupt, their exploitation a blight upon the kingdom.

It was time King Soltran acted to protect his people. Qiturah had set herself the unhappy task of telling him so, though in truth, she held little hope that he would act. In her heart she knew he lacked the necessary confidence.

Smoothing the edge of her veil as it was caught by a breeze, she tried once more to clear her mind of shadow. There was still time to reverse the descent into chaos that she and the other priestesses had foreseen. At least, that was her fervent prayer.



Talon absentmindedly scratched the back of her neck where the collar of her brightly colored costume was rubbing unpleasantly against her skin. Her eyes never left her two sisters, who sat on the floor of the great hall listening as Showmaster Naurin introduced their troupe with his usual blustering zeal. Lyris and Bria didn't seem to share Talon's distaste for these events; hardly surprising, since these were the only duties they enjoyed and both girls had such skill that they did not fear failure.

Talon was less fortunate. Acrobatics did not come as naturally to her as music did to her sisters, and she'd suffered for it. Every failure meant a beating, or extra backbreaking chores, or a meal that was withheld—often a combination of all three. Talon was a successful acrobat only because she pushed herself to the point of breaking. Her real value to the showmaster lay in her ability to coach Lyris and Bria. She knew if it were not for that he would have gotten rid of her long ago, and she could not allow herself to be separated from her sisters. They were her responsibility, and they needed her.

At a sharp elbow in her spine and a warning glare from the showmaster, she sprang forward, mentally cursing herself for nearly missing her cue. Leaping to the center of the room, she launched right into her routine, executing two cartwheels and a front flip, bending backward, and then kicking into a handstand. With exquisite precision, she lifted one hand off the ground and held the position while one of the smaller troupe members placed delicate cups of steaming tea on the tips of her toes and in her open hand.

Knowing that if she spilled so much as a drop she would pay dearly for it later, she closed her mind to everything except the tea. Bending one leg carefully, she took the cup from that foot so there were two in her hand. She then pulled herself into a standing position, balancing on one leg without letting the cup on her other foot waver. Passing one of the cups to her head, she balanced it there as she used her free hand to grasp the ankle of the foot holding the tea. Slowly, she stretched her leg behind her into a graceful arabesque.

The teacup routine involved several more manipulations, and then each cup was replaced by a lit candle. Talon carried those through another set of poses, tying her body into various knots and unwinding it again, narrowly avoiding catching her hair or parts of her costume on fire.

Afterward, she had a brief moment to catch her breath and gauge the audience's reaction. For the first time she glimpsed the people at the head of the room. A bearded man sat at the center of the table, a large gold crown displayed prominently on his brow. On either side of him were a boy and a girl, about Lyris's age, wearing miniature versions of the same crown: Ithyria's famous royal twins. In her nineteen winters, Talon had never seen the royal family in person. She supposed she should feel thrilled, but unlike the rest of her performing troupe, she took very little interest in political figures, royalty or not.

Talon was not scanning the royal faces out of curiosity; she needed to evaluate the effect of her routines. Even after a flawless performance, she could still be punished if the showmaster felt she'd lost audience interest. The young Prince appeared engrossed, grinning and clapping, but the Princess only stared down into her goblet as though she found its contents more intriguing than the entertainment. Talon frowned slightly, but there was no time for further contemplation. The troupe musicians had begun to play her next piece, and her partner, Boleyn, was already in position.

Their duet performance was always a crowd pleaser, and was far more difficult than any of her solo routines. Talon spun quickly and back-flipped toward Boleyn, who dropped to the ground, planted his feet into her chest, and lifted her into the air with his legs. She arched her back and posed before giving a guttural "Ha!", Boleyn's signal to kick his legs and roll forward. As he did this, she contracted her abdomen, flipped her legs over her head, and flew through the air to land on her feet exactly where Boleyn's face had been a moment before.

Holding her final position, she risked a glance at the Princess, whose face now showed faint curiosity—an improvement, but not the excitement Talon had hoped for. Deciding to try something different, she swirled her hand in front of her face and exchanged a look with Boleyn to be sure he understood. His eyes widened but he nodded slightly and dropped to one knee, hunching his shoulders.

Talon executed a series of back flips as far as the hall's doors, putting as much distance between herself and Boleyn as she could. They usually reserved this dangerous move for outdoor arenas and had never tried it in an enclosed room like this one.

Arms extended, she carefully judged the distance between herself and Boleyn, and between Boleyn and the King's table. One

miscalculation and she could land on someone in the audience, perhaps the Princess herself, and that would be an unforgivable offense. The showmaster would probably kill her if the King didn't. But if the stunt worked, she'd spare both Boleyn and herself a night of empty bellies and bruised backs.

She could feel Showmaster Naurin's gaze burning into the back of her head, and with the discipline born of nearly ten winters of rigorous training, she cleared her mind of everything but the sensation of blood pounding through her veins, the tension in each muscle, the contraction of her back and abdomen, the strength of her legs. Drawing a quick breath, she ran forward lightly, launched herself into the air, and sprang onto Boleyn's shoulders. He jerked up and tossed her, providing the momentum she needed to soar high above the floor.

Arms crossed in front of her chest, Talon held her body in a straight line, and flipped and twisted at the same time in a half circle before curling into a ball and using her abdominal muscles to swing her legs up and over her head. That provided the inertia she would need for landing, and as she came down she envisioned where her feet should land—there and there on the table, right in front of the Princess, without disturbing her plate or goblet.

Time stood still in those split seconds and she knew this could very well be her last performance if she failed. But her lucky streak held out. She landed on the table a little more heavily than she would have liked, but the royal family's plates and goblets merely shook at the impact. Not a drop of wine spilled.

The audience erupted in a cacophony of applause and cheers and the Princess looked up at her with astonishment that faded quickly into awe.

So that's why the legends of the royal house always speak of "the amber eyes of Rane," Talon thought bemusedly. The Princess's eyes were an unusual pale golden shade that almost exactly matched her golden brown hair.

Struck with sudden inspiration, Talon sank to one knee on the table, tugged a red silk flower out of a hidden pocket in her sleeve and presented it to the girl with a flourish and rakish wink. As she hoped, the Princess's face reddened and she accepted the token with a giggle.

The court cheered again at this little exchange. Talon grinned, well aware that her dark Outlander coloring and androgynous, elfin features

were quite attractive to most of her female audience. It was one of the benefits that came with her masculine disguise. She'd fallen into the pretense by accident, initially. But impersonating a man had turned out to be the best protection she could offer her sisters, and moments of flirtatious fun like this one almost made it worth the considerable inconvenience.

Somersaulting lightly from the table, she bowed deeply to the royal family amid renewed applause and resumed her position against the wall with the other performers. Showmaster Naurin caught her eye as she fell back into line, disapproval and greed warring on his face. She knew she'd probably get an earful for the risk she'd taken, but he couldn't deny that she'd just delivered a powerful performance, possibly the best of the night. The golden coins showering the stone floor proved that.

A brief delay before the next act allowed the smallest performers in the troupe to scamper about collecting the coins. They delivered these to the showmaster, who filled the leather pouch at his belt and bowed to the audience with exaggerated gratitude. Talon gave a smug grin. Naurin was fond of reminding her that he only tolerated her presence in the troupe because of her sisters. Occasional triumphs like this one meant she could be an asset all on her own.

Lyris and Bria performed next, and Talon was finally able to let her body relax. Her part in the show was over, and better yet, had been a great success. She watched as Lyris's harp was positioned in the center of the floor and Lyris settled herself on the small stool before it, stretching her fingers experimentally over the strings. Bria stood near her shoulder. A respectful hush fell over the audience when Lyris began to play, and after a few notes Bria's sweet crystalline soprano rose above the delicate tinkling of the harp, filling the entire hall with a sound so achingly beautiful that all eyes were drawn to the sisters in the center of the room.

Talon's heart swelled with pride. No one would know from just looking at her sisters that they were near-penniless vagrant troupe performers. When Lyris and Bria made music together, they appeared as elegant and cultured as the wealthiest of noblewomen. They could have become real ladies one day—with their lovely faces and sweet dispositions they certainly would have married well. If only the raiders had never come to their village...

Her face burned at the memory. Nearly ten winters had passed since barbarians had killed her parents and kidnapped Talon and her sisters. Life as traveling entertainers was certainly not the worst fate that could have befallen three young orphan girls; Talon knew from terrible stories she had heard that it could have been far, far worse. That was why she pushed Lyris and Bria so hard. Even at a very young age, she'd understood that to survive they would have to make themselves indispensable, profitable, and irreplaceable to Showmaster Naurin.

Listening to her sisters perform now, Talon knew that was exactly what they had done. Lyris and Bria cast a spell over their listeners no matter what kind of audience they performed for. They always pulled in the greatest profits and were obviously the showmaster's favorites. This made it easier for Talon to look after them. Lyris had reached sixteen last Twelfthmoon, and Bria would be fifteen this winter, yet due to their value to the troupe and Talon's close watch, both remained untouched by the hands of men. Such innocence was unheard of among girls in the entertainment trade.

Talon watched Bria work the room slowly as she sang, fluttering her eyelashes in the direction of men sitting on either side of her, and paying special attention to those at the King's table. The Prince in particular seemed to have caught her eye, and Bria began directing her graceful arm movements toward him.

Talon felt an unpleasant mixture of dismay and annoyance. Bria didn't seem to realize that what happened to the other girls in the troupe could easily happen to her. So far the showmaster had turned down every offer he'd received for either of the sisters, convinced that their purity and innocence was part of their charm for the crowds. But that could easily change the day someone made an offer he could not refuse.

With Bria older now, and constantly flirting with the men in every audience, the risk was steadily growing. Talon wasn't sure what she'd do if Showmaster Naurin ever accepted an offer for one of her sisters. She didn't want to think about it.

Fortunately, the young Prince seemed unlikely to inquire after such a thing. Talon kept her eyes on the other men in the room, trying to evaluate any potential danger to her sister. Everyone was watching both girls, only a few with undisguised lust on their faces. After assessing their various wardrobes and positions relative to the head table, Talon

was satisfied none of them could afford to make the kind of offer the showmaster would require for either of her sisters' favors.

Her gaze returned to Bria, who suddenly struck a high note of such clarity that the walls of the hall itself seemed to strain to contain it. Lyris's hands ceased to move on the strings, allowing only the sound of her sister's voice to carry above everything and everyone else in the room. She stood up from her seat at the harp. Together the sisters approached the head table, Bria still holding that one glorious note.

Bria extended her hands to the Prince, while Lyris did the same for the Princess, beckoning them to step out from behind the table. Prince Daric took Bria's hands willingly, but his sister seemed uncertain. When the Princess finally did reach out and take the offered hand, Bria let go of the note she was holding, and Talon was able to breathe easy again. A moment of rapt silence ensued as the sisters led the royal twins out into the center of the floor.

In a split second dancers surrounded them, and the group of musicians at the back picked up where the music had left off, beginning with the sweet sounds of a flute. The tempo increased slowly, and both Bria and Lyris began to sing, Lyris's warmer, fuller tones supporting Bria's airy soprano. The two girls whirled the Prince and Princess into the center of the dancers, and the music became more lively with each step.

Talon grinned. Another perfect performance for her sisters this evening. She turned to peek at the showmaster's face, and movement caught her eye. A hooded figure in a dark cloak left his position by the door and glided smoothly among the lords and ladies of the hall without eliciting so much as a curious glance. He moved more like a shadow than a man, and Talon's nostrils flared. Whoever this person was, she felt certain he was dangerous. Her eyes tracked him as he moved, straining to catch a glimpse of the face concealed within the deep hood. Suddenly there was a flash of silver from his sleeve.

What happened next took only a split second, yet it seemed like an eternity. The cloaked man threw a knife into the party of dancers, with an aim so swift and deadly that it had to be expert. It flew over Bria's shoulder, missing her by a hairbreadth, and embedded itself in the chest of the young Prince. Bria screamed, and the hall erupted in chaos.

That scream wiped out every other thought for Talon, whose eyes had never left the dark figure. She caught a second flash, and with the

intuition born of a lifetime of brutal training, she knew where the next knife was headed...toward the two girls who had been dancing at the far side of the room. Toward Lyris!

With a cry, she leapt from her spot at the wall, planted her feet on a nearby bench and catapulted herself into the air. She shoved Lyris in the small of her back and pushed the Princess to the ground, then landed hard in front of them. At the same instant that her knees buckled with the impact, she was aware of an explosion of pain in her abdomen. Her hand came up instinctively, and when she pulled it away her palm was slick with blood. She did not bother to ponder this but regained her balance, frantically seeking out her sister's face.

The pain in her abdomen increased when she tried to straighten and she found herself strangely dizzy. Looking down, she was stunned to see the hilt of the assassin's knife sprouting unnaturally from her stomach, above the left hipbone. She must have caught it with her own body in her attempt to save her sister. Again she sought out Lyris, but a pair of warm golden eyes arrested hers. Princess Shasta's disbelieving stare was the last thing Talon saw before her vision clouded and she lost consciousness.



King Soltran stared at Qiturah, weariness etched into his features. "Are you certain?"

"I assure you I could never invent such a story. I have examined the acrobat myself, and..." Qiturah pursed her lips. "Your Majesty, he is not a boy at all. The person lying in that room downstairs is unquestionably female." She was still astonished by the discovery.

The King rubbed his temples. "My apologies, Honored Mother. Of course I believe you. It's just been..." His sigh was heavy, and slightly choked. "It's been a very hard few days."

Qiturah laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, aware that the royal family had not a moment of rest or privacy in which to grieve their loss. "The thoughts of the entire kingdom are with you and your family right now, Your Majesty."

News of Crown Prince Daric's death had rocked Ithyria within hours of the chaotic events at the celebration banquet. The assassin had disappeared without a trace. It was as if the mysterious cloaked man

had been absorbed right into the stone of the castle walls. The royal guard had no luck so far tracking him down. The hunt continued, but there was precious little information to go on.

All anyone could be certain of was that the assassin had two targets, both the Prince and his twin sister. Now the court was in general disarray, with rumors flying at every turn, and the young performer who had saved Princess Shasta had become, instantly, a national hero and a curiosity.

Qiturah, however, had more pressing concerns, and here in the King's study she was afforded, for the first time since the tragedy, the opportunity to do what she had come to do. The unusual situation presented by the Princess's savior gave her the perfect opening. "I've spoken with the young woman's sisters, the harpist and the singer. Evidently they are the only ones who know her true gender, and they virtually begged me not to reveal her secret. From what they say, their sister has lived as a male for nearly ten winters."

"And I suppose you want me to have her executed for it?"

"What?" Qiturah exclaimed in horror. "No, Your Majesty, not at all."

The King regarded her with a curious expression. "You surprise me, Honored Mother. Isn't dressing contrary to one's sex considered blasphemy against the Goddess? I thought such sins were punishable by death."

"Dressing against one's nature is blasphemy, Your Majesty, which isn't quite the same thing. And the Goddess Ithyris is far more interested in the preservation of life than the preservation of fashion."

Soltran's brow wrinkled. "Your Honor, I do not have the capacity for riddles today. Speak plainly."

Qiturah gave a little smile that the King would not be able to see beneath her veils and launched into her argument smoothly. "Very well. According to the sisters' story, they were orphaned in a barbarian raid ten winters ago. As you are aware, Majesty, over the past decade nobles have overrun the provincial governments. Many now sit as senators and use their positions to further their own selfish interests. The nobility has become corrupt and greedy, waging small wars between one another and killing thousands of innocents in the process. Not only do they prey upon their own people, they do nothing to stop the barbarian invaders from the Dangar Empire who constantly terrorize the northern

provinces. These girls come from the eastern Outlands, as I'm sure you could tell by their coloring. Of all Ithyrians, the Outlanders face some of the worst persecution. They're a simple people, nomadic hunters, and easy prey for those who would seek to raid their lands and homes."

She paused to note the effect of her words. The King's face was beginning to darken rebelliously, so she gentled her sermonizing tone. "Majesty, imagine three small Outlander girls, mere children, alone and defenseless against a world that is often particularly brutal to women." She waited for that image to sink in, then asked quietly, "Can you truly see no reason that the oldest would disguise herself as a boy?"

The King's cheeks flushed. "I am not so far removed from the realities of human nature, Your Honor, that I cannot understand her reasons. Nor do I fail to empathize with their plight. But what do you expect me to do?"

Annoyed, Qiturah closed her eyes and breathed a quick prayer for patience. "You are the King of Ithyria, Your Majesty. I expect—the kingdom expects—that you will act accordingly. Stop your nobles' petty bickering. Remove the undeserving from power. Reinforce our defenses along the northern border. Save the children of Ithyria from lives of starvation and abuse." She wanted to add "Grow a backbone," but was far too diplomatic to let the words leave her lips.

"And how exactly do you propose I go about that?" Soltran scowled. "The nobles pay lip service to my commands, then do whatever they please. The royal guard follows its general, not its King! I am well aware that my own son inspired more respect and obedience from the Ithyrian nobility than I do." He rose to his feet. "I may be King, but everyone knows it's in name only. The court tolerates me as a placeholder, awaiting the day when a descendant of Rane will take the throne."

Soltran paused and Qiturah stared at him pointedly until he seemed to remember who he was speaking to. One of the twelve Honored Mothers of Ithyria, Qiturah was a direct representative of the Goddess, and courtesy dictated that he show proper respect.

"Now that Daric is gone, what little power I had, as his father, has gone with him." The King sank back into his chair, his tone less belligerent. "Princess Shasta is the only remaining heir to the crown, and even if she survives the present threat, Ithyria will have to wait yet another generation for a king of the royal bloodline to take the throne.

I grieve for our kingdom, Honored Mother, of course I do. But I cannot save Ithyria if she will not allow me to rule her.”

The King lowered his forehead into his hands and Qiturah unhappily pondered a reply. It was not the nobles’ fault that Soltran was a weak ruler. He lacked confidence and authority, which ran strong in the blood of Rane. But such traits were not exclusive to the royal family. Soltran had simply never cultivated them, instead developing the habit of placing blame on others for his own failures. It was difficult to challenge his behavior without violating protocol.

“I know you are worried about your family,” Qiturah finally said, as gently as she could. “But your suffering is no less than the suffering of hundreds of other families in Ithyria, families who have also lost children, parents, husbands, and wives in the chaos that has swept this country. Your Majesty, how many more must die before you take action? You have already lost your son. Will you stand idly by and let your enemies take your daughter as well?”

As she had hoped, her words seemed to inspire a flicker of determination in the King and his eyes suddenly sparked. For all his failures as a ruler, Soltran was a devoted father who adored his children. “You’re right, Honored Mother. Shasta is all I have left. I’ll swear faith to cursed Ulrike before I let anything happen to her.”

Qiturah clucked her tongue. Ulrike, brother-god to Ithyris, was the antithesis of everything the Goddess stood for, and though his name was often used in casual swearing it was more powerful than most people knew. But Soltran seemed careless of this fact.

Sounding unusually resolute, he said, “Shasta will be the salvation of Ithyria and must be protected at all costs. With her there still lies a chance for a strong king on the throne, someone who can cleanse the provincial governments and restore order.”

This was not exactly what the priestess had meant, but she had no chance to interrupt. Tugging at his beard in agitation, the King continued, “What am I to do? I don’t trust the nobles. Any one of them could have sent that hooded devil. General Anjen is too busy trying to track down the assassin to provide sufficient protection for the Princess. She needs constant security. In fact, someone must attend her every moment of the day and night. Standing outside her chamber door just won’t be sufficient, not with this elusive assassin at large. I want a guard at her bedside.” This thought apparently gave him pause, and he

stood to pace the study. “But there’s not a man I would entrust with her so...intimately.”

Qiturah sighed. The King was getting sidetracked from the original subject. “Your Majesty, the Princess’s safety is indeed vital, but the problems extend far beyond one person. Take that brave young woman who saved Princess Shasta’s life...”

The King suddenly paused in midstep. “That’s it.”

Qiturah wasn’t sure he had even been listening. “Majesty?”

“The acrobat. She’s strong, isn’t she? She has to be, to be able to perform all those stunts. Quick reflexes as well, and I’ve heard Outlanders have especially keen senses. Best of all, everyone believes she’s a man, which makes her absolutely perfect.”

“Perfect for what?”

“For Shasta’s bodyguard.” The King smacked his hands together. “Don’t you see? As a woman, she could be trusted alone with the Princess. And as a man, properly trained as a soldier, she could be an effective deterrent to any assassin.”

The priestess was at a loss for words. Yet again the King was avoiding real action, instead making a token gesture. Not to mention that the very idea was rather bizarre. “Majesty, I really don’t think that’s the best solution...”

“Of course it is. Fear not, Honored Mother, I’ll make it worth her while. So long as the acrobat is obedient, she and her sisters will be rewarded with positions in the royal household. The girls can serve as ladies-in-waiting to the Princess. Shasta will like having attendants her own age. She’s always complaining about the ladies the court chooses. Of course, if the acrobat fails in her duties, her sisters will pay the price. An added incentive.”

“Goddess save us!” Qiturah exclaimed. “Majesty, you simply cannot use people like this.”

“These are dark times, Honored Mother,” Soltran replied with a dismissive wave. “I’m not a cruel man, and I’m sure the Goddess will understand the need to protect Her chosen. Thank you for your guidance in this matter. Ithyria has not lost all its hope after all. If you will excuse me, there are many preparations to be made.”

Qiturah bit her tongue to keep from protesting. This was not at all the result she had desired, but she could not push the matter further now. She inclined her head, her long golden earrings jingling. “If this

is to be, I request Your Majesty's permission to remain in the palace until the young woman is fully recovered. I will entreat the Goddess's blessing on this task you are about to lay on her shoulders."

The King nodded. "An excellent idea, Honored Mother, and most appreciated."

Qiturah left the King's study, glad that the white veil covering the lower half of her face could hide her irritated muttering as she swept through the corridor in the direction of the infirmary. *Ithyris, help me*, she prayed silently. *This is going to be more difficult than I thought.*

She had been so sure of her mission in Ardrenn, convinced she must persuade King Soltran to control the nobility. Although this still seemed hopeless, she could not shake the feeling that somehow the events now in motion were part of the Goddess's will. It was confusing, but the enigmatic Ithyris often gave commands that seemed to make little sense. Only later did hindsight reveal Her wisdom. Qiturah had never known the Goddess to act without reason.

Ithyria was Her land, and had been so since the Great Division. According to historians, approximately one thousand winters ago the Goddess of the Spirit rose up against Her tyrannical brother Ulrike, God of the Flesh, and chose twelve from among the daughters of men to free Her people from Ulrike's oppression. Endowed with the Goddess's powers, the Twelve drove the followers of Ulrike out of the coastal plains and lowlands into the northern mountains of Dangar and established a new land where the followers of Ithyris lived under Her divine protection, in peace at last.

This land, Ithyria, was divided into provinces, with one of the Twelve governing a Great Temple in each. The Goddess appointed the house of Rane, a strong bloodline of charisma and wisdom, to rule sovereign over them all. As centuries went by, the kingdom of Ithyria remained in the hands of the Goddess, despite countless attempts by Ulrike and his followers to reclaim the lands taken from him.

Yet the war between brother and sister was far from over, and the Daughters of Ithyris shared a sense of foreboding. Ulrike was stirring again. Qiturah felt certain the recent civil unrest was his doing, with the death of Queen Talia a catalyst. Ulrike's dark power most readily influenced the northern provinces, which bordered the lands of his followers, and these had been the first to grow uneasy beneath Soltran's rule.

Qiturah feared that now, almost a millennium since Ithyris had established independence for Her people, their kingdom would soon face another deadly spiritual war. Her own role in the coming conflict was a mystery as yet, but she had a feeling it would be somehow significant. The Goddess would reveal this in Her own time. Like all priestesses, Qiturah trusted Her wisdom implicitly and would wait patiently for Her guidance.

She entered the infirmary, passing through a cluster of curious servants and nobles gathered outside. If they were hoping to glimpse the kingdom's latest hero, they would have a while to wait. The acrobat had serious injuries and would not be well enough to leave for at least three quarter-moons.

As she approached the girl's bedside and looked down at the handsome olive-skinned face resting peacefully against the pillows, Qiturah felt the sudden familiar clarity that she recognized as Ithyris's touch upon her mind. Whoever this girl was, the Goddess had important plans for her as well.

Qiturah let out a breath of apprehension and knelt beside the cot. Touching her fingers to her forehead, she began to pray.

CHAPTER TWO

Your Highness?" Talon held out an elbow. "It's time for temple prayers."

Princess Shasta looked up, her heavy mourning veil making it impossible to read her expression. She closed her book and set it on the windowsill. Standing, she carefully tucked a blue feather into the waist of her skirts.

Talon wondered at the feather for the hundredth time. Shasta had that thing with her daily, at every lesson, lying beside her books or tucked into her belt. Sometimes she would pull it out and twirl it thoughtfully. Talon had overheard other young members of the court tease the Princess about it from time to time, but Shasta never explained its significance.

Ignoring Talon's offered arm, the Princess swept past her and left the room without a word.

"Well, we're really bonding, aren't we?" Talon muttered under her breath.

Bria found this amusing. "What's the matter, Talon, not used to a girl who doesn't fall all over you every time you look at her?"

Talon made a face, but Bria just giggled and took her arm. "Oh, cheer up. You may be my escort."

"And mine." Lyris took the other arm.

Talon grinned at each of her sisters in turn. "Then I couldn't ask for better company."



The Ithyrian temple on the castle grounds was a beautiful structure, one of the oldest of the palace buildings. A high vaulted ceiling painted with murals of the Goddess and Her various consorts soared above an enormous central altar. This was carved from pure white marble in the likeness of Ithyris Herself, and it seemed the Goddess smiled down benevolently upon all who entered Her temple.

Talon had never put much faith in religion of any sort, but she had to admit that there was a peace and serenity about this place that felt almost spiritual. Lyris always seemed particularly affected by the atmosphere. Talon was not surprised. Her gentle, introspective sister was certainly the type to be drawn to the Goddess of the Spirit.

It was a breezy, sunny summer morning in the Fourthmoon, and although no one was meant to open their eyes during prayers, Talon could not help herself. Privately she reasoned that if anyone saw this grave disrespect to the Goddess, they were guilty of the same transgression so would be unlikely to call attention to it.

Talon found the morning prayer service exceedingly tedious. Try as she might to connect with her spiritual side and hear the Goddess's voice speaking to her, the most she could muster was a dull ache in her neck and arms from standing in the prayer position for so long. Why the Goddess would have chosen such a position, with the supplicant's head tilted back, eyes closed and arms uplifted for a seemingly endless amount of time, was beyond Talon's comprehension. It didn't make her feel spiritual, but it was at least a good strength-building exercise for her arms and shoulders.

She studied the murals ringed the ceiling, which were the only things within her range of vision while her head was tipped back. They were not very interesting, cheerful white-robed nymphs bearing wreaths of flowers and baskets of fruit. As she stifled a yawn, a strong breeze passed through the temple chamber and caught the Princess's veil, and suddenly Talon found her face being tickled with the heavy gauze-like fabric. Shaking her head to free herself, she was startled to hear a small cry erupt from the Princess, interrupting the rhythmic chant of the high priestess.

Talon followed the Princess's alarmed stare and saw the blue feather soar out of reach. Carried by a gust of wind, it floated through the temple chamber in a gentle spiral over the heads of the worshippers and drifted out the open doors. Before Talon could act, Shasta darted into the aisle and bolted after it. Talon hadn't thought the small girl

capable of such speed and hastily followed her. The other worshippers were alarmed, and worse still, the high priestess ceased in midchant. But Talon had no time to apologize for the disruption; her orders were to keep the Princess in sight at all times.

Once outside the temple, she stared around trying to determine where her young charge had gone. A flicker of color caught her attention, and she saw the little blue feather fluttering precariously in the branches of a nearby tree. It was at least twenty paces above the ground, snagged between two leaves, and likely to be dislodged at any moment. There was no sign of Shasta.

Talon spun at a cry from one of the onlookers, and her mouth dropped open. The Princess was making her way gingerly along the edge of the temple rooftop. How she'd managed to get up there, Talon couldn't imagine. Her black skirts and veil blew about her legs and face in the strong breeze, but she didn't seem to notice. While Talon was debating whether she should climb after her or hover below to catch her in case she fell, Nurse came storming up, her aged face red with indignation.

"Shasta Talia Soltranis of Rane, get down this instant."

Shasta seemed not to hear the shrill command, intent on the feather, which was hovering only a few paces above the edge of the roof.

"Don't you ignore me, girl. Get down here, now, or it will be the belt for you."

Shasta had reached the corner of the roof and nearly slipped as she tried to pluck the feather from the tree. The onlookers gave a collective gasp. Talon ducked into position to catch her should she fall.

"You've earned yourself five strokes, young lady." Nurse's voice bordered on hysteria, as it seemed obvious that the Princess had no intention of listening. In fact, Shasta regained her balance and reached for the feather again. "Ten strokes...Fifteen! Goddess save me, child, come down from there!"

No matter how Shasta tried, Talon knew she could never reach the feather; it was up too high in the branches. But for some reason she was foolishly determined to get it back, even if it meant falling off the temple roof.

Puzzled, Talon called up to her. "Princess."

Her deep voice rang out over the temple yard, quieting even Nurse. All the onlookers fastened their eyes on her, and Shasta herself seemed surprised, peering down at Talon through her veil.

Talon cleared her throat. “It’s all right, Princess.” She tried to make her tone as soothing as she could. “I’ll get it for you, I promise. Just...don’t move.” She looked around and spotted one of the guards grooming a large, dappled gelding several paces away.

“Excuse me, uh”—she eyed the single gold bar on the collar of the man’s uniform—“Corporal, sir. May I borrow your horse?”

The corporal blinked, but held out the reins. With a deep breath, Talon took them. *Time to see if all that training with Captain Vaughn in the riding ring has rubbed off.* Putting her foot in the stirrup, she swung herself onto the horse’s back and urged him into a gallop away from the temple. When she got about four hundred paces from the tree, she reined the horse around and yelled at the crowd, “Would everyone please move out of the way?”

Lyris and Bria obviously understood her intent and quickly herded the confused spectators back to clear a path.

When Talon was satisfied that she wouldn’t trample anyone, she waved an arm over her head and kicked her heels into the gelding’s sides. They were still over two hundred paces from the tree when the horse reached full gallop. The entire crowd of onlookers gasped in shock as Talon tucked her legs in underneath her and, carefully matching the horse’s rhythm, *stood up* in the saddle, arms out to maintain her balance.

Talon wasn’t sure that this would work, but if she didn’t find some way to retrieve the blue feather it could mean the Princess’s neck. With concentration honed by a lifetime of practice, she blocked everything from her mind but the steady rocking of the saddle beneath her and focused on the tiny spot of blue suspended from the tree branch ahead. Even standing on the horse’s back, it was still too high for her to reach, but if she timed it just right...

Bending her legs as deeply as she dared, she sprang into the air, teeth gritted as she catapulted herself in a smooth arc up and over the tree branch. Her feet came up over her head, and just as she passed above the feather, she snatched it from the leaves, giving a half twist as her legs came down on the other side. Using her free hand, she caught the edge of the temple roof right by the Princess’s feet and dangled there from one arm.

Another chorus of gasps rose from the crowd as she lifted her other arm to offer the blue feather to the veiled girl balancing gingerly above

her. The Princess took it from her fingers and held it for a moment before tucking it into her belt. Talon let go of the edge of the roof and dropped to the ground, then held out her arms to the Princess. After patting her belt to be sure the feather was safe, Shasta stepped from the roof and fell into Talon's outstretched arms.

Cheers and applause broke out as Talon lowered her charge's feet to the ground, but Nurse gave them no time to enjoy the acclamation. Looking like smoke would billow from her ears at any moment, she pinched Shasta's shoulder and grimly escorted her toward the palace.

Talon followed behind, the onlookers erupting into gleeful whispers as she passed by. She had to shake her head. She'd done it again. The palace was sure to be abuzz with this escapade for the next quarter-moon, at least. She ought to have been proud of herself, but she felt only a deep sense of relief.

Her sisters fell into step with her and Bria elbowed her in the ribs. "Well done." She grinned. "You know, you're the stuff that legends are made of."

"Oh, shut up." Talon tried to make her voice sound lighter than she felt. "You've seen me do harder tricks a hundred times."

"Well, the horse was certainly new," Lyris agreed. "Our performing troupe never could afford a horse for trick riding. I didn't know the Captain was teaching you such things."

"He isn't. I had to improvise."

Lyris arched a brow. "And you wonder why they call you the Marvel?"

"Huh?"

"You haven't heard? Everyone's saying it now. *Talon the Marvel*. Somebody even wrote a song about the way you rescued Princess Shasta from that assassin. I've heard them singing it in the kitchens. Now they can add another verse."

Talon just laughed. More than two full moons had passed since her debut as a national hero, and she and her sisters now lived in a palace, dined on fine food, and spent their days with the Crown Princess of Ithyria.

In trying to save her sister, she had unintentionally made a new life for all of them. It was still hard to believe their good fortune.



“What’s going on?” Talon whispered in Bria’s ear as they watched Nurse pace back and forth, flicking a wide leather strap in her hand.

Bria shrugged. “I’m not certain.”

They had all been summoned to the west conservatory, and from the strap in Nurse’s hand it wasn’t too difficult to figure out why. Talon wasn’t sure what Nurse was waiting for and wondered if she should volunteer herself for the punishment, just to speed things along. She cast a glance at the Princess, who, even beneath her veil, seemed entirely unconcerned.

There was a timid knock at the door, and Nurse grunted in satisfaction. “About time.”

Talon’s confusion grew as a young boy, about thirteen or fourteen winters in age, peeked into the room. When he caught sight of Nurse, his face contorted in fear. Nonetheless, he stepped into the conservatory and closed the door behind him, looking like he would rather be anywhere but in that room at that moment.

Nurse beckoned. “Well, come on, child, I haven’t got all day.”

Reluctantly, the boy, whose hair was a shockingly bright shade of yellow, shuffled over to a strange contraption in the center of the room. It looked something like a low chair, but with a curved seat and no back. Talon had been wondering what its purpose was, but she knew as soon as the boy kneeled in front of it and leaned forward so that his stomach was cradled in the curve.

He gripped the high sides, and Nurse turned to glare sternly at Shasta. “Crown Princess Shasta Talia Soltranis of the house of Rane, you have brought shame to your house this day. The punishment has been set at fifteen strokes of the strap.” Nurse walked over to the boy and looked at the Princess once more. “Are you ready?”

Princess Shasta inclined her head, and Nurse raised her arm.

Talon had heard of such things, children of noble birth whose parents would punish a surrogate for their misdeeds, as they could not punish the children themselves. But she’d never actually seen a whipping boy before. As the nurse brought the strap down upon the boy’s backside with a loud crack, he gave a whimper.

“One,” Nurse announced, pulling her arm back again. “Two. Three.”

With every stroke came the sickening smack of leather on flesh. Talon could not see the boy’s face, but she winced each time the strap descended. She’d experienced such beatings herself and knew all too well

the stinging, burning pain that grew worse with each strike. Yet, standing next to her, the Princess was perfectly still, apparently unconcerned. The veil over her face made it hard to read her expression.

“Eight. Nine...”

Talon felt a wave of anger. How could Shasta just stand there, uncaring, while someone else suffered such pain on her behalf? How could she be so cold? Disgusted, she balled her hands into fists at her sides. Selfish, cruel, callous...all nobles were the same.

“Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen.” Nurse brought the strap down one last time.

The boy was sobbing unabashedly now, and he made no effort to rise from the chair even with the punishment complete. Bria stared with her mouth hanging open, and Lyris had tears running down her face, but the Princess did not say a word.

Nurse looked down at the boy. “When you have regained your strength, child, you may visit the infirmary and receive balm for the welting.” She narrowed her eyes at the Princess. “And you, Your Highness. Perhaps you will think twice about trying such a dangerous stunt again.”

Ordering them to return to their chambers and remain there until called for the evening meal, she swept from the room almost immediately followed by the Princess, who did not spare so much as a backward glance at the boy on the floor.

Talon stared at her retreating back until Lyris nudged her toward the door, urging, “Go, Talon. We’ll look after him.”

Still Talon hesitated. She had no desire to be anywhere near her self-centered charge at the moment. But she had no choice, so with one last sympathetic glance at the whipping boy, she reluctantly strode after the Princess.



Steam rolled from beneath the door of the privy chamber, filling the Princess’s rooms with the scent of lavender and roses. Talon wasn’t sure what Shasta did in her privy chamber for such a long time each evening; probably brushed her hair a thousand times or some such girlish silliness. Her Royal Highness insisted on bathing every night, heedless of the work this involved.

Maids lugged countless buckets of hot water to fill the tub, and

perfumed the bath with various soaps and oils. Afterward the same maids had to return to drain and clean the tub, releasing the bathwater into a pipe that ran the length of the castle wall into an irrigation canal used to water the garden.

Talon was astounded by this huge waste of water and expensive perfumes, but the Princess took such extravagance for granted. Eying the privy door with irritation, Talon used a hunk of bread to mop the beef juices on her plate. During the nightly baths, she had a maid bring up a plate of food. She valued these precious hours, the only time of day she had completely to herself, and after the day's earlier events she was glad for a break from Shasta's presence.

They had spent the afternoon in silence, Shasta reading contentedly in her usual spot by the window as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened while Talon buffed her boots by the fire. Dinner was an equally sullen affair. Lyris and Bria were unusually quiet, picking at their food without much enthusiasm, and Talon stood stiffly at attention behind the Princess's chair. Yet Shasta did not seem to notice her companions' discomfort, or if she did, she made no comment.

Taking a sip of tea to wash down the bread, Talon set the mug down a little harder than necessary. The Princess was incredibly spoiled, she decided with a grunt. She was willing to bet that Shasta had never felt the pangs of hunger, never lain awake at night shivering because she was too cold to sleep. She had probably never even bruised her royal little knee without the entire castle making an ordeal out of it. And, as Talon had learned today, the Princess had never experienced the consequences of her own actions. No one had ever laid a hand on her, of that Talon was certain. The arrogant brat had no concept of what pain was or how much she could cause to someone else just by being careless.

And at her age! At sixteen, she was old enough to stay out of trouble, surely. Her unfortunate whipping boy should be out of a job by now, but apparently the Princess had not yet outgrown the disobedience that made him indispensable.

Talon wiped her mouth with a cloth napkin and tossed it onto the dinner tray, which she placed on a low table in the sitting room for the maids to clear. Compelling her thoughts in a more relaxing direction, she retrieved her short sword from the wall beneath the window. The weapon had been given to her by Captain Vaughn, the soldier appointed to train her in her bodyguard duties.

The Captain was a good teacher whose daily lessons in swordplay, horseback riding, hand-to-hand combat, and battle strategy pushed Talon to her limits. But they were still more effective than the acrobatic torture sessions she'd endured under the showmaster, and it was a pleasant change to respect her teacher. Vaughn was every inch the soldier, a hardened survivalist and warrior, yet with the bearing and manners of a well-bred gentleman. He was one of only four people in the palace, aside from Talon's sisters, who knew her true gender.

In the beginning Vaughn had obviously doubted the King's decision to place someone so young—and female, no less—in charge of Shasta's personal safety. Talon had sensed his unease and a well-concealed resentment. No doubt a captain of the royal guard had better things to do than play drill sergeant to a glorified servant girl.

If anything, his attitude made her all the more determined to impress him. Captain Vaughn had given her a small whetstone and demonstrated how to properly care for her sword after every lesson, and so every night before sleeping Talon obediently pulled out the short sword and prepared it for the next day's training. She was deadly serious about becoming the best fighter in the royal guard, determined to prove the Captain wrong about women being unfit for such duties. There was always something immensely satisfying about the soft *shing! shing!* of the stone against the metal of her blade. Every stroke drew her closer toward the soldier she would be one day.

It was strange to think she had spent ten winters as an acrobat and ended up in the Ithyrian royal guard. Lyris and Bria, once musicians in a ragged band of street performers, were now ladies-in-waiting to the Crown Princess of Ithyria herself. It was a far better life for all of them, and everything she had ever dreamed for her sisters. But Talon got the feeling the Princess resented her presence; hardly surprising given that she believed Talon was a man. No doubt she resented "him" infringing on her personal space.

For her part, Talon was beginning to dislike Shasta equally. The Princess was the most selfish and pampered person she had ever known.



When Shasta finally stepped out of her privy chamber, dressed in a long white nightgown and soft woolen dressing robe, she noticed that

her guardian was already stretched out on his cot by her bedside. Talon had been particularly cold to her the entire evening, and she could guess the reason. Quietly she set the lamp on the nightstand. When she was satisfied that Talon was not looking, she removed her dressing robe and slippers and quickly climbed into bed, pulling the satin bedclothes up to her chin.

Father and his ridiculous ideas. She didn't mind so much when Talon was following her around the castle. She didn't even mind sharing a lesson hall with him. In fact, it was a welcome distraction from her own boring lessons, to be able to sneak glances over where Captain Vaughn would be showing Talon some flashy sword maneuver. But really, to have the young man sleeping in her room, right next to her bed...it was bizarre, not to mention embarrassing.

Even having Nurse snoring away in the adjacent chamber did little to soothe her annoyance. The old woman's presence was intended to still wagging tongues, but her early bedtime usually left Shasta alone with her guardian for several hours in the evenings. To his credit, Talon tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, but he could only do so much. It was still a most unwelcome invasion of her privacy.

Shasta wished she had the energy to argue with her father as she might have before all of this happened. *Before Daric...* Her breath caught in a small sob and she picked up the blue feather lying next to the lamp at her bedside. In the dim light she turned it around and around in her fingertips. *Daric.* It was so strange, going to lessons every day, eating at the family table, and not seeing him. Not hearing his mischievous laugh echo through the corridors. It felt like a vital part of her was missing, like she'd awoken one morning to find she'd lost an arm, or a leg, yet was being asked to continue to do everything exactly the way she used to.

Shasta knew the King was worried and wanted to talk to her, but she didn't have anything to say. Everything that had ever bothered her had always gone through Daric first. He was her twin, and he seemed to share her mind at times. Without him, she was lost.

Casting a glance down at her guardian's still form to be sure he was asleep, she tucked the blue feather into the sleeve of her nightdress and left the bed, donning her dressing robe. She still had a task to do before she could sleep, and she preferred to do it alone. Sliding her feet into her slippers, she pulled a carefully wrapped package from beneath her pillow.

The leather hinges squeaked a bit as she opened the door, and she froze, but the sound didn't seem to disturb Talon. After pausing in breathless silence for a moment, she slipped out into the stone corridor.

It was dark and chilly, and she walked briskly to warm herself as best she could. Still, she was shivering when she reached the turret stairs and started down. These descended to the ground floor and proceeded past the kitchens to the servants' garden. There Shasta stepped around a large pumpkin growing in the middle of the dirt path and ducked beneath an overhanging vine.

"Lainen?" she called softly. "Lainen, are you here?"

The boy stepped out from behind a fruit tree on the elevated terrace, his yellow hair glinting in the moonlight. "Your Highness?"

Shasta held out a hand. "I'm glad you came. Are you...How are you feeling?"

"Eh. I've had worse." He jumped down from the terrace. "Don't worry about it, Princess. All in a day's work."

"I'm so sorry, Lainen. I didn't mean for this to happen." She held out the package. "I brought something for you."

The boy's eyes lit up, and he took the package from her hands. Sitting on the stone of the terrace, he tore away the paper. Inside were several smaller bundles, each wrapped in cloth.

"Strawberries!" he exclaimed on unwrapping the first one. He immediately crammed a huge bite into his mouth.

Shasta had to smile. "Well, I know they're your favorite. There's a jar of honeyed plums in there too, and I had Erinda bring me most of Cook's sweet breads from yesterday's baking." She watched Lainen take another gleeful bite while inspecting the contents of the other packages. "And...that little one on the bottom has coins in it, for your mother. I would have put in more but it was all I had left from my quarterly allowance. Please tell her I'm sorry."

Lainen grinned, exposing teeth coated in gooey red pulp. "Aw, Your Highness, you really don't have to do this. Not that I'm complaining."

Shasta laughed and sat down next to him on the cold stone of the terrace. "Well, it was my fault. I hate it when they do this to you. It's not fair."

Lainen regarded her seriously for a moment. "I really don't mind that much, you know. We've been friends since we were kids, you and Daric and me." He sighed. "I still can't believe he's gone."

“Me either.” Shasta blinked back tears. “You should probably go back to bed before your mother realizes you’re gone.”

“Yeah, and I want to hide the sweets. If she finds them, she’ll eat them all!” He gathered up his packages and winked at her. “Hey, thanks, Princess.”

Shasta watched as the boy trotted off through the foliage. She should be thanking him. A few smuggled treats were hardly sufficient compensation for the pain she knew he’d gone through on her behalf. If she were in his place, she would not be so forgiving. She stood and turned to go, but a rustling sound froze her in her tracks.

“Is someone there?” she called, and her heart leapt into her throat as a tall shadow moved out from behind the garden entrance. She let out a deep breath of relief when she recognized who it was.

“Talon. Don’t scare me like that.” She took a few steps toward him and frowned. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“I could ask you the same question.” Her guardian’s dark eyes looked pointedly off in the direction that Lainien had gone, then slid back to her.

Shasta sighed sadly and brushed past him, but then paused. “You know, I’m not as heartless as you think I am. I just—I can’t let them see that I care.” She kept walking, knowing he would follow.

When they reached her room, she stepped back so that Talon could open the door for her, and he set the lamp on the table beside her bed. Shasta touched the collar of her dressing robe and shyly cast a glance at her guardian. His dark eyebrows lifted, and he turned his back to allow her to remove her robe and climb into bed. When the rustling of the bedcovers had quieted, he turned around once more and sat on the edge of his cot to remove his boots.

Shasta leaned against the pile of pillows, pulling the blue feather from her sleeve and holding it to the light. “When my brother and I were young...right after we’d celebrated our seventh winter...we snuck off one afternoon while Nurse was napping and ran out onto the moor.” She spoke softly, hardly above a whisper, and her guardian looked up. The surprise in his dark eyes made her grin. No doubt that was the longest sentence he’d ever heard her speak.

“We were running among the grasses, shouting and chasing one another. Hardly behavior befitting a proper prince and princess, and that was the whole point...And we saw this amazing bird. It was bright

blue. I'd never seen anything like it." She twirled the feather in her fingers. "Daric got this crazy idea to try and catch it and take it back to the castle with us. We followed that bird for...oh, it must have been hours. It just hopped from here to there across the moor, but it never flew away."

Shasta wasn't sure why she was going on like this. She hadn't wanted to speak of her brother at all in the moons since his death, but suddenly she needed to talk about him, to say his name.

"Finally the bird stopped, and Daric took his hat off and crept up on it so slowly. I ran out of patience a hundred times before he even got within arm's reach of it. He held his hat out, over the bird, and brought it down fast. I thought for sure he'd gotten it, but when he lifted it up just a little to check, the bird was gone and there was only a little blue feather. He was so disappointed." The memory made her smile.

"By then, it was fairly dark and we couldn't see the castle anymore. We were completely lost. I became very frightened...it was getting colder, and darker, and I was hungry. I started crying. But Daric, he patted me on the shoulder and said 'It's okay, sis, see? We were following the bird, and it was facing away from the castle when I tried to catch it, so if we just follow the direction that the feather's pointing, we'll get home.'"

She shook her head. "He knew as well as I that it was nonsense, but his confidence made me feel better, and we started walking. We walked and walked until I felt like my legs were going to fall off. I was ready to just lie down in the grass and cry myself to sleep when we heard voices and saw lights coming toward us. Father had formed a search party to look for us, and we'd walked right into them."

Shasta stroked the edge of the feather thoughtfully. "The next day we met Lainen for the first time. Father ordered ten strokes for each of us, but we were the Prince and Princess of Ithyria...so of course they wouldn't actually beat us. They found the only child in the castle who was close to our age, and he received the whipping for both of us. Nurse counted out the strokes and said our names after each one. 'One, Daric. One, Shasta. Two, Daric. Two, Shasta.' Twenty strokes. It was awful. But Daric kept whispering in my ear, saying 'Don't cry, Shasta, you can't let them see you cry. If they know it bothers you they'll beat him every time you misbehave.' So I just stood there trying to look like I didn't care."

“When it was over, Daric and I combined our stashes of Solstice sweets, and when everyone else in the castle had gone to sleep, we snuck down to the servant’s quarters and found Lainin. We gave him all our treats and told him over and over again that we were so sorry. From that day on the three of us were fast friends.”

“Yet you still hide that fact and allow him to be treated badly,” Talon commented softly, his husky voice melodic in the semidarkness. “Why?”

“If Father or Nurse knew how much I like Lainin, they’d only beat him more often to try to control me. Whippings have always been their last resort, when they can’t think of anything else.”

Talon was silent for a moment, then to Shasta’s surprise, he reached out and took the feather from her fingers with a slight smile. “We used to see birds this color every spring. My mother used to say they brought good luck.”

“Your mother?” Shasta rolled on her side to look at him.

Talon sighed. “I don’t remember a lot about my childhood. My people were Outlanders. Our tribe used to travel to the plains in the colder seasons, then return to our hunting grounds in the mountains for the summer. Our village was attacked by raiders when I was about nine winters.” A muscle along his jaw tightened. “They came sweeping down on us out of nowhere. Killed my father, and...” He paused uncomfortably. “And my mother too. Burned our house to the ground. Burned the whole village.” There was anger in his voice, and he was silent for a moment, turning the blue feather in his fingers. He lifted his eyes to hers. “I guess we’ve both lost people we love to murderers.”

Shasta reached out and touched the feather in his hand with a fingertip, and suddenly realized she was crying. Tears poured down her cheeks, and without thinking, she wrapped her arms around her guardian’s neck, sliding out of her own bed and down onto his cot. “I...I miss Daric, Talon, I miss him so much.”



Talon stiffened with shock, uncertain how she should respond as the sobbing Princess climbed into her lap and clung to her. When it became clear her charge wasn’t leaving any time soon, Talon sighed and leaned back against the bed, bending one knee for balance, and

placed an arm around Shasta's shoulders. She held the girl until her sobs abated and her body grew heavy with sleep, then carefully slid her free arm under the Princess's knees and stood up. Carrying her to the other side of the bed, she laid her gently on the soft mattress and tucked the satin quilt beneath Shasta's chin.

For a long moment, Talon stared down at the Princess's tear-streaked face, then she realized she was still holding the blue feather. She studied the precious keepsake and had an idea. Lifting the oil lamp from the table, she moved to the window and rummaged through her own small chest of belongings. After finding what she was looking for, she positioned the lamp on the window seat, settled herself on the floor beside the chest, and began to work.

CHAPTER THREE

Shasta awoke the next morning and gave an unhappy groan as a beam of sunlight blinded her with its brightness. Her eyes felt grainy and hot from her crying episode the night before, and a flush crept across her face as she remembered. Sitting up, she was relieved to see Talon's cot was empty. *He must be in the privy chamber already.*

As if on cue, a cheerful whistling emerged from behind the privy door, and Shasta smiled wryly. Their living situation was awkward, to say the least, but they were learning to adjust. After several uncomfortable morning encounters, Talon had begun a habit of whistling just before he stepped out of the privy, giving Shasta time to don her dressing robe before he appeared.

She slid from the bed and soon after she'd wrapped the robe around her shoulders, Talon appeared carrying a lidded chamber pot, which he set outside the door of Shasta's rooms for collection.

He gave a small bow. "Your chamber awaits, my Princess."

"Thank you, oh great Master of the Privy." She grinned at him as she retreated into the anteroom.

Nurse had already laid out her black silk breakfast gown and mourning veil, ready to be worn for the morning meal. A splash of blue caught Shasta's attention, and she reached out and picked up her feather, which was lying on top of the gown. A thin gold wire encircled its base, strung between tiny holes bored in the shaft to hold it securely. The wire formed a loop through which was threaded a delicate gold chain. In wonder, Shasta held the feather pendant up for a moment, then turned and ran out of the chamber.

“Did you do this?” she demanded.

Talon finished buckling his sword belt and looked up. “I thought it might keep that thing from taking off into any more tree branches.”

She felt like crying, but instead met her guardian’s eyes earnestly. “Thank you.”

He nodded, and Shasta returned to her chamber to dress. As she approached the black gown from the chair, however, her hand drifted to the feather around her neck, and she made a decision. Leaving the somber dress and veil where they were, she went to the door of her rooms and called for her ladies-in-waiting.

Lyris and Bria appeared in the doorway almost immediately from their room down the hall. “Your Highness?”

“Lyris, please put those black clothes back and fetch my yellow dress.”

Lyris’s eyes widened, but she curtsied. “Yes, Highness, at once.” She carried the black dress and veil to the wardrobe and exchanged them for a soft yellow satin breakfast gown embroidered with small blue flowers. “Is this what Your Highness wanted?”

Shasta smiled. “Yes, thank you. Come, both of you may help me dress. Bria, will you arrange my hair?”

The two dark-haired girls curtsied again and followed Shasta into the privy chamber, closing the door behind them.

When they emerged, Talon nearly dropped the small knife she was sharpening at the sight. Bria had obviously been paying attention to her hairdressing lessons, for Shasta’s waist-length, light brown hair was drawn into an elaborate twist of smooth braids and loops, fastened with sparkling pins here and there that glittered in the morning light. The cheerful yellow gown brought out the warmth in the Princess’s eyes, turning them a rich shade of amber. And the little blue flowers scattered across the dress accented the blue feather at her throat.

But it wasn’t just the change in clothes that startled Talon. There was life in the Princess’s face that Talon had never seen before. Shasta was strikingly beautiful. In fact, Talon was startled by a sudden irrational desire to touch her, wondering if that flawless skin was as soft as it looked. She checked the impulse quickly, though a flush crept into her cheeks for even thinking such an impertinent thing.

Shasta giggled. “You look so shocked, Talon. Was I that much of a fright before?”

Talon gulped. “No, of course not, Highness.” She hoped her face was not as red as it felt.

The Princess did not seem to notice. She giggled again. “Well, come on, we’ll be late to breakfast.”



The guards in the corridors bowed a little lower that morning and looked surprised as Shasta greeted them. When she and her entourage reached the dining hall, King Soltran stood up from the table. His face lit when he saw her unveiled for the first time in several moons.

“Shasta. You look so well this morning.”

“Thank you, Father.” She took the chair Talon held for her, and grinned across the table at Lyris and Bria. “I have excellent assistants.” Both girls beamed at the praise.

As the servants began to distribute plates of food, King Soltran waved a hand at the tall young man at the opposite end of the table. He had risen to his feet when they first entered, and remained standing as the King introduced him.

“Shasta, you remember his Excellency Duke Kumire Fickett, the chancellor from Mondera province. I have invited him to breakfast with us this morning.”

The chancellor bowed and his eyes traveled over her face and figure with scarcely adequate respect. “Your Highness.”

Shasta had seen the chancellor around the palace of late. His father, Archduke Fickett Anwulfis, had been her mother’s uncle, which made Kumire a distant cousin. Fickett was the current viceroy of Mondera, and it came as no surprise to anyone when he appointed his own son to the position of chancellor, second in command of the provincial senate.

Shasta had never much cared for either of them. The noble traits that characterized the Ithyrian royal family seemed to have bypassed Archduke Fickett and his son. They were both intolerably arrogant and dull and, after greeting Kumire with what she hoped was a sufficient display of good manners, Shasta ignored him entirely.

“Father, I have a request.”

Soltran looked up from his breakfast. “What is it, my child?”

“I want to join Talon’s fencing lesson with Captain Vaughn.”

Chancellor Kumire made a disbelieving noise. Nearly choking on a mouthful of eggs, the King shook his head, reaching for his goblet.

“I know we’ve argued about this before, Father, and you’ve always said no. But things are different now.” Unconsciously she reached up to touch the feather at her throat. “If I am to inherit the throne of Ithyria one day, I should know how to defend it. At the very least, I should know how to defend myself. I want to learn the sword.”

King Soltran regarded her gravely. “I suppose now is as good a time as any...I brought the chancellor here this morning, hoping to speak with you. He and I have had several discussions in regard to, well...” He took a deep breath. “With Daric gone, we must reconsider our plans for the future. The chancellor has suggested, and I agree, that we should begin to think about your betrothal.”

Shasta stared at him. “My betrothal? To whom, may I ask?”

“To Chancellor Kumire.”

“That’s ridiculous. Father, I’m not ready to marry.”

“Kumire is your cousin, my dear, the only other possible heir to the Ithyrian royal bloodline. This marriage would mean—”

“He would rule after your death and I wouldn’t need to worry about anything but filling the palace nurseries with blue-blooded children and being a pretty arm decoration. I understand perfectly.” Angrily, she pushed her plate away. “Daric loved Ithyria, and as his sister I refuse to sit back playing with my hair and jewels while someone else rules his kingdom—our kingdom. I am not going to hide from my birthright by marrying the chancellor or anyone else.”

Her father flinched, and Shasta knew she’d struck a sore spot. It was no secret that many in the kingdom questioned his right to wear the crown. Shasta felt a twinge of guilt and softened her tone. “Father, the law of the Goddess says I may choose my own husband, and I’m sure that in time I will. But with all due respect to His Excellency,” she cast a brief nod in Kumire’s direction, “I have yet to meet anyone I could endure to live with the rest of my life.”

“You do not understand.” Frustration entered King Soltran’s tone. “Ithyria must have a strong heir to the throne. With Daric gone the wait will be longer than we’d expected, I’m afraid, but the sooner you marry and produce a son—”

“You really believe I can’t rule on my own, don’t you?” Shasta could hear the incredulity in her own voice. “I will admit, up to this

point I haven't taken as close an interest as I should have in the politics and troubles facing our country—”

“That's not the only concern, and you know it.” Her father rubbed his forehead wearily. “The healers have always said your blood is weak. I worry that your fragile constitution...”

Shasta leapt to her feet, so quickly her guardian had to take a step back to avoid being hit with her chair. “Fragile constitution be damned! I am still my mother's daughter, every bit as much as Daric was her son. There have been queens before, Father, who ruled Ithyria alone just as well as any man.”

Talon was astonished. She had come to think of the Princess as a rather quiet, somber girl, far too wrapped up in herself to summon such passion. Shasta's startling forcefulness gave Talon her first glimpse of the legendary Rane charisma.

“Sit down,” the King ordered, though even he seemed slightly daunted by his daughter's bout of royal temper.

“Father, I can do this.”

“Please, Shasta.” He sounded tired, and Shasta sat, though defiance was clearly written all over her face.

King Soltran sighed. “I did not mean to imply that you have no choice in the matter. Of course I will not force you to marry against your will, but I worry that you may find the responsibility of the crown far too heavy a burden to bear alone. However, you are still young and we have time, which is why I am going to propose a compromise. I will agree to allow you to study fencing under Captain Vaughn, but you will also study economics and politics under the chancellor's tutelage. In doing so you will learn many of the things you will need should you decide to take the throne yourself, and perhaps it will afford you the chance to get better acquainted with Chancellor Kumire. You might find that you enjoy his company.”

Shasta rolled her eyes, but at the King's frown she sighed, “Very well. But I'm not making any promises.” She rose and swept from the room, leaving all who remained to exchange surprised glances.

Soltran rubbed his beard and chuckled. “Well, she's right about one thing—she certainly is her mother's daughter.” He eyed Talon, who was still stunned by the entire exchange. “Well, go on after her, boy. Who knows what trouble she's going to stir up between the dining hall and her own chambers.”



“You don’t think he’s handsome?” Bria goaded, poking the Princess with the tip of her fan.

Shasta shook her head. “Goddess, no. He’s got a pointy nose. And a weak chin. I’ve seen horses more handsome than Chancellor Kumire.”

Bria fluttered her lashes. “Well, I think you do him a disservice, Princess. I find him absolutely lovely.”

“He’s coming back,” Lyris warned as their tutor approached the table to check their work.

“I think that’s enough for today, ladies. Tomorrow we’ll go over the various currencies of the Ithyrian provinces and the effect the exchange rate has on our economy.” The chancellor smiled down at them, and Shasta thought to herself that he looked rather like a grasshopper, with his large forehead and narrow face.

“Thank you, Chancellor,” Bria replied sweetly.

Shasta rolled her eyes at her companion and stood up, closing the book on the table and rolling up her parchment. “Yes, well, if that’s all...” She marched to the other end of the hall, where Talon was bent over a map with Captain Vaughn. Her guardian was tracing a line on the map with his finger, engrossed in conversation with the captain. Shasta cleared her throat and they both looked up at her.

“My lessons are done for the day. I want to go riding.”

The captain sighed. “Your Highness, Talon still needs several hours of exercise and sword practice this afternoon.”

Shasta waved a hand. “I give you my word, he will receive all the exercise and practice he needs. Tomorrow.” She walked away, knowing Talon had no choice but to accompany her.

Lyris and Bria hastened after them, Bria insisting she wished to ride as well.

“Oh...” Shasta paused. “But I thought you wanted to practice your dancing this afternoon. The Goddess’s harvest benediction festival is only a half-moon from now.”

Lyris curtsied. “Of course, Your Highness.” She gave Bria a warning glare as her sister began to protest. “Enjoy your ride. We will see you this evening.” She took Bria’s arm and led her away before the younger girl could say anything else.

“They know you’re up to something,” Talon commented suspiciously. “Why don’t you want them coming with us?”

Shasta grinned. “You’ll see. Come on, I have to change.”

Ithyrian women of class wore special split skirts for riding. These possessed the same fullness as regular skirts, but had separation for the legs that made it much easier to mount and sit astride a horse. Shasta chose a dark blue riding skirt and a white bodice with light boning, wanting as much freedom of movement as possible.

After changing as quickly as she could in her privy chamber, she emerged and gave her guardian an enormous grin. “Let’s go.”

She led Talon across the palace gardens and into the castle grounds, across the hard-packed earth trampled smooth by horse’s hooves and the boots of countless men. The servants’ stables were on the far south end of the castle grounds, near the south gate. It had been several moons since her last visit, and her excitement and trepidation grew with every step.

This had been their special place, a secret between twins, and for the first time she would share it with someone else. Part of her couldn’t wait to take up the sword in earnest again, to feel the rush of adrenaline in her veins. She’d missed it terribly. But another part of her felt guilty. Was this a betrayal of Daric’s memory, of their secret time together? Shasta stopped walking, her stomach queasy.

“Princess?”

She looked up at the face of her guardian, realizing again just how tall he was. He could easily rest his chin on her head, and probably have to duck a little to do it.

Scuffing her foot in the dirt, she said, “Daric and I, we were really close. We spent a lot of time together.” Talon was watching her with those fathomless dark eyes, waiting for her to go on. “If I show you something, will you promise me not to...” She struggled for the right words.

It wasn’t that she was worried that Talon might tell someone else. She could order his silence easily and knew he would obey. What she wanted was to ensure, somehow, that the tradition she’d shared with her brother would remain special.

Talon seemed to understand her ambivalence. “You want to make sure he is not forgotten.”

The gentle rumble of his voice was comforting and Shasta nodded. "I just...I need someone else for this, and Daric's gone. It was our secret, together. I don't want to give it up forever, but..."

"Perhaps you are not ready to share it. You don't have to."

"I know. But Daric wouldn't want me to give it up."

As she said the words, she realized they were true, and with renewed determination she took Talon's hand and tugged him to the door of the servants' stables. Once inside, she stood for a moment to allow her eyes to become adjusted to the cool darkness.

"Daric and I used to come out here almost every day," she explained as Talon came up behind her. "When we were kids, Daric started taking fencing lessons. I begged Father to let me join in, but he wouldn't. So Daric brought me out here one day and started teaching me himself."

When her vision had cleared and she was no longer seeing spots, she moved to the haystack at the far corner and began to dig through the straw. "Now that Father's finally agreed to let me study fencing for myself, I need someone to spar with. Especially since it will be a while before I can really show Captain Vaughn what I can do with a sword. If Father ever found out that I'd been secretly practicing since I was six, he'd probably take the lessons away out of spite."

With a triumphant squeak she pulled two silver fencing foils from the hay. "Good, they're still here." She dropped one and flicked the other through the air a few times, taking a few practice lunges in her riding skirts to make sure she'd have a full range of motion. "Wow, that feels good." She turned to see Talon surveying her with amusement in his dark eyes and folded her arms defensively. "What?"

"It's just that..." Talon chuckled. "I remember the first time we met, you seemed so little and fragile. Yet to hear Nurse talk, a person would think you were made of fire and thunderbolts. Until the last few days I thought she was making it up."

"I may be little, but I'm not as fragile as you'd think."

"Evidently."

"Here." She tossed her guardian one of the fencing foils. "I've had to let you trounce me in all our lessons with the captain so far, but out here nothing can stop me from giving you a good clobbering."

"Why do I have the feeling," Talon asked as he stepped into an opening position, "that you are just full of surprises, Princess?"

Shasta matched the stance with a wicked grin. "You have no idea."



In her chambers later that evening, Shasta sat at her window as usual, reading from a thick leather-bound book as she waited for her chambermaids to finish filling her bathing tub. Periodically she looked up at Talon, who was sitting in a chair across the room, sharpening his sword with smooth, methodical strokes. When their eyes met they would exchange grins, and Shasta would return to her reading. But it was difficult to concentrate on the pages. She was edgy with an irrational excitement, something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Talon had turned out to be quite a good fencing partner. His movements weren't as polished and elegant as Daric's had been, but he shared her affinity for creatively bending the rules in ways they couldn't in formal lessons, and his acrobatic skills made him an interesting opponent. It had been a while since Shasta had felt the breathless, contented exhaustion of real physical exercise. And it was fun to have a secret once more.

Nurse came bustling into the room and eyed them suspiciously. "Just what are the two of you grinning about, then?"

Talon gave an innocent shrug and Shasta replied sweetly, "Nothing, Nurse."

"Humph." The old woman continued to glare as she announced, "Well, your bath is prepared, Highness."

"Thank you, Nurse."

After Talon had inspected the privy chamber to be sure it was empty, Shasta closed her book and crossed the room. As she passed Talon, her nose twitched at the pungent aroma of horses, hay, and sweat.

"Talon," she asked. "When did you bathe last?"

Her guardian blinked. "I'm not sure, Highness. It couldn't be more than a half-moon ago."

Shasta wrinkled her nose. "Ugh! How can you stand it?"

A look of consternation crossed his face, and he opened and closed his mouth as if searching for a way to reply.

Shasta waved her hand. "Never mind, I don't want to know. It's got to be hard to find the time, since you have to follow me around every minute of the day." He nodded, seeming relieved. "When I'm done bathing it will be your turn. From now on you will use the privy chamber bath at least twice a quarter-moon." Her nose twitched again.

“And any other time you’ve been sweating. Or near horses.” She looked him up and down. “Or doing anything... involving dirt.”

“Talon’s duty is to watch over you at all times, young lady,” Nurse interrupted with a clucking of her tongue. “He can hardly watch over you and bathe at the same time.”

“I don’t want him anywhere near me smelling like that,” Shasta replied indignantly. “I’ll be just fine for the few minutes it will take him to de-putrefy himself.”

A funny look crossed Talon’s face, as though he were trying to decide whether he was offended or amused. “Your Highness, the King gave strict orders—”

“What my father doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Shasta retorted.

Nurse sighed and she, too, eyed Talon critically. “I suppose there’s no harm in it,” she conceded after a moment. “But if His Majesty ever gets wind of it, I will deny all knowledge.” She marched into her own quarters, closing the door that separated her little room from the Princess’s chambers with a decisive bang that indicated her duties were over for the evening.

“Of course you will.” Shasta rolled her eyes and winked at her guardian.

Talon grinned back and closed the door as the Princess entered the privy chamber. In truth, she was relieved. She had a hard time trying to arrange for a bath. Usually, Captain Vaughn found a way for her to use the soldiers’ bathing rooms, but he had to stand guard outside to ensure that no one interrupted her and at the same time arrange for the Princess to be occupied safely in his sight. This new bathing routine would be much easier, and it meant she could remain close to Shasta in case she was needed.

A slow grin crossed her face as she went to retrieve her sword and sharpening stone from the chair where she’d left them. Shasta had turned out to be nothing like she’d originally thought, which was a pleasant surprise. Though even if the Princess were as mean-spirited and selfish as Talon had supposed, this was still the best thing that had ever happened to Talon and her sisters, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Her position as Shasta’s guardian granted her the opportunity to study under the captain of Ithyria’s elite royal guard, and Talon eagerly absorbed everything he could teach her. But it wasn’t only for the Princess’s sake. As a child, she had sworn to avenge herself on those

who had murdered her family and sold her and her sisters into a life of brutality and terror. Now her revenge was closer than ever before. Once her sisters were safely established in a new life, Talon would seek out those who had destroyed their village and haunted her dreams ever since. She would make them pay for what they'd done, for the tortured childhood they had inflicted on her and her sisters.

It may have been nearly ten winters ago, but those memories were forever burned into her mind. Talon could still hear the screaming of the villagers and see the panic on her mother's face when her father failed to return. She could smell the stench of the raiders as they burst into her home, hear their guttural language and their cruel laughter as they ransacked the house and raped her mother over and over...

"Talon. Talon! Are you all right?" A small hand on her shoulder made her jump, and she turned to see the Princess, wrapped in her dressing robe, staring at her with anxious golden eyes. "You're...you're bleeding."

Talon realized she'd been gripping the blade of her sword, and it had cut right into the palm of her hand. She dropped the weapon immediately, rose to her feet, and gazed at the scarlet line dripping thickly down her wrist. Shasta still seemed bewildered, and Talon cursed inwardly. But she couldn't explain.

"I didn't mean to scare you, Princess," she said. "I'll go clean up." Without waiting for a reply, she crossed to the privy chamber and closed the door behind her.

A few moments later, at the washstand, Talon winced as she poured cool water over her hand, staining the liquid in the bowl a brilliant red. She looked up and met her own eyes in the looking glass. What a strange person stared back at her, she thought: this androgynous dark face with its delicate elfin features and high cheekbones. Her lips were too full for a boy but not quite dainty enough to be feminine. Thick black brows jutted out over eyes the color of coal. She'd been living as a man for so long, at times it was a shock to remember that she wasn't one.

With a heavy sigh, Talon took one of the small towels from the stand, wrapped it firmly around her injured hand, and sat down to remove her boots. She shrugged out of her vest and unbuttoned the front of her white linen shirt, making a face as she caught a whiff of the fabric. No wonder the Princess had complained. Dropping the shirt in a pile next to her boots, she made a mental note to ask Erinda to add

her clothes to the laundry the next morning. Then she began the painful process of removing the wrappings that held down her chest, carefully rolling the strips of fabric as she went.

She didn't have much in the way of a womanly figure, for which she was extremely grateful, but she did have breasts noticeable enough that they required strapping down in order to be indistinguishable beneath her shirts. She gave an involuntary gasp as the last binding strip came free, suddenly releasing her chest so that she could breathe fully. For a moment she sat doubled over, inhaling and exhaling a few times to try and accustom her brain to the sudden rush of oxygen.

It was a strange feeling, not being wrapped tightly in layers of fabric. Oddly self-conscious, Talon stood and unbuckled her belt, quickly removed her trousers and undergarments, and stepped into the tub of fragrant water. It was still very warm, and she mused absentmindedly that the Princess must like her bathwater near scalding.

She sank down in the tub so that the soap suds covered her shoulders, careful of her injured hand. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, enjoying both the feel of the warm water enveloping her body and the scent of lemongrass and chamomile. A wry smile touched her lips. The captain would surely tease her tomorrow about her sweet-smelling skin and hair. At the moment, however, she didn't really care. Few luxuries in her life could equal this.

Talon had never regretted the decision to maintain her male disguise, in spite of numerous resulting inconveniences. Nothing in the world was as important as the safety and well-being of her sisters. It had been her last promise to their dying mother, and every day that she saw Lyris and Bria wearing the fine clothes of court attendants, taking tea with the Princess, and studying ballroom dance as if they were as nobly born as the Princess herself, it filled her with indescribable pride. No sacrifice was too great to bear for such a reward. She'd do it all again, spend the rest of her life pretending, take a thousand more daggers to the stomach just to see her sisters remain this healthy and happy.

Remembering that she really shouldn't be leaving the Princess alone in the other room, she ducked her head beneath the water to wet her hair, and with her uninjured hand managed to rub soap into her scalp, then rinse out the lather. After making sure she'd thoroughly "de-putrefied" every other important area of her anatomy, she reluctantly left the tub and grabbed a towel.

She dried herself briskly, slicking her hair back with her fingers, then with expert movements she rewrapped herself, pulling the strips of fabric tight until she'd achieved a neat, flat silhouette with no sign of curves. Satisfied, she finished dressing but decided against the belt and boots, as she was going to bed soon.

When she opened the privy chamber door, Princess Shasta was in bed and was lying very still. Her lamp was out and the only remaining light was the one on the table by Talon's chest of belongings. Talon sighed and put it out, undressed and quickly pulled on a clean shirt, then felt her way through the dark to the edge of her cot. She lay down, and for several moments the Princess's soft breathing was the only sound in the room.

Finally Talon couldn't take the silence anymore. "Princess." She propped herself up on one elbow, looking over at the still form under the covers. Shasta didn't move. "Your Highness, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you." She made her voice as gentle as she could. "You have to know I would never hurt you."

Shasta rolled over then, her face pale in the moonlight, strands of her long hair falling over her eyes. In her hands was the necklace Talon had fashioned for her, and she was stroking the feather.

"Is that what you think? That I'm afraid of you?" She shook her head. "I'm not afraid of you, Talon. If you laid a hand on me my father would skin you alive." Even in the dark Talon could see her eyes twinkle a little. "I just wish I knew why you're so angry. What were you thinking about when I interrupted you?"

"I don't remember."

"That's a lie." She didn't sound upset, just matter-of-fact. "You were bleeding all over yourself but you didn't even notice. Talon, I'm afraid *for* you. The way you looked—like you were ready to kill someone—I've seen that look before. On criminals my father has sentenced to death." Her voice trembled. "I know you haven't been here long, but I like you. You're the only person around here who..." She paused, and Talon saw the shimmer of a tear as it dropped from her eyelashes. "With you around I don't miss Daric quite so much, and I'm afraid if you do something stupid they'll take you away from me."

Talon looked down at her blankets, picking imaginary specks of lint from the heavy wool. "I'm just your bodyguard. I don't see why—"

"You're my friend." Shasta's tone was firm, though she might have

been blushing a little; it was hard to tell in the dim light. “I like Lyris and Bria, of course, but I grew up with a brother. I’m used to having a boy around, and,” she lowered her head, “honestly, I don’t know how I would have made it through these past moons without you.”

Talon stared at her in disbelief. “Until recently, you barely even spoke to me.”

“And yet you still treated me like a person instead of a princess. I could tell when you were frustrated with me, or when I’d annoyed you. No one else in the palace ever gets abrupt or cold with me, no matter how obnoxious I am. You treat me just like your sisters.” Her voice caught a little. “I miss being a sister.”

Talon was silent for a moment, touched in a way she wasn’t sure she could describe. Finally she reached up and brushed the tear from the Princess’s face. “Highness, I promise I won’t do anything that would get me taken away. I do have my own demons to deal with, but they won’t interfere with my duty to you. You have my word.” Talon was surprised to find that she meant it.

Shasta reached up and caught her hand, which was still wrapped in the thin towel. She held it for a moment, then inspected it in the faint moonlight. “Tomorrow morning I’m taking you to the infirmary. I bet this is going to hurt like crazy until it heals.”

“Well, it will give you the excuse to...how did you so carefully put it...give me a good ‘clobbering’ in public as well as in secret, now won’t it?” Talon waggled her eyebrows at Shasta, making her laugh. “Now go to sleep, Highness.”

“Good night, Talon.” Shasta snuggled down into her pillows, closing her eyes.

“Good night, Princess.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Stop fidgeting.” Lyris pinched Talon sharply on the arm. “I can’t help it, the collar itches.” Talon slid a finger between her neck and the offending fabric.

“You’d better get used to it, my boy,” Captain Vaughn commented with gruff amusement, “because after tonight you’ll be expected to appear in uniform every day. An officer in His Majesty’s royal guard has a certain appearance to uphold.”

Talon made a face at her instructor, who seemed to greatly enjoy the irony of referring to her as “my boy” and “young man” at every opportunity. She turned slowly before the tall glass, tugging at the bottom of her jacket. It was the more formal version of a royal guard’s uniform, a crisp bloodred jacket with a high collar and gold braid across the chest, and white trousers with red trim running down the outer leg seams. Gold-fringed epaulettes topped both shoulders, and a white sash banded in gold ran from one shoulder down to the opposite hip. A hat completed the uniform, a squarish black thing with red and white ostrich plumes blossoming from a gold decorative facet above the forehead.

Nurse, also a party to Talon’s secret, had altered the jacket for her, adding padding to the shoulders to give the illusion of a more masculine frame. Talon had broad shoulders anyway, but she had to admit that the extra bulk was more convincing.

“You look very handsome,” Shasta said, coming up from behind to peek into the mirror. “Here, turn around.”

Talon obeyed, and the Princess carefully pinned a small red rosebud to Talon’s sash. “There. Now you will wear your Princess’s favor when you accept your commission.” She smoothed the sash with

her hands and shook her head. "I can't believe you managed it in only six moons."

"Earning an officer's commission in half a winter is quite an accomplishment," Captain Vaughn agreed. "You've worked hard, Talon, and you deserve this."

"Thank you, sir."

"Before I forget," The captain reached into his bag on the table and pulled out a small pouch. "I have spoken with the King, and he also considers that your work here in the past few moons has been exemplary. Your duties are intensive. Even the lowest-ranking servants in the palace have a day off for their own rest, yet your position does not allow you so much as an hour to yourself. So this evening, I will assume personal responsibility for the Princess at the Harvest Benediction. You, my boy, have the evening off." He handed the pouch to Talon. "And this is for you, to celebrate with."

