

A close-up, high-contrast portrait of a woman's face. Her eyes are the central focus, looking slightly to the left. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows on the right side of her face and bright highlights on the left, particularly around her eyes and nose. Her skin has a warm, golden-brown tone. The background is dark and indistinct.

Richard Shekari

**Aaricia
and
the Noland Army**

Aaricia and the Noland Army

By Richard Shekari

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Cover: Xusenru

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DEDICATION

For *Marica Varron*.

JUST A WOMAN

"You? A woman?!" Dirty Simo laughed. "You want to fight the great Azzodonian army?" He mocked the lady standing in front of him, who was dressed in a long, hooded cape. His belly, grotesquely obese, pushed forward as he almost choked on laughter before asking the next question. "Are you mad?" A teardrop formed in the corner of his eye, and saliva dribbled down his chin as he spoke. Dirty Simo's attire consisted of an old, torn doublet that was indicative of his lowly status. "With a face like yours, woman, you don't need an army to conquer a kingdom! Present yourself at any banquet! Watch how kings and their entire subjects shall yield to your beauty!" His beard was stroked a few times as his eyes leered at the beautiful woman.

"A great reward shall befall upon all you men, if you help me fight," she said, dressed in a long hooded white cape, "I am Aaricia, the..."

"No one here gives an old lass' arse who you are, woman! I think we all know what constitutes your kind, me lady," interjected the fat fellow, in a husky tone as he held unto his crotch, "You see, most of the men here haven't had it for a

long time.” He looked filthy and unkempt, throwing his vile tongue out in such a despicable manner. His stench was awfully offensive she had to hold her breath for a series of moments.

“Shut it, Dirty Simo,” a cool but authoritative voice said, revealing the tall, daring man, dressed more nobly, with a wielding sword frog, concealed in his cloak.

The fellow carries the carriage of someone to be taken more serious, she thought, for he apparently was the leader of the gang.

“Kufius is right; only a madman would think of rising against the Azzodonians. Besides, I do not see a man talking, or have you, boys?” Walking boldly, staring down provocatively at her as he sniffed. All the men murmured cynically in response to his remarks.

Aaricia smiled, “Bring out six of your best fighters,” she said, “If I make them beg for their lives, you join me to fight the Queen of Azzodonia. I will also like you to set him free,” pointing to a young man locked in a cage.

“Such an ambitious request from one who isn’t in position to negotiate, Is that so?” said the leader, pointing to Aaricia’s tied wrists, “You should know that because my men found you more amusing doesn’t mean you aren’t more vulnerable here,” he smiled.

“Do you doubt all the dices you possess?” she asked, smiling.

“The lady is a gambler,” he said, grinning back, “And what if you’re to lose?”

“Then I will be your slave,” she replied, squinting, “I’ll do anything you ask, anything you want, besides, you know what my kind constitutes, so I don’t think it’ll be hard finding what way I can serve you!”

A stretch of booing echoed the tent.

“First of all, lass, you’re already a slave here.” Inpuffed the leader, “I asked them to bring you out of your cage so I’d have a good look at your voluptuous self, in order to see what fun we might have with you, and now you’re trying to trade with threats? Asking us to join you disinvest the Queen of Azzodonia of her throne?” he paused, “If my own men could catch you off-guard while you slept, what the Queen’s men would do to you, I wonder.”

“Let’s just say our meeting was divine,” she said, “They say, a man often meets his destiny on the very path he takes to avoid it!”

“Hmm! So, you think we, here; my men and I are destined to serve you?”

“...Or destined to have our way with you?” said a husky voice interrupted by a smack on the head,

“No!” she sighed, “You’re destined to help me bring peace and prosperity to the realm!”

“The kingdom, its people and the lands are cursed,” he answered, “I have seen many rise against her from the four corners of the world, only to be trampled down. As much as the Queen enjoys tracking and hunting the likes of our kind, we want nothing to do with her, let alone being a part of anything that’s risen against her! Mercenaries, peasants, outcast, we’re all free men here, and shall die bound to no chain!” he added, “See, when my men caught you and that young thief while you basked under the stars in your sleep, enjoying the solitude of the river’s melody last night. Little did you know, that word on your bounty would still get to these parts!”

Aaricia paused in silence.

“As much as I’d like the reward for your bounty, I’m persuaded to incline to the amusement your proposed spectacle might accrued,” he smiled, “So, I’ve got a proposition for you,” he whiffed a pinch of powdered herbs up his nostril, “Fight three of my best men, and if you win,” shaking his head wildly like a horse, “My men and I will swear allegiance to you and whatever ridiculous course you dream of, and wish to make manifest; we will fight by your side to the last man, won’t we boys?!” he turned to the crowd.

“Yeaaaaah!!!” the amused men cheered.