Talon took the pouch. It was quite heavy, stuffed with coins. "Captain, I'm most grateful, but I couldn't. My duty to the Princess—"

To Talon's surprise, Shasta waved a hand. "Don't be silly," she said lightly. "The captain's right, you haven't had so much as a moment to yourself since the day you came to the palace. I'll be standing by Father all evening, and Captain Vaughn will be watching over me. I'll be perfectly safe. You should go, have a good time at the ball."

"But, Highness, it's dangerous."

"Are you implying that I can't protect the Princess as well as you?" Vaughn inquired sternly.

"Of course not, Captain, but," Talon held the pouch out to return it to him, "honestly, I wouldn't know what to do with myself, on my own. And I want to be there. Just in case."

Vaughn grinned and gently pushed the pouch of coins back into her hand. "Take the money, young man, it's yours. And my offer stands if you change your mind."

Talon accepted the gesture with a little smile. "I'll think about it."



The great hall was lined along every wall with members of the royal guard in their blazing scarlet coats. The musicians at the entrance struck up a fanfare as Talon reached the doors. This was it. She made

sure her ridiculous hat was tucked securely under her arm and took a deep breath. Shoulders back and head held high, she marched into the vast room, approached the thrones at its far end, and dropped to one knee, bowing deeply before the King.

She avoided the Princess's eyes during this formality, knowing Shasta would probably make silly faces over her father's shoulder. Talon wasn't sure she could keep a straight face if her charge set out to break her composure.

King Soltran rose to his feet and held up his hands for silence. The musicians stopped playing, and he addressed the room of soldiers.

"We have gathered today to bear witness to the commission of Talon, faithful servant to the crown of Ithyria, to the rank of officer among the Ithyrian royal guard. Rise, Talon, and swear an oath of fealty to the Goddess and your King."

Talon rose and made a fist with her free hand, holding it over her heart.

Captain Vaughn stepped forward from the King's side and mirrored the salute. "Repeat after me. 'I, Talon, having been commissioned to serve the Ithyrian royal guard by His Majesty, King Soltran Novaris...'"

"I, Talon, having been commissioned to serve the Ithyrian royal guard by His Majesty, King Soltran Novaris...do hereby swear my allegiance to the crown of Ithyria, to protect and uphold my sovereign in all things..."

Talon had heard the oath many times before, having been present for the commissioning of many other officers during her training, though this was the first time that she had not experienced the ceremony from behind the Princess's small throne. Although she had every word memorized, their true meaning struck her deeply as she made her own solemn pledge.

"To defend, with my life and honor, the authority and security of the royal family chosen by the Goddess Ithyris to rule Her holy land. I enter into this pledge of my own volition, under no adverse influence and without personal reservation, to serve my king and country with all my strength and with all my heart from this day forward. May the Goddess guide and protect His Majesty and those who serve his will."

When she had finished the oath, the King took a sword from Captain Vaughn's hands as Talon knelt again. "I, Soltran Novaris of the royal house of Ithyria, as King Regent of the twelve Ithyrian provinces and chief commander of her military, do hereby confer upon Talon the rank

and title of corporal in His Majesty's royal guard." The King tapped her lightly on each shoulder with the flat edge of the sword. "Rise, soldier, and serve me well."

Talon stood, and meeting the King's eyes, responded with a firm salute. King Soltran saluted back, as did the captain and all other members of the guard present.

"Will the officer's sisters please come forward and pin his new rank," Captain Vaughn commanded.

Lyris and Bria both stepped up, beaming as Lyris carefully pinned a single gold bar to the collar of Talon's uniform.

"Congratulations, Corporal," King Soltran declared, which was cue for the entire audience to begin clapping and whooping.

Talon bowed once more, then turned and bowed to the Princess. This gesture was not required, but the crowd noticed it and increased their applause and cheers. Shasta's lips parted with delight and Talon winked at her mischievously before she spun neatly on one heel and marched into the assembly of soldiers, who began clapping her on the back in raucous approval. She turned back, grinning, to face the King as he gestured for silence once more.

"As you all know, this is the night of the Harvest Benediction when we will thank Ithyris for Her generous provision for the winter. You are all invited to attend the entertainment and ceremonies this evening, and we will hold a dance in the palace gardens afterward." More cheers went up, and the King waved his arms. "Now all of you get out of here so the servants can do their work."

The soldiers began to disperse and several tried to encourage Talon to join them for drinks before the festivities began, but she casually refused, insisting she had duties to attend to.

"You could go, you know," a voice softly chided, and Talon turned to find her young charge standing at her elbow.

"Trying to get rid of me, Princess?" Talon teased with an uplifted eyebrow. "Planning some sort of trouble for our poor, unsuspecting captain the minute I turn my back?"

"Maybe." Shasta poked her in the arm but quickly became serious again. "I mean it, you really don't have to stay with me. It's your first chance to do something for yourself for a change."

Talon shrugged. "I'd rather stay near you. The other fellows

mean well enough, but they get loud and obnoxious when they have a few drinks in them. Besides, I have to protect Captain Vaughn from whatever it is you've got up your sleeve."

Shasta made a face of mock disappointment. "Damn you, interfering with my evil scheme."

"Language, Highness," Talon admonished, and Shasta stuck her tongue out.

Soltran observed the exchange between his daughter and her bodyguard, and was inwardly pleased at how fondly Talon gazed down at the Princess. *As if she were the boy's own sister*, the King thought, then mentally corrected himself. It was difficult to remember at times that Talon was not a boy at all. Six moons ago, had someone suggested that he would one day commission a woman to serve in the royal guard, Soltran would have laughed aloud. But Talon had worked just as hard, or harder, than most of the young men who were hoping for that same honor.

Soltran was certain that putting his daughter in Talon's care was the wisest decision he'd ever made. The flowering friendship between the two exceeded his highest expectations. Soltran had thought at first that the only way to ensure Talon's full dedication would be to threaten those she loved, but the young guardian seemed to be developing a true attachment to the Princess, all on her own.

It was a good sign, he decided, watching Shasta lead Talon and her two sisters out of the hall to prepare for the night's banquet. Soltran hoped it meant he would never have to call on the harsher terms of their bargain.



Talon shifted uncomfortably in her chair and, for the hundredth time, craned her neck to peer around the Princess. Shasta gave her a light smack on the shoulder.

"Stop that. No one's going to sneak up on me, you worry wart, so just sit still and have fun."

Talon sighed and nodded, but didn't feel reassured. This was entirely new for her, sitting beside Shasta at a table rather than standing behind her chair. She found herself scanning the tables along the sides

of the hall with an anxiety that almost amounted to obsession, searching for any sign of the black-cloaked assassin she remembered from the birthday banquet.

Shasta sighed. “Relax, Talon. Have some wine.” She slid Talon’s goblet toward her, but Talon shook her head. Shasta sighed again. “You’re going to drink this, right now,” she insisted imperiously. “That’s an order.”

Talon snickered, but one glance at the Princess’s face told her that her young charge was not teasing. “Highness, I really don’t—”

“Your first few hours as a corporal and you’re already refusing an order from your Princess?”

Talon could not think of an appropriate reply, and Shasta took the opportunity to put the goblet in her hand. “Drink.”

Captain Vaughn, who was sitting at Talon’s other elbow, leaned over with a wicked grin. “You’d better do it, boy. I think she’s serious.”

Talon shot him a glare but obediently took a sip, albeit a tiny one.

“Good. Now keep drinking. I want that glass empty before the night is over.” The Princess’s warm amber eyes snapped, and Talon reluctantly surrendered. Shasta watched her take a long draught from the cup, and gave a satisfied smile. “Much better. Look, they’re about to start.”

Talon felt an odd twinge as she saw a group of brightly clad performers enter the far end of the hall and take up positions against the wall. She didn’t recognize any of the individuals; neither did she know the burly, well-dressed man who followed them and stood near the door. But she could tell this troupe was not much different than her own, and the man in the expensive clothes with eyes as predatory and cruel as a hawk’s was the showmaster. At the end of the table she heard a small gasp and knew her sisters had also noticed the performers.

The musicians suddenly changed their tune and tempo, and several dancers twirled out into the center of the hall, waving long ribbons and expertly weaving their bodies in and out between one another. Talon knew the Harvest celebration well. First a few brightly dressed performers would warm up the crowds, followed by an acrobat or jester. Then would come some sort of sultry dance with plenty of hip jiggling, more acrobatics, and a singer or bard to deliver a poetic tribute to Ithyris. Finally a group of Ithyrian priestesses would scatter rice on the floor and chant prayers of thanks to the Goddess for the winter’s provision.

She had been a part of such celebrations every Seventhmoon since she was ten and was so familiar with the routine that it was disconcerting to be the audience rather than the entertainment.

As she had predicted, when the dancers were finished a dwarflike man wearing a ridiculous multipointed hat and oversized slippers waddled into the center of the room and performed a few sleight-of-hand magic tricks, then began to tell jokes while he juggled random food items he chose from the serving platters. Talon knew most of the punch lines, but couldn't help laughing as the diminutive man made faces and chattered on in a voice that seemed entirely too big to be coming from such a tiny person.

Then came the dancing girls, with their silken scarves and bare bellies, jingling bracelets and chains of coins shimmering at their hips. There were six of them, of various sizes and shapes, all so thin Talon could see their ribs as they bent and swayed. The musicians played an incessant, sensual drum beat and the girls moved their bare feet in time to the rhythm, the sheer fabric of their skirts affording everyone in the room a generous view of their calves and thighs.

After swirling through the center of the room, they scattered, each one going to a different table and choosing a guest to favor with special attention. One of them, a redhead, approached the head table and flicked a scarf seductively at the King. He smiled but lifted a hand, politely rejecting her invitation, and so her eyes scanned the rest of the guests and suddenly locked onto Talon.

Talon's eyes widened as the girl came toward her, sashaying her hips and tilting forward to allow a full view of her ample cleavage. She moved Talon's plate aside and lifted herself onto the table, caressing Talon's cheek with a handful of silk. Talon tried not to let her discomfort show; if she didn't appear to be satisfied with the girl's performance, she knew the redhead would pay for it dearly.

Reluctantly she forced a smile, and the girl seemed to take that as a sign she was succeeding. She leaned forward, over Talon's goblet. Talon raised a hand to move it, and the dancer, thinking Talon was reaching for her, moved to allow Talon access. In the process, they ended up bumping one another's hands awkwardly and the goblet tipped over into Talon's lap.

Without thinking, Talon jumped to her feet. She met the redhead's terrified gaze and realized everyone was staring. Her heart sank as she glimpsed the showmaster's enraged face. He snapped his fingers, and

quickly the musicians started playing again as a couple of acrobats took to the floor.

The dancer slid off the table, bowing over and over, and Talon watched helplessly as she returned to her position by the wall. Her master would not beat her in the middle of a performance, but Talon could guess what sort of pain he would inflict the moment the troupe left the palace.

Moving closer to her mentor, she asked, "Captain, I may have to take you up on your offer after all."

"Sure. Go clean yourself up, kid. I'll keep an eye on things here."

Avoiding Shasta's curious gaze, Talon bowed and left the hall to change.



Back in the Princess's chambers, she berated herself as she stripped off the ruined trousers and reached for a clean pair. If she'd stayed in her seat and inconspicuously righted the goblet, no one would have noticed the accident. As it was, the poor girl was probably going to be beaten within an inch of her life. As she rebuckled her belt, she noticed the pouch of coins Vaughn had given her before the commission ceremony, and before she could change her mind, she grabbed the pouch and returned to the great hall.

Talon waited outside the double doors for the troupe to finish their performance. She could tell by the beating drums that the priestesses were probably finishing with the Harvest prayers, and a few minutes later the hall doors opened so that the Ithyrian women could file out, grains of rice still clinging to their veils. Talon stepped back so they could pass, inclining her head respectfully. The hall erupted in applause as the performers took their last bows and collected the shower of coins that were thrown into the center of the floor. They exited soon after, passing Talon on their way to the gardens. Last came the showmaster, his pockets jingling with the evening's profits.

Talon put a hand on his shoulder as he passed. "Excuse me, sir. A word, if you please."

The showmaster recognized Talon immediately and bowed. "My lord, please accept my deepest apologies for my stupid girl's inexcusable

behavior.” His manner was repulsively ingratiating. “I can assure you she will be dealt with.”

“Actually, I would prefer to have her services this evening.” Talon drew her hand from the shadows, allowing the showmaster to catch a glimpse of the bulging coin pouch. As she expected, his eyes immediately gleamed.

“My lord, if you desire company this evening, perhaps you would allow me to recommend one of the other girls. Several of them are quite...skilled.”

“Worthy of thought, but you see,” Talon lowered her voice conspiratorially and leaned toward his ear, “I have a particular fondness for redheads.” She shook the bag in her hand for added emphasis.

“Ah, I understand perfectly, my lord.” The showmaster gave a sharp whistle and beckoned to the flame-haired dancer. When she recognized Talon she looked as though she might be sick, but she approached nonetheless and fell to her knees, bowing her head to the floor.

“This gentleman requires your company this evening, girl. I expect you to serve him well.”

The girl on the floor did not look up, but she nodded. “My lord.”

Talon dropped the entire pouch into the man’s greedy hands and watched his eyes grow big as dinner plates as he gauged the weight. “Enjoy your evening, my lord,” he simpered with a bow. “You are welcome to keep her all night long, if that is your wish.”

Talon lifted an eyebrow, then turned her attention to the girl on the floor. “Follow me,” she ordered, trying to sound authoritative, as if she did such things all the time.

The redhead stood, eyes downcast, and followed Talon as she strode down the corridor. As soon as they’d rounded the corner, out of the showmaster’s sight, Talon let out a breath. She knew she’d given the burly man enough money to assuage his anger. The girl would not be beaten and Talon would see to it that she received a solid meal, probably the first she’d had in a long time if her sunken cheeks and protruding ribs were any indication.

They walked in silence to the Princess’s chambers, where Talon held the door and ushered the girl in. Closing the door behind them, she said, “Make yourself comfortable, I’ll only be a moment.”

She unbuttoned her uniform jacket, eager to shed the stiff, heavy

coat with its itchy collar. The loose white shirt she wore beneath was much more comfortable, and considerably cooler. Shaking the jacket out to remove any creases, she said, “The servants are all waiting on the guests, so we will be left to our own devices, I’m afraid. But we’re lucky—everyone was so excited about the Benediction tonight that they forgot to clear away the afternoon luncheon. The Princess eats like a bird, so there should be plenty left.”

She unbuckled her sword belt and propped the weapon against the wall. When she turned around she was startled to find the redhead less than an handbreadth away, and before Talon realized what was happening the girl was pressed up against her, little fingers working quickly at the buttons of her linen shirt. She succeeded in unfastening the first three and pressed her lips to Talon’s throat.

Talon reached up and gently prevented the questing fingers from straying any farther. Backing away, she looked into a pair of gray-blue eyes the color of the sky during a summer storm. “You don’t have to do that,” she said.

“My lord, you paid a great deal of money for my company this evening,” the girl replied, her voice silky. “I wish you to fully enjoy what you have paid for.” She pressed her hips into Talon’s, and Talon was so startled that she let go to catch her balance against the wall behind her. The redhead’s hands traveled lightly downward, brushing over the muscles of her abdomen.

Talon could guess where they were headed next, and with a gasp she slid out of reach and said, “You don’t understand.”

“Perhaps it is you who does not understand.” The girl advanced. “You may not realize it, my lord, but my mistake tonight was certain to cost me a terrible beating. Your generous gift to the showmaster has saved me, and for that,” she reached up and locked her arms around Talon’s neck, “I want to show my gratitude.” She rose on tiptoe, pulling Talon’s head down to meet her lips in a kiss.

An electric shock went through Talon’s body at the soft, sensual contact of the dancer’s lips against her own. For a moment she was frozen with a paralyzing combination of surprise, curiosity, and something else...something she’d never felt before, a heat that started low in her abdomen and spread into her arms and thighs, making them strangely weak. Instinctively she cupped the girl’s shoulders and drew her in.

Talon had been kissed before, but always by dirty, drunken older men whose advances she was attempting to avoid without seeming openly uncooperative. It had never felt like this, so soft and warm and pliant, and she had never before found herself desiring more, wanting deeper, stronger contact. Her body shouldn't react this way to the touch of another woman. *Should it?*

Disturbed, she pushed the redhead away and backed up several steps, finding it hard to catch her breath. The girl's face immediately contorted with fear and she fell to her knees on the floor.

"Forgive me, my lord, if I have displeased you." She sounded close to tears, apparently mistaking Talon's confusion for anger. "I truly desire only to give you pleasure."

Regardless of the thousand warring thoughts screaming through her head at the moment, Talon had a more immediate problem. The girl on the floor was terrified.

Bending down, she said, "The only pleasure I desire of you is the pleasure of your company while we eat. I have no other expectations, I promise." She offered her hand. "Come. Sit with me."

The redhead looked up with wondering eyes and took the offered hand, allowing Talon to lead her into the Princess's sitting rooms. A low table before the plush upholstered couch was laden with covered dishes, and Talon seated the redhead on the couch before lifting the silver cover of one of the platters to reveal an assortment of sliced cheeses and meats and a colorful arrangement of fruits.

"What's your name?" she asked her startled companion.

"Elsi, my lord."

Talon lifted another cover to find several rolls of crusty golden bread and reached for a bottle of wine, still over half full, resting in a silver tub of melted ice. "Well, Elsi," she said with a grin as she filled a glass with the wine and held it out, "I want you to eat and drink until you can't hold any more."

Wide-eyed, Elsi accepted the glass. "It will be my pleasure, my lord, I can assure you."

Talon filled a glass for herself. The lamplight glinted through the red liquid. "To pleasure, then."

Elsi clinked Talon's glass with her own and brought it to her lips, but before drinking she added quite seriously, "And to the kindest, most honorable man I've met in all my life."

Talon wasn't sure what to say, so she simply broke off a hunk of bread and handed it to Elsi with a flourish. The dancer ate ravenously, and with a twinge, Talon recalled feeling such hunger herself. She made a mental note to wrap up whatever was left for the girl to take with her later. Elsi's last words echoed in her mind. Kind she might be, but after that kiss, Talon wasn't sure that she was so honorable; and contrary to popular belief—and evidently her own rebellious body—she was most definitely not a man.

CHAPTER FIVE

“And the King has agreed to this?” Talon gaped at Chancellor Kumire.

The chancellor nodded. “He said it would be a wonderful experience.”

“A trip to the Ardrenn markets? It sounds lovely.” Bria batted her eyes at Kumire and clung to his arm.

“It sounds dangerous,” Talon retorted, annoyed at the way Bria hung on Kumire’s every word and amazed that the chancellor would even suggest such a reckless outing. “Chancellor, you can’t parade the Princess through the streets of the city with her brother’s assassin still at large.”

“Nonsense, boy, that was nearly a full winter ago.”

Talon gritted her teeth. “It’s hardly nonsense, Chancellor. Princess Shasta’s life could be at stake.”

“Relax, Talon.” Shasta poked her in the ribs. “No one will know it’s me, I’m going in disguise so I can get a real look at the lives of Ithyrians without my title getting in the way.”

Talon shook her head. “Princess, please, think about the risk you’d be taking.”

Shasta shrugged. “Risk comes with the birthright. And besides, it’s what makes life interesting.” Her eyes twinkled wickedly.

In frustration Talon called to Vaughn. “Captain, can you talk some sense into her? Maybe she’ll listen to you.”

Vaughn rose from his seat at the far end of the lesson hall and approached with a sigh. “Your Highness, surely you realize how unwise it would be to venture into the open with so little protection. Talon is a

capable soldier,” he nodded in his young student’s direction, “but even he can’t hope to offer the kind of comprehensive protection you would need in such a situation. If you insist on going, at the very least let me assign you a guard escort.”

Kumire snorted. “That would defeat the entire purpose.”

“Which is?” Talon challenged.

“To walk among my people,” Shasta declared. “To gain an understanding of their lives. To be one of them, even if it’s just for an afternoon. If I’m to rule one day I should have real knowledge of what the world out there is like. That’s something I’ll never get if I’m locked up in the palace my entire life.”

Talon stared at her charge suspiciously. This had nothing to do with Shasta’s lessons, and they both knew it. The Princess wanted a chance for adventure, something she was carefully sheltered from on a daily basis. “This is a very bad idea,” she said.

Shasta folded her arms. “I don’t have to explain myself to you, Talon. I have my father’s permission and that’s all I need. We’re going. That’s final.”

Vaughn cleared his throat. “Then the extra guard—”

The Princess waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t want a bunch of soldiers hovering over me the entire time. It will draw unnecessary attention.”

“You mean it will ruin your fun,” Talon grumbled under her breath, and Shasta spun to glare at her.

“Just having you around is going to be bad enough. If Father hadn’t permanently attached you to my shadow I wouldn’t be bringing you along either.” Shasta paused, and her tone softened. “Really, Talon, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m going to borrow some of Erinda’s clothes and dress up like a serving girl. Lyris and Bria, too. We’ll pose as the chancellor’s attendants, and he’ll give us a tour of Ardrenn dressed like a merchant. No one will have any idea who we are.”

“Well, the disguise is a good idea, but, Highness,” Talon dropped her voice so that only the Princess could hear her, “your brother was killed in full view of the entire court, surrounded by royal guard. You’re talking about walking into the middle of the city with almost no protection.”

“Well, that’s what I have you for, isn’t it?” Shasta reached for her ladies’ hands. “Come, let’s go find Erinda and put our costumes together.”

Talon met Vaughn's eyes helplessly and moved to follow the giggling girls from the lesson hall, but was stopped by a hand at her shoulder and a low voice in her ear.

"You shouldn't be so concerned," Kumire sniveled over her shoulder. "I've been a student of the sword since I was a child, and I'm perfectly capable of protecting Her Royal Highness myself. Between their disguises and my blade, we won't even need you, Outlander."

Talon fixed Kumire with a cool stare. "This entire trip is folly, Chancellor, and it's for that very reason that I'm going. Someone has to protect the Princess from your poor judgment."

She marched from the room, leaving the Monderan chancellor to sputter in her wake.



"You're so lucky, to be allowed to wear these every day," Shasta mused, straightening the waistband of the brown roughspun split skirts she'd borrowed from her chambermaid. "They're so comfortable."

"I barely get away with it as it is," the chambermaid replied with amusement, marking a spot on the waistband with a pin where it needed to be taken in. "Most of the palace servants pride themselves that they don't have to wear them. Nurse always scolds me because of the way I dress, but it's easier to carry a chamber pot up and down the palace stairs when my legs are free."

Bria shook her head as Erinda hovered around Shasta, making additional alterations to the borrowed outfit. "Your Highness, are you sure you want to wear those? There are other servants in the palace who are closer to your size, and their clothes wouldn't need to be taken in..."

Shasta flashed her companions a grin. "But Erinda's the only one who wears split skirts every day." Lyris and Bria exchanged dubious glances, and the Princess snickered. "What's the matter, you don't like them?" She could easily guess the answer, but unlike the other ladies of court she did not share the opinion that split skirts were only for the most menial of laborers.

Lyris blushed lightly. "It's only that...well, they're not very ladylike."

"We thought only servants and farmer's wives wore those," Bria chimed in quickly. "Aren't they a little...*common*, for you, Princess?"

Erinda cleared her throat, and Bria quickly inclined her head to the chambermaid. “Of course I mean you no offense, Erinda.”

“Of course,” the chambermaid replied dryly, but there was humor in her tone.

Shasta laughed again. “Looking common is the whole idea. And when else will I have the opportunity to wear split skirts in public without riding horseback? I’d wear these things every day if they’d let me. They’re so much easier to move in.” To demonstrate her point, she gave a kick that nearly toppled the dressing mirror and produced appalled squeaks of disapproval from her companions. “You’ll see. When I become queen I’m going to make these the new court fashion.”

Bria still appeared doubtful and straightened her own gray dress with a sigh. “I do wish we could have chosen more elegant disguises,” she complained. “The chancellor gets to be a merchant, so why can’t we?”

Lyris patted her sister’s arm. “Because we don’t want to take any chances. It’s important to keep the Princess from being recognized.”

Bria sighed again. “I suppose. But these clothes are just so...drab, aren’t they?”

“You’re just worried because you want to make a good impression on Chancellor Kumire,” Shasta teased.

Bria flushed but made no effort to deny it. “You can’t blame me for hoping to catch his eye. He’s only the most handsome man in Ithyria.”

Talon groaned audibly and closed the book in his lap, interrupting the conversation for the first time. “Bria, what in the name of the Goddess has gotten into you lately? Every chance you get, you’re batting your eyes at the chancellor instead of concentrating on your lessons. You’re only fifteen winters in age, little sister. It’s too soon to be sighing over some spineless viceroy’s son.”

Bria’s mouth dropped open. “How dare you!”

“I mean it, Bria.” Talon rose from his seat by the window. “I want you to stop.”

“Both of you stop,” Lyris interrupted, her voice calm but firm. “I’m tired of you two arguing about this all the time. Bria, Talon’s right, you really ought to tone it down with the chancellor. He’s our tutor, not your personal Prince Charming. And, Talon, you really have to stop being so overprotective.” She touched the sleeve of Talon’s uniform. “I know

you care about us, and you worry because you care, but the chancellor's harmless. Just because he doesn't wear a sword and swagger around all the time doesn't mean he's not a good man."

Shasta observed this little family spat with a pang of envy. Most of the time the three siblings treated her like she was one of them, but moments like this reminded her that blood was thicker than water.

"Well, personally, I agree with Talon," she said, ignoring Bria's squeak of protest. "Kumire may be my cousin, but I've never liked him much. He's...*slithery*." She caught her guardian's amused smile and returned one of her own before changing the subject. "Now come on, let's get dressed for dinner. I'm starved."



The markets of Ardrenn were an entirely new experience for the Princess, who constantly turned this way and that, gazing out from beneath the deep hood of her cloak as their little party wound up and down dusty streets lined with shops and small carts. It was a cool day in early winter, and the wind had a slight chill, but the weather was still pleasant enough for business. A thousand intermingled smells, of cooking food and rotting fruit and horse excrement, blended together in a combination that was as fascinating as it was disgusting. Merchants shouted at the people passing by, shoving scarves and jewelry under their noses and promising values that their competition could not match.

Kumire pointed out particular carts and shops, telling the girls whether the wares were cultivated, handmade, or imported, and how that affected their cost and value to the customer. Talon followed behind, the chancellor's voice a nonsensical murmur at the back of her mind. Her eyes darted from face to face, every muscle in her body tight. She'd expected to be nervous, walking around in the open like this, but she hadn't anticipated this level of anxiety. She almost felt sick to her stomach.

"Is everything all right?" Lyris's small hand slid into hers. "You're looking a little green."

Talon shook her head. "I just...I can't shake the feeling that something terrible is going to happen today."

“But, Talon, everything’s going so well.” Lyris cast a look around them as they moved through the crowded street. “No one seems to suspect a thing, and the Princess is having such a good time. Look.”

Talon did her best to draw some reassurance from her sister’s words. She could see that few of the passersby gave their small party more than a cursory glance; a merchant with a small group of assistants was hardly an unusual sight. And Shasta seemed utterly fascinated, even elated by the entire experience. In spite of the hood shadowing her charge’s face, Talon could almost feel tangible enthusiasm pouring off the Princess in waves. She was drinking in the sights and smells, tugging impatiently at the hood that blocked her peripheral vision. She probably would have removed it entirely were it not for Talon’s stern grunt every time she pushed it back a bit too far. She had to smile, but only faintly.

Lyris squeezed her fingers. “It’s going to be fine, Talon, really.”

“I hope you’re right.”

After another two hours of meandering between shops, carts, and stands of varied goods, Talon’s nerves were so on edge that she nearly jumped when Shasta suddenly leaned against her shoulder. The Princess looked fatigued, and Talon immediately turned to Kumire. “Chancellor, we should rest awhile. Her Highness is tired.”

Shasta attempted to protest, but Kumire nodded quickly. “Forgive me, ladies, I know you must be hungry. We will retire to that pub over there.” He indicated a gaily painted building with a hanging sign depicting a chubby, notably topless mermaid swinging over the door. “You’ll be able to rest your feet and experience a typical meal of the common folk.”

Bria quickly latched herself onto one of the chancellor’s arms, and he led them through the pub’s open double doors. A matronly woman bustled up to them with a cheerful grin that split her face ear to ear.

“Well now, my lord,” she greeted Kumire, offering a nod to the girls behind him, “welcome to the Siren’s Song Tavern!” She caught sight of Talon and the sword and knife at her belt.

Talon could hardly wear her uniform while accompanying the disguised Princess, and so she had insisted on wearing the garb of a mercenary. It was not uncommon for merchants to hire a blade to attend them while doing business in town, and in this guise Talon could carry a sword without incurring unusual attention.

Far from impressed, the hostess said, "Sir, I'm afraid weapons are not allowed here. I must ask you to leave them by the door."

Talon put a protective hand on her sword hilt and the woman sighed, looking to Kumire for help. "My lord, I really must insist that your man there remove his blades or else wait outside. I run a respectable, peaceful business here and we're not looking for any trouble."

"Of course, madam," Kumire replied smoothly and jerked his head at Talon.

She tightened her grip on the sword, but Shasta gave her a warning glare and flicked her eyes in the direction of the weapon rack. With a sigh of annoyance, Talon marched to the rack by the door and removed her sword and the knife in her belt. At the tavern hostess's frown, she sighed again and pulled another knife from the inside of her vest and one from each of her boots, dropping them with the others. Still the woman did not look satisfied, and with an irritated mutter, Talon rolled up her sleeve and removed the small dagger strapped to her forearm.

Shasta watched her produce these blades, seemingly from nowhere, and her eyes grew larger and larger as the pile on the rack grew bigger. "Goddess, did you have to bring along the entire armory?"

Talon did not reply, but instead stared so intently at Shasta that the Princess seemed to grow nervous. The tavern hostess beckoned them to follow her to a table and benches in the corner of the room. They took their seats, and as she did so Shasta's stomach rumbled loudly.

"I forgot to eat breakfast this morning," she explained with chagrin.

"Well, miss, we'll soon have you fixed right up," the hostess assured cheerily. "Perhaps you'd like to try the spiced beef tongue? It's our afternoon special, very fresh."

Shocked revulsion filled the Princess's face. "You eat *tongues*?"

Talon almost laughed at the horror in her voice. Kumire appeared equally disgusted.

Pointing at a nearby table, he said, "Just bring us whatever it is those gentlemen over there are having."

"Five bowls of pheasant stew." The hostess gave a little curtsy. "Right away, my lord." She scuttled off, and a few minutes later the tavern girls delivered large wooden bowls filled with a thick, greasy brown substance and hunks of dark bread.

Pheasant was often served at the palace, and the Princess eagerly

pushed her hood back and lifted the spoon to her lips. But Talon reached out and took the utensil from her hand, sniffing at it suspiciously. Shasta gave a frustrated sigh.

“Give that back, Talon, I’m hungry.”

“In a moment, I just need to be sure...”

Shasta interrupted with a little growl and snatched the spoon away.

“Princess, it might not be safe—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’m starving, and you’re being silly. There’s nothing wrong with the food. See?”

Before Talon could stop her, the Princess put a big spoonful in her mouth. Talon sprang up in alarm as Shasta’s smug expression abruptly became one of startled pain and she choked a little. Waving Talon away, she reached for a mug of water and drank deeply. It took Talon several moments to realize she had not been poisoned but had simply burned her tongue. Slowly Talon sat down again, wishing for the hundredth time that they had never embarked on this absurd adventure.

Shasta took another sip from the mug before speaking. “Talon, you have to relax a little. Please? You’re taking all the fun out of this for me.”

Her words brought a touch of guilt, but Talon shook her head. “I’m sorry. Truly I am, but...it’s my job to worry. You’re in danger here.”

Shasta gave her an incredulous look. “Here? In this tavern, sitting at this table, wearing a servant’s split skirt and apron, eating a bowl of stew with my personal bodyguard attached to my hip? Look around us, Talon, no one’s so much as sneezed in our direction. No one knows I’m here, I’m essentially invisible.”

Talon shook her head. “I can’t explain it, Highness, but...I feel it. Something bad is coming.”

“Nothing’s coming.” Shasta took another mouthful of the stew, this time blowing on it several times before putting it in her mouth. She jabbed at Talon’s untouched bowl with the end of her spoon. “Now eat.”

But Talon couldn’t. Her stomach was tied in knots and she couldn’t concentrate on food with so many people milling around them. Several times when someone passed a little too close behind the Princess’s seat Talon rose sharply, only to be tugged back down again by Lyris’s firm hand. Bria kept heaving exaggerated sighs and Kumire simply glowered as though Talon were sabotaging the outing on purpose. But

even though no one actually made a threatening move toward their little party, Talon's anxiety did not subside.

"We should have brought a guard unit," she muttered under her breath and received an elbow in the ribs from the Princess that she scarcely felt.

The food and rest seemed to be exactly what Shasta needed to restore her usual cheerful energy, and she chatted animatedly with her companions as they finished their meal, all former weariness apparently forgotten. As the tavern hostess passed by their table, Shasta caught her arm.

"Pardon me, but do you have a," she paused, "a privy chamber that I might use?"

Talon frowned, tempted to object, but she could hardly forbid the Princess from relieving herself before they had returned to the palace. It was a long ride back, and Shasta was unaccustomed to waiting.

The busy woman stared. "Well, aren't we just the queen of all Ithyria," she chuckled finally. "That's a fancy tongue you've got there, little miss. We don't have, uh, a *privy chamber* here, but there's an outhouse if you have need of it." She jerked her thumb toward the back door.

"Thank you." Shasta stood, and Talon rose to join her.

"Sit down, boy!" Kumire exclaimed. "You can't follow her out there."

Talon glared at him. "It's my duty."

"Talon, be reasonable." Bria covered the chancellor's hand with her own. "You're supposed to be Chancellor Kumire's hired sword, remember? How would it look for you to abandon your master in order to follow his maid outside?"

The words barely registered. Talon's attention was fixed on her little sister's hand resting atop Kumire's. When his thumb moved to caress the tops of Bria's fingers, Talon snatched Bria's arm and forced the pair apart. "Goddess, Bria, you're in public. And you," she glared murderously at the chancellor, "keep your hands off my sister."

Kumire widened his eyes in a show of ignorance. "Really, boy, you're far too excitable this afternoon. Your imagination is getting the better of you."

"I hate you," Bria balefully informed Talon, her face bright red.

Lyris, the peacemaker, quickly stood. "All right, you two, now is not the time or the place. Talon, you have other things to worry about

right now. And Bria,” she fixed the younger girl with a cool stare, “when we get back to the palace you and I are going to have a talk.”

Talon looked around with alarm, realizing that in the disturbance the Princess had disappeared. She must have gone to find the outhouse on her own. Cursing, she hurried to the weapons rack to retrieve her sword and smaller knives.

The hostess clucked her tongue disapprovingly as Talon strode out of the tavern, sword clanking. The outhouse was a small, narrow hut not far from the back door. Its distinct, pungent odor made Talon wrinkle her nose in distaste. She couldn't imagine the Princess using such an amenity.

Appalled, she rapped on the decaying door. “Your Highness?”

When there was no reply, she knocked again but was greeted only with silence. With growing alarm, Talon yanked on the door handle and lurched back as the door swung wide. The outhouse was empty.

A surge of panic flooded her limbs and she looked around frantically. If someone had taken the Princess, there should be tracks. Talon began examining the hard-packed earth beneath her feet for any sign of a struggle. It was then that a familiar voice tore through the air.

“What in the name of the Goddess do you think you're doing? Stop that at once!”

“Shasta.” Talon drew her sword and sprinted toward the Princess's screams.

CHAPTER SIX

Shasta had been less than impressed by the tavern's toilet facilities. She'd never used such a dirty, stinking little building before. She didn't even want to make contact with the rough wood seat, let alone insult her delicate skin by using the coarse leaves stacked on the filthy planks of the floor. But, gritting her teeth, she'd told herself that it was all part of the rustic, commoner experience. If her people could relieve themselves in such a place, so could she, and besides, she simply could not bear the pain of her straining bladder any longer.

As she stepped from the outhouse, looking forward to her evening bath, a disturbance caught her attention. She heard several loud cracking noises and a woman's cries of pain.

Running toward the source of the clamor, Shasta descended the low hill behind the outhouse and was shocked to see a man standing in the road with a long black bullwhip, repeatedly striking a woman in a shabby, nearly threadbare dress. Nearby lay an overturned basket and a few heads of lettuce scattered in the dirt. The woman cried out as the whip tore through the thin fabric of her bodice, leaving long, bleeding welts, and as she rolled a bit to her side, trying to avoid the biting blows, Shasta blanched. The woman being beaten was very obviously pregnant.

Shasta bolted toward them, joining the ranks of the crowd that had already begun to gather to watch the spectacle. "What in the name of the Goddess do you think you're doing?" she shrieked, stepping between the man and his unfortunate victim and throwing her arms out to halt his attack. "Stop that at once!"

“Little wench! Get out of the way.” The man spat on the ground. He was evidently a merchant, by the finery of his coat and trousers.

“I most certainly will not!” Shasta glared indignantly. “How dare you speak to me that way. Do you have any idea who I am?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.” He might have recognized her, or at least the famous amber eyes and hair that marked a member of the house of Rane, had he taken the time to look. But he didn’t seem capable of seeing anything beyond her shabby maid’s disguise. Ignoring her protests, he raised his arm again, shouting, “I warned you!”

Shasta almost thought she imagined hearing a low growl just before a familiar hand caught the bullwhip. Instead of striking her, the thin leather whip snaked around her guardian’s forearm in a coil.

Talon didn’t flinch. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” His voice was deadly.

The merchant’s face darkened. “Don’t interfere, Outlander.” He yanked on the end of the whip to free it from Talon’s arm. “These girls need a lesson in respect...”

Talon pressed his sword to the man’s throat in one smooth movement. His black eyes glittered dangerously. “You lay a hand on either of them and I’m going to teach you a lesson of my own.”

Shasta was slightly taken aback by the cool ferocity in her guardian’s tone. *He sounds just like Captain Vaughn when he gets angry.* If she hadn’t been so outraged she would have giggled.

“It’s no concern of yours what I do with my property,” the merchant insisted, his eyes jumping between Talon and the Princess.

“Property?” Shasta repeated incredulously over her guardian’s shoulder. “She’s a person, not a farm animal.”

“It was a perfectly legal business transaction. Her father borrowed money that he couldn’t repay, so he signed her over to me for a term of four winters to work off the debt.” He shifted uneasily beneath Talon’s dark gaze. “She still has another two to go, and as long as she is in my service I’m entitled to administer whatever discipline I see fit. She just cost me more than a quarter-moon’s wages.” He indicated the ruined lettuce in the road.

“I don’t care if she burned your entire crop to the ground, you sadistic brute. Goddess save me, she’s pregnant!” Shasta knelt beside the woman, who was not moving, though a soft moan showed she was still breathing. A pool of blood had formed beneath the servant’s skirts, staining her legs. It was far too much blood to be caused merely by

her wounds, and Shasta had a terrible feeling that something was very wrong.

“I will give ten pieces of gold to the first person who brings me a healer,” she shouted at the gathered onlookers, several of whom immediately took off in hopes of earning such a large sum of money, more than most men made in a moon. She gently touched the young woman’s face. “Shh, don’t try to move. Help is coming.”

Chancellor Kumire came puffing up the hill, Lyris and Bria in tow, and Shasta addressed him furiously. “Chancellor, can people really sell their children into servitude to pay off a debt?”

Kumire nodded. “Well, yes. It’s actually quite a common occurrence among the lower classes, Your H—” He broke off at Talon’s warning glare. “That is, labor has always been considered a fair trade for monetary debts. Sometimes the debtor himself will serve out the indenture, or else he might sign over his wife or children. Occasionally the debt is so great that his entire family must work together to pay it off. It happens all the time.”

Shasta shook her head in disbelief. “It’s...barbaric.” She looked up at the man with the whip, who was still frozen at the point of Talon’s sword. “Just how much did her father borrow from you?” she demanded.

He rolled his eyes with irritation. “One thousand gold pieces.”

I have dresses in my wardrobe that cost more, Shasta thought bitterly. She rose to her feet, marched over to Kumire, and took his hand, removing the enormous emerald and diamond ring that glittered on his middle finger. “I’ll see that you receive a replacement,” she said and held up the huge jewel so the merchant could see it. “This is worth at least a thousand.” She seized his hand with distaste and pressed the ring into his palm. “Consider her debt paid.”

The merchant stared at the jewel, then back at Shasta. The crowd of onlookers seemed as confused as he was to see a servant girl giving orders to her master. A flick of Talon’s sword was all the encouragement the merchant needed, and after a moment of thought, he apparently decided to pretend Shasta wasn’t even there.

“Thank you, my lord.” He bowed to Kumire. “I accept your generous offer. You have purchased her debt in full.” He shuffled through the inner pocket of his coat and withdrew some folded pieces of parchment, which he handed to the chancellor. With a tip of his hat he picked up the basket still lying on the side of the road and strode

over the top of the hill, leaving the ruined lettuce to rot in the afternoon sun.

Kumire unfolded the document and looked it over. “Her indentureship papers,” he said.

Shasta reached out and took them, and knelt again beside the injured woman. “It’s going to be all right,” she said, putting the papers in her hand with a little smile. “These belong to you now. You’re free.” But the woman was very still. Too still.

“The healer’s coming! Miss, I’ve brought the healer, like you asked.” A young man came running toward them, followed by an older woman in white robes who was puffing along behind.

“Pay him,” Shasta ordered the chancellor, who reluctantly counted out some coins. She turned to the healer. “Please, this woman needs help, I think she’s badly hurt.”

The healer felt for a pulse at the servant’s wrist, then checked again at her neck. She leaned forward and put her ear to the still lips, and after a moment shook her head. “I’m sorry, but she’s dead. In her condition, the strain and loss of blood was too much for her heart.”

“What?” Shasta rose to her feet, her head spinning. “But the baby...”

The healer laid a hand on the servant’s swollen belly and eyed the blood soaking her legs and skirt. “It was too soon. The child did not survive.”

Kumire coughed politely. “Does this mean I get my ring back?”

Shasta stared at him in disgust, then down at the body lying in the street. She turned and buried her face in her guardian’s jacket, feeling like she might be sick. “Take me home, Talon,” she begged. “I want to go home now.”



Other than a few disgruntled squeaks when they went over a particularly sharp bump, the Princess was unusually quiet on the way back to the palace. On the trip into Ardrenn, Shasta had done nothing but petulantly complain of the rough wooden wagon’s discomforts. They could hardly take the royal coach on such a trip, and so Vaughn had arranged for one of the guard transports to be filled with boxes and crates to give the illusion of a merchant wagon, and Kumire drove while the rest of them sat in the back among the cargo.

Talon found herself scanning the passing houses and buildings anxiously as they rode by, expecting someone to jump out at them at any moment. Unconsciously she fingered the hilt of the knife concealed in her vest. *Just a little longer*, she told herself.

“Are you all right, Your Highness?” Lyris asked gently, and Talon realized that the Princess’s face was far paler than usual, her lips pressed together in thought.

Shasta met her companion’s eyes gravely. “Lyris, you and your family were once like that poor servant woman, weren’t you? I mean, you were working for that performance troupe against your will.”

Lyris blinked. “It wasn’t exactly against our will, Highness. It’s just that there weren’t many other choices for three Outlander kids on their own in the world. The performance troupe was better than... well, most of the other alternatives.”

“But your showmaster. He could beat you to death like that if he wanted.”

Lyris flushed without reply, and Bria answered for her. “Well, yes, he could, though most people don’t die from such a beating unless it goes on for a very long time.”

“Did he beat you?” the Princess asked.

Bria bit her lip. “Lyris and I were lucky. We were his star attraction, too important to risk.”

Shasta paused, then turned to Talon. “What about you? Were you beaten?”

“Sometimes.” Talon’s tone was more terse than she meant it to be, but the subject made her uncomfortable.

Lyris laid a hand on her sleeve and frowned slightly at Shasta. “I’m sorry, Highness, but we don’t like to talk about it much. Those are very unpleasant memories.”

“Oh.” Shasta dropped her head. “All right.”

They lapsed into an awkward silence as the wagon proceeded toward the city gates and Talon pushed the conversation to the back of her mind, scanning the streets for any sign of potential danger. The heightened paranoia was beginning to wear on her after so many hours, and she was feeling slightly sheepish. Maybe she really was being silly. After all, they’d been walking around the markets all day and nothing had happened, certainly nothing that Talon couldn’t handle. But she wouldn’t feel at ease again until they were safely back within the palace walls.



Qiturah was lost in thought as she moved through the hall of Verdred Temple on her way to officiate the evening prayer rites. A growing sense of danger plagued the edges of her consciousness. Ulrike was stirring. She could feel his presence, faint but sinister, curling like wisps of smoke somewhere in the distance. She was not certain what it meant, but she planned to lead several protective invocations during the prayer service.

“Umph!”

Qiturah was jolted from her deliberation as she collided with one of the young priestesses also walking the hall. She looked up into a pair of remarkably vivid green eyes, and the young woman quickly stepped back and inclined her head respectfully.

“Forgive me, Mother Qiturah.”

Qiturah laughed softly. “I am the one to blame, *Ostryn* Kadrian. I should not allow my troubled thoughts to overwhelm my feet.”

Kadrian’s head came up quickly. “Then you can feel it as well? The strange evil circling above Ardrenn? Even from provinces away it seems so...malevolent, doesn’t it?”

Ardrenn? Qiturah regarded the priestess with curiosity. “Tell me, *Ostryn*, how is it that you know the threat is in Ardrenn?”

Color rose in Kadrian’s cheeks. “I...” She seemed to struggle for the words, then shook her head helplessly. “I cannot explain, I only know what I feel. There are shadows gathering over our capital city.”

Qiturah nodded thoughtfully. “Did you not come to us from Ardrenn, Kadrian?”

“I was born there, Your Honor.”

“The Goddess often uses bonds of love between Her children to project Her power,” Qiturah said. “Perhaps ties to the family you left behind allow you to sense more than most.” She extended a hand. “Come, *Ostryn*. You will stand by my side at evening rites. The priestesses of Verdred shall cast their prayers upon you, and perhaps those same ties will help carry Ithyris’s power where it is needed most.”

Kadrian accepted the offered hand and pressed her lips lightly against Qiturah’s knuckles. “May the Goddess heed your voice, Honored Mother,” she replied formally.

As Qiturah led the way to the temple sanctuary, she cast a sideways

glance at the tall priestess walking a slight but respectful distance behind her. She had the sinking feeling that if Kadrian was right and Ulrike's influence was centering on the capital city, he was likely targeting the royal family once again.

Silently, she invoked the grace of the Goddess. *Divine Lady, watch over the house of Rane this night, and lend Your strength and wisdom to those who protect it...*



Chancellor Kumire guided the wagon through the western gates and followed the road south along the city walls. To preserve the Princess's disguise, they had taken the long way from the palace to the market and back again. That meant using the southern palace entrance, which opened onto the moors rather than directly into Ardrenn itself. It was a good, cautious plan, but Talon still felt they were far too exposed and vulnerable. After fifteen of the most agonizing minutes of her life, they finally reached the southern gates, and Kumire exchanged a few words with the guards posted above. They recognized the Monderan chancellor immediately and, after checking their daily roster, gave the order to open the gates.

Only when the wagon was back inside the palace walls and the gates had closed with a resounding bang could Talon finally breathe a little easier. Kumire brought them across the grounds and right up to the palace doors before pulling the wagon to a halt.

Captain Vaughn was the first to come running across the courtyard to greet them. "You're back early," he observed as Talon leapt down and extended a hand to help first the Princess, then Lyris and Bria.

Shasta gave the captain a wry smile. "Yes, well, it was a bit more of an adventure than I was counting on."

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing serious, Captain," Talon replied quickly. "Her Highness had an...encounter...with the darker side of Ithyrian commerce."

"I see." Vaughn jumped up the steps and pulled heavily on the palace doors until they swung open. "Well, I look forward to hearing all about it, but right now it seems to me you could use some rest."

Shasta thanked him as she entered, trailed by her companions.

As Talon passed by at the rear of the group, the captain clapped her on the shoulder and said, "Well done, kid."

Talon gave her mentor a nod but knew she didn't deserve the praise. If Vaughn only knew how she'd let the Princess out of her sight while she was caught up in an argument with Bria... *Never again*, she promised herself firmly as she followed the Princess and her sisters through the corridor.

"Princess Shasta! You're back already!" Erinda bobbed a curtsy as they entered Shasta's chambers. "How was your trip?"

Shasta threw herself into the nearest chair, ignoring Talon's attempt to take her cloak. "Educational." She closed her eyes. "I must have a bath, Erinda."

"I'm ahead of you, Highness." The buxom maid grinned. "They're already heating the water for you in the kitchens. I was hoping to have your tub ready by the time you got back, but you're here early so I'm afraid you'll have a few minutes to wait."

The Princess dragged off her hood and cloak and discarded them on the floor. "Goddess love you, Erinda, you're wonderful."

She picked up Shasta's outer garments. "I'll just go put these away and check on your hot water."

Erinda left the room with her usual bustling energy, and Talon went to her chest by the window. Stripping off her coat and vest and removing her sword belt, she began making a little stack of the blades she'd been carrying all day. Her body felt remarkably light without all the extra metal, but somehow she didn't feel as relieved as she'd expected.

"You still look worried," Shasta said. "We're home. You can relax now."

Talon sank down into the chair beneath the window and rubbed her temples. "I know, Highness. I've just been on edge for so long today."

"I told you there was nothing to worry about, didn't I? We walked around the market all afternoon and it was perfectly safe."

"Just because you didn't get assassinated in the middle of the street doesn't mean you were safe, Princess. We just got lucky."

Shasta pulled a face. "Do you have to be such a pessimist all the time?"

Talon gave a little grin and picked up one of the knives from the table, shuffling through her trunk of belongings until she located her whetstone. Leaning back in her chair, she drew the stone along the knife blade in smooth strokes.

"You almost gave yourself away, giving the chancellor orders in public. I thought for certain someone would recognize you." She looked

up. "But it was a good thing you did, trying to give that indentured servant her freedom."

The Princess shook her head sadly. "It didn't help her much, did it?" After a moment her gloomy expression melted into a snicker. "I'm surprised Chancellor Kumire didn't put up more of an argument when I took his emerald ring, I know he really liked that one."

Talon wiggled her eyebrows. "I think he'd give you every jewel in his possession, if you asked."

"He doesn't like me *that* much."

"Sure he does. He wants to marry you."

Shasta covered her ears and gave an exaggerated wail of horror. "Oh, don't say that."

Talon smirked and returned attention to her blade sharpening, but in the next instant she jumped instinctively to her feet as the chamber door opened. It was just a group of maids bringing buckets of steaming water for the bath, and the girl in the lead gave a little shriek of fear when she caught sight of the Princess's guardian. Talon realized she had the knife drawn back, poised to throw it at the unfortunate chambermaid's head, and she quickly dropped her arm and sat again, heat rising in her cheeks.

Shasta burst out laughing. "Don't pay him any attention, Panna," she reassured the frightened maid. "Talon's just a little more overprotective than usual today."

Panna curtsied and continued to the privy chamber, followed by the other maids, and they set about ferrying hot water between the Princess's chambers and the kitchens until finally the air began to fill with the sweet scent of lilacs and roses, a sure sign that the bath was ready.

Talon set her book on the table and glanced into the chamber, then stepped back beside Erinda and bowed. "Your chamber is clear, Princess. Enjoy your bath."

"I plan on it," came the reply, and Shasta moved past them into the fragrant room.

Talon closed the door and returned to her seat by the window, giving Erinda a little salute as the chambermaid excused herself. Pulling the book back into her lap, she tried to read but found she couldn't concentrate. To her consternation the anxiety tightening her chest had suddenly increased tenfold, until it was difficult to breathe.

This is ridiculous, she thought in a panic. *We're safer right now*

MERRY SHANNON

than we have been all day. What in the name of the Goddess is wrong with me? Her eyes strayed to the privy chamber and she got to her feet and crossed the floor, reaching out, almost without thinking, to touch the heavy wood-paneled door. *Shasta...*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shasta stood before the small round looking glass over her washbasin. It was already beginning to fog over with the steam from the bathing tub and she quickly unpinned her long braids, releasing the ends and working out the plaits with her fingers. As much as she had enjoyed wearing split skirts for an entire day, the fabric was much coarser than the more delicate materials she was used to, and she was looking forward to the soft, silken touch of her dressing robe.

She removed the robe from a hook on the wall and flung it lightly over her dressing screen in the far corner. Even though she was supposed to have complete privacy in this chamber, somehow she felt better about dressing and undressing behind a partition. After all, the privy door had no lock, and her father had assigned a man to share her rooms. The silk-paneled screen made her feel more secure. She picked up the chamber pot, preferring to relieve herself behind the divider as well. As she rounded the edge of the dressing screen, her heart nearly jumped into her mouth.

A man was crouching behind the partition.

The moment she caught sight of him, he leapt at her. Shasta barely had time to register the gleam of a knife in his hand, and she did the only thing that sprang to mind—she shrieked and flung the chamber pot straight at his head.

With a crash, the china vessel shattered over his skull, momentarily stunning him. Shasta seized the edge of the screen, toppling the heavy wooden frame onto her attacker before bolting for the door. But he was not so easily deterred. His knife ripped through the silken panels, and

rising, he followed after her. The privy chamber door burst open with a bang, and Talon barged in. Shasta reached out for her guardian but was yanked backward sharply.

The man had caught a handful of her long hair to prevent her from escaping, and the pain that exploded through her scalp made her scream furiously.

Talon gave a roar and flew between her and the would-be assassin. The man grunted as Talon blocked the knife with one arm while delivering a powerful blow to the offender's gut with the other. Shasta's pain subsided as her hair was released, and she quickly dodged aside. Talon and the assassin were blocking the door, so she ran to the farthest corner of the chamber and curled into a ball on the floor. Her lungs felt hot and she closed her eyes, struggling to breathe.

Talon's first instinct was to rush after her charge, but she hesitated. Unarmed, how could she defend Shasta? Should she try to distract the assassin instead? As if sensing her dilemma, the assassin saw his opportunity and grinned. In that instant, Talon realized that this was what her nerves had been preparing her for all day. The tension that had built for hours on end suddenly released in a flood of adrenaline. Her concentration heightened so intensely that everything—colors, smells, sounds—abruptly amplified as time seemed to slow down.

The assassin barely took a step before Talon hurled her weight at the man. Growling, "Over my dead body," she grappled him from behind and they both crashed to the marble-tiled floor.

The man rolled over with a snarl and slashed upward with the knife. Talon felt a sting and threw herself backward just in time to avoid having her throat slit. She struck his wrist sharply with the edge of her hand.

As the knife spun across the floor, she yelled, "Princess, get out of here now!"

Shasta removed her hands from her eyes and stared, frozen and wheezing hard. Talon didn't have time to repeat her instructions before the assassin retaliated with a fist of his own planted solidly across her face. She reeled back at the force of the blow but managed to block a second strike, bringing her knee down hard into his abdomen.

Shasta chose this moment to move, scrambling out of the corner and past the brawl. With a grunt of desperation the assassin grasped her ankle, tripping her to the floor. Talon clamped her hands around

the man's throat to cut off his air, and he let go of the Princess, trying to fight off the constricting fingers. But Talon's grip was unshakeable. Her muscles felt like iron. The man's face purpled as he struggled to breathe.

Out of the corner of her eye Talon saw Shasta crawling out of reach. Relief must have loosened her fingers slightly, for the assassin chose that moment to bring his legs up unexpectedly, heaving her through the air.

Only her acrobatic training saved her from being pitched headfirst into the stone wall. She twisted so that it was her left shoulder, not her head, that struck the wall first. Searing pain erupted through her arm and upper back. Stumbling to her feet, she saw that Shasta had paused at the sound, her expression suddenly conflicted.

Talon gasped as the Princess took a hesitant step toward her. "No, Shasta, run! Don't worry about me, just run!"

On his feet again, the assassin lurched toward his knife, and Talon threw herself at him, ignoring the white-hot surge through her shoulder as she tackled him. The blade was just a handbreadth from his grasp. Her left arm was strangely unresponsive as she tried to hold him, and it took only a second for the assassin to flip her over. The breath was trapped in her lungs as he crushed her windpipe with his forearm. No matter how she kicked, his weight pinned her down. The powerful burst of adrenaline that had lent her such strength before seemed to be dissipating with the lack of oxygen. Her vision began to sparkle darkly until she couldn't see his face any longer. Then, somewhere above the chaos she heard the Princess's voice.

"Talon! The knife!"

Something caught her flailing wrist, pressing a smooth, familiar object into the palm. Talon's fingers tightened instinctively and she brought the blade down into her attacker's back. A warm liquid rush followed when she withdrew, and the grip at her throat loosened. Talon continued stabbing as her vision gradually cleared, but now all she could see was red. Everything was covered in a thick, shiny coat of scarlet that burned her eyes. She kept moving the blade automatically, feverishly, until a firm hand at her shoulder caused her to pause.

"That's enough, my boy. I don't think he's a threat anymore."

Talon looked up and met the eyes of her mentor with shock. "Captain Vaughn?"

She inhaled sharply when she realized that she was straddling a dead body, the man's chest and throat torn with multiple stab wounds. Blood saturated his cloak and pooled beneath him on the tile, flowing in streams toward the gutters along the edges of the walls and into the bathing tub. The water in the tub was morbidly crimson, steaming like some evil potion being brewed right there in the privy chamber. Talon realized she was still gripping the knife with blood-slicked hands and dropped it, numbly. Vaughn's hand on her shoulder suddenly reminded her of the pain throbbing there and she twisted away, looking for the Princess.

Shasta was staring with an indescribable expression, and Talon frowned. Something was wrong. As Shasta's eyes rolled back in her head Talon cursed and sprang to her feet, but Vaughn was faster. He caught the girl before she could hit the floor and quickly checked her pulse.

"She's not breathing," he said tersely, and Talon moved forward but he held up a hand. "No, wait, just give her a moment."

For several anxious seconds Talon obeyed, frozen in place and only half aware of the bustle in the chamber around her as several of the royal guard inspected the assailant's body, the tub, the dressing screen, trying to determine what had happened. Her attention was entirely focused on the Princess, whose face was alarmingly pale and still.

Finally Shasta gave a shuddering gasp, and Vaughn nodded with satisfaction. "There, she'll be all right now. Too much excitement, I think, but she's breathing again. She'll come out of it in a minute or two." He straightened, carrying the Princess out of the privy chamber and setting her gently into her bed with Talon on his heels.

King Soltran burst into the bedchamber then, and when he caught sight of Talon's blood-soaked clothing and his daughter lying quietly on the bed, he erupted furiously. "What happened here?" He crossed the room in four strides and took hold of Talon's shirt front, mindless of the blood that covered her clothing.

Talon swallowed. "There was a man, Your Majesty, in the Princess's privy chamber..."

"I seem to remember giving strict orders that you were to inspect Her Highness's privy before every use."

"I did, Majesty, but I didn't see anyone—"

"Then you didn't look well enough, did you? Did I or did I not

make it quite clear that Shasta's life is in great danger? I expect you to take that seriously, Corporal!"

Talon resisted the urge to point out that it was the King himself who had authorized a trip into the middle of the Ardrenn markets without so much as a guard escort, but she thought better of it. Talon had come to realize that common sense was not the King's strongest attribute. Soltran loved his daughter very much, and meant well, but he often set others up for failure inadvertently. Of course, when things inevitably backfired no one dared to blame the King publicly, and Soltran himself seemed oblivious to his own faults.

So Talon simply nodded. "You're right, Majesty. I have failed Princess Shasta. I should have been more careful."

Her shame was genuine. How could she have become so comfortable with their daily routine that she had lost sight of the very real danger that attended the Princess at every minute of the day? She'd been so obsessed with getting out of the open, back to the palace where they would be safe. How easy it was to forget that for Shasta, the palace was hardly safer than the streets of Ardrenn.

"Please, Your Majesty, I will accept whatever punishment you choose. But my sisters..."

"Fear not, Corporal Talon." Soltran suddenly appeared surprisingly calm, considering his fit of temper only a moment before. "You are still learning what it means to be a soldier. And the Princess is unharmed, after all. So, this one time, you will not be punished, nor will I impose the special terms of our bargain. This is your one and only free mistake, so learn from it."

Talon bowed quickly. "I will, Your Majesty, you have my word. Thank you."

The King then looked down at his hands, smeared with blood from Talon's clothes, and grimaced. "Report to the infirmary immediately and get cleaned up. I imagine that eye's going to swell up like a ripe plum in a few days. I'll stay with the Princess myself until you get back."

Hesitating, Talon cast another look at Shasta, who was beginning to stir against the pillows. "Your Majesty, I...I may have frightened her. I lost control there, for a minute, and..."

The King chuckled and clapped Talon on the shoulder. "You'd be surprised how much it takes to frighten my daughter, Corporal."



Later that night Talon could barely suppress a groan as she lay down on her cot by the Princess's bed. Every muscle in her body ached. The healer had corrected her shoulder, which had been dislocated when she connected with the privy chamber wall. He'd also stitched the cut at her throat, which was not dangerously deep but would probably leave a scar. True to the King's prediction, her eye was already beginning to swell shut, and now that the rush of adrenaline had left her veins there was nothing to prevent her from feeling the full impact of the day's damage to her body. Even the healer's special pain-reducing tea could not do much more than dull the sharper pains into a permeating haze.

Talon berated herself for the hundredth time that day as her head hit the pillow. How could she have been so careless? After all the stress of the afternoon in Ardrenn, she'd allowed the Princess to walk right into an assassin's trap. Talon wished she could be in the King's study right now; he and Vaughn would be trying to determine how exactly the assassin had managed to conceal himself in the Princess's privy without anyone noticing. Erinda and the other chambermaids, who had gone in and out repeatedly as they filled the bathing tub, faced particular suspicion. All of them claimed they had not seen any sign of the villain lying in wait behind the dressing screen.

Talon wondered if they'd identified him; that was surely another assignment that the King and Captain Vaughn would be working on tonight. It was impossibly frustrating that she couldn't be a part of the investigation, and even worse that she could barely perform her primary duty, that of ensuring Shasta's continued safety.

"Talon?" Shasta's head suddenly appeared over the edge of her bed.

Talon gave a start. She'd thought Shasta was asleep. "Princess?"

"Are you all right?" she asked shakily. "I heard they gave you stitches."

Talon propped herself up on one elbow and pulled the collar of her shirt open. "They're not bad, see? It wasn't a very long cut."

Shasta slid from her bed onto the cot and nudged Talon's legs aside so she would have room to sit. Very gently, she placed cool fingertips on Talon's swelling eye. "Does it hurt?"

“Everything hurts. But better me than you.”

“You killed that man, didn’t you?”

Talon closed her collar again. “Yes.”

“Have you ever killed anyone before?”

Talon was taken aback for a moment, debating her answer. “Once.”

Shasta nodded thoughtfully. “Was it like this?”

“In some ways, yes.” To avoid further questions she quickly changed the subject. “Princess, I’m so sorry. I never should have let you set foot in that chamber.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You’ve checked the privy for me hundreds of times, and no one was ever hiding there before.”

The thought was far from comforting. Talon was horrified to realize that it had never occurred to her to inspect behind the dressing screen as part of their daily ritual. She’d put the Princess in danger not just on this one night, but hundreds of times without even thinking. “Oh, Goddess,” she whispered.

Shasta made an impatient sound. “Now stop that. You saved my life today. I really didn’t know what to do when I saw him crouching there. I just threw everything I could at him and ran.”

“You did exactly the right thing.” Talon pulled herself into a sitting position, trying to ignore the throbbing complaint from her shoulder.

“But I didn’t. As soon as you came in I just...I ran off into the corner like a frightened child. I didn’t even try to help you.”

Talon stared. “You’re not supposed to help me, Princess. You’re supposed to stay alive. The fighting is my job.”

“Darc would have helped. He wouldn’t have been afraid.”

Talon could hear the catch in her charge’s voice, and she covered Shasta’s hand with her own. “Then your brother would have been foolish. Fear is nothing to be ashamed of, Princess. It can keep you alive.”

“You weren’t afraid.”

Talon choked back a laugh. “I was terrified.”

“You were?” Shasta turned luminous eyes on her guardian, the moonlight turning them a pale golden color.

Talon looked away, feeling strangely, deliciously chilled under the Princess’s gaze and suddenly forgetting what she was going to say.

Shasta didn’t seem to notice, and gave a sad sigh. “He was perfect,

you know. Daric was the perfect Crown Prince for Ithyria. He was strong and brave and so very wise, and me...I'm scarcely even a shadow of what he was. I get winded going up the stairs, a mouse scurrying across the floor is enough to send me shrieking from the room, and I can't even save a poor serving girl from being beaten to death in the street."

"Princess, you can't blame yourself for that. You did everything you could for her. It couldn't be helped."

"You're wrong. There must have been a way to save her, I just wasn't able to find it." Shasta covered her face with her hands. "What good is being a princess if you can't help your people?"

Talon didn't know what to say, and she did the only thing she could think of: pulled the Princess into her arms like she would one of her sisters and held her for several minutes. "You know, you're much more courageous than you think. You stayed in the privy and handed me the knife. In fact...you saved *my* life."

Shasta slowly dropped her hands. "I did, didn't I?" A smile spread across her face as she blinked up at Talon.

"Yes, you did." Talon allowed a few seconds for that to sink in. "And you have to promise me you will never do anything so foolish again. When I tell you to run, you run. Don't stop, don't look back, don't think about me or anything else."

"I don't know if I can make that promise, Talon. How could I just run away and leave you to be hurt, maybe even killed?"

"Because I'm asking you to." Talon held the Princess's eyes intently with her own. "If that man had killed me, he would have gone after you next." Talon didn't want to imagine the possibility. "You're the Crown Princess of Ithyria. No one's life is more important than yours. So if I tell you to get away, promise me you'll go."

Shasta cringed, and Talon realized she was gripping her charge's shoulders rather fiercely. Immediately she released her, and the Princess drew a deep breath.

"All right. If that's what you want, I promise."

"Thank you."

Shasta stood up and returned to her own bed, climbing under the bedcovers. She was silent for a while, then rolled over on her side and said, "Good night, Talon."

Talon was relieved to hear only affection in Shasta's tone, instead of sulkiness. "Good night, Princess."



Who wanted Shasta dead and why? Who had the most to gain? Talon swung her sword at an imaginary enemy and pondered what the royal guard had been able to gather so far. Captain Vaughn kept her informed but so far, they had more questions than answers.

No one had been able to identify the assassin's body. Everything about him was carefully unremarkable, from his average height and build to the slightly shaggy cut of his brown hair. He had no scars or markings of any kind and wore simple dark clothing that was neither unusually shabby nor unusually fine. General Anjen was convinced the man was a professional assassin, likely the same who'd murdered Prince Daric the previous winter, but Talon wasn't so sure. The black-cloaked man she remembered from the banquet had a catlike grace, subtle and sinister. But the man she had killed, though aggressive, relied on brute force and moved clumsily.

"Careful, my boy," Vaughn warned, rising from his seat. "In a position like that you've opened yourself up for a nasty strike to the gut. Remember what I've said about guarding your center." He took the sword from Talon's hand and repeated the swing she'd just made, exaggerating the vulnerable position. "You see? Pull your shoulder in and put your weight on both feet. You have to pay more attention, unless you want someone spilling your insides in the dirt."

Sheepishly, Talon took the sword back and repeated the corrected movement he had demonstrated. Vaughn gave a grunt of approval. She continued through the exercises, meant to improve form as well as strengthen important muscles, and glanced at her mentor out of the corner of her eye.

"Captain Vaughn, do you think one of the nobles could be behind the attacks on the Princess?"

"What makes you say that, Corporal?"

Talon shrugged and dropped into a lunge, raising the sword over her head to block an invisible attacker. "It just seems like whoever it is must have connections in the palace. They managed to sneak an assassin right underneath the noses of the royal guard in spite of the new restrictions at the palace gates. Not only that, he was able to get into the Princess's private chambers without anyone seeing him."

She lowered the sword and rose smoothly, making a half turn and thrusting outward. She held the position for several seconds so that the

weight of the blade burned in her upper arm. “He was too good to be some disgruntled revolutionary. Someone had to be paying him.”

“That’s our assumption as well, yes.”

Talon sheathed her sword and pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve to mop the sweat from her brow and neck. “It just doesn’t make sense. Why would someone try to kill Princess Shasta and not the King? Surely His Majesty has more enemies than the Princess.”

“Not necessarily.” Vaughn shuffled through the books on the table in preparation for the academic portion of Talon’s lessons. “King Soltran’s claim to the throne is more tenuous than his daughter’s. Perhaps the Princess is a greater threat because of her birthright. The house of Rane has ancient and powerful enemies.”

Talon joined the captain on the bench, stretching her legs out in front of her and peering at Vaughn skeptically. “You’re talking about the Flesh God, aren’t you? Ulrike and his followers. My sister Lyris is convinced that he’s the one trying to destroy the Goddess’s royal family. She blames every flower that wilts on his influence. I didn’t think you put much faith in those mystical religious stories.”

Vaughn chuckled. “Well, I don’t know that I’d go as far as that, but it does seem that some tragedy befalls the royal house with every winter that brings us closer to the millennium. Two winters ago it was the Archduchess Silaine and her two children killed in that terrible house fire. A winter before that, the Queen’s cousin Duke Asquith died of fever unexpectedly. Over the past two decades, the house of Rane has dwindled through illness, infertility, and misfortune. Now the Queen is dead and the Prince murdered, and only Princess Shasta, Viceroy Fickett, and his son Kumire remain to continue the royal line.”

Talon cast a distasteful look toward the opposite end of the room, where Chancellor Kumire was bent low over one of the tables explaining something to the three girls seated there. He was standing just a little too close to the Princess, one arm resting lightly on her shoulder while, on his other side, Bria leaned toward him in an obvious attempt to usurp his attention.

Vaughn followed Talon’s line of sight, his own disgust evident. “It certainly seems there must be some evil power at work, doesn’t it?”

“You may be right.” Talon swung one leg over to straddle the bench, tugged a heavy volume from the stack on the table, and opened it to where they’d left off the day before. “But I’m not going to let anyone, God of Darkness or otherwise,” she glared quickly over at Kumire,

“bring harm to my family *or* my Princess.” She pretended not to notice Vaughn’s poorly concealed snicker and turned her attention to the book. “Now, where were we?”



Pacing in her room after the lessons were over, Shasta could not shake the restlessness that had gripped her for days. She knew it was reasonable to be distressed by the attempt on her life, but that wasn’t what truly bothered her. She kept thinking about the episode in the Ardrenn markets, unable to get the dying woman out of her mind. How could such inhumanity be tolerated among her people?

During lessons, Chancellor Kumire had explained that in Ithyria, labor was a commodity that could be exchanged for money, room and board, and other goods. Shasta could understand that. The servants in the royal household had tended the palace kitchens and waited on her family for generations and were compensated for their services with lodging on the palace grounds, as well as food and an allowance for clothing and personal items. But each person was rewarded for their own labor, and no one was held responsible for anyone else’s debts.

It troubled her that Ithyrians could indenture not only themselves, but their families, to pay off obligations or obtain loans. The woman in the marketplace was working off a note that wasn’t even her own. How selfish, how unbearably wicked, for a man to live in freedom while his daughter slaved under a tyrannical master to repay his debts. And how could the laws be so careless of an indentured servant’s most basic rights? Servants were hardly criminals, yet terms of indentureship allowed the creditor unlimited power over a person for the duration of their service.

Shasta’s first real glimpse of her people had been quite a revelation. She realized just how very sheltered she had been and wondered what other terrible things were going on in Ithyria, right under her very nose, that she was completely unaware of. Shasta found herself replaying bits of conversation with Talon and her companions, those rare moments when one of them would make reference to their lives before they came to the palace. She recalled Talon saying that they had been orphaned when they were very young by a barbarian raid on their village. How could such a thing be allowed to happen? Was her father aware of any of this?

Daric had sometimes alluded to the fact that the public did not much care for King Soltran, and Shasta now thought she could understand why. The government and nobility were supposed to provide protection for their people, yet injustice seemed tolerated with little concern. Did the people of Ithyria blame her family for their misery? Was that the reason Daric was killed, the reason someone was after her now? Had someone been mistreated so badly that they were looking for revenge?

After pondering these matters anew, Shasta finally decided she had to speak to the King herself.

A few mornings later, immediately after temple prayers, she marched to her father's study and ordered the guards to announce her.

They were greeted at the door by Tarbek, the King's personal attendant. He seemed surprised to see her, but immediately inclined his head. "You seek an audience with the King, Highness?"

"I do," Shasta replied firmly.

"Wait here, please." He disappeared inside the study for a moment, then returned and held the door open for her. "You may enter."

Shasta stepped quickly inside, plopping herself down in a chair before the King's desk without waiting for an invitation. Her guardian followed silently, and Tarbek closed the door behind them.

Soltran looked up from the papers scattered across his desk. Weary lines creased his forehead. "What is it, Shasta?"

Shasta decided not to waste any time beating around the bush. She slapped down the indentureship papers the merchant had handed over in the market and demanded, "I want to know why we allow such misery and injustice in this kingdom."

Her father picked up the papers, startled. "What are these?"

"When we went to the Ardrenn markets a few days ago, a man there beat his servant woman to death with a bullwhip in the middle of the street. Father, she was pregnant." Shasta felt a rush of anger return at the memory, and her hands balled into fists against the arms of the chair. "Why are such acts unpunished in Ithyria? It's an abomination!"

King Soltran appeared startled. "I must say, Shasta, I wasn't expecting you to take such an interest in matters of state so soon." He fastened his gaze on her guardian, who stood at attention behind her chair. "Corporal Talon, I hope you haven't been trying to influence her in this."

Before Talon could reply, Shasta said, "No, Father, this isn't about Talon. It's about Ithyria. Father, are you aware that thousands of people,

right now, at this very moment, are considered nothing more than property in the hands of others? Chancellor Kumire says that men can sign over their wives, their children, even their mothers to pay off debts that they've incurred themselves. It's not right. Why can't we outlaw it? People should be responsible for their own obligations."

The King rubbed his temples wearily. "Well, I agree with you, Shasta, but it's not that simple."

"Why not?" she demanded hotly.

"Well, for one thing, Ithyrian law allows each province to govern matters of business within its own borders. That includes the manner in which debts may be incurred and repaid. Most of the provincial governments agree that indentured servitude is an important economic institution. I couldn't overrule them even if I wanted to."

Shasta frowned. "You're their King, Father. The senators have to listen to you. Tell them they're wrong. Tell them they need to protect their people. Ask them to reconsider their laws, limit indentureship to the borrowers only, prevent lenders from mistreating those in their service."

"It's not as easy as you might think," Soltran replied darkly. "Many of the senators, even the chancellors and viceroys, are extremely wealthy and powerful men. Business is good for them, and they like things the way they are."

Shasta stared. "You mean to tell me that these men are allowed to make decisions that bring suffering to thousands of people, simply because it suits their own greed? Father, that's just...why haven't you stripped them of their titles and tossed them in the nearest prisonhouse?"

Soltran gave an irritated sigh. "I can't do that."

"You most certainly can. Under Ithyrian law you have the authority to assign the viceroys to their positions and approve all the appointments they make to the senate." Shasta was confused. Her father had to know he had these powers. Why was he pretending he could do nothing?

The King simply shook his head. "Many of the provincial senators have held their positions long before I took the crown, Shasta. They were granted their appointments and titles by your grandfather, a true Ithyrian King."

Shasta gaped at him incredulously. "Father, you're every bit as much the King as Grandfather was."

"Not without your mother." Soltran smiled sadly. "I know you don't

remember, Shasta, but when Talia was alive things were different. The nobles listened to me then, because she was at my side and they trusted her. And for a while, Daric had the same effect.” They were both silent for a moment, and Shasta struggled to hold back tears at the mention of her brother. Soltran gave a heavy sigh. “I can’t control them the way that the Rane legacy does.”

“You can. You just don’t want to try,” Shasta replied sullenly.

Her father’s brows drew together and Shasta became aware of Talon’s reproving gaze burning into her back. She knew she had been disrespectful, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. “You know what, Father? If you don’t believe you deserve to wear that crown, no one else will either. From now on I want to join the conferences with the provincial viceroys. If it’s Rane blood you need to feel like you’re in charge, then you need me there.”

“You’re far too young.”

“Daric and I were the same age, and you let him sit in on the conferences,” Shasta pointed out flatly. “Someone needs to get these greedy, pigheaded men under control, and if you’re not going to do it, then I’ll eventually have to.” She reached across the desk to take one of his hands. “Please, Father. Let me do this. For Mother, and Daric, and the people of Ithyria who need us.”

After another moment the King nodded reluctantly. “Very well, Shasta. But I expect you to show those men the respect they deserve. Remember that you are scarcely more than a child among seasoned government authorities.” He smiled wistfully. “Perhaps the experience will allow you to succeed where your father has failed.”

Shasta bit her lip, irked by his defeated attitude, but she had said enough. Rising to her feet, she gave him a formal curtsy. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The King escorted Shasta and her guardian to the study door and dismissed her with a kiss on the forehead. Tarbek was waiting outside and retreated back into the study with his master. As the door closed behind them, Shasta blew out a puff of air and met Talon’s watchful gaze.

“I don’t understand him sometimes,” she said. “He just... gives up, so easily.”

When Talon remained silent, Shasta moved grumpily down the hall toward her own chambers. “No wonder the nobles have overrun this country with their selfishness. Well, they’re not going to walk all over

me.” Talon made a funny noise, and she looked up at him, demanding, “What?”

His eyes twinkled. “I was just thinking that the poor viceroys have no idea what they’re about to get into.”

“Well, they’ve had it their way far too long.” Shasta stopped in front of her chamber door and stepped back so he could open it for her. “If it’s a Rane they want on the throne, they’re going to get their wish. And when I rule this kingdom, Talon, things are going to change.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

One late winter morning in the Twelfthmoon, Talon awoke just as the first rays of dawn crept across the carpeted floor of the Princess's chambers. She yawned and stretched a little, then swung her legs over the edge of the cot and sat up. The movement caused a peculiar sensation that made her jump up and turn to look down at her bed in dismay. Blood had formed a spreading scarlet stain on the sheets where she had been lying. Talon blushed furiously, grateful that the Princess was still sound asleep.

Quickly and quietly, Talon stripped the sheet from the cot and went to her chest by the window where she removed a clean pair of undergarments and clean breeches. She ducked into the privy chamber and closed the door behind her gently so the noise would not wake Shasta, then grabbed one of the heavy upholstered dressing chairs and slid it in front of the door to prevent any accidental interruption. This was one of the most difficult parts of keeping her secret: the regular, inconvenient reminder that she was not the man she pretended to be.

She removed her soiled clothes and padded the inside of the clean undergarments with a roll of gauze from the basket beneath the washstand before redressing. She was lucky that her young charge was also female and suffered the same inconvenience with each new moon. The supplies she needed to care for her problem were within easy reach.

Talon rolled her garments into the sheet, tucked the bundle under one arm, and slid the chair away from the door. She peeked cautiously

out of the privy chamber to be sure Shasta was still sleeping and carried the bundle to the door.

She had barely touched the latch when it swung open and Erinda greeted her cheerfully. The maid eyed the sheet-wrapped bundle in Talon's hands and gave a knowing grin. "Is that for me?" she asked, her voice a polite whisper so as not to awaken the Princess.

Erinda was the fourth—and final—person who'd been brought in on Talon's well-guarded secret. Nurse had quickly realized that Talon was going to need some special assistance to keep from being found out, and the buxom chambermaid was the logical choice. She was a full winter older than Talon and had already been assigned to care for the needs of Lyris, Bria, and the Princess. Erinda's family had been serving the royal family of Ithyria for four generations and she had proven herself to be a trustworthy girl, one they could count on to keep quiet.

The maid took the sheets and clothes and winked coquettishly. "I'll bring you fresh gauze and linen before the Princess wakes," she promised and darted off down the corridor.

Talon watched her retreating back with confusion. She could have sworn Erinda had caressed her hands as she took the bundle, deliberately prolonging the contact between them. Disconcerted, she lingered at the door to ensure the maid could enter silently when she returned. Shasta was still fast asleep and Talon was anxious to replace the gauze in the basket and make her bed up again so nothing would arouse suspicion. When Erinda returned, she handed the gauze to Talon and moved quickly around the cot tucking the sheet into place. The position emphasized her impressive cleavage and it seemed to Talon that she was leaning a little farther forward than necessary. When Erinda caught her watching, she gave a sultry smile. Startled, Talon looked away and fiddled with the gauze in the basket.

Erinda had always been flirtatious with her, even knowing full well that Talon was not what she seemed. At first Talon was convinced that the warm glances meant nothing and the way Erinda brushed just a little too closely against her when they passed was just playful teasing. But now Talon began to wonder if she'd been wrong.

She followed the maid into the corridor and closed the door behind them. "What's going on?" she asked. "You've been acting strangely for nearly a half-moon."

Erinda lowered her eyes, her long, thick lashes casting shadows on her cheeks. "It's not obvious? I like you, Corporal."

Talon lifted an eyebrow. "I think you're forgetting something about me that's rather important."

"I haven't forgotten a thing." Erinda's pouty, heart-shaped mouth curved upward, almost shyly, and she used one finger to trace an invisible pattern on the shoulder of Talon's shirt. "I know what you are. It's part of the reason I like you so much."

"What are you talking about?"

The chambermaid's arms snaked around Talon's neck. "I'm not suggesting that we start anything serious. Goddess knows I'm not that kind of girl." Her face was only a fingerbreadth from Talon's, her warm breath fanning Talon's lips. "All I'm saying is, it can get terribly lonely around here. Sometimes a person really just needs someone to hold them, you know...to feel close to."

Talon felt her own breath quicken as she allowed Erinda to pull her head down slowly. She knew she should stop this, but there was a part of her that wanted to know what it would feel like. She remembered her kiss with the redheaded dancing girl the night she received her commission, and the warm, heady feeling that spread through her body at that gentle contact.

She was not disappointed, though Erinda's touch was softer and less purposeful than the dancer's had been. Talon still found herself aroused by the other woman's kiss, the way Erinda's sensual lips moved slightly against her own, the light salty taste of her mouth. But Talon could not allow herself to give in completely, and after a moment she pulled back.

"Erinda, we can't do this. I'm not..."

Erinda smiled, trailing a finger down Talon's jaw. "Shh. The idea takes time to get used to, I know."

"We're both women."

"That's the way I like it," the maid replied airily. "But you're not ready yet. I understand that. Just...know that the offer is open, and I'll be here." She planted a small kiss on Talon's cheek and sauntered away.

Stunned, Talon stood outside the door of the Princess's chambers for several minutes, her mind racing. Servant girls in the palace often

developed crushes on her and followed her around with batting lashes and lovelorn sighs. She was used to it by now. But there was one enormous difference between those girls and Erinda—Erinda *knew*.

She'd heard of women like Erinda before, who preferred the intimate company of other women rather than that of men. Talon recalled one of her troupe's 'special' clients, a wealthy spinster heiress who used to pay the showmaster on a regular basis for a few hours at a time with one of the dancing girls. But she'd never imagined she might one day encounter such a person.

Talon was surprised to realize just how right it felt to be touched and kissed by a woman, when those same actions felt uncomfortable and bizarre with a man. *Have I been impersonating a man so long, she wondered, that somehow I've become one, on the inside?* But that didn't make sense either, because Erinda was certainly not masculine in the slightest, yet she still professed attraction to women.

"Talon?" The Princess's voice, muffled by the chamber door, reached her ears, and guiltily she realized that while she'd been standing in the corridor lost in thought, Shasta had awakened and was probably wondering where she'd gone.

"I'm here, Princess." Talon stepped into the room.

Shasta tilted her head curiously. "What were you doing out there?"

"Nothing." Talon shrugged and changed the subject. "You should hurry and get dressed. There's snow on the ground, so you'll want to wear something warm for prayers at the temple."



When Shasta emerged from her morning toilet, Lyris and Bria were already waiting in her sitting room. Talon had donned his everyday military uniform and sword belt and a heavy scarlet cape that glided by his heels as he walked. Lyris and Bria helped the Princess with her own winter cloak, made of soft sapphire blue wool and lined with white fur. She picked up the matching muff, which hung from a cord around her neck, to keep her hands warm.

Together they made their way across the snowy courtyard. Though Shasta and her two companions had warm leather boots designed for

such weather, they still slipped from time to time and caught hold of Talon for balance. The castle grounds appeared strangely beautiful and ghostlike under the thick blanket of ice, and Shasta's breath formed clouds of mist in the cold air.

"I love winter," she declared happily, surveying the sparkling icicles dangling from bare tree branches. Ahead of her lay a smooth, glittering expanse of unbroken snow that softened every angle and piled up on the occasional fencepost or barrel. "It's so pretty and clean."

"But it's eerie, too," Lyris pointed out. "It's so quiet. Like everything is sleeping."

"I could wake it up." Shasta grinned and threw her arms out, giving a whoop that echoed against the stone of the nearby buildings. Not caring who might have heard, she spun around in a circle, but her foot hit a patch of ice and she stumbled.

"Careful," Talon warned with a chuckle, catching her against his chest before she could fall flat on her face. "Really, Highness, I don't think your father would approve."

Shasta stuck her tongue out at him, ignoring the people nearby who had paused to see what the commotion was about.

"We're going to be late," Lyris said.

Bria elbowed her sister in the ribs. "Yes, and you wouldn't want the high priestess to see you come in after prayers had begun, would you?"

"It's disrespectful to the Goddess!"

Shasta giggled at the look of annoyance on Lyris's face. The elder Outlander sister took worship far too seriously.

Bria paid her no mind, rushing ahead and calling, "Come on, then, I'll race you."

"I'll race you both," Shasta interjected. She gathered her skirts up in one hand and took off running with Lyris and Talon close behind.

When they reached the temple, the three young women piled onto the steps in a tangle of cloaks and skirts and snow. Talon came jogging up to them and stood there shaking his head as other temple patrons stepped around the giggling girls on the steps to get inside.

After a moment, both Lyris and Bria had caught their breath, but Shasta was still wheezing. In fact, it was getting harder to breathe, and she coughed as her lungs began to burn for lack of oxygen. Her

windpipe was closing. She put her hands to her throat. In a heartbeat Talon was at her side, shooing his sisters away and calling for a healer. She looked up at him, frightened.

“I can’t...” She tried to get the words out but she didn’t have enough air.

“Don’t try to talk, Princess. Just relax. Relax and concentrate on breathing.”

But she couldn’t. Her lungs gasped and spasmed as if they were swollen shut, and the small amount of icy air that she could get into them stabbed like needles. Shasta grabbed the wool of her guardian’s jacket and closed her eyes. Her entire body heaved with the effort it took to inhale. Talon moved behind her so that she was nestled between his legs, her back pressed up against him. He put his arms around her, one hand on her stomach and the other against her upper chest.

“Like this, Princess.” He inhaled and exhaled, his chest rising and falling behind her. “Don’t think, just breathe with me. In. Out. Breathe with me.” He spoke quietly into her ear, his deep tones nearly hypnotic. Shasta coughed, trying to match his rhythm, deep and steady against her back.

People came streaming out of the temple to see what the matter was. Several of them also started shouting for the healer and took off running toward the palace. The high priestess moved through the crowd, sinking beside them to place a warm hand on Shasta’s forehead. Steam from her breath rose through her white veils as she began to chant a soft prayer.

The even rhythm of Talon’s breathing blended with that of the priestess’s chant and became the only thing Shasta could sense clearly. She felt dizzy and her ears were ringing so loudly that she could scarcely hear; both Talon and the high priestess sounded like they were speaking from a great distance away. Her hands balled into fists, her strength sapped by each breath until she wasn’t sure she could lift her chest anymore.

Suddenly a pungent smell tingled at her nose and mouth, forcing the swelling in her throat and lungs to recoil. A slow, gradual release began to expand through her body, and she gulped gratefully at the air, not caring how cold it was. She was incredibly tired, with barely enough energy to do more than pant weakly in Talon’s arms, but she opened her eyes to reassure him that she was all right.

“Shasta!” The first face that came into focus belonged to her father as he scooped her up and held her tightly. He was breathing hard himself, and Shasta wondered vaguely if he had run the entire way across the temple grounds.

“I’m all right, Father,” she insisted, patting his concerned face.

“The Princess should recover in a matter of minutes, Majesty,” said the old healer standing at the King’s elbow, “though it is my recommendation that she receive plenty of bed rest today. Fighting for breath has exhausted her.”

“You have my thanks, Master Healer.” The King addressed the high priestess. “My apologies, Your Grace, but my daughter and I will be unable to attend temple this morning.”

The veiled woman bowed, her long gold earrings tinkling. “The Goddess understands, Majesty. The Daughters of Ithyris will keep Princess Shasta in our prayers today.”



The King carried Shasta back to the palace himself, his heavy boots crunching briskly through the snow. He didn’t put her down until they had reached her chambers, where he gently laid her on the bed. Nurse was waiting and applied a warm towel to Shasta’s forehead before untying her cloak and removing her boots. Talon followed them as silently as a shadow, closing the chamber door. Three pairs of worried eyes focused on Shasta, and she shifted uncomfortably.

“Really, Nurse, there’s no need for such a fuss,” Shasta protested as the old woman helped her out of her snow-soaked outer clothing. “I’m fine now.”

“The healer has said that you need bed rest, and bed rest you will have,” her father grunted from her bedside. He backed up a step to stand next to Talon. “What happened?” His voice was quiet, but Shasta could still hear every word.

“She...the Princess was running, Your Majesty.”

“Why was the Princess running?”

Talon rubbed the back of his neck. “She was racing Lyris and Bria to the temple.”

The King rolled his eyes. “Of course she was. Let me guess who came up with that brilliant idea.”

Talon did not reply, and Shasta felt bad for him. It had actually been Bria who first mentioned a race, but she didn't want her companion to be blamed, and she knew Talon did not want to get his sister into trouble. "It was my idea, Father," she volunteered brightly.

The King sighed heavily. "Shasta, how many times do I have to tell you? You know your body cannot handle such strenuous exercise, especially not out in the cold air. What would you have done if the healer had not arrived in time?"

"Died, I guess."

This flippancy did not amuse the King. In a frustrated tone, he said, "You say you want to be my successor, that you are capable of ruling when I am gone without the help of your husband, but you keep doing irresponsible, childish things. It makes me doubt very much that you will even live to see your coronation."

Stung, Shasta dropped her eyes. Her father rarely became so upset with her, and she knew in her heart that he was probably right. Her life was tied to so many other people, people she didn't even know who would be affected terribly if something happened to her.

"There's only so much I can do to protect you," the King added, then eyed Talon. "And as for you, Corporal, you've been told repeatedly that the Princess's health is delicate. You should have stopped her."

Talon's face flinched, but he nodded. "Yes, Majesty. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't." King Soltran turned back to his daughter. "And you, young lady, are going to spend the rest of the day in bed, on the healer's orders."

Shasta gaped. "But, Father, I feel fine now."

"You're not moving from that bed," he declared stubbornly and cast a pointed look across the room to Nurse.

With that, he clapped Talon on the shoulder and left the chamber.

"What am I supposed to do all day?" Shasta complained.

"You could try resting," Talon offered dryly, and she glared at him. He put his hands up in a mock gesture of surrender. "Hey, don't blame this on me. I tried to tell you the King wouldn't approve."

"I know. I'm sorry he scolded you. It wasn't your fault." She looked around the room in annoyance. "But really, how am I supposed to pass the time? I'm not sleepy."

"Perhaps you should practice your needlepoint." Nurse brought over a sewing basket and set it on the bed next to Shasta.

"I hate embroidery."

"Sixteen winters old and you haven't yet completed a single sampler worth mentioning. When I was your age, girl, I had embroidered entire tapestries. Several of them." She pulled out the wooden hoop that held an unfinished stitching sampler and clucked her tongue over the uneven, knotty threads scattered carelessly across the surface of the linen. Thrusting it at Shasta, she said, "Here. Perhaps a day in bed will do you good in more ways than one."

"Wonderful," Shasta mumbled as her tormentor bustled from the room. To Talon, she said, "I suppose you're going to study all day since we're stuck here."

"Probably. Captain Vaughn's been working with me on the topography of the Ithyrian provinces."

"Boring." Shasta scrunched her nose in distaste. She looked down at the hoop in her lap and huffed. "There's no way I can spend all day making the same tiny stitches over and over. I'm going to go crazy."

"Maybe I could read to you."

Shasta met his eyes. "Would you?"

"Sure." Talon went to the bookshelf, but before he'd selected a story to read there came a light rap at the door and a nasal masculine voice called, "Princess Shasta?"

"Chancellor Kumire." Shasta feigned a delighted smile as the chancellor entered and waved a bouquet of flowers at her.

"I heard you were ill," he said, oozing concern. "I brought something for you."

"They're lovely," she replied politely.

"Difficult to find this time of winter," Kumire pointed out proudly. "Very expensive to obtain."

Shasta made another polite sound and asked, "Talon, do you think you could—"

"Of course, Princess." Her guardian took the bouquet from Kumire and laid it on a low table.

"I was so very worried when I heard of your...episode...this morning," Kumire took her hand. His fingers were cold and rather clammy. "I cannot express what a relief it is that you are all right."

"Thank you, Chancellor." Shasta cringed as Kumire's lips brushed the back of her hand. Fighting the urge to wipe his unwanted touch away on the bedquilt, she picked up the sampler and began toying with several knots.

Kumire watched her for a few awkward seconds, obviously unwilling to leave. Finally, she looked up. “Was that all, Chancellor?”

“Uh...well...”

Shasta gave a delicate yawn. “Oh, my, I’m just so tired,” she said sweetly. “Thank you so much for dropping by, Chancellor, and for the lovely flowers. If you don’t mind, I think I’m going to take a bit of a nap and rebuild my strength.”

Kumire’s face fell, but he nodded reluctantly. “Of course, Your Highness. Sleep well.” With a little bow and a disdainful sniff at Talon, he left.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Shasta burst out laughing. “Ugh. He’s so boring!”

“He hopes to marry you, you know.”

“I’d sooner take the vows of a priestess and never marry at all than be stuck with somebody like him for the rest of my life.” Shasta gave a dramatic shudder. There was another knock at the door, and she groaned. “Don’t tell me he’s back...”

But these visitors were far more welcome. Lyris and Bria pushed a large harp into the room, Lyris announcing, “We thought we might come cheer you up.”

Shasta clapped her hands. “You’ll play for me?”

“Yes, and Bria’s going to sing.”

Bria gave a little curtsy. “We’ll make you forget all about being stuck inside all day.”

“I haven’t heard the two of you play together in a long time,” Talon said, sounding pleased.

Bria jabbed a finger in her brother’s ribs playfully. “Maybe when I’m done singing you should do a few acrobatic routines for her.”

Talon made a face. “I don’t think so.” But he did help Lyris move the harp in front of the Shasta’s bed, then drew a chair alongside and sat to listen.

Lyris ran her fingers lightly over the harp strings and tuned a few that were in need of it. She struck a chord, delicate and full, and with a nod to Bria, began to play.

Shasta was familiar with the sisters’ musical talents from their lessons together. The court considered instruction in music an important part of a well-bred woman’s education. Lyris and Bria were, of course, much more advanced than she was. They had relied upon music for survival from a very young age, so their skills were finely developed

while Shasta still struggled with many technicalities. But she enjoyed their lessons. When she sang with them it felt like she had become a part of something beautiful and much larger than herself.

Shasta knew some of the melodies her companions played for her now, and so she sang along when she knew the words. From time to time she glanced over at Talon. She couldn't help noticing the pride glowing in his face as he watched his sisters, and it filled her with the familiar, bittersweet longing that often struck when she spent time with all three siblings together.

It was touching to see how deeply Talon cared for his sisters. Their traumatic childhood had obviously forged a tight bond between them. For a long time, the girls had been Talon's sole reason for living. He was their protector and caretaker, a father figure who had looked out for them since they were children. It always made Shasta a little envious. Even though the three treated her like an addition to their little family, she could not be part of the history they shared.

Recently Shasta found herself wondering more and more about the lives of her guardian and companions before they had come to live at the palace. None of them liked to talk about it. She knew they had been beaten and had not always had enough to eat. Shasta could not imagine being completely at the mercy of another person; the nearest she could come was remembering how it felt to be attacked in her privy chamber. She thought of the man with the bullwhip at the market. Had someone beaten Talon like that? She looked over at her guardian, who appeared so strong and capable in his neat military uniform, and tried to picture him ragged and half starved like the pregnant servant woman had been, suffering beneath a brutal whip. The sweet, mournful sound of Bria's voice uplifted in an aria somehow made this image even more vivid, and Shasta could imagine her guardian's pain when his sisters were mistreated.

Talon must have sensed her eyes on him, because he turned to look at her and his eyes widened. "Your Highness, are you crying?"

"Oh." Shasta sniffled. "The music was so sad, I guess it just made me start thinking of sad things."

Bria drew a handkerchief from her bodice and handed it to Shasta. "We didn't mean to make you cry," she said as Shasta dabbed her eyes.

"No, it was beautiful. Your voice, and the harp, they're just too beautiful for words." Shasta smiled at her young ladies-in-waiting.

“Please, will you sing another for me? Perhaps something happy this time.”

The hours passed surprisingly quickly, and the handkerchief lay forgotten in her hands as Lyris and Bria exhausted their repertoire. Afterward, they shared lunch with Shasta and they all chatted about the most recent court fashion trends—Shasta despised the extremely pointy-toed shoes that the noblewomen were wearing with increasing regularity—and palace gossip, like the rumor that Countess Valenne of Daiban province was caught up in a scandalous romance with her husband’s coachman.

When Nurse interrupted to insist that the Princess’s companions attend at least a few lessons that day, Talon made good on his promise, reading from a book of fairy tales for the next few hours while Shasta did her best to concentrate on the embroidery sampler in her lap. It was time for dinner before she even realized the day had passed, and after they’d dined and the servants had cleared the plates, she stretched and grinned at her guardian.

“I can’t wait to get out of this bed tomorrow. You and I are going to visit the servants’ stables the minute lessons are over. It’s been days since our last practice.”

Talon shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Princess. Maybe we shouldn’t fence together in secret anymore. After what happened today—”

“Today was my fault,” Shasta interrupted impatiently. “I got careless. But our fencing practice is different. You always make me stop before I’m even close to having an attack like the one this morning.”

“I know, but”—worry lines appeared across his forehead—“the cold weather makes it harder on your breathing. It would only take one mistake. One time that we don’t stop soon enough.”

She waved a hand dismissively, but he caught it in his own and met her eyes, and suddenly she realized how very serious he was. “You didn’t see yourself this morning, before the healer came. You were turning blue, Highness. I really thought...” His voice was unusually rough. “You could have died, right there in my arms. You almost did.”

Shasta was startled by the intensity in her guardian’s face. If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought Talon was close to tears. He cleared his throat and released her hand, moving to the window to remove his sword belt and jacket. With his back to her, he spoke a little more firmly. “I think we should stop fencing together, at least until the

weather changes. We'll both get plenty of practice in lessons with the captain, and you'll be in the palace, near the infirmary, in case anything happens."

"Talon?" Shasta waited for him to turn and look at her. "I'm sorry for scaring you today. We won't practice out there anymore. For the next few moons, anyway."

The genuine relief in his dark eyes was worth the sacrifice, though he only replied with a quiet, "Thank you."

Talon truly cares for me, Shasta realized with mild surprise, *just like he does for Lyris and Bria*. At that moment she knew she wouldn't feel left out of their little circle any longer. She might not be a part of Talon's family, but she still had a bond with him that not even his sisters shared. The Princess found she was quite content with that.

CHAPTER NINE

The day of Shasta's seventeenth birthday celebration started off badly, with a heated argument between the Princess and her guardian. It began when Shasta emerged from her privy chamber in the gown she was to wear for the traditional birthday banquet later in the day. The palace seamstress wanted to do a few last-minute alterations before the celebration began.

Talon's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline when he caught sight of her. "What in the name of the Goddess is that?" he demanded, eyeing the daringly low neckline and tight bodice that was designed to push the Princess's feminine assets up into a dazzling display.

Shasta stuck her tongue out at him. "It's the latest court fashion, and now that I've reached seventeen, I'm finally allowed to wear it." She turned slightly so the seamstress could mark a hemline.

"You can't go out in public like that," Talon protested.

"It's my birthday. I'll wear what I want." Shasta studied herself in the mirror. The blue feather necklace fell at just the right place between her breasts, drawing attention to the alluring valley between them, and the gown made her feel very pretty and grown up, far older than her seventeen winters. But Talon seemed unimpressed, glaring darkly at her reflection in the mirror.

"You look like a courtesan," he said.

Shasta stiffened indignantly. "You forget your place, Talon. I'm the Crown Princess of Ithyria. You are my servant. I did not ask for your opinion, and I don't care what you think."

"Well then, as your *servant*," he replied testily, "I don't want to have to follow you around all night rescuing you from the men who are going

to be drooling all over that gown of yours, thinking you're wearing it to tease them. You don't understand how men think, Highness. They'll see you in that and, Princess of Ithyria or not, all decency and honor will be forgotten."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment." She lifted an arm so the seamstress could adjust her sleeve. "I'm a woman now, Talon, and you're just going to have to get used to it."

"There's a difference between looking like a woman and looking like a harlot."

Shasta's mouth dropped open. "How dare you!" she sputtered furiously. "You know what, Talon? I don't even want you at the celebration tonight if you're going to treat me with such disrespect. My birthday is the one day that Father gives you time off. Take it, because I don't want to see your face the rest of the night."

"Highness—"

"Not another word," she spat. "Your free time begins now. Get out."

"Highness, I—"

"Out!" Shasta shrieked, pointing at the door.

For a long, tense moment they stared at one another. Her guardian's eyes narrowed, then he snapped, "Fine," and stalked out, slamming the chamber door heavily behind him.

Shasta gazed at herself in the mirror, biting her lip with rage. Who did he think he was, anyway? He'd called her a harlot. For such an offense she really should have him tossed in the guard prisonhouse for a moon. *I don't care what he says*, she told herself firmly, admiring her figure in the glass. *I feel beautiful*.

A few moments later, Captain Vaughn entered the chamber, unable to fully conceal his amusement. After exchanging polite greetings, he said, "Talon says you kicked him out."

Shasta lifted her chin defiantly. "I did."

"Then I guess it will be my duty to defend your honor from all the men who fall in love with you tonight," he quipped, taking Shasta's hand and pressing it to his lips. "Truly, you do look lovely."

"You should tell Talon that," she retorted with frustration.

"I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Vaughn assured her with a smile.

"I don't care what he intended." Shasta yelped as the seamstress

tightened something at the back of the gown, making a pin jab. "His opinion means nothing to me."

She didn't want to think about Talon for the rest of the night. She was not going to let him ruin the fun of the celebration for her.



Erinda found Talon sitting on a bench in the royal gardens, whittling away at a small stick with the knife from her belt. It was a sunny day in early spring, and the snow had all but melted away entirely, leaving dark puddles here and there on the stones of the path. A few of the garden blossoms were beginning to open, and a gentle breeze ruffled Talon's dark hair as she chipped away at the stick in her fingers.

"Corporal Talon, I'm surprised to see you here." Erinda sat down next to her, close enough that her thigh pressed into Talon's suggestively. "What's wrong? You look like you just swallowed a mouthful of briars."

Talon hacked a little more aggressively at the stick in her hand. "The Princess has decided she doesn't want my company today, and since the King has already given me the day off there isn't much I can do about it."

Erinda looked surprised. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," Talon growled.

"She wouldn't have kicked you out over nothing. You must have said something to make her angry."

"I told her she looked like a harlot."

Erinda clapped a hand over her mouth. "You didn't."

"I did. You should see the gown she's planning on wearing tonight."

"I've seen it." Erinda laughed. "I just can't believe you'd say something like that. It's a wonder she didn't order you thrown in prison."

"I wouldn't care if she did," Talon responded hotly, flicking a chip of wood with her knife. "She looks ridiculous."

"You mean she looks like a ripe, sensual, mature young woman and you don't like it." Erinda gave a knowing grin. "Maybe you're jealous."

"I most certainly am not."

“Lyris is wearing the same style tonight. You’ve already seen her gown and I don’t recall you getting this upset about it.”

“That’s different. Lyris—”

“Lyris is the same age as the Princess, and she has an even more developed figure.”

“But Lyris isn’t...” Talon ran a hand through her hair, the knife recklessly dangling from her fingers. “Lyris knows what she’s doing. She carries herself differently than the Princess. Even in a dress like that no one will dare to touch her. You know what I’m talking about. She gives off that unapproachable aura. But Shasta is too naïve for her own good.” Talon gave a grunt of irritation. “Every man in the palace is going to be chasing after her tonight. Chancellor Kumire...everyone.”

“Sounds like jealousy to me.”

“It’s not.” Talon scuffed the toe of her boot in the dirt.

“Whatever you say.” With her index finger, Erinda delicately flicked Talon’s earlobe and leaned forward, her warm breath tickling Talon’s neck. “Just remember, if you need someone to help you relieve the tension, I’ll be waiting for you.”

Talon stared at her, too startled to speak, and the buxom girl winked and stood up. “I have to get back to the kitchens. It’s going to be chaos around here all day with last-minute preparations. Enjoy your day off.” She sashayed away down the garden path, her shapely behind swaying from side to side.

Talon felt her cheeks burning and hacked at the stick in her hand with renewed vigor. “Jealous. Ha. Not a chance.”

But the garden was empty, and there was no one to hear her stubborn assertion but the cool spring wind and the little birds flitting through the trees above.



That evening at the celebration banquet, with her father on one side and Captain Vaughn on the other, Shasta reflected that Talon had been right, in his way. Attention had been lavished on her all evening. Every man she passed, from the provincial viceroys to the serving boy who poured her wine, had made a show of admiring her beauty. She couldn’t understand why Talon had been so worried, though. No one had treated her with anything less than complete respect and politeness. She was

having a wonderful time and was almost sorry her guardian wasn't there to see it. The serving boy kept refilling her wineglass, and although Shasta didn't enjoy the light-headed, dizzy feeling of tipsiness, she'd lost track of how much she was drinking. It was not until the banquet had ended and the guests were dismissed to wander about the gardens for the reception that she rose to her feet and realized just how much the wine had gone to her head.

"Whoa, careful now, Highness." Captain Vaughn caught her arm as she swayed. "Perhaps you should retire to your room for the night?"

Shasta shook her head, unwilling to give up the adoration and fun of the evening so soon. "Thank you, Captain, but I'm fine."

"Your Highness, may I escort you to the reception?" Chancellor Kumire stood at her side, offering his elbow. Shasta hesitated, but in her compromised state, she could not think of an appropriate refusal. Reluctantly she took his arm and allowed him to lead her toward the garden entrance, Captain Vaughn following behind.

In the gardens, Shasta found herself clinging to the chancellor's arm more for balance than because she wanted to. He smiled down at her as they made their way to the garden square, a large area covered by close-set paving stones with an enormous fountain shaped in the likeness of a shapely, nearly nude peasant girl pouring water from a jar into the basin below. The court musicians were positioned around the base of the fountain, and the soft sounds of water splashing mingled with the music of their stringed instruments and the chatter of a hundred subdued voices until all the sounds blurred together in Shasta's head.

Kumire led her to one of the stone benches, where she could watch the musicians play, and offered a low bow. "May I get Your Highness something to drink?"

Shasta requested some juice, hoping it might help clear her head. "I've had enough wine for one night."

A smile spread across his face. "Of course, Highness. I will be right back."

Standing at her shoulder, Captain Vaughn murmured, "Princess, you don't seem well. Are you sure you don't want to—"

She cut him off. "I'm fine, Captain. I want to enjoy my party."

She heard his resigned sigh as the chancellor returned with a glass filled with red liquid. Ignoring the Captain's consternation, she took the glass and inhaled the fruity aroma of its contents.

“It smells delicious,” she remarked. “What is it?”

“A blend of juices, I believe, that the cook created especially for the reception. She said it’s mostly apple juice, with some other berry flavors.”

Something about the chancellor’s smile and fawning attentions made Captain Vaughn suspicious, but just as he was about to ask Kumire for a sample of the juice, he was interrupted by a young lieutenant who came up to exchange pleasantries. As tedious as these social functions were, they mattered to the junior officers, providing an opportunity to make a good impression.

When the lieutenant offered a final salute and excused himself, Captain Vaughn turned and discovered to his dismay that the Princess and the chancellor were nowhere to be seen. Cursing, he made his way through the crowd to look for them. He was supposed to fulfill Talon’s duties that night and he’d already managed to compromise the guardian’s primary rule: never let Shasta out of sight.



“Chancellor, where are we going?” Shasta giggled as she tripped a little over her own feet. She gripped Kumire’s arm to avoid falling over. “I feel...so strange...”

“It’s just the wine, Highness,” Kumire assured her with a silky smile. Taking the empty glass from her, he tossed it away into the bushes behind them. “You look so beautiful tonight. Truly a vision.” He grasped both of her hands, bringing them to his lips.

Shasta withdrew from him. “Thank you, Chancellor. Don’t you think we should go back to the party?”

“Not yet. I’ve been waiting all night for the chance to steal you away from that annoying captain of the guard.”

His tone made Shasta uneasy and she turned to go, but in the dark, with her impaired senses, she wasn’t sure which way the party was. Kumire came up behind her, put his hands at her waist, and pressed his lips to her neck. Shasta shuddered with disgust, but before she could catch her balance to walk away, he spun her around to face him.

“Such a pretty girl,” he said, placing one hand against her cheek and leaning forward.

Shasta pushed against his chest and turned her face away, though she was not strong enough to break his grasp. “Chancellor, please.”

He took her chin in his fingers and compelled her to face him once more. “You should relax, Princess. I’m not going to hurt you. I just want you to give me a kiss.”

“No, I don’t want—”

“You’ll like it, you’ll see.” He lowered his head, and she put a hand up, this time forcibly pushing his face away. His expression darkened. “What’s the matter? You think you’re too good for me?”

“No, I just...” Shasta’s head was spinning, and as he again attempted to duck toward her lips, she struggled more violently in his arms. “I mean it, I don’t want this. Stop it!”

She couldn’t get away from him, and her struggling was to no avail. Kumire was much stronger than she was and the wine had overwhelmed her senses so that she could not think of how to defend herself. His lips were only a hairbreadth from hers when suddenly his head snapped back and his grip on her was abruptly torn away.

Shasta stumbled back a few steps and put a hand to her aching head. When she looked up, she could just make out with her wine-blurred vision the tall, dark form of her guardian holding the chancellor by his hair and with one arm twisted behind his back.

“Talon,” she hiccupped with relief. Her legs would not hold her up anymore and she dropped in a heap of silks to the ground. She moaned as a wave of nausea threatened to empty her stomach into the nearby bushes.

Captain Vaughn came charging toward them, alarmed by the commotion. He took one look at Shasta retching on the ground and tapped Talon on the shoulder.

“I can take over from here. Get Princess Shasta back to her rooms. There’s no need to make a scene.”

For a moment it seemed as if Talon was going to break the chancellor’s arm, he looked so angry. But he lowered his eyes to Shasta and said, “Of course.”

Captain Vaughn immediately seized the chancellor firmly by the shoulder and Talon released his hold. But he was not quite done. Loudly enough for Shasta to hear, he snarled in Kumire’s ear, “You touch her again, and I will kill you.”

Vaughn gave Kumire a shake and added, “The King will hear all about this.”

For a moment Talon gleefully envisioned shoving her sword into Kumire’s belly, but this was not the time. Instead, she bent down and

put Shasta's arms around her neck, scooping her up and marveling at how light she was. It was so easy to forget what a small girl the Princess actually was.

Shasta buried her face in the front of Talon's jacket. "Mmm. You smell nice," she mumbled, nuzzling Talon's neck.

Talon stiffened a little as the Princess's lips brushed her skin, sending a strange shiver down her spine. She patted Shasta awkwardly on the back. "Let's get you into bed," she said quietly, deliberately choosing a path through the garden that would keep them out of sight of the party.

"Not tired," the Princess protested, but Talon paid no attention and carried her back into the palace and up to her rooms.

There, she helped her young charge directly into the privy chamber and held her voluminous skirts out of the way as the Princess threw up into a chamber pot. The maids were all working at the party and Nurse had long since gone to bed, so without waiting for help Talon unbuttoned the back of Shasta's dress, lifting it over her shoulders. Shasta gave a weak murmur of protest.

"I'm sorry, Princess, but we need to get you out of these clothes. I promise to be quick." Talon lifted the Princess's arms up, tugging the gown over her head and dropping it on the floor. Shasta was left wearing only her linen shift, and Talon took the dressing robe from a hook nearby. She wrapped the robe around Shasta's shoulders and guided the Princess to the bed, helping her beneath the covers.

Tucked in, Shasta looked up at Talon with apologetic, bleary eyes. "I feel awful," she groaned.

"I'm going to make you some tea to help calm your stomach." Talon moved briskly around the room, filling the teakettle from the pitcher on the table and swinging it out on an iron hook over the fireplace to boil.

"Talon, I'm sorry..."

"Shh, Princess. Just rest."

"No, I mean it." Shasta struggled onto one elbow. "I shouldn't have yelled at you the way I did this morning. You were right. And now I'm sick and you're being so nice..."

"It's my job to be nice," Talon replied lightly, but seeing the hurt in Shasta's face she sighed. "I'm just glad you're all right."

"Me too."

Shasta was quiet as Talon measured the tea leaves into a silver

strainer and chose one of the china teacups from the sitting-room cabinet. After pouring steaming water into the cup, she carried it to Shasta's bed, swirling the strainer to darken the tea.

"Here you go. This should help."

Murmuring her thanks, Shasta took the cup from her hands and sipped at it. She still looked as pale as milk.

Talon smiled down at her, then moved a few paces away from the bed to remove her sword and uniform jacket. Faint music drifted up through the window. It would still be several hours before the celebration below would wind down, but the Princess was in no shape to return to the party. It was past their usual bedtime anyway. They might as well get undressed and go to sleep.

Talon shed her boots and laid them neatly against the wall, then blew out the two sitting-room lamps. This left only the lamp on the Princess's bedside table, which Shasta always extinguished herself when she was ready.

Talon slid her legs under the blankets of her cot and lay down. She tucked one arm behind her head and closed her eyes. But Shasta was evidently not ready to sleep yet, and her voice piped up from the bed.

"Have you ever kissed anyone?"

Talon's eyes flew open again. "What?"

Shasta peered down at her over the edge of the bed. "Have you ever kissed a girl before?"

Talon sat up. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Well...yeah, I guess." Technically the girls had kissed her, but she was pretty sure it didn't matter.

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"How many girls have you kissed?"

Talon's breath seemed trapped in her chest. "It's really none of your business."

"Oh, come on." The Princess puffed out her lower lip childishly. "You have to tell me. Please? You know I'll just keep asking until you do."

Talon rolled her eyes, and gave in. "Two."

Shasta frowned. She was still tipsy; Talon could tell by the way her eyes were just slightly unfocused. "That's all?"

“It isn’t enough?” Talon gave a slight chuckle.

“It’s just that...well, I see how all the girls around here look at you. I bet you could kiss as many of them as you want. Some of the noblewomen, too.”

Talon made a show of lying back down. “Go to sleep, Highness.”

“What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Kissing. What’s it like?”

Talon sighed. “If you wanted to know so badly, why didn’t you just let Chancellor Kumire kiss you tonight?”

“Ugh.” Shasta made a face. “I can’t stand him. He’s so...well, if you were a girl would you want him kissing *you*?”

This gave Talon pause. “I suppose if I were a girl,” she said slowly, the irony of the words making her want to laugh, “I wouldn’t want his lips anywhere near me.”

“See.” Shasta waved an arm in the air, for no particular reason that Talon could tell. “I don’t want my first kiss to be from someone like him. It’s going to be something I’ll remember the rest of my life. Can you imagine?” The Princess shuddered visibly. “I want my first kiss to be with somebody I like. Somebody who I feel safe with. Like you.” Talon gave a sharp intake of breath as Shasta’s eyes suddenly widened with an idea. “You should kiss me.”

“Princess, you’re still very drunk.”

“No, I mean it. You should give me my first kiss. I can’t think of any other man in the entire palace I like as much as you.”

“It’s not going to happen, Highness.”

“But what if you hadn’t gotten there in time tonight? Kumire would have ruined my first kiss forever.”

Talon couldn’t resist pointing out, “If you had listened to me this morning and hadn’t sent me away, he wouldn’t have had the opportunity.”

“I know.” The regret in the Princess’s voice was genuine, though her speech was still a little slurred. “But I’ve made up my mind. I want you to be my first kiss.”

“No.”

“I can make you.”

“No, you can’t. What are you going to do, tell your father?”

“Maybe,” Shasta responded with a sly glint in her eye. “I could tell him about that dancer you brought up here last autumn.”

“What?” Talon stared at Shasta in disbelief.

The Princess gave a little smile. “Didn’t think I knew about that, did you? Panna told me how you paid that showmaster all the money Captain Vaughn gave you to bring a little redheaded dancer up here. To my room.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Talon said. “Nothing happened. I just wanted to keep her from getting beaten for my mistake.”

“I wonder if that’s what Father will think when he finds out,” Shasta said triumphantly.

“Princess, you can’t—”

“Just one kiss, Talon. It’s not like I’m asking you to marry me.”

Talon sighed. “This is a very bad idea.” But Shasta had already scooted out of her own bed. Sitting on the low cot next to Talon, she closed her eyes and lifted her face expectantly.

Talon didn’t know what else to do. Shasta didn’t know that Talon wasn’t a man, but the King certainly did. She couldn’t imagine how she’d be able to explain to him why she’d paid for an entertainer to accompany her to the Princess’s chambers during the Harvest Benediction. It would have been shameful enough had she been a man, but as a woman, she had the sinking feeling that the King would be even less understanding. Talon took a deep breath and gave the Princess a peck on the lips.

Shasta’s eyes flew open. “Not fair,” she said petulantly. “I want a real kiss. That one was just exactly like how Father greets me every morning.”

Talon grimaced. “The King’s going to kill me.”

“Who’s going to tell him? There’s no one else here.”

Shasta lifted her face again, and Talon didn’t have any choice. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to Shasta’s, more firmly this time. Shasta lifted a hand to Talon’s cheek, and the gentle brush of her fingers caused an explosion within Talon that was unlike anything she had ever felt before. Her arms came up of their own volition, drawing her small charge close. Her skin felt like it was tingling everywhere Shasta touched it, and for the first time Talon knew what desire was. She found herself wanting...no, *longing* for Shasta’s touch, in a way that she’d never thought possible.

Hungrily she moved her lips against Shasta’s and thrust her tongue gently against small pearly teeth until they parted, allowing her access to the warm sweetness of the Princess’s mouth. She tasted the tea and

a lingering hint of wine, and for a breathless moment Talon's tongue danced with the Princess's small one, until Talon knew she had to stop this before it went so far that she was unable to call a halt.

She pulled away without meeting the Princess's eyes. "Happy?" she asked, her voice huskier than she would have liked.

Shasta just sat quietly, her fingers coming up to touch her lips wonderingly. "Wow," was all she said, and Talon gave a short laugh that was harsher than she intended.

"Now, will you please go back to bed and let me get some sleep?"

Shasta hesitated for a few seconds, but then she rose and crawled back into her own bed. With a loud, contented yawn, she blew out the light.

Talon lay back on her pillow and listened as the Princess's breathing gradually deepened into an even, soft rhythm. On the ceiling above them, the shadows formed long patterns against the stone. *What in the name of the Goddess was that?* she asked herself over and over again.

She'd found herself intrigued, even aroused, by the kisses of others, but never had she felt like this, like a fire had been kindled in her very skin at the Princess's lightest touch. Even now her body ached with the desire to take Shasta back into her arms, to wake the sleeping girl and kiss her once more until they were both senseless. It was terrible, she told herself, completely impossible. The Princess was like a sister to her, and Talon felt dirty for even thinking such a thing. Only, at that moment, her feelings for Shasta were anything but sisterly.

With a low groan Talon rolled onto her side. Sleep would be a long time coming that night.



The next morning Talon could barely bring herself to meet Shasta's eyes, but she did her best to seem cheerful and unruffled. Shasta didn't mention their kiss from the night before, and that suited Talon just fine. She wasn't sure what exactly the Princess had done to her, but she could barely look at her young charge going about her morning preparations without feeling the same fire from last night reignite low in her stomach. *What's wrong with me?* she chided herself in near desperation. *It didn't used to be like this.*

Talon agonized throughout breakfast and morning prayers, certain that everyone who looked at her could see the guilt written plainly on her

face. Just standing near the Princess was difficult; the sweet fragrance of her hair was constant torture. Talon was so ashamed of herself that she was surprised no one else seemed to notice her discomfort.

As usual, the Princess took lunch in her chambers, and Erinda bustled around the sitting room pouring tea and serving the plates. Talon watched the chambermaid closely as she worked, and Erinda, sensing her gaze, rewarded her with seductive smiles. Talon knew she shouldn't, but she had to do something or else continue to endure this silent shame for who knew how long. As Erinda came to refill her teacup, Talon reached up and caught the chambermaid's wrist.

Erinda looked down at her, surprised, and Talon returned her gaze evenly. The maid's lips parted and her eyes widened in understanding. Then a slow smile spread across her face and she nodded slightly. Talon released her wrist, filled with a strange sense of relief as Erinda finished up her duties and took leave of the room.

That night, when the Princess had finished her bath and sat in a chair toweling her hair and humming softly, Talon rose from her spot by the fire.

"I'm going to bathe now," she said, removing her jacket and leaving it on her chair.

"Good," Shasta affirmed cheerfully. "It's about time, you haven't had a bath yet this quarter-moon. Have fun."

Trying to seem nonchalant, Talon ducked into the privy chamber and slid one of the dressing chairs in front of the door. Erinda was waiting for her inside.

As Talon began to unbutton her shirt, the chambermaid stepped forward to help.

"We have to be quiet," Talon said.

A sultry smile spread across Erinda's face. "Well then, Corporal, I hope I remember to whisper when I'm calling out your name."

CHAPTER TEN

The darkness was moving. We, the Daughters of Ithyris, could feel the cold shadow creeping farther across our lands with every passing moon. And we began to wonder—what was Ulrike waiting for? Patience was never one of the strengths of the Flesh God. Our Divine Lady also seemed to be biding Her time. The only answer the Goddess offered when we asked for Her intervention was a quiet, “Not yet.”

And so we directed our prayers as She led us, over the nobles and viceroys who ruled Her people. We prayed that they might be gifted with Her wisdom and compassion. We prayed that their hearts would be guarded from Ulrike’s influence. But most of all, we prayed that our leaders would listen to the voice of the Goddess as She prepared to defend Ithyria from the greatest evil threat it had faced in a millennium...

“What do you mean, you’re not going to dismiss him?” Shasta repeated incredulously. “You said you would think about it. Father, Chancellor Kumire ought to be executed for even laying a hand on me. How can you keep him on as my tutor after what he did?”

Soltran rolled his eyes. “Shasta, don’t be so melodramatic. Yes, the chancellor made an error in judgment, and yes, I did think very seriously about sending him away. But I have spoken at length with him, and with his father, Archduke Fickett. Kumire has admitted his fault in the matter and apologized like a gentleman. It was three quarter-moons ago, and he has been on perfect behavior ever since, has he not?”

“I cannot believe what I am hearing!” Shasta exclaimed in

frustration. “An apology hardly makes up for the way he treated me. He had no right to—”

“No, he didn’t.” Her father gave her a stern glare. “But it is not entirely his fault, is it?”

Shasta’s mouth dropped open. “It most certainly is!”

“Shasta,” Soltran pulled a chair from the table in the conference hall and sat down, “Kumire is a well-bred and honorable man”—Shasta gave a derisive snort, and the King lifted an eyebrow—“but he is still young and hot-blooded, and certainly not immune to your charms, my daughter. Did you really expect him to behave differently, when you were clinging to his arm all night long, dressed in a gown that was obviously designed to attract his attention? You snuck out from under Captain Vaughn’s nose so you could lead the chancellor away from the party, alone. Of course he thought you were welcoming his advances.”

Shasta felt her cheeks burn, partly from embarrassment, but mostly from anger. “That’s not how it happened, Father,” she protested. Her memory of the evening was fuzzy at best, but she was certain she would never have contrived to be alone with Kumire. “And even if it were, it shouldn’t matter. If the chancellor were truly honorable as you say, he would have stopped when I told him to.” She waved an arm at her guardian, who was standing quietly by the door. “Talon over there has more honor in his littlest finger than Kumire does in his entire body. Talon sleeps by my bedside, for the love of the Goddess, and has never so much as *looked* at me with the kind of disrespect Kumire demonstrated the other night.”

Talon shifted his weight, suddenly looking very uncomfortable as the King eyed him thoughtfully.

“Yes, well,” Soltran said, clearing his throat, “this situation is a little different.”

“I don’t see how. If any other man in the palace had tried to force his attentions on me like that, you would have him dangling by his neck from the nearest tree. I cannot believe you would let Chancellor Kumire get away with this.”

“He did not mean you any harm. In fact, he adores you.”

Shasta stared. “You still expect me to marry him eventually, don’t you?” She knew by the look on his face that was exactly what he was hoping. Furiously, she said, “I hate him. I don’t want to have to endure

even one more afternoon of lessons with him. Father, I demand that you send him back to Mondera immediately.”

“Your Majesty?” The door to the conference hall swung inward, and Archduke Fickett stood in the doorway, a cool smile on his face. “Your Majesty, the last of the viceroys have arrived.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency. Come in, please, and take a seat. We will begin shortly.”

Shasta watched the elderly Archduke enter the room, choosing a chair to the King’s right. Fickett bowed in her direction before seating himself. “Your Highness, may I express again my deepest apologies on behalf of my son.”

Shasta glowered at her wizened great-uncle. “You may tell your son I hope he—”

“Shasta!” Soltran interrupted quickly, with a warning in his voice. Shasta sighed and bit back the curse on the tip of her tongue.

She took a deep breath and gave Fickett the sweetest smile she could muster. “You may tell your son that I forgive him his intolerable rudeness with the hope that he will never indulge in such despicable behavior again.”

Fickett pressed his lips together as if he was trying to decide how to respond, and finally gave a dignified nod. “We are most grateful for your understanding, Highness.”

The provincial viceroys began to fill the room, taking up seats at the long table, and when all twelve had assembled Soltran waved a hand to dismiss the servants from the room. Shasta locked eyes apologetically with her guardian for a brief moment. By law these meetings between the Ithyrian heads of state were completely private. No servants, guests, or bodyguards were allowed to attend, and so Talon had to stand guard outside the door until the conference was over. He never complained, but Shasta knew he dreaded these meeting days and the long, dull hours spent in the castle corridor.

Still, Talon’s face betrayed no sign of discontent as he bowed politely to her. The door closed softly behind him, and the King called the meeting to order.



“Having fun?”

Talon looked up from her position by the wall and made a face as Erinda approached. “Do I look like I’m having fun?”

The chambermaid giggled and lightly tapped Talon’s nose with an index finger. “If you’d just agree to come back to my quarters with me, I can promise you’d be having more fun than standing around out here.”

“Tempting,” Talon replied, deliberately letting her lips hover scarcely a fingerbreadth from Erinda’s for a few seconds before drawing back with a sigh. “But you know I can’t.”

Erinda pouted. “I don’t understand why the King makes you stand out here for hours. Either he should let you in there to watch over the Princess or he should give you the time off.”

Talon shrugged. “I guess he wants me out here to make sure no one gets in there to hurt her. This is the only way in and out, so I stand out here until they’re done.”

“Pfft. Aren’t you bored?”

“Extremely.”

“Then I’ll keep you company.”

Talon shook her head with alarm. “Erinda, no, not out here. Someone might...”

The chambermaid smacked Talon’s arm. “Get your mind out from under my skirts, you pervert. I meant I’ll keep you company. That’s all.”

“Oh.” Talon felt her cheeks redden, and Erinda burst out laughing.

“You’re so cute when you get embarrassed.” She sat down against the wall and tugged on Talon’s sleeve.

Talon sank down next to Erinda, her long legs nearly spanning the full width of the corridor. Talon looked to either side of them to be sure they were alone. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

Talon fidgeted with the braid on her uniform, feeling somewhat nervous. “When did you first realize that...that...”

“That I like women?” Erinda’s smile grew wistful. “It’s a long story.”

“I have plenty of time.”

“Very well.” Erinda took a deep breath. “You know I was born here, in the palace. My mother was head maid in charge of the royal

family, as was her mother before her. I was quite lonely growing up. My sister was many winters older than I, and there were no other girls my age to play with. When I was six, a new family moved onto the palace grounds. I was so excited to learn they had a little girl, just a winter older than me. Her name was Kadrian.”

Erinda paused, and Talon noticed a sudden brightness in the chambermaid’s eyes. “Kade quickly became my best friend in the world. We did everything together, our chores, our lessons. But she was the firstborn daughter in her family, so she was being groomed for service in the temple. Ithyrian parents, especially those whose families have served in the palace for generations, have a tradition of dedicating their firstborn sons to the military and their firstborn daughters to the Goddess.”

“So I’ve heard,” Talon replied with a wry grin. Lyris and Bria often teased that Talon was their family’s sacrifice to the royal guard.

“My older sister was already a priestess by the time Kade and I turned nine. I remember begging my parents to let me take the vows with my best friend so we wouldn’t be separated. But one child is all most families can afford to give, even to the Goddess.” Talon could hear a touch of bitterness in Erinda’s voice. “And I think my parents were worried about how attached we were to each other. They kept saying it wasn’t natural.”

“Were you...together?” Talon asked curiously.

“Kade was the most beautiful person in the world to me, and the most important. She felt the same about me. But it wasn’t until our last days together, the moon before her eighteenth birthday when she was to take her vows, that we realized just how powerful our feelings for one another were.”

“You loved her,” Talon concluded quietly.

Erinda nodded. “By then it was too late. Kade could have refused the vows, I suppose, if she’d really wanted to. Ithyris doesn’t force anyone into Her service. But Kade truly believed she was born to be a priestess, and couldn’t turn her back on destiny, not even for me. I wouldn’t have wanted her to. If she’d chosen me over her faith, I think she eventually would have come to resent me for it. That was the last thing I wanted.” Erinda looked up at Talon. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Did you and Kade ever...?”

Erinda flinched. "Once."

She didn't say anything more, and Talon did not want to press her further. For several long moments they sat in silence.

"Now she's gone," Erinda said sadly. "Serving Ithyria in some temple somewhere. I'm sure she doesn't even remember me." She met Talon's eyes with a wicked twinkle in her own. "Since you came along, though, it's not quite so difficult to bear. We women have to help one another out sometimes, especially when the ones we really want are unattainable."

Talon wasn't sure she liked being included in that last statement. "I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do." Erinda gave her a knowing grin. "In a way, it must be worse for you. At least I never have to worry about seeing Kade with someone else, but the Princess...she's growing up fast. Pretty soon she's going to have men lined up from here to the coastal provinces hoping for a chance at winning her hand. I don't envy you that."

"It's not like that," Talon denied hotly. "Why should I care who the Princess marries? Shasta's like a sister to me."

"Uh-huh." The chambermaid's tone was skeptical. "I suppose that's why you keep asking me to come to you, especially after you two have had lessons together all day. Or you've gotten into an argument. Or she happens to wear something particularly pretty."

"Stop that." Talon felt her cheeks flush again. "That's not it."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Talon. I don't blame you. She's a smart little thing, lots of spunk, and she's not bad to look at, either. Just be careful. That one's going to break your heart." Erinda rose to her feet before Talon could protest again. "Sounds like they're just about done in there," she said, jerking her thumb at the door. Talon could hear the sound of polite clapping, followed by chairs scraping against the floor. Erinda winked. "I'll see you tonight."

With that the busty little chambermaid trotted down the corridor, and Talon jumped up as the heavy oak door opened. The provincial viceroys began to pour out of the room, a few muttering under their breath while others seemed to be trying to hide amused smirks.

Talon waited for the Princess to emerge, which she did after a few moments. The King kissed his daughter briefly on the forehead, but Shasta did not return the gesture and marched stiffly down the corridor without a backward glance at her guardian. Talon followed behind as she always did until they had rounded the corner, and then Shasta

suddenly stopped and leaned her forehead against the wall with a heavy sigh.

“Princess?” Talon inquired with concern.

Shasta turned to look at her with anger sparking in her amber eyes. “I’m beginning to understand why they don’t like him,” she spat bitterly. “You should hear the way he lets them talk to him, Talon, like he’s some sort of nuisance who doesn’t deserve to have an opinion in their affairs.”

“You mean King Soltran?”

Shasta snorted. “He just lets them walk all over him, interrupt him, ignore every word he says. It’s terrible. And Archduke Fickett...he’s the one really running the show. He keeps throwing around my family’s name like it puts him in charge.” She dropped her voice into a screechy imitation of her great-uncle. “‘As elder of the house of Rane, I say we should sacrifice small children to the barbarians of Dangar.’”

Talon snickered, but then realized the Princess wasn’t smiling. “Wait, he actually made that a proposal?”

“That was the essence of it, yes. It was wrapped up in all sorts of fancy talk about building good foreign relations. I don’t know, maybe I just didn’t understand it, but that’s sure what it sounded like to me. Half the other viceroys are just as bad, all with their own greedy plans to line their pockets at the expense of the Ithyrian people.” Shasta put her hands to her head. “I know I’m not supposed to speak during these sessions, but all I wanted to do was stand up and say that as *Crown Princess* of the house of Rane I’m stripping every last one of them of their positions on the spot.”

Talon lifted an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because I don’t have the power. Only the Ithyrian Regent can remove viceroys from their positions. And Father...Talon, I think he’s too afraid of them.” She closed her eyes, leaning back against the stone wall. “Today was the first time in my life I’ve ever been ashamed to be my father’s daughter.”

Talon didn’t know what to say.

Shasta opened her eyes again. “I love him, Talon, but Goddess help me, I’m not going to let him condemn Ithyria into the hands of people like Fickett.” She started walking again, heading for the turret steps. “I may detest Kumire, but if Father insists on keeping him around I’m going to learn everything I can from him. One day I’m going to clean up the mess these people have made of my kingdom.”

Talon followed Shasta up the winding steps, considering the conviction in her charge's voice. It might not last. The Princess was prone to whims that flared brightly for a few days and then dissipated just as quickly. But somehow, this time, Talon was inclined to believe that Shasta meant every word.



As spring stretched on into summer, Shasta was determined to make good on her new resolution, devoting all her energy to her lessons. She even completed the extra assignments Kumire suggested and took on additional reading from the books in the palace library. She found that any time her enthusiasm for her studies would begin to wane, another court conference would take place. She always emerged from those meetings with renewed determination.

In autumn, King Soltran promoted Talon from corporal to the rank of second lieutenant, adding another gold bar to the collar of his uniform. This new rank came with new responsibilities, and Captain Vaughn began to bring some of the young recruits, still hoping to earn their own commissions, to the lesson hall so Talon could provide part of their training. Shasta overheard Vaughn tell the recruits that Talon had become an expert in battle theory, in command protocol, in nearly every aspect of a soldier's duties save actual combat experience. Usually a soldier of Talon's rank and experience would have been assigned to some field exercise by now, but as Shasta's guardian, Talon could not under any circumstances leave the palace.

It was Shasta herself who suggested a compromise. Every afternoon she accompanied Captain Vaughn and Talon on a ride across the grassy expanse of the southern moors. There she would sit atop her horse and watch her guardian and Captain Vaughn skulk around in the fields, hiding from imaginary enemies and planning survival tactics. She was greatly amused by the whole thing and teased Talon mercilessly throughout the exercises until one day Captain Vaughn threatened to pull her down off her horse and make her join them in the dirt.

That quickly sobered her up; Shasta had no desire whatsoever to go crawling around on the ground where there might be bugs or snakes or other undesirable creatures. Instead she spread a blanket on the grass where she could study, and their afternoon excursions often turned into an excuse for a picnic when Talon's training was done.

When the first snows began to fall, to Shasta's great disappointment, Captain Vaughn called a halt to their outdoor exercises. She knew there was no choice. She was forbidden exposure to the cold, dry winter air, and no one wanted a repeat of last winter's episode. Still, it meant the days dragged, and Shasta waited anxiously for the Winter Solstice celebration, the one part of the cold season that she actually looked forward to.



Traditionally, the Ithyrian royal family celebrated every Winter Solstice at the ancient Dervaughn estate on the bank of Indellus Lake, the biggest landlocked body of water in Ithyria. Three provinces formed its borders: Mondera to the northwest, Olsta to the south, and the capital province of Aster, where Ardrenn was located, to the northeast. The estate was owned by the exceedingly wealthy and traditionally royalist Dervaughn family. Captain Vaughn himself was a distant relative of the Dervaughns and accompanied the royal family every winter to the lake.

Talon disliked the annual visit, as it meant a long coach ride from the palace to the estate and a constant battle with the Princess over her health. She knew Shasta looked forward to the quarter-moon at Indellus because of the winter activities, sledding and ice skating, that the lake had to offer. It was the one time of the season that the court healer permitted her to spend time outdoors. But the Princess was still only allowed an hour in the snow at a time, and inevitably she was never ready to go inside when her time was up.

This winter, they were joined by an additional guest. Talon couldn't imagine how Chancellor Kumire had managed to get himself invited on the royal family outing, given his conduct, but it seemed like wherever they went, there he was, tagging along behind. The man was fast becoming Shasta's unwanted shadow.

Talon watched her own breath crystallize in midair as she crunched through the snow behind the Princess, carrying a large wooden sled on her back. The sled was not terribly heavy, certainly lighter than some of the feed sacks the Captain made her lug around during their exercises, but it was long and unwieldy, so she had to be careful not to lose her balance. Shasta was several steps ahead of her, a bounce in her step as she led the way to her favorite sledding hill. Talon had to grin in spite

of herself. The past few moons of confinement indoors had been hard on her charge. Even at seventeen winters of age, Shasta had not lost her love of play, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to find an excuse for such activities.

By the time they reached the top of the hill there was a dull ache in Talon's shoulders, and looking down at the steep, snow-covered slope, she had the feeling she was going to be worn out by the end of the day. She swung the sled from her shoulders and set it down in the snow, then held out a hand and helped the Princess onto it.

Shasta tucked her skirts carefully around her legs so they would not get caught in the shiny runners, then flashed Talon a grin. "Push me?"

Talon gave the back of the sled a little shove, and the Princess squealed with glee as she flew down the side of the hill, slowing as the ground leveled. When the sled came to a stop, she stood and waved happily at Talon. Talon sighed. *It's going to be a long day*, she thought to herself as she carefully picked her way down to join the Princess at the bottom.

Shasta hopped onto the sled again and Talon picked up the rope, trudging back up the hill while pulling the sled behind her. She was lucky the Princess was such a small girl or her task would have been much more difficult. As it was, she felt slightly winded when they reached the top. Shasta jumped off to allow her to turn the sled around, but before she could settle herself for another ride, there came a hoot from the direction of the estate house.

Chancellor Kumire was waving at them enthusiastically while Bria clung to his arm and Lyris walked beside them. The Princess groaned. "Did they have to bring him along?"

"How's the snow, Your Highness?" Kumire asked cheerfully, his loud, nasal tone echoing in the still morning air. A little servant boy came puffing up behind, dragging two sleds with him, and deposited them at the top of the hill.

"It's lovely, Chancellor."

Talon could hear the irritation in Shasta's voice. Kumire's smile widened, revealing sharply pointed teeth on either side of his mouth.

"Will you ride with me, Highness?" he asked, indicating one of their sleds.

"Thank you, Chancellor, but...uh..." Talon was surprised when the Princess grabbed her arm. "Actually, I promised Talon he could ride with me today."

Obediently Talon helped the Princess onto the sled, then settled herself behind her, one long leg on either side. She spoke quietly into Shasta's ear. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather ride with the Chancellor, Highness?"

Shasta shot her a dirty glare and called, "See you at the bottom, Chancellor!"

With both of them on the sled it went much faster, and when they reached the base of the hill they glided quite a bit farther before coming to a stop. Shasta twisted to address Talon over her shoulder. "That's not funny. I don't want that man touching me."

"You'll hear no arguments from me." Talon got off the sled and grabbed the rope to pull her charge back to the top.

They made several more trips down and back, and Talon noticed with irritation that after Shasta's rejection, the chancellor had decided to ride with Bria. She could guess whose idea that had been. Her youngest sister's crush on Kumire showed no sign of abating any time soon. It seemed the more Talon argued with Bria about it, the more her sister seemed determined to flaunt it in her face.

Talon kept a close eye on the position of the winter sun, and after an hour it was time for Shasta to return to the estate to warm up. She let the Princess talk her into making one more run, and so she got on the sled behind Shasta and started them off. One corner of Shasta's skirts got loose this time, however, and as Shasta attempted to retrieve it so the fabric wouldn't be shredded beneath the sled runners, she accidentally threw off their balance. The sled tipped over just as they reached the bottom of the hill.

Talon tightened her grip and rolled to break the fall for the Princess, hitting the ground hard. When they stopped moving, she found herself lying in the snow on her back. The impact had temporarily knocked the wind out of her, and it took a moment to remember how to breathe. Shasta seemed to be all right, though she was unwittingly pinning Talon beneath her. "Oops," she said, blinking down at her.

Talon was suddenly very aware of the soft, gentle weight of Shasta's body pressing into her chest. She wiggled, but Shasta didn't move.

"I just noticed," the Princess said, "that you have very pretty eyelashes. They're so long and dark and curly. A woman would give anything for those lashes. How come the Goddess wasted them on a boy?" She peered closely at Talon's face. "You know, you're just too pretty for a boy altogether. That's just not fair."

Talon opened her mouth but couldn't think of a suitable reply. Instead, she grunted, "Um, Princess, if you wouldn't mind..."

"Oh. Sorry." Shasta rolled away so Talon could get up.

"We should go back to the main house now," Talon said, standing and brushing snow from her trousers.

Shasta sighed, but didn't argue, and Talon knew the Princess was getting tired. *Not that she would admit it, of course.* She took the rope and waited for Shasta to seat herself back on the sled before returning them to the top of the hill. On the way up, her mind flooded with worried thoughts. The last thing she needed was to arouse the Princess's suspicions about her gender. She wondered if it was possible to cut one's own eyelashes, or thin them out at least; anything to avoid drawing attention to them again. It was a bizarre thought.

"We're going in," Shasta called to her companions. "You coming?"

"I will," Lyris said, but Talon watched Bria meet the chancellor's eyes.

Smugly, he announced, "Bria and I will stay out here for a little longer."

"Suit yourself." Talon picked up the sled, swung it over one shoulder, and started walking.

Shasta trotted up behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Talon, are you sure you want to leave Bria alone with him? After what he...you know?"

Talon shrugged. "Bria's sixteen. She's old enough to make her own mistakes." But her voice was tight. *Stupid, irresponsible girl. I'm tired of fighting with her. She wants to be alone with the chancellor, fine. It would serve her right if he did try to take advantage of her. She ground her teeth. Of course, then I'll have to kill him.*



As the Princess and her sisters left, Bria batted her eyes playfully at Kumire. "Another ride, Chancellor?"

His gaze was fixed on Shasta, who was happily marching away alongside her tall protector.

Bria reached up and placed a hand to Kumire's face. "Forget about her, Chancellor. She doesn't know a good man when she sees one." Her eyes flickered from his face down the length of his body, then back up

again. “I, on the other hand,” she leaned into him while running a hand up the inside of his thigh suggestively, “can fully appreciate your many excellent qualities.” She began to unfasten the buttons on the front of his trousers.

“Bria, now is not the time...”

“They won’t be back for a while.” She slid a hand through the opening and heard his sharp intake of breath as her fingers found their mark with little difficulty. His eyes fluttered closed involuntarily. “I’m going to make you forget all about her. I don’t want you thinking of anyone but me.”

“You’re too young,” the chancellor panted as her strokes picked up rhythm.

“That’s never stopped you before.” She nuzzled his neck sweetly without ceasing the motion of her hand. He stopped protesting, and Bria grinned. Shasta might be the Princess of Ithyria, but she couldn’t have Kumire. Bria was determined that, in the end, the chancellor would belong to only her. She was very good at getting what she wanted.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On the night of the Winter Solstice, the Princess and her two ladies-in-waiting sat in the great room of the Dervaughn estate, the floor littered with ribbons and bright scraps of fabric. It was Solstice tradition to exchange gifts with family and friends, and so the evening had passed in squeals of delight as the girls unwrapped packages of jewelry and perfumes, small toys and sweet breads. The King was always most generous, not only showering his beloved daughter with presents but ensuring that Talon and her sisters received gifts as well.

Talon lounged on the floor before the fire, admiring the finely crafted silver sheath Soltran had commissioned especially to fit the ever-present sword she wore at her hip. The metal guard was much nicer than the leather one that was standard issue for soldiers, and she noted with a trace of amusement that the King had the silver engraved with a swirling pattern that was faintly feminine. She slid her sword blade in and out of the sheath a few times, appreciating the close fit of the metal. It was extremely well made.

She looked up as Lyris suddenly rose from her spot by the Princess's chair and bowed before the King. "Your Majesty has been most kind to us. I do not know how we could ever hope to thank you for your thoughtfulness."

Soltran smiled back at her and inclined his head. "You are most welcome, Lady Lyris." Shasta had bestowed both sisters with this new honorific, insistent that since all other members of court bore titles, her ladies-in-waiting should be granted them as well.

"Your Majesty, if I may..." Lyris bit her lip. "I have a request to

make of you.” Talon lifted her eyebrows. Lyris never asked anyone for anything.

The King also seemed surprised, and he leaned forward in his chair. “A request? Well, it is Solstice, and I am in a generous mood. Now is a good time to ask a favor.”

“I would like...” Lyris twisted her fingers nervously. “That is, with your permission, I would like to take vows at the Ithyrian temple.”

Talon’s jaw dropped, and hers was not the only one. “What?” she and Shasta exclaimed, in near-perfect unison.

Lyris blushed, but did not look away. “I have thought very hard about this, Majesty. Since the day we first came to attend the Princess in the palace, I have felt a pull within me. A calling, if you will. I have come to love the Goddess with all my heart, and I wish to serve in Her temple.”

Shasta blinked. “You want to be an Ithyrian priestess?” she asked incredulously.

“With the King’s permission, yes.”

“You would choose the Goddess’s service over my daughter’s?” the King asked.

“I did not mean it that way, Majesty,” Lyris said. “I love attending Princess Shasta. I have never been so happy in all my life as I have been these winters in her service. But in gratitude to Your Majesty for the wondrous kindness you have shown us, it seems right that we should follow Ithyrian tradition. Talon is dedicated to service in the royal guard, and I, as the eldest daughter of our family,” there was a note of irony in her voice that only her siblings and the King understood, “would like to dedicate myself to the Goddess.” Her dark eyes shone. “But more than this, Majesty, I feel called to the Goddess’s service in a way that is difficult to explain. I am meant to serve Her. I feel certain of it.”

“You are only a moon or so older than Shasta, are you not?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“Which means you will reach eighteen winters in less than a half-moon. You are aware that most of those who enter Ithyris’s service have already completed their winter of pledge by their eighteenth birthday?”

Lyris dropped her eyes shyly. “I have spoken with the high priestess at the palace temple, Majesty. She says that if I enter the pledge on my

eighteenth birthday, it will not be too late for me to take vows when I become nineteen.”

“I see.” The King drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. “I have been told that when a girl is meant to serve the Goddess, she does indeed feel a calling, as you described it. And yours, Lady Lyris, must be particularly strong for such a modest girl to summon the courage to ask me for it.” Lyris flushed again, and he chuckled. “You and your brother and sister have served me well, as well as any Ithyrian family. I am inclined to grant your request. But there will be a condition.” The King turned and looked at Talon, his deep blue eyes piercing. “During your time of pledge you will continue to attend to the Princess, and once you have taken vows you must not leave the palace temple to serve elsewhere.”

Slight confusion appeared on Lyris’s face, but she did not ask for an explanation. Talon understood well, however, and gave the King a nearly imperceptible nod to show she comprehended his meaning. The King would allow Lyris to become a priestess if that was her wish, but she had to remain on the palace grounds as insurance on the Princess’s life. Soltran had not forgotten the terms of their agreement. Shasta’s life was tied to those of Talon’s sisters, even if they did not know it, and not even status as an Ithyrian priestess would exempt Lyris from the consequences should anything befall the Princess.

Lyris curtsied deeply. “Your Majesty, if that is your wish I will gladly obey and remain at the palace temple as long as you desire.”

Soltran inclined his head. “Very well. Lady Lyris, you may have my permission to pursue a life of dedication to the Goddess.”

Talon had never seen her sister look so happy, but her own feelings were a jumble. She was incredibly proud of her sister’s courage and grace. But she was also afraid for her. Talon knew what dedication the life of a priestess required. Lyris was going to give up her family identity. She would belong only to the Goddess. If that was her desire then Talon would be happy for her, but she was going to miss her gentle, soft-spoken sister. After taking vows, Lyris would no longer be her sister by anything but blood.

She must have looked more pensive than she realized, because suddenly Lyris was kneeling beside her, searching her face with dark eyes. “Talon, are you all right? You don’t mind, do you?”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

Her sister nodded emphatically. “More than anything.”

“Then you have my blessing.”

Lyris threw her arms around Talon’s neck and kissed her cheek. “You’re the best brother in the world, you know that.” She gave a little wink and Talon chuckled.

“I do my best.”



Later that night, as Talon lay on the carpeted floor beside the Princess’s bed in a guest room of the Dervaughn estate, Shasta peered over the edge of the mattress. “Did you know Lyris was going to do that?”

Talon shook her head. “I was just as surprised as you were.”

“I wonder why she’d want to be a priestess,” Shasta mused. “I mean, she could never get married, or have children, or do anything fun. She’ll have to spend all day inside swinging incense burners and chanting prayers. What kind of a life is that?”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun to me either, but...” Talon shrugged. “I guess that’s what she wants. Lyris has always been a quiet sort of person. I think she’ll be happy serving Ithyris.”

“I’m going to miss her.” Shasta sighed, rolling back onto her pillow. “You think we’ll even get to see her once she goes into the temple? I mean, other than for morning prayers?”

“Probably not. Once she takes her vows she won’t belong to us anymore. She’ll be a vessel of the Goddess.” Talon’s voice caught and she stopped talking.

“You’re going to miss her, too, aren’t you?”

It took Talon a moment before she was able to still her swirling emotions enough to reply. “I’ve never known a time when the three of us weren’t together.”

“I know you won’t see her much once she’s living in the Temple, but at least you’ll know she’s alive and happy, right?”

With a pang of guilt, Talon realized Shasta must be thinking of her dead twin. She propped herself up on one elbow. “That’s true.”

“Since Daric was killed, you’ve been almost like a brother to me.” Shasta reached out and touched Talon’s cheek. “I know I’m nothing like Lyris, but if you ever need someone to sort of help take her place...”

The Princess's cool touch on her skin made Talon inhale sharply. She raised a hand and held Shasta's fingers to her face for a moment and turned her face to press a kiss into the soft palm. But that was as much as she could allow, more than she should have permitted to begin with, and she forced herself to release Shasta's hand and back away slightly to break the contact.

"Thank you, Princess." She lay back down on the floor, out of Shasta's reach. "We should sleep. It's going to be a long trip back to the palace tomorrow morning."

Shasta grinned at her and disappeared back onto her own pillows. For a long time Talon lay staring uncomfortably at the ceiling, listening as Shasta's breathing slowly deepened into the even rhythm of sleep. She was glad this was their last night away from the palace. As much as she wanted to deny it, Erinda was right. Too much time alone with the Princess wasn't good for her. It aroused desires that were as impossible as they were inappropriate, and Talon found herself looking forward to the embrace of the little chambermaid more than she liked to admit.



With the winter holiday at an end, lessons resumed within a quarter-moon of their return to the palace. Even Talon found it difficult to concentrate on her first day back in the lesson hall. After spending the better part of an hour staring blankly at the pages of a particularly unexciting volume of military history, Talon sighed and looked across the hall to where the Princess sat with her companions. Kumire was hovering over them with his customary simpering attention, and as usual Shasta was ignoring him to the best of her ability.

"Captain," she said to her mentor, who was trying in vain to redirect her attention to the book, "I've been thinking."

Vaughn followed her eyes with his own. "Well, thinking is a useful exercise, even for a soldier."

Talon smirked. She'd grown accustomed to her mentor's odd sense of humor. "I realized this morning," she continued patiently, "that it's been over a full winter since the last attempt on Princess Shasta's life." When he didn't seem impressed, she said, "Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that, young man. Are you saying life has gotten dull around here?"

“Of course not,” Talon protested, though she knew he was teasing. “It’s just that within the first winter I came here she was attacked twice. Then nothing. If someone was still so determined to kill the Princess after the first failure, why would he stop after the second?”

“Maybe you scared him away,” Vaughn suggested.

“I doubt it.”

The captain shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps General Anjen was right and there really was only one assassin after all—and you killed him.”

“I don’t think so.” Talon was still convinced the black-cloaked assassin who had killed Prince Daric and the man she’d killed in Shasta’s privy were two different people. “But even if it *was* the same man, we still don’t know who was paying him. Someone obviously went to great trouble and expense to eliminate the Princess, not once, but twice in the same winter.” She frowned, troubled. “A person like that doesn’t just give up.”

“You think he’s waiting for something,” Vaughn concluded.

“Yes, but I can’t imagine what, and it seems like the General has abandoned the investigation.” Talon thumped her palm against the table with irritation. “I know we never had much information to begin with, but we have to keep trying. Whoever it is, he’s going to come back, and when he does—”

The captain laid a hand on her shoulder. “If the bastard shows his face again,” he interrupted calmly, “you and I will be ready for him.”

Talon gave a little nod, her eyes still on the three young women at the end of the hall. “I hope you’re right.”



Lyris’s birthday was the first time Talon had ever witnessed an Ithyrian pledge ceremony. It was the Twelfthmoon, the last days of winter, and most of the snow had melted from the ground, replaced instead by sporadic bursts of rain that turned the earth into mud beneath their feet. The sky was pouring down the afternoon that they assembled in the temple sanctuary, at the feet of the marble statue of the Goddess.

An Ithyrian priestess was required to first pledge her intentions to Ithyris for a full winter before she was allowed to take her vows. This pledge time was intended to allow the girl a final opportunity to decide

whether life as a priestess was truly what she wanted. The Pledged were expected to conduct themselves as priestesses-in-training, investing great amounts of time in meditation, prayer, and study of the Ithyrian manuscripts. As one of the Pledged, Lyris could still live in the palace and attend the Princess, but she would also be preparing, under the watchful eye of the temple priestesses, to eventually take vows herself.

One of the most distinctive features of a priestess was her shaved head and veils. Though the Pledged were not yet allowed to don a priestess's veils, their hair was cut short during the ceremony to demonstrate a fledgling commitment to the Goddess. Talon watched in fascination as the high priestess walked behind Lyris, pulling out the golden pin that held the girl's hip-length hair in a knot at the base of her head. The shining dark tresses fell down Lyris's back, and the priestess produced a small dagger from beneath her full white sleeve, holding it up to the Goddess's statue and chanting.

Talon didn't understand the language of Ithyris, a musical, tinkling speech that made up temple hymns and prayers. She recognized a few words here and there. *Ostryn*, for example, meant "daughter" and was used by the priestesses to refer to one another. It was repeated often in the ceremony for the Pledged. The only bits of Ithyrian tongue she knew by heart were the general blessing and morning salutation that all citizens recited daily.

According to Lyris, the Goddess's tongue had been the first language ever spoken by man. Today it was obsolete, replaced by the more guttural languages of Ithyria and its surrounding kingdoms. Only priestesses and scholars ever used the original tongue now.

Lyris joined in the high priestess's chant as the knife came down in several quick flashes. Almost faster than Talon could blink, the floor beneath Ithyris's monument was covered in shorn piles of hair. Lyris's face was now neatly framed by a sharp, straight line level with her chin. Her eyes were closed, her lips moving in earnest prayer, and when the high priestess was finished Lyris opened her eyes and picked up a strand of hair from the floor. She held it up toward the statue and said a few Ithyrian words that Talon assumed had some ceremonial importance.

The high priestess then addressed the small audience in the language they all understood. "The newly Pledged will now drink from the cup of purification for the first time." One of the smaller priestesses stepped

forward with a tray bearing an ornately engraved silver goblet, which the high priestess lifted for all to see. “For those of you who are unschooled in the ways of the Goddess, the cup of purification allows one who drinks from it to come into contact with Ithyris’s power. The first drink is always accompanied by a vision. Do not be alarmed, as these visions are often powerful and can evoke great emotional response.”

Talon took a deep breath. Lyris had warned her of this. Ithyrian priestesses were the only ones allowed to drink from a cup blessed by the Goddess in order to more fully experience Her presence and hear Her voice. Talon secretly figured it had to be some sort of potent wine or drug in the cup that induced hallucinations and other such seemingly mystical experiences. Still, Lyris had seemed very excited about it, and so she watched curiously as her sister took the cup from the high priestess and drank.

To Talon’s shock, the silver goblet fell from Lyris’s hands and hit the stone floor with a metallic crash, spilling its contents. Talon tensed as her sister’s head was suddenly thrown back, her arms out to the sides, and instinctively her hand went to the hilt of her sword. But the high priestess held up her hands to soothe the startled onlookers. Apparently this phenomenon was expected. Talon kept her fingers on her sword, however. The smooth, solid feel of the hilt in her hand was oddly comforting, though it was doubtful that the weapon would be of any use in defending Lyris from whatever it was that had come over her.

Lyris’s body convulsed involuntarily, her blank gaze fastened on the ceiling murals of the temple and her arms outstretched. The Ithyrian priestesses began to sing a hymn together, and the high priestess picked the goblet up from the floor, replacing it onto the tray so it could be carried away. She pulled a small bottle of oil from her belt and used her forefinger to anoint first the feet of the statue, then Lyris’s forehead.

Talon saw a tear trickle down her sister’s face and ground her teeth. Irrational as it was, she wanted nothing more at that moment than to snatch Lyris up and run with her out of the temple, away from these crazy women and their veils and oils and holy cups of radiant whatever-it-was. Only Shasta’s soft touch on her arm prevented her from acting on that impulse, and stubbornly she reminded herself that this was what Lyris wanted and she wasn’t in any real danger.

After several tense minutes, Lyris gave one final gasping jerk and

collapsed onto the floor. One of the veiled women brought a stool, and the high priestess helped the girl to sit as she recovered from the intense experience. The high priestess used a gossamer scarf to dab at Lyris's forehead. "What did you see, Child?"

"I..." Lyris's gaze flew to Talon, and Talon's lips parted at the look of awe on her sister's face. "I saw Ithyris."

"The Goddess herself?" The high priestess's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. She...she was beautiful. Her eyes glowed with light, and Her voice sounded like She was singing."

The high priestess nodded slowly. "Those who drink from the cup of purification are unable to lie. If you say you saw Ithyris..." She shook her head, her long golden earrings jingling. "Child, you are truly chosen by the Goddess. Very few of us have ever seen her directly in a vision. I myself have only seen Her twice, and never have I heard of Ithyris appearing to a Pledged in her first vision." She gazed at Lyris with an expression akin to reverence. "Did she speak to you?"

Still staring uncertainly at Talon, Lyris said, "Yes."

"What did she say?"

Lyris gulped. "I'd rather not talk about it, Your Grace. Please...I can't."

The high priestess regarded her for a moment before acquiescing. "The Goddess's words may have been for your ears alone, Child. Whatever She told you, you must take it to heart, and ponder it carefully. She would not have appeared to you this day if it were not important."

Talon watched her sister with concern. Something had happened that Lyris didn't want to talk about, and if Talon wasn't mistaken, it had to do with her. Why else would Lyris have looked at her with such uncharacteristic fright in her eyes?

The rest of the ceremony passed in a bit of a blur. Lyris read from a scroll and chanted several prayers, then two of the priestesses helped to raise the hood on her white cloak, effectively hiding her face. When it was over, everyone rushed forward to congratulate the newest member of the Pledged. Lyris seemed distracted, though she smiled at the well-wishers and accepted the embraces of the priestesses with respectful curtsies.

When they stepped out of the temple to return to the palace, Shasta and Bria both opened their parasols and scurried across the muddy

ground as quickly as possible, wanting to get out of the rain. Talon took the opportunity to fall behind them with Lyris. She opened her sister's parasol and held it over both their heads. "Walk with me?" she asked.

"Yes, please." Lyris still seemed afraid and clung to Talon's waist as they picked their way across the soggy lot.

"Tell me," Talon said, pausing as Lyris hopped over a puddle and gathered the hem of her white cloak over one arm to prevent getting it dirty.

"Tell you what?" Lyris asked, though Talon was sure her sister knew perfectly well what she meant.

"Something happened in there. Something's scared you."

"I just...the Goddess, she..." Lyris looked up into Talon's face. "Talon, you wouldn't ever betray King Soltran, would you?"

Talon's eyes widened. "What?" She stopped moving and stood for a moment as the sound of the rain hitting the canvas of the parasol pattered above them.

Lyris cleared her throat awkwardly. "And you're not...um...you're not pregnant, right?"

Talon choked back a laugh. "Lyris, what are you talking about? What did she say to you?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy." She began walking again, slowly, and Talon matched her pace. "Ithyris's words were vague. I couldn't make sense of much of it. But one thing I did understand clearly. The Goddess told me that one day your child will rule Ithyria."

Talon gave a snort. "*My child?* Lyris, I can assure you I am not pregnant, and I'm not planning on having children. That sort of requires...well, it requires factors that are very unlikely in my situation."

"I know." Lyris squeezed Talon's arm gently. "But I also know what Ithyris said. Your offspring will take the throne one day. I don't see how it's possible, unless you..."

Now Talon understood the reason for her sister's fear, and she stopped them again. "I am not a traitor, Lyris."

The younger girl sighed. "Of course you're not. I can't even imagine you doing such a thing. But how else...?"

"It was just a vision. It might not mean anything. And this is the Goddess we're talking about. She's notorious for speaking in riddles and confounding us poor mortals with her mysteries and so on. For all

we know, ‘Talon’s child will take the throne’ might have meant that I’m going to eat pork the next time the wind blows.”

Lyris giggled and smacked Talon lightly on the shoulder. “You are such a heretic.” But she sobered quickly. “You don’t have to believe it, Talon. But I’m certain of what I heard. Just...promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Have you ever met anyone more careful than me?”

“Well, I don’t know. While we’ve been standing here talking you’ve almost let the Princess out of sight.”

Talon glanced up to see that Lyris was right. Shasta and Bria had nearly disappeared into the palace gardens. Automatically, she and Lyris quickened their pace to catch up.

My child, on the throne. The very idea was so preposterous Talon wanted to laugh. She couldn’t imagine herself giving birth to a child, much less participating in the act that would create one to begin with. And despite Lyris’s fears, Talon would never dream of turning against the King, or against the Princess. Besides, Talon had no political ambition. She didn’t want the throne. All she wanted was for her sisters to live safe, happy lives. With Lyris on her way to becoming a priestess, all that remained was for Bria to marry well and settle down with a family. When Shasta also eventually married, Talon would be left truly free at last.

And then what? The future wasn’t something Talon liked to dwell on often. She didn’t know what she was going to do once the Princess no longer had need of her. She supposed she could continue her service in the royal guard. Talon had too much of the soldier in her to be happy with any other way of life. But without her sisters and the Princess to protect, what would she really have to live for?

She pushed those depressing thoughts to the back of her mind. The point was, though she might not know exactly what her future plans were, they definitely did not include having children, overthrowing the King, or laying claim to the throne. Of that much, at least, she was certain.

CHAPTER TWELVE

You're really not coming?" Shasta stared at her guardian in surprise.

Talon shifted his weight, suddenly appearing somewhat self-conscious. "King Soltran does give me this one night every Firstmoon. I thought I would go ahead and take it. Unless it's not all right with you?"

"Well...no...I mean, of course, it's all right. It's just that this is the first time you've actually volunteered to take the time off."

Talon's eyes slid over to where Erinda was clearing away the remainder of the afternoon's luncheon. "Yes, well, I have plans."

"You have plans? Since when do you have *plans*? What are they, anyway? Are you going to sit up here all night sharpening your sword into a toothpick?"

"I could if I wanted to," he retorted, but there was amusement in his tone. "Are you sure you'll be all right with the captain?"

"After what happened last winter, I'm not letting Captain Vaughn out of my sight," Shasta asserted.

Talon grinned. "Better stay away from the wine, too."

She gave him a little kick in the shins. "Oh, shut up." But her scowl quickly melted into a grin that matched his. "I'll be just fine. Really. It's about time you loosened up a little and had some fun."

Erinda made a funny noise from the sitting room, and Shasta glanced at her. "Erinda, are you ill?"

The chambermaid coughed into a handkerchief. "No, Your Highness. Just a touch of a cold." She looked over at Talon and coughed again, her cheeks pink.

Shasta moved to feel the chambermaid's forehead with one hand. "Your face is all flushed! Perhaps you ought to take the evening off as well. I don't want you to get sick." This seemed to set her off again, and she coughed violently into her handkerchief. Shasta patted her on the shoulder. "I want you to take it easy tonight." She turned back to her guardian, noticing for the first time that his cheeks were also rather red. "Talon, you're not looking so well, either. Maybe you and Erinda should both take some time to rest and relax a little tonight."

This seemed to be too much for the chambermaid, who gripped the tray in her hands and ran from the room, coughing all the way. Shasta frowned as the door closed. "I hope she's all right."

"I'm sure she'll be fine," Talon replied.

His voice sounded oddly tight, and Shasta peered at him closely. "Well, whatever it is, I hope you don't catch it. If you get sick I'll be stuck in my rooms until you get better."

Before Talon could respond, a knock heralded Captain Vaughn's arrival. He crossed the room and presented Shasta with a bouquet of roses from the royal gardens, wishing her a happy birthday.

Shasta took the flowers and inhaled deeply of their sweet scent. She had barely managed to thank the captain when Talon asked to take his leave.

She laid the roses down on the table, intrigued by her guardian's apparent impatience. "Can't wait to get away from me, huh?"

"Something like that."

She narrowed her eyes at him in a mock glare. "Well then, by all means, go."

He gave her a sweeping bow. "Have fun at your party, Princess. And happy birthday." At the door, he turned and said, "Captain Vaughn, keep an eye on her. Don't let her drink too much wine, and if you see Chancellor Kumire come within a stone's throw of her, break his arms for me."

"You can count on it, my boy." The captain cracked his knuckles for emphasis and all three of them laughed.

When Talon was gone, Shasta asked, "Do you know what he's up to tonight, Captain?"

"He wouldn't tell me. Just said he had plans and that they're a secret."

"A secret. Ha." Shasta turned to admire herself in the mirror. She had chosen another low-cut gown this winter, though she'd asked the

dressmaker to raise the neckline a little. As much as she'd enjoyed the attention on her last birthday, she had learned that not all such attention was desirable. She straightened the lace at her shoulders. "Talon couldn't keep a secret from me if his life depended on it. We practically spend every minute of the day together."

Vaughn bowed politely. "I'm sure you're right, Princess."



Shasta's eighteenth birthday celebration was not much different than any other before it, and she soon found herself bored with the usual banquet-entertainment-reception routine. The food was as delicious as ever, and the performing troupe was as talented and engaging as she expected. The music was lively, the party guests were in high spirits, and Lyris and Bria talkative, but Shasta just couldn't get into a celebratory mood. She felt more like snuggling under a warm blanket with a cup of tea and a good book than parading around in diamonds and jewels and dancing the night away.

Still, she did her best to appear cheerful and energetic, trying not to let even a hint of boredom show on her face. Her father had gone to great lengths and even greater expense to prepare this party for her, and she wanted him to know she appreciated his efforts. So she put on her prettiest smile, and she laughed and applauded with the rest of the audience as the performers did their work.

She was very careful not to touch even a drop of wine at the table, having learned her lesson from the celebration a winter before. Shasta wanted to face the entire evening with a perfectly clear head. Captain Vaughn escorted her to the reception, where she waltzed with her father and various men of the court, some of whom she recognized from the viceroys' conferences.

At one point it seemed that Chancellor Kumire might actually ask her to dance, but she shrank behind Captain Vaughn's broad-shouldered frame, and he glared so imposingly that Kumire seemed to change his mind at the last minute. Instead of approaching her, he turned and made a show of inspecting the pastries on the nearby refreshment table. Shasta breathed a sigh of relief. Let the chancellor dance all he wanted with her lady-in-waiting. Bria obviously enjoyed his company, and as far as Shasta was concerned she was welcome to it.

Lyris stood serenely by the center fountain of the palace gardens

where the musicians were playing. Wearing the white robes of the Pledged, her hair cut in the distinctive Ithyrian style, she would not be asked to dance. Those pursuing the service of the Goddess only danced at temple festivals, and then only in specific ceremonies as ordained by Ithyris.

A few of the young soldiers attending the party had actually summoned the courage to approach Shasta. Several of them were quite handsome and charming, and she'd accepted nearly all their invitations, aware that a turn on the floor with the Crown Princess of Ithyria was quite an honor for any young man in her father's service. It annoyed her, however, that none of them seemed to realize she was more than just a political celebrity. They sputtered shyly at her every attempt to make conversation, and Shasta found herself missing the company of her guardian. At least Talon would talk and tease, without staring as if she were some mythical fairy-tale creature.

After a particularly rousing waltz, she sank onto one of the garden benches to catch her breath. The musicians began to play a minuet, and a red-faced corporal came up to her. His voice cracked nervously as he asked her to dance. Shasta suppressed the urge to snicker and offered him a weary smile.

"I would love to, Corporal. But would you mind asking me again in a few minutes? I'm just so tired from that last waltz, I need a moment to rest."

"Oh. Of course, Highness." He bowed awkwardly and began to walk away. Shasta sighed. The poor boy was so nervous, she was certain he would probably be too discouraged to ask her a second time.

"What's your name, Corporal?" she called after him.

He spun around and offered a stiff military salute. "It's Jen, Highness. Corporal Jen Crossis, at your service."

"Well, Jen Crossis, don't forget about me. I expect you to be my partner for the next piece."

The grin on his face stretched from ear to ear. "I won't forget, Your Highness, I promise."

"That was very kind of you, Princess." Captain Vaughn spoke quietly from behind her seat. "I'd wager you just made that young man's evening."

"Ha. He hasn't danced with me yet. I'll probably step all over his feet and then he'll wish he never asked."

The captain chuckled, but eyed her with a concerned expression. “You look tired.”

“I’m a bit winded, that’s all.” She smiled. “You’ve seen me more exhausted in our fencing lessons.”

“Just trying to look out for you the way Talon would,” he insisted cheerfully. “After last winter’s...events, your guardian would skin me alive if I let anything happen to you.”

At that moment, Shasta happened to glance toward the arched entrance to the palace gardens, which opened onto the grounds. She was startled to see two shadowy forms running across the hard-packed earth in the direction of the servants’ stables. There was a glint of metal that she could have sworn looked just like Talon’s new silver sword sheath, the one her father had given him for the Solstice. She rose to her feet and rubbed her eyes, squinting into the darkness beyond the garden arch, but the shadows were gone. Either they were too far away for her to see or she had only imagined the fleeting movements. It was silly of her to think that she recognized Talon from such a great distance, anyway.

Gripped with the impulse to investigate, she took a step toward the arch, but paused when she heard her name being called.

“Your Highness, the next dance is beginning.”

Reluctantly Shasta shifted her attention from the archway to the eager young man waiting expectantly for her. “And you kept your promise, Corporal.” Smiling as graciously as she could, she extended her hand so that he could kiss it. “Shall we?”

As they spun around amidst the other dancers, Shasta’s gaze wandered repeatedly to the dark garden entrance. When the musicians finished playing and the corporal escorted her back to her seat on the bench, she turned to Captain Vaughn with the suggestion of a pout. “Why, Captain, you haven’t been on the dance floor all evening.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “My duty is to watch over you, Your Highness. Unless of course, you’d do me the honor?”

She fanned herself briskly and nodded. “It would be my pleasure, Captain, but I’m afraid I need a few moments to rest.” She nodded in the direction of one of the benches across from the fountain where several ladies of the court were gathered together gossiping.

Shasta had noticed Captain Vaughn’s attention was often drawn to that corner of the garden, and she knew why. Lady Minde, the daughter

of the viceroy of Olsta province, was known to be Vaughn's favorite among the noblewomen at court. Though a self-proclaimed bachelor, he was not quite too old to be considered an eligible catch, and the golden-haired Minde was the only woman Shasta had ever seen him express an interest in.

She smirked as Vaughn's gaze followed the direction of her nod. "You should dance with her, Captain. She looks quite lonely over there by herself."

"You think so?"

In truth, Lady Minde appeared quite content to engage in conversation with her friends and showed no sign of loneliness whatsoever, but Shasta insisted anyway. "I'm sure she would love a chance to dance with one of the most eligible bachelors of the Ithyrian court. You should ask her. I'm just going to sit here for a while and rest."

For a moment the captain seemed undecided, his eyes flickering between Shasta and the beautiful Minde, but when the blond woman tilted her head back to laugh at something one of her companions said, causing the diamonds at her throat to glitter in the torchlight, he apparently made up his mind. "You're going to stay here?"

"Of course. Go on, have a good time." Shasta watched as the captain made his way through the throng of dancers and extended a hand to Lady Minde.

As she'd hoped, the pretty blonde accepted his offered arm and joined him on the dance floor. Shasta met his eyes and gave him a conspiratorial grin, and when she was sure that his attention was completely absorbed in his dancing partner, she stood and slowly made her way to the garden entrance.

Looking around to be sure no one was watching her leave, she slipped around the stone arch and moved briskly across the grounds toward the servants' stables. Her heart was pounding in her chest. This was probably a very bad idea, sneaking off alone into the dark, chasing mysterious shadows. *This is exactly how I get myself into trouble. Father would kill me if he found out. What if there's an assassin waiting for me out here?* But her curiosity, combined with the boredom that had built up throughout the evening, won out. *It's probably nothing. At least it beats spending all night making nice with nervous soldiers and stuttering courtiers.*

She winced as she stepped on the occasional small pebble scattered across the dirt. Her dainty dancing slippers were not designed for any surface rougher than a neatly tiled ballroom floor. But such a minor inconvenience could not deter her from her mission. When she reached the stable doors, she leaned against them for a moment to catch her breath, stiffening as a strange noise emanated from inside the stable. It sounded like a woman moaning.

Shasta pressed her ear to a gap between two of the wooden planks, and her eyes narrowed when she recognized the deep, throaty sound of Talon's laugh. *I was right*, she thought triumphantly. *What in the name of the Goddess is he doing out here?* Another moan, definitely feminine, suddenly made it clear that Talon was not alone.

Unable to hear much more than muffled voices through the stable door, Shasta made her way around the side of the building, to a loose plank that Daric had discovered when they were children. At some point one of the horses must have kicked a hole in the wall, and whoever had repaired it had obviously been lazy about his task—a single wide plank of wood, held by one nail at the top, was meant to patch the gap. Of course, this made it very easy to rotate the plank, and the hole was big enough for a small person to slip through. Shasta and Daric had used this secret entrance many times when the stable doors were barred.

There was the rather inconvenient matter of Shasta's ball gown, which she couldn't possibly remove. Awkwardly, she hitched the delicate fabric of the dress up around her waist so that it would not be snagged when she knelt in the dirt. After wrestling with it for a few minutes, she sank carefully to her knees and patted the petticoats down as they ballooned around her, then rotated the plank as slowly and quietly as she could. She might not be able to sneak all the way into the stable, but at least she'd have a better eavesdropping spot.

As it turned out, she was able to do much more than eavesdrop. Leaning forward, she caught a glimpse of movement in the hay, directly across from the stall she was peeking into. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the eerie glow of the lantern hanging from one of the support beams, and to discern just exactly what it was she was seeing.

Beneath a pile of blankets at the base of the haystack were two heads she immediately recognized. Erinda was the only person in the palace who had those mousy brown curls, though Shasta had never seen her wearing her hair down before. The other head was unmistakably

Talon's. It took Shasta a moment to realize that she was intruding on something very private between her guardian and the chambermaid, but she found herself too fascinated to tear her eyes away.

Talon murmured something and Erinda giggled, then Talon's hand appeared from beneath the blanket to stroke the maid's cheek and he drew her in for a kiss. Shasta's face grew hot as she watched her guardian's mouth move over Erinda's with an intensity she was familiar with herself. Unconsciously she raised her own hand to her lips, recalling the feel of Talon's kiss...it had been exactly one winter ago, on this very same night, in fact, that she'd blackmailed him into giving her her first kiss. She'd been too embarrassed to mention it since, but she certainly hadn't forgotten.

Shasta caught her breath as Talon moved, rolling himself on top of Erinda, the lantern light painting shadows across the firm muscles of his bare back as the blankets fell to his waist. The sight caused a sudden golden twang in Shasta's stomach that spread heat through her body and caused her cheeks to burn even more fiercely. She heard Erinda sigh, and Talon's responding groan was guttural and feral, unlike anything Shasta had ever heard from him before. It caused a shiver of goose bumps to form down her arms, and with a gasp she dropped the plank back into place and rose to her feet. She ran back toward the gardens as if there were fire at her heels, untwisting her skirts from around her waist as she went.

She was so distraught that she nearly tripped over her own feet several times, and she had to pause behind the stone of the arch to pat her hair and settle her gown back over her petticoats before reentering the party. As unobtrusively as possible, she made her way to the refreshment table.

"Your Highness." If the serving girl noticed anything odd about Shasta's breathless appearance, she showed no sign of it. "What may I get for you?"

"Wine, if you please."

The girl selected one of the pitchers on the table and filled a crystal goblet, watching with large eyes as Shasta snatched it up and drained it. "More, Highness?"

"Yes, thank you."

She refilled the goblet. This time Shasta sipped in a much more ladylike manner.

“Princess!” Captain Vaughn clapped her on the shoulder and spun her to face him. “Where have you been? When I looked up you were gone.”

“I’m perfectly fine, Captain. I needed to get up and stretch my legs. I was beginning to cramp a little. I’m sorry to have worried you.” She offered him a smile, but his eyes were on the goblet in her hand.

“I thought you were going to stay away from the wine tonight.”

“I changed my mind. Don’t worry, I won’t overdo it. This,” she waved the glass, “is hardly enough to get me tipsy.”

Vaughn still appeared concerned. “Would you like to retire for the night, Highness? You don’t look well.”

Shasta considered it. Her mind was still reeling from what she had seen in the stables, and embarrassment threatened to overwhelm her composure. But if she returned to her rooms now, Captain Vaughn was sure to accompany her and lurk around until Talon returned. The last thing she wanted was to spend the rest of the evening answering awkward questions. At least out here, among the other party guests, she could hope for a few moments in which she could ponder uninterrupted.

“Really, Captain, I’m fine,” she insisted. “I just want to observe the rest of the dancing, I think.”

He led her back over to the bench she had occupied earlier, and stood at attention behind her shoulder. Shasta realized that there was no way he would leave her unattended again, but she was grateful that at least she had her back to him and he could not see the emotions she knew must be warring on her face.

Embarrassment was tinged with irrational anger, though she could not tell whether she was angry with Talon, or Erinda, or herself. After all, what Talon did with his one free night was his own business. He was what—twenty-one winters of age now? A fully grown man. Of course he would be interested in women, especially one as flirtatious and attractive as Erinda. But girls flirted with Talon all the time, and though occasionally he responded in kind, Shasta had never noticed him pay more attention to one than another. He acted as if it were all a lighthearted game, and until tonight it hadn’t occurred to her that he might have an interest in anything more. Apparently she had been very, very blind.

She could still hear his soft groan in the back of her mind and

picture his smooth olive skin in the lantern light. This strange, wicked curiosity that had suddenly awakened within her was an entirely new feeling, at once both exciting and shameful. She found herself deliberately replaying the memory several times to hold on to the dark fascination it evoked.

How long had this been going on? Shasta tried to remember if she had witnessed anything between Erinda and Talon that might have given a clue as to the true nature of their relationship. She recalled their conversation earlier that afternoon and suddenly realized why Erinda had coughed so loudly and why Talon had such a strange note in his voice. She clapped a hand to her mouth. They had been laughing at her. Why wouldn't they?

A fresh surge of anger and humiliation washed over her. She had thought she knew everything there was to know about her guardian, and now she was finding out that, contrary to her rather self-centered assumption, he did indeed keep secrets from her.

"Ah, Talon." Captain Vaughn's voice broke into her thoughts, and at her guardian's name Shasta's head snapped up. Sure enough, Talon was striding toward them, now fully clothed of course, the gold braid of his uniform shining in the torchlight. Shasta looked away quickly, unable to meet his eyes.

"Captain Vaughn." Talon saluted formally. "How was the party?" His face darkened when he caught sight of the wine goblet in Shasta's hand, and he took it away from her. "What's this?"

Shasta didn't look up, and after a moment of awkward silence Vaughn shrugged. "The Princess wanted some wine after the dancing. Don't worry, my boy, I've kept an eye on her. She hasn't even finished one glass."

Talon grumbled something unintelligible, finished off the rest of the wine in two swallows and handed the empty crystal glass to a passing servant. Shasta caught sight of Erinda, who entered the garden through the archway and took a spot behind one of the refreshment tables to help serve the guests. She had rebraided her hair, though one stubborn strand still curled rebelliously down her forehead.

Feeling inexplicably vexed, Shasta rose to her feet and said, "I wish to retire for the night."

Captain Vaughn bowed deeply. "Pleasant dreams, Highness."

She acknowledged him with a tilt of her head. “Thank you for your services this evening, Captain. You were the perfect escort.”

Without a glance or a word to her guardian, Shasta made her way through the party guests, pausing to kiss her father on the cheek and bid him good night. Then she continued into the palace and up the tower stairs to her rooms, Talon a few paces behind.

Talon opened the door for her, and she brushed past him without looking up. Shasta heard him close the door behind them, and suddenly his hand was on her shoulder. “Have I offended you somehow, Princess?”

Transfixed by the warmth of his fingers against her bare skin, she paused a moment before ducking away. She still refused to look at him, afraid he would read the jumbled emotions on her face. “No, of course not. I’m just very tired. Ready the privy chamber for me.”

Obediently Talon inspected the small room, then stepped back to allow her to enter. Shasta closed the door behind her and wearily sank into one of the dressing chairs. *This is ridiculous*, she told herself firmly. *You can’t just avoid him the rest of your life. He shares your room, for the love of the Goddess! You’re going to have to find a way to get over this.* Talon was certainly not the first man in history to make love to a woman. This sort of thing happened all the time, and so long as it did not interfere with his duties why should she be bothered by it?

Taking a deep breath, Shasta stood and wrestled herself out of the heavy petticoats and skirts. Usually she had Lyris and Bria to help her with the task of undressing, but they were attending the party, and she wasn’t about to send for Erinda or ask Talon to help her. Just the memory of his fingers against her skin was enough to make her shiver again.

After slipping on her nightshift and robe, she went through the motions of taking down her hair, brushing it out, washing her face, and using a damp cloth to clean the sweat from her shoulders and breasts. She would bathe first thing in the morning, she promised herself, as there was no one to draw a bath for her at the moment. She rinsed her mouth with a peppermint wash to eliminate the taste of the wine and then made quick use of the chamber pot. When she could no longer think of any other reason to prolong her stay in the privy, she took a deep breath and opened the door.

Talon had removed his jacket and boots and was in the process of unbuckling his sword belt as she emerged. For a moment Shasta stood watching him. She'd seen her guardian perform these same simple actions a hundred times before, but for the first time she noticed how the soft white linen shirt seemed to glow against his dark olive skin, how the broad, lean lines of his shoulders filled every seam, muscles contracting visibly across his back as he bent to prop his sword against the wall. She watched his slender, graceful fingers as he folded his uniform and placed it on the table beneath the window, and she marveled that she'd never really paid attention to them before.

Talon turned, and for an instant their eyes met. Shasta started and looked away quickly. With an exaggerated yawn, she climbed into bed and mumbled, as if already half asleep, "Ah, I'm so exhausted. Take care of the rest of the lights, will you, Talon?"

In truth her entire body was tingling, and her mind had never been more awake. She had never been so keenly aware of Talon's presence in the cot beside her, only a handbreadth away from her own bed. Her heart beat so rapidly she was certain sleep would elude her all night. Dismayed, she extinguished the lamp at her bedside and burrowed down beneath the quilts, as far out of sight as she could get. *I'll never be able to look at him the same way again. How is it possible for so much to change in a single day?*



Talon stared at the Princess's form in the bed. Just now, when she'd caught Shasta watching her, she could have sworn she'd seen something in Shasta's expression that she'd certainly never seen before. *It almost looked like...*

Talon shook her head. She was imagining things, probably because she'd just spent the entire evening in Erinda's arms. It was the first time they'd been together without feeling the need to rush or to stifle the sounds of their pleasure. A wicked smile curved her lips at the memory. While she and Erinda had no deep emotional connection to one another, they certainly had plenty of chemistry in other ways.

She gazed at the Princess's still figure again and found a lump rising in her throat. As comforting as Erinda's touch was, there was something shallow about it, something that didn't seem completely satisfying no

matter how intense the physical sensations were. But even if it *was* desire that she'd glimpsed in Shasta's face tonight, Talon knew her fevered imagination was just taunting her with impossible hope. She was not a man. She would never be anything more than the Princess's faithful guardian and servant. With a sigh, she pulled the blanket up to her chin and closed her eyes.

Neither young woman slept easy that night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Over the next half-moon it became painfully obvious that Talon had not been imagining things at all. More and more often she would glance up to catch Shasta watching her through half-lidded eyes. At first the Princess seemed embarrassed to be caught staring and looked away quickly, but it didn't take long before she became bolder and began meeting Talon's gaze with little smiles and fluttering lashes.

Talon could scarcely believe it. It was as if Shasta turned eighteen and overnight became as big a flirt as any of the palace serving girls.

Then the love notes began. The first time Talon found one, she'd emerged from the privy chamber in the morning to see a small folded piece of parchment resting on top of her boots. Opening it, she found a snippet of poetry from one of the Princess's books, carefully copied out in curling handwriting and decorated with sketches of flowers and butterflies. When she looked up, Shasta was watching her with a self-satisfied smile. Uncertain what to do, Talon dropped the note into her small wooden chest of belongings. After that, she found such missives on an increasingly regular basis, tucked inside her textbooks and lying on the pillow of her cot at night.

She wasn't sure how to handle this new development. Her common sense told her that the Princess's sudden interest in her was based on a false ideal—the romantic image of the handsome soldier Talon pretended to be—and would likely be short-lived. But there was another part of her that wished, dangerously, that she might pretend it was real, if only for a little while. That little voice terrified her, and privately she resolved to do whatever she could to discourage the Princess's infatuation.

Captain Vaughn found the situation extremely amusing, as almost every day brought some new surprise, inevitably discovered at the most inopportune moment. One morning while lecturing a group of young recruits, Talon drew her sword for a demonstration and found that Shasta had wrapped a note around the blade. It flew across the room and landed in the lap of one of the soldiers. Before she could snatch it back, he opened it and began to read it aloud, much to the entertainment of his classmates. Talon was finally able to take it from him, but in a matter of hours every foot soldier in the barracks had heard of the Princess's crush on her guardian.

Shasta seemed unfazed by the teasing. Talon was sure that in some twisted way the Princess thrived on it. To make matters even more difficult, Shasta had begun a most inconvenient habit of calling for Erinda to brush her hair while Talon was bathing. As there was no other time of day that she could be alone with Erinda, their trysts together became fewer and farther between. Though Talon tried at first to treat the whole situation with a sense of humor, she found herself running out of patience and becoming more and more irritable and snappish with her charge.

She realized that Shasta enjoyed flustering her, and the harder she fought to maintain her nonchalance, the harder Shasta tried to break it down and the more amusing it became to the servants and guards. Even Erinda could not help snickering from time to time at the look on Talon's face upon finding the Princess's handkerchief in the pocket of her uniform or discovering Shasta's red hair ribbons tied in cheerful bows around the hilt of her favorite belt knife.

When it became evident that simply ignoring these gestures was not effective, Talon began to retaliate the only other way she knew how: tearing up the love notes and purposefully shrinking away from the Princess's attempts to touch her. She began flirting more intently with the palace serving girls and even the ladies of court, presenting them with little flowers and compliments for no apparent reason, hoping that Shasta would get the message that she was not interested.

Instead, Shasta continued undaunted. She actually seemed to enjoy the challenge. Talon found herself engaged in an unspoken, bizarre battle of wills with her charge that persisted exhaustingly through nearly every minute of every day. It was a battle she could not afford to lose, for both their sakes.



“You’re leaving already?” Bria propped herself up on one elbow and drew the sheet to her chest as she watched her lover’s naked back retreating from the bed. Kumire only grunted, picking his trousers up from the floor and stuffing one leg into them at a time. “I don’t understand why you always have to run off so fast.”

“That’s because you don’t understand what it means to be a man, with real responsibilities.” Kumire buckled his belt and began looking around on the floor for his shirt. “I have lessons with the Princess in a few minutes.”

“I know that, silly. I’ll be there too, remember?” Bria smiled sweetly and rose from the bed, keeping the sheet wrapped around her. Approaching him from behind, she ran a small hand over his chest. “Princess Shasta won’t mind if we’re a little late. Besides, I have a funny bit of gossip for you.”

“I don’t care about gossip.” Kumire slapped her hand away as she offered to help with his buttons.

“You’ll like this. It’s about the Princess. You know how she’s been sighing around after my brother recently?”

Chancellor Kumire glared darkly at her. “So what?”

“So...yesterday she told Lyris and me that she’s in love with him.” Bria moved around him to tackle the tie at this throat. “Isn’t that funny?”

“Not really.”

“Well, there’s no need to sound so jealous, Chancellor. Talon is... well, trust me when I say the Princess doesn’t have a chance.”

Disdain washed across her lover’s face. “I would think rather that your brother wouldn’t have a chance. After all, she’s Crown Princess of Ithyria, and there’s not a drop of noble blood in his Outlander veins. It doesn’t matter how ridiculous Princess Shasta’s infatuations are, she’s going to marry a man of breeding and title. Her father will see to that, no matter what the Goddess’s laws say.” He straightened the knot of his tie, and Bria drew back to stare at him in disbelief.

“Chancellor, you’re not still thinking of marrying her yourself, are you?” His expression told her that was exactly what he had in mind, and Bria stared at him in disbelief. “But I thought...you and I, we have...”

“Don’t be such a child.” He sat in a nearby chair and huffed as he

pulled one boot on and then the other, stamping each foot to settle the heel. “You and I have nothing. This is merely a diversion, a pleasant way to spend the afternoon. And as sweet a temptation as you are,” his eyes raked appreciatively over her body, still wrapped in only the sheet, “my destiny lies in far greater things.”

Bria knew she should be furious, but there was something irresistible about the way he looked at her. The lust and admiration in his eyes always made her feel strangely powerful. She liked how it felt to be desired, and the chancellor could rarely resist her when she put her mind to it. Bria wasn’t ready to give that up, especially not to her mistress, who treated Kumire with such distaste and scorn.

She slid into his lap and flicked the tip of her tongue against his neck in the manner she knew he liked. “Of course it is your destiny to be great,” she murmured into his ear, “but you’ll see. One day I’ll convince you that you don’t need her. You don’t need anyone but me.”

Kumire seized the back of her hair and pulled her in for a crushing kiss, his mouth enveloping hers demanding for a few moments before he pushed her off his lap with a wry grin. “Now, little vixen, you must leave me to finish dressing. I have things to do and cannot afford further distraction.”

She rewarded him with a triumphant smile and picked up his books from the table, waiting for him to finish shrugging into his jacket before handing them to him. “Just remember, no matter how blue her blood might be, no one knows how to please you like I do.”

Kumire rolled his eyes. “Yes, well, get yourself dressed and hurry to the east hall. It won’t do for you to show up late to lessons.”

She gave him a mock curtsy. “Of course, Your Excellency.”



Talon shifted her weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. The court conferences remained her least favorite duty. Usually she brought a book and tried to study, but it was hard to concentrate with the periodic bursts of yelling from the other side of the door. Many of the provincial viceroys were emotionally volatile men who took Ithyrian politics quite personally.

While Talon could easily grasp some of the more basic issues, when

the Princess began talking about crown-subsidized land development and the formation of ethical-treatment law-enforcement committees, she was quickly lost among the complicated intertwining definitions. The Princess was inevitably upset after every conference and ranted for hours about the ineptitude of the viceroys and what she termed their “asinine self-importance.” Talon suspected that being able to explain it to someone else helped the Princess better understand what was going on, so for that reason she didn’t mind listening.

She jumped as the door opened unexpectedly and the provincial viceroys began to file into the corridor. When Shasta did not emerge after them, she poked her head into the conference room. Shasta was sitting next to the King at the end of the table. They both looked very tired.

Talon could read infinite frustration on the Princess’s face and felt a twinge of compassion. She wished there were some way she could handle these conferences in Shasta’s stead.

Shasta’s head lifted and she said, “Father just suggested a recess for a few minutes...everyone was getting a little too tense.” She tugged gently on the King’s sleeve. “Father, would it be all right if I were to send Talon to the kitchens to fetch us something to eat? I didn’t have much for breakfast this morning, and you look like you haven’t eaten in days.”

“I suppose that would be all right.” King Soltran looked over to Talon. “Go on, my boy, I’ll watch over her for now.”

Talon bowed, and Shasta clapped her hands. “Bring some strawberries, will you? And maybe some bread and cheese. And that white wine I like. Oh, and maybe some of Cook’s tarts, if she has any left. Those were good.”

“As you wish. Anything else?”

The Princess licked her lips. “Yes, tell Cook I want roast lamb for dinner. I’ve been craving it all day. And hurry up, because I’m starving.”

Talon bowed again before heading off down the corridor. She hoped she could remember all Shasta’s requests and wondered if she’d be able to carry that much food. She might have to borrow one of those rolling carts the serving girls used at dinner.

The palace cook was delighted to have Talon visiting her kitchens.

A plump, pleasant woman not quite old enough to be Talon's mother, she chattered happily while piling several trays, all the while poking Talon in the ribs and making tsking noises at how lean she was. By the time she had finished, there was more food there than Shasta could eat in a quarter-moon, let alone as an afternoon snack.

Talon had to move the rolling cart slowly so that nothing dropped from the trays and was only about halfway to the conference room when a familiar voice made her pause.

"We agreed to do this my way!"

"Quiet down, boy, unless you want the entire palace to hear us."

Talon recognized the first speaker. Chancellor Kumire's distinctive, whiny tone was impossible to mistake. The other voice sounded older. The conversation was coming from behind one of the closed doors along the corridor. The palace was so big that Talon wasn't sure if it was an office, a bedchamber, or a broom closet that the men were in, yet they had to be standing close to the door, for she could hear them quite clearly.

"Father, you have to give me more time."

So the older speaker had to be Archduke Fickett, the crotchety viceroy of Mondera. The family resemblance between Fickett and Kumire was easy to see, as they shared the same Rane hair and eyes as the Princess. Talon liked Fickett about as much as she cared for his son. She knew she shouldn't be eavesdropping, but some instinct kept her there, hands on the cart, ears pricked toward the door.

"I've given you two winters, Kumire, and you've made absolutely no progress. You're no further now than you were when you began."

"It has been more difficult than I thought."

Lord Fickett snorted. "That's putting it mildly. She doesn't want anything to do with you. And with each of these *conferences*," the words were spat out with evident distaste, "our fool of a King grows more confident. You know he actually refused to sign my new proposal today, the one I've spent two seasons trying to put together? All that little spawn of his has to do is bat her eyes sadly in his direction, and he loses what little manhood he has."

"If I succeed, the King can refuse anything he wants and it won't make a bit of difference in the end."

"That's if you succeed, which seems unlikely at this point. You're running out of time. We are talking about the ruin of our family. The ruin of your future."

“Father, if I can make this happen, my future and our family will be secure for generations to come. You know that.”

“Which is why I agreed to let you risk this harebrained idea in the first place,” Fickett growled. “But my patience is wearing thin. If you had followed my instructions at the beginning we wouldn’t be in this situation. And if I do not see some definitive action from you in the very near future, I am calling it off entirely and we are going to revert to my original plan before it’s too late.”

“Father.” Kumire’s voice lowered to a hiss, and Talon had to strain to hear his next few words. “You realize that your plan could throw the entire kingdom into civil war.”

“Maybe that’s just what Ithyria needs!” the Monderan governor shouted, before apparently remembering that they were supposed to be speaking in secret and lowering his voice again. “The people of this country have grown soft. They’ve been too comfortable, living their little peaceful lives for so many winters now that they’ve started to invent problems where there are none just to have something to entertain themselves. Up to this point the King hasn’t been too difficult to handle, but I worry about his softhearted weakling of a daughter. They’re both a disgrace to the house of Rane.”

“I don’t want to see Ithyria in their hands any more than you do.”

“Then prove it. Step up and be a man for once in your miserable life.”

Talon drew a little closer to the door to hear Kumire’s reply, forgetting that her hands were still on the cart. The slight movement was enough to jar a spoon resting by her fingertips. It wasn’t a loud noise, but the spoon still made a definite metallic clank against the serving tray.

“What was that?”

Talon managed to straighten herself and push the cart down the corridor several steps before the door opened and Kumire appeared. The chancellor glared at Talon suspiciously. “What are you doing out here, boy?” he demanded.

Talon shrugged as casually as she could and waved a hand at the cart. “The Princess was hungry.”

Chancellor Kumire narrowed his eyes but did not inquire further. After staring Talon down for several moments, he sniffed imperiously. “Well, don’t just stand around here, then. Get on with it.”

Talon gave him a nod she hoped would appear respectful and

continued pushing the cart around the corner toward the conference room.

“It’s about time,” Shasta cheered, launching herself at the tray of snacks the moment Talon wheeled it into sight. “What were you doing down there for so long, anyway, flirting with all the kitchen staff?”

She didn’t wait for a reply, stuffing a strawberry into her mouth. Then, fastening her golden brown eyes on Talon as if she thought better of her manners, she raised the next berry with daintily manicured fingers and bit the end from the fruit, letting the scarlet juice stain her fingertips and lips. Talon caught a flash of white teeth and little pink tongue as she tucked the morsel into her mouth, and she realized the Princess was flirting with her again. Apparently, even in the middle of a political battle, Shasta was happy to continue their own more personal war.

Talon kept her expression neutral and picked up one of the trays from the cart, placing it before the King. She wondered if she should tell him what she’d overheard. Archduke Fickett and Chancellor Kumire were conspiring against the throne, possibly against the Princess herself. Kumire had even mentioned civil war. But it would be Talon’s word against Kumire’s, and without proof she wasn’t sure the King would believe her. Until she had something more solid to go on it would be a bad idea to go around making accusations of treason.

The viceroys had begun to file back into the conference room, and Talon resumed her stance outside the door. She passed Fickett in the doorway and met his gaze evenly. She wasn’t afraid of the old weasel. To get to Shasta he would have to go through her first. Talon would take great satisfaction in running him through, and his cloying, obnoxious son, too, if it came to that.

Fickett seemed not to notice her stare and brushed past her into the room. Talon took her place against the outer wall and sighed as the door closed once more. It was going to be another long afternoon.



Qiturah sank gladly onto the prayer cushion in her small chamber, settling her feet comfortably beneath her before lifting her hands into prayer position. She always looked forward to her private meditation in the evenings, and tonight she was in great need of some quiet rejuvenation.

It had been a very long day. An influx of refugees from the southern

coast had arrived midmorning, seeking shelter in the Great Temple. Their village had been burned in yet another petty conflict between feudal lords. Qiturah didn't care what the battle had been about. She was infinitely more concerned that they now had nearly fifty starving, terrified people under their roof, a few of them with severe injuries. The priestesses would do what they could, of course, but there was little left, even in the temple gardens, to feed such a crowd.

"Y'kurakura nasiaa, y'vysashun lo siriaa..." The words of the Ithyrian chant soothed her, as they always did. She could feel the Goddess moving to embrace her, and she welcomed the familiar, sweet touch upon her mind. Qiturah relaxed into it gratefully. *Divine Lady, Goddess of my heart, I need Your love so badly tonight. Please, Lady, give me the wisdom to lead Your Daughters, Your people, through this time of darkness. I cannot manage it alone.*

She felt Ithyris respond immediately. Peace crept blissfully over her body, calming her mind, her heartbeat, her breathing, and wrapping her in the delicious, overwhelming sensation of being loved. Those who said the life of a priestess was painfully chaste had never felt Ithyris moving inside them the way Qiturah did. She could not imagine ever loving another human being the way she loved her beautiful Goddess. Nothing could compare to the sheer glory of Ithyris's presence, the feeling of being surrounded by unadulterated purity and light.

But tonight, Qiturah was to receive an even more special gift.

"Julias yi shaa'ri, y'Ostryn." The musical words sounded in her ears and Qiturah nearly jumped in surprise. She knew only one voice like that, so rich and lyrical that it sang rather than spoke.

"Sweet Ithyris," she gasped, so startled that she forgot to use the Ithyrian tongue. The Goddess rarely spoke so clearly, unless there was something She wanted, and the command was one Qiturah had been hoping for. "Oh, speak to me again, Lady, please." She waited breathlessly. Though she had understood the first time, of course, Qiturah craved the sound of that voice again. It had been many winters since she'd last heard it.

"Julias yi shaa'ri," the words repeated, and Qiturah felt tears spring to her eyes.

"Yes, Ithyris, I hear you. It will be done." She rose to her feet and threw open her chamber door so quickly that a young priestess passing in the corridor looked up with concern.

“Is everything all right, Mother Qiturah?” the girl inquired with a bow.

Qiturah could not keep the elation from her voice. “Things are very well, *Ostryn*, very well indeed. Tell the others that the Goddess has commanded the priestesses of Verdred to take up *shaa’ri*. We begin tomorrow.”

She could see the priestess’s mouth drop open even beneath her filmy veil. “Yes, Your Honor, at once.”

Qiturah could not wait for morning. She hurried down the corridor to her temple study and rummaged through the drawer of her desk until she’d located a quill and parchment. She sat at the desk and set to work. Many letters needed to be written, one to the head priestess of every Ithyrian temple in Verdred.

The Goddess was finally calling Her Daughters to prepare for war.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I just don’t understand it,” Shasta complained, keeping her voice quiet while watching Talon from across the lesson hall.

Her guardian was explaining some sort of acrobatic maneuver to the young recruits he was training. He moved his hands animatedly to demonstrate the proper technique and then bent backward, planting one hand on the floor and flipping his legs over his head in a smooth arc. His sword was still held firmly in his free hand. The younger soldiers applauded enthusiastically and hopped up, eager to try the move for themselves.

Shasta stabbed the tip of her quill into the parchment she was supposed to be working on. “How much more obvious do I need to be before he’ll start taking me seriously?”

Lyris smiled. “Highness, you mustn’t be angry with him. Talon thinks of you as a sister. We all do.”

“But I’m not his sister. Doesn’t he realize that I love him? I just want him to feel the same way about me.” The Princess glared sullenly in his direction.

“Maybe you just need to be a little more direct about it.” This suggestion came from Bria, who had a twinkle in her eye.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you keep fluttering your eyelashes at him, mooning and sighing, it looks like you’re just playing games. If you want a man’s attention you need to command it.”

“Oh, Bria, hush. What would you know about it, anyway?” Lyris reprimanded with a touch of amusement in her tone.

Bria made a face at her older sister. “I know more than you do, Miss I-want-to-be-a-virgin-the-rest-of-my-life.”

“Bria!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” the younger girl pointed out cheerfully before turning back to Shasta. “Let me tell you something about men, Princess. They only understand one language, and that’s this.” She wiggled her fingers. “You want a man to notice you, you have to get right in his face and touch him until he can’t think of anything but you.”

“Bria!” Lyris’s mouth hung open. “That’s an entirely indecent thing for a lady to say.”

Bria shrugged. “But it’s true.”

“Don’t let Talon hear you talking like that, or he’s likely to scrub your mouth with soap and lock you up for the rest of your life.” The young Pledged turned to Shasta. “Pay no attention to my sister, Princess. I don’t know where she gets such vulgar ideas.”

“I know what men like, that’s all.” Bria elbowed Shasta conspiratorially.

Shasta looked down at her own fingers, wiggling them thoughtfully. “So, you think I should...what—march up to Talon and kiss him or something?”

Bria burst into a fit of giggles. “Oh, what I wouldn’t give to see that.”

“Now stop it, Bria. I mean it, this is going too far.” Lyris’s usually calm voice was suddenly snappish, and she took Shasta’s hands in her own, staring the Princess straight in the face. “Listen to me, Highness. Talon isn’t like other men.”

“I can see that.” Shasta sighed dreamily, her gaze following her guardian spot some of his students as they attempted the back flip he’d demonstrated.

“No, I mean that you can’t just approach him like that. You mustn’t. Highness. I know your feelings for him are strong, but trust me when I tell you they will lead you nowhere. Talon just...he isn’t your type.”

“And what’s so not-my-type about him? He’s handsome, he’s so intelligent and courageous and strong...” Bria nearly fell off her chair laughing, and Lyris glared hard at her younger sister.

Bria sighed. “Yes, Talon’s a marvel. But Lyris is right, Highness. It would never work.”

“Why not?”

The sisters exchanged a glance and Bria said, "Because this is just infatuation. Trust me, you'll get over it and feel silly for ever letting it get to you." She patted Shasta's hand, all mirth gone from her expression. "We just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Talon would never hurt me."

"Not on purpose, no," Lyris agreed quietly. "But if you keep chasing him like this, he might not have a choice."

Shasta turned Lyris's words over and over in her mind for several days. She couldn't imagine Talon ever doing anything to cause her pain, despite his sisters' warnings. He was the most honorable man she had ever met. Surely he was worthy of her affections. And even though Bria had seemed to agree with Lyris in the end, she had given Shasta an intriguing bit of advice that the Princess could not help but ponder. Could she really command Talon's attention just by touching him?

Lyris said that Talon was not like other men, but Shasta had seen with her own eyes just how much Talon enjoyed Erinda's touch. She couldn't imagine what else he could possibly have in common with the plump little chambermaid. Certainly Erinda possessed a worldly aura that implied confidence and experience. Maybe that was how she had won Talon over to begin with. And if a common chambermaid could seduce someone as stoic and self-controlled as Talon, why couldn't the Princess of Ithyria?

She wasn't worried about what the King would say. According to law she was allowed to choose her own husband, and her father, for all his faults, loved her enough to wish for her happiness above all other things. When he saw how happy she and Talon were together, she was certain he would not object to the match.

She spent hours envisioning the perfect wedding. She would sweep into the temple, dressed all in white, with a train so long that the temple doors would have to be left open so it could tumble down the stairs behind her. She would stand at Talon's side, and he would smile down at her with love shining in those incredibly deep, dark eyes. They would pledge their devotion in front of the entire court but be so absorbed in one another that it would be like they were the only man and woman left in the world. And she would then place the crown of Ithyria on Talon's head, making him heir to her father's throne and cementing the royal line for another generation.

They would have children, of course. A boy and a girl to rule after them. Maybe even twins, which were common in the Rane bloodline.

She would name them Daric and Talia, after her brother and mother... unless of course Talon wanted to pass on one of his own family names. And when the King had reached an age where he was too tired to continue the responsibilities of the crown, he would abdicate in favor of his handsome son-in-law, and together Talon and Shasta would be the best rulers Ithyria had ever known. They would clean up the provincial governments, establish schools for the children of Ithyria, abolish the laws that made women the property of their husbands and fathers. And oh, the delicious, romantic irony of seeing a common Outlander rule the country as king!

It was a pleasant daydream. Of course, there was the small matter of getting her guardian to return her feelings. Her chances didn't seem promising, for with each passing day, he seemed more and more determined to ignore her. She was beginning to think she might never get through to him.



Spring turned into early summer and the weather began to get hot, especially in the afternoons. Shasta grew faint at times from the combination of heat and heavy gowns, and her tutors began to schedule lessons in the cooler hours of the morning so that her afternoons were free and she could lounge around her chambers in her lighter dressing robes.

On one such afternoon in her sitting room, Shasta looked up from the book in her lap and brushed a damp strand of hair from her forehead. She resented the mugginess of summer almost as much as the winter cold. Both extremes kept her cooped up indoors with nothing much to do. She was clad in an airy pink silk robe with short, fluttering sleeves that was much cooler than any of her heavier layered skirts and petticoats, but she was still feeling slightly light-headed. It was more humid than usual today, probably thanks to the rain shower the night before, and the air felt heavy in her lungs.

Talon was sitting in his usual chair by the hearth, one ankle crossed over his knee. The heat did not seem to bother him as much as it did her. Even on this sweltering afternoon he wore long dark trousers and a linen shirt buttoned all the way to his neck. There were several open books on the floor and an unfurled map on the table to his right, and he was busy scribbling something on the blank page of a notebook

balanced carefully against one thigh. His dark hair was plastered lightly to his forehead, and one stubborn lock kept falling forward into his eyes as he worked.

Nurse had left a few minutes ago to see to the preparation of lunch, so they were alone for the time being. Shasta closed the book in her lap. *I've tried everything else*, she reasoned, rising to her feet. *It's now or never.*

Talon looked up at her. "Highness?"

She approached him with deliberate steps, taking the quill from his hand and closing the notebook and setting them both on top of the map on the table.

Her guardian blinked at her curiously. "Is everything all right?"

Shasta tugged at his hands and he stood obediently. She found herself looking up into his face, a full head above her own. Taking a deep breath, she thought of Bria's words. *Men only understand one language.* She placed her hands on his chest, running them slowly along his collarbone and then over his shoulders and around his neck. Meeting his dark eyes, she smiled shyly and rose on tiptoe.



Talon felt her entire body tense beneath Shasta's touch. "Highness, what are you doing?"

The Princess's fingers wound into her hair, and she tugged Talon's head down until Talon could feel lips brushing lightly against one earlobe. Shasta's breath tickled her neck and sent a sudden uncontrollable shiver coursing along her spine.

Talon gave a sharp gasp and seized Shasta's wrists. "Shasta. Stop." She rarely used the Princess's first name, but it seemed to get her attention.

"Why?" The amber eyes searched her face teasingly. "Don't you like me?" Shasta pressed her hips gently into Talon's, but did not attempt to free her hands.

"Princess, you know that isn't even an option." Talon forced herself not to dwell on the feel of Shasta's body against her own, or how remarkably beautiful the Princess looked with her heat-flushed cheeks and charmingly damp hairline. She realized her charge must have tired of subtlety and was now going to try a more aggressive approach. If it had been anyone else it might have been comical; the Princess was such

an innocent and she was trying far too hard to be seductive. But there was nothing funny about the way Talon's heart had begun to pound. "You don't know what you're doing."

"I know enough. And what I don't know, you can teach me."

Talon backed away, releasing Shasta's wrists. "No."

She was startled by the bitter look that crossed the Princess's face. "You don't seem to mind when Erinda touches you."

"Erinda?"

"I've seen you, so don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

Talon ran a hand through her hair, her mind racing. She wasn't sure when the Princess had learned of her relationship with the chambermaid, or exactly how much Shasta really knew. Talon chose to keep her answer vague. "That's different."

"Why? Because I'm the Princess?"

"No...yes." Talon took a deep breath. "Princess, there are things that you don't know about me. I'm your guardian, and this is wrong."

"I love you, Talon. What's wrong with that?"

"Everything!" Talon growled. "You can't have feelings like that for me, Princess, you mustn't." Desperately she tried to think of an explanation, an excuse, anything to keep the Princess from touching her again. "Look, I know you think you're in love with me, but you're not."

"I am."

"You don't even know me."

Shasta laughed. "I spend every minute of the day with you. I think I know you pretty well."

"You don't know anything."

"And Erinda does? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Are you in love with her?"

The hurt in the Princess's voice was unmistakable, and Talon closed her eyes tightly to maintain control. "No. Erinda and I have an understanding, that's all."

"What kind of understanding could you have with a servant girl that you can't have with me?"

"I can't explain it."

"Can't or won't?"

“Both.”

Shasta gave a little screech. “Why do you always do this? Why are you always so closed off and distant? If I don’t know you, maybe it’s because you’re so damned elusive, like you’re hiding some huge secret all the time. I tell you everything, Talon. Everything. It’s not fair.” She stamped her foot childishly. “I could make you tell me, you know. Or I could make your precious Erinda tell me. It wouldn’t be that hard.”

“Princess.” Talon tried for a reasonable tone. “If you love me as you say you do, then you have to trust me. I’m sorry I can’t tell you everything, but I can’t.” The confusion and pain in Shasta’s amber eyes was too much for Talon to stand, and she could not help taking the Princess’s face in her hands. “Listen, if my relationship with Erinda bothers you so much, I’ll call it off. Is that what you want?”

Shasta’s hands came up again and locked themselves around Talon’s neck, and Talon instantly regretted getting that close. “What I want...” The Princess tilted her face up and kissed her.

Her lips were so soft, and Talon’s keen senses were suddenly overwhelmed with the smell of her, the flowery fragrance of the Princess’s perfume mingled with the salty sharpness of her perspiration, and beneath it...Shasta’s own unique scent, like raspberries and rain, the natural fragrance of her very skin. It was a scent Talon had grown to recognize easily over the past two winters, and knowing it belonged only to the Princess she found it intoxicating.

A powerful wave of desire swept through her, and before she could stifle it, a fire began in her belly and spread outward until she wasn’t sure she still had control of her own limbs. Her arms tightened around the small of the Princess’s back, the cool pink silk of Shasta’s robe sliding sensuously beneath her hands.

Shasta’s lips parted against hers and her small tongue teased at Talon’s mouth, flickering over her lower lip. Talon was unable to suppress a moan. Delicately, playfully, the Princess ran her tongue along the bottom edge of Talon’s upper teeth before pushing deeper. The taste of her was sweet, so erotic in its forbidden innocence that Talon felt like she was falling. In a few more seconds she would be completely bereft of her ability to reason at all.

This could not be. No matter how much she ached to take her Princess into her arms and give her everything she was asking for, Shasta was the future Queen of Ithyria, and Talon’s responsibility. More

importantly, she didn't know the truth about Talon and could never be told. Her life depended on it. With enormous effort Talon broke the kiss and pulled away.

A triumphant smile curved the Princess's lips. "That's what I want."

Talon stared, panting softly to catch her breath. *Unbelievable*. The Princess was such an innocent. She had no real understanding of the response her touch aroused. To her this was a game, but for Talon it was quickly becoming much more. Her trysts with Erinda were purely for fun and to satisfy their mutual need for physical contact, but they had no emotional attachment to one another. With Shasta it was different. Never in her life had Talon cared for someone so much or wanted someone so badly. Why did it have to be the one person in the world that she could never have? If Shasta knew, if she ever discovered the truth, she'd be disgusted.

Talon backed away, the back of her hand pressed to her mouth. When she managed to speak, her throat felt like it was coated with sand. "Don't do that again," she mumbled and left the chamber, closing the door behind her.

Leaning against the wall out in the corridor, she willed the rough stone to cool the heat coursing through her veins, heat that had nothing to do with the summer weather. How long could she keep this up?



Eyes on the door, Shasta raised a hand to lips that were still warm and tingling from the broken contact. Had she done something wrong? She could have sworn that Talon wanted the kiss as badly as she did. She felt the response of his body to her touch, the way his arms tightened around her and his breath quickened in her ear. But then he'd pushed her away and left.

Perhaps she'd made a terrible mistake. Was he angry? Shasta knew he would not have gone far; it was his duty to stay by her side. He was probably right outside the door, but she was too humiliated to go after him. What was she thinking, throwing herself at a man like that? She was no better than a common harlot. Hadn't he once insulted her with that label? What must he think of her now? How could she face him again after this? And why... *Why doesn't he want me?*

A small whimper escaped her, and with flaming cheeks Shasta threw herself onto her bed.



Talon had no idea how long she stood outside the Princess's door, listening to her muffled sobs. The sound tore at her heart. She knew Shasta had to be confused and hurting. A girl's first crush was a powerful thing, and Talon berated herself for ever flirting with the Princess, for giving her a reason to think she might be interested.

In truth, for a long while, Talon had thought it was harmless fun. Shasta was destined to be courted by princes and kings, and Talon was only a soldier. But she knew there had been moments when the flirting went beyond playfulness. Shasta was unlike any other person Talon had ever known—intelligent, beautiful, and fiercely independent, yet fragile. It was the Princess's ferocity and tenacity, despite her ironically frail constitution, that Talon admired most. It awakened her deepest protective instincts in a way that only Lyris and Bria had ever been able to. She had taken the position as Shasta's bodyguard solely to protect her sisters, but now she found that she wanted to protect the Princess just as much. Maybe even more.

She straightened as Lyris approached from down the hall, her anxiety apparent. No doubt she had been alarmed at the sound of Shasta crying from the other side of the wall.

She eyed the Princess's door and Talon's face, and demanded, "What's going on?"

Talon had no idea how to answer. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Lyris patted her older sister's shoulder. "I know. It's not your fault. You're just too charming for your own good. She'll get over it, you'll see." Lyris paused and looked at Talon more intently. "You're not...you don't have feelings for the Princess, do you?"

Talon gave a heavy sigh and hid her eyes behind her hand. "I don't know."

"Talon," Lyris's voice took on a warning tone, "you're not a man. Erinda is one thing, but Princess Shasta?"

Lyris was the only other person who knew of Talon's relationship with the chambermaid. Talon hadn't even felt comfortable telling their

youngest sister about it. Somehow she was sure Bria wouldn't be able to understand. Even the generally open-minded Lyris had found the situation strange, to say the least.

"I know. I know it's all wrong. But..." Talon laid a hand on the oak-paneled door, wishing she could see through the wood. "I can't explain it. I feel like my heart's being taken from me."

Lyris squeezed her shoulder. "I just want you to be happy, Talon. You've given up so much for everyone else, and you deserve to be happy. But this is only going to bring you pain."

Helplessly, Talon gazed into her worried eyes. "I know."

Lyris sighed again. "I'll go talk to her. Maybe I can cheer her up."



That night, Shasta lay in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to Talon's rhythmic breathing from the cot nearby. The whole evening had been awkward. Talon hadn't even come back into the room until right before it was time to sleep. He'd walked in without a word, inspected her privy chamber for her as usual, waited for her to finish, then lain down and fallen asleep without even meeting her eyes. Part of her was grateful that her guardian hadn't mentioned the events of the afternoon, and part of her was angry. Embarrassment and frustration had been battling back and forth inside her for the last few hours. She knew she'd overstepped an invisible boundary today, and obviously she'd made Talon extremely uncomfortable. But he should feel lucky for her attentions, she told herself stubbornly. She was Crown Princess Shasta Talia Soltranis of Rane. Did he think he could do better? Or perhaps he was afraid of her father. Shasta had no such worries, and if that was Talon's only reason for rejecting her she was certain she could explain it to him—if he ever spoke to her again.

Bitterly she replayed the memory in her mind for the hundredth time. The rich, throaty sound of his laugh, and Erinda's irritating giggle. The shock of the sight of them together in the hay, and the weak feeling in her knees as she watched them kiss, at the view of Talon's tanned, muscled back when he moved. Since that night, she had been unable to get the image out of her mind or to stop wondering what it might be like to have been in Erinda's place. The crazy mix of jealousy and longing that filled her as she ran back to the gardens had only grown stronger over the past few moons.

Once she'd realized how attractive Talon was, she became increasingly aware of his presence, the warmth of his body as he stood behind her chair at the table, the way his teeth flashed when he grinned. She admired the strength of his well-muscled frame when he swung her down from her horse after their rides. Even his quiet, husky voice in her ear when he helped with her lessons caused warm shivers down her back. She was surprised he hadn't seemed to notice. For the love of the Goddess, everyone else in the palace was well aware of her attraction to her guardian. Why did he insist on ignoring it?

Lyris and Bria were convinced that Shasta was merely infatuated with Talon, and his words to her that afternoon seemed to indicate that he thought so too. He probably thought she was just playing games with him, as Bria had said. But what else was she supposed to do? Shasta had never experienced such feelings before. She was certain they were far too intense to be a meaningless crush, no matter how silly she seemed to everyone else.

The thought of Talon with Erinda was what really stung, though. Today, Talon had said he would give up Erinda if she asked him to. That would help, but it wasn't enough. Shasta wanted him to hold her, to kiss her the way he had kissed the servant girl. She wanted to know what it felt like. And she could swear there were moments when he felt at least some attraction to her... a flicker in his dark eyes sometimes, when he thought she didn't know he was watching. But maybe she was just imagining it. She had to be, because she had practically thrown herself at him today and he'd rejected her completely.

In the darkness her face grew hot again at the memory of the way she'd wrapped her arms around Talon and kissed him as brazenly as a barmaid. No wonder he didn't want her. No decent man would want a girl who threw herself at him like that, and Talon was so honorable he must have been appalled. Like a fool she had tried to test his resolve, to make him forget the same integrity that made him so noble in the first place. A tear slid down her face. How was she going to face him tomorrow? Listening carefully for any change in her guardian's soft, steady breathing, Shasta slipped out of bed and slid her feet into satin slippers. Carefully she picked up her robe from the base of the bed and tiptoed to the door. She held her breath and opened the door a tiny, agonizing bit at a time, but with such patience that the leather hinges barely made a squeak. Once in the corridor she wrapped the robe around herself and started to run.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Talon awoke the next morning with a jolt. It was still very early; the gray fingers of dawn were only beginning to creep through the window. But something was wrong, and it took her about two seconds to figure out what it was. Shasta was gone.

In a matter of moments she had donned her boots and sword belt and was racing down the corridor and into the courtyard. She was lucky. Shasta's dainty satin slippers had left light tracks in the grass that had not yet faded. The Princess had been heading for the servants' stables. *Of course, she has her fencing clothes hidden out there.*

Talon sprinted through the arched stone of the gardens toward the stables at the opposite end of the grounds. She didn't know how long the Princess had been gone or how much of a head start she had. Given the awkwardness between them last night, Talon could understand why Shasta would have slipped off alone, but as she raced across the palace grounds she cursed herself for not having been more vigilant.

She should have expected this. Shasta was obviously distraught and humiliated after Talon's rejection the day before. She should have talked to her, said something comforting, anything to let the Princess know that she hadn't done anything wrong, that it wasn't Shasta's fault. *It's not you, it's me.* Talon snorted; if she were in Shasta's place she wouldn't have believed that trite assurance either.

She could only hope she would find Shasta and get her back to the castle before anyone else realized that they were both absent—and before the Princess got herself into trouble, or worse. She cast up a quick prayer to Ithyris or anyone else who might be listening. *Please, just keep her safe.*

When she reached the stables, Talon ran to the haystack where she knew Shasta kept the split skirts and loose blouse she wore for sparring practice. Sure enough, the Princess's robe, sleeping shift, and slippers lay in a pile by the straw. Talon bent over to pick up the nightdress. It was warm—from the Princess's body heat or the mugginess of the air, she couldn't quite tell. Dampness around the neckline told Talon that Shasta must have run all the way to the stables.

Alarmed, she saw that one of the fencing foils was missing. If Shasta had taken a weapon with her, she was obviously planning to venture farther afield than the gardens. Was she running away? Talon felt sick at the thought. The Princess was a good fencer, but such skills wouldn't do much to protect her against an experienced assassin or anyone else who really wanted to do her harm.

“Looking for something?”

A voice startled Talon and she spun around to face an aged stable hand. “Kallin, did you see Princess Shasta ride out this morning?”

Kallin scratched his temple. “Sure, she left about a quarter of an hour ago, rode out of here on that little black filly she likes so much. Running fast, like demons were chasin' her. I thought you were with her.”

“Which way did she go?”

“South, toward the moors.”

There was no time for a saddle. Talon chose the biggest mare in the stables and swung herself onto its back. If Kallin was right and the Princess had left so recently, then she had a good chance of catching up to her. Leaning over the mare's neck as its powerful hooves pounded the ground, Talon thanked the Goddess that she hadn't slept any longer than she had or Shasta might have had a much greater head start.

They picked up her trail quickly. Shasta was riding fast and hard through the moor, so it wasn't difficult to follow the grass beaten down by her horse's hooves. But Talon knew she still probably had quite a chase ahead of her. The little filly Shasta was riding was not only swift, but possessed great endurance and probably wouldn't slow for at least an hour.

She found herself very thankful for Captain Vaughn's repeated field exercises on these moors. She was familiar with the terrain and knew what to look for. Shasta was heading southeast, and Talon pulled up a map of the area mentally, for the first time finding a reason to use all the geography Vaughn had pounded into her head.

The moors south of Ardrenn were bordered to the southeast by Warin Forest, which stretched all the way to the banks of Indellus Lake. There was one small village on the edge of the forest: Warinsmoor, if Talon's memory served her correctly. Though Shasta probably had no particular destination in mind, her trail cut through the grass and managed to find the one developed road leading across the moor, right to the village. Talon wasn't sure whether to be relieved or even more afraid. While the village meant that the Princess was unlikely to get lost, where there were people there was always greater danger. Especially for a pretty young woman riding alone.

Talon followed the dusty road for nearly two leagues before Warinsmoor finally came into view. She hadn't seen any sign of Shasta leaving the road, but it had been impossible to distinguish the filly's hoofprints from all the other traffic along the hard-packed earth. She pulled on the big mare's mane, stopping short in front of a man standing with an overturned cart just outside the village. He was picking up shards of broken pottery from the dust and muttering under his breath.

"Excuse me, sir. Have you seen a young woman on a horse come this way? She would have been wearing split skirts, long brown hair, riding fast..."

The man subjected Talon to a taciturn stare. "Sure did, just a few minutes ago. Little hellcat nearly ran me down, she did. Turned over my cart and cost me some of my best wares." He spat on the ground. "Hope she gets what's coming to her, inconsiderate little wench."

"What do you mean?"

"She galloped straight through the village and headed for the forest on the other side." He grinned as he pointed in the direction of the trees. "Lucero and his gang of outlaws have been living out there for the last two moons, everybody knows that. Good-for-nothing pack of vermin, the lot of them, sneaking into the village at night and making off with our chickens and cattle, harassing all travelers coming in and out. Even the King's own royal guard haven't been able to snuff them out of there yet. Those ruffians'll be very happy to have a visitor like that one. Take her down a peg or two, I'm sure."

Fear shot through Talon and, just as quickly, she stifled that response. Now was not the time to let emotion override her judgment. Thanking the stranger, she urged the mare through the village toward the forest.

They barreled into the trees without slowing. "Shasta!" Talon

didn't dare call for the Princess by her title. If there were indeed outlaws nearby, she didn't want them getting any ideas about holding Shasta for ransom. Even using her first name was a risk, but it would be worth it if it helped find her. "Shasta, can you hear me? Shasta!"

A scream tore through the woods, and Talon drew her sword and directed the mare off the path through the trees to her left. She would know the Princess's voice anywhere. Fear and hope surged through her veins with a rush of adrenaline. She might not be too late.

Talon didn't have to go far to find her charge. Five swarthy, dirty men had the Princess and her horse cornered against a rock wall. Shasta's little filly reared back and pawed at the outlaws trying to put a rope around her neck, making loud, screeching whinnies. Shasta screamed again as one of the outlaws wrapped his hand around her ankle. She slashed at his face with the fencing foil. The blade drew blood, and he was forced to release his grip. His comrades laughed while he cursed in fury.

Relief flooded through Talon when she saw that the Princess was relatively unhurt. She charged toward the group of outlaws and cleared a path through them with her sword. When she pulled up alongside the black filly, Shasta dropped her foil and allowed Talon to swing her onto the mare behind her.

Seizing the filly's reins, Talon dug her heels into her own mare's sides and attempted to force her way past the men. From both sides, outlaws came at them. The mare reared back and the filly broke away. Talon lifted her sword over her head with one arm while clinging to the thick mane with the other to avoid falling off. She was thankful for her acrobatic training. Without a saddle and with Shasta's added weight behind her, they both would have slid right off the horse if not for the instinctive balancing grip of her legs.

Talon heard a sudden whooshing sound and grunted as pain exploded in her side. Shasta shrieked. The mare came back down and Talon slashed her sword across the throat of one attacker and immediately swung at another, driving him back. She did not pause to observe the results of her handiwork but leaned over the mare's neck and shouted, "Ha!"

The big horse broke through the outlaws and galloped back toward the path. Whipping branches stung their arms and legs as they escaped. The men pursued them on foot, but after only a few minutes they gave

up the chase, apparently preferring to stay under the cover of the trees. Talon was willing to bet she and Shasta hardly seemed worth the risk of capture.

When they had cleared the woods and Talon was satisfied that they were not being chased, she pulled the mare to a stop and looked back over her shoulder. "Are you all right, Highness?" Breathing was surprisingly painful and her words came out as a wheeze, but she still gave a gasp of concern when she saw the long cut across the Princess's cheek. "You're bleeding."

Shasta stared at Talon in disbelief. "Am I all right? Talon, I have a scratch. You have an arrow sticking out of your side."

Startled, Talon looked down. A red patch had already spread through her shirt. The thin white linen was soaked with a steadily growing circle around the shaft, which was sticking about a foot out of her ribs on the right side. She grunted. "Huh. No wonder it hurts."

"That's not funny. Quick, we need to get to the village. They have to have a healer there who can attend to you."

Talon shook her head. "No." She could not risk being examined by anyone who might discover her secret.

Shasta's eyes narrowed. "Really, Talon, now is not the time to be stubborn."

"We'll return to the castle and I'll see the healer there."

"We're not waiting that long. Look at you, you're practically white." Before Talon could stop her, the Princess slid down from the horse and whistled for the filly, which had been trailing them all the way. "I'll fetch the healer myself."

"Princess, please!" A note of desperation found its way into her exclamation.

Shasta spun around, her eyes shooting sparks. "And why not?"

"Princess, I can't...I'm not..." Talon gritted her teeth as a wave of dizziness crashed over her. She was losing a lot of blood, very quickly. "I can't be seen by another healer. We have to go back to the castle."

Shasta glared defiantly, and Talon's desperation grew. The Princess was determined, and in her wounded and distracted state, Talon wracked her brain to come up with an excuse that Shasta would accept.

"I'm tired of this, Talon, I'm sick of all your silly games and secrets. If you can't give me one good reason—"

"I'm not a man!" Talon winced as the words left her lips, but there

was no taking them back. Terror overwhelmed her as she realized what she'd done.

Shasta stared in confusion. "What?"

Talon took a couple of shallow breaths, each one sending sharp stabbing pains through her chest. "I...your father, he doesn't want anyone to know. Highness, you have to swear you won't tell anyone. I'm not a man. I'm a woman. And if the healer in that village finds out, the news will be all over Ithyria by tomorrow evening. You'll be in great danger."

The Princess took a step back, her eyes wide. "Talon, if this is a joke—"

"It's not a joke." Talon looked down at the mare's mane in her fingers. "Your father—why do you think he trusts you so completely with me? Lets me share your room, sleep beside your bed? I'm a woman. He knows I wouldn't hurt you, or...compromise your virtue." She felt her cheeks flush. "But the rest of the castle, the rest of the kingdom—they have to think I'm a man. They have to believe your bodyguard is formidable, capable of protecting you. People just don't have that kind of respect for a woman. If the assassin who killed your brother ever found out, he might think you're not well guarded after all and make another attempt on your life."

"You're lying. I don't believe you." Shasta stamped one foot in the dirt. "Do you realize how completely insane you sound?"

Talon closed her eyes and fought for breath. "Please don't make me do this."

"Do what?"

She opened her eyes again. The skepticism on Shasta's face and her own rapidly fading strength convinced her that there was no other way. Talon unbuttoned the front of her shirt. After looking around to be sure no one else was nearby, she pulled the shirt open and winced as the movement jarred the shaft of the arrow embedded in her side. The wrappings that held down her chest were clearly visible.

Shasta's golden eyes grew to the size of saucers as they flew from Talon's wrapped breasts up to her face. The Princess shook her head hysterically, then spun on one heel and turned her back.

"I wanted to tell you." Talon's fingers shook as she refastened the buttons. "Goddess knows, Princess, there were so many times I would have given anything to tell you. I never meant for you to find out, not like this."

Shasta's knees must have given way, for she sank to the ground on the spot. "Two winters." Her back was still turned. "You've been with me two winters. You've shared my meals, my lessons, my sleeping chambers. And now I find out that you've been lying to me the whole time."

"I never lied. I just couldn't tell you the truth."

"It's the same thing! You let me believe that you were...that I could..." Her hand suddenly flew to her mouth. "Goddess save me," she breathed. "Yesterday, I tried to...I *kissed* you."

The sheer horror in Shasta's voice pained Talon in a way that made the arrow seem trivial. "That wasn't your fault, Princess. You didn't know."

"I've been such a fool."

"No. You had no way of knowing. And I wanted so badly to find a way to tell you, but...well, I just couldn't." She coughed, and little flecks of red stained the cuff of her sleeve.

The gasping sound seemed to snap Shasta back to reality. She stood up and regarded Talon's injury coldly, then glanced at her own black filly. "I suppose I'd better ride with you on the way back," she said slowly, looking not at all pleased by the prospect. "Otherwise you're likely to fall off that horse before we even make it to the palace."

Talon was too weak to waste time arguing. She lowered her arm so that Shasta could pull herself up behind her. The Princess's stiff, flinching touch at Talon's waist made it clear she wished to avoid as much physical contact as possible. Fighting her dizziness and pain, Talon directed the mare back toward the castle at a full gallop.



Shasta was in shock. She didn't know whether to be angry, or amused, or horrified. Talon, a woman? It seemed ludicrous, but her guardian had never lied to her before. Except that now it seemed Talon had been lying all along, and Shasta didn't know what to think. Her romantic fantasies, the beautiful wedding and perfect twin children and glorious reign, seemed like a cruel joke now.

Lyris had said her brother wasn't like other men. Shasta realized that in her own way, the Pledged had been trying to warn her, and Shasta hadn't been listening. She was too wrapped up in her own idiotic daydreams, believing that nothing Talon ever did would hurt her. How

very wrong she had been. She felt like her guardian had just plunged a knife into her heart, and the betrayal hurt more than anything else. She'd thought they were friends. More than that...how many times had she told Talon that he was like a brother to her? Only it turned out that Talon wasn't a "he" at all.

Her guardian coughed again, and Shasta found herself caught in a swirl of emotions. Fury and shock were not quite able to overwhelm her genuine worry over Talon's wound. She'd run away from the castle like a child throwing a tantrum, and if Talon hadn't come after her she might have faced a terrible fate at the hands of those outlaws. Talon had saved her, possibly at the cost of his life. *Her life*, Shasta corrected herself bitterly.

Shasta made up her mind to concentrate on one thing at a time. First, she would make sure Talon received treatment for her wound. *Then I'll decide whether or not to have the lying bastard executed for treason.* The thought was ridiculous, as Talon had only been following her father's orders, but in her infuriated state it still gave her some perverse comfort to consider it.



King Soltran himself came running into the courtyard as the mare thundered through the open gates and slid to a stop. A small crowd of guards and curious servants quickly assembled, and Shasta had no doubt that someone had run to fetch her father the moment they were sighted.

"What happened?" The King pulled Shasta from the horse and into his arms. He held her tightly as two guards carefully helped Talon dismount. Kallin led the exhausted mare away.

"We were out riding this morning and were attacked," Shasta explained. It was not a complete lie. "Talon fought them off."

Soltran did not seem fooled. "And where exactly were the two of you riding that someone would attack you in broad daylight?" Then he noticed the thin stripe of blood, now dry, that lined her cheek, and his face darkened. "You're hurt."

"It's just a scratch, Father. I'm fine, and I can explain everything later, but Talon...she needs help."

The King stiffened and turned his hard gaze on Talon. "She?"

Talon nodded weakly. "She knows, Majesty. I'm sorry."

“Don’t blame Talon, Father. I was trying to bring the village healer—”

“Village healer?” Soltran rounded on his daughter. “You mean to tell me that you were out riding by Warinsmoor?” Furiously he glared at Talon. “What were the two of you doing so far from the castle? Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? There are outlaws in Warin Forest. The Ithyrian guard has been trying to apprehend them for moons now.”

Talon grimaced. “Yes, I know. We...uh...met.”

The anger in the King’s face was so terrible that several of the nearby maids stepped backward, and even the guards exchanged nervous glances. Soltran took a deep breath, and when he spoke his tone was dangerous. “Guard. Escort the Princess to her chambers. She is not to leave until I summon her. And you”—he jerked his thumb at another uniformed man—“take the Princess’s guardian to the infirmary, and call for the healer. There will be consequences for this.”

Shasta did not dare voice a protest and followed the guard meekly up to her chambers. She’d never seen her father so angry before. It frightened her. She wasn’t sure what he was going to do, but whatever it was, she knew it would not be pleasant.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Several mornings later, Shasta was summoned to her father's study. Talon was already there, and Shasta was relieved to see that some of the color had already returned to his...no, *her* face. *Argh, it's going to be so hard to start thinking of Talon as a woman.*

The palace healer had removed the arrow, announcing that while it had grazed the lung, it had not caused any permanent damage. Blood loss had been the primary enemy, and careful administration of fluids combined with poultices to stop the bleeding and prevent infection had Talon feeling much better already. However, though the old healer predicted a full recovery, Shasta had heard that he was quite disgruntled by the King's command for an audience with Talon so soon after her injury. But apparently Soltran was so insistent that the healer did not dare to cross him.

Shasta sat timidly in one of the chairs before the King's desk and glanced anxiously at Talon from her seat.

Soltran ordered Shasta's escort to close the door, which he did with a deep and resounding bang that made the Princess gulp. Her father's eyes were pinned to Talon, and when he spoke his words were deceptively calm. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you how disappointed I am." Talon nodded and hung her head. "In fact, disappointed doesn't even begin to describe it. My daughter could have been killed yesterday. I expected more from you, Talon."

"Father," Shasta tried to interject, but the King held up a hand.

"Silence." He continued to stare darkly at her guardian. "Not only was Shasta's life put in danger, but somehow you managed to break your

secret to her at the same time. I believe I was very clear on the terms of your service here, Talon. You know the consequences of failure.”

At this, Talon’s head snapped up. “Majesty, please, you can do whatever you want with me...”

“That was not our bargain. Guard!” The door opened and the guard outside saluted. “Have Lady Lyris and Lady Bria taken to the west conservatory, and inform Nurse that her services will be required there.” The man saluted again and closed the door, and Talon leaned forward in her chair.

“Your Majesty, no. Please, no. Let it be me.”

Shasta looked from her father to her guardian and back again, and her mouth dropped open in astonishment. “Father, what’s Talon talking about? What bargain?”

Soltran lifted an eyebrow. “Would you like to explain it to her?”

The pain on Talon’s face was excruciating as she locked eyes with Shasta. Then she tore her gaze away and looked down at the tapestry covering the floor. Her voice shook. “It’s my duty to protect you. If you are hurt under my care, Lyris and Bria pay the price. Their lives for yours.”

“That’s positively insane.” Shasta stared at the King. “Father, you can’t do this. Lyris and Bria didn’t do anything.”

He remained unmoved. “Talon’s duty is to protect you, and she failed. She knew what would happen.”

“I don’t see how she failed, Father. I have a tiny scratch, that’s all.”

“That’s not the point.” Shasta had never seen her father so cold. “You should not have been in that situation in the first place. It doesn’t matter how badly you were hurt. It never should have happened, and you were never supposed to learn of Talon’s true gender. It is not to your benefit to know. I’m just glad you are the only one she disclosed this to, or I would have to have her replaced completely.”

“Father, listen to me, this wasn’t Talon’s fault. I lied to you before.” Shasta blushed as she made the admission. One of the King’s thick eyebrows rose, and she hurried on before she lost her nerve. “We didn’t go out riding together. I ran away. I left while Talon was sleeping, and he...I mean, she came after me. If it hadn’t been for her I really might have gotten hurt. And she had to tell me about the...well, about not

being a man, because I was going to drag her in front of the village healer and then everyone would have known. Talon didn't do anything wrong, and neither did Lyris or Bria. You can't do this. I won't let you."

Soltran slammed a fist down on the desk in frustration, and Shasta jumped. "What do you want me to do, Shasta? Summon your poor whipping boy just so you can sneak out and console him tonight with sweets and a few gold coins?" Shasta's mouth dropped open. "Oh yes, I know all about your little arrangement with Lainen. I've always known, but I let it go on thinking that at least if your conscience bothered you enough to try and make it up to him, perhaps it wasn't a total loss. But this..." He shook his head. "This is far too serious a matter for such light punishment. You're eighteen, Shasta. You have to learn, somehow, that there are consequences for your actions. Everything you do has an effect on everyone around you. Lyris and Bria will each receive twenty strokes for your foolishness." Talon gave a small cry in the back of her throat, but the King seemed unmoved. "Perhaps watching your friends suffer for your mistakes will finally get that through to you!"

"No!" Shasta leapt to her feet. "You will not do this! I won't allow it!" She clenched her fists until they shook, and for several long minutes she and her father stared one another down. Then the King's expression turned thoughtful.

"Very well. Since you keep insisting that all of this was your fault, Shasta, I'm going to give you a choice. Either Lyris and Bria get the strokes, or you may opt to take them yourself."

Shasta sank back down into the chair. "Myself?"

Her father's expression was triumphant. He was usually so protective of her fragile health, and Shasta was certain he would not have made the challenge if he thought she would actually accept it. She had never been beaten in her life. It was an idea too foreign and terrible to comprehend. Uncertainly, she looked over at Talon. Though she was still furious with her guardian for deceiving her, the desperation in Talon's face was more than she could stand. She had the power to prevent this injustice, power her father clearly did not expect her to exercise.

She tightened her lips determinedly. "I'll do it." The words came out a little more tremulously than she would have liked, but she did not back down now that they were out of her mouth.

Talon's head snapped up, and both her father and her guardian stared with their mouths hanging open.

"Highness, no," Talon began, but Soltran held up a hand, regarding his daughter with incredulity.

"You're not serious."

Shasta gritted her teeth. "Oh yes, I am. You said I could take them, Father, and I'm going to." For a long moment she stared defiantly, daring her father to go back on his word.

Soltran's eyes narrowed angrily, and he threw his hands up in the air. "I've had enough of this, Shasta. I'm not playing these ridiculous power games with you. You want the beating, it's yours." He stood. "Talon, you will escort the Princess to the west conservatory for her punishment."

Shasta jumped from her seat and marched to the door. As she entered the corridor, she heard Soltran speak again. "And, Talon...tell Nurse she is not to spare her arm."

Shasta flinched but did not turn back around. Her fists shook at her sides as she stalked toward the tower stairs that led to the west wing of the palace. Stubbornly she forced one foot in front of the other, ignoring the little voice in the back of her head begging her to run the other way. Forty strokes. The most she'd ever seen Lainén receive was twenty, and that had been enough to reduce the good-natured boy to screams toward the end. Was she insane? *Father is the crazy one*, her mind insisted hotly. *Holding Lyris and Bria hostage over Talon like inconsequential pawns. He's no better than any of the provincial viceroys, using people for his own ends without any thought for their feelings or welfare.* That thought made her even angrier. *He thinks I'm too much of a coward to go through with it. I'll show him.*

She held on to the anger that suddenly filled her, because it was dulling her terror. Still, when they reached the doors of the conservatory, she faltered.

"Princess." Talon spoke for the first time, her deep voice close to Shasta's ear and full of anxiety. "You can't do this. It could kill you. Remember the woman in the market? You're not strong enough for this."

Oddly, those very words strengthened Shasta's resolve. She turned on her guardian fiercely. "Would you rather see Lyris and Bria beaten for something they didn't do?"

Talon winced. “Of course not, but...”

“I have to do this, Talon. Don’t worry, I’m too valuable to Ithyria. The Goddess won’t let me die.” Shasta pushed the doors open in time to see Nurse rolling up her sleeves. Lyris and Bria stood to one side. Shasta had not seen such fear on their faces since they’d first come to live at the palace.

“Nurse, stop.” The old woman turned to look at her, and Shasta stubbornly quelled a wave of fright that was nearly nauseating in its intensity. “Father has given new orders. I have chosen to take the strokes myself. All of them. And Father commands you not to spare your arm.”

The old woman’s brows disappeared into her hairline. “Is that so?”

Lyris ran forward, taking Shasta’s hands in her own. “No, Highness, it’s all right. We”—she looked back at her sister—“we’ve had whippings before. You don’t know what it is you’re asking for. Besides, this way the strokes will be split up between the two of us. It won’t be that bad. Please, let us do this for you.”

Shasta’s eyes filled with tears at this selfless generosity, but before she could answer Talon interrupted. “No, Princess, let me do it. I’m stronger, I can—”

“You’re wounded,” Shasta snapped firmly. “And this is not your decision. I’m through letting other people suffer for my foolishness.” She squeezed Lyris’s hand before releasing it, and marched to the center of the room where the curved whipping chair was waiting.

Again she felt the urge to run as she stared down at the strange wooden contraption, remembering all the times she’d witnessed Lainin at the mercy of this very chair. She knelt in front of it and leaned forward slowly, gripping the sides so hard her knuckles whitened.

She heard Nurse clear her throat hesitantly. “Your Highness, I really don’t think—”

Shasta twisted to look at her. “You can’t tell me you haven’t wished, at least once or twice, that you could get me in this chair instead of the whipping boy. Now’s your chance, and you may never get another. You’re going to punish me properly, or I will see to it that you’re assigned to kitchen staff for a moon, understand?” She knew that would rouse the old woman’s temper and was not disappointed.

“Very well.” Nurse threw her shoulders back resolutely. “Princess

Shasta Talia Soltranis of Rane, you have disobeyed the orders of your King and put the sole heir to the Ithyrian throne in undue danger. The punishment has been set at forty strokes of the strap. Are you ready?"

Shasta squeezed her eyes shut. "You may begin." The brave words were undermined considerably when they came out as barely more than a squeak.

The leather strap sang through the air, and when it finally connected Shasta gave a cry of pain. She'd known it would hurt but hadn't imagined how much. Her entire body jerked, and she tightened her grip on the sides of the chair.

"One."

Another strike, more painful than the first, and she could not suppress a second gasping cry. She was wearing a simple breakfast gown with only a shift beneath, as the morning had been hot. Still, it was one layer more than Lainen wore when he suffered these beatings, and Shasta still couldn't imagine how he ever withstood the pain. "Two."



At the Princess's first cry of pain Talon stepped forward, determined to put a stop to this insanity. But Lyris lay a hand on her arm. "No, Talon. You must let her do this. It's important."

Talon pulled away. "I can't just stand here and—"

"You must. I can't explain it, Talon, but I know that this is something she has to do for herself."

Talon flinched as the strap came down again and Shasta shrieked, still stubbornly clinging to the whipping chair. Talon couldn't believe that her pampered, self-centered charge had actually chosen to be beaten rather than allow her companions to suffer unjustly. Talon knew perfectly well that no one had ever laid a hand on Shasta before. It was a sacrifice she couldn't bear. "Lyris, this is just too much."

"Then leave if you mus,," Lyris replied firmly.

Talon shook her head. "I won't leave her." *I can't.*

The King had pulled her aside as they left his office and made Talon promise not to let the Princess be seriously injured. The hypocrisy sickened her. Shasta had called her father's bluff, and both of them were too hardheaded to admit defeat. Helplessly frustrated, she dug her nails into her palms as Shasta cried out again.

The Princess's sobs turned into a constant low moan punctuated

each time the strap fell, yet she did not call a halt. As Nurse's arm continued to rise and fall, Talon realized that Shasta had no intention of backing out. She would let Nurse beat her to death before she'd go back on her word. And at forty strokes, she might very well come close.

Though the leather of the strap in Nurse's hand was not designed for the purpose of drawing blood, at the force she was bringing it down Shasta might just faint from the pain. Surely the crotchety woman would not let things go that far.

With each count, Talon forcibly held herself back, respecting Shasta's stubborn pride. And her courage.

"Nineteen. Twenty."

It was only halfway over, and Shasta was already crying so hard she could barely breathe, making choking sounds that ripped at Talon's heart. Each new strike made a terrible noise, the cruel crack of leather over thinly protected flesh. A hellish eternity dragged between them, and Talon struggled to remember why she wasn't supposed to intervene. If Shasta's breathing got any more labored, she wouldn't have a choice.

"Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine."

As Nurse completed the thirtieth stroke Shasta lost her grip on the chair and slid forward, catching herself on the floor with her hands and wheezing. Nurse paused apprehensively.

"Enough!" Talon threw herself to the floor beside Shasta. The violent motion tore at the newly formed clot over her wound, but she paid no attention. She gathered the whimpering Princess into her arms and rocked back and forth. "Shh, Highness, it's all right. I've got you."

Shasta's gasping sobs racked her body so hard that for several minutes she could not reply, and she clung to Talon's arms so desperately that it made Talon's heart ache. But when she did finally lift her face there was still obstinacy filling the amber-colored eyes. "I have to... finish this."

"No." Talon's arms tightened around her. "Princess, you've had enough. I'll take the rest myself."

"I won't let you do that." Shasta pulled herself from her guardian's grasp and grabbed the arms of the chair, once again placing her body into it. She coughed, her hair in such wild disarray that Talon could scarcely see her face. "For once in my life I'm going to take responsibility for my own damned mistakes. Nurse!" She twisted her head slightly. "You only get ten more. Better make them count."

“Shasta, no.” Talon was too distraught to care if Nurse heard her calling the Princess by name. “I mean it, this ends now.”

Shasta glared up at her. “It ends when I say it does. Ten more strokes are not going to kill me, Talon. If you don’t want to watch, then get out.”

Her words cut Talon sharply. Shasta was right—now that she’d regained her breath the last ten strokes might be brutal, but it was unlikely they would kill her. Lyris said this was important, and Shasta seemed determined to see it through, so Talon wouldn’t stop her. But that didn’t mean she would let the Princess bear it alone. She moved in front of the chair and took Shasta’s hands in her own. “I’m not leaving.”

Little fingers intertwined with Talon’s, and Shasta screwed her eyes shut again. “Nurse...keep them coming.”

Nurse met Talon’s eyes questioningly. Talon pursed her lips before giving a tight, reluctant nod. The old woman raised the strap again, and this time she seemed to bring it down more slowly.

Shasta didn’t cry out, but she did squeeze Talon’s fingers so tightly that Talon thought they might be crushed. She didn’t care. “Almost there,” the Princess gasped, her eyes squinted shut as the dire count continued.

“Thirty-seven.”

Shasta began to count as well, but backward. Her voice came as a hoarse croak. “Three. Two. One.”

As the last of the strokes fell, Shasta collapsed into the chair, and Nurse stood watching her for a moment with an indescribable expression. Talon was certain she saw a measure of newfound respect in the old woman’s eyes.

By this time both Lyris and Bria were sobbing, and they ran to pull Shasta from the whipping chair and into their arms. Shasta was not crying anymore. She lay against her companions weakly as though she did not have the energy even for tears. Very carefully, Talon moved closer and drew the Princess’s arms around her neck.

“Bria, would you go down to the infirmary and ask the healer for a salve? I’m taking her to her room.”

Ever so gently, Talon slid a hand beneath the Princess’s knees, careful not to touch the backs of her thighs or buttocks. She rose to her feet, ignoring the screaming pain in her side, and carried the Princess out the door, through the corridors, and up the stairs to her chambers.

She was so light. It was easy to forget sometimes just what a tiny person she really was. Upon reaching the room, Talon set Shasta down on the bed and made sure to roll her onto her stomach.

Lyris followed them into the chamber and tugged at Talon's sleeve with concern. "You're bleeding again."

"It's nothing."

Shasta moved her head to study the scarlet patch spreading across Talon's shirt. "I did not just take forty strokes of the strap so you can bleed to death. Get to the infirmary. Now."

Talon sighed. This was not the time to argue. Her hand was on the latch when the Princess's voice gave her pause.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you. For being a damned liar."

Talon met Shasta's eyes sadly. "I know." She opened the door and saluted the guard who'd been ordered to stand watch until she was well enough to resume her full duties. As she made her way down the corridor, the burning in her side bore no comparison to the deeper pain pricking cruelly at her heart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nearly a half-moon passed before the court healer finally declared Talon well enough to resume her usual duties. They were strange, painful days for Shasta.

She couldn't even roll onto her back for a quarter-moon after her beating. The first few nights that she spent alone, lying uncomfortably on her stomach without her guardian's familiar, soft breathing beside her, Shasta found that she could not fall asleep. She had grown so accustomed to sharing her room that she felt oddly vulnerable and even lonely without Talon's presence.

In spite of the healer's salve, and Lyris and Bria who gently applied it to the scarlet welts several times a day, the trauma to her skin took a long time to heal. The welts finally began to dissolve into bruises and darkened into a deep purple shade that was tinged with brown and green on the edges. When she was finally able to roll over on her back, she had to keep her knees bent so the sore area was elevated off the mattress.

The morning Talon returned, Shasta was sitting up in bed, trying to concentrate on the book in her lap. Talon was still wrapped in bandages, though the wound had closed itself enough so as to be unlikely to reopen again. When the healer had discovered how carelessly Talon allowed it to reopen only days after it had begun to heal, he refused to let her out of bed until he was sure such a thing could not be repeated.

Shasta pursed her lips. "So you're back."

Talon nodded. "The healer says I can return to most of my duties, though I'm not allowed to lift a sword for at least another quarter-moon."

Her voice was quiet, almost timid, and Shasta found her emotions swinging between delight and fury. She had missed her guardian more than she cared to admit, but she was still deeply angry.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Come in and sit.” She closed the book in her lap and swung her legs tentatively over the side of the bed, wincing a little at the pressure it placed on her bruises. “I’ve been confined to this bed for a half-moon. When I’m dressed I want to go for a walk in the gardens to stretch my legs.”

Talon drew closer. “How do you feel?”

“Better.” She stood carefully, and limped a bit as she crossed the room to her wardrobe. “In light of recent events, I think I should set some new rules.” She pulled out a simple blue gown, one that she could easily put on without help. Lyris and Bria would be returning from their morning lessons soon, but she did not want to wait. Shasta draped the gown over one arm and turned to face Talon. “Whether you are a woman or not, I will still desire my privacy while tending to personal matters.”

Talon inclined her head. “Of course, Princess.”

“And from now on you will not speak to me unless spoken to. You may still be my guardian, but I no longer consider you a friend. Friends,” she emphasized, “don’t lie to one another.” Stubbornly, she ignored the expression of hurt that flitted across Talon’s face. “You will conduct yourself as my servant and nothing more.”

“I understand.” The deep tones were perfectly neutral.

“And one other thing. You will address me in the future as ‘Princess’ or ‘Highness.’ I have allowed lapses in the past, but it is inappropriate for us to be on more familiar terms.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

Shasta gave Talon a sharp look, but could detect no sign of sarcasm in the olive features. “Then prepare the privy chamber so I may dress.”

Well, that’s done, she mused as she entered the privy a moment later. The hurt in her guardian’s eyes brought a twinge of guilt, but she shrugged those feelings away. *Talon isn’t my friend, and she never was. She stayed with me because of Lyris and Bria and lied to me the entire time, made a fool out of me. But that’s fine.* She removed her robe and nightdress and struggled into the blue day gown. The dress fastened

in the front, and she buttoned it slowly and straightened the bodice. *She doesn't have to like me. Talon is a servant in my father's house and I was an idiot to think she would ever be anything more.* With that thought buzzing angrily in her head, she picked up a brush and ran it vigorously through her waist-length hair. The famous amber eyes of Rane stared back at her resolutely from the looking glass.



Talon was true to her word and no longer spoke to Shasta at all unless the Princess said something that required a response. The playful, flirtatious little war between them was replaced by cool tension. Talon was now careful to walk several steps behind her, to bow and avoid eye contact as formally as any common guard, though occasionally Shasta would look up and catch her guardian watching her with deep sadness in her black eyes. Talon always looked away immediately, but it was obvious that she was trying to make Shasta feel guilty. It wasn't going to work.

One evening, while Erinda bustled around the chamber, straightening up before leaving for the night, Shasta caught several looks that passed between Talon and her chambermaid. Erinda's sympathetic glances made her irrationally angry, and from her chair by the window she snapped at the maid.

"That's all for tonight, Erinda. You may go."

Erinda curtsied and cast one more longing look at Talon before leaving the room.

"You know," Shasta said to her guardian, "being stuck in bed all day for such a long time gave me a lot of time to think. And something has been bothering me." Talon's head came up but she did not respond. "Erinda. She knows about you, doesn't she?"

Talon's reply was soft. "Yes."

"Yes. Yes, of course she does, how could she not? And still, you and she..." Shasta trailed off, not wanting to say the words aloud, but Talon seemed to understand what she meant.

"Yes."

"But you're both women."

"Yes." Her calm responses were beginning to infuriate Shasta.

“But that’s just...How would that even work? Never mind, I don’t want to know.” Shasta screwed up her nose in distaste. “And you, you actually like it? Being with her, that way?”

Her guardian’s face twitched almost imperceptibly, and she nodded. “Yes.”

Shasta shook her head, revolted. “You disgust me.” Talon did not meet her eyes. “Ugh. You know what I ought to do, I ought to tell my father.” After a few moments of silence Shasta said a little indignantly, “Well, aren’t you going to try and talk me out of it?”

For the first time in days, Talon actually looked Shasta in the eye. “No.”

“He’d probably have you executed, you know.”

Talon glanced away. “You are the future Queen of Ithyria, Your Highness. You have to do what your heart tells you is right.”

Shasta tightened her lips rebelliously. “Well, I haven’t made up my mind quite yet. I’m still so angry with you. I can’t decide if I’m just mad or if I really hate you.”

“Hate me?” Talon’s whisper sounded choked.

The Princess winced slightly at the pain in her guardian’s voice. “Yes, well, like I said, I haven’t decided yet. You lied to me, and not just a little white lie. That I could forgive, but this is something huge. I thought you and I were close. You were the closest thing I had to a brother since,” she blinked back tears, “since Daric was killed. I actually believed you cared about me, then I find out that the only reason you stayed was for the sake of your sisters, and it was never about me at all.” Talon’s eyes widened. “And to top it off, I realize that I don’t have any idea who you really are. You’ve been by my side for two winters and you’re a complete stranger.”

Her guardian opened her mouth as if she wanted to reply but then shook her head sadly and remained silent.

Shasta sighed. “Twice you’ve nearly died saving my life. So I’m not going to tell Father about your... indiscretions. I owe you that much. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to trust you again.” She rose to her feet and blew out the lamp on the table. “I’m going to sleep.”

Slowly Talon followed the Princess into the sleeping chamber. Shasta climbed into bed and extinguished the light on her bedside table. The room fell into darkness and heavy silence. If Shasta had looked down at the cot where her guardian lay, she would have seen the single

quiet tear that rolled back along Talon's temple until it vanished into her hairline.



Summer passed into autumn, and the trees of the royal garden began to change color in preparation for the coming cold. Talon took up woodcarving, just to have something to do to distract herself from the strange, sullen silence of the evenings. Shasta seemed content to sit curled up in her little chair by the window reading for hours on end, but as Talon had reached an age where her basic studies were relatively complete, she had nothing to do to keep herself occupied. So Captain Vaughn borrowed some carving tools from a cabinetmaker friend who lived in Ardrenn, and Talon spent the evenings chipping away at blocks of wood and sanding edges into glassy curves. She had no real shape in mind, but it felt good to have something to do.

Shasta still had daily lessons. A few were focused on the arts, like music, dance, and painting, but most were of a political nature. Talon continued teaching at the opposite end of the hall, but Shasta had cancelled their joint fencing sessions with Captain Vaughn, and their private matches in the servants' stables had ceased as well. Talon found she missed their good-natured sparring.

Life settled into a steady routine of morning prayers, mealtimes, and lessons, with the occasional court conference, social function, or riding excursion, all of which Talon attended in obedient silence, keeping a respectful distance between herself and the Princess at all times.

She was aware of an increasingly intense feeling of loss. Shasta had withdrawn almost completely, and Talon felt oddly jealous watching Lyris and Bria giggling and chatting with the Princess in a way she no longer could. She hadn't realized how much she'd cherished their friendship until it was gone. Now they lived, studied, ate, and slept side by side, yet it was as if they were strangers. But Talon could not bring herself to resent Shasta for it. She could easily imagine how much the truth had hurt, especially considering the terrible timing of its revelation. Shasta's infatuation with her might have been only a crush, but it was a powerful one and the Princess was unused to disappointment.

She wished, more than anything else, that she could at least find a way to explain that her affection for Shasta was genuine. Once

Shasta had learned of the terms of Talon's service, she was convinced that Talon had never cared for her at all, and that stung deeply. But Talon couldn't find the words, or an opportune moment, to rectify that misunderstanding. What was she supposed to say? *At first I just wanted a better life for my sisters, but after a while I really did start to love you.* Not only did it sound weak, but now that the Princess knew about Talon's particular...preferences...she didn't want to risk being misinterpreted.

There were only two people in the palace that Talon felt she might talk to: Lyris and Erinda. But Lyris was so busy with her preparations to take the Ithyrian vows, rising before dawn to pray and studying late into the night, that the only time Talon saw her was during lessons when Lyris was tending the Princess. And Talon had promised Shasta that she would give up her relationship with Erinda. Even a quiet conversation with the chambermaid would be seen as a violation of that promise, she was sure. She was at a loss, and for the first time in her life she felt truly lonely.

With nothing else to do, she threw herself even more intently into her work, turning her haphazard lesson plans into a defined curriculum for the recruits she trained and developing exercise routines for herself that were both intensive and exhausting. She had always been physically fit, but now she began to build her strength deliberately. Using a combination of weights and vigorous acrobatics, she began to sculpt her body into a harder, more well-defined collection of muscles, careful not to lose flexibility in the process. And she added new subjects to her studies, anything that seemed like it might be of use to a soldier, including several foreign languages and the basic healing arts. She kept herself so busy and exhausted herself so thoroughly by every nightfall that she had neither the time nor the energy to feel sorry for herself.

But she did have time to notice Chancellor Kumire steadily increasing his attentions toward the Princess. He began presenting her with gifts, from simple flower bouquets to extravagant diamond jewelry, and calling upon her in her chambers to invite her for afternoon rides and evening strolls in the garden.

To Talon's irritation, Shasta actually accepted several of these invitations. Talon had the sneaking suspicion that she only did so to grate on her nerves, since Talon had no choice but to accompany her everywhere they went. At least she could draw some satisfaction from

the knowledge that her presence annoyed Kumire immensely. The simpering viceroy did not dare to make more than the most subtle of overtures for fear that Talon might run him through on the spot.

When the first snows began to fall, Kumire joined them once again on their annual trip to the Dervaughn estate for Winter Solstice. It was there that he apparently decided it would be a good time to make his intentions clear.

After a day spent ice skating on the frozen edge of the lake, they had returned to the great room of the main house. Kumire waited until almost everyone but Bria had retired, then rather pointedly suggested that she must have studying to do. To Talon's surprise, Bria did not so much as pout. Astonishingly, she jumped up as if it were the best idea she'd heard in her life and trotted obediently from the room.

Talon did not have the chance to ponder this strange behavior because once she, Kumire, and the Princess were the only ones remaining in the room, Kumire cleared his throat and dropped to one knee beside Shasta's chair.

Talon's mouth fell open as the chancellor took Shasta's hand in his own. She could guess what was coming next, though the Princess did not seem to have realized it yet.

"Your Highness, there is something I would like to discuss with you."

"Oh?" The Princess sounded not the least bit interested and tried to pull her hand away.

Kumire held on to it, however. "In the time that I have been your tutor, I have found you to be a very beautiful, clever girl, and I have come to care very deeply for you."

Shasta quirked an eyebrow. "Er...thank you, Chancellor."

Talon put a hand to her mouth to cover a smile. Shasta still hadn't figured it out.

Kumire dug into his pocket. "I cannot think of anyone else whose company I would rather enjoy for the rest of my life."

The Princess evidently could not think of a response to such a strange declaration, and Kumire lifted his hand from his jacket to reveal a small gold ring. Understanding dawned on Shasta's face, and to Talon's great surprise she actually turned wide eyes on her for support. Talon just shrugged and shook her head. The Princess was on her own with this one.

Oblivious to this exchange, the chancellor held the ring expectantly before Shasta's eyes. "I have spoken with the King and he agrees that you and I would make an ideal match. Shasta, my love"—the Princess grimaced—"it would do me great honor if you would agree to become my wife." He began to slide the ring onto her finger, but this time she tugged her hand away in earnest and gave a laugh.

"Why, Chancellor, I'm far too young to be thinking of marriage."

"You're eighteen, are you not? Most young women are already married by your age."

"Well, that may be, but I am not like most other young women, Chancellor Kumire. I am, of course, quite flattered by your proposal, but I am afraid I must decline."

His brows drew together. "Your Highness..."

Shasta stood. "Your sentiments are appreciated, Chancellor, but I have no intention of marrying anyone at this stage of my life. I'm afraid I'm something of a romantic, and when I do marry I want it to be for love. As fond as I am of you"—Talon fought the urge to snicker at the outright lie—"I do not have such feelings for you and cannot in good conscience wed anyone I do not love."

Kumire also stood. "Princess, I am sure that in time you will come to love me deeply. I would be a good husband to you."

"If that day comes, Chancellor, then you may ask me again. But until then," she gathered her skirt in one hand, "I'm afraid I must bid you good night."

She did not wait for him to bow or otherwise acknowledge her dismissal, and swept from the room with as much dignity as Talon had ever seen from her. Talon could not resist a tiny smirk at Kumire before following behind.

When they had reached the safety of the Princess's guest chamber, Shasta collapsed on the bed in a fit of breathless giggles. "Can you believe him?"

"Well, I for one think you'd make a lovely Mistress Kumiris," Talon teased.

"Goddess, can you imagine? Princess Shasta Talia Soltranis *Kumiris*?" Shasta succumbed to another gale of laughter. "Oh, it's just too dreadful to think of." At that, Talon chuckled heartily, and Shasta suddenly gazed at her with a thoughtful expression. "I haven't heard you laugh like that in a long time."

Talon's grin faded slowly into a wistful twist of the lips, and for a long moment they stood looking at one another.

"We should go to bed." Shasta seemed to have sobered considerably. "It's late."

Talon sighed as she lay down on the floor by the bed on a folded blanket that served as a makeshift mattress. For a few precious seconds she'd actually had the Princess back, laughing with her like they'd used to. As brief as those moments had been, Talon treasured them. Perhaps hope was not lost after all.



Lyris's nineteenth birthday arrived in a flurry of excitement, yet Talon had mixed feelings about it. She had both anticipated and dreaded this day, although she knew it was what her sister had been yearning for, the day for which she had prepared so carefully during the past winter. She would finally take the vows to become an Ithyrian priestess, bound to the Goddess for the rest of her life.

Talon was proud of her, and Lyris seemed blissfully happy at the prospect of committing herself to the Goddess she so loved. But after this day, Lyris would no longer live in the palace. Talon would not see her gentle sister at lessons, hear her soft laughter, or even be able to talk with her when she needed a compassionate and understanding ear. Lyris would be gone, replaced by a virginal religious icon whose only purpose in life was service to the Goddess.

When the morning dawned, bright and clear though a bit frosty, Lyris and Bria came to the Princess's chambers to prepare for the afternoon ceremony. This would be the last time that the four of them would walk together to morning prayers. While Bria was putting the finishing touches on Shasta's hair, Lyris pulled Talon into a tight embrace.

"I know this is difficult for you," she whispered into her ear. "But thank you. Thank you so much, for everything you've done for us. I would never have had this opportunity if it weren't for you." Her eyes were filled with tears. "I love you, my sister, and that will never change."

Talon cleared her throat gruffly and returned the hug. "Are you happy, Lyris?"

“Very happy.”

“That’s all I need to know.” Aware that Shasta was waiting, she offered her elbow to Lyris. “Shall we?”

As they crossed the palace grounds to the temple, Talon savored these last few moments she would have with her sister. Lyris was dressed in the flowing white robes of the Pledged, and her short black hair swung sharply at her chin. In a few hours that hair would be gone completely, shaven off as a symbol of her complete surrender to Ithyris. Talon couldn’t imagine what her sister would look like bald. It was a strange thought.

The morning prayer service began as usual, with chanting and incense and a long period of prayer. For once, Talon found herself actually praying, asking the Goddess to watch over her sister and give her the happy life Talon had always wished for her. As prayers ended, the high priestess clapped her hands, and instead of dismissing the worshippers, she called Lyris to the base of the Goddess’s statue.

Talon was both startled and touched when Bria moved to take Lyris’s place next to her, winding her smaller hand into Talon’s as they watched their sister kneel before the statue.

“People of Ithyria,” the high priestess intoned, her voice carrying through the temple, “today we witness the dedication of one of Ithyris’s chosen Daughters. Lyris, lady-in-waiting to Princess Shasta, has made the decision to commit her heart, mind, and body to the service of the Goddess.” To the kneeling young woman, she pronounced, “You will now repeat the vows of faith that will bind you as Ithyris’s vessel from this day until the day you die.” She gave another command, this time in the Ithyrian tongue, and Lyris began speaking.

The vows of a priestess were all made in Ithyris’s language, so Talon wasn’t sure of the exact translation. But Lyris had studied the tongue so intently that she was practically fluent, and it was obvious from the passion in her face as she chanted that she understood the words perfectly. Her voice took on a sort of singsong quality, the tinkling syllables falling from her lips with ease, and as she spoke, two priestesses swinging incense burners walked through the gathered worshippers to stand at either side of the statue. One of them passed right by Bria, and Talon looked down with concern as her youngest sister gagged.

“Are you all right?” she whispered softly, not wanting to interrupt the ceremony.

Bria nodded, but she didn't appear well, and Talon kept an anxious eye on her as the chanting came to an end.

The high priestess produced a dagger from her sleeve, the same one that she had used the winter before to cut Lyris's hair into its current style. As she held it up, the Ithyrian priestesses broke into song. The high priestess lowered Lyris's hood and dipped one hand into a bowl of scented oil being held out by one of the other veiled women. She smoothed the oil slowly over Lyris's head, starting at the hairline, and then, ever so carefully, she drew the blade of the dagger backward against her scalp. Dark clumps of hair fell to the floor, and the high priestess reapplied the oil and continued shaving.

Talon blinked back a dangerous stinging in her eyes. This was what Lyris wanted, but oh, how she was going to miss her. At her side, Bria swayed unsteadily, and Talon looked down to see that her youngest sister's eyes were unnaturally glassy. "Bria...?"

"I'm fine," came the hushed reply, though she looked anything but. Even Shasta had noticed Bria's discomfort by now and was also watching her with a worried expression.

"It is done," the high priestess announced. "We welcome you, *Ostryn* Lyris."

Talon let out a breath as the veils of an Ithyrian priestess were settled for the first time over her sister's newly shaven head. Heresy or not, she would never stop thinking of Lyris as the girl she'd grown up with, the little harpist with a soft spot for animals and a fondness for cold tea.

Bria made another gagging noise then, and bent forward. All ceremony forgotten, Talon grabbed her sister's shoulders as she suddenly threw up, right there on the floor of the temple.

Shasta's eyes widened. "Lady Bria!"

The other worshippers gasped and the high priestess moved forward. When Bria straightened up, the veiled woman seized her chin and looked intently into her face, then at Talon.

"Get this girl to the infirmary at once," she said in low tones.

Talon scooped Bria into her arms and followed Shasta hurriedly across the palace grounds. When they reached the infirmary, the old healer shooed Talon and Shasta away and led Bria behind a screened partition.

Shasta patted Talon's arm. "It's probably nothing," she said reassuringly. "Here, sit."

Talon allowed herself to be tugged down next to the Princess on one of the cots lining the infirmary. She was still troubled. Bria had a strong stomach and never vomited unless she was very ill. After what seemed like an eternity, the healer emerged from behind the curtains. He was shaking his head as he went to the washstand against the wall and scrubbed his hands.

Talon sprang to his side. “Well?” she demanded impatiently.

Grim-faced, the healer said, “I suppose you might as well hear it first, as you are Lady Bria’s immediate family. The good news is that your sister is perfectly healthy. But...well...” He scratched his head, then tugged at her sleeve so he could whisper into her ear.

Talon caught only two words. *With child*. She snapped upright and stared in disbelief. “What?”

The healer grimaced. “I’m afraid it’s true.”

“Talon, what is it?” Shasta asked.

“I can’t discuss it as yet, Your Highness. But do you think it would be possible to have an audience with your father? Now?”

“Well...well, yes, I suppose so, he’s usually taking luncheon in his study around this time.”

Talon marched behind the curtained partition, where Bria was waiting with tear-streaked cheeks. She firmly gripped her sister’s upper arm. “Let’s go.”



“Your Majesty, what is the meaning of this?” Archduke Fickett glared around the royal hall at the strange assembly Soltran had called together.

The King sat in the throne at the head of the room with the Princess on one side and Bria on the other. Talon was at her usual post behind Shasta’s shoulder. She glowered down at Chancellor Kumire and his father, who stood facing them to the left of the throne. To the right were gathered the healer, the high priestess, and Lyris in her newly awarded priestess veils.

King Soltran stared sternly down at the Monderan viceroy. “It would seem that Lady Bria is with child.”

Lyris gasped, her hand flying to her mouth through her veils. Bria kept her eyes pinned to the floor. Her face was the color of a ripe tomato,

and it only deepened as Fickett huffed, "Well, I don't see what that has to do with the rest of us."

"She has named your son as the father."

Now it was Fickett's turn to glower at Kumire. "Is this true?"

The chancellor stuttered. "N-no, no. Of course not, Father." Under the harsh glares of the King, Talon, and his own father, he sighed. "I'll admit that Lady Bria and I have had an intimate relationship." His eyes anxiously flew to Shasta, who was looking at him as if he were an insect she very much wanted to stamp on. "But that does not make me father to her child. She's a wanton girl, Majesty, a seductress of the most vile sort."

"That's a lie!" Talon bellowed, and lunged forward, sword drawn. She stopped the blade a hairbreadth from the chancellor's throat. It took all of her self-control to keep from killing him then and there. She wasn't proud of her sister's behavior, but she would defend Bria's honor nonetheless.

Kumire appeared properly frightened. "M-majesty, please. I'm not the only man that girl has preyed upon. She's been with half the members of the royal guard, at least!"

"No!" Bria cried from the King's side, tears suddenly springing to her eyes and streaming down her cheeks. "Chancellor, how can you say that? You know you're the only one. I love you!"

He flushed, and Talon felt her blood boiling in her veins. She flicked the end of her sword upward. "I should kill you where you stand, you perverted, filthy, child-raping son of a whore!"

"That's enough, Lieutenant," the King declared, and reluctantly Talon lowered her sword, though her grip was still white-knuckled on the hilt. The King turned. "Your Grace, if you please..."

The high priestess placed her hands on Bria's belly, closed her eyes, and threw her head back, chanting softly. "Your Majesty, the girl tells the truth," she pronounced after a moment. "This child is the seed of Kumire and of the house of Rane."

"That settles it, then." Soltran rose to his feet. "Chancellor Kumire Fickettis of Mondera, I am sorely tempted to have you horsewhipped within an inch of your life, both for impregnating a Lady of the King's court without the bonds of matrimony, and for dishonoring yourself and your family by lying to this assembly." Bria gave a cry and fell to her knees, and Soltran regarded her for a moment. "However, there is

the matter of the girl and her child to consider. No descendant of Rane should be born a bastard, no matter how foolish his parents might be.” He sighed and rubbed his brow. “Therefore, it is my command that Chancellor Kumire and Lady Bria be married, this very day. This very moment, in fact.”

Kumire’s mouth dropped open, and his eyes returned desperately to Shasta as if he were suddenly watching his greatest dream crumbling before his eyes. “But, Your Majesty—”

“Silence.” The King turned to the high priestess. “Your Grace, will you perform the rites?”

“As Your Majesty wishes.” The veiled woman took Bria’s hand, leading her to stand beside the chancellor.

Kumire seemed too stunned to even look at her, and Bria kept her head down, her entire body trembling visibly. The priestess took their hands and intertwined them, then held her own hands out over their hearts.

“We who gather here bear witness to the joining of this man and this woman in the bonds of marriage.”

As she continued to speak, Talon gritted her teeth. She couldn’t believe Bria had been this foolish. Worse still, she couldn’t believe she had, herself, been so blind. If Bria was telling the truth, she had only been fifteen when the affair began. It was everything Talon had ever feared for her sisters, and it had happened under her very nose while she was wrapped up in her own problems. The one thing their mother had asked of Talon before she died was that she watch over Lyris and Bria, and she had failed.

Part of her was glad that the King had ordered the marriage. If Kumire was going to take advantage of her little sister he should be held responsible. But on the other hand... Talon observed the chancellor’s infuriated expression, the way he shrank from the glare of his father, the way he gazed at Shasta so frantically. Kumire had always intended to marry the Princess, and Talon feared for Bria, married to a man who would most likely resent her as the person who ruined his ambitions. How could she bear a child to such a man? What could she have been thinking?

Talon shook her head to clear it of these jumbled thoughts, in time to hear Bria’s tremulous, “I swear it.” The end of the wedding vows. The high priestess raised her arms above her head.

“Kumire and Bria, your joining has been blessed by the Goddess,

who is the advocate of all true lovers. May you share a happy home and bountiful lives together, filled with a love that never fades.” Lowering her arms, she said, “Congratulations, Chancellor and Duchess Kumiris.”

Fickett gave an angry snort and brushed past the newlyweds. He paused near his son’s ear, and Talon was standing just close enough to hear his words. “As of this moment, we go back to the beginning.”

Kumire’s nostrils flared but he did not look up, and the Monderan viceroy stalked out of the hall. The high priestess curtsied to the King and led Lyris away. Bria’s eyes followed her as she passed, and Lyris gave her the smallest of encouraging nods. King Soltran rose from the throne, and without a word he strode past Kumire to the doors. The Princess followed on his heels, and like her father did not give the chancellor so much as a glance.

Talon had no choice but to go where her charge went. She could feel Bria’s eyes on her, pleading. But Talon couldn’t give her sister the reassurance she needed. Feeling sick and reluctant to abandon Bria to her unwilling spouse, she lingered at the door briefly after everyone had left.

Her heart sank when Bria turned those same pleading eyes on her new husband and offered him a shy, tremulous smile.

He just stared down at her dully, and when he spoke his voice was flat. “How could you do this to me?”

Bria gasped and tears spilled onto her cheeks. Her knees buckled and she fell to the stone floor at the chancellor’s feet, convulsing in hysterical sobs that rang against the walls of the throne room. A part of Talon longed to go to her, to rescue her sister as she always had, but already the Princess was moving out of sight and she could remain no longer.

From now on, if Bria needed comfort she would have to seek it in her husband, and from the iron rage on Kumire’s face, Talon doubted she would find it. Bria’s fate was out of Talon’s hands now; she could only hope that, in spite of this terrible mistake, her little sister might still one day find the happiness that Talon had always wished for her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With the arrival of spring, the kingdom of Ithyria entered its nine hundred and ninety-ninth winter. Ithyrians began to prepare excitedly for the celebration that would occur in just twelve new moons, when the millennium would mark Ithyria's thousandth winter of freedom from cursed Ulrike.

At the dawn of the Firstmoon the Daughters of the Goddess felt an alarming shift in the lingering darkness that hovered over the lands. Where the threat had once been sinister and patient, it now seethed with rage. Ulrike no longer seemed content to wait, and we knew he was going to strike soon—very soon. In my heart I knew it was the royal family that Ulrike hated most, and I feared for the safety of our King.

The Princess's nineteenth birthday was fast approaching. The twelve Honored Mothers of Ithyria always received invitations to the celebration, though few of us were ever able to attend. I wanted very much to be there, but the refugees filling our halls were still in dire need of our help and I could not leave Verdred Temple.

I felt the Goddess urging me to write to the high priestess of the temple in Ardrenn. Obediently, I set pen to paper and detailed my concerns, offering sanctuary in Verdred to any member of the royal house who might ever have need of it. At the time, I had little idea that Ithyris, in Her infinite wisdom, was already preparing a defense against Her brother's wicked plans.

Talon was shocked to hear the Princess's voice shouting through the conference room door. Her first instinct was to interrupt the meeting and she put a hand on the latch, but common sense told her that Shasta

was probably not in danger. The King himself was at the Princess's side and would have called for the guard if they were needed. Her sharp ears picked out Shasta's voice quite clearly. The Princess sounded incensed.

"No, I will not calm down, Father. How dare any of you speak to your King that way!"

"Your Majesty, as elder of the house of Rane I really must insist that you control your daughter." Talon recognized Archduke Fickett's voice. She felt guilty for listening in and stepped back into a position of formal attention, but it was impossible not to overhear the Princess's earsplitting reply. Talon would have been surprised if her voice hadn't carried all the way to the kitchens.

"I'm tired of the way you use my family name to throw your weight around this room! As heiress to the house of Rane, the blood of Rane, the throne of Rane, and the crown of Rane, it is I who must insist that *you* control yourself, *Uncle*."

Talon could almost picture the look of fury on the aged Monderan viceroy's face, and she snickered when she heard him exclaim, "Insolent girl! You do not wear the crown yet!"

"And you never will!" Shasta thundered.

A tense silence followed, and Talon resisted the temptation to press her ear to the door. A moment later she was very glad for her self-control, because the door flew open unexpectedly and Shasta stalked out. Talon caught a glimpse of the table of viceroys, a few of them on their feet, all with mouths hanging open.

Shasta slammed the door behind her. "Argh! I've had it." She stormed down the corridor to the turret stairs, and Talon followed meekly behind.

The Princess did not say another word as they ascended the stairs to the third level of the palace and entered her chambers. She marched straight to her wardrobe and violently threw open the doors.

Nurse was arranging packages in the sitting room and turned quizzical eyes on Talon, who just shrugged. The Princess was in a fit of temper again.

"I'm going riding for the afternoon." Shasta pulled a hat from the top shelf of the wardrobe. "I can't stand these egotistical, bullheaded, imbecilic men for even one more minute." She plopped the hat on her head and turned around, tying the ribbons beneath her chin. "Oh, would

you just look at that?" she exclaimed, waving a hand toward her sitting room.

The low couch, every table, and nearly every other usable bit of space had been filled with gaily wrapped packages, baskets of fruit and candies, enormous flower bouquets, velvet boxes containing extravagant jewels, even a large gilt birdcage containing a rather loud and opinionated yellow parrot—birthday presents from well-wishers across the kingdom.

The lavish display grew bigger every day and usually the Princess delighted in such attention, but today Talon was startled to hear Shasta complain, "Can't you do something about all this clutter, Nurse?"

"Not until after the celebration tomorrow, Highness," the old woman replied, though she, too, seemed a little surprised at the Princess's annoyance. "We wouldn't want to offend any of your guests by giving their gifts away."

"There's enough food and candy here to feed the entire palace for a moon," Shasta declared. "As soon as all of this is over, I want you to take it into Ardrenn and have it distributed to people who really need it. And please, can we at least find another place to put that bird? It keeps waking me up at night with obscure poetry quotations. It's not a very pleasant experience to be jarred out of a nice sleep with a parrot squawking, 'Hark! My love has breasts like pomegranates.'" Her bad mood seemed momentarily forgotten as she giggled. "For a minute last night I thought Talon was going to decapitate the poor thing."

Nurse grumbled, "I'll see what I can do, Highness." Straightening the bonnet ties beneath Shasta's chin, she said, "Don't forget the dinner tonight."

King Soltran had arranged a welcoming banquet for the Princess before the real celebration began. Many of the most powerful nobles in the country would be in attendance, including every one of the viceroys his daughter had just turned her back upon. As the subject of the coming festivities, Shasta could not possibly decline to attend.

With a loud groan, she said, "Oh, Goddess. All right, I'll make sure I'm back in time."

"See that you do," the old woman responded pointedly.



Hours later the lower corridor rang with the sound of footsteps as Shasta flew breathlessly toward the stairs, Talon jogging along behind with exasperation. She'd been trying to get Shasta to return to the palace for the past half an hour, but since she was not supposed to speak unless spoken to, it had been difficult. When Shasta reluctantly agreed to head back, it was already getting dark. Now there was scarcely a quarter of an hour before the banquet was supposed to begin, and the Princess hadn't even started to dress.

"You're late," Nurse scolded as they dashed past her in the hall.

"I know, I know!"

They raced up the tower stairs and toward the Princess's chambers. Talon stopped short when she saw Kumire in the hall outside Shasta's door with a large box in his hands. The chancellor jumped nervously as they approached.

"What are you doing here?" Talon growled, but Shasta shoved the chamber door open.

"No time for that, have to dress..."

She entered the chamber and nearly ran over Bria, who was on her way out. Talon stood in the corridor glaring darkly at her new brother-in-law. Kumire put his arm around Bria's waist.

"There you are, my dear. I was wondering what was keeping you." He looked up at Talon and offered a toothy smile. "My wife was just recovering some of her belongings from the Princess's chamber, since we will be returning to Mondera in a few days."

He nudged Bria, who held up a gold bracelet and pair of small earrings without meeting Talon's eyes. Bria had put on some weight in the past moon, and there was now a noticeable swell to her belly. Kumire inclined his head. "We will retire to our rooms now. Have a pleasant evening, Lieutenant."

Talon tracked them with her eyes as they walked away, and when she entered the chambers she looked around in confusion. "Highness?"

"We're in here." Erinda's voice came from the privy chamber, and the door opened. "I was just helping her dress."

"What do you think?" Shasta asked, sweeping over to the tall looking glass by the wardrobe to examine herself more critically. With time being so limited, Erinda had swept the Princess's waist-length hair up into a simple chignon, using several jeweled pins to hold it in place, and had powdered over her perspiring face, neck, and shoulders. Shasta's blue feather necklace rested at her throat. She always wore it

on her birthday, and the brilliant color matched almost exactly with the blue silk of the gown.

Talon eyed the gown curiously. She did not remember the Princess ever being fitted for such a dress. “You look lovely,” she finally replied with a small bow.

“Isn’t it just a beautiful color?” Shasta enthused, turning back to the mirror. “I don’t know who sent it, but it’s absolutely perfect.”

Talon frowned. “Sent it?”

“Yes, one of the gifts, I suppose. It was waiting for me on the bed when we got back and it’s just perfect to wear tonight. I’m glad, I was thinking there was no way I’d be able to get dressed in time.”

“A gift...” Talon’s instincts were triggered and she drew closer to inspect the dress. The smell was the first thing she noticed. It was so faint that even her unusually sharp nose could barely pick it up—a musty, virulent odor that blended with Shasta’s own sweet raspberry scent. Talon grabbed the Princess’s arm, pulling it up and sniffing at the fabric of the long, close-fitting sleeve.

She gasped, “Take it off. Now.”

“What?” Shasta scowled. “No. I’m late for dinner as it is.” She turned for the door, but Talon pulled her back, almost roughly. She seized the fabric of the sleeve and yanked, tearing it right off the dress. Shasta shrieked. “What are you doing?”

Talon reached for her other arm. “You have to take it off, Highness.”

“Stop it! Stop, you pervert, I mean it! Help, someone help me!” But Talon had already ripped the other sleeve away, and as Shasta drew back her arm to slap her, she caught a glimpse of her skin and her face blanched. “What *is* that?”

A scarlet rash had formed across her arm, an ugly red pattern of lines that looked almost like spiderwebs. They seemed to be moving, undulating slowly through her skin. Shasta’s eyes flew to her guardian. “I don’t understand. What’s happening?”

“The dress is poisoned,” Talon replied tersely. “Hold still.” She took the fabric of the bodice in her hands, and in one powerful motion tore it from top to bottom.

“Get it off, get it off me!” Shasta wiggled out of the dress and stood in her shift, scratching at her arms. “Ugh, it itches.”

Talon took hold of Shasta’s hands. “No, Princess, you mustn’t scratch or it will spread faster.”

Shasta stared at her guardian, eyes suddenly wide with terror. “The shift...it came with the dress,” she whispered hoarsely.

Talon spun to Erinda, who had been watching this entire exchange with an open mouth. “Erinda, go for the healer. As fast as you can.”

The chambermaid ran from the room, and Talon seized Shasta by the hand, rushing her into the privy chamber. “We have to get the shift off. I’m sorry, Princess, but...”

She didn’t get the chance to finish because Shasta had already pulled the offending fabric from her body and dropped it in a pile on the floor. Talon inhaled sharply and averted her eyes as Shasta began to wiggle out of her undergarments as well.

“I couldn’t believe how convenient it was,” the Princess gasped. “The shift and undergarments and gown and stockings all laid out, ready for me. Oh, it’s burning!”

Shasta sank naked to the privy floor, tugging the stockings from her legs, and Talon took a deep breath. She couldn’t help the Princess and worry about modesty at the same time. The thin, threadlike red lines crossing Shasta’s skin had begun to bleed outward, turning her body a very unnatural shade of pink.

Talon went to the rack on the wall that held an array of perfumed oils and toiletries, shuffling quickly through the small glass vials until she found what she was looking for.

Shasta bent forward dizzily, supporting herself with her hands. “Talon, I feel strange.”

“Princess, do you trust me?”

Shasta stared at her guardian through bleary eyes. “What?”

Talon moved forward, holding out the bottle of ivory-colored powder. “Yellow mint. It has a natural compound that I think will slow the spread of the poison, but,” she pressed her lips together, “the rash is leaving your skin raw. This is going to hurt. A lot.”

Shasta looked fearfully at the bottle, then at the rash covering her body. The little lines were almost invisible now, and her skin had turned bright pink everywhere the poisoned fabric had touched it. In a few places she was bleeding from lacerations as small as pinpricks. She met Talon’s eyes. “Just do it. Do it.”

Talon examined the glass vial in her hand. The mint was potent, but it would take far too long to apply the powder directly and still cover the entire rash. As she looked around the privy for a better idea, her eyes fell on the bathing tub. It had not yet been drained. Erinda had

probably filled it hours ago in anticipation of Shasta's return from her afternoon ride.

Quickly Talon emptied the entire contents of the bottle into the tub. She kneeled to swirl the water, which was cold by this time, with her hand. Then she rushed to Shasta's side and put the Princess's arms around her neck. She carried her to the tub, stepping down into the water herself without bothering to remove her boots.

She sank down into the tub slowly. The moment the medicated water touched her skin, Shasta screamed.

"It hurts! Oh, Goddess, it hurts!"

"I know. I know, Princess. I'm so sorry."

Talon splashed the water up onto Shasta's arms, then carefully unwound them from her neck to immerse them in the tub. The Princess kept crying, her head thrown back against Talon's shoulder. Talon forced herself to block out the sound. She couldn't risk losing her focus or Shasta's suffering would only get worse. Rubbing her hands along Shasta's skin in small, vigorous circles, Talon tried not to think about what parts of the Princess's body she was touching. She had to get the powdered herb as deeply into Shasta's skin as possible. The more of the mint extract that was absorbed, the better chance it would have of slowing the spread of the poison.

As more and more bleeding spots opened across the scarlet rash, wisps of blood curled through the water like smoke.

The door of the privy chamber burst open, and Erinda ran in with the healer. King Soltran was following close behind.

"Shasta!" he bellowed. One look at his naked, screaming daughter in the tub and he swore heavily. "What in the name of the Goddess are you doing to her? You're killing her! Get her out of there, now!" He shoved Talon aside and pulled Shasta from her arms, laying the Princess out tenderly on the stone floor.

Talon climbed out of the tub, mindless of her dripping uniform. Fear clenched her heart as she realized that Shasta was no longer screaming. The Princess lay motionless, her eyes closed, and Talon couldn't tell if she was even breathing. The old healer dropped to her side and pressed fingers to Shasta's pulse.

Talon gulped. "Healer, is she...?"

King Soltran whirled and fixed her with a deadly glare. "Wait outside. I will deal with you later."

The healer seemed to read the terror in Talon's eyes and rifled

through his bag of medicines as he spoke. "She's alive, but she's fainted from the pain. There's not much time." He produced several vials and began carefully measuring various substances into a clean glass tube.

Reluctantly Talon left the privy chamber and closed the door behind her. She collapsed into a chair beneath the window, burying her head in her hands. What if she'd made a mistake? She had only begun to study the most rudimentary concepts of the healing arts a few moons before. What if she'd made the wrong diagnosis? Her throat constricted and she gave a small moan. Her eyes fell on the torn blue gown lying on the floor. *When I find the bastard who did this to her...*

The sleeping chamber door opened, and to Talon's great surprise the high priestess of the palace temple entered, accompanied by Lyris in her veils. Talon jumped to her feet as her sister ran forward.

"Talon, the Princess. She's in great danger." Lyris frantically swept her eyes around the chamber. "Where is she?"

"In the privy. The healer and the King are with her."

The high priestess laid a calming hand on Lyris's shoulder. "Our new *Ostryn* came to me saying she'd had a vision and that the Princess's life was in peril." She scanned the room. "I was skeptical, but there is a strong aura of death in this chamber. What happened here?"

Talon shook her head. "It happened so fast, Your Grace. Someone left poisoned garments for Princess Shasta to wear to the banquet tonight, and she put them on before I recognized them for what they were."

Lyris clapped a hand to her mouth. "Is she all right?"

"I don't know," Talon admitted miserably.

"Come, *Ostryn*. We will pray to the Goddess for the Princess's life. Ithyris may see fit to provide her with divine protection." The high priestess took Lyris's hands, and they knelt together over the poisoned dress, chanting.

Talon watched them with a flash of envy. The priestesses, at least, had something to contribute. She was left with nothing to do but wait helplessly to find out if Shasta was going to live or die. She paced the room, ignoring the cold seeping through her soaked uniform.

When the privy door finally burst open, King Soltran emerged first, and the rage on his face was unmatched as he lunged at Talon, wrapping his hands around her neck and lifting her until her feet almost left the floor. Her eyes bulged as his choke hold cut off her flow of air. "She'll

live, no thanks to you. What did you think you were doing? I'll kill you with my own hands!"

Talon tried to choke an explanation past the viselike clamp at her throat, but the King did not seem to hear her. Just as Talon felt herself growing dizzy, the healer shuffled from the privy and whacked the King sharply on the shoulder with his wooden cane.

"Before you go strangling the lieutenant to death, Majesty, you might want to know that he just saved your daughter's life. Again."

The King instantly relinquished his grip and Talon put a hand to her throat, wheezing. The old healer held up Shasta's shift, pinching it gingerly between a gloved thumb and forefinger. "These clothes have been infested with a rare, deadly fungal toxin that we healers refer to as 'Miner's Bane,'" he informed the King. "The spores burrow through the skin and into the blood, where they are carried to the brain and cause paralysis and eventually death. Miner's Bane is one of the fastest-moving poisons in existence. Even a very small area of infection, left untreated, will kill in a matter of days." He dropped the shift into a clean pillowcase that Erinda held out for him. "Thank you, dear girl. Take a pair of gloves from my bag and gather up the rest, please. Be careful not to touch the fabric directly." Erinda bobbed a curtsy, and the healer turned back to the King.

"As I was saying, Majesty, this poison works quickly and fatally with minimal exposure. The Princess was covered with the spores over nearly every inch of her skin. At that level of infection, death should have followed in minutes. If Lieutenant Talon hadn't immersed her in the mint bath, the Princess would have been dead by the time I got here." Both the healer and the King turned to stare at Talon.

"What I don't understand," the old man continued curiously, "is how you knew that yellow mint would slow the progression of the toxin."

Talon swallowed. "I...I've been studying books of medicine for several moons. I thought some healing knowledge might one day be useful." She watched Erinda carefully stuff the remnants of the gown into the pillowcase. "Something about the dress seemed strange, but it didn't hit me until I noticed the smell: like mold, but with a warm sweetness. And I remembered reading of a skin poison that was said to smell like rotting carrots." She looked from one man to the other. "That's exactly what it smelled like."

“So you removed her garments in the hopes of preventing this poison from spreading.” The King sounded contrite.

“Yes, but she’d already begun to break out in a rash. I recalled the book saying that the poison was sensitive to the leaves of the yellow mint plant, and that the antidote was”—she concentrated, trying to remember—“a blend of egg white, belladonna, and...arsenic.” She caught the healer’s impressed nod.

“That’s correct. Belladonna and arsenic are themselves deadly poisons, but in this case they act to kill the Miner’s Bane spores before they reach the brain. Yellow mint against the raw, infected skin causes terrible stinging pain, but it retards the spread of the toxin and buys precious time for treatment.”

Erinda and the high priestess carried Shasta from the privy chamber and laid her on the bed. The Princess was wrapped in a white dressing robe. Erinda had already discarded the contaminated sheets and blankets and prepared clean ones, and she tucked Shasta into the fresh linens, fluffing her pillows while the veiled priestess rested a hand on the Princess’s forehead and prayed softly.

Lyris left Talon’s side to join the prayer, and Talon found she could not tear her gaze from her charge’s face. Shasta looked exhausted and disoriented, but she had regained consciousness.

The King regarded Talon with emotion darkening his eyes. “I owe you a humble apology. This is the fourth time you’ve saved my daughter’s life.” He removed a golden military pin from his own collar and fastened it to Talon’s. “Second Lieutenant Talon of Ithyria, you are hereby promoted to the rank of First Lieutenant in His Majesty’s royal guard.” Stepping back, the King saluted with suspicious brightness in his eyes that he blinked away. “And, Talon,” he added, “if I ever doubt your devotion to the Princess again, you have the King’s permission to knock some sense into his royal head.”

Talon was rendered speechless, too stunned to even return the salute. The healer nudged her and handed her a small glass tube containing the poison antidote.

“Drink this, now,” he ordered, eyeing the rash that had developed over Talon’s hands from contact with the contaminated fabric. “We can’t have the hero of the day dying on us, can we?”

“She needs some as well,” Talon said, nodding at Erinda. “She helped the Princess get dressed earlier.”

As Talon and Erinda downed the antidote, both grimacing at the

unpleasant taste, the healer held up the pillowcase full of infected fabric and said, “We shall burn this, immediately.”

Soltran clapped Talon on the shoulder. His eyes on Shasta, he said, “Take care of her for me tonight. Tomorrow we launch a full investigation into this matter. This attempt on my daughter’s life will not go unanswered.”

After kissing Shasta good night, he thanked Talon and the healer again and departed, wearing the somber look of a man who had just realized how close he’d come to losing his most precious treasure.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

That evening, Lyris remained at Shasta's bedside with Talon. Before her departure, the high priestess had given permission for Lyris to stay the night.

Her words echoed in Talon's mind. "I am aware of the close relationship you shared with Princess Shasta in your former life, *Ostryn*. It is certain Ithyris has called you to Herself for a reason. You may stay. Perhaps your prayers will indeed invoke the Goddess's protection over our beloved Princess."

Talon lifted one of Shasta's small hands to her lips and kissed it fervently, too overcome with emotion to care what her sister and Erinda might think.

Shasta was resting, and Talon could not resist brushing a stray lock of hair behind the Princess's ear. Her fingers lingered over the soft indentation beneath her cheekbone and trailed down the delicate line of her jaw.

Shasta opened her eyes to look at her guardian quizzically.

Talon quickly withdrew her hand. "How do you feel?" She wasn't supposed to talk unless Shasta spoke first, but this time it seemed warranted.

"My legs and hands are still all tingly. The healer said that was the paralyzing effect of the poison and that it should be gone by morning." Shasta tilted her head. "He also said you were right about the mint. And that it saved my life."

"I got lucky," Talon said dismissively.

"Maybe." Shasta's golden brown eyes searched her face, and for a moment it looked like she was going to say something else, but then

her expression hardened and she turned away. "I'm so tired. I'd like to sleep now."

Talon rose to her feet as Erinda arrived with fresh blankets. Talon tossed them on the floor by the bed, then took Erinda's elbow and guided her into the gift-filled sitting room, where their voices would not disturb the Princess.

"Erinda, where did that dress come from?"

"I don't know." Erinda looked as puzzled as she was upset. "I've been in and out of the Princess's chambers all day. Someone must have put the dress on the bed while I was in the privy chamber preparing the bath."

Talon rubbed her temple. It had to have been someone who was familiar with the Princess's activities, who knew she'd be out today. Someone who would know her room. They even chose a gown in her favorite color. Who would... She inhaled sharply. "No. No, it can't be."

"What?" Erinda whispered.

"When we got back, Bria was just leaving the Princess's chambers. She said she'd left some jewelry here. But she wouldn't...It doesn't make sense. Bria loves Princess Shasta like a sister."

Erinda frowned. "Funny, I never heard anyone come in or move about the room. If Bria was here, she must have been very quiet about it. Talon, are you completely sure..."

"My sister would never betray the Princess," Talon said firmly.

Sighing, Erinda laid a hand on Talon's shoulder. "I know you don't want to think of your sister as a traitor, Talon, but if there's even a chance she might put Princess Shasta in harm's way, you have to face it, for the Princess's own safety." She drew her hand away and rubbed her fingers together. "You're still soaking wet. Go change into dry clothes before you catch cold."

Talon nodded absently, but before she could move, Erinda rose on tiptoe. "I miss you, you know," she said and quietly brushed her lips ever so slightly against Talon's.

Talon backed away. "Erinda, we can't. I told you, I made a promise."

Erinda sighed, but she still wore a slight smile. "I know, I know. Far be it from me to try and break a gentleman's promise to his lady." She swatted Talon's backside playfully. "Go on, change and get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

Talon wished the chambermaid good night and returned to Shasta's bedside. The Princess was still asleep and Lyris was meditating silently on the cot, her legs crossed beneath her and her lips moving in silent prayer.

Talon did not interrupt her but simply blew out the lamp on the Princess's table and lay down in the pile of blankets on the floor. Tucking one hand behind her head, she stared at the ceiling, unable to stop turning over the events of the day in her mind. *Bria's not a traitor*, she told herself repeatedly, but the more she thought about it the less she could deny that it was the most logical explanation.

Bria knew the Princess almost as well as Talon did. She knew Shasta loved the color blue, she knew Shasta was out riding that afternoon, and she even knew that the Princess tended to be late for important social functions and was likely to be in such a hurry she wouldn't question finding an entire outfit conveniently laid out for her in preparation for the banquet. Bria even had a perfect excuse for being in the Princess's chambers, Talon thought bitterly, remembering the bits of gold jewelry that her sister had held up at Kumire's prodding. *Goddess, she was even wearing gloves to protect herself from the spores. I'd nearly forgotten that.*

Appalled, Talon rolled over onto her side. She just couldn't believe Bria would do such a thing. Instinctively she was sure that it was all connected, everything from the moment she and her sisters had arrived at the palace, to the assassin hidden in the Princess's privy, to the poisoned dress today. There had to be a common factor, something that tied all of this together. There was something she was missing.

Suddenly Talon shot straight into a sitting position. *Kumire was wearing gloves, too.* Fancy white kid gloves, as if he were going to a party, but he hadn't been invited to the banquet that evening. And the box under his arm...she'd assumed that it was for helping Bria carry her belongings back to their chambers, but the only things Bria had retrieved were a few small pieces of jewelry. Hardly enough to warrant a big box like that.

The pieces began to fall into place. Talon could practically hear the clicking noises as they came together in her head. There had been two attempts on the Princess's life within a few moons of each other—then nothing, for several winters. Apparently the assassin had decided that he didn't need to kill the Princess after all. Why would he change his mind and try again after lying dormant for so long?

Again she replayed the memory of encountering Bria in the hall when they returned from their ride. Her sister wouldn't even look her in the eye; she just snuggled up to Kumire and walked away, his hand possessively at her waist.

Talon's heart pounded. It was so obvious. There could only be two reasons why anyone would want to kill the royal twins in the first place—revenge or power. If Soltran died without an heir, who would be next in line for the throne? The house of Rane had dwindled, and the Princess's closest living relatives were her great-uncle, Archduke Fickett, and his son, Kumire. With Daric and Shasta out of the way, the Archduke would have the only legitimate claim to the throne after the King's death, and he was already so old that the title would surely fall to Kumire.

Little wonder that Kumire had taken a position in the palace that allowed him direct access to the Princess. He would have had any number of opportunities to do her harm from that close a proximity. It must have been Kumire who had hired the assassin to attack Shasta after their return from Ardrenn. But afterward, he had spent another two winters as her tutor without any further attempt on her life. Why?

Because he hoped to marry her. The conversation Talon had overheard between Kumire and his father suddenly took on an entirely different light. That was the plan Fickett had been protesting so strongly. If Kumire married Shasta, he would become the next king of Ithyria, and as her husband his position would be far more secure. Fickett and Kumire were not well liked in the government, and if anything happened to the Princess, there would be many among the provincial viceroys who would protest Kumire's right to the throne in spite of his lineage. *And that might bring about civil war.* By marrying Shasta, Kumire could have achieved everything he wanted without the risk and expense of war. But his hopes had been dashed the day King Soltran ordered his marriage to Bria. What was it Fickett had said in his son's ear that day? Something about going back to the beginning...

Talon crept from the blankets and took the lamp and a small box of matches from the Princess's bedside. She carried them both to the table beneath the window and lit the wick, careful to keep the light dim so as not to disturb the sleeping women behind her. She opened her chest of belongings and pulled her books out until she found the one she was

looking for. In the flickering lamplight she paged through it quickly, running one finger down the text until it stopped over the entry she remembered.

Miner's Bane: also called caverot or shadowsbane; a rare fungus, the spores of which contain a deadly poison and are said to have the odor of rotting carrots. Can be infectious through consumption, inhalation, or absorption through the skin. Symptoms may include stomach pains and vomiting, respiratory trauma, or virulent rash, and all methods of contraction result in paralysis of the limbs and death. The antidote—

Talon skipped to the end. Her finger underlined the words as she read them in a whisper, ““Miner’s Bane is so called because it is only found in the deepest levels of certain coal mines in the northern mountains of Mondera.””

She snapped the book shut and exhaled, her breath causing the lamp to flicker. The poison came from Mondera province, Kumire’s homeland. Though it was not absolute proof, every instinct told her that her suspicion was correct. Kumire had arranged to have the dress poisoned and had somehow manipulated Bria into planting it in Shasta’s room.

Talon allowed her gaze to travel slowly over the Princess. Lyris had said the betrayal was not over, and she was right. With marriage no longer an option, Kumire was not going to give up. He would try to kill Shasta again. He had to be taken into custody that very night, and until he was, the palace was not safe for the Princess.

Talon hurried to the cot and shook her sister awake. Lyris’s eyes flew open. “What is it?”

“I have to get Shasta out of here.”

“What?” Lyris sat up, reaching for her veils.

Talon was already gently shaking the Princess’s shoulder. “Highness. Highness, you have to get up.” She turned to Lyris. “Your Grace, I need you to go to the barracks and fetch Captain Vaughn.”

“Why? Talon, what’s going on?”

“It’s Kumire. He’s been behind the assassination attempts all along. He tried to kill the Princess today and he’s going to try again.”

Lyris's eyes widened and she stood from the cot, slipping her feet into her sandals. "Are you sure?"

"There's no time to explain, but yes."

"Then I'll go at once."

Shasta blinked sleepily at her guardian. "It's the middle of the night," she complained, but Talon made her sit up and wrapped the dressing robe around her shoulders.

"I know, Highness, but you're in great danger. We have to see your father, right now." Shasta was exhausted and still half asleep, so her protests were feeble. Talon drew her to her feet, helping her with her slippers and robe. Then she strapped her sword belt around her hips. She didn't bother with her uniform jacket, as it was still wet. She led them all to the door and peered into the hall to be sure it was clear.

Lyris put her hand to Talon's cheek. "Goddess save you both," she whispered and hurried away.

Placing her arm around Shasta's waist, Talon propelled her down the hall in the opposite direction, toward Soltran's personal chambers. Shasta stumbled every few steps, having not yet fully recovered from the poison's paralysis. Talon urged her along, regardless. With any luck, the guards would apprehend Kumire while he slept, before he could make another attempt on Shasta's life. Talon just prayed that she was not too late.



The King's bedchamber was empty, the bed turned down but unslept in.

"Lieutenant, what's the meaning of this?" a familiar voice demanded, and Talon turned to see Nurse behind them, looking quite disgruntled at having been roused from her sleep at such an hour. Talon clutched the old woman's arm urgently. "Nurse, where's the King? We have to see him immediately. The Princess is in terrible danger."

Nurse wrenched herself from Talon's grasp and glared. "His Majesty is in his study working on a speech for the celebration. He does not wish to be disturbed."

"This is one disturbance I think he'll understand." Talon tightened her hold at Shasta's waist and hurried away, calling thanks to Nurse over her shoulder.

Soltran's study was only a few doors down from his personal chambers. Again Talon was puzzled to find no guards standing watch and wondered if the King had sent them away. After knocking, she pushed the door open. The King was at his desk, and his eyes widened as Talon appeared in the doorway with the Princess at her side.

"Your Majesty, pardon the intrusion, but this is urgent." The words tumbled out in a rush. "Chancellor Kumire is the assassin. He killed Prince Daric and now he's trying to murder the Princess as well. Since he failed with the poisoned dress he's sure to try again. You must arrest Chancellor Kumire and his father at once." Talon finally stopped to breathe. Shasta gaped at her.

Soltran regarded Talon with a strange expression. "I know."

Talon's mouth dropped open. "You know? But how...?"

The door suddenly slammed shut behind them, and Shasta whimpered as several swarthy, unkempt men stepped out of the shadows cast by the bookcases and overstuffed chairs filling the study. Chancellor Kumire was leaning against the door with a triumphant smile, and they moved to his side.

"An excellent bit of deduction, boy," Kumire said with a mocking flourish.

His men bore rough weapons, not only swords and knives but also huge axes and clubs. One had a chain that he was casually swinging in a circle. Talon's hand went to the sword at her side, and Kumire jerked his head at the men standing closest to him. "Take his weapon."

Talon counted five of them, all much bigger than she was and all blocking the door. Even with her sword, she wouldn't have a chance against all of them at once, and she had no choice but to stand still while one of them yanked her blade from its silver sheath and leveled it at her with a mocking grin. Her nostrils twitched. There was something familiar about the smell of them, the foulness of their sweat and breath that inexplicably filled her with a sense of helplessness and dread. She couldn't remember where she'd encountered such an odor before.

Kumire fixed her with a mocking glare as the armed men forced Talon and the Princess behind the desk, beside Soltran. The chancellor clucked his tongue condescendingly.

"Well, now, Lieutenant, I was wondering how long it would take you to figure it out. Frankly, I was surprised you weren't calling for my arrest the moment you saw me and the little wife outside the Princess's

chamber. But then I realized you probably wouldn't believe your dear sister capable of treachery, at least not until you'd had some time to think about it."

Talon growled low in her throat. "What did you do to Bria?"

Kumire gave a short laugh. "Nothing, dear boy. In fact, the dress was her idea. When she found out what I was up to she couldn't wait to be of help. After all, when I take the throne your sweet little sister will become Queen of Ithyria. You must be so proud."

"You're lying."

Kumire's grin widened so that his pointed teeth flashed, snakelike, in the lamplight. "Think what you will. I knew it was only a matter of time before you figured it out. Of course, I was hoping by then that the poison would have done its work," he eyed Shasta with irritation, "and then I would have the pleasure of deciding whether to frame you for the murder or go after the King immediately."

Talon's gaze slid to the King, who was gripping the edge of the desk with white knuckles, looking like he might just spring right over it and attack Kumire himself.

"As fun as it would be to watch you burn for the death of your precious little milksop, it will be more effective to eliminate King Soltran right away." Kumire pulled a dagger from his belt and began to clean his fingernails with it. "I'm afraid, Your Majesty, that this entire situation is rather your fault. If you'd ordered the Princess to marry me, all of this could have been avoided. She wouldn't even have had to die, so long as she bore me an heir."

Talon was surprised to feel the King's hand suddenly touching her own. Soltran pressed something into her palm and closed her fist around it. He didn't look at her, and Talon squeezed the small, warm object in her hand. She couldn't tell what it was.

Kumire was still playing with the dagger in his hands as he spoke. "So here we are, and it's such a shame. It didn't have to be this way, but I really have no other choice now."

His cold blue eyes snapped up suddenly and his arm moved. Faster than any of them could blink, the dagger embedded itself into the King's heart. Soltran gave a gasp, and his body slumped over in the chair. Talon tensed, but she didn't dare move, and she examined the King's body from where she stood. From the length of the dagger's blade and

its precise location in his chest, she knew he was dead. Unthinkable, that such a thing could happen so fast and so unceremoniously.

“No!” Shasta screamed and tried to run to her father, but one of the smelly, burly men wrapped his arms around her. She kicked and shrieked furiously. Talon moved to help her but Kumire held up another dagger.

“Stay right where you are, Lieutenant. Not a step, or the Princess joins her daddy in Ithyris’s great temple in the heavens.”

Talon ground her teeth but remained where she was. She was weaponless save the small knife in her left boot, and against all five huge leather-clad men, she wouldn’t have a chance. Shasta might even get hurt. Instead, she tried to think of a way to keep Kumire talking until she could come up with a plan. “Not many men have aim that accurate,” she observed coldly. “Am I right in assuming that you murdered Prince Daric yourself?”

Kumire gave a small, mocking bow. “Why, thank you. Yes, I killed the Prince and would have gotten Princess Shasta too if it weren’t for you. At first, I thought perhaps I owed you a debt of gratitude for your little bout of heroics when I realized that marrying the Princess might be a far better option than killing her. But now,” he shrugged, “it just seems I’ve been wasting my time these past few winters.”

Shasta stared at the chancellor, her eyes wide. “You killed Daric?” she whispered hysterically. “And then you proposed to me. You expected me to marry my brother’s murderer?”

“Deliciously ironic, isn’t it?” His lips twisted. “And now I’ve killed your father as well. But don’t feel too left out, Highness. You’re next.” Kumire stalked over to the King’s body and looked down at it with contempt. “First things first, though. There’s just one thing I need to seal my claim to the Ithyrian throne.” He grabbed the dead man’s hand and frowned, then snatched at the other, and a howl of frustration escaped his lips as he spun to stare at Shasta. “Damn you, where is it?”

“Even if I knew what you were looking for, I wouldn’t tell you.” The defiance in Shasta’s eyes did not fade as Kumire approached her, a deadly look on his face.

“The royal signet. He’s not wearing it, which means he must have given it to you.”

Talon's fist tightened over the little item Soltran had given her, and she finally understood. He'd known. From the moment Kumire drew that dagger Soltran must have known he was going to die and had handed off the heavy gold ring to his daughter's guardian to keep it safe. Without the signet, the sign that the King had willingly chosen Kumire to succeed him, it would be next to impossible for the chancellor to claim the throne without opposition. Kumire knew that, and Talon determined grimly that no matter what happened, she would not let the conniving traitor get hold of it.

Shasta made a face at Kumire. "I don't have it. And I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Little wench!" Kumire slapped Shasta across the face and Talon lunged forward, receiving a meaty fist in the stomach from one of Kumire's cronies that stopped her short. She bent over, gasping for breath, and Kumire rolled his eyes. "Bring them," he ordered and marched from the room. Talon was too breathless to fight back as two of the burly men grabbed her arms and hauled her roughly behind.

Kumire had them dragged all the way back to the Princess's chambers. The royal chambers were on a private floor, so they did not encounter any guests and the servants were all probably asleep. Talon caught sight of several more ruffians like the ones in Soltran's study standing watch outside various doors and grunting gleefully as Kumire passed. Now she understood why the King's study and chambers and the royal corridors were unguarded. Kumire must have had his men dispatch every guard on this floor.



The chancellor shoved the Princess's chamber door open and commanded three of the men to begin searching the room for the royal signet. The other two held the Princess and her guardian immobile. Shasta was fully awake now, her fury overwhelming her grief and shock.

If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was being lied to, and if she'd thought Talon's misrepresentation of her gender was terrible, this was a thousand times worse. This wasn't even in the same category of evils. Kumire had killed her twin brother. He'd been Daric's assassin all along, and when she thought of the hours she'd spent listening to his voice as he lectured, shrinking from his breath as he leaned over her

while she wrote... The man had the nerve to try and seduce her at her birthday party and then actually asked her to marry him, and the bastard had her brother's blood on his hands the whole time.

She'd never really known hate before, but now she felt rage boiling through her veins. Her fists shook with it. Kumire had taken her family from her. He'd just murdered her father in cold blood in front of her very eyes, and for what? So he could take the throne and further his father's selfish agendas across the entire kingdom?

"You'll never rule Ithyria," she sneered, her voice trembling with anger. Her bottom lip felt sensitive, and she tasted blood. Kumire must have split it when he hit her.

The chancellor's eyes narrowed and he moved until his face was a handbreadth from her own. "I beg to differ, Highness. Not only will I rule this kingdom, but I'm going to undo all the damage your fool of a father has done during his reign. Soltran never understood the most basic principles of wearing the crown. Your people must fear you if they are to revere you." He smiled at his own little rhyme.

Shasta shook her head slowly. "My father was ten times the king you'd ever be. And a hundred times the man."

"Is that so?" He moved closer, his eyes raking over her face. "His death is on your hands, Princess. All you had to do was marry me when I asked." He ran a hand up the front of her robe, cupping her breast beneath the soft fabric and squeezing it suggestively. "I would have made it worth your while."

Shasta gasped and spat into his face, causing him to back away with a curse. "I'd rather marry the lowest peasant in Ithyria than endure your foul touch for even a moment."

Kumire snarled and wrenched her from her captor's grasp, throwing her onto the bed. "You know what your problem is, Princess, you don't understand how the world works."

"Don't touch her!"

Shasta looked up as her guardian brought an elbow up into the chin of the man holding her, knocking his head back and wriggling free of his grasp. Talon ducked beneath a swinging club and lunged at Kumire. But the chancellor snapped his fingers. The three men who had been searching the room converged on Talon. Shasta heard a sickening crunch as one of them landed a fist across her guardian's face. After several more blows, they got her back under control.

"Talon!" Shasta cried. Kumire stalked over and lifted up her

guardian's chin, staring into black eyes that were burning with rage. A trickle of blood left Talon's nose and stained her upper lip.

"What's the matter, boy, can't stand the thought of a real man taking what you can only dream of? You're nothing more than a glorified slave, not even worthy of emptying her chamber pot."

Talon's voice was hoarse. "I'll kill you."

"Of course you will." Kumire patted her dark head condescendingly. "Except you'll be dead before you get the chance." The chancellor turned his back and moved toward Shasta again.

"No!" Talon yelled as she struggled against her captor. Without breaking his stride Kumire snorted.

"Hold him."

Shasta shrieked again as one of the burly men again struck her guardian across the face. Talon wouldn't stop fighting to free her arms. She was hit again in the stomach and face until her knees gave out and she dropped to the carpet. Blood streamed from her nose and lip.

Kumire paid no attention, advancing on Shasta, who crawled as far from him as she could get, against the headboard of the bed. He grabbed one of her ankles, and she kicked at him as he yanked her back down the bed. "Stop it! Stop!"

She turned her head to see her guardian, who even on her knees had not yet been defeated. When Talon attempted to stand again she received a hard kick in the abdomen and doubled over, spitting blood onto the thick carpet of the floor. Another kick and she was down completely. One of the brute's booted feet came down to rest on her head. A little more pressure and her skull would crack.

Shasta struggled against Kumire. "No! Stop! Kumire, make them stop, they're killing him! Talon!" She was glad that she'd remembered, albeit barely, to refer to Talon as a man. The chancellor's eyebrow quirked, and he leaned over her on the mattress so that she was forced to lie completely down on the bed.

"Tell you what, Princess. You give me the royal signet, and I'll spare your faithful little puppy's life."

"But I don't have it," she said earnestly.

Kumire shrugged. "Then you leave me no choice." He raised a hand, and Shasta twisted her neck to see Talon's bloodstained face pressed into the floor beneath her attacker's boot and only a fingerbreadth away from being crushed.

"No, wait... wait, please!" Kumire turned to look at her expectantly,

and she swallowed. “I don’t have it. Really I don’t, or I’d give it to you, I swear. I’ll do anything, just”—she licked her lips as her gaze flickered between Talon and Kumire—“just don’t kill him. Please.”

“Anything, you say?” The chancellor’s eyes moved over her body greedily.

“Princess...no...” Talon’s moan was scarcely audible.

Shasta couldn’t stand it. Twice Talon had nearly died saving her life, and here she was ready to do it again. Shasta had no doubt that Talon would let that horrible monster split her head open before she’d allow Kumire to lay a hand on her. But it wasn’t Talon’s decision. And so Shasta met Kumire’s eyes, trying not to let her revulsion show, and nodded. “Anything.” She cringed as Kumire brought a hand to her face, trailing it slowly down her neck and chest, slipping a finger beneath the collar of her robe.

Kumire leaned forward so that his lips were next to the Princess’s ear. “Then stop fighting me and hold still.” His other hand went to the belt of her robe and he pulled it open, revealing the lacy straps and low neckline of her nightdress. He ran his fingers over her collarbone, then lower, squeezing her breast beneath his hand and pinching the nipple so hard so that she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. He grinned and gave a small cruel twist with his fingers that caused her to whimper. “Good girl.” He jerked his head at his companions, who were chuckling darkly. “Get the lieutenant on his feet. He gets to watch the show.”

The one resting his foot on Talon’s head suddenly moved it and seized the back of her shirt. He hauled her up and tilted her face in the lamplight. One of Talon’s eyes was already beginning to swell shut, and she didn’t seem to have the strength to stand on her own. Kumire gave a satisfied grin and ran his hands down Shasta’s sides, tracing the indentation of her waist, the curve of her hips, the sides of her thighs and calves. When he reached the hem of her nightshift he slid his hands beneath it, retracing their way back up beneath the shift to her waist.

Shasta cringed at the feel of his fingers against her skin, still tender from the poison rash, and gave a little gasp as Kumire clawed at the waistband of her undergarments. He pulled, stripping the fabric from her body and leaving her naked beneath the thin cotton shift.

“No, wait...” Talon gave a cry, and Shasta again twisted her head to look at her guardian. She was startled to see a tear fall from one of the dark eyes, trailing over the bruised and bleeding flesh of her cheekbone. Talon’s face was swollen and streaked with blood, and she stared at the

Princess with a mixture of desperation and excruciating pain. “I have it. The signet. I’ll give it to you.”

Kumire’s head came up. “You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s true, just let me—” Talon wiggled to free her arms and received another blow to the face for her efforts. The chancellor gave a hard, cruel little laugh.

“It’s rather sweet, the way the two of you would say or do just about anything to protect one another. Disgusting, but sweet. Don’t worry, boy, there will be plenty of time to search your pockets when her Highness and I are done here.”

Talon thrashed again. “Shasta—”

“Shh. Talon, it’s all right,” the Princess murmured quietly.

Another tear fell down her guardian’s face, and Shasta kept her eyes fastened on Talon while the faint clank of metal told her that Kumire was unfastening his belt. She would not look at him, would not give him the satisfaction of making her cry or scream. Kumire grabbed her behind the knees and pulled her down the bed toward him. As he forced her legs apart, his men began to chuckle raucously.

Shasta gave a deep shuddering breath, and at the same time she and Talon both squeezed their eyes shut, tears sliding across their faces simultaneously. Kumire lifted her legs to surround his hips, and Shasta felt the heat of his body, the hardness of him brushing against her inner thigh, his breath coming in quick, eager spurts. She gritted her teeth, but just as his weight began to descend, a crash and the roar of men’s voices made him freeze. Shasta’s eyes flew open just as Kumire was wrenched from between her legs. The room suddenly filled with uniformed royal guard, swords flashing, and Shasta felt gentle hands at her shoulders, lifting her into a sitting position.

“Your Highness, are you all right? He didn’t...”

“Lyris!” Shasta cried out, clinging to her friend for dear life. Tears streamed down her face, and she no longer tried to hold them back.

The priestess patted her back, but said urgently, “Come, Highness, we must get you out of here.”

Another hand touched her shoulder, and Shasta turned with indescribable relief to see Captain Vaughn surveying her worriedly. “Princess Shasta, I’m so sorry we couldn’t get here sooner.” The room rang with the sound of clashing swords. Shasta saw Chancellor Kumire sidling out the door and pointed. Vaughn grunted and moved to intercept the chancellor but was turned aside by a huge, grizzled ruffian wielding

an axe. With a few quick flicks of the sword Vaughn managed to slit the enormous man's throat. A spray of blood fell over them all as the thug slumped to the floor and Kumire fled from the chamber.

Shasta thought she might be sick, but Captain Vaughn caught hold of her. "The palace is overrun with barbarians, Highness, and many of the royal guard have turned against us. I don't know how long we'll be able to hold them off. You must escape the castle, now."

Shasta rushed toward her guardian, crumpled on the floor. "Talon..."

"I'll get her, come on." Vaughn cleared a path through the flailing blades and lifted Talon from the carpet, supporting her as they made their way out the door. Once they were in the hall, the fighting was not in such close quarters, but there was a roar from beneath their feet. More of the barbarian army was filling the lower corridors, making their way to the upper levels.

Lyris reared back as a loud clang sounded to their left and one of the smelly intruders fell to the stone floor. Erinda stood over him with a metal washbasin in her arms. The chambermaid gasped as she caught sight of Talon on Vaughn's shoulders. "Captain Vaughn, what's happening? Who are all these men?"

Vaughn regarded her grimly. "Kumire is a traitor and this barbarian army of his is taking over the palace. You need to come with us." His gaze moved to Shasta. "Highness, where's King Soltran? We have to get him out of here as well."

Shasta's eyes spilled over again and she shook her head.

Talon gave a weak grunt. "The King is dead. Kumire killed him."

Vaughn's eyes grew the size of saucers, but it took less than a second for him to regain composure. "Then it's even more important to get the Princess away from here now. Erinda, Your Grace, take Princess Shasta into Ardrenn and find the cabinetmaker known as Roald. He's a friend of mine and will hide you until we can arrange for transport out of the city."

"But what about Talon?" Shasta protested.

Vaughn and Talon exchanged looks.

"With these wounds I would only slow you down," Talon said. "Besides, I can't leave without Bria. I have to go after her and get her away from Kumire before it's too late."

Shasta shook her head adamantly. "Then I'm coming with you."

Vaughn put his free hand on Shasta's shoulder. "Your Highness,

when it's safe we will both join you at Roald's. I will take responsibility for Talon myself, you have my word."

Shasta scarcely had the chance to look back over her shoulder before Lyris and Erinda steered her to an indentation in the wall.

"The dumbwaiter?" she said incredulously as Erinda climbed into the cubbyhole, onto the wooden platform that was raised and lowered by pulleys to allow the quick transport of food and bedchamber supplies between floors.

"The stairwells are too dangerous, Highness, come on." She held a hand out and Shasta took it. She climbed onto the platform as well.

"What about you?" Shasta said to the priestess.

Lyris shook her head. "There isn't enough room, or enough time. Take this." She pulled a small knife from her belt and pressed it into Shasta's hand. "Just in case. I'm going to take the stairs. These men may be barbarians, but few would dare lay a hand on an Ithyrian priestess while in the Goddess's own lands. I'll meet you on the grounds, by the servant's stables."

"Hang on, Highness." Erinda gave her an encouraging smile. "This may be a bumpy ride."

She tugged at the rope of the dumbwaiter and they were slowly lowered down into the cold stone shaft between floors. Shasta huddled close to the chambermaid. She felt claustrophobic as the damp walls surrounded them. Darkness consumed the warm torchlight of the corridor as they sank farther downward.

The royal chambers were on the third level of the palace, and so they passed another similar cubbyhole on the second floor. Shasta froze with fear as she saw the number of barbarian warriors filling the corridor—hundreds of them, swarthy and tattooed in their leathers and furs, snarling as they swarmed against the palace walls. Shasta clapped a hand over her mouth.

One of the men gave a harsh grunt as her movement caught his eye. Shasta gasped and Erinda gave a mighty yank on the rope pulley. The wooden platform lowered just as a heavy, crude knife sailed into the shaft and embedded itself between two stones above them. Erinda grabbed Lyris's dagger from Shasta's hands and sawed at the rope. They had no more time to waste struggling with the pulley. "Hold on!" she shouted as the rope severed and the dumbwaiter dropped into free fall beneath them. They crashed with dizzying speed to the bottom of the shaft.

The landing was hard and the shock tingled through Shasta's body. She felt a little shove at her back and quickly scurried off the platform into the room. Erinda followed suit, just in time to avoid a hail of knives and one long spear that the barbarians dropped from above them. The sharp points dug into the wooden platform. Shasta eyed them with shock but Erinda paid no attention. She moved to one of the baskets near the wall and rummaged through it. Shasta surveyed the room with some confusion.

"Where are we?"

"The palace's main laundry, Highness," came the reply, and Erinda thrust something at her. "Put this on, and hurry."

Shasta held it out. It was a simple cloak of brown linen with a deep hood, like the ones the kitchen girls wore to tend the garden in cool weather. She swung it around her shoulders and fastened the ties at her neck, then thought of something and spoke up shyly. "Erinda, are there any clean undergarments in here?"

The chambermaid evidently decided not to ask for an explanation. She went to a shelf on the other side of the room and returned with a pair of neatly folded bloomers that Shasta wiggled into gratefully. "Ready?"

Shasta nodded. They crept to the door and opened it slightly. This particular corridor seemed fairly quiet. They could hear the sounds of fighting from above them, but the hall leading past the kitchens to the servants' gardens was clear. Shasta pulled the hood of the cloak over her head, and together they darted into the corridor. They ran as fast as their legs would carry them, out through the servants' gardens.

Shasta knew where they were headed. As children she and her brother had discovered a small door in the garden wall, now overgrown with ivy, that led out onto the castle grounds directly facing the stables. The gardens were empty. Apparently the barbarians were more interested in looting the wealthy guests in their chambers than in the vegetable and herb beds. The iron hinges squeaked loudly as Erinda hauled the door open, and Shasta gasped when she caught sight of the grounds. Bodies covered in blood littered the dirt, some wearing the scarlet jackets of the royal guard and others the scraggly beards and furs of the barbarian army.

Erinda grabbed the Princess's hand. "Come on, Highness. Try not to look at them. We have to get to the stables."

They ran, slinking close to the garden wall. In her hood and Erinda's

plain dress, Shasta hoped they would not look interesting or profitable to the barbarians still fighting here and there along the grounds. She made the mistake once of actually meeting the eyes of a dying man as they passed. He had suffered an axe blow to the midsection that had nearly severed him in half, and his bowels spilled onto the hard-packed earth in a glistening mass of blood. Yet he was not quite dead yet, and Shasta put a hand to her mouth, gagging. She'd read books of war, even books of torture, but never before had she seen such graphic violence with her own eyes. The air reeked of death. Shasta might have fainted save for Erinda's sharp pinch at her arm.

"Don't look down, Princess. We don't have time for you to get sick."

Shasta met the chambermaid's eyes and kept running. At one point Erinda bent and grabbed a fallen sword from the dust, the blade streaked with crimson, but she did not slow her pace. They reached the big doors of the servants' stables to find Lyris waiting for them. She was seated on a small cinnamon-colored gelding, and she had a big brown mare's reins in the other hand.

Shasta was unaccustomed to riding a horse in her nightshift, of all things, and the mare was far too tall for her to mount herself. Erinda dropped to one knee and interlaced her fingers. With her help Shasta was able to climb up into the saddle. Erinda stood and leapt up behind her. Shasta was surprised that the plump little chambermaid seemed so uncharacteristically athletic all of a sudden. She kept the hood pulled low over her face as Erinda kicked her heels, and the Princess, the priestess, and the chambermaid raced off through the palace's back gates onto the southern moors.

Their frantic ride was a blur for Shasta. Under the combination of physical exhaustion and emotional trauma, she could hardly think coherently anymore. In one day she'd nearly been poisoned to death, had been awakened in the middle of the night to watch her father killed in front of her very eyes, had almost been raped, and then was forced to flee the only home she'd ever known in fear of her life.

She felt numb, like she was floating inside herself, surrounded by a comforting darkness that promised to protect her from any further shock. The horse beneath her was galloping hard, and the rhythm of its movement lulled her into a strange, hypnotic daze. Vaguely she was aware that they were galloping around the castle, clear of the palace walls, toward Ardrenn. She felt it when the horses finally slowed to a

more dignified and less suspicious walking gait. They wound through the dusty streets, and a few times they stopped so that Erinda could inquire directions of one of the night watchmen. No one in Ardrenn seemed to be aware yet of the terrible battle that was being fought right this moment beneath their very noses.

They came to a stop in front of what looked like a shabby little furniture shop. The windows were dark, the owners having long since gone to bed. Erinda helped Shasta from the big mare, and they made their way around the side of the shop to a small door in the back. Erinda pounded on it until a light appeared in the window above them and a man's voice called down to them.

Erinda tipped her head back. "Are you Roald?" The man gave an affirmative grunt. "Captain Vaughn sent us."

There was a thumping as the cabinetmaker made his way down the stairs at breakneck speed, throwing the door open. His round-faced wife peered curiously over his shoulder at the bizarre sight of an Ithyrian priestess, a servant girl, and a hooded stranger at their door in the middle of the night.

Erinda pulled Shasta's hood back, and Shasta met the cabinetmaker's eyes, licking her swollen lip. She heard his sharp gasp and his wife's cry of amazement. Then the darkness that had been pounding through her head all night finally overwhelmed her, and she lost consciousness completely.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It wasn't the pain that drew Talon out of slumber, it was something else—a light, gentle touch on her side that somehow felt even more vivid than the throbbing pain that besieged her body. She opened her eyes and blinked against the dim lamplight, then quickly closed them again when she realized what had awakened her. Shasta was sitting by her bed, running several fingers along the white scar above Talon's hip. Talon did the best she could to maintain the evenness of her breathing, knowing that if the Princess thought she was awake she'd probably withdraw her hand. And Talon didn't want her to stop.

With her eyes still closed Talon tried to ascertain where they were, or at the very least what condition she was in. She vaguely remembered flashes from the battle at the palace, Kumire's betrayal, the murder of the King. What plagued her mind more than every other terrible fragment of memory was Bria's stubborn refusal to leave her traitorous husband and escape with Talon and the Captain. Instead, she had called Kumire's men. She had been willing to see Talon killed.

Even now, Talon could hear the snarling grunts and smell the overwhelming stench of the barbarians who had converged on her at her sister's command. Her entire body ached with the consequences of that night. A deep pain pulsed through her lower left leg, and she was aware of a sharp sting across her right thigh and right arm. Her face felt strangely tight. One of her eyes was almost impossible to open. She could feel cool air on her stomach and shoulders, but there was a soft weight across her chest and lower hips that let her know she was probably wrapped in a sheet of some sort.

Still, all the pain was overwhelmed by that small, delicate sensation of Shasta's hand on her skin, and for the moment that commanded Talon's complete concentration.

The Princess's fingers traced the scar above her hip several times, then trailed across her abdomen to the small round indentation left by the outlaw's arrow. Her skin tingled lightly everywhere Shasta touched it, leaving a soft fiery trail that made it difficult for Talon to control her breathing.

She heard a quiet sob, and it was almost enough to make her open her eyes, but then she felt Shasta's breath tickling her hip and the warm press of lips against her scar, followed by a sudden hot liquid sensation that Talon recognized as tear droplets striking her skin. She couldn't suppress the shiver that ran through her body, so she tried to hide it by inhaling deeply and fluttering her one good eye as if she were just waking up.

Shasta straightened quickly and enfolded one of her guardian's hands in her own. "Talon?"

Talon tried to smile, but it hurt too much and instead she ended up grunting. Shasta didn't seem to care. Her amber eyes widened with a look of intense relief.

"Oh, Talon. At last. I was so afraid you might never wake up."

"Princess..." She could barely get the words past her lips. Her throat was parched and rough from disuse.

"Shh, don't try to talk." Shasta took a cup from the table by the bed. "Here, open your mouth."

Talon obeyed, although even that small motion stretched her swollen face uncomfortably, and Shasta poured water into her mouth, pausing to let her swallow. "Good. The healer said you needed as much water as we could get into you, and that's been hard with you unconscious this whole time."

Talon lifted her head from the pillow and tried to sit up. The pain coursing through her sides and chest was just as much a deterrent to that idea, however, as Shasta's hands at her shoulders pushing her back down.

"Don't you dare. You can't get up yet, you're still practically in pieces."

Talon didn't have the strength to argue. She scanned Shasta's face with her one good eye. The split lip she remembered had healed. She gave a little gasp as memories washed over her. The chancellor bending

over Shasta's helpless form on the bed, stripping away her clothes, forcing her legs apart...

"Kumire," she choked out. "Princess, did he...?"

"No. No, Talon, it's all right. Captain Vaughn got there in time."

Talon sagged against the pillows in relief. She flexed the fingers that Shasta was holding, lifting them up to stroke the Princess's cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"Whatever for?"

"I should have stopped him. I failed you."

Shasta shook her head vehemently. "Don't you say that. You did everything you could, Talon. Kumire was going to kill you."

"He should have had to before he could even lay a finger on you." Talon lowered her head, ignoring the pain that small movement sent shooting through her neck and shoulders. "I failed you."

"Say that again and I'll beat you up myself." More tears spilled down Shasta's face as she reached out and gently cupped Talon's cheek. "I don't deserve you, Talon. When I think about everything I've put you through...I've been such a child. So selfish and petty. And you still would have died for me." She drew a shuddering breath. "Now Captain Vaughn's talking about war, and revolution, and mustering an army to retake the palace from Kumire. What right do I have to ask anyone to risk their lives for me? To die for me?"

Talon reached out to wipe Shasta's face with her thumb. "Because you're special. You are the Queen of Ithyria now. And who wouldn't want to die for a queen as beautiful as you?" Her tone held a hint of mischief, just enough to break through Shasta's troubled thoughts and put a little grin on her face.

"Look at you, all black and blue and still as big a flirt as ever." The Princess smoothed Talon's hair away from her face gently. "Look, I'm trying to say that I'm sorry. And to say thank you, for staying with me. After Father died, you didn't have to. You could have left at any time, and you didn't."

"It never crossed my mind," Talon replied firmly. "Highness, I know you think I was only looking out for my sisters, but I really do care about you. I want you to know that."

"I do." Shasta gave a small smile. "I knew the moment I saw those tears on your face in my chamber, when Kumire..." She shuddered a little, but ran a finger lightly down Talon's bruised cheekbone. "I'd never seen you cry before."

Talon wasn't quite sure how to respond. She felt like she might be blushing and hoped the heavy discoloration of her face would conceal it. Trying to think of some way to change the subject, she cast her eyes around the dark room and noticed the light scent in the air, a warm blend of incense and earthy smells.

"Princess, where are we?" she asked.

"Verdred Temple. The Honored Mother of Verdred has granted us sanctuary until we can figure out what to do next." Shasta grinned wryly. "Of course, by 'we' I mean Captain Vaughn. He's been plotting and planning nonstop for the past quarter-moon or so, and I don't understand half of what he's talking about."

"Where is he?"

"Probably asleep. It's pretty late."

Talon realized that Shasta had dark circles beneath her eyes. At first she had attributed them to the shadows cast by the lamp at her bedside. But on closer inspection, the Princess looked quite pale and exhausted, and her cheeks were sunken as though she'd lost weight.

"Highness, you should go to bed. You don't look well."

"Ha. I bet I look better than you." Shasta stuck her tongue out and Talon chuckled, then winced as the movement sent sharp, stabbing pains through her lungs. "Besides, I've waited for a half-moon without knowing if you were going to die or ever wake up again. All we could do was keep pouring water and broth into you and hope it would be enough to keep you alive." She straightened abruptly. "Are you hungry? You must be, you haven't had any real food for a long time."

Talon shook her head. Her stomach did feel almost painfully empty, but she couldn't imagine trying to chew or swallow anything at the moment; it was hard enough just to get those small gulps of water down. "No, I'll be fine. I can wait until morning. I'll be here when you wake up. I promise." She made her voice as reassuring as she could. "Go on." Shasta stood reluctantly, but kept hold of Talon's hand, and so gently Talon separated their fingers and pulled her hand away. "Good night, Princess."

"Good night." Shasta picked up the lamp and took a few steps, then paused and turned back around. "Talon?"

"Hmm?"

Her eyes glowed amber in the lamplight. "I..." But for some reason she couldn't seem to finish the thought and finally gave a little shake of her head. "Good night."



Captain Vaughn's face looked like it had gained thirty winters in a matter of days. Lines creased his handsome forehead and gathered deeply at the corners of his eyes, and he seldom smiled anymore.

Talon gazed at her mentor with sympathy. She couldn't imagine how difficult recent events had been for him, feeling the sole responsibility of the kingdom and its Princess on his shoulders. She rolled the mug of tea slowly between her palms. "So after Kumire took the castle, he laid claim to the crown?"

"That's right. Conniving little bastard called a conference with the provincial governors to declare that the palace had been attacked by an army of barbarians from Dangar, and that they'd killed the royal family and ransacked the place until—and get this—*Kumire himself* rallied the royal guard together and drove them away." Vaughn gave a humorless laugh. "Then he declared that as Queen Talia's nephew and a member of the house of Rane, he was next in line for the throne, and proposed that they pronounce him king."

"But they didn't."

"Not yet. They all saw King Soltran with their own eyes, but Kumire couldn't produce the Princess's body or the royal signet. Kumire's excuse is that the barbarians carried them both off, but there are those among the viceroys who have speculated that perhaps Princess Shasta was taken alive. They're grasping at straws and they know it, but some of them just can't stand the thought of Kumire on the Ithyrian throne and they're trying to delay it as long as possible, hoping for a miracle."

Talon nodded slowly. "So why don't we just find some way to present Shasta to the supportive viceroys? Let them know she's not dead?"

"Kumire's got Ardrenn locked up tight as a tomb. No one going in or out. He says it's for the citizens' own protection, to keep the barbarians from getting in again, but that's bullshit." Vaughn pounded a fist on the table in frustration. "Conveniently enough, the viceroy of Daiban and the viceroy of Striniste, Soltran's strongest supporters, were reported dead in the palace attacks, yet not one of the representatives from the seven northern provinces, all friendly to Mondera, were harmed. It takes a unanimous vote from the viceroys to place the crown on Kumire's head without the royal signet. Right now the viceroys of Olsa, Verdred, and Marinland are all that stand between Kumire and the throne."

Talon slowly exhaled. “And with all of them sealed up in the palace, there’s no way to get Princess Shasta in front of them? To prove she’s alive.”

“Not without putting her in enormous danger, no.” Vaughn wrinkled his brow. “The provincial viceroys would recognize the Princess’s face—they’ve seen her enough times—but if we can’t get to them, our only other hope would be to appeal to the provincial senates of the five southern provinces. None of those men will recognize her on sight, though. And with the rumors of her death they’ll demand proof that she is who we claim she is. For all they know we could be a couple of swindlers with some amber-eyed girl we picked up off the street.”

Talon put a hand in the pocket of her trousers, grimacing as the movement sent pain shooting through her still-mending ribs. She’d been healing much more quickly, now that she was awake enough to consume a proper diet and provide her body with the fuel it needed to repair itself. However, she was still in a lot of pain and although much of the swelling had gone down, her fractured leg and ribs were taking longer to heal. She gave a sigh of relief to find that the object was still in her pocket where she had left it. Thankfully her pants had not been torn badly in the fighting, so they’d been folded and set aside until she could wear them again. She held the precious symbol up to Vaughn in the palm of her hand.

“Will this help?”

Captain Vaughn gasped and stood so suddenly that his chair fell over behind him. His eyes fastened on the ring in Talon’s hand and he reached out to take it, reverently. “The royal signet. How did you get this?”

“King Soltran gave it to me. Put it in my hand right before Kumire struck.” Talon was filled with sorrow as she recalled the King slumped in his study chair with Kumire’s dagger protruding from his chest. She watched her mentor turning the signet in his fingers thoughtfully. “Do you think that will be proof enough for them?”

“I think it will be perfect.” Vaughn met Talon’s eyes. “With this, no one will question Shasta’s identity or her claim to the throne.” His hand tightened around the ring. “This gives us a glimmer of real hope, Talon. We might just have a chance against Kumire after all.”



Shasta frowned curiously at the captain. "So you want me to write letters?"

"That's right. Five of them, one to each of the southern provinces. You need to let the senates know that you're still alive and that you're disputing Kumire's attempt to take your throne. Explain his treachery and ask for the help of their provincial guards, according to your right as Queen. We have to muster an army to retake the palace. It's certain that Kumire won't give up quietly. We're going to have to force him out."

The Princess looked uncertainly at the signet in her hand. It was far too big for her fingers, so she carried it on a leather thong around her neck with Daric's blue feather. "Will you read them over for me? Make sure they sound all right?"

"I'd be honored, Highness."

She twirled the quill in her hand, then dipped it in the ink that the priestesses had provided and made a few marks on the parchment. "But Captain, how will the senates get these letters? I don't think the regular messenger service should be trusted with them, do you?"

"I'll carry them personally, Princess. With your permission, of course."

"It's too dangerous," Shasta protested. "If any of Kumire's supporters catch you with these—"

"I'm the only one you can trust at this point, Your Highness. And I should be fairly safe. My travel route will keep me within the borders of friendly provinces. I should never even have to enter hostile territory."

Shasta was still worried, but she had to admit that Vaughn was right about one thing: he was the only person she trusted who could do this for her. "Very well." She began to write in earnest, filling the parchment quickly with neat rows of script.

When the letters were finished, her hand was cramping from holding the quill for so long. Vaughn looked them over, and with his approval Shasta folded them all carefully, then took the stick of red wax that Vaughn was holding out to her. She'd watched her father seal court documents and letters hundreds of times, but this was the first time she had done it herself. She held the tip of the wax into the flame of a candle until it softened to near liquid, then rubbed a good portion of it onto the fold of the parchment. Before it cooled she pressed the signet into the hardening wax, leaving a clear imprint. Anyone who looked at that seal would know it had been executed by royal hand.

“When do you leave?” Shasta asked as she repeated the process with the other four letters.

“Right away, Princess.” He tucked the crucial letters into a small brown bag at his belt. “I’ll start with the senate here in Verdred. If I’m successful, the Verdred provincial guard will be sent here to the Great Temple to prepare for battle. I’ll send word from the other provinces as I go.” He saluted, then spun on his heel.

Shasta watched him walk away with a profound sense of gratitude, but also a steadily deepening dread. There was no turning back now. Ithyria was headed straight for civil war.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tell me again that I did the right thing,” Shasta said.

“You know you did, Princess,” came Talon’s calm reply, but Shasta paced in agitation.

“Then why do I feel so guilty? This is war we’re talking about, Talon. Captain Vaughn’s already taking a huge risk, carrying those letters to the provincial senates, and,” she wrung her fingers anxiously, “it’s been almost an entire moon without word from him. For all we know, he could have been captured and killed already.”

“You’re going to wear a hole in the carpet with all that pacing, Highness,” Talon gently upbraided her. “Captain Vaughn’s not dead. Bad news travels faster than good news. No word means that he’s probably right on track with the Verdred senate.”

“Or else he’s lying in a ditch somewhere.”

“Princess,” Talon’s voice held a hint of amusement, “you have to learn not to be so pessimistic.”

“I can’t help it.” Shasta met her eyes fearfully. “I’m not ready for this, Talon. I have no idea what I’m doing. How can I lead my country into civil war when I know nothing, nothing whatsoever, about battle or strategy or politics? Oh, I wish I’d paid more attention in lessons.”

“It’s going to be all right, Highness.” Talon pulled away from the table slightly so that it wouldn’t bump her rib cage whenever she moved. Three half-moons after the battle at the palace, and she was finally able to leave her bed. Her fractured leg had been set in a splint of slender iron bars and tight wrappings, and with the help of a cane, she was able to move around the temple a little. The healer said in another

half-moon she would be able to do away with the splint entirely. Her ribs had healed almost completely, though they were still tender, and one of the priestesses had removed the stitches for her. All in all, she was looking much better.

She eyed the Princess sympathetically. “Anyway, that’s why you have me, isn’t it? Luckily for you I always paid attention in *my* lessons.” A glassy tinkle made both of them look toward the beaded curtain across the doorway, and a Verdred priestess entered with a curtsy. “Your Highness, you have a visitor.”

“A visitor?” Shasta rose to her feet as a handsome young man in a green military uniform marched into the temple room and gave a sweeping bow.

“You are Princess Shasta Soltranis of Rane?”

“I am.” Shasta held out the royal signet suspended from her neck so that he could see it, and his eyes widened as he looked from the signet to her face. He dropped to one knee.

“Your Royal Highness, I’m General Harneth of the Verdred provincial guard. I was sent by our provincial senate in response to your letter.”

Shasta clasped her hands with excitement. “You mean Captain Vaughn was able to reach them?”

“Yes. The senate have sent me to verify the captain’s claim that you are still alive.” He looked up again, surveying her closely. Satisfaction lit his face. “There can be no mistaking the famous amber eyes of Rane. Princess Shasta...” He tugged a piece of folded parchment from his belt and held it out. “This is a message from Captain Vaughn. My orders are to deliver this to you and send word to the senate verifying that you are indeed alive. Praise be to the Goddess, Your Highness, that you are still with us, and may I offer my most sincere condolences on the death of your father. He was a good man.”

Shasta did her best to maintain her composure as she accepted the letter and broke the seal. Talon rose to her feet and limped to Shasta’s side, leaning heavily on her cane. She looked down at the young soldier intently. “General Harneth, was it? You seem very young to have acquired such a prestigious rank.”

“I was fortunate, my lord, to be appointed to my commission at a very young age. I assure you that in spite of my youth I am well

equipped to lead the provincial guard of Verdred.” He took a closer look at Talon and asked, “Forgive me, my lord, but am I right in assuming that you are Lieutenant Talon, the Princess’s personal guard? The one they call the Marvel?”

Talon inclined her head in the affirmative and the young general rose and saluted.

“It is an honor, sir. There’s not a soldier in Ithyria who has not heard the stories of your bravery and devotion to our Princess.”

“Exaggerated, I’m sure,” Talon replied dryly, “but thank you.”

Shasta returned her attention to the paper in her hand. “General. I have new orders for you.” Her eyes flicked over Vaughn’s letter again to be sure she was reading it correctly. “I am invoking my right, as heir to the Ithyrian throne, to call upon the services of the provincial guard for the defense and preservation of my crown. You are to assemble every able-bodied soldier in Verdred and set up a temporary base of operations around the Great Temple. Choose representatives from among you to organize battle training and field exercises and to ascertain what weapons and armor will need to be made to properly equip each man for active combat.” She followed the text with her finger. “The men must be battle-ready by the Seventhmoon. When the guard have been gathered from the other provinces as well, I will give the marching order and we will advance on Ardrenn to retake the palace.” She inhaled quickly and reread the last line to be sure she was interpreting it correctly. Then she met the general’s eyes. “We’re declaring war on Chancellor Kumire.”

Harneth saluted. “Understood, Your Highness. I will begin right away.”

He turned smartly and left the room, the beaded curtain swinging behind him as he made his exit, and Shasta sank back down into her chair with a heavy sigh.

“One province down, four more to go.” She handed Talon the letter. “He’s on his way to Striniste next.”

Talon skimmed the letter quickly, her dark eyes jumping from line to line. “From the sound of this, Kumire’s already gathering together his own army from among the northern provinces. Even if we succeed in recruiting all five of the southern provinces to come to your aid, we’re still going to have a difficult fight ahead of us. He has the barbarians

and the northern provincial guard, not to mention those of the royal guard that he's turned against us." She looked up at Shasta. "You did very well, by the way. Issuing those orders like a true queen."

Shasta gave a short laugh. "Hardly. I read them almost verbatim from the captain's letter."

"It doesn't matter," Talon insisted. "It's more about how you say it than about what you say. You delivered those commands with as much authority as your father ever had." She folded the parchment up again and set it on the table, then squeezed Shasta's shoulder gently. "I know you're scared, Princess, but I believe in you. You've got the blood of kings in your veins. You're going to be just fine, you'll see."

Shasta smiled up at her gratefully.



By early summer, Verdred Temple was completely surrounded by the tents and fires of a military camp stretching for a radius of almost a league. Unlike the royal guard, who were trained in the fine manners and pleasantries of the court, the provincial guard were a much coarser breed. Shasta found their untamed facial hair, rumpled uniforms, rough manners, and boisterous laughter unnerving. She usually avoided stepping out of the temple, preferring instead for General Harneth to come to her when he had updates.

She had grown to like Harneth immensely. He had not yet reached thirty winters, yet he had an aura of strength and confidence about him that suited his hefty responsibilities. He reminded her of Captain Vaughn, with the same friendliness and self-assured manner. He also had a talent for explaining things in simple terms so that Shasta actually understood why the information was important, and she found herself learning more than she'd ever wanted to know about the operations of a military base.

One morning while Erinda was brushing and plaiting Shasta's hair, a loud scuffle erupted outside her window and Shasta was shocked to see two young soldiers engaged in a violent physical altercation, rolling around on the ground while yelling obscenities and throwing punches at one another.

She threw open the window. "What's the meaning of this? Stop fighting at once!"

They looked up, startled, and their mouths dropped open when

they realized that the young woman in the window was not an Ithyrian priestess. They might not have recognized Shasta, but they must have known the Princess was somewhere in the temple. Both of them stood and dusted their trousers sheepishly. One of them had something red in his hand that he appeared to be trying to keep away from his companion.

“What’s that?” Shasta demanded. “Is that what you two are fighting over? Give it to me.” She bent down over the ledge and held out a hand.

The two men exchanged hesitant glances but finally handed over a small apple. “You two are ready to kill each other over a little piece of fruit?” Shasta glared down at them in disbelief. “Get out of here. Both of you. And I don’t want to hear another disturbance like that again.”

As the two soldiers scuttled off toward the tents, Talon approached to see what the fuss was about. “You shouldn’t sit in an open window like that, Princess,” she admonished gently. “It’s not safe.”

“Bah. They weren’t trying to hurt me, they were trying to hurt each other. Over this.” Shasta handed the apple to Talon. “Come with me. We’re going to see General Harneth right now. Foolishness like this should not be tolerated.”

Shasta stomped from the room and out the tall, heavy front doors of the temple to the top marble step. There, she paused in confusion. She had no idea where Harneth was in this sea of tents and horses.

Without waiting for Talon to lead her, she hailed the first man who happened to pass by them, an older soldier with a grizzled beard, and asked to be taken to General Harneth.

A pair of watery blue eyes scanned her from top to bottom until they settled on the heavy gold signet hanging from her neck. The soldier gave a little start and bowed deeply. “Your Highness. It would be an honor. Please, follow me.”

They wound in and out of several of the tents and cooking fires and passed by a fenced arena where some sort of organized sparring was going on. Next to her, Talon walked with a scarcely noticeable limp; her splint had been removed days ago and her leg was almost completely healed. When they reached a large canvas shelter, supported by tall beams of wood planted in the ground, Shasta saw Harneth sitting at a table inside with several other men in uniform.

They all jumped to their feet and bowed when they recognized their visitor.

Shasta greeted them and took a seat on one of the benches. "Please, sit down. I'm sorry to have interrupted your..." She eyed the plates on the table and her nose wrinkled. "Is this breakfast?" She picked up a fork and poked at the lumpy white substance on one of the plates. "What in the name of the Goddess is that?"

"Rice gruel, Highness," Harneth replied.

"It looks awful."

He chuckled. "Yeah, doesn't taste like much, either, but," he shrugged, "it's standard issue in wartime."

"What do you mean? Surely your soldiers don't like this stuff. Is it good for them?"

"Not particularly. But the provincial guard has a limited budget, and we're already overstretched as it is trying to get proper weapons, armor, and horses for all these men. Ask any soldier out there and he'll tell you he'd rather have a good protective set of armor than a full belly when he marches into battle."

"But that's not right." Shasta chewed her lip. "Not right at all." No wonder the men she'd confronted were ready to kill each other over a piece of fruit. She took the apple from Talon's hand and set it on the table in front of the general. "It certainly explains why there were two soldiers fighting over this outside my window this morning."

Harneth inclined his head. "My apologies, Highness. I'll see to it that you are not disturbed again."

"That hardly seems the point," Shasta pondered aloud. "These men are risking their lives for me. They deserve better."

Recalling some of the farms they had passed as they made their escape to the temple, Shasta had an idea. "I believe there are orchards around here?"

Harneth seemed surprised, but after a moment's thought replied, "Yes, Princess, I think there's a small orange grove about four leagues to the west."

"Perfect. Do you have a quill and some parchment, please?"

He complied quickly, producing a small writing case from a wooden chest beside one of the low cots in the corner of the tent. Shasta scribbled several lines of script onto a sheet of parchment and sprinkled it with blotting powder. While she was waiting for the ink to dry, she pulled the stick of wax out of the box and requested a candle.

One of the soldiers at the end of the table slid a candlestick over,

and every man present watched with fascination as she folded the letter and sealed it with the wax and royal signet.

“General, have someone carry this to the owners of that orchard. I’m going to write more, to every farm and ranch and chicken coop within ten leagues of the Great Temple. If these men are going to dedicate their swords and their lives to my service, I owe it to them to see that they’re properly fed.” She stood and handed the letter to the general. “And another thing. From now on, have whoever’s cooking up this stuff bring a plate of whatever the soldiers are eating to me as well. I refuse to sit in the comforts of the temple eating bread and honey while these men, my men, are out here eating...that.” She made another face at the plate of gruel.

General Harneth looked almost flustered, but Shasta did not give him the chance to reply.

As she marched briskly out of the tent, the general glanced toward Talon. “Is she always like that?”

Talon’s mouth twitched. “She has her moments.”

“The Princess is quite a woman.”

Talon could not fail to notice the open admiration in the young general’s expression. “Yes.” She followed Shasta out of the tent, mumbling under her breath, “She certainly is.”



Several days later, a large wagon pulled up in the middle of the camp, amid cheers from the soldiers as they realized what it carried. A line of men formed to help unload the cargo—crate after crate piled high with big golden oranges.

Shasta, having been summoned to witness the literal fruits of her labor, stood on the temple steps, delighted to see the soldiers’ excitement.

“I take it you received my letter,” she said, when the farmer and his wife approached to make their bow.

“We did, Your Highness, and it’s an honor to be able to offer our support and assistance however we can to the crown of Ithyria,” the farmer replied.

Shasta descended the steps. “Ithyria is in your debt, sir. Your generosity will be remembered.” She held out a hand. “When I have

regained my father's throne, you and your family will be granted exemption from kingdom taxes for a period of ten winters."

The man and his wife bowed again to kiss her hand. "May the Goddess bless you, Princess Shasta."

Shasta addressed the soldiers within earshot. "Tonight there will be a celebration. We praise Ithyris for her provision and guidance, and thank our new friends," she indicated the orchard owners, "for their kindness."

The men set up a cheer that dissolved into an enthusiastic chant of Shasta's name, and she waved before retreating back into the temple. A little later, from her window seat, she watched the soldiers finish storing the produce and said with satisfaction, "Isn't that just a beautiful sight?"

Talon looked down at the Princess's glowing face. "Beautiful," she agreed, but she wasn't referring to the excitement outside.

Shasta had always been a pretty girl, but the past moons had added depth and serenity to her beauty. Losing her father had sobered her, somehow. Gone was the frivolous, pampered little girl that Talon had known. Even her health seemed less fragile. She now demonstrated a dignity and grace that she'd never possessed before. Talon could not help finding her completely breathtaking.

She realized she was staring and quickly turned her attention to the scene outside. "It's a great thing you've done for them, Highness."

"It's nothing compared to what they're doing for me."

Talon caught the note of guilt in Shasta's voice and said, "They're not just here to fight for you, Princess. They're fighting for themselves and their families as well. Those men out there believe you were chosen by the Goddess to lead them."

The Princess stared out the window again. "But birthright alone won't make me a good queen, no matter what the legends about my family say." She gave a heavy sigh. "These people—my people—are fighting every day just to survive, while the nobles and politicians grow fat and rich by exploiting them. And here I am, waving my signet around under their noses," she held the ring up almost distastefully, "and demanding that they lay down their lives for me to suit my own selfish purposes. I'm no better than my uncle."

Talon was of the opinion that a dung beetle could rule Ithyria better than Fickett, or Kumire either for that matter, but chose to keep that

remark to herself. “You’re nothing like the Archduke,” she declared firmly, but Shasta did not seem convinced.

“I don’t know what these people expect of me, Talon. They’re willing to fight and die to put the crown on my head, yet I don’t have any idea what I’m supposed to do with it once I get it. What if my father was right? What if women just aren’t meant to rule alone?” Talon could see tears beginning to sparkle in the golden eyes. “Oh, if only Daric—”

Talon took Shasta sternly by the shoulders. “I am sure Daric would have been a great king, but he is gone, Princess. You are what Ithyria needs now.” She paused, suddenly wondering if she’d said too much. What did she know about politics, anyway? She was just a soldier. She dropped her hands. “I’m sorry, Highness, it really isn’t my place.”

“No, your opinion is important to me. Tell me what you mean.” Shasta touched her arm. “Please?”

That one little word was her undoing. Sighing, Talon sat beside the Princess and waved an arm at the window. Outside, the emptied wagon was just pulling away. Laughter emanated from the encampment as the soldiers celebrated their treat.

“The way I see it, this kingdom is starved for a ruler with both strength *and* compassion. As you said, someone needs to cleanse the provincial governments of corruption—someone who understands that every person’s rights are important, regardless of wealth or title. The people of Ithyria need a ruler who is empathetic, just, passionate, decisive, and most of all, wise enough to understand that a society is only as successful as its weakest members.”

“Do you really believe I can be all of that?”

The vulnerable quaver in Shasta’s voice made Talon’s stomach flip. “You already are,” she answered softly.

Her heart began to pound as the Princess reached out to touch her face, and she felt suddenly light-headed when Shasta leaned forward and brushed her lips against her cheek. How had the childish, spoiled girl she’d known become such an extraordinary young woman?

“You have so much faith in me.” Shasta’s eyes were dark with emotion. “How I hope I can prove worthy of it.”

Talon could find no voice to reply.



The soldiers' party was unlike any other party Shasta had attended in her life. She was used to the gaiety of court, a sophisticated, cheerful affair of pleasantries, soft music, and elegant dances. There was nothing sophisticated or elegant about the way the Verdred soldiers celebrated. The music was loud with a pounding beat, and the dancing was a cacophony of stamping feet and clapping hands, punctuated by boisterous leaps into the air and enthusiastic twirls across the hard-packed earth. Yet the fun was undeniably infectious. Shasta noticed even her usually stoic guardian tapping a toe to the music, and she grinned at her.

Talon grinned back, white teeth flashing mischievously. Shasta's breath caught and she quickly averted her eyes. *I'm so used to thinking of her as a man.* Even now that Shasta knew her guardian's secret, Talon's seemingly effortless confidence made it far too easy to forget that the handsome soldier she'd grown up with was actually a woman in disguise. Talon was still the same strong, thoughtful, and infuriatingly overprotective person Shasta felt like she'd known forever.

It was Shasta herself who was different. She didn't want to be angry with Talon any longer, but she had no idea how to relate to her guardian as a woman. It was simpler just to slip back into the comfortable brother-sister relationship they'd shared for so long. Except that occasionally she'd find herself battling that old infatuation, those powerful surges of attraction that washed over her every time she let herself forget for even a moment that Talon was not what she seemed to be. Her heart ached as though she'd lost something vital, yet that was silly since Talon could never have been hers to begin with.

If only she'd listened to Lyris and Bria. If only she'd accepted Talon's gentle attempts to discourage her affections. Now their friendship would never be the same again, and it was her own fault.

General Harneth approached and held out a hand. "Will you dance, Princess?"

"Oh..." She looked past him at the men whirling and jumping around and shook her head. "I don't know how. I've never danced like that before."

"Then you'll learn something new. I promise you, it's fun." He took her hand and led her out into the dancers, amid hoots and cheers from the soldiers that made Shasta blush. Placing one hand at the small of her back and taking her hand in the other, he said, "Just follow me, Your Highness."

At first Shasta felt like she might topple over, but once she realized that the steps matched the beat of the music and that the general was quite adept at guiding her among the other dancers without any collisions, she began to relax. He was right, it was fun; much freer and more invigorating than the carefully rehearsed, dignified court dances she was familiar with. She gave a little shriek of delight when Harneth lifted her into the air and twirled her around, her feet flying an arm's length from the ground.

The other soldiers began to cut in at intervals. Since Ithyrian priestesses did not dance socially, Shasta and Erinda were the only two women in an ocean of men and never had a shortage of partners to dance with. The men seemed thrilled that Shasta was so small and lightweight, and there were entire musical pieces where her feet didn't touch the ground more than twice.

Erinda, too, seemed to enjoy the lively music and dancing, though Shasta thought that the maid seemed a little distracted, her eyes constantly returning to the shadowy temple behind them.

Shasta caught sight of her guardian standing quietly by one of the tables. In her black trousers and loose black linen shirt she seemed almost like a silhouette of herself. Her eyes never left Shasta; she could feel them following her every move in the crowd of riotous dancers.

Impulsively, Shasta excused herself from her partner and marched over to her guardian. She grabbed one of her hands. "Come along, Talon, you can't just stand here like a statue all night. Dance with me."

With a groan, Talon allowed herself to be dragged away from the table. But just as they reached the other dancers, the music slowed, and one of the soldiers who had been playing the drums stood up and called out over the party.

"Hey, Waltis! Get over here and sing us a little something."

A short man with protruding ears that reminded Shasta of a monkey's was pushed up to the front where the instruments were. Elbowed and pummeled cheerfully by his fellow soldiers, he broke into song. He had a deep, rich voice, and the ballad he chose was well known across Ithyria, so many of the soldiers found seats along the benches or plopped themselves down on the ground to enjoy the soaring baritone.

Only Shasta and Erinda and their dance partners remained standing to sway back and forth to the music. Talon felt a little silly out there in front of all those soldiers, but just as she was about to suggest to the Princess that they join the men on the benches, Shasta wrapped her arms

around her and laid her head innocently on Talon's chest. Suddenly Talon was unaware of anything but the feel of Shasta's heartbeat against her, the quick rise and fall of the Princess's breath beneath her hands as she held her. Talon's insides clenched and dipped strangely as though she'd lost her balance, and she abandoned all self-consciousness in an instant. She wouldn't have traded those moments with the Princess in her arms for anything else in the world and was disappointed when General Harneth tapped her on the shoulder to cut in.

She released Shasta to him, and as she resumed her position by the table she berated herself furiously. She had to stop letting herself get so carried away. Nothing had changed. Talon was still a woman, and Shasta was still the Princess she'd sworn to protect and serve. One day Shasta would be Queen of Ithyria, and the last thing Talon wanted was to get in the way.

A lump formed in her throat as she watched the Princess dance with Harneth, her head resting on his chest as it had on Talon's only a few moments ago. *He would be good for her*, Talon admitted reluctantly. Harneth had proven himself a capable, intelligent leader, the kind of man that people followed and looked up to instinctively. He treated everyone from Princess Shasta to the greenest recruit among the guard with the same level of respect and sensitivity. He was young, handsome, and already well accomplished. If Talon were to choose a man for Shasta, Harneth would be the one. So why did she feel such heaviness in the pit of her stomach as she watched them?

The sound of clapping jolted her from her despondent reverie. The ballad had ended and Waltis was taking his bows. Shasta made her way to Talon as the music picked up again and held out a hand, but Talon shook her head this time.

"I think I'm going to turn in for the night," she said, ignoring Shasta's little mew of protest. "I'm sure you'll be perfectly safe out here. The general will make certain of that. You should stay and enjoy the party." She bowed and kissed the Princess's hand a little too ceremoniously, then turned toward the temple.

"Talon." Shasta trotted after her. "Are you upset with me? Did I do something?"

Talon stopped, and closed her eyes briefly before turning again to face the Princess. "Of course not. I'm just tired."

Shasta scrutinized her anxiously. "All right, then I'm coming in

with you. Wait for me just a moment, please?” She didn’t give Talon the chance to reply, darting back to the party. After a round of good-natured booing the men laughed and bowed as Shasta took her leave and returned to Talon’s side.

“General Harneth is a good man,” she declared as they walked to her rooms.

“Yes, he is.” The sick weight in Talon’s stomach was pressing painfully against her ribs, and she couldn’t resist saying, “You like him a lot, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.” Shasta poked Talon playfully. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

Talon wiggled an eyebrow. “Maybe,” she responded, careful to keep her tone light.

“Well, don’t worry. You’re still the Princess’s favorite.” Shasta snuggled against Talon’s arm. “You’re my best friend, you know that?”

Talon couldn’t reply, overcome with a sudden maelstrom of conflicting emotions. She just nodded and patted the Princess’s hand on her arm before brushing aside the beaded curtain.



Talon awoke suddenly, blinking at the ceiling above her in confusion as she tried to ascertain what it was that had disturbed her sleep. Then she heard it again, a low moan coming from the Princess’s bed on the other side of the room. She sat up, alarmed, but there was no sign of an intruder in the room. Was Shasta sick?

She started to rise from her cot, but another noise from the Princess made her sit down again, hard. There could be no mistaking that sound. Shasta was dreaming, and for the first time Talon’s keen sense of smell picked out the light, faint scent hanging in the air. Her mouth dropped open with shock. The Princess’s dreams were definitely erotic in nature.

As her eyes adjusted to the dark, Talon could make out Shasta’s form behind the filmy white curtains that surrounded her bed. She didn’t know whether to be amused, or... Another moan and Talon’s cheeks flushed hotly. She rubbed her forehead in consternation. Shasta was nineteen now, and it was not unnatural that she would have developed

a grown woman's desires and fantasies. But Talon was accustomed to thinking of her as an innocent, as chaste and virginal as any Ithyrian priestess. This very evident proof to the contrary was difficult to contend with.

To make matters worse, every sound that left the Princess's lips incited a powerful pull in Talon that became impossible to deny. The light, heady scent of Shasta's arousal called to her like a siren's song, irresistible and overwhelmingly seductive. Talon drew a ragged breath, clamping down hard on the desire that suddenly coursed through her.

It's not you she's dreaming of, she reminded herself firmly. And then she realized there was only one person it could be. *Harneth. She's dreaming of General Harneth.* And why wouldn't she? Shasta had said herself that he was a good man. Talon had never seen her express such an interest in anyone else, except, of course, that agonizing infatuation she'd developed for Talon almost a winter before. Strange, so much had happened in the past twelve moons that those days seemed like a lifetime ago.

It was bound to happen one day. Shasta was a such a passionate, loving person by nature, that Talon had always known the Princess would eventually want to be in love, to marry and have children and build a family. She'd never dwelt on the prospect for very long because the idea hurt more than she wanted to admit. Once Shasta had her own family she would no longer have need of her guardian. Talon would probably still serve her in the royal guard, attend her at court, but it would never be the same. Shasta would belong to someone else, and Talon would be relegated to the position of affectionate old friend. The thought broke her heart.

But why can't I let her go? she asked herself fiercely. *If I can accept that my sisters have moved on with their lives, why does it seem so much harder to watch the Princess do the same?* Lyris was blissfully dedicated to service in the temple, and Bria...well, Bria had made her own choices, and Talon couldn't protect her any longer. Shasta was all Talon had left, the only one who still needed her. That was the most reasonable explanation for Talon's heartache, but as she sat there on the edge of the cot, listening to the Princess's soft sighs, she could no longer deny the overpowering longing that threatened to suffocate her with every breath. *I have to stop this.*

Talon stood and went to the bed. She drew the gauzy curtains aside

and sat gingerly on the edge of the mattress, reaching out to shake Shasta gently. “Princess, wake up. You’re dreaming.”

Her only intent was to wake her, maybe make it look like she thought Shasta was caught in a nightmare, but the Princess was so deeply asleep that she didn’t seem inclined to awaken any time soon. Talon shook her again, a little more firmly this time, and suddenly Shasta’s hands were in her hair, winding her fingers through Talon’s short dark waves.

Talon gasped as the Princess pulled her head down, and when their lips met she felt a physical jolt as all her carefully built control was shattered by that delicate, electric contact. Desire and tenderness flooded her body before she could quell them, so powerfully that Talon could barely remember to breathe. She thought her heart might explode from trying to contain such intense feeling, and Talon gathered the Princess into her arms, kissing her as though they both might dissolve into thin air if she stopped.

Shasta broke the kiss to nuzzle sleepily at Talon’s neck, and for several moments Talon clung to her tightly, inhaling and exhaling as she tried to calm her racing heart. Trapped there, with Shasta fast asleep in her arms, Talon finally realized that she was beyond any hope of ever being able to control her feelings when it came to the Princess. Shasta was dangerously close to her, and with every day that passed Talon was drawn deeper and deeper into a lethal storm of her own creation. She was playing with fire, and she knew it.

Gently, she lowered Shasta’s head back onto the pillow, extricating the Princess’s arms from her neck. *I can’t do this*, she thought desperately. *I can’t stay here and watch her fall in love. It’s going to drive me mad.*

Talon rose and returned to her own cot. She knew what she had to do. Shasta was surrounded by an entire army, and she no longer had need of an ever-present protector. Talon could be of more use to the Princess’s cause somewhere else. It wasn’t going to be easy, but separation seemed like the best thing for both of them now. There was no other way.



“Princess, there’s something I want to discuss with you.”

Shasta dropped her spoon back into her unappetizing rice gruel as her guardian took a seat across from her at the table. “Good timing. I

don't think I can stomach another bite of this stuff." She pushed the bowl away and propped her chin on her hand. "What did you want to talk about?"

Talon's dark eyes drifted to the table as she traced a knot in the wood with one fingertip. "I want you to send me back to Ardrenn."

"What?" Shasta was stunned.

"We've heard that many of the royal guard are still loyal to you, Highness. They don't believe Kumire's claims that you're dead, but they can't leave Ardrenn because of the restrictions on travel. Kumire is hunting them down." Talon still would not meet Shasta's eyes, but her hand balled into a fist. "You're going to need every bit of help you can get to defeat him, Highness, and the royal guard are the best of the best. You need them."

"What are you suggesting?"

"They know nothing about our plans, but if I spread word of what we're doing, we could organize an offensive from within Ardrenn itself and coordinate with Vaughn's efforts to attack the palace."

Shasta found the thought appalling. "Have you lost your mind? You barely got out of Ardrenn alive last time, and now you want to go back? It's too dangerous."

"You need the royal guard, Highness."

"Then let someone else go. I'll ask Harneth for recommendations."

Talon shook her head. "The royal guard are too elitist. You know that, Princess. I can promise you they're not going to listen to anyone but one of their own. It has to be me. There's no one else."

Shasta exhaled stubbornly. "No. Absolutely not."

"Please." Talon lifted her head and Shasta could read the determination on her face, along with something else—a faint trace of desperation that pricked painfully at Shasta's heart.

"You really want to leave me, don't you?" she accused in disbelief. "Have I become that boring?"

"You don't need me here," came the reply, and Shasta heard an odd catch in Talon's voice. "I can serve you better in Ardrenn than I can here in Verdred. Think about it, Highness. You know it's true."

"I...I can't. Talon, I just can't." The Princess's chin trembled, and she looked down. "I nearly lost you once. I won't take that chance again. You're too important to me."

She heard Talon's deep sigh, and then her guardian covered her

hands with her own. "I'll come back to you, Princess. You have my word on that. But war is coming, and this could mean the difference between winning and losing. You have to let me go."

There it was again, that slightly desperate shake in her guardian's voice, and as much as Shasta wanted to refuse, she couldn't. For winters, Talon had practically been held captive in her service, on threat of her sisters' lives. But now that Soltran was gone, Shasta could not force her guardian to stay with her. Besides, she didn't want Talon to stay only because she was being blackmailed into it.

And Shasta could see her point. It made perfect sense to mobilize the loyalists among the royal guard. General Harneth would agree; of that she was certain.

Fighting back tears, she took a moment to make sure she had control of her voice. "When would you leave?"

Talon stood. "I have a few supplies to gather and then I'll go. An hour at most."

"Very well. If that is your wish." Her guardian was halfway across the room when Shasta called her back. "Talon, I..." She stopped uncertainly, longing to somehow express what she was feeling—how much it hurt to be near her, how the thought of separation hurt even more. But she couldn't find the words, and she felt her eyes spill over.

Talon's expression softened, and in two strides she was in front of the Princess. She drew Shasta up from her chair, took her face between her hands, and bent forward. Shasta closed her eyes breathlessly, but Talon only pressed her lips to her forehead in a sisterly farewell.

"Wait." Shasta unfastened the gold chain that held her brother's blue feather and transferred the necklace to Talon, reconnecting the clasp with shaking fingers. "That's so you don't forget your promise."

"Princess, I can't take this."

"You can bring it back to me yourself, when this war is over. You gave your word."

Talon caressed the feather reverently. "I will." She straightened into a formal salute. "Goddess save you, Your Highness."

Then she was gone, the tinkling strands of beads swinging in her wake. Shasta sank down into her chair once more and buried her head in her arms. Tears dripped down her nose to stain the polished tabletop.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The morning breeze ruffled the robes of the priestesses gathered in the courtyard, and in unison they all moved, slowly raising one arm while swinging the other in a graceful arc.

Shasta leaned over and whispered in Lyris's ear. "What are they doing?"

"It's called *shaa'ri*, Highness. It's an ancient Ithyrian battle technique."

"Battle technique? It looks more like a ceremonial dance." Shasta watched the veiled women shift their weight from one foot to the other, turning their bodies and pushing their palms away from them.

Lyris inclined her head. "*Shaa'ri* requires intense concentration and extreme muscle control. Over the centuries it has become more ceremonial than practical in application, but that's about to change."

"What do you mean?"

"There's more to being a priestess than just meditation and prayers, Princess." Lyris's voice held a note of amusement. "You should know the story already. Thousands of winters ago, when wicked Ulrike ruled the world in darkness, the Goddess Ithyris called Her first twelve Daughters from among the children of men. She trained them to channel Her power through the practice of *shaa'ri* and gifted them with celestial fire. With their help She was able to drive the darkness back from Her land and restore peace."

Like all Ithyrians, Shasta was familiar with the legend. "And they became the first Honored Mothers of Ithyria. I learned all about the Twelve in my history lessons. Each of the provinces is named after one of them."

“That’s right,” Lyris affirmed. “It’s been centuries since Ithyris last called Her Daughters to war, and sadly none of us has been able to draw forth celestial fire for hundreds of winters. But the *shaa’ri* has remained a part of our traditions. Now the Goddess has called Her army back into service, so we must ready ourselves.”

Shasta stared. “What do you mean?”

“The Honored Mother of Verdred has received a visit from Ithyris. The Goddess has decreed that Her Daughters must rise again to battle, to protect the one She has chosen to succeed the crown.”

“Who?”

Lyris laughed. “Really, Princess. Who is there but you? Ithyris put your ancestors on the throne for a reason. She knew the house of Rane would be the best rulers for Her kingdom, and while Chancellor Kumire may be your cousin, he is not the one She intends for the crown.” Her eyes wandered to the priestesses. Sweat glistened on their brows as they concentrated. “This war we face is not just about you and Kumire, Highness. The Goddess has warned that Kumire brings the threat of darkness to Ithyria, the same darkness that She battled long ago. She has called us to help defend you, to return you to your rightful place as Queen.”

“You mean to tell me that you’re all going to march into battle alongside the soldiers?” Shasta could not even imagine such a thing.

“That is the Goddess’s command.”

“But, Your Grace, you carry no weapons.” Devotion was all very well, but surely the priestess could not expect to fight an army of barbarians with a few graceful waves of the hand. “You’ll be slaughtered.”

“Such little faith, Highness.” The priestess patted Shasta’s shoulder. “Never fear. Ithyris’s Daughters are far from defenseless.”



As Qiturah passed the temple kitchens a young, mousy-haired woman stumbled toward her, and Qiturah reached out to take her arm. “Is everything all right, child?” she asked kindly.

“Honored Mother.” The young woman seemed startled. “Yes, yes, everything’s fine.”

Qiturah recognized her then; this was the chambermaid who had arrived with Princess Shasta. She peered at her more closely. “You look as though you’ve been crying.”

“It’s nothing, Mother, really.”

Young women did not cry over nothing, but Qiturah’s intuition told her it would not be wise to press the matter further. “Well, in that case, I shall bid you good night.” As the maid scurried down the corridor, a sound from within the kitchen drew Qiturah’s attention, and she stepped inside to find one of the younger priestesses bent over a sink full of dishes.

“It’s late, *Ostryn*. You may leave that task for morning.”

The priestess spun around. Tears plastered her white veil to her cheeks.

“*Ostryn* Kadrian. What is it, my child?”

“Why did it have to be me, Mother?”

“I’m afraid I need a slightly more specific question, dear,” Qiturah replied gently.

“Why did you send me to carry that message to Ardrenn? There had to have been others who could have done it just as easily.”

“Yes, but you were the one She wanted.” Qiturah could still see the question in Kadrian’s eyes, and she held up a hand. “It is not my place to question Her reasons, child. She asked for you, and you were sent.”

Kadrian’s shoulders slumped. “I just don’t understand why now, after all this time...it seems so cruel...”

Qiturah recalled the distraught chambermaid in the corridor and knew instinctively that the girl’s unhappiness was somehow related to Kadrian’s. The maid was likely some part of Kadrian’s former life, before she had been dedicated to the temple, and though Qiturah did not know the details she patted the younger woman’s arm sympathetically.

“The Goddess is never cruel, *Ostryn*, though Her ways may often bring us pain because we do not understand them.” She could read that pain in Kadrian’s eyes now. “Trust Her heart, my child. She never acts without reason.”

Qiturah laid gentle hands on Kadrian’s temples. She could sense the torment burning there, just beneath the surface. “The burden you carry is indeed a heavy one,” she mused as she withdrew her fingers. “You will be in my prayers this night, *Ostryn*.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Kadrian bowed her head.

“Now it is time for your own sleep.” Qiturah gestured toward the door. “Off you go.”

With a respectful curtsy Kadrian obeyed, and for a long moment Qiturah stood looking after her. She did not know what it was that lay so heavily upon the young priestess’s heart, but she had the sinking feeling that it would only grow heavier in the time to come.

Divine Lady, I do not know what You have planned for this child You have called to Your service, but please guard her heart with strength and serenity. She is suffering terribly.



One of the Pledged entered the Princess’s room through the beaded curtain and curtsied deeply. “Your Highness, a letter has come for you.”

“Talon,” Shasta breathed. She rose quickly to her feet and took the folded parchment from the girl. But when she broke the seal and opened it, she gave a small sigh of disappointment. It was from Captain Vaughn.

“It’s good news, for the most part,” she informed Erinda, who was hovering anxiously at her shoulder. “The captain’s made it through Olsta and Striniste, and both provincial senates have agreed to dedicate their guard to our cause. That leaves only Daiban and Marinland.” She scanned a few more lines. “There are some additional orders in here for General Harneth, and then he says that he’s expecting to have all five provincial guard behind us by the middle of the Sixthmoon. Down here at the bottom, he’s set the date for the marching orders.” Her eyes flew to Erinda’s face. “It’s the third day of the Seventhmoon.”

Erinda clutched at the corner of a cabinet. “So soon?”

“I imagine Captain Vaughn must want to get this over with before the snows fall.” Shasta refolded the letter and tucked it into the waist of her skirts. “I’m going to take word to General Harneth.”

Shasta was no longer intimidated by Harneth’s men, rough though they might be. For the most part they were good people, respectful and generous, and since the night of the celebration they had come to recognize Princess Shasta and always called greetings to her as she

passed. She had grown very fond of many of them, and as she made her way to Harneth's tent, she smiled and waved, and when she could, addressed them by name.

The young general leapt up from his seat at the table as she was ushered into his tent, and took the letter eagerly.

"So, we have our marching orders," he said after reading it carefully.

There was an unmistakable edge of exhilaration to his voice and Shasta guessed that for a military man, the prospect of imminent battle must be preferable to the tedium of waiting.

"We don't have much time. Vaughn's set a different date for each of the guard, based on their distance from Ardrenn's southern moors. If we all leave at the times he's specified, we should converge on the moors within days of one another, weather permitting." He seemed impressed. "The captain's got everything planned out to the last detail, doesn't he?"

"General." Shasta lowered her voice. "I know you have commissioned metalworkers to forge the weapons and armor for these men."

"Yes." Harneth nodded. "We'll be cutting it close to get all the supplies we need before it's time to set out."

Shasta took a deep breath. "I don't want to place any more strain on the metalworkers, but do you think they could make something like this? Before it's time to leave?" She withdrew a parchment leaf from her bodice and laid it flat on the table.

Harneth looked the diagram over carefully. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure. This is my fight too, you know."

"Well, it's a bit unorthodox, but you seem to have all the vital measurements here. I think it can be accomplished."

"Then make it happen," Shasta replied firmly. "The sooner the better."

She took a final look at the sketch on the parchment, which she had carefully copied from one of the books she'd found in the Temple library. It was a suit of armor specifically modeled for the female form. According to the ancient manuscript, the armor had been designed by Zarneth, one of the Twelve, for an all-female regiment of soldiers that she'd led into battle in the western foothills during the Division. Shasta

had never seen anything like it before, but she was determined that if these men were going to follow her into battle, she would personally lead them as far as she possibly could.

She met the general's eyes. "This is a secret between us for now, General Harneth."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

She gave a satisfied nod and left the tent.



Talon's hands were in her hair, roving lightly across her body, her lips tracing lines of fire down her neck and across her collarbone. Shasta moaned into those touches, so warm and passionate, and drew her guardian closer to her. Her entire being cried out for Talon's presence, a longing in the deepest part of her spirit to somehow meld herself with this woman, to share her heart, her body, to be a part of Talon as purely and as naturally as Talon was a part of her.

She planted kisses on every inch of the olive skin that she could reach, but it wasn't enough and she gave a little squeak of frustration. Her guardian seemed to understand and suddenly she shifted position, rolling on top of Shasta, the lamplight glinting off her smoothly muscled frame. And the Princess moaned again as Talon's lips came down to meet hers in a fervent kiss, the kiss that would finally join them and quench the ache in her heart...

Shasta sat straight up in bed, her breath coming in short pants and her forehead beaded with sweat. The dream again. She'd been having the same dream for several moons, one plainly influenced by her memories of the night she'd seen Erinda with Talon in the servants' stables. But in the dream, she was always in Erinda's place.

Her cheeks grew hot in the darkness and she pressed her hands to her face. What sort of woman had such brazenly indecent dreams? What was it about Talon that somehow brought out the harlot in her? Talon was a woman, for the love of the Goddess! She shook her head and lay back down, but found sleep elusive.

It had been a full moon since Talon left for Ardrenn. Four long quarter-moons without a word. Shasta knew that Ardrenn had been locked down on Kumire's orders, and it would have been hard enough for Talon to smuggle herself into the city, let alone manage to send any

messages out. She didn't even know if Talon had made it there alive or if she'd had success in reaching any of the royal guard who were in hiding. The danger her guardian was in was too frightening to think about for very long. Kumire was hunting down the remnants of the royal guard, and if he found Talon he would kill her. Shasta was certain of that.

She'd never been separated from Talon for such a long time. After three winters of sharing her room, her meals, her lessons, every minute of every day with her guardian, a moon seemed like an eternity. Even during the half-moon that Talon was healing from her arrow wound in the infirmary, Shasta had spent much of that time asleep, recovering from her own injuries. Her anger had made the distance between them easier then. Now, she found it took hours to fall asleep, the loneliness in her room was so pervasive. And when she finally did fall into exhausted slumber, she was plagued with this recurring dream, the same shockingly tawdry images night after night.

With a sigh, Shasta threw back the sheet and slid her feet into her slippers, not bothering with her robe, as the night was warm. She parted the filmy white drapes that enclosed her bed and went to the fireplace, where a few coals glowed red on the hearth. It was midsummer and the afternoons were brutally hot at times, so she did not particularly need the fire for its warmth, but she did want hot water for her tea.

Shasta opened the tinderbox and tossed a few more fresh pieces of coal onto the embers, then used the poker to stir them a bit. As she hoped, the new coals caught flame and in a few minutes she was rewarded with a brightly flickering fire. She swung the iron hook that held the kettle out over the flames, then sat and drummed her fingers against the tabletop impatiently.

Shasta gave a start when she heard the outer door opening and jumped to her feet as Erinda entered through the beaded curtain. "Oh, Erinda, you frightened me."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, I didn't mean to. I heard you moving around in here and thought perhaps you were having trouble sleeping." Shasta nodded, and the chambermaid gave a little smile. "Me too. You want some company?"

"I'd like that. Let me get you a cup." Shasta moved toward the cabinet, but Erinda insisted on doing it herself, saying it just wouldn't feel right to have the Queen of Ithyria waiting on her own chambermaid.

Shasta thought that was a bit silly, given that it was just a cup of tea, but Erinda seemed to take it so seriously that she decided not to argue.

“So let me guess,” Erinda said as she filled their cups and took a seat across from Shasta. “Still not used to sleeping alone?”

Shasta sighed. “It’s hard. I can’t hear her breathing. You don’t realize how accustomed you get to someone until they’re gone.”

“Don’t I know it,” Erinda agreed quietly. “You really miss her.”

It was a statement, not a question, and Shasta blushed. “It’s that obvious?”

“You’ve had dark circles under your eyes for days now, and you wander around looking lost.” Erinda winked and picked up her teacup. “But don’t worry, Your Highness. Talon promised she’d come back to you, and that means she will.”

“But that’s just not a promise you can really make to someone,” Shasta protested. “You can’t promise you’re not going to die. Talon’s a good soldier, but she’s not immortal. If she gets killed out there...”

“I can’t think of any way that Talon would rather lose her life than in the service of the country she loves, and...” Erinda bit her lip as if she were wondering whether she should really say her next words. “And the woman she loves.”

Loves? Shasta looked up sharply, thinking that perhaps Erinda was teasing her, but the maid just offered an encouraging smile. Somehow that only deepened Shasta’s sadness. “You’re wrong. Talon’s completely dedicated to her work, but she doesn’t feel that way about me.”

“Are you sure?”

Shasta recalled the desperation in her guardian’s dark eyes the day she’d asked to leave. Evidently Talon had wanted to get away from her so badly that she actually preferred the mortal danger of Ardrenn to remaining by Shasta’s side for even one more day. “I’m positive.” She met Erinda’s gaze and said painfully, “Besides, Talon’s a woman.”

“So what?”

“So,” Shasta chose her words carefully so as not to hurt Erinda’s feelings, “I know there are some people who... I mean, it doesn’t matter to them. But it does to me.”

“Why?” The question was not defensive, only curious.

“Because it’s... well, it’s *gross*.”

Erinda threw her head back and laughed then, heartily. “How do you know it’s gross? Have you ever tried it?”

“Of course not.” Shasta stared at her indignantly.

“Well, Princess, I’m not sure what to tell you. Are you saying you think Talon’s unattractive?”

Shasta blushed again. “No.” She took a gulp of tea. Her impulse was to confess the embarrassing truth to the maid, yet she was not sure if she could even find the words. Shyly, she said, “I’ve been having strange dreams recently.”

“About Talon?”

The Princess nodded, feeling her face redden. “I...The night of my eighteenth birthday, I followed you and Talon out to the servants’ stables, and...I saw you. Together.”

Erinda let out a puff of air and sat back in her chair. “I see.” A twinkle entered her eye.

Shasta couldn’t bring herself to say any more and took another sip from her teacup to hide her discomfort. But Erinda was far too perceptive to be fooled, and a knowing grin spread across her face.

“Something tells me these dreams of yours don’t involve me and Talon.”

Guiltily, Shasta said, “No. I mean, I dream about what I saw between you, but in the dreams it’s always me...with her.” The confession was mortifying and she knew her face had to be a thousand shades of red.

But Erinda did not seem at all offended. “Tell me something, Princess. In your dream, is Talon a man or a woman?”

Shasta had to think about that for a moment. “A woman.”

“And when you’re with her in the dream, does it feel gross to you?”

Shasta shook her head. “No. Not until I wake up and remember that I was dreaming. Then I know I should be ashamed of myself.”

The chambermaid lifted the strainer from her cup and set it on the table. “When I was young,” she said softly, “I fell in love for the first time. Kadrian was my best friend, the most important person in my life, and all I knew was that my feelings for her seemed like the most natural thing in the world. But no one else, not even our parents or our siblings, could understand it. Everyone said it was a terrible grievance against the Goddess.” She fidgeted with her cup handle. “Kade was destined to take the vows of an Ithyrian priestess, and in light of how our families felt about our relationship it seemed like the best thing. For a long time afterward I thought maybe I was sick. Maybe there was something very wrong with me.”

Shasta was intrigued and she leaned forward. “Wait, are you talking about the priestess who rode next to me in the carriage on the way here? The one with the green eyes?”

“Amazing, aren’t they?” Erinda’s face lit. “Such a bright color, like the grass on the moors after the rain.” Her head drooped and the light faded from her expression. “I went to see her a few nights ago. I didn’t mean for anything to happen. I just wanted to see her again. I wanted her to know that I hadn’t forgotten her, that she still means everything to me.”

“Did you...?” She trailed off at the infinite sadness on Erinda’s face.

“I tried, but...Kade won’t even speak to me now. She acts like we’re strangers.”

The Princess felt a surge of compassion. “Oh, Erinda, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s been six winters, after all. We were both so young then, it’s only natural that she would outgrow her feelings for me. In a way I suppose I’m glad. At least one of us isn’t walking around with this terrible emptiness inside.” Erinda’s eyes sparkled with tears. “I have just one thing to say to you, Princess. True love doesn’t come along often in a person’s life. If you’ve found it, if you even think you *might* have found it, you have to open your arms and embrace it while you can. Otherwise you’ll spend the rest of your life cursing yourself for your own foolishness.”

Shasta inhaled slowly. “I don’t know if I can do that.” She twisted her fingers in her lap. “What if Talon doesn’t feel the same about me? I’ve thought about telling her, Erinda, I’ve even tried to say it a few times, but...it never seems to sound right and I lose my nerve.”

Erinda’s reply was very soft. “I don’t say this out of cruelty, Highness, but think for a moment. How would you feel if Talon were to die out there and you never had another chance to tell her how you’re feeling?” Shasta flinched, and Erinda rose to her feet. “I know it’s frightening to hand your heart over to someone who might very easily break it. But that’s part of what it means to love.”

Her words rang in Shasta’s ears long after they said good night. She’d told Talon once before that she was in love with her. That had been ages ago, and looking back she was ashamed of her own foolishness. Her crush on her guardian had been intense but infantile, a self-centered stroking of her own ego. But now, oh, everything was

different. Shasta had learned a lot about herself in the past few moons. Now she found herself seriously considering possibilities that would have seemed ludicrous and even blasphemous a winter ago.

She'd kissed Talon twice. Granted, both were of her own initiation, and she'd believed her guardian to be a man at the time, but still... She closed her eyes and tried to remember the feel of Talon's lips on her own, the taste of her mouth, the strength of her embrace. Even knowing what she knew now, it didn't stop her heart from racing at the memory.

Shasta realized with a shock that nothing, not even her father's crown, was as important to her as Talon. Even if they lost this war and she somehow miraculously survived, Shasta could still imagine a happy life for herself so long as her dark guardian was at her side. Shasta would rather not win at all if it cost Talon's life. *I'd hand the crown over to Kumire myself first.*

The room was beginning to lighten as the first rays of dawn crept through the window, and Shasta fetched her writing box from the mantel. Talon might not believe her, she might not even care...she might have been killed already. But Shasta was not going to waste any more time. If her guardian was still alive, she had to reach her somehow. Sitting down at the table, she dipped her quill in the inkpot and started to write.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The tavern was a chaotic place this time of night, when its patrons had been drinking for several hours and were at their most uninhibited. The fiddler in the corner was playing a cheerfully bawdy tune, and men were shouting to one another over the music, calling out raucously to the serving girls and pounding their wineglasses on the counters. No one even noticed the group of plain-clad men sitting quietly at the back table.

And that was exactly why Talon had chosen the place for their meeting. She'd learned that there were at least a hundred of the royal guard hiding out in Ardrenn. Some had disguised themselves as common tradesmen or merchants, but many, particularly officers whose faces would be recognized, were forced to hide in small back rooms and root cellars, borrowing space from friends and supporters and depending on the kindness of others for their meals.

All had refused to swear loyalty to Kumire, rejecting claims that Princess Shasta had been killed and demanding he provide proof. They'd been ostracized for their defiance. Kumire had ordered them imprisoned for treason, though it was no great secret that "imprisonment" meant a clandestine visit from a jailer with a large axe. Now, any man who still wore a royal guard uniform was the enemy, particularly because of the risk of recognition.

Every now and then someone would be identified as one of the former guard and a troop of red-jacketed soldiers would appear at the door of the house where he was staying. Usually they arrested not only the wanted man but the family that was harboring him as well, women

and children included. No one knew for sure what happened to such families, but Talon had heard the sickening rumor that Kumire was running a virtual slave trade out of the palace, selling the wives and children of anyone who displeased him into barbarian camps to the north, possibly to the Monderan coal mines.

She'd managed to make contact with a few of the men who remembered her, and word had spread quickly that Princess Shasta was alive and was gathering an army. The response had been tremendous, so much so that Talon had to rely on a system of messengers to relay information back and forth because it was impossible for a hundred men to gather in secret in a city that was being so closely watched.

They met irregularly so as not to attract attention, often in taverns such as these where it was not uncommon to see a group of men huddled together over a table of beer and wine. Their strategy had been set several times but delayed when one of their fellow conspirators was arrested. Men in hiding were still coming forward, so Talon had to keep making alterations to their plan.

The men who had gathered tonight had just agreed upon one such adjustment and were dispersing slowly so as not to attract attention.

Talon was always the last to go.

It was taking some time for everyone to drift away, so she sat quietly talking with Jen Crossis, a former lieutenant in the royal guard and her self-appointed co-leader among the rebels. She liked Jen; he was extremely bright, if a little too eager at times. He'd been her first contact when she arrived, and he was so excited to hear that the Princess was still alive he'd nearly choked on a mouthful of the bread Talon had brought to him.

Talon was just about to give Jen the signal to go when the tavern door swung open and a boy in a ragged cloak entered and looked around the room uncertainly. He couldn't be more than about eleven winters, far too young to be wandering the streets at night and certainly not old enough to be in a tavern like this one unescorted. Casually Talon slid a hand inside her vest, where she had a small dagger concealed in an inner pocket. Weapons weren't allowed in taverns such as this one, but that didn't mean that most of the men here weren't carrying at least one blade of some sort.

Talon's instincts told her that this boy was up to something, and she gripped the handle of the dagger beneath her vest. She didn't relish

the idea of killing a child, but she would if she had to. The plan, and those who were risking their lives, had to be safeguarded.

The boy approached cautiously, winding among the tables as if he were purposely trying not to attract attention to his movements. He finally drew up close to the wall, and Talon caught his hand before he could make any aggressive moves.

“Can I help you, kid?”

He licked his lips nervously. “Are you...” He lowered his voice to a whisper, almost mouthing the words. “Are you the one they call the Marvel?”

Talon considered her reply. The rebel guard had begun the habit of referring to her by that nickname, but it was hardly a secret title. She gave the tiniest of nods, hoping she hadn’t just fallen into a trap. “What is your business with me?”

“I have a letter for you.” Very slowly the boy reached into his belt and pulled out a parchment note. Talon released her grip on the dagger and drew a sharp breath when she saw the seal. Only one person had that signet.

Her hand shook for just an instant as she took the letter. “Thanks, kid. You did well.” Surreptitiously, she reached into the pouch at her belt, pulled out a gold coin, and pressed it into the messenger’s hand.

At the feel of the money in his palm, the boy brightened but still managed to contain his excitement with admirable aplomb. He carefully made his way to the back door, slipping out unnoticed.

“The royal signet,” Jen murmured in awe.

“Yes,” Talon confirmed quietly, and her fingers trembled again. “This is from the Princess. I don’t know how she managed to get this to me.”

“It must be important.” Jen elbowed her. “You gonna just sit there? Open it.”

Talon broke the wax, her heart in her throat. Had something happened while she was gone? Was Shasta hurt? She unfolded the parchment.

Dear Talon,

I’ve had a letter from V. It’s good news, but I’m not going to put the details here in case this letter is intercepted. Trust me when I say no one else can hold a candle to V.’s orders. But

that's not why I'm writing to you, and I don't think the rest of what I have to say will be of interest to our enemies so I'm not going to censor it.

I don't know at this point if you're dead or alive. I'm praying that you're safe and that this letter finds you well. A part of me feels silly to be writing rather than saying this to your face, but I realized tonight that I can't bear the thought that you might die before we see one another again and before I have the opportunity to tell you what I need you to hear. Also, in a strange way, I think writing makes it easier to overcome my own cowardice.

I love you, Talon. For everything that you are, exactly the way you are, I'm completely and helplessly in love with you.

I know I've said it before, at a time when I really didn't even know who you were. I've done a lot of growing up since then. When V. brought you to us after the battle at the palace, those barbarians had nearly beaten you to death. All those long days I sat by your side, terrified that I might lose you. It was a very dark time in my life, having lost every member of my family and faced with the prospect that you might never awaken from your injuries. I cannot tell you how frightened I was.

I realized then that no one in my life, not even my father or twin brother, has ever been as much a part of me as you are. A world without you wouldn't be worth living in. You're my family, Talon, and I want you with me forever. For the rest of my life.

Those are the feelings that are in my heart every day, but I don't tell you this expecting anything in return. I just want you to know. In case anything happens to either of us, I had to make sure I at least tried to reach you first. I only wish it hadn't taken me so long to muster up the courage.

I may never know if this letter reaches you, but I'll always hold the hope that it did. Know that no matter what happens, you are in my heart.

*Love always,
Shasta*

Talon found it hard to breathe. She reread the letter several times to be sure she'd understood it correctly. It couldn't be. She'd been so certain that Harneth... She shook her head. They were about to launch a war! This was the worst possible timing for such a revelation. It took all her self-control not to tear out the tavern door that very moment and run without stopping until she reached Verdred Temple.

Jen was watching her face closely. "Is it bad news?"

"Not exactly." Talon stroked the blue feather at her throat, a gesture that had become habitual over the past moon. She gazed down at Shasta's prettily formed writing once more and her eyes were drawn to the long blank space after the Princess's signature. Sucking in a breath, she reread the first few sentences. "No one else could hold a candle..." She gave an amazed laugh. "By the Goddess, she remembered that lesson."

"What lesson?" Jen asked.

"Something I taught her a long time ago. We were playing, really." Talon glanced around to be sure no one was paying them undue attention, then slid the candle from the middle of the table and lowered it out of sight. Holding the blank spot of the parchment carefully over the flame, she said, "It's really simple, actually. You write a message in lemon juice and when it dries, you can't see it. But hold it over some heat..." She shook the paper and gave a little smile when she saw the light brown script now filling the seemingly empty space on the letter. "And there you have it."

Jen took the candle from her and returned it to the tabletop. "What does it say?"

"Captain Vaughn's issued the marching orders."

Jen's eyes widened as he read the date. "That's less than a half-moon from now!"

"Which means we finally have a time frame to put our plan into action, though it's not much." She caught Jen skimming over the remainder of the letter, and she quickly pulled it away. "The rest isn't important."

"Looked pretty important to me. Are you going to answer her?"

Talon shook her head with frustration. "There's no way I can get a message out of Ardrenn. And if I did, it would only put her in danger."

"But you love her, don't you?" Jen prodded, and when Talon didn't answer, his grin widened. "Why don't you go tell her yourself?"

"I can't leave now. We're a half-moon from the biggest battle any of us have ever seen."

"Hey." Jen cocked an eyebrow. "I know our plans just as well as you do. I can handle it from here. You should go."

"I couldn't."

But her head was spinning with Shasta's words. *I'm completely and helplessly in love with you...* Was it even possible? Talon didn't think she could endure it if this turned out to be a mere repeat of the Princess's giddy infatuation. Her self-control was sure to fail her this time, and she just wasn't strong enough to go through that misery again.

But everything was different now. There were no more secrets. Shasta knew who she was and what she was, and still... Talon's heart beat so fast she started to feel dizzy. She was a soldier. Her duty was to stay and see the mission through. But Jen was right, he could probably handle the Ardrenn offensive on his own. The coming war was going to be a deadly affair, and it was very possible that neither of them would survive it. Could she really pass up what might be her last chance to see the Princess again?

Talon caught herself unconsciously gripping the feather at her throat, and she met Jen's amused gaze. "I couldn't, Jen, could I?"

He elbowed her cheerfully. "I think you'd better. A girl like Princess Shasta only comes along once in a man's life. I don't know how you did it, but you managed to catch her eye. You'd be a fool to let that go."

"Are you sure you can handle things on your own?"

"Positive." The lieutenant clapped her on the shoulder. "Go get your girl, Marvel."

Talon chuckled and tucked the letter into a pouch at her belt. She rose from the table and held out a hand. "Good luck, Jen."

"You too."

Talon shook his hand firmly, then hurried to reclaim her sword belt from the rack at the door. With one last nod at her friend, she slipped out into the night.



Shasta knew she ought to think about something else, but she couldn't get her mind off the letter she had sent to Ardrenn. She didn't even know if it had reached its destination. What if it had been

lost among the intricate chain of couriers? What if Talon had been discovered...imprisoned...killed, because the letter found her at the wrong moment? She should have thought of that before she'd sent it out, and now there was no taking it back. What if Talon read the letter, and was repulsed, and became even more determined to stay away from her? The not knowing was torture.

Absently she stitched the edges of the fraying lapel on a soldier's jacket. She and Erinda were mending uniforms before the army set out for Ardrenn. Sewing had never been Shasta's strong suit, but she was making a genuine effort this time around, and gradually her stitches were improving. Erinda could still finish three jackets for every one that Shasta managed, but she didn't mind much. It was nice to feel useful.

As she added stitches, her mind drifted from the letter back to the days after her father's death. Shasta would never forget the kindness of the cabinetmaker Roald and his wife, Syanne, who had taken them in on that terrible night and hidden them until they fled Ardrenn. Syanne, especially, had comforted her like a mother that first morning when Shasta had awakened to find herself in a strange house, among strange people, her family murdered and her guardian missing.

"What's done is done," Syanne had said in her gentle, matter-of-fact way. "I know you're grieving, but you're the Queen of Ithyria now. You mustn't waste time feeling sorry for yourself. You need your energy for other things."

At the time, Shasta had been too overcome with fear to truly absorb the wisdom of her words. Memories of Talon's bruised and bloodied face, the sound of fists striking flesh were still vivid in her mind. "I'm not ready for this," she had protested. "I can't do it, I can't."

Syanne would have none of it. "If you don't take the crown, we'll all be stuck with that traitorous Kumire on the throne. You don't want to see that man ruling your kingdom, do you?"

It was that thought that had sustained Shasta through the grief and fury. She remembered thinking that if she'd only known what was to come, she would have gladly taken the bullwhip from the merchant's hands that day in the markets of Ardrenn and beaten the chancellor to death with it.

Such violent thoughts had surprised her. She'd always had a temper, but that was the first time she'd ever actually wished to inflict physical harm on anyone. She wanted Kumire to pay for his crimes, for

his treachery against her father, and her kingdom, and herself. But she didn't see how she could ever hope to fight back against him. She had no army, no advisors, no idea where to go or what to do.

Syanne called her Queen, yet Shasta had never felt less like a royal in her life. The Goddess could easily have ordained that she be born a common craftsman's child instead of the heir to the Ithyrian throne. The thought made her heart constrict. Shasta now realized that she had always taken her position for granted. Her birthright was something every fairy-tale heroine dreamed of, and when a girl in a story became a princess, she was immediately granted a happily-ever-after.

But real life taught a different lesson. The power and prestige of royalty came at a high price. The future of the entire kingdom had fallen on her shoulders, and the responsibilities were so heavy, the position so precarious, that Shasta couldn't imagine how her father had ever endured it.

"Ow." She put her finger in her mouth and glared down at the needlework in her lap. "Now I remember why I hate sewing."

Erinda chuckled, her own needle flashing as she moved it in and out of the green fabric. "You don't have to do this, you know. The priestesses pretty much have it covered. I just volunteered to help so I'd have something to keep my hands busy in the evenings."

"If you can do it, so can I. I'm tired of feeling so useless around here. All I ever seem to do is write political letter after political letter."

"Your letters are hardly worthless, Highness. They've certainly improved the quality of the menu around here, for one."

"I suppose that's true." Shasta stabbed the needle through the fabric again. "But it seems like such a small thing. I want to do more."

She didn't add that a part of her was hoping that when Talon returned, she would be proud of her efforts. It seemed like everything she did now, she did with the thought of pleasing her guardian, as if by her actions she could somehow keep Talon from drifting completely out of reach.

Her eyes filled with tears as she again drifted into memory, this time recalling that dark night when Captain Vaughn had finally shown up on the cabinetmaker's doorstep, carrying Talon's unconscious form over his shoulder. She remembered him lowering Talon to the floor and Lyris using a small knife to cut away the wrappings that bound Talon's chest.

The fabric fell back to reveal a mass of ugly bruises that spread

across the olive skin in a terrible rainbow of yellow, green, purple, and brown. Shasta could still see them in her mind's eye and recall with perfect clarity the three livid scars marring her guardian's torso: a round and still slightly pink mark over Talon's ribs on the right side, a short, straight line at the base of her throat, and a long, jagged white stripe above her left hipbone. They were Shasta's scars, though they were on Talon's body—a permanent reminder of the suffering her guardian had endured on her behalf.

It had been strange to see Talon's small but defined breasts for the first time. Though by that point she knew her guardian was a woman, she'd grown accustomed to thinking of Talon as flat-chested, and Shasta was embarrassed now to recall just how curiously she'd stared.

The healer had applied salve to the open wounds to prevent infection and pressed a dark glass bottle containing a pain-relieving tincture into Shasta's hand. She'd told her that Talon had broken ribs and a leg fracture, several deep gashes, and a dislocated shoulder.

"Frankly, I'm surprised she's alive at all," the old woman had huffed, "but that young woman in there is a fighter if I've ever seen one."

Shasta hadn't left Talon's bedside for the next half-moon. As she replaced bandages, forced broth past the swollen lips, bathed the wicked black eye and changed dressings on her guardian's many wounds, she'd whispered over and over how sorry she was. How foolish she'd been. How stupid she felt for letting her anger come between them for so long.

And she'd begged her to stay alive. "I need you, Talon. Come back to me. Please come back."

Staring down at the uniform jacket in her lap, Shasta repeated that prayer once more. *Please, Talon, I love you. Don't die on me before I have the chance to tell you myself.*

Erinda grabbed Shasta's arm at the sound of the outer door slamming shut. It was very late, long past the time that the rest of the temple had gone to bed. No one should have been entering or leaving at that hour.

Shasta exchanged a glance with Erinda and they rose to their feet as the beaded curtain parted and an intruder stepped into the room.

"Talon!" Shasta dropped the jacket in her hands and ran to throw her arms around her guardian's neck. She buried her face in Talon's cool linen shirt. "Oh, you're back, you're back...and you're alive."

Talon's dark eyes searched Shasta's face intently, and then she reached into the pouch at her belt and extracted a tattered leaf of parchment. It had obviously seen some wear, but Shasta recognized it immediately.

"I got your letter." Talon's deep voice was soft, almost shy.

"Oh." Shasta lowered her arms and took a step back, almost colliding with Erinda, who was hastily stuffing the mending into a basket.

"Your Highness...Lieutenant...I think I'm going to retire for the night," the chambermaid said and left the room without waiting for a reply.

Shasta met her guardian's gaze and bit her lip. "And...?" she said finally, her stomach doing nervous flips.

Talon took Shasta's face in her hands as she had the morning they'd said good-bye. But this time she kissed her lips, not her forehead, and there was nothing sisterly about this contact between them. Talon's mouth moved passionately over hers, causing a little explosion in Shasta's abdomen that took her breath away, and then her guardian gathered her into a tight embrace that lifted her feet right off the floor.

"And...I love you, Princess. I think I always have."

The words were whispered fiercely into her ear, and Shasta gave a gasp of joy that came out sounding almost like a sob. When Talon set her down again, she felt light-headed. "Really?"

Talon gave a slight chuckle. "Yes, really."

"But..." Shasta pulled away to stare self-consciously at the floor. "You seemed to want to leave so badly."

"Oh, Goddess." Talon ran a hand through her hair. "I thought...that is, you seemed to...I thought you were falling in love with General Harneth." She unbuckled her sword belt and propped it up against the wall. "I didn't want to get in the way. I want you to be happy, Highness, that's all I've ever wanted, but I just couldn't stay and watch you fall in love with someone else. So I asked you to send me away."

"Harneth?" Shasta repeated incredulously. "But, Talon, you...you didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"General Harneth is...well, he's like you. Like us, I mean." Shasta offered a shy smile. "He prefers the company of his own gender."

Talon sat down in one of the chairs, looking completely stunned.

"I thought you knew," Shasta said.

“No. I was so sure that you and Harneth...”

“It’s you, Talon, it’s always been you. It just took me a long time to figure it out.” Shasta knelt by her guardian’s side, her nightshift billowing around her legs. She rested her head against one of Talon’s knees. “I tried to tell you, so many times. But I didn’t know how to put it into words. I wasn’t sure I could, and I made everything so much more complicated than it had to be. The whole time it was so simple. I love you.”

“So why did you let me go?”

Shasta looked up and gave a sheepish laugh. “Because I thought it was what you wanted. I’d never force you to stay with me, Talon, if you didn’t want to.”

Talon gave a little roll of her eyes. “I guess we were both wrong.”

“I just can’t believe you came back.” She traced a little pattern on Talon’s knee with her fingertip, and Talon bent to kiss her again, gently.

“Of course I did. After a letter like that I practically ran the whole way here.”

“Uh-huh. I know you too well, Talon. Admit it. You had a hard time deciding between me and your work. Somebody probably had to talk you into leaving.”

Talon’s eyes shone with amusement, and she put her hands around Shasta’s waist and drew her to her feet. “Maybe just a little.”

Shasta allowed her mouth to drop open in mock indignation. “I knew it!”

But all other reprimands dissolved from her mind as Talon lifted her chin and pressed their lips together firmly, nuzzling her bottom lip and robbing her of any other thought.

Shasta lifted her hands to her guardian’s shoulders and tried to catch her breath. Talon took advantage of that situation, gently probing the depths of Shasta’s mouth with her tongue. Her hands moved up Shasta’s torso, palms brushing the sides of her breasts. Then they slid downward again, roving across her back.

It really didn’t matter where Talon touched her; Shasta’s entire body was tingling, and she felt like she might melt right into her guardian’s arms. It was like her dreams, that sudden overpowering longing for oneness, for a connection that went deeper than physical contact. She pressed her body even closer, wanting to feel Talon’s warmth along her entire length.

Talon's hands suddenly stilled, and she gazed into Shasta's face with intense passion burning in her fathomless black eyes. "Tell me..." Her deep tones were husky with an unmasked desire that made Shasta's knees weak. "Tell me this is what you want." The burning eyes searched her face. "If it isn't, you have to tell me now. Otherwise," a tremor coursed through her body that Shasta could feel against her own, "I don't think I'll be able to stop."

Shasta's breath caught at the vulnerability in her guardian's face. Talon was always so controlled, so powerful, and yet here in her arms, she seemed suddenly uncertain. Shasta realized that Talon felt just as helpless against the growing torrent of passion that surrounded them as Shasta herself did. She stroked her guardian's face, ran fingers down the smooth planes of Talon's cheekbones and marveled at the satiny texture of her dark skin.

"This is what I want," she said firmly, her own voice unusually rough. "You are what I want. I love you, Talon. I need you, please."

Talon bent forward and buried her face in the curve of Shasta's neck, her breath soft against her ear. "And you're sure?"

"Very sure." Shasta wound one hand into the thick dark hair. "Don't stop. I don't ever want you to stop."

And then Talon's mouth claimed hers again with renewed hunger, and Shasta opened willingly to the warm, caressing tongue that slipped past her lips and teeth to dance wildly with her own. Her guardian's hands moved once more upon her sides, her back, one sliding up to cup the soft fullness of her breast through the nightshift. Talon's touch was gentle, even reverent, and Shasta gave a small cry in the back of her throat at the pleasure of that first intimate contact. She pressed herself into Talon's hand, wanting more, and her guardian responded with a delicate massage that deepened slowly without ever becoming demanding or forceful.

Shasta ran a hand down her guardian's neck, across the shoulders to her upper arm. She felt the firm curve of Talon's bicep, the powerful muscle there contracting so easily beneath her hand. She had to pull out of the kiss to catch her breath, which was coming in soft pants, and Talon took that opportunity to plant a trail of warm kisses down her neck, flicking her tongue lightly against her skin.

Her hand left Shasta's breast and Shasta gave a whimper of disappointment, until she realized that Talon was untying the satin ribbon at the neck of her nightdress. The edges of the cotton shift opened

to expose a deep vee of creamy flesh at the base of her throat. Talon leaned in and fastened her lips to the tender hollow there, drawing a gasping moan from her. Shasta tilted her head back and sank her fingers into her guardian's hair. "Talon..."

Talon gathered up the shift at Shasta's back, so slowly that Shasta didn't realize what was happening until the sudden warmth of hands against her bare skin made her shudder. Talon stroked her back with her palms, then her fingertips. Her hands followed the delicate curve of her spine upward, across the flat planes just above her shoulder blades, and curled lightly around the tops of her shoulders. Then her head came up and she took Shasta's lips with her own again. This time the kiss was more playful, a dainty nibbling and teasing at Shasta's mouth. Talon released her shoulders and again took hold of the edges of her shift. There she hesitated, and Shasta could feel her guardian's hands trembling.

"Do it, Talon, please," she begged. "It's all right."

That seemed to steel Talon's resolve. In one smooth, deft motion, she lifted the nightshift up and away from her and dropped it carelessly to the floor.

Shasta was astonished to find she didn't feel in the least bit self-conscious or embarrassed. How could she, with Talon staring down at her as if she were the most magnificent thing she had ever seen? And with a boldness that surprised even herself she pulled Talon into a kiss, taking her hand and guiding it to her breast, craving that delicate touch against her bare skin. For a moment even Talon seemed surprised, and she gave a little gasp against Shasta's lips that trailed into a faint groan. Gently, she caressed Shasta's breast, her thumb brushing across the nipple, making it tighten beneath her touch.

Abruptly Talon dropped to one knee, drew Shasta toward her, and replaced the kneading fingers with the sudden liquid heat of her mouth. Shasta cried out at the pleasure of that exquisite sensation. Her head fell back, unbidden, and she closed her eyes with ecstasy. Never had she imagined anything so erotic as the warmth of Talon's mouth at her breast. Her dreams were becoming reality in a way that was far more vivid and sensual than anything she might have been able to imagine on her own. Gentle sucking sent waves of bliss crashing through her body, and when her guardian's tongue flickered sensuously over the taut peak, Shasta thought she might lose her mind entirely.

"Talon, I..." She could barely get the words out, not wanting that

sweet contact to end but swaying dangerously as her knees threatened to give way. "I can't..." She lurched forward to steady herself on Talon's shoulders.

Her guardian seemed to understand. She guided Shasta's hips forward and pressed her bent knee between Shasta's legs, tugging her down to straddle her thigh. Again Shasta was overwhelmed with glorious, escalating sensation as Talon's firm muscles pressed tightly against her most intimate spot. Talon switched her attention to the other breast, this time licking the erect nipple delicately a few times and running her tongue in a circle around the puckering flesh before covering it completely with her mouth.

She placed one hand on the Princess's back and lifted the other to fondle the breast her mouth had just left, lightly pinching the hardened bud and rolling it beneath her fingertips. Shasta's hips rocked of their own accord against Talon's thigh, and she slid her hands back into her guardian's hair to plant kisses on the top of her head, which was all she could reach from that angle. Talon chuckled at her little growl of frustration and tilted her head back to meet Shasta's lips with her own. Shasta delved into her guardian's mouth with her tongue, suddenly wanting to show Talon just how arousing her touches had been. She moved greedily over the infinite softness of Talon's lips, nipping lightly with the barest hint of teeth, and this time it was Talon who had to pull back to get some air.

She met Shasta's gaze with a mixture of wonder and longing in her black eyes that took her breath away. Rising, Talon pushed her knee upward to press tantalizingly against Shasta's pulsing center. She was rewarded with a panting sigh, and her lips curved slightly as she put Shasta's arms around her neck and lifted her from the floor.

In three strides she had crossed the room. Tenderly she laid Shasta onto the bed, then brushed the gauzy curtains aside to sit next to her. Shasta watched impatiently as she removed her heavy boots one at a time and left them on the floor by the bed.

Boldly she pressed herself against Talon's warm back and brought her lips to her guardian's ear. "Hurry up," she demanded, encircling Talon's stomach with her hands and splaying her fingers on the firm, flat muscles there. Talon exhaled abruptly, and Shasta felt the sensitive muscles of her abdomen flex in response to her touch. She lowered her head to kiss Talon's neck, beneath the earlobe. A powerful heartbeat

thundered against her lips, making her own heart quicken to match that unflinching rhythm.

Sliding her hands upward, she could discern the wrappings that bound Talon's chest beneath the loose linen shirt, and suddenly Shasta was possessed with the urge to feel her guardian's bare, satiny skin against her own. She struggled with the buttons, but it was difficult to undo them without being able to see. Talon's hands came up and covered hers, and in a few quick, precise motions she had the shirt unfastened. She stood, whipped the shirt from her shoulders, and tossed it on the foot of the bed. She reached up to remove the tight binding, but Shasta patted her hand away.

"Let me do it," she said, and Talon held her arms out obediently.

Shasta unwound the wide strips of fabric, watching with wonder as, layer by layer, her guardian's feminine curves were revealed, until at last the binding fell away completely. Shasta gazed unabashedly on Talon's seminakedness, for the first time not feeling compelled to blush or turn her eyes away.

"Perfect," she breathed, reaching out timidly to trace one soft curve with her fingertip. "You're so beautiful."

She was not sure whether it was her words or that feather-light touch that pulled the groan from her guardian's lips, but either way that sound was the most intoxicating thing Shasta had ever heard. She cupped the small breast in her palm and watched in fascination as both dark nipples tightened in front of her eyes, then lifted her other hand to the second breast and brushed the pointed tips with her thumbs.

Talon's breathing grew harsh and her hands suddenly trembled on Shasta's shoulders, and Shasta realized that she was struggling to hold still beneath her touch, to allow her the chance to explore her body freely without interruption. Sensing that her guardian might not be able to maintain that control for much longer, Shasta leaned forward and tentatively touched one of the dark nipples with the tip of her tongue. This elicited another small noise, somewhere between a moan and a growl, and Talon entwined her hands in Shasta's long, loose tresses. Shasta became bolder and drew that yielding flesh into her mouth. The textures were amazing, the silkiness of the dark skin, the intriguing puckered circle with its firm little point. She ran her tongue over them repeatedly, wanting to memorize the way they felt, the slight taste of salt on Talon's skin.

Finally her guardian could be still no longer. She inclined her head and raised Shasta from her breast to meet her lips. Gently, she lowered them both to the bed, shifting her body weight so that their torsos were pressed together. The warmth of Talon's heated skin against her own was an intimacy that Shasta had never imagined, and she ran her fingertips daintily over that strong, muscled back that she remembered so well from the night she'd seen Talon and Erinda together. Only now it was she who lay beneath Talon's attentions, as she had so often in her fevered dreams. But these sensations, these feelings building inside her went far beyond anything she could have ever fantasized.

She felt one of Talon's hands glide down the flat expanse of her stomach, and her abdomen contracted beneath that touch, almost ticklish in its delicacy. She gasped in surprise as the slender fingers did not stop at the waist of her undergarments, but slid beneath them and continued downward, and that gasp turned into a moan when one finger slipped between her wet folds for the first time. Her hips rocked against Talon's hand, and her eyes flew open to stare with amazement. Talon lifted an eyebrow, almost mischievously, and her fingertip began to trace small, firm circles in that most sensitive of places.

"Ohh," Shasta cried out, closing her eyes tightly as a fiery heat began to build in her thighs and hips, a feeling unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

She was too overcome with sensation to distinguish each movement of Talon's hand, but it seemed that each passing moment brought a surge of pleasure stronger than the last. And then suddenly it stopped. Talon withdrew her hand and Shasta gave a mewling cry of protest, but Talon only winked at her, hooked her fingers in the waist of the white undergarment, and stripped it away.

She parted Shasta's knees, settled herself between them, and leaned forward to press her lips to Shasta's, tangling their tongues for a few breathless moments. Then she traveled downward slowly, planting sensuous kisses in a line from Shasta's throat, between her breasts and across her ribs. When she reached the belly button, her tongue dipped into its crevice and swirled, making Shasta giggle.

She could feel Talon's smile against her skin at that response. Shasta was a little confused as to her guardian's intentions, and so a gasping cry tore from her throat when she suddenly felt the hot softness of Talon's mouth cover her unexpectedly, her tongue repeating

the little circular motions of her fingers only moments before. Her cries became almost rhythmic as Talon flicked delicately and repeatedly across that intimate spot, and she felt the fire building in her again until she wasn't sure her body could contain it anymore. Her hips rose off the mattress, and she called out her guardian's name in a final, torrential burst of ecstasy that crashed through her and robbed her of her senses, her energy, everything but the pulsing waves of pleasure that shook her entire small frame.

Talon moved up her body again soothingly, kissed her stomach, and nipped at her breasts lightly before hovering a handbreadth from her face. A little smile played at her lips. "Are you all right?"

Shasta just stared at her with astonishment. Her chest was heaving, and when she finally regained her voice it was full of wonder. "How did you do that?"

Her guardian's dark eyes twinkled with amusement. "You're a woman, Highness. It's what your body is designed to do, with the right encouragement."

Shasta brought a hand up to stroke Talon's cheek. "I never knew anything could feel like that."

Talon captured Shasta's hand against her face and pressed kisses into the palm. Shasta's breath caught and she bent one knee, inadvertently pressing it up between her guardian's legs, and Talon's eyes fluttered closed for a moment. Experimentally, Shasta lifted one hip to rub her thigh more firmly against the sensitive spot. Talon exhaled sharply and opened her eyes to gaze at her.

Shasta smiled shyly. "Can I...?"

Talon's lips parted in a slight smile. "Aren't you tired?"

"No. I feel very much awake. And I want to. Please?"

Talon chuckled. "You know I can't deny you anything."

She sat up on the bed, and Shasta followed her. She wasn't quite sure what to do, and she bit her lip uncertainly. Her guardian gave her an encouraging smile, kissed her softly, and stood to unbuckle the wide black belt girding her hips. Shasta let her gaze rove across Talon's body, the smooth, olive skin, the sharply defined muscles of her upper arms and the four neat little bundles of muscle that made up her abdomen, the small, perfectly formed breasts with their little dark points, the distinct scars on her ribs and above her hip, and Shasta's blue feather necklace resting against the dark throat. She couldn't believe what a beautiful

woman Talon was, and staring at her now in the flickering light of the bedside lamp, Shasta could not imagine how she had ever mistaken such beauty for a man.

The heavy belt came undone and fell to the floor with a clunk. Talon unbuttoned the front of her trousers, tugged them off with her undergarments, and left them in a pile. Shasta inhaled at the sight of her, the slim hips and thighs, the glorious warmth of her dark skin, the patch of black curls at the junction of her legs. “Nervous?” Talon’s voice was husky.

Shasta nodded slightly. “I...I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” The deep tones held a tinge of amusement. “Here.” Talon took Shasta’s hand and guided it between her legs, giving a small moan as Shasta’s fingers came into contact with her slick center.

Shasta was fascinated by the feel of those delicate tissues beneath her touch, smooth and soaked with desire. “It’s so...wet,” she said, and her guardian made a choking sound that was something like both a groan and a laugh. Shasta blushed, meeting Talon’s eyes shyly. “Is that because of me?”

“Mmm-hmm.” The affirmative response was soft, and Shasta stroked her experimentally, coating her fingers with the moisture and running them over the hot folds a little at a time, amazed when those small movements produced an additional flood of wetness against her hand.

A shiver coursed through Talon’s body. She drew them both back onto the bed and pulled Shasta on top of her. Shasta continued her tentative exploration, enjoying the soft shuddering sighs and light trembling of her guardian’s body beneath her. When one finger found the hidden opening and slid inside, Talon let out a guttural breath and rocked against her touch.

Instinctively Shasta began a stroking motion to match the pulsing hips. She moved her finger in and out of the warm depths of her guardian’s body, felt the muscles there contracting in response. She added a second finger, wanting to feel those contractions more intensely, and let Talon’s hips set the rhythm of her hand. Her thumb brushed against the hardened bundle of nerves and her guardian growled, prompting her to rub more purposefully against that spot just to hear that raw, feral sound again.

Leaning down, she fastened her lips to Talon’s earlobe and sucked

there as her breath expelled warmly against her guardian's neck. Suddenly she felt the muscles around her fingers clamp down hard as Talon's entire body stiffened beneath her and then relaxed in a rush of exhaled air and trembling limbs.

Shasta withdrew her fingers and gazed at them wonderingly. "Did it work?" she asked.

Talon gave a panting laugh. "Oh, it worked."

"You're a lot quieter than me," Shasta observed sheepishly, and Talon chuckled again and pulled her into a crushing kiss.

"That's all right," she mumbled against Shasta's lips. "I love to hear you call my name like that. I don't care if the whole world hears it."

Shasta pulled back with a shocked expression. "You don't think the rest of the temple—"

"Who cares?" Talon tucked a strand of long brown hair behind Shasta's ear, her black eyes shining. "I love you, Princess. So much." Her chin quivered, just slightly. "I never thought... I never dared to hope this might happen. That I'd be here with you, like this, making love to you. I've wanted this for such a long time and couldn't even dare admit it to myself. It seemed impossible."

Shasta spattered little kisses playfully across her guardian's face, then dropped her head to the strong shoulder and hugged their bodies together. "Yet here we are. You know, if you were a man you'd have to marry me after tonight."

"I wish I could," came the sincere reply, and Shasta propped herself up on one elbow to gaze into Talon's face.

"I don't ever want this to end. I don't ever want to be away from you again. Promise me, Talon. Promise me you'll stay with me from now on, not because you have to but because you want to."

Talon raised a hand and stroked her hair gently. "I promise, Princess."

"I think you'd better start calling me Shasta."

Talon chuckled, then her dark eyes grew serious again, and she trailed a hand absently down Shasta's bare shoulder and upper arm. "You have all of me, Shasta. My sword, my heart, my body, to do with what you please. For the rest of my life."

Shasta gazed down at her guardian, shook her head incredulously, and lowered her head for another kiss.

MERRY SHANNON

For that night at least, all thoughts of war and politics were banished from both women's minds. Nothing mattered but that they were together and they were in love. They would take these few precious hours of darkness to bask in one another's presence, the outside world blissfully forgotten—if only for a short time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Talon opened her eyes as the morning sun streamed in through the window, and the soft weight on her chest reminded her of what had passed the night before. She looked down to see Shasta's head resting on her shoulder. One of the Princess's legs was slung across her hips. Talon's heart swelled and she lifted a hand to stroke Shasta's golden brown hair.

It still seemed too incredible to be true. She was lying in bed with the Princess, the same girl she'd watched growing up these past winters, the woman she'd loved so deeply and for so long that she couldn't even pinpoint exactly when those feelings had begun. She'd spent so much time trying to stifle them, trying to pretend she was only fond of Shasta as a sister or friend. Lying to herself, really, because the truth was too dangerous and seemed too impossible.

Shasta's sweet raspberry scent washed over her in waves, and Talon tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply. She didn't know what she'd done to deserve such happiness, but every fiber of her being cried out thanks to the Goddess, to whatever divine power had put this beautiful, perfect woman in her arms.

Shasta must have sensed the change in her breathing, because Talon could feel her awakening slowly. She rubbed a hand in relaxing circles against Shasta's lower back, gradually drawing her into wakefulness. Eventually Shasta moved against her shoulder and lifted her head, trailing long hair across Talon's chest to blink sleepily into her face.

Talon couldn't help a smile. "Good morning."

Shasta seemed to become aware of their naked bodies pressed

together beneath the sheet, because she blushed a charming shade of pink and met Talon's eyes shyly. "Good morning."

Talon reached up and unfastened the blue feather necklace she'd worn since she'd left Verdred, holding it between them for a moment before putting it around Shasta's neck. "I think this belongs to you."

One of the Princess's hands fluttered up to cover the familiar feather, and she leaned forward and pressed her lips to Talon's sweetly. Talon knew it was only meant to be a gentle thank-you kiss, but she couldn't get over the silkiness of Shasta's mouth, the intoxicating taste of her. That light contact turned into something much deeper as she slipped inside, touching her tongue to the Princess's in a warm caress, tangling her hands in the satin strands of her hair. Shasta shifted her weight, and Talon became very conscious of the Princess's leg draped across her midsection, her intimate heat pressed firmly against Talon's hip. She felt a fire that she knew all too well beginning to spread through her body, and reluctantly she pulled out of the kiss to gaze into those beautiful amber eyes.

Shasta gave a happy sigh and snuggled against Talon's neck. "I wish we could stay like this forever."

Talon chuckled. "So do I. But we have to get up. There's still so much work to be done, and we're running short on time."

The Princess puffed out her lower lip in a pout. "Aw." She wiggled closer, then lowered her leg so that it slid between Talon's and pressed upward with a wicked glint in her eye. "I bet I could convince you to stay at least a few more minutes."

Talon inhaled sharply, love and desire warring with common sense for several breathless seconds. "Yes, you probably could. But we really shouldn't...oh."

Shasta's lips were a distraction, teasing lightly over Talon's neck, and her hand slid purposefully downward across Talon's abdomen. She forgot what she was going to say. Shasta's touch made her skin tingle until she could scarcely form a coherent thought.

Erinda's voice outside the chamber startled them both as the chambermaid called out more loudly than was necessary. "My lord, the Princess has not yet awakened. If you'll just allow me to fetch her for you..." The outer door opened and closed, and Shasta sat up quickly, hugging the sheet to her chest. Erinda came through the beaded curtain, eyes politely averted to the floor.

"Your Highness, General Harneth has been waiting to speak to you

all morning. I told him you were up late and needed your rest, but he insists that it's important."

Shasta sighed. "All right. I'll give him an audience when I've dressed."

"Very good, Princess." As she eyed the pile of clothes on the floor by the bed, a mischievous smile crossed Erinda's face. "Did you sleep well?"

Shasta threw a pillow at her playfully. "Go on, get out of here."

"Yes, Your Highness." The chambermaid gave an exaggerated curtsy and trotted out of the room in a fit of giggles.

Shasta sighed, but her expression was one of laughing exasperation. She was irresistible, and Talon couldn't help but pull her in for a quick kiss.

"Don't worry. We'll have plenty of time later to pick up where we left off." She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and picked up her trousers but gave a little groan when she felt warm lips pressing kisses along her back. "Shasta," she said warningly, but she turned to meet those lips with her own yet again before she stood and pulled the pants up around her waist.

"I suppose I should be clothed when I greet the general," Shasta said with playful reluctance.

"You'd better get dressed before I decide he can wait," Talon said, turning her back to bind herself with the efficiency of many years' practice.

"Or what, you'll ravish me right here and now? I can't say that's much of a deterrent."

Talon pulled on a shirt, then held out her hands to help the Princess from the bed. The sight of her made Talon's breath catch. "Goddess, you're so beautiful," she said and tore her eyes away as Shasta wiggled into a clean shift and undergarments.

Talon had no idea how they managed to finish dressing. She could not resist stealing another kiss after buttoning the back of the Princess's gown. As she retrieved her sword belt from the wall, she cast a critical eye over the Princess and quickly patted herself to make certain her own clothes were properly fastened.

Shasta seemed amused by this last-minute concern for propriety and said, "Too late now, my love. What he sees, he will see."

Talon was still reeling happily at being called *my love* when Shasta opened the chamber door and greeted the General. She did her best to

wipe the silly grin off her face and regain some measure of dignity as Harneth entered the room.

“Your Highness, good morning. I wanted to let you know that the...er...special project that you requested has been completed.”

Shasta gave a little nod. “Thank you. Please, come in.”

The general offered a startled salute when he caught sight of Talon. “Lieutenant! I thought you were in Ardrenn.”

Talon returned the salute. “I had some personal matters to attend to here. However, I did have success in making contact with the rebels among the royal guard.”

“Excellent.” Harneth struck a fist into his palm. “I received a message from Captain Vaughn this morning. He’s succeeded in recruiting the two remaining provinces to our aid. That gives us five provincial guard against Kumire’s seven, and word is that the barbarian army has begun to amass outside the southern walls of the palace. They know we’re coming.”

Shasta held out a hand. “Please, General, have a seat.”

He complied, and once Talon and the Princess joined him, he looked around the table gravely. “We’re going to have quite a battle ahead of us, I’m afraid.”

“So we have the five guard of the southern provinces and a few of the royal guard that Talon’s managed to organize within Ardrenn. And the priestesses of Verdred, though I still don’t know how much help they can be to us.”

Talon was confused. “The priestesses? What do they have to do with it?”

“Lyris says that the Honored Mother received a vision from the Goddess, declaring that the priestesses will fight with us.”

The general coughed as though he were trying to hide a laugh. “March into battle with a procession of holy women?”

“I don’t think we can stop them, General. Her Grace assures me that the Daughters of Ithyris are capable of fighting. How, I don’t know.”

“Perhaps I shall ask her,” Talon muttered. “The idea seems ridiculous.”

“General, do you suppose any of the provinces currently fighting for Kumire might change their allegiance if they are certain I’m alive? I know there are rumors. Perhaps they are supporting him only because they are not certain of the truth.”

Harneth shook his head wearily. “There’s no way to be sure,

Highness. Aster has always been supportive, for the most part, of the royal family. But we cannot count on it. Chancellor Kumire and his father have powerful influence there as well.”

Talon clapped Harneth on the shoulder. “So what’s the plan of attack, General?”

Harneth tugged a map out of his jacket and unfolded it on the table. “Our five provincial guard will converge at the edge of the southern moors behind the palace, here.” He pointed out a spot on the map. “If all goes as planned, everyone should be there within a few days of one another. The barbarian army is gathering here.” He drew his finger along the southern wall of the palace. “We don’t know yet where Kumire has positioned his other allies, but his primary concern must be to prevent us from breaching the castle grounds. We’re going to send the Olsta guard around to the left, like this,” he swept an arc across the map, “and the Striniste guard around to the right. If we get very, very lucky, we might just be able to trap the barbarians up against the palace walls.”

“Where they’ll have no choice but to retreat inside or be killed,” Talon noted with satisfaction. “Then we will break through the palace walls to overcome the castle grounds and lay siege to the castle itself. It’s a good plan.”

Harneth grimaced. “Of course, it would be easier if Kumire would lead his troops himself. Then we could just pick him off and put an end to his claim to the throne.”

“He’ll never show his face in battle,” Shasta said scornfully. “He’s too much of a coward. To retake the palace we’re going to have to go in there and drag him out.”

Talon nodded. “And on that note, I have some good news. Breaching the castle grounds may not be as difficult as we’d thought. The rebels in Ardrenn have a plan.” She leaned over the map. “The palace walls are connected to the main city walls here and here. Once the battle begins, Kumire’s royal guard will be called as the last line of defense, atop the palace walls. Most of the rebels still have their uniforms, and those who don’t shouldn’t have too much trouble acquiring one from their former comrades. With the attention on the battle, the rebels plan on taking the city watchtowers first.” She pointed out the towers, which were drawn as small circles on the map.

“From there they can infiltrate the palace walls by way of the city walls. In all the excitement, no one will notice the additional men. When our forces draw close enough to force the barbarians back inside,

the rebels will drop scaling ropes and provide cover for us to get over the walls.”

“What about the gates?” Harneth asked.

“The rebels will try to get them open from the inside, but we can’t count on it. We’ll need a battering ram.”

“They’ll be putting themselves in great danger,” Harneth said. “But if it works, it could mean the difference between victory and defeat. Especially considering how badly we’ll be outnumbered.”

Shasta reached beneath the table to lay a hand on her guardian’s thigh. She was not quite sure that she fully understood the plan, but so long as Talon was with her, she felt certain that everything was going to turn out all right in the end.



The march to Ardrenn took far longer than had their frantic escape to the Great Temple. Most of the men were on foot, and with nearly a thousand soldiers their pace was much slower. By the time they had reached the edge of Warin Forest, the provincial guards of Daiban, Olsta, and Striniste were already there. Shasta had never seen so many people in one place in all her life, and from a distance it looked like a strange rainbow spanning the moors as far as the eye could see: the yellow uniforms of Olsta to the west, and next to them the blue of Daiban. Verdred was in the center, in green.

When Captain Vaughn arrived with Marinland the following day, their orange jackets and flags took the spot next to Verdred, and Striniste to the east wore white. Shasta was overwhelmed that so many people had come out to support her, to fight in her name.

Captain Vaughn looked very tired but extremely satisfied with the turnout. Shasta promised herself that as soon as this was over she would be giving the captain a promotion and some well-deserved leave. Assuming victory was theirs, of course. If not... Shasta did not want to dwell on that possibility.

Vaughn wasted no time in issuing the battle plan among the various troops, and Shasta rode alongside him to visit with each one. She met with each of the generals and showed them the royal signet to confirm her identity, and greeted as many of the men as she could before moving on. It took three days to assemble the combined forces, and

they planned to strike the next morning, hoping Kumire had not yet gathered his entire army.

As the time for the battle approached, Shasta noticed that Talon grew increasingly tense. She knew Talon must be worried about Lyris, riding out to fight alongside trained soldiers when she had never lifted a sword in her life. But there was more in balance than one life, no matter how precious, and Talon's troubled black eyes made it clear she had a great deal on her mind.

When night fell and they were finally alone in the royal tent, Shasta took one of Talon's hands and led her to the pile of cushions that served as their bed. She tugged her guardian down beside her and laid her head on Talon's chest.

"What is it?" she asked. "Something's bothering you."

Talon planted a kiss on the top of her head. "It's nothing."

Shasta looked up at her. "That's a lie. You've been edgy for days and you keep smelling the air and making a face. Like this." She scrunched her nose, drew her eyebrows together, and squinted her eyes. It was an exaggeration, of course, but it made Talon laugh.

"If I look that frightful, then no wonder you're worried."

"I mean it. I know something's wrong. Tell me." Shasta searched her lover's face. "Please?"

Talon's eyes clouded. "It's a long story."

"We have all night," Shasta pointed out. "Though I can think of a few other things I'd like to fit in before dawn." She gave a wicked grin and let her hand drift across Talon's chest, softly caressing her beneath the binding. Talon ducked in for a kiss, but Shasta backed away. "Uh-uh. Not until you tell me what's going on."

"Such a tease." Talon gave an exasperated roll of her eyes. "All right." She settled back into the cushions and sighed. "Remember those barbarians who attacked us in your father's study that night? They had a...*unique* odor."

Shasta grimaced. "Unique odor? They reeked."

"Their stink seemed familiar to me. At first I couldn't remember where I'd smelled it before, but when we were back in your room and Kumire was..."

Shasta felt her guardian's heartbeat quicken with the memory, and she gave her an encouraging hug.

Talon took a shuddering breath and continued, "When I saw him

attacking you, I remembered. I was very young, about nine winters old, when my village in the Outlands was attacked. These strange, enormous men came charging through with huge weapons, burning the longhouses and raiding the food stores. My father went out to fight them, but he never came back, and my mother and sisters and I were left in our hut, hiding. My mother knew it was only a matter of time before they found us. And she knew what they would do to me, to my sisters, if they caught us. So she asked me to bring her a knife, and she put it to my throat.”

Shasta stared at Talon with horror. “She was going to kill her own children?”

“To save us, yes. Only I didn’t understand it at the time. It wasn’t until winters later that I realized what she’d intended. She kept crying and saying she was sorry, but in the end she just couldn’t do it. Instead, she used the knife to cut my hair. She told me I had to pretend to be a boy so I could protect Lyris and Bria. I didn’t understand what she meant.”

Shasta could picture the terrible scene just as Talon painted it, a mother driven to desperation, preparing to kill her daughters to spare them from a fate far worse than death. It certainly explained where Talon had picked up those maddeningly self-sacrificial tendencies. No wonder she had kept her gender hidden for so long. Shasta touched her lover’s hand tenderly, wishing she could spare Talon the pain of these memories. This was probably the first time Talon had ever shared this story with anyone outside her own family, she realized, and that trust meant everything to her.

“Then they came. I grabbed my sisters and we hid in the pantry, but there was no place for my mother to run. She tried to fight them off but they just laughed at her. I remember their faces, their voices, everything. And then...” Talon’s dark features contracted in anguish. “They raped her. All three of them, one after the other, they threw her over the table and they raped her. And when they were done, one of them stuck his knife into her belly.”

Shasta’s eyes spilled over as she pictured Talon as a frightened child, hiding, trying to protect her little sisters while her mother was being violated and murdered in front of their eyes. No wonder none of them had ever wanted to talk about it.

“And then I understood what she’d meant. Why she wanted me to

pretend I was a boy. I could never allow any man to do to my sisters what those men had done to her.”

“And afterward...they found you?” Shasta whispered.

“Yes. Three young, healthy Outlander children were worth more to them alive than dead. It was a great stroke of luck that they sold us to the performing troupe. We stayed together, and we managed to survive. By some miracle, no one ever found out that I wasn’t a boy. Until the day I came to the palace...”

“...and saved my life,” Shasta finished for her, softly. “Oh, Talon, I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.”

“They say scent is our strongest connection to memory,” Talon said with pensive sorrow. “And Outlanders have unusually keen senses. Scent was what I remembered when I saw Kumire bending over you.” Talon gritted her teeth. “The barbarians with him that day weren’t the same men who raped my mother, but they were from the same tribe. There’s no question in my mind about that. Because of them, my entire world was destroyed. My sisters and I were sold like cattle to be beaten, starved, treated like objects that could be broken or replaced.”

Shasta could not even imagine how terrible that must have been, and she was helplessly frustrated. What possible consolation could she offer to the woman she loved, who had suffered so much?

Tears spilled down Talon’s cheeks. “I’ve had revenge in my heart all my life, Shasta. It’s what drove me to study hard, to learn everything I could from Captain Vaughn. But that night in your room, with Kumire, I couldn’t move. I felt as helpless as I did when I was nine winters old. Because of me you were almost...” More tears fell, and she couldn’t finish.

Shasta’s heart ached as she realized how long Talon must have been carrying this heavy burden of guilt. “Shh, my love, it’s all right.” She wrapped her arms around Talon and lay back against the cushions. Talon wept silently, her shoulders heaving with soundless cries that were somehow more heartbreaking than any audible sobbing could have been. Shasta was in tears herself at the sight of Talon in such pain. She wound her fingers through the thick dark hair and rocked back and forth. “I’m here, it’s okay. Just hold on to me.”

After a minute Talon seemed to regain some control. She straightened and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “I’m scared, Shasta,” she confessed shakily. “I’m terrified that I’m going to go out there tomorrow and it’s

going to happen again. I'll freeze up, I'll put someone I care about in danger. I could never forgive myself."

"That's not going to happen." Shasta took a handkerchief from her sleeve to tenderly wipe her guardian's face. "It took you by surprise the first time, that's all. It would have been too much for anyone to handle in your place. I probably would have fainted dead away." She ran a hand along Talon's cheek. "But it turned out all right, didn't it? I'm safe, you're safe, and no matter what happens, we're together. Tomorrow we're going to go out there and make those barbarians wish they'd never set foot in the Outlands. Or the palace. Or anywhere else in Ithyria, for that matter."

Talon gave an astonished laugh. "Goddess, Shasta, I love you."

Shasta grinned and leaned forward until her lips were only a fingerbreadth from Talon's. "You may kiss me now."

And Talon did just that, thoroughly and passionately until all thoughts of barbarians and war were completely banished from both of their minds. Shasta reached out and flailed a bit with her hand until she found the lamp and extinguished the wick. For the remainder of the night the only other sounds to be heard in the darkness of the royal tent were the muffled sighs of two women in love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

True to Lyris's word, the thirty priestesses of Verdred turned up to take their places the morning of the attack, which the soldiers had begun to refer to as the "Battle of the Ranes." The holy women wore armor over their white robes the likes of which Talon had never seen before, with silver breastplates and gauntlets and skirts of chain mail slit in front and back for riding. Their filmy veils were held by a band of metal across their foreheads. But they carried no weapons.

The Verdred priestesses were not the only ones to appear. They were joined by priestesses from the Great Temples of the four other southern provinces as well as the Honored Mothers from the northern provinces of Aster, Zarneth, Hollis and Cibli, each with an entourage of veiled women. These provinces were fighting for Kumire, and yet the Mothers declared their intention to stand with the Princess, as commanded by Ithyris.

All in all, there were approximately three hundred priestesses, and they paid no attention to the soldiers' disbelieving stares and hoots of laughter. Talon found their cool determination disconcerting. These women were going to fight for the Princess, with or without her permission, and they didn't seem to care what any of the military men had to say about it.

Captain Vaughn had already expressed his reservations. Like most of the soldiers, he could not imagine how the Ithyrian women would be able to handle themselves on the battlefield in their flowing veils, riding bareback and weaponless. Still, he respected their status

and determination and instructed that they be positioned behind the provincial guard, hoping that at least the soldiers might be able to provide some protection. The Honored Mothers seemed disinclined to take his orders and insisted calmly that they would go where the Goddess directed them to go.

As if the battalion of priestesses were not enough, Talon nearly fell off her horse when the Princess rode out before the assembled soldiers. Sunlight glittered off a molded silver breastplate that fit like a second skin. She wore rounded shoulder guards and silver gauntlets on her arms and legs. Talon could make out a shirt and leggings of chain mail beneath, the weave so fine that it moved like shimmering scales in the morning sun. Her long brown hair streamed from beneath a silver helmet that came down over her ears. There was a strange contraption in her hand that looked like an open-ended metal cone.

Talon gaped for a long moment before turning to Captain Vaughn. “Did you know about this?”

“I’m just as surprised as you are, Lieutenant.”

“Where in the name of the Goddess did she get that armor?” From Talon’s other side, General Harneth coughed guiltily, and Talon whirled to glare at him. “Did you have something to do with this, General?”

“Her Highness drew up the plans, had all the measurements, asked me to help her get it done. How could I refuse?”

“Oh, you could have refused,” Talon replied testily. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“She said it was to be kept secret.”

“I’ll bet she did.”

Talon almost had to plug her ears when Shasta lifted the metal cone to her lips and spoke.

“My people, I want to thank you for being here today.” Her voice rang so loudly across the moors that Talon was certain even Striniste and Olsta on the far ends could hear her words. “I am Princess Shasta Talia Soltranis of Rane, and contrary to what you may have heard, I am very much alive.”

A deafening shout went up from the soldiers lining the moors, and the Princess had to wait for the noise to die down before she could speak again. “We are here today because the man who has laid claim to my father’s throne is a traitor. Chancellor Kumire murdered Prince Daric, my twin brother, and I watched him kill my father, King Soltran

Novaris, with my own eyes.” Outraged cries erupted from the assembled troops at this shocking information.

“I will not let Kumire take the throne of Ithyria without a fight. Over the past century, the unchecked greed of the Ithyrian nobility has crippled our kingdom. Feudal lords destroy entire villages in their squabbles for power, while barbarians from Dangar are allowed to roam freely across our lands, thieving and raping and killing as they please.” Shasta’s eyes sought out Talon’s in the crowd and held them a moment before she continued. “Our people are forced to sell themselves and their families into indentureships for years at a time just to survive. Chancellor Kumire and those who support him would have you believe that this is the proper way of things. I am here today to tell you that he’s wrong.”

Now the fields were silent, and even Talon found herself listening breathlessly as the Princess’s voice carried through the morning stillness. “My people, I dream of a very different Ithyria, a place where the provincial governments protect their people instead of exploiting them, where everyone has the opportunity to reap the rewards of their own labor, and most of all, where the life of every man, woman, and child is treated with equal respect. No one should be allowed to strip another person of their most basic rights. No one should be allowed to purchase and sell another human being like a piece of furniture. And no one should ever, ever have to watch their family suffer and die from the selfishness of a few rich bastards who think they’re better than everyone else!”

A cheer erupted from the soldiers then, so loud that Shasta had to lower the cone and clap hands over her ears. Talon cheered right along with the others, her heart soaring. It didn’t matter that they hadn’t yet won. Shasta was, at that moment, as much a Queen of Ithyria as she would ever be. After a minute Shasta waved her hands for quiet and lifted the metal cone again.

“Most of you are here because you believe I am chosen by the Goddess to lead you. Yes, I am heir to the house of Rane. But I am only a person, just like everyone else, and you must not follow me into battle simply because of my title or my parentage. I ask you to stand with me this day against Kumire, not for my own sake, but for yours. For the future of your own families and children. It’s time to take back the dignity that has been denied the Goddess’s people for far too long.”

Shasta turned to face the palace. Just on the edge of the horizon, the dark seething line that every man recognized as the barbarian army waited for them along the palace walls. With her free arm Shasta unsheathed the sword at her side and waved it over her head.

She lifted the metal cone to her lips one last time and yelled, “For Ithyria!”

The soldiers echoed her war cry, and it thundered across the moors until the ground itself vibrated beneath their feet. *ITHYRIA!* With a mighty roar, the men surged forward as Shasta kicked her horse and led the charge. The ground trembled beneath thousands of pounding hooves. Shasta’s little white mare was quickly overtaken by the big warhorses that lunged past her, but it was just as well. It was one thing to fire up the men as best she could and start the attack, but what was true for Kumire was also true for her. If she were killed, their cause would be finished. She had to fall back, and so she did, letting the troops surge past her with deafening cheers.

As she retreated behind the charge she glanced around, already knowing what she would see. Sure enough, Talon was closing on her at a gallop.

“Don’t be mad,” Shasta called with a grin, her voice nearly drowned out by the thundering hooves.

Talon drew alongside, and Shasta could see mingled reproach and pride on her face. “You could have told me.”

“Scold me later!” Shasta slowed her horse and dropped back until even the line of priestesses galloping bareback had passed her. Gradually the din quieted.

Talon reined in her horse as well and regarded the Princess with exasperation, as if she was trying to decide on a response. Evidently adoration won out, for she reached out and pressed Shasta’s hand to her lips. “You won their hearts out there. I’m so proud of you.”

Shasta nodded, but she saw her guardian’s eyes darken and she knew what was coming next. Before Talon could say anything else, Shasta inclined her head toward the battle. “Go on. I know you have to.”

Talon grimaced apologetically. “I’m a soldier, Shasta.”

“I know. Just...be careful, please.” She wheeled her mare and leaned as close as she dared, catching Talon to her in a sweet, firm kiss. “I love you so much.”

“And I love you. Go to the command tent and wait there. I’ll come back, I promise.” Talon gazed at the Princess for one more long moment, then kicked her horse into a gallop and raced away to join the charging forces.

Shasta blinked away the tears that blurred her vision. It was going to be a long day, and she prayed fervently that if Ithyris really was backing her in this battle, perhaps the Goddess would see fit to extend a special touch of protection to her beloved.



Lyris followed closely behind the Honored Mother of Verdred, the horse beneath her galloping so hard her teeth rattled. She was surprised she didn’t feel more apprehensive. Though she and the other women had practiced the *shaa’ri*, none of them were certain exactly how it worked. Yet she felt confidence surging inside her, a certainty that she was somehow well protected despite her inexperience.

The barbarians came charging toward the line of soldiers, flanked on either side by provincial guard of their own. Lyris recognized the red uniforms of Aster and the deep burgundy of Mondera. She could distinguish two other colors besides, turquoise and brown, though she couldn’t remember which provinces those belonged to. That was as far as she could see. The enemy army extended off into the horizon in both directions, and she gasped when she saw the ocean of men amassed before them. Princess Shasta’s troops consisted of almost six thousand. There were easily twice that number standing between them and the palace walls.

The priestesses slowed their horses when the barbarians and the front line of soldiers came into contact for the first time in a terrifying roar of clanging metal and bellowing voices. Men started dying immediately, cut down beneath the swinging blades of the barbarians. Slowly the two opposing forces began to meld together as soldiers from both sides plunged more deeply into the opposing ranks. And then Lyris had her own first encounter with one of the enemy.

They were behind the Verdred guard, at the center of the line, and so their entire section was faced primarily by barbarians. The creature who came lunging toward the priestess on a massive, wild-eyed horse was more beast than man, so covered in leathers and furs and facial hair

that it was hard to determine what was a part of his clothing and what was his own body. He snarled to reveal yellowed teeth that had been filed into little points and lifted a heavy club over his head.

Instinctively Lyris lifted a hand, slicing it through the air with the same concentration they used in their meditative *shaa'ri* sessions. But this time it was different. She felt a strange gust of air and energy, as if her hand had somehow extended beyond itself. The barbarian clutched at his throat as a deep gash opened across his neck. He slumped and fell and disappeared beneath the pounding hooves of the horses. Lyris stared at her hand in amazement but did not have time to ponder as another of the hairy, smelly men came charging from the other side.

This time she extended her arm forcefully, palm out, and again felt a strange surge of force. The barbarian grunted as though the wind had been knocked out of him and flew off his mount to disappear on the ground like his comrade.

And so it was that the priestess finally understood the true use of the *shaa'ri*. Slicing motions directed the Goddess's power like a blade at whatever enemy she was focused on. If she thrust out the tips of her fingers in a straight line, it was like stabbing with the point of a sword. Using the palm of her hand had the same impact as a blunt club. She did not have to touch her adversary in order to attack him, and the *shaa'ri* seemed to work from as far as twenty paces away. All Lyris could do was marvel with renewed adoration at Ithyris's incredible power.

Looking around, Lyris could see the other veiled women catching on as well. In spite of their small size and harmless appearance, the Ithyrian priestesses quickly cut through the lines and moved to join the soldiers on the leading edge of the attack.

Lyris discovered, too, that when she used the *shaa'ri* to directly protect someone else, it had a greater range and more powerful impact than when she tried to use it offensively. She spent a great amount of time, therefore, scanning the battle for soldiers who were in danger and using her powers to protect them and herself. The barbarians learned quickly that the little veiled women on horseback were by far a greater threat than the armored men. Yet very few of them could even get close enough to a priestess to attack her.

Still, there were only about three hundred priestesses and thousands of enemy troops. The most the holy women could do was to provide some defense for Shasta's army, and in spite of their best efforts, the sheer volume of the enemy was gradually pushing them back.



The wounded began to pour into camp almost immediately as the sounds of the battle carried across the moors to Shasta's ears. She didn't have time to be afraid or shocked into inertia. Each of the provincial guard had brought their own healers, but all in all they had only about twenty, and the injured quickly began to number in the hundreds. They needed every available hand, and Shasta was grateful to have something to do, though at first she thought she might be sick from the sight of so much blood.

One of the healers, a brusque middle-aged woman with a startlingly gruff voice, took the Princess under her wing. She barked out orders, demonstrated how to clean and cauterize wounds, and showed her how to stitch up open gashes. Her no-nonsense, unsympathetic approach made it easier for Shasta to concentrate. They could not afford the luxury of squeamishness or even horror, and Shasta quickly found herself doing things she never could have imagined: piercing a man's skin with a needle over and over to stitch a gash closed, pressing a red-hot blade against an open wound while others held the injured man down and he screamed in agony as the metal seared his flesh to prevent blood loss.

Ordinarily she would never have believed herself capable of such things, only she didn't have time to think very hard about what she was doing. The wounded kept pouring in, many of them to be patched up just enough so they could head back out again.

Shasta had never imagined people could bleed so much. The healer made her wash her hands over and over again until she wasn't sure if their redness was due to bloodstains or all the rough scrubbing. She hadn't had time to remove her armor, but it fit so well and was lightweight enough that she scarcely noticed.

Once she had mastered the basic skills the healers required of her, the day became a whirl of blood and skin and stitches and screaming, a blur of scarlet. She saw things with her own eyes that she'd only ever read about: severed limbs, missing eyes, horribly disfigured faces on some who had been unlucky enough to survive an enemy's axe. She watched men die while she held their hands. It felt surreal, like a garish nightmare too terrible to actually be happening, and Shasta felt like she was seeing everything from somewhere deep inside herself. She was

glad of it, because without that strange disembodied feeling she was certain she would have fainted or lost her mind hours ago.

She was startled when she realized the day had passed and the sky had grown dark. The battle continued into the evening and through the night, the moonlight still bright enough over the moors that the enemy forces could see one another.

Erinda came and tapped her on the shoulder as she was tending to one soldier's pierced shoulder. It had been shot clean through with an arrow, and though they had managed to get the shaft out, he had already lost so much blood from other more superficial wounds that Shasta knew he wasn't going to make it. The man's skin was already turning the ashen gray color that she'd come to recognize as a sign of imminent death. Shasta wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and faced the chambermaid wearily. Like her own, Erinda's clothing was caked with blood.

"Your Highness, you have to come quickly. It's Captain Vaughn."

Shasta glanced back toward the soldier she'd been tending, and his glassy, empty gaze told her that he had died. The realization struck dully. She'd seen so much death that day that she found it difficult to summon emotion at all anymore. She reached out and gently closed his eyes, pulled the bloodstained sheet up over his face, and dropped the rag she'd been using to wipe his face with into a pan of scarlet water.

Erinda led her to one of the healer's tents, and Shasta gasped when she saw Vaughn stretched out on his side on the table. A long spear pierced his lower abdomen, above his hip. It entered right above the hipbone in the front and exited upward through the back.

"Captain!" She ran to his side and took one of the large hands in her own, the numbness of the day suddenly shattered by the sight of a familiar face. "How did this happen?"

He winced as one of the healers wrapped cloth around the base of the spear, trying to slow the bleeding. "Got careless." His voice came as a wheeze. The spearhead must have grazed a lung. "One of them came at me from the ground while I was going after a barbarian commander. Never saw it coming."

Shasta turned to the healer. "Quick, we have to get this out of him."

But the man only shook his head grimly. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, but the shaft is too wide. We could break off the head and pull it out,

but he's already lost so much blood that it would just kill him faster. At this point even cauterization won't stop the internal bleeding."

Shasta stared in horror. "You mean..."

"I'm sorry, Highness. There's nothing we can do."

Shasta shook her head as tears spilled down her face for the hundredth time that day. "No..."

"It's all right, Princess." Captain Vaughn squeezed her hand weakly. "I'm just sorry I couldn't see this through to the end."

Shasta drew his hand to her face. "No, Captain, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got us all into this mess. These men are out here dying because of me."

"We're here because we believe in what you stand for, Your Highness. I'm..." He coughed a little and grimaced again as the motion jarred the spear impaling him. "I'm proud of how you've grown, Princess. You've become the leader that this country so desperately needs. No matter what happens, you can't let that rat cousin of yours sit on the throne of Ithyria. There's not a man here today who wouldn't be proud to give his life for Princess Shasta of Rane. We all believe in you."

Shasta looked up at the healer, tears streaming down her face. "Master Healer, your services are probably needed elsewhere. You may leave us. I'll stay with him." After dipping a cloth in a bowl of clean water beside the table, she gently pressed it to Vaughn's forehead. "I'll never be able to thank you enough, Captain, for your valiant service to my family. You're an excellent soldier...and a true friend."

Vaughn closed his eyes with a faint smile. "It was an honor to serve the King...and you."

"Captain..." Shasta was ashamed of her own selfishness, but she had to ask. "Did you see Talon out there? Is she alive?"

"I saw her right before this happened," he replied, every word an obvious struggle. "She was fighting well. Didn't seem to be hurt."

Shasta let out a heavy sigh, and Vaughn opened bleary eyes to gaze at her knowingly. "You love each other."

Shasta was startled, but after only a slight hesitation she nodded. "Yes."

Vaughn closed his eyes again. "I think of you both as my own children." He inhaled with difficulty. "I am glad...you have found happiness, together. Take care of one another." Shasta felt him squeeze

her fingers, lightly. His last few words were hard to hear. “Long live the Queen.”

And then he let out a breath, and never took another.

Shasta held his hand to her face and cried. She felt Erinda’s touch on her shoulder and turned to throw her arms around the chambermaid. “What are we doing here, Erinda?” she sobbed. “How can this be right?”

Erinda let her cry for several moments before she eased back to regard her sadly. “This is war, Princess. It’s supposed to be terrible. But Kumire on the throne—that’s definitely not right. Captain Vaughn knew that. And so do those men out there.”

Shasta wiped her eyes and nodded. “Then I’d better get control of myself, hadn’t I?” She gave Erinda a tremulous smile. “There’s more need of us out there than in here.”

With one last look at Vaughn’s body, she followed Erinda from the tent. They still had a war to win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Talon's arms were so tired of lifting her sword they'd gone numb. Now, hours into the battle, she was moving mechanically, thankful for the keen instincts and acrobatic training that had saved her life more than once this day. So long as there was enough moonlight that they could see their enemy, they could not call a retreat, not unless Kumire's army called one first. While Kumire had a palace and thick stone walls to protect him, Shasta did not have such a shield. If Kumire's army pushed past them, they would reach the Princess in the camp, and that could not be allowed.

On the positive side, they were now actually able to hold the line. After the start of the battle, the Honored Mothers of Tabin and Fyn arrived with their following of priestesses and joined the Princess's ranks. Only Mondera was not represented among the holy women now in attendance. This brought the priestess's head count to nearly four hundred, and Shasta's army adopted the strategy of grouping around a priestess, about fifteen or twenty men to one woman, so she could provide cover for them while they fought.

Most of the men had lost their horses by now, but they made sure to keep their priestess mounted at all times so she'd have a clear vantage point to protect them. This method proved quite effective, and after fighting in this way for some time it seemed that perhaps they were finally beginning to level the playing field in terms of numbers. They might not have had as many men to begin with, but the priestess's powers gave them an unexpected, invaluable advantage. After struggling all day to keep from being pressed back, they were finally able to stand their ground as night fell.

Now it was a matter of who would tire first. The barbarians, as massive and bloodthirsty as they were, seemed to be feeling the fatigue of the day as much as the soldiers. If Shasta's army could hold out long enough to wear them down, there was the chance that they might be able to pin them up against the palace walls after all. But this was far easier said than done. Even Talon was beginning to feel a little foggy in the head.

She spun to block a sword that was headed for her midsection and slashed upward with her own, effectively relieving her attacker of his arm. He fell to the ground with a scream, and for a moment she stood staring numbly down as his open wound added a fresh pool of dark blood to the soaked grass. There was a guttural shriek behind her, close to her ear. Too close. She turned to see one of the barbarians, his axe raised, fall backward with glassy eyes, and when she looked up in surprise she saw her sister gazing at her with concern, her arm still outstretched with pointed fingers. Her veils were spattered scarlet.

"Lyris," Talon breathed, and the priestess wove through the knot of fighting men until she was within earshot.

"Talon, you're too tired to keep this up. Go back to the camp and rest awhile or you will get yourself killed. Have that looked at while you're there." She pointed at the gash across Talon's forehead, then gasped sharply and waved her arm in a swift arc at something over Talon's shoulder.

Yet another axe splintered into pieces in midair, the fragments striking Talon in the chest where the blade would have embedded itself if not for her sister's intervention.

"All right, all right, I'm going," she said. "But only for a few minutes."

Lyris offered her a hand. "Up here. I can get you away from the fighting."

Talon sheathed her sword and jumped up behind her sister. Lyris guided her little horse between the fighters, calmly cutting enemies down until they broke free of the cluster of soldiers. Talon dismounted quickly and waved a good-bye. But Lyris was already riding directly into the fight again.

Talon picked up one of the wounded men lying on the ground. He had a deep gash in one leg and was unable to walk back to the camp on his own. If she was going to go all the way back she might as well help

out someone who needed it at the same time. “Come on, friend, let’s get you to the healers. Lean on me, all right?”

It was a long way back to the camp. The distance had seemed much shorter during the excited charge on horseback, but when she was on foot and half dragging a soldier who was easily twice her size, it felt like miles. Still, Talon was thankful for it. The farther the battle was from Shasta, the better.

When they finally reached the camp, Talon flagged down one of the healers to help her lay the injured man out on a blanket in the grass, which was all the room they had left. It was brighter here due to all the lamps that bobbed in and out among the rows of wounded soldiers as everyone who was able played nursemaid to everyone else. Talon rubbed her forehead wearily, then winced as she remembered the gash there. It had been bleeding for the better part of an hour, stinging her eyes most inconveniently, but it was not anywhere near as grave as most of the injuries she could see around her.

For a moment she ground her teeth. She really shouldn’t be here when the battle was far from over and she wasn’t really injured. Still, she had to admit reluctantly that her exhaustion was starting to impair her judgment. Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a terrible thing to lie down for a few minutes and close her eyes. Even ten minutes of rest sounded like bliss. She wondered if she should go to Shasta’s tent. After so much horror and ugliness today, the Princess’s beautiful face would be a welcome sight.

But as she turned her steps toward the royal tent, she was suddenly deterred by a familiar voice singing sweetly nearby, and she followed the sound until she laid eyes on Shasta. The Princess was sitting on a wooden bench next to an assortment of healing paraphernalia, and a soldier knelt at her feet with his arm in her lap. Shasta was singing to him quietly, an old folk song that Talon remembered from her days as an entertainer, as she carefully drew a needle through the man’s skin to sew up a gash in his forearm. She was still dressed in her shining silver armor but had removed the helmet. Her long hair was plaited at the base of her neck to keep it out of her face.

Talon was shocked that Princess Shasta, who had always abhorred sewing, was not only plying a needle willingly but was actually stitching up human flesh. Slowly, she drew closer. Shasta’s voice was soft and melodic, and the soldier she was tending seemed so entranced that he

scarcely flinched as she moved the needle up and down. Perhaps he was just astonished that the Princess herself was caring for his wound.

Talon watched her finish the row of stitches, tie the thread off at the bottom, and snip it with a small pair of scissors. Her song ended, and she gave the man a smile.

“Good as new, soldier,” she said gently and stood with him as he flexed his arm.

When she looked up, the weariness in her face made Talon’s heart ache, and she opened her arms so the Princess could fall into them. For a long moment neither of them spoke, but Shasta squeezed her so tightly Talon found it difficult to breathe.

“Are you hurt?” Shasta asked weakly.

“It’s nothing.”

“We’ll just see about that.” Shasta took a step back and tugged her over to the bench. “Kneel.”

Talon obeyed, her gaze never leaving the Princess’s face as Shasta rinsed the needle and wiped it with something out of a small glass vial. She threaded it again and took a firm grip on Talon’s chin. “This might sting a little,” she warned, then proceeded to take a tiny stitch in the torn skin, tugging very gently.

Talon couldn’t even feel it, she was so stunned. “When did you learn to do this?”

“I’ve learned a lot of things today.”

Talon noticed flecks of blood staining the Princess’s cheeks, dark spatters against her pale skin that looked even more pronounced in the lamplight.

“You’ve been helping the healers all day?”

Shasta nodded, her eyes intent on her work. “They need every hand they can get. If I can’t go out on the field and fight Kumire myself, at the very least I can do something to fight him from back here.”

“You’re amazing.”

The Princess gave a wistful laugh and tied the thread off. She eyed her handiwork critically. “Not nearly as amazing as the soldiers I’ve been tending today.” Her eyes darkened. “Talon...have you heard yet about Captain Vaughn?”

“I saw him go down, and I knew they were bringing him here...” The grief on Shasta’s face made her throat constrict. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” came the tremulous reply.

Talon's chest felt heavy. Vaughn had been her teacher and her mentor for more than four winters. He was one of the most decent, intelligent, noble men she'd ever known. But this was how the captain would have wanted to die, if he'd been able to choose. She gave a sad smile. "I'm going to miss him."

"Me too." Shasta stood. "You look exhausted, Talon. Come lie down and rest for a while."

"I really should go back. I've been here too long already."

"Please?" Shasta met her eyes imploringly. "You just got here. I've been so worried all day. Please, just come sit with me for a few minutes, at least."

Talon couldn't refuse her. She allowed herself to be led back to the Princess's tent, where Shasta collapsed into the pile of cushions, drawing Talon down beside her. "You know, I should have brought these out so the injured could use them," she said, fingering a tasseled pillow with a guilty expression. "I didn't even think of it."

Talon squeezed her shoulders. "We can bring them out together in a few minutes. But for now..." She rested her cheek on the Princess's head and closed her eyes. "Ah, it feels so good just to sit here like this with you."

"Tell me, Talon, do you really think we're going to win here?"

"Mmm." Talon kissed Shasta's temple, taking a second to think before she spoke. She'd been asking herself that question all day. "It could still go either way, but I think we are gaining an edge thanks to the priestesses."

"How are you holding up?" The question was asked so carefully that it brought a grateful smile to Talon's lips. Shasta was inquiring, as gently as possible, about their previous conversation.

"Better than I'd expected," she replied truthfully. "The barbarians don't seem nearly as frightening now that I've been fighting them for hours on end. I don't worry about freezing up anymore."

Shasta snuggled beneath her guardian's chin. "I'm glad."

Her voice trailed off, and Talon realized that Shasta was falling asleep. She knew she should go back, but she couldn't bring herself to leave just yet. *A few minutes*, she promised herself, *and then I'll go*. She settled back into the cushions, for the moment content to just feel the Princess resting on her chest, her breath rising and falling as she relaxed against her guardian's side. Just a few more minutes, she thought, caressing Shasta's soft hair. It couldn't hurt.



Lyris had observed something strange all day, a sort of darkness gathering around the face of each enemy she attacked. At first she'd attributed the phenomenon to the setting sun and the fact that twilight can often play tricks on the eyes, but now that night had fallen completely she realized she was observing something entirely different. The darkness was still there, but it was more a sensation than a visual. She knew it was there without actually seeing it.

Eventually she noticed that it always seemed to appear right before an adversary attacked someone. Testing this theory, she found that she could defend the soldiers proactively by looking for that gathering darkness among the sea of enemy faces.

Yet it still felt as though something was missing. Without the *shaa'ri*, the battle probably would have ended long ago, and not favorably for Princess Shasta. But Lyris felt certain there should be more, that there was something they hadn't tried yet. She wracked her brain but could not think of anything they could be doing more efficiently.

The thin light of dawn had just begun to gray the eastern horizon when all of a sudden, everything around her *stopped*.

To Lyris's utter shock, the battle seemed to freeze in place, as if time itself had ceased. Both Shasta's soldiers and the enemy forces were suspended in midmotion, arms raised and mouths hanging open in wordless battle cries.

Lyris looked around in bewilderment. All down the line, some unseen force held everyone—the barbarians, the guard, the horses, even the other priestesses—as immobile as statues. Even the horse beneath her seemed riveted to the spot. She could still feel the warmth of its sweating skin beneath her legs, but its sides no longer heaved with breath and it no longer rocked beneath her. The sounds of fighting were replaced by an eerie silence.

Lyris twisted to look behind her and gasped. There was a woman gliding toward her over the bodies of the dead, her feet never touching the ground. Silver-blue robes glowed around her, undulating gently in a nonexistent breeze. Her features and hair were obscured by a light that seemed to radiate from her very skin. Of all the descriptions of the Goddess in the ancient books, not one had truly prepared Lyris for Her beauty.

The priestess's heart skipped erratically, but she remembered to bow her head and lift her hands in the prayer position. "Ithyris."

The Goddess approached, floating right over the brawling, motionless men on the ground until She was an arm's length from the priestess. Her eyes were burning, a cool, beautiful swirl of light, and when She spoke Her voice was musical, nearly singing rather than speaking. "*Palri, y'Ostryn. Si lo kursshiaryn.*"

Lyris comprehended the words—*Go back, my daughter. They are coming for her*—but they didn't make any sense. "Forgive me, Divine Lady, I don't understand..."

Ithyris's unfathomable gaze remained on her for a moment, and then She reached out and laid a hand on the priestess's forehead. "*Si lo kursshi.*" *They are coming.*

Lyris gave a sharp cry as her mind suddenly flooded with horrific images. When she opened her eyes the Goddess had vanished and the battle had resumed around her as if it had never stopped. The sudden clamor was disconcerting. Frantically she called down to a man by her horse's shoulder.

"Do any of the provincial guard wear black uniforms?"

He stared up at her, his face caked with blood and sweat. "That would be Tabin, Your Grace. But they're not here. The other six northern provinces are fighting us, but Tabin never showed."

Lyris clenched her jaw. "Soldier, I need you to tell the others to disperse to another priestess's cover. I'm afraid I must return to camp for a moment." She did not wait for his reply but wheeled her horse around and cut her way through the fighters until she reached Qiturah, Honored Mother of Verdred.

The older woman regarded her with astonishment and some sternness. "*Ostryn* Lyris, have you left your section unprotected?"

"Your Honor, there's not enough time to explain everything. I've seen Ithyris. The Princess is in grave danger. I believe the Tabin provincial guard are going to attack her camp from behind."

"What?" The Honored Mother's consternation did not prevent her from waving an arm at a charging enemy soldier.

Lyris held her breath. Ithyris rarely spoke directly to anyone, much less appeared in person, and when She did it was usually to the Honored Mothers themselves, not to a priestess as young and new to the temple as Lyris was. She hoped Qiturah would believe her.

After a tense moment, the Honored Mother commanded, "Gather as many horses and riders as you can. We must go to check on them."

Relieved, Lyris darted off to obey. There were horses trotting aimlessly behind the Princess's lines, their riders having been thrown or knocked off during the battle. Her heart in her throat, she called exhausted soldiers to help and set about assembling the riding party. As she worked, she chanted a prayer under her breath, thanking the Goddess for the gift of Her vision and begging for time...just a little more time...to come to the Princess's defense before the enemy could strike her down.



Talon smelled them first. An acrid odor drifted into the royal tent and awakened her in Shasta's arms. She was aghast to realize that she'd actually fallen asleep, and then even more alarmed when her instincts alerted her that something wasn't quite right. She put one hand on the ground and felt a faint rumble vibrating the earth beneath them. It was not a good sign.

Gently she shook the Princess. "Shasta, wake up. We have to go."

"Go?" The Princess blinked sleepily as Talon rose to her feet and pulled Shasta up with her. "Talon, what...?"

"Something's coming. From behind us, I think."

"From the forest?" Shasta allowed Talon to lead her out of the tent, and Talon stared into the thick trees behind them. The early-morning light was beginning to streak the sky in shades of yellow and pink, and had there been more time Talon would have berated herself for sleeping so long. But the rumble was audible now, and Talon knew it meant horses. Many of them. She could smell sweating horseflesh, and it was getting stronger by the second. She drew her sword and handed it to the Princess gravely.

"Take this. Don't be afraid to use it if you must." She bent over one of the patients on the ground and took the sword from his side. "I'm sorry, Corporal, but I need to borrow your blade." She held an arm out protectively in front of Shasta as the rumbling grew louder and she scanned the camp, squinting to see any movement in the thin light of dawn. "Argh, we need a horse. We need to get you off the ground."

Shasta put her fingers in her mouth and gave a sharp, unladylike whistle that screeched through the early morning air, causing everyone

within earshot to stare at her oddly. A high-pitched whinny sounded in reply, and Shasta's little white mare came trotting toward them, the same horse she'd ridden every day of their journey from Verdred Temple.

She grinned at Talon and patted the mare's nose affectionately. "I've been teaching her a few things."

Talon was getting used to Shasta's surprises. She boosted the Princess into the saddle and met her eyes. "Shasta, you once promised me that if the time came for you to leave me behind, you'd obey my order to run." Talon was half tempted to give that order now, but the attackers were too close and there wasn't enough time for Shasta to get clear of the camp. "If anything happens to me I want you to gallop south, as hard and as fast as you can, and don't stop until you're out of Aster entirely."

"What do you mean?" Shasta asked, suddenly looking frightened. "What's going to happen?"

"I don't know yet." Talon scanned the line of trees anxiously. "Just promise me you'll get away from here. Don't wait for me, just go."

"I..." But the Princess did not get the opportunity to answer, because at that moment a group of riders in black uniforms burst through the trees and into the camp. Talon recognized them as Tabin guard. They trampled carelessly over the injured soldiers on the ground and waved their swords with triumphant hoots. Anyone who was still standing was cut down, including the defenseless healers. Those among the wounded who were still able to walk struggled to their feet to avoid being crushed beneath the horses' hooves.

Shasta shrieked furiously. Before Talon could stop her, the Princess had urged her horse forward with a loud cry, Talon's sword lifted over her head.

"Shasta!" Talon shouted in dismay as the white mare surged past her, and she shot after the Princess on foot.

Utter confusion ensued as the Tabin guard caught sight of the Princess in her shimmering armor. They converged on her and her little horse. Though Shasta was no stranger to the sword, she'd never fought a real battle before. Still, she hacked and slashed at the soldiers on either side of her, rage making up for what she lacked in technique.

Talon reached her side and tried to hold them off, but there were just too many. She heard a loud clang over her head and looked up. A heavy blow had knocked Shasta off balance, and she was sliding backward

off her horse. Talon caught her with one arm. It was too late to get the Princess back into the saddle, so Talon lowered her to the ground. She used the mare as cover on one side and held their attackers back as best she could on the other. Then she and Shasta were back to back as the horse was slapped away and they were completely surrounded.

Talon cursed under her breath. Without the mare Shasta had no means of escape. With the wall of soldiers facing them on all sides, the situation did not look promising. She couldn't see Shasta's face, but she could hear the fear in her voice.

"Talon? I love you."

"I love you too," Talon replied softly.

She felt Shasta straighten at her back. "Let's make them work for it."

Talon gave a grim laugh and tightened her grip on her sword. "Sounds good to me."

And then they came, one after another, wave upon wave of flashing metal and clanking swords and spurting blood. The Princess and her guardian did not have the opportunity for any more words as the black uniforms pressed in on them. Talon was surprised that they had even lasted more than a few seconds against such an onslaught. She thought she could perceive a strange blue haze surrounding them, some kind of mist that kept their attackers at bay enough to allow them both room to swing their swords.

A woman's cry rang out over the knot of soldiers. Talon was confused as something that appeared to be a burst of blue fire erupted through the enemy ranks. The Tabin guard were immersed in flames that spread from one man to another until they were surrounded by a peculiar sapphire inferno. Right in front of her eyes, their attackers dissolved as though they had been melted away.

Talon swung her gaze frantically around in case more attackers were bearing down from another direction, but all she saw was Lyris sitting astride a pale horse, staring down at her hand in utter bewilderment.



"*Ostryn!*" Qiturah's sharp cry made Lyris wheel around. The Honored Mother gazed at her with an expression that was difficult to read. A strange joy lit her eyes and she bowed her head and pressed the tips of her fingers to Lyris's brow, a formal sign of reverence.

“Ithyris has blessed you with the gift of celestial fire,” she breathed in amazement. “Surely you are beloved of the Goddess.”

Lyris stared back at the empty space where just moments ago nearly fifty enemy soldiers had converged upon Princess Shasta and shook her head dazedly. “I don’t think it’s just me, Your Honor. I think we all have it, we just didn’t know how to use it.” She pointed at the oncoming soldiers. “Can you see the darkness surrounding our enemy as they fight us?” At Qiturah’s nod, she said, “Try attacking the darkness instead of the men themselves.”

The Honored Mother of Verdred stretched out a hand toward one section of the line and concentrated for a moment. A similar burst of blue fire erupted from her palm to engulf the soldiers and dissolved them just like the first.

“*Ostryn*.” Her voice wavered slightly. “With this gift...”

“Yes, Your Honor. We can win this war.”

Qiturah wheeled her horse. “Hold them here. I’m taking word to the front lines.”

As the Honored Mother charged back across the moors toward the battle, Lyris flung her hands out repeatedly and directed the celestial fire of the Goddess across the entire camp. The holy blue flames affected only those who emitted the darkness. The fire seared into the enemy ranks until one of them raised a white handkerchief on the tip of his sword and waved it frantically in the air.

Lyris paused, her arm drawn back and her fingers sparking. She felt a hand on her thigh and looked down to see Talon.

“You can stop, Your Grace,” her sister said, her voice low and amused. “I think you’ve beaten them.”

Shasta appeared at Talon’s side, wheezing from the physical exertion of the battle. Lifting startled eyes to Lyris, she asked, “How did you do that?”

Lyris winked and lifted her hand over her head, her fingers still blazing dangerously. She spoke to the remaining enemy guard. “Soldiers of Tabin, the Goddess Ithyris has taken sides in this battle. If you do not wish to incur Her wrath, you will drop your weapons immediately and swear fealty to Princess Shasta Talia Soltranis of Rane, chosen by the Goddess as the true regent of Ithyria.” She wiggled her fingers for emphasis, and the blue flames danced around her fingertips.

One by one the men began to throw down their swords. The thirty Verdred guard moved to confiscate the surrendered blades, and Lyris

scanned the faces of the surrendered to be sure there was no further sign of the darkness that promised danger to the Princess's forces. She gave a satisfied smile.

"So long as you intend no detriment to Princess Shasta, the Goddess's flames will not harm you. Choose to serve the Princess now, and you may still enjoy Ithyris's favor. Treachery, however, will be met with swift punishment."

In minutes the Princess's few soldiers overcame the two hundred or so remaining men of Tabin. They were quickly relieved of their horses and weapons and corralled neatly to await Shasta's judgment.

Lyris stepped aside as Shasta moved forward to address them. "Men of Tabin, I am grieved that our first meeting has taken place on a field of battle. I have the greatest appreciation for Tabin province. The entire kingdom benefits from the contributions of your forests and mines, and your people are some of the most courageous settlers in Ithyria, facing constant raids from the barbarians in the northern mountains. I have no desire to do you harm." She held up her hands. "Chancellor Kumire has lied to you, and indeed to all of Ithyria. He killed my father the King with his own hands and told you that I was dead. Yet here I stand. The very barbarians who now guard the palace gates are the same ones he claims to have vanquished in an attempt to save King Soltran. Yet you can see with your own eyes that they clearly follow his orders."

The soldiers began to mutter as they considered her words.

"Kumire is a power-hungry traitor, and he is using you to take a throne that is not rightfully his. But I will not ask you to fight for a cause you do not believe in. If you wish to take up your swords and stand with me, I will welcome your services with open arms. Or you may choose to return home to your families immediately, without fear of reprisal from me. So long as you cease all further attempts to thwart our objectives, you receive my full pardon either way. I doubt you would receive such a bargain from Kumire."

The muttering grew, and then one man in the middle leapt to his feet. "Your Highness, if the Goddess herself has chosen you to lead us, I will not stand in the way. I have three sons at home," he declared hotly, "and I would hate for them to grow up believing their father was a traitor to Ithyria's rightful queen. If you will allow it, Your Highness, I wish to join you."

Shasta inclined her head, and he saluted her. Immediately another man jumped up. And one by one they stood, shouting out their intention to fight with Shasta until there was not one man left seated on the ground.

The Princess held out her hands for silence and turned to Lyris. “What do you think?”

Lyris scanned the Tabin soldiers again but could see no sign of darkness gathering on any of their faces. “I believe they are sincere, Highness.”

Shasta acknowledged her with a nod. “Then I accept any and all who choose to follow me. Those who wish to fight, reclaim your weapons and horses, and let’s go!”

Talon watched uneasily as the Tabin soldiers were released to retrieve their swords from the pile of confiscated blades. “Shasta, are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked quietly. “Not ten minutes ago those men were trying to kill you.”

“Which is why I have to give them the opportunity to redeem themselves,” Shasta replied evenly. “If there’s one thing I learned in my lessons with Chancellor Kumire, it’s that history favors the victorious. If I send them home and we win this war, they will return to their families as little more than pardoned traitors. But if I give them the chance to stand with us, they could still go down in the history books as heroes. What man would not prefer to leave that legacy to his family?”

Talon found herself gazing at the Princess in awe. At that moment, the woman standing before her scarcely bore a resemblance to the spoiled, flighty child Talon had once known.

One of the Verdred guard appeared with Shasta’s little white mare. Talon helped the Princess mount, then swung herself onto the horse provided for her. The Tabin soldiers gathered before the Princess again, this time on horseback, and Shasta looked them over.

“Who is your commander?” she asked, and after some mumbling someone shouted out that their general was dead. “Then who among you is the most experienced officer?”

One man was jostled to the front, and he saluted. “Captain Kadent, at your service, Highness.”

“Captain, you’ve just been promoted. Are your men ready?”

His eyes widened, but he recovered quickly and gave a sharp nod. “We are, Your Highness.”

“Then sound the charge, General Kadent.”

He drew his sword. “Tabin guard, present arms!” he barked, and with a shing of metal every man pulled his own blade to match Kadent’s salute. “Charge!”

With a roar, the men in black uniforms surged across the moors to join the Princess’s army. Shasta kicked her horse and followed them, Lyris on one side and Talon on the other.

As they galloped, Talon frowned over at her. “Shasta, you can’t mean to join the fighting.”

“The camp is useless now. Most of the healers were killed during the Tabin attack. I’m not going to hide away anymore. If all that blue light on the horizon means anything, there probably won’t be much of an enemy army left to fight once we get there, anyway.”

She grinned and urged the little mare to go faster. Talon had no choice but to keep up.



As it turned out, Shasta was right. By the time they reached the battle lines, the priestesses had nearly wiped it clean of enemy forces. Enormous sections of barbarians and enemy soldiers alike were destroyed by streams of holy fire. For the first time the Princess’s troops were able to break the enemy line and charge the palace walls. Lyris kept Shasta’s path so clear that the Princess did not even need to lift her sword once.

When they reached the palace walls Talon gave a shout. “Now, rebels! Now!”

Atop the wall they could hear the sounds of scuffling, and after a moment a member of the royal guard fell over the edge, a dagger piercing the chest of his scarlet uniform. Then ropes began to drop, at least twenty of them, at various intervals along the wall. Talon grabbed one as it came down and turned to Shasta.

“Stay by the gates until we get them open,” she ordered. “Let the soldiers in first and then follow.” To Lyris, she said, “Please take care of her for me, Your Grace.”

Talon swung herself out of her saddle and climbed hand over hand up the rope and over the wall of the palace grounds. When she reached the top, strong hands seized her shoulders and helped her to safety.

“Good to see you again, Marvel.”

“Jen!” Talon gave her friend a fierce hug. He looked about as tired as she felt. “You actually pulled it off.”

“Not quite yet. We still have to get those gates open.”

“I’ll go,” Talon grunted. One of the royal guard tried to attack them from behind, and she sidestepped his assault with a shove that sent him tumbling over the edge of the wall. “Stay here and help the others.”

She sprinted along the top of the wall toward the stairs, took them two at a time on the way down, and with a leap she skipped the bottom three altogether. She landed with her sword drawn. Unlike the barbarians and provincial soldiers, the royal guard were trained to use swordplay as an art form, a swift and deadly dance, and there were no priestesses within the palace walls to tip the odds. It was not easy cutting through them, but as more of the Princess’s army made their way down the stairs, their morale boosted considerably by the sudden turning of the tide, they were able to press the guard back until they’d cleared a space around the gates.

When Talon was sure the others could hold their enemies back without her help, she turned and ran to the heavy bar that had been laid across the gates. There was a shudder from the other side. The Princess’s forces had brought the battering ram, but with a solid metal bar in the way they would have to beat the gates off their hinges to get them open. Talon called for help from some of the soldiers coming down the stairs. It took twelve of them to lift the bar and drop it to the ground by their feet.

Talon flung herself backward as the battering ram came at the gates one more time and the wood splintered with a thunderous sound. The gates smashed open and soldiers streamed onto the palace grounds, the Ithyrian priestesses on their heels.

It was over in a matter of seconds. Once the priestesses set foot inside the walls, a few bursts of celestial fire were all it took to convince the remaining royal guard to surrender. By the time Shasta actually entered the grounds of her childhood home, Talon and the rest of her troops had the area completely secured, and priestesses were inspecting the captured soldiers for any signs of the telltale darkness that identified foes.

Shasta slid from her horse and wrapped her arms around Talon’s neck. “We did it. We won, we won!”

Talon chuckled but shook her head. “Not yet.” She pointed at the palace. “We still have to get in there. From the looks of it, that may be the hardest task yet.”

Shasta followed Talon’s hand with her eyes and her jaw dropped. “A moat? Kumire’s dug a *moat* around my father’s castle? But the gardens, and the courtyard...”

“They’re most likely gone.”

The Princess growled. “Oh, that does it. When I get my hands on that bastard, I’m going to strangle him myself. I *loved* those gardens.” Talon put a hand around her waist, and Shasta looked up at her. “So how are we going to get in there, anyway?”

“We can’t.” This came from Jen, who stepped up behind them, his eyes fastened on the castle. “The place is locked up. With the moat, we can’t get close enough to get in. We’re going to have to wait him out. A siege.”

Talon gave a nod. “That’s right. No water, food, or supplies of any kind go in or out of the castle until Kumire surrenders.”

“Or starves to death,” Jen added dryly.

Shasta furrowed her brow. “How long will that take?”

“It’s hard to say. But we don’t have to figure everything out now. I think we all need some rest, don’t you?”

Shasta felt like arguing, but now that Talon had mentioned rest, her body suddenly felt heavily fatigued. So she nodded and allowed herself to be led to one of the buildings on the outer palace grounds. Talon found blankets and spread them on a pile of hay for her, then helped unbuckle her armor and remove her chain mail. Shasta lay down without bothering to remove the tunic and split skirts she’d worn beneath them. Vaguely she could hear Talon instructing Jen Crossis, something about guarding the prisoners. She was nearly asleep when the outer doors closed with a familiar creaking sound, and for the first time Shasta realized where they were.

“The servants’ stables,” she mumbled sleepily.

“Yes.” Talon settled into the blankets next to her and held out her arms.

Smiling, Shasta snuggled into the safety of her guardian’s embrace. “I’m home,” she whispered and fell asleep with a smile curving her lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Shasta offered the same choice to the surviving vestiges of Kumire's army that she had to the Tabin guard. After surrendering, they could either join her forces or return to their families with a full pardon, so long as they made no further attempt to resist.

The barbarians, apparently realizing it was unlikely they would receive their pay now that Shasta's victory seemed assured, had retreated entirely. Many of the soldiers, particularly Monderan guard, opted to return home, grumbling under their breath even as they grudgingly admitted defeat. However, once the royal signet convinced them of Shasta's identity, most followed Tabin's example and swore allegiance to the Princess.

The soldiers of Aster and the royal guard in particular were quick to change sides, the general of Aster himself kneeling at Shasta's feet in apology for ever having lifted a sword against the rightful heir to the throne. Shasta remembered meeting the general on several occasions at court. She knew him to be a good man, and she accepted his apology without question or reproach.

Her forces set up camp both within and without the palace walls, as there were too many men to be accommodated within the castle grounds. The servants' stables became Shasta's temporary residence. Though she could have chosen any number of more comfortable buildings, she found the stables strangely comforting, a piece of the home she hadn't seen in moons. No other place could match the childhood memories those stables housed.

After several days passed without so much as a sign from within the

castle, it became evident that Kumire had amassed some stores before the fighting. There was no way of knowing how long the supplies would last, so Shasta and her army settled in for a more lengthy wait.

They had no way of bridging the moat without being confronted by a hail of arrows from the ramparts above. However, they had effectively blocked all provisions from reaching the inhabitants of the castle, so that Kumire was entirely dependent upon whatever food he had accumulated. Shasta sent the wounded and injured into the infirmaries of Ardrenn to be tended while the rest waited in camp. Though this was a much more passive form of war and they had not truly won yet, morale was high and every night the soldiers played music and danced merrily for hours before retiring. Shasta made it a habit to attend and watch the frivolity, a welcome distraction from their more serious—and, she had to admit, rather boring—objective.

One such night, as the soldiers sang and cheerily toasted one another with mugs of ale brought in from the city, Shasta sat before the main campfire and watched her guardian talk with Jen Crossis, the leader of the royal guard rebels. Her lover's hands moved animatedly as she spoke, and the firelight warmed her olive skin to a rich golden color. Her deep, throaty laugh carried across the grounds to Shasta's ears, and she could not help a smile.

As if she could feel Shasta watching her, Talon looked up and met her eyes. Within moments, she had excused herself from the soldiers and come to Shasta's side.

She pressed the Princess's hand to her lips tenderly. "Something wrong, Your Highness?"

"Not at all." Shasta let her gaze drift over to Jen, who had put up his fists in a mock challenge to one of his companions. They pretended to take a few swings at one another before dissolving into laughter.

Talon followed the Princess's line of sight and nodded. "Jen's a good man. A little headstrong, perhaps, but a brave soldier."

"It makes me happy that you've found a friend." Talon looked at her quizzically, and Shasta gave a little smile. "In the entire time I've known you, you've never really had a friend of your own. You were always too busy following me around every second of the day." Her eyes returned to Jen. "It's good to see."

"Shasta." Talon's dark eyes were serious. "You know I've never regretted being at your side."

"I know." Shasta pressed her finger to her guardian's mouth.

“You’ve always been completely dedicated to your work, and to me. But you deserve your own life, your own friends, your own identity.”

Talon kissed the finger against her lips. “I’ve always had those things. In you.”

“There’s more to life than me, Talon.”

“Maybe. But you’re my favorite part.” Her gaze slid toward the servants’ stables, and she wiggled her eyebrows. “Speaking of favorite parts...”

Shasta clapped a hand to her mouth with a scandalized giggle. “You’re terrible.” But her heart had already begun to pound with anticipation at the wicked gleam in Talon’s eye. She stood and took leave of the soldiers nearby with perhaps a bit too much haste, then led her guardian by the hand to their quarters.



Shasta collapsed onto the blankets, blood thundering in her ears and her breath coming in pants. “Goddess, Talon, I swear you make me feel like I could sprout wings and fly right up into the sky. It’s incredible.”

Her guardian chuckled and planted little kisses across her face. “You’re incredible. If I could, I’d spend every minute of the rest of my life making love to you.”

Shasta snickered. “Don’t you think you’d get tired after a while?”

“Never.” Talon paused to search Shasta’s face worriedly. “You’re not...you’re not getting weary of me already, are you?”

Shasta was startled. “What? No! No, Talon, of course not. What would make you say that?”

Her guardian flushed. “After all that talk about how you want me to have my own life...” She suddenly buried her face in the curve of the Princess’s neck, muffling her next words. “I couldn’t bear it if you sent me away now.”

“Talon.” Shasta lifted the dark head so she could look into her eyes. “I have no intention of sending you away, not ever again. I just...” She took a deep breath. “Your whole world seems to center on me. You’re capable of such great things on your own, and I’m certainly not the only one to have use for you. I’m so afraid one day you’re going to wake up and feel that I’ve kept you from having your own life and your own purpose.”

Talon traced a finger down Shasta's cheek. "Don't you understand, Shasta, you're everything to me, and I like it that way. My sisters don't need me anymore. You're the only one I have left, and I love you so desperately sometimes I think my heart's going to burst with it." She leaned forward to rest her chin on her knees. "I need to belong to you. I need you to need me."

Shasta reached out to stroke the satiny skin of her guardian's back. "I'll always need you, Talon," she said softly. "Your strength, your faith in me, sometimes those are only things that keep me from losing my mind. The way the men out there look at me, as though they believe I'm somehow going to single-handedly return the dawn to their dark lives..." She sighed. "I want so much to give these people a happily-ever-after, the fairy-tale ending that they deserve. Where every person is able to feed and clothe their family in peace. Where every Ithyrian child can receive an education and have the freedom to choose their own path in life. It's so much, to have the hopes and dreams and expectations of an entire people resting on my head. I don't want to face this alone."

Talon turned her head and reached up to entwine her fingers with Shasta's. "You won't have to. I'm proud to be a part of this, Shasta, this new world you're going to create. I want to help see it through however I can."

Shasta planted a kiss against her guardian's neck and disentangled their fingers. "Well, I suppose it's a start."

"A start?"

Playfully she pushed Talon down into the blankets so she could pillow her head against her guardian's strong shoulder. "To finding your own purpose, one that's bigger than just me." She yawned, then started at the sound of loud pounding on the stable doors.

"Your Highness?" a male voice called. "Your Highness, it's urgent."

"I think that's Harneth," Talon said, hastily getting out of bed and locating her clothes.

"Just a moment," Shasta called and rose from the hay with a blanket drawn around her shoulders. She opened the stable door just a crack. "General, what is it?"

"We've just taken a prisoner that I think you're going to want to see for yourself, Highness. She's asking for you."

"She?" Shasta repeated, puzzled. "Very well. Bring her to the palace temple. I will be there presently."



Shasta's mouth dropped open in disbelief when Harneth led the prisoner onto the temple floor, her hands bound in front of her. A heavy purple bruise darkened one side of her face.

"Bria!"

She would have run to her former lady-in-waiting, but Talon caught her arm and said grimly, "No, Princess. She cannot be trusted."

Shasta took another look at Bria's swollen cheek and demanded of the guards, "Who did this? Which one of you laid a hand on her?"

"It wasn't your men, Highness," Bria said quietly. "This happened before I entered your camp."

Talon leveled her sword at her sister. "What are you doing here?"

"Talon!" Bria's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, I'm so relieved..." She took a step forward but stopped as Talon's sword flicked ominously toward her throat.

"Your Highness," General Harneth addressed Shasta. "Just a few minutes ago the drawbridge was lowered and the prisoner appeared, carrying this." He held up a white handkerchief that had been fastened to the end of a stick. "She claims Kumire sent her out with a message for you."

The point of Talon's sword did not waver. "So deliver your message," she spat.

Bria's face was sad. "My husband desires to invite the Princess Shasta to a negotiation regarding the terms of our surrender."

Talon growled. "You tell your *husband* if he wants to surrender, he's welcome to come out and negotiate terms himself."

"That's not possible. He fears for his life at the hands of your soldiers and requests that the Princess enter the castle herself, alone, as a sign of good faith."

General Harneth guffawed loudly, and the soldiers behind him began to chuckle as well until the temple walls rang with laughter. "Let me be sure I understand you correctly, little lady," he said, wiping his eyes with a thumb. "We have Kumire surrounded and besieged. He expects Princess Shasta to enter his castle, alone and unguarded? Why would she do such a thing?"

Bria flushed and curtsied to Shasta. "He does not expect you to accept his offer."

“Then why make it at all?” Talon demanded.

“Please, Your Highness...” Bria cast her eyes to one side. “May I speak with you in private?”

“You may not,” Talon replied hotly. “You’re in no position to be making such requests.”

“Lieutenant,” Shasta admonished, deliberately using Talon’s rank to make it clear that her guardian was out of line. Talon stiffened visibly at the rebuke, and Shasta proceeded to dismiss the soldiers. “Leave us, all of you. I will speak with the prisoner alone.”

“Princess,” Talon protested in a more subdued tone, “please, you mustn’t be alone with her. She may be dangerous.”

Shasta caught the genuine fear in her guardian’s eyes. “Agreed. You will stay.” But she fixed Talon with a meaningful stare that indicated she would tolerate no further interference.

When only Shasta, Talon, and Bria remained, Shasta looked her onetime companion and friend squarely in the eye and demanded, “All right, what’s going on? I want the truth.”

Bria did not hesitate. “My husband is trying to distract you, Your Highness. He sent me to ask you to come to him, not because he believes that you will but because he wants you to continue to believe that you are winning this fight.”

“We *are* winning,” Talon pointed out dryly.

“No. You only think you are.”

Talon grunted and Shasta held up a hand warningly to her guardian. She eyed Bria thoughtfully. “What do you mean?”

“Kumire and his family have been pursuing an alliance with the Dangar Empire for winters now, Highness, but Emperor Vulgoth’s price has always been too high. However, right before your people took the castle grounds, Kumire sent a messenger to Dangar. He has decided to accept the Emperor’s demands if it will win him the Ithyrian throne. In less than a quarter-moon, the barbarian armies of the Dangar Empire will be here, surrounding Ardrenn, to wipe you out once and for all. Princess, the empire’s army numbers more than a hundred thousand. Even the Ithyrian priestesses will not be able to stand against that many. They will overtake you.”

Talon’s eyes narrowed. “If that is true, why would Kumire bother pretending he wants to negotiate?”

“Because, Talon, he’s still slightly hopeful that he can win this

battle without the Emperor's help. He's not happy with the idea of paying the empire's fee."

Shasta scrunched her forehead. "What fee?"

Bria's expression was grave. "In exchange for lending Kumire his armies, the Emperor is demanding half the Ithyrian provinces. They would be annexed with Dangar's borders to become a part of the Emperor's lands, and all inhabitants will become slaves to the empire."

"What?" Shasta was horrified. "Kumire just can't give away half of Ithyria."

"He would rather do that than lose the throne he's lusted after his entire life." Bria shook her head. "He doesn't really expect you to be foolish enough to march unarmed into the palace. He's hoping that an offer of negotiation, however halfhearted, will convince you that you're close to victory so that the empire's attack will be completely unexpected. Of course, you mustn't enter the castle, but I wanted to warn you of what's coming."

Talon glared. "I don't know what game you're playing, Bria, but I don't believe a word of it. You're traitors, you and Kumire both! Do you have any idea what you've done, what you've put Shasta through these past moons? You're lucky I don't run you through this very moment."

"That's enough, Talon." Shasta pressed her fingers to her forehead for a moment, her mind racing. "Let's all sit down and take a moment to breathe."

Bria followed the Princess to the benches at the front of the temple sanctuary. Talon stalked behind them, her sword still trained on her sister. They sat, Bria on one bench and Shasta facing her on another. Talon insisted on standing at formal attention behind Shasta's shoulder. The Princess rolled her eyes and sighed as she turned to Bria.

"You have to admit, Lady Fickettis..."

Bria cringed. "Please, Your Highness, I prefer just Bria."

"I don't blame you." Shasta gave the younger woman a grin before continuing. "You have to admit, Bria, that your claims are rather suspicious. If the Dangar Empire is coming at this very moment to wipe us out, you stand a very good chance of becoming Queen of Ithyria yourself, so, frankly, I don't trust you. Talon nearly died because of you." Shasta struggled to keep her voice even. The memory was still

difficult. “You called those barbarians down on her head, let them beat her nearly to death. You should have seen what they did to her. She was so badly injured we weren’t sure she’d ever wake up. Now you expect me to believe that you’d betray your husband, the man for whom you tried to have your own sister killed? What possible reason could you have?”

Bria flinched. “I... A lot of things have changed since then, Highness.” She cast a pained glance at Talon. “Not a day has passed that I haven’t regretted what I did. You can’t imagine the horror I’ve lived with, believing I’d caused your death. You devoted everything to taking care of Lyris and me, and I...” She choked a little. “Afterward, there were so many times when I thought about killing myself to escape the guilt. But I had the baby to consider. I was already responsible for the death of one member of my family, and I couldn’t bear the thought of another.”

Talon’s expression remained impassive. “You expect me to feel sorry for you?”

“No.” Bria’s eyes spilled over. “No, Talon, I’m not trying to... What I’m trying to say is that I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t even come close to making it better. I’m not asking for forgiveness, I don’t even expect you to believe me, but I have to say it. I’m so sorry. And I’m very, very grateful that you survived.”

Talon gave a disbelieving huff and stalked across the room to sit on the far end of the bench. Bria’s eyes followed her regretfully.

“Bria, you mentioned the baby.” Shasta eyed the other woman’s flattened stomach. Though she had put on some noticeable weight, she was certainly not pregnant any longer.

“Yes. I have a daughter.” Bria’s eyes shone, but only for a moment. “The day she was born was the first time I realized the truth about the man I married. Kumire wanted a son. When he heard that I gave birth to a girl, he wouldn’t even look at her. He practically threw the baby at Nurse, and told her to...” She gave a little sob. “He told her to ‘drown the useless brat.’ He said we were both worthless. I couldn’t believe he could be so cruel.”

“The man is a cold-blooded murderer and you’re surprised by this?” Talon inquired mockingly.

“I was a fool!” Bria burst out. “I had hoped that by bearing him a child he would forgive me, but...”

“Forgive you?” Shasta touched her arm gently. “Whatever for?”

“For spoiling his chance to marry you.” Bria averted her eyes. “I always knew he hoped to marry you, Princess, but I thought that was because he believed himself in love with you. I thought I could change his mind and eventually win him over. I didn’t realize until after we were married that love had nothing to do with it. He said I’d ruined his life.” She hung her head.

“He was just angry because you got in the way of the throne he wanted so badly,” Shasta pointed out.

“I was so blind. All I could think of was that I had offended the man that I loved. I would have done anything to make it right again, even betray my own family.”

Shasta heard a sound like a snort coming from Talon’s end of the room, but she judiciously chose to ignore it. Kumire had murdered her father and brother. It was not so difficult to believe that he had manipulated Bria as well. Besides, she had learned herself just how powerful an influence love could be.

Bria seemed to read her silence as encouragement to speak further, and said, “He’s completely insane, you know. He parades around the palace in King Soltran’s crown and robes, insists on taking dinner while seated on the throne, makes everyone call him ‘Majesty.’ He wanted me to come out here tonight and try to convince you to follow me into the castle, alone, so he could get his hands on you again. I refused.”

“Is that why he did this to you?” Shasta gently traced the bruising on Bria’s cheek.

She nodded without meeting Shasta’s eyes. “I told him he’d have to kill me before I’d betray you again. But...” She shuddered. “He said if I didn’t do what he wanted, he’d kill the baby. I didn’t have a choice.” She looked up. “I don’t care what he does to me, but I can’t let him hurt her, Princess, she’s all I have.”

“So what exactly do you want from us, Bria?” Talon rose and stalked toward them as if her patience had finally run out. “What’s the game this time?”

Bria shook her head. “I just wanted to warn you of what Kumire is planning. Maybe you can come up with a plan, some way of stopping him. I...I’ll return to the castle and tell him you wouldn’t come, Princess. He’s expecting that answer, anyway.”

“You can’t do that, Bria, he’ll kill you.”

“I have to. I have to go back for my daughter.”

“Kumire’s likely to kill your child whether or not you go back, and whether or not I agree to go with you,” Shasta warned. “Surely you know that.”

“I won’t leave her with him,” Bria said stubbornly. “I owe her that.”

Talon remained unconvinced. “You still haven’t given us proof that anything that you say is true. For all we know this just another of Kumire’s elaborate schemes.”

“There’s an easy way to determine that, isn’t there? I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before.” Shasta rose and went to the curtain at the corner of the room. Drawing it back, she called out, “Your Honor? I need assistance, please.”

There was a soft scuffling sound from above them and the Honored Mother of Verdred appeared, followed by several other veiled women. They pressed their fingertips to their foreheads and bowed.

Shasta indicated Bria. “I’m sorry to disturb you at this time of night, Mother Qiturah, but this woman comes with news of Chancellor Kumire. I need to know if she speaks the truth, if she means us harm. It’s important.”

Lyris was among those attending the Honored Mother, and she gasped when she recognized her sister.

Qiturah inclined her head to the Princess and approached Bria slowly. She sat next to her and laid a hand on the young woman’s forehead. “Ask her what you want to know, Child,” she said to Shasta.

“Did Kumire really send a messenger to the Dangar Empire?”

“Yes,” came the reply, and Qiturah nodded.

“She speaks the truth, Highness.”

Shasta took a breath. “Is the empire sending its armies to support Kumire?”

“Yes.”

“Does Kumire really intend to surrender to us?”

“No.”

The Honored Mother nodded again on both counts, and Shasta considered her next question carefully before she asked it. “Does Kumire know you’re telling us any of this?”

Bria closed her eyes. “No.”

The Honored Mother nodded once more, and Talon stood, coming to lean on the bench right in front of her sister. Her voice was low. "Have you said anything to us tonight that was a lie?"

Bria opened her eyes and met her sister's gaze. "No."

"I sense no deception in her, Your Highness," Qiturah said quietly. "She is telling you the truth."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

The entourage of holy women bowed before returning to their upper chambers. Lyris hung back and placed a hand on Talon's shoulder.

"What's happening?" she asked.

Talon ground her teeth. "Our little sister claims she's had a change of heart."

At that moment, Bria recognized the woman behind the veils, and her eyes brimmed with tears. "Oh, Lyris, is it really you?"

Normally Shasta would have been overjoyed at the reunion of her three childhood companions, but right now she was too preoccupied with the sinister threat that loomed over them. She sat back down on the bench and tried to come up with a solution, some way of getting all of them out of this precarious situation without sacrificing even more lives. "Talon, do we stand any kind of chance at all against the Dangar Empire?"

Talon shook her head. "Not if their armies are as big as we believe. Even every priestess we have couldn't handle that many."

Shasta dropped her head into her hands and Talon moved quickly to her side. She straddled the bench behind the Princess and put her arms around her. "Hey," she said softly into her ear. "It's going to be all right, we'll think of something. We've made it this far, right?"

Bria seemed to watch this exchange incredulously. "Wait...is there something going on between you two?"

Lyris laid a hand on Bria's shoulder. "Talon and the Princess love one another. Nothing else matters."

"But how is that even possible?" Before anyone could reply, however, she gave a snort of amusement. "You know what, I don't want to know. It's weird. But I guess if it makes you both happy, that's what's important."

Talon quirked a brow at her. "Not that I need your approval, little sister, but thanks anyway."

Bria started to deliver a cheeky reply but then appeared to think better of it, as if she'd realized the time for teasing between sisters was long past. She held out her bound wrists. "Your Highness, please, I beg you to release me. I must return to the castle soon or Kumire will become suspicious."

"I can't send you back to that man," Shasta said. "There has to be another way."

"Please, Highness." Bria dropped to her knees and pressed Shasta's hands to her lips. "Please, you have to let me go back. He'll kill her."

Shasta twisted to look beseechingly at her guardian. "Talon, can't you think of something? We can't let her go back without some sort of protection."

"I don't think there's anything we can do. If Bria doesn't return, Kumire will probably make good on his word to kill their child. And if she does return... I think he'll kill them both."

Shasta bit her lip as an idea began to formulate in her head. "What if Bria doesn't return empty-handed? Think about it for a moment." Her excitement grew with each of her next words. "What if I agree to go with Bria to see Kumire? We can't stop the Dangar Empire from coming. They'll be on us in less than a quarter-moon, and then we're all dead anyway. The only way to stop the empire is to stop Kumire before they get here."

Talon shook her head adamantly. "Shasta, no. You saw Kumire kill your father, you know what he's capable of. I'm not going to let you waltz into the castle unguarded just so he can finish what he started."

"Your Highness, you mustn't," Bria agreed. "Whatever my husband might do to me, it's nothing compared to the hate he harbors for you. You're too important to Ithyria."

Shasta patted her kneeling friend's face gently. "But I am not doing my country any good just sitting around out here, waiting for the Dangar Empire to sweep down on top of us and wipe us out. Kumire has to be stopped." She stood to pace the sanctuary. "I will follow Bria into the palace and meet with him, but I won't go alone. Kumire would know something was wrong if I agreed to march into his castle unguarded. He knows I'm not that much of a fool. Talon, you'll come with me."

"Shasta, this is madness. Though I appreciate your faith in me," Talon's dark eyes twinkled briefly, "even I could not stand alone

against the horde of guards Kumire has assembled in the palace. I can't protect you from Kumire and hold off his men at the same time. It's too dangerous."

"That's why Kumire is sure to let us both in. He won't think you pose enough of a threat by yourself. And it's also why we'll need you, Your Grace." Shasta turned to Lyris. "You could easily make any problems Kumire might throw at us just...disappear. But we'll have to find some way to smuggle you in with us. Kumire might allow me to bring Talon, but he'll never open the drawbridge for a priestess. I'm sure he's heard by now what you're capable of. So the question is, how do we sneak Her Grace into the palace along with us?"

"Shasta..." Talon began, but she was interrupted by Bria, who rose slowly from the bench.

"Your Highness, do you have another set of split skirts stored away somewhere?"

Shasta frowned in confusion. "I'm sure I could borrow some from Erinda."

"That would be perfect. We'll need one of her caps, too." Bria turned to Lyris. "Your Grace, would the Goddess permit you to unveil your face for a time, if it were in the service of the Princess?"

"I suppose." Lyris sounded just as confused as Shasta felt, but Talon's eyes suddenly lit and for the first time her attitude seemed to soften toward her sister.

"You know, Bria, that just might work." Talon met Shasta's questioning gaze. "We could dress Her Grace like one of your maids."

Bria nodded enthusiastically. "My husband has never paid much attention to servants," she said wryly. "Kumire won't recognize Lyris until it's too late."

"I'll do it." There was a note of eagerness in the priestess's voice. "I'll need a maid's cap. He mustn't see my head is shaved."

"The four of us marching into the castle to face Kumire alone. This is insanity," Talon muttered, but after mulling it over a few more seconds, she met Shasta's eyes. "And I think it may be our only choice."

"Then it's settled," Shasta declared. "Tomorrow, we enter the palace, and one way or another, this comes to an end."

As she looked around at their faces, she recalled the three olive-skinned Outlanders that her father had taken in four winters ago. How

they all had changed. Somehow it seemed fitting that it had come down to the four of them at last. Shasta took Talon's hand on one side and Bria's on the other, and Lyris joined them to form a circle.

Shasta regarded them all one last time. "You are my family. In spite of everything that's happened," she squeezed Bria's hand gently, "and no matter what happens tomorrow, you three will always be my sisters."

They bid each other good night and separated. Lyris returned to her quarters above the temple sanctuary, and Talon turned Bria over to one of the guards at the temple doors to be escorted away. Shasta and her guardian made their way across the dark grounds, through the mass of tents and nearly extinguished campfires.

Shasta prayed they were doing the right thing. How many men had already died in the fight to reclaim her father's crown? Too many lives were counting on her, and not just those of her soldiers. She would not fail them. Tomorrow she would walk into the lion's mouth with her head held high, and if it cost her life, at least she would die knowing she'd fought for her people to her last breath.

Shasta realized with some surprise that she wasn't even afraid. Talon had once said that she had been born for this, and now Shasta felt like she understood what her guardian had meant. She was ready for whatever tomorrow would bring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The morning wind was chilly with the promise of snow as Shasta stood before the castle moat, directly in front of the palace entrance—or rather, what had used to be the palace entrance. Kumire had replaced the ornately carved oak doors with a rough-hewn drawbridge that made her wince every time she looked at it. She shivered, but only partly due to the cold. Talon put a warm hand at her waist and Shasta gave her a grateful look.

At Talon's insistence, Shasta was wearing her silver armor once more, and it gleamed icily in the winter sun. She wore a sword of her own at her belt but had left off the helmet. Her hair was arranged in an elaborate swirl of ringlets that tumbled down over the shoulder guards and chain mail in an incongruously feminine manner, so that Shasta appeared at once both dangerous and elegant. On one side of her, Bria stood with her hands still bound. On the other were Talon in her dress uniform and Lyris, wearing Erinda's cap and split skirts. The priestess kept her head down.

"Chancellor Kumire," Shasta called out, her voice ringing against the castle walls. "Your wife has presented your invitation to negotiate the terms of your surrender." She waved a hand at Bria, who stepped forward. "I will accept this invitation on the condition that I am allowed two attendants: my maidservant and my personal bodyguard. I await your answer."

There was silence for several minutes. Finally a man's voice responded from one of the turrets. "His Excellency Kumire Fickettis of Mondera will agree to these terms. We will lower the drawbridge, but only you, your attendants, and Lady Fickettis may enter the castle.

If anyone else attempts to approach, the drawbridge will be withdrawn immediately.”

Though the disembodied voice did not say anything else, Shasta grasped the implied threat. If Kumire thought she was trying to breach the castle he would pull up the bridge, whether or not she had finished crossing it.

“I understand.” She called back over her shoulder to the soldiers who were looking on with disbelief. “Soldiers of Ithyria, you are not to come within fifty paces of the drawbridge until I am inside and it has been raised completely. Is that understood?”

General Harneth’s shocked protest sounded from her elbow. “Your Highness, with all due respect, this is madness. You cannot possibly—”

Shasta challenged the general with a hard stare. “Trust me.”

With a painful screech, the drawbridge was slowly lowered on heavy iron chains. The ground vibrated beneath their feet as it struck the edge of the moat. Shasta took a deep breath. “Let’s do this,” she said.

The moat was wide, but she forced herself to go slowly. It wouldn’t do for Kumire to think she was afraid. She didn’t realize until she finally set foot on the stone floor of the palace that she’d been holding her breath the entire way. She hadn’t expected that Kumire would really raise the bridge in the middle of her crossing, but that didn’t stop her vivid imagination from envisioning what it would be like to topple into the moat, or worse, to be crushed by the huge groaning wheels as the massive drawbridge was retracted.

She heard another loud squeak as the bridge was pulled back into place behind them and closed with a reverberating bang that made her skin crawl. A man dressed in a red royal guard uniform gave a mocking salute to the Princess. “Follow me, Your Highness. His Majesty awaits.”

Their footsteps clicked loudly through the stone corridor as they proceeded to the great hall. When the doors swung inward, Shasta’s brow twitched. Bria hadn’t been exaggerating. Kumire sat on her father’s throne, the royal crown drooping low on his forehead and a velvet cape draped around his shoulders. Doing her best to pretend she didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, Shasta entered the room and stopped a few paces from the base of the dais.

Kumire's smile was predatory. "Princess Shasta." He had a bundle in the crook of one elbow, and on closer inspection Shasta realized it was a baby wrapped in blankets. With his free arm Kumire gave a grandiose flourish. "Welcome to my palace."

"Your palace?" Shasta repeated disdainfully. "If I'm not mistaken, Chancellor, we are here to discuss the terms of your surrender to *me*."

"Insolent girl, have you no respect for the crown of Ithyria?" He pointed to his head, where Soltran's crown was resting lopsidedly. "He who wears the crown is king. You will address me as 'Majesty.' Or 'Excellency,' if you wish. I've always liked the sound of that as well." His eyes slid to Bria, whose gaze was fixed on the baby in his arms. "Well, little wife, you finally managed to do something right. I don't know how you did it, but..."

"Please." Bria took several steps toward him and held out her arms, her gaze still on her daughter. "I did what you wanted, so please...give her to me."

Kumire gave a cruel little chuckle and appeared to consider her request for a few moments longer than necessary before he shrugged. "I suppose you've earned it. Take the thing if you like." Bria removed the baby from his arms and backed away quickly, anxiously examining the child to be sure she was all right. Kumire snorted. "Women. All the same. Throw a mewling brat in their arms and they turn into mindless fools." He turned back to Shasta. "Now, where were we?"

Shasta kept her face carefully composed in spite of her swiftly growing temper. "I believe we were going to discuss your surrender, Chancellor."

She was not at all surprised at the crafty look that crossed Kumire's face as he stood. Her eyes flickered over to where Bria was carefully laying the baby into a cradle by the wall.

"Ah yes. Well, I'm afraid, my dear, that there's been a slight change of plans. I have decided not to surrender after all. Why should I, when you've walked so willingly into my waiting arms?" He snapped his fingers. Shasta did not have to look around to know that the back of the room was beginning to fill with Kumire's men. She heard a soft shing as Talon drew her sword and spun to face the amassing enemy.

Doing her best to feign wide-eyed shock, she said, "But I thought..."

"You thought I was going to bow at your feet and beg forgiveness?"

Really, Princess, you *are* gullible. Still, I'm overjoyed that you're here. You've just made things so much easier." He stepped down from the dais and drew a knife from the folds of his cape. "Now, you can tell your little boy toy over there to put down his sword and we can do this the easy way. Or you can continue to resist me and we can do this the fun way."

Shasta couldn't maintain the innocent façade any longer, and she bared her teeth in a grin. "I always did like a bit of fun."

Kumire's eyes lit and he drew the knife back, but Shasta held up a hand. "Just a moment, Chancellor. You're not the only one with a little treachery up his sleeve." She reached out and snatched the cap from Lyris's head. The priestess looked up, her dark eyes blazing. She slowly brought her fingers up in front of her face as holy blue flame licked at her fingertips. Shasta exaggerated a sigh. "So hard to find good help these days."

Kumire dropped his arm and took a step back as he realized he'd been fooled. For the first time his confidence seemed shaken. But it only lasted for a moment. Then the chancellor's brows drew together and he gave a screech. "Kill them!"

Lyris whirled as Kumire's men charged from the back of the room. With two flicks of her wrist she dissolved most of them in a torrent of blue fire. Another wave poured through the doorway. Lyris ran forward to intercept the newcomers and forced the soldiers back out of the hall. A clash of blades ensued as Talon collided with the few who'd escaped the priestess's wrath.

Kumire bellowed furiously and drew his arm back again. With a cry of horror Talon ran forward, but she was cut off by an enemy's blade. She drew the man into a deadly embrace, her sword piercing him right through. As he fell, the knife left Kumire's fingers and shot straight for Shasta.

"No!" several horrified voices cried out at once.

A blur passed before Shasta's eyes. The pain she expected never came. Instead, she found herself staring at Bria's crumpled form on the floor, Kumire's knife embedded squarely in the center of her chest. It had happened so fast that it took Shasta a moment to comprehend that Bria had thrown herself in the path of the blade meant for Shasta herself. Forgetting everything else, Shasta ran and dropped to her knees beside her friend.

"Bria!" She drew the wounded woman into her arms.

A guttural roar erupted from Talon's throat, and Shasta looked up to see her guardian wrench her sword from the body of the man she'd just impaled and lunge at Kumire. The noise was too much for the baby, who awoke and began to scream loudly at this unpleasant interruption of her nap. The hall filled with the sound of metal on metal as Kumire met Talon's charge with his own sword. Back and forth they went across the tiled floor. Kumire was not a soldier, but he had been raised as a nobleman's son and had studied swordplay since childhood. This was not a heavy, crushing encounter like those on the battlefield. This was a gentleman's duel, graceful and lethal.

The baby's cries must have attracted his attention, for Kumire ran to the wall and pushed the cradle out in front of him. Talon hesitated and Kumire grinned. "What's the matter, boy? Don't tell me you're worried about one squalling infant."

He stroked the cradle's hood; it was a large old-fashioned thing with four long carved legs and a high bassinet, and it rolled on small wooden wheels to make it easily portable. Shasta recognized it from childhood. Nurse had tended many a newborn in that cradle, from Shasta herself to the children of the kitchen staff.

Bria moaned in Shasta's arms, and the Princess gave her a comforting hug. Talon wouldn't let any harm come to the child if she could help it, but Shasta couldn't see how her guardian could get to Kumire when he was using the cradle as a shield. As Talon stood there indecisively, blood staining the blade of her sword, Kumire pulled another dagger from his cape and threw it. Talon dodged. Kumire reached into his cape again and this time produced four small throwing knives, one blade pinched between each of his fingers and thumb. His eyes glinted.

"It ends," he hissed, and flung out his hand repeatedly, releasing all four one after the other. Shasta gave a shriek.

Talon leapt into the air with her arms out and twisted into a cartwheel. Shasta watched in astonishment as the first blade passed harmlessly beneath her guardian's body, the second and third narrowly missing as she turned, and when Talon landed she snatched the fourth out of midair. A feral smile curved her lips. "You're going to have to do better than that, Your Majesty."

Shasta gave a sigh of relief that turned into a gasp as Talon darted forward. Kumire tensed and ducked behind the baby's cradle. Talon suddenly dropped and skidded feet first across the floor between the wheeled legs. She sent the cradle hurtling across the tiles behind her,

and Kumire was suddenly left without a shield to hide behind. Talon rolled as the chancellor stabbed frantically at the floor with the point of his sword, and swung her legs in an arc to knock him off balance. Kumire fell to the floor and the crown went flying from his head to roll across the room.

Shasta put her hands out to stop the careening cradle and took hold of the legs to prevent it from tipping over. The baby was still crying angrily, and her screams combined with the renewed clanging of swords as Talon and Kumire both regained their footing. Kumire leapt onto a table along the wall, vases and plates of fruit tumbling in every direction as he kicked them away. Talon bounded up to join him. Her sword flashed in her hand as she relentlessly forced Kumire backward. The chancellor jumped down. Talon followed.

Shasta leaned over Bria and kept a firm grip on the cradle as the fighters passed right by them, Talon pressing the chancellor back toward the dais. She heard a shout from the back of the room. Lyris ran back into the hall with her fingers ablaze. She must have finished with the soldiers in the castle. Shasta reached out and caught the edge of her split skirts, and when Lyris's dark eyes met hers Shasta shook her head.

"This is Talon's fight," she said. "You have to let her finish this."

Lyris caught sight of the knife in Bria's chest then and moved to join them on the floor, but Shasta indicated the cradle.

Lyris lifted the crying infant into her arms and brought her down so that Bria could see with her own eyes that her daughter was unharmed. The baby quieted once she felt herself held, and Shasta flinched at the sound of metal striking the floor. Talon had finally succeeded in knocking the sword from Kumire's hand. With her blade at his throat, she pressed him down into the throne. Rage burned in her eyes and venom infused her deep voice. "*Now* it ends," she decreed, and a trickle of blood darkened the edge of her blade as she drew it slowly across Kumire's throat.

"Talon," Shasta said quietly, and her guardian turned to look at her. "Kill him if you must, but make it quick. Traitor or not, we will not stoop to cruelty in order to serve justice."

Talon pressed her lips together, but she nodded.

"Look out," Bria wheezed as Kumire produced yet another dagger, this one from his sleeve.

Talon stumbled backward off the dais as the blade tore through her

jacket and shirt and grazed her ribs. She hissed and fell to one knee as the edges of her coat began to darken with blood. Shasta felt her stomach turn over. With a squeal that was almost girlish, Kumire lunged. Talon lifted her sword, and Kumire howled as it pierced his ribs at an upward angle. Shasta saw the end of the blade appear over Kumire's shoulder as it exited his body. Talon yanked her sword out and the dagger fell from Kumire's hand, and he slumped to the floor.

Talon stood slowly and lowered her sword, the blade dripping crimson dots of blood onto the tiles. "He's dead. It's over." She dropped to one knee beside her fallen sister. "Oh, Bria, I'm so sorry I didn't believe you."

"Shh." Bria waved a hand feebly. "After how I betrayed you, I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd executed me on the spot." She winced as the words cost her a ragged, painful breath.

"Hang on, Bria," Shasta pleaded, alarmed by her friend's steadily graying skin tone. Experience on the battlefield told her that it would be unwise to remove the blade until they had something to stop the bleeding. As it was, the blood had already stained her entire bodice and crept down onto her skirt as well. Bria was losing too much blood, too quickly, and even as she said the words, Shasta knew it was hopeless. "We'll get a healer, just stay with us, please."

Bria's eyes had already begun to glaze over, and she reached out feebly for the baby in Lyris's arms. The child was now dozing contentedly, sucking one tiny fist, and Lyris held her up so Bria could see her clearly. Though she was too weak to take the baby, Bria's face lit at the sight of her daughter.

"Princess, I want..." She gave a little cough, and flecks of blood appeared on her lips.

"Don't try to talk," Shasta said, but Bria shook her head.

"No, please. I want you and Talon to take care of her for me. Don't let her..." She coughed again, and the fluid accumulating in her lungs made a deep bubbling sound. "Don't let her grow up to be the fool her mother was. Promise me."

Shasta met Talon's eyes helplessly. Talon took her little sister's hand in her own. "We promise, Bria. We'll take good care of her."

Bria smiled faintly. Her eyes rolled back and her body convulsed once, weakly. And then she was gone. Shasta bent over her, sobbing.

After a minute Lyris spoke softly in her ear. "Your Highness."

Shasta straightened, sniffing, as the priestess leaned forward to gently place the baby in her arms. Shasta stared down at her tiny, perfectly formed features, chubby cheeks crowned with a dark swirl of hair. The infant peered up at her sleepily with eyes the color of warm amber.

Through her tears, Shasta looked up at Talon. “Bria never told us the baby’s name.”



Only days later, the castle was so transformed that few would have known Kumire had ever even been there. The first thing Shasta had done was to order the moat filled and the gardens replanted. The original palace doors were retrieved from the lower levels to be restored to their proper place at the castle entrance. Shasta’s chambers had to be cleared of the gifts that had been left in her sitting room over the past moons. Several baskets of fruit had gone bad and filled the rooms with a sickly stench that took a long while to fade.

Most of the provincial viceroys were discovered half starved and locked in their rooms. The three who had refused to acknowledge Kumire’s claim to the throne had been chained to their bedposts and badly beaten, for while Kumire had needed them alive, he was apparently not above torture to get what he wanted. Shasta called a special conference to explain what had happened and bestow special thanks on those who had preserved her throne under such terrible conditions. Even the viceroys who normally supported Mondera were outraged to learn that Kumire was directly responsible for the assassination of both the King and their beloved Crown Prince.

Archduke Fickett was the only one to refuse Shasta’s offer of clemency. When he heard the news of his son’s death, the malicious old man’s heart stopped on the spot, as if his body had finally realized that it was truly over. Shasta commanded that Kumire and his father be buried as nobility in the Rane family cemetery behind the palace temple. They might have been traitors, but they were still her blood relatives.

She was thrilled to find Nurse still alive and well. The old lady had managed to stay out of Kumire’s way for the most part, helping Bria to give birth and tending to the baby. When she found out that the infant was to remain in the palace, she wasted no time in setting up the nursery again, even though Shasta insisted the cradle be kept in her

own chambers during the night. The baby spent more time in Shasta's rooms than in her own as Shasta grew more and more fond of her. Talon, too, seemed enchanted by her tiny niece.

"Have you thought of a name for her yet?" Shasta asked one night as she joined her guardian on the low couch of the sitting room. Talon had the baby cradled in one elbow and was dangling something shiny before the infant's eyes. Shasta groaned. "Really, Talon, a diamond necklace is not a child's toy." She took the jewelry from Talon's hand.

"It's not like you don't have hundreds of them," Talon retorted with a grin. "Besides, she likes the way they sparkle. Don't you, hmm?" She tickled the baby's cheek with her finger and was rewarded with a giggle that made both women smile. "I really can't think of what we should call her." Talon narrowed her eyes. "But something tells me you have a thought on the subject."

Shasta laughed as the baby wrapped her little fist around her forefinger. "There's really only one name we can give her, you know. Bria. For her mother." Talon inhaled, but Shasta wasn't finished yet. "Talon, for her—*father*." She winked and Talon blushed a little. Shasta reached out and took the baby into her own arms, cuddling her close as the dark lashes fluttered softly into sleep. "And Shastis. Because I intend to make her my heir."

Talon's eyes flew wide. "Shasta...are you sure?"

Shasta nodded. "I've thought long and hard about this. She's ours, Talon, yours and mine, as surely as if we had created her ourselves. She carries both our blood in her veins. Bria was your sister. And Kumire, hateful as he was, was my cousin. That makes this child the last living member of my family...and yours, unless you plan on having children yourself one day." Talon made a revolted face, and Shasta laughed. "That's what I thought."

She carried the baby to the cradle by the bed and laid her carefully among the satin blankets. She felt Talon's hand at her waist and leaned back contentedly into her lover's strong arms. "We've both lost people we love to Kumire," she said softly. "And now we're going to make our own family together. You, and me," she looked back down at the sleeping infant, "and our daughter."

Talon pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I can't imagine anything better," she said fiercely.

"Oh really? How about if I just marry you and make you my king, hmm?"

“You know we can’t do that.”

“The rest of the kingdom thinks you’re a man,” Shasta prodded. She knew full well that was not the reason for her guardian’s discomfort, but she couldn’t resist teasing her. “No one would ever need know that the King of Ithyria was actually a woman.”

Talon looked uneasy. “It’s one thing for us to be...you know, together. But...” She blushed a little.

They’d talked at length about whether they should hide the true nature of their relationship from the general public, but because they couldn’t even look at one another without their feelings showing blatantly on their faces, there had been no shortage of whispers among the soldiers and palace servants already.

“People are used to me sleeping in your room and shadowing your every move, so those who choose to turn a blind eye have plenty of excuse to do so. Really, I don’t care if the whole kingdom knows. I don’t even care if they find out I’m a woman, if it comes to that.”

Shasta nodded. “Me either. Talon, we can tell them if you want. You know I’m not ashamed...”

“I know.” She acknowledged that with a tender smile. “But many of the government officials are not going to be very accepting. It’s scandalous enough that the new Queen is carrying on a love affair with her bodyguard, let alone the fact that said bodyguard is actually a woman. We just won a war, Shasta, but the kingdom still needs a lot of healing. Too many issues all at once for the public to deal with. We should leave things the way they are for now.”

Shasta grinned. “Ironically enough, I think even the most conservative of the nobles would prefer that we remain unmarried, even knowing we’re...involved...than to see an Outlander on the throne of Ithyria. It’s almost a socially acceptable alternative that you be my...” She struggled for the right word. “Well, I guess you’d be considered the royal concubine.” She laughed at the consternation that appeared on her guardian’s face. “Sure you wouldn’t rather be my husband?”

“I...” Talon faltered.

Shasta knew that look, the one that Talon always got when she was worried about hurting her feelings. “Tell me.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to marry you.” Talon’s blush deepened, and so did her voice, at the admission. “Goddess, Shasta, if you were anyone else...I mean, if you weren’t the future queen...I’d keep this masculine disguise the rest of my life if it meant I could marry you.

But if we were to marry, now, with you being who you are, they'd make me..." Her faintly desperate tone sent a flash of guilt through the Princess, and she planted a kiss on Talon's shoulder.

"Shh, Talon, it's all right, I was only teasing. I know perfectly well how much you'd hate every minute of wearing the crown. You're a soldier at heart and you always will be." She laughed at Talon's very obvious sigh of relief. "No, I have special plans for you, my love." Her hand drifted around her lover's neck and she tugged her head down. "Very," kiss, "special," kiss, "plans." And then another kiss, this one longer and deeper and full of promise.



The coronation ceremony was attended by all twelve Honored Mothers, even the one from Mondera, who made it a point to apologize sheepishly to the Princess for her failure to appear at the battle along with the others. The palace and grounds were packed with people, the vast crowd spilling out of the gates and into the southern moors. A coronation was always a momentous occasion, but when it simultaneously marked the end of a war it was a truly historical event indeed.

For all its pomp and circumstance, the coronation itself was a surprisingly brief ceremony. Qiturah herself placed the crown on Shasta's head amid thunderous cheering that shook the walls of the palace. Then came several hours of lesser ceremonies, as Shasta's first acts as Queen were to hand out various promotions and awards to those who had helped her win back her crown.

She named Talon captain of her personal royal guard, which had been Vaughn's former position, and Shasta took particular pride in fixing the new bars to her lover's collar. Though she knew she would always be Talon's first priority, with her new rank Talon would now have duties and responsibilities that extended far beyond just one person. Shasta didn't care if the entire kingdom was whispering about the new Queen and her handsome young captain of the guard. For now it was a scandal of minor proportion. Talon was a soldier and Shasta a politician, and this arrangement allowed them both to do what they loved.

Shasta appointed new viceroys to each province whose former head of state had been killed in Kumire's rebellion and did the same for each provincial guard that had lost its general. On Talon's recommendation, she appointed Jen Crossis as viceroy of Mondera and granted him the

title and properties of a true nobleman of the court in spite of the fact that he'd been born the son of a foot soldier. Shasta couldn't imagine anyone more worthy of the position or more capable of serving in it.

Roald the cabinetmaker and his wife Syanne were not forgotten. For their generous hospitality during the darkest days of Shasta's life, she bestowed upon them the titles of Duke and Duchess of Aster, titles normally reserved only for members of the royal family. With them came land and wealth and a position at court that was to be envied among the nobles.

The guard barracks on the palace grounds were dedicated to the memory of Captain Vaughn. Shasta had a life-size statue of their beloved friend and mentor erected in front of the barracks entrance, and it was such a good likeness that it brought tears to her eyes when it was finally unveiled.

The long, tedious string of minor ceremonies involved speeches and vows and other such time-consuming traditions, so Shasta was surprised that most of the audience remained throughout the day. Many laid picnic blankets on the grass of the moors and cheered for each and every individual promotion and honor, though Shasta was certain they couldn't possibly hear or see what was going on from such a distance. Flags were waved from the turrets to indicate that the audience could applaud, and they did so just as enthusiastically for the last man as they had for the first.

And then, as the sun began its downward trek through the sky, Shasta stepped forward atop the castle walls. She raised the metal cone she'd used on the battlefield, and Talon and most of the others beside her had to plug their ears as she spoke through it.

"People of Ithyria, I am Shasta Talia Soltranis of Rane, daughter of King Soltran Novaris and now Queen of the twelve Ithyrian provinces. I thank you all for being here today to bear witness to this long-awaited triumph. Today I retake my father's crown."

A roar went up from the crowds, and they rose to their feet in a wave that spread across the moors. When they were quiet again, she continued speaking.

"More than this, today I intend to rebuild my family. The royal house of Ithyria has been torn apart by a web of treachery, greed, and murder. Today this comes to an end."

Qiturah stepped forward and held up the baby so that those positioned in the palace grounds could see her.

“This child is the seed of my kinsman, Kumire Fickettis of Rane. Though her father was my enemy, she is my cousin by blood, and from this day forward she will be honored as my daughter and heir to my throne.” Confused muttering spread through the people, but Shasta kept speaking. “In this way I hope to finally heal my shattered family line and unify our broken kingdom once more. The new Ithyria that we all wish for can only be brought about through love and cooperation.”

Qiturah lowered the baby back into her arms. Lyris approached with the silver cup of purification, the holy goblet blessed by the Goddess. Shasta dipped her fingers into the water and traced them on the baby’s forehead. She spoke into the metal cone again.

“I hereby bequeath to you my birthright, my title, my crown...and the never-ending love of a mother for her child.” She indicated that the Honored Mother should lift the child again. “My people, I present to you the Crown Princess Bria Talon Shastis of Ithyria. May she grow to serve you even better than I.”

A tumultuous cheer rose from the crowd and reverberated against the palace walls. Shasta caught Talon’s eye and beamed. Though it was unlikely that everyone would accept her decision to adopt Kumire’s baby as her own, their current audience was swept away by the excitement of the moment. The announcement of the adoption had stirred the people’s imaginations. Given time, Shasta was certain that eventually little Bria would win over the hearts of the kingdom, just as she had already won hers.

Talon felt a tap on her shoulder, and Lyris smiled at her from behind her veils. “The Goddess was right after all,” she said, and her eyes flickered to the baby in the Honored Mother’s arms. “One day, your child *will* take the throne.”

Talon could do nothing but shake her head. “The one time Ithyris wasn’t being cryptic, and it still turned out like the answer to a riddle.”

She grinned, still scarcely able to believe that all of this was real. Only four winters ago she had been a ragged, starving street performer. Now she was captain of the Ithyrian royal guard, and what was more, she had somehow managed to win the love of the most amazing woman she had ever known.

She moved to Shasta’s side. “And now, my love,” she murmured into her ear, “now we have our fairy-tale ending.”

Shasta looked up, her amber eyes shining. “And a whole new beginning.”

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As the sun set on the western horizon, painting the sky in crimson and gold, Qiturah delivered baby Bria into Shasta's waiting arms. Together Talon and Shasta turned to wave at the cheering crowds below. The days to come would bring a grand time of rebirth for all of Ithyria: powerful changes and new adventures in the making. Talon could hardly wait.

EPILOGUE

Ulrike has failed. The Goddess still possesses firm control of Her lands, and though She has not yet managed to fully banish Her brother's influence, the plans he has laid so carefully for centuries have now been thwarted utterly. Even as I rejoice at our Divine Lady's triumph, in my heart I sense that the war between the Gods is far from over.

Our young Queen will have her hands full rebuilding the damage that the past centuries have wrought upon this kingdom. Her vision for a new Ithyria is a noble one, ripe with the hopes and dreams of our people, and I pray she will be allowed the time she needs before the God of the Flesh strikes out again.

In the meantime, Ithyris has grown silent. Perhaps She, too, is recovering from the strain of recent battle. My heart aches to hear Her sweet voice in my ear once more, yet I know that when it is time, She will return to guide us through whatever is coming next, just as She always has.

Strange—as I held the child Bria in my arms at the coronation, I was struck with the certainty that this infant girl will mean more to Ithyria than any of us can imagine. She is a peculiar child, with the amber eyes of Rane and the dark skin of an Outlander. Somehow I feel that this one tiny babe holds a powerful connection to the destiny of our kingdom.

I cannot help but think that the story of our people is only just beginning.

About the Author

Merry Shannon has been creating fantastical worlds in her head for as long as she can remember. She grew up a military brat and began writing stories at the age of seven. In 2001, she graduated from the University of Colorado with a Bachelor of Arts in English. Currently she resides in northern Denver with her beautiful girlfriend Laura and their very noisy cat, and works full time for county social services. In addition to writing, she enjoys sewing glittery costumes with friends and drooling over the gorgeous women of the Japanese Takarazuka theater. *Sword of the Guardian: A Legend of Ithyria* is her first published work.

You can visit Merry on the web at <http://www.MerryShannon.com>.

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