“You know, a tree is known for its fruits.” He added, “So if you lose, be assured that we shall have a bountiful harvest, and we have our most fertile seeds,” looking at Simo.

“Over my rotten corpse,” she solemnly objected.

“Your rotten corpse I would still gladly take,” said Simo, “And take good care of it!”

The rest of the men cheered.

“I haven’t finished yet,” interrupted the leader, “If you lose, not only would you become Dirty Simo’s bride, I shall personally jab my sword through that young man’s heart!” pointing to the frightened handsome prisoner, who was carried away by the stakes being made to their lives.

“How am I sure that your actions won’t outweigh your tongue, when I win?” she said.

“I’m the last descendant of Ogrieh,” he replied, “We’re bound by the words that come forth from our tongues! So, yes, IF you win, you shall have my word!”

“I am ready, when your men are!” she interjected with such boldness staring fearlessly into his eyes, “Hand me a sword!”

Without hesitation, two volunteers, Tarragan and Boswa, the high spirited men known for their sadistic infliction of pain jumped from the crowd and reached for their favourite weapons, “Let’s begin!”

“Hmm! Have my sword,” the leader said to Aaricia, pulling his blade, as he cut off the bound ropes from her wrist, “Maybe she needs a feminine touch, today!” referring to his steel blade, he hands over to her as he pauses, sighting a

strange mark on her wrist which causes his face to have a cold reaction that symbolized fear and awe, a response which Aaricia pretended not to notice. But it did not stop him from gesticulating his desire for his expectation, “So, woman! How do you want it?” as he grinned maniacally, “One at a time or three...of them at once?”

The men burst into laughter as Simo licked his lips salivating in celebration to the outcome of the showdown.

“I’ve got all the time in the world,” she grabbed hold of the sword as she turned, “If they can last that long,” walking out of the tent, “Let me see what you-men are made up of.”

The men cheered and booed vociferously as they all walked out of the tent to the small fighting arena. They watched her walk like a goddess of beauty from a world known only in their fantasies. The leader gave the order, as the three men; Tarragan, Boswa, and silent Ghart took to their positions. Dirty Simo leaned as he caressed himself and drooled in gratification.

“Whatever happens,” said the leader, “Do not touch her face!”

The three men, clad like gladiators made their way into the arena. Boswa revealed his proto-glaive as he spat, the second, Ghart, who appeared slim and tall among the three only smiled. The third, Tarragan a bit huge like a wrestler bent the iron spear he carried with his bare hand and threw it away as he giggled.

“Dead or alive, missy,” said Dirty Simo in his husky voice, “Together forever, even death can’t do us part!”

Aaricia stared at him disgustingly, for she could smell his mouth from where she stood, yet, remained calm like the desert sand at night. She placed the edge of the sword in her left hand. Sighed heavily, caressing the sword as though something she was familiar with. Her mind wandered far away from that which was impending.

“Does my beautiful sword remind you of something, my lady?” mocked the leader, “Is it not...long enough?”

“I am afraid so!” she said as the reflection from the sword lit her dazzling face.

“Boys, won’t you show this woman, why they call us the Ruinous Roamers!” he added, turning to the young dark haired fellow in a cage, in view of the arena, “I shall do the young thief, myself!”

“Are you going to fight or stand there waiting for your mothers to come breastfeed you, lads?” said Aaricia mildly, as she pulled the rope that held her white cape together, letting it gently fall to the ground, unveiling a gray tunic hooded huntress’ costume, with a lace-up neckline and short hooded cape that had a gold trim. She gently readjusted her buckled shoulder belt that had an embossed golden symbol of a *Chrysolophus pictus*, the golden Pheasant.

Ghart, the tallest of the three gladiators pulled out a bow from

his back which was concealed by the garment he wore, he set his arrow and aimed at Aaricia with such great precision.

“You may do well to cover your hide in the open grounds, woman,” yelled the leader to Aaricia, as he sat on the old wooden chair under the hot sun not far from the arena, “Ghart is our best archer, considering you never gave us enough time to set the rules of the game. You should’ve yearned for our hospitality rather than our desire to harm! And my men?”

“...*And like many men,*” whispered Aaricia, “Their ego weighs down their advantage.”

His mockery didn’t get to her as she remained focus, her hand tight to the sword with her eyes set on the three men like a lioness who is out to kill for the game. She could hear her own heartbeat.

The mind of the men wondered as her eyes wandered.

For a second there, she knew what she had to do, and considered what she was fighting for; the silent young man whose fate was now in her hand, her virtue, her cause to live and her life.

Fear reeked in the arena, and the archer smirked in triumph, closing one of his eyes. Whether the leader would keep to his end of the bargain was something she chose to handle afterwards, if she would survive the challenge she purported.

Aaricia let a cry out as she ran toward the men, the one with the proto-glaive threw it at her but missed as she front flipped,

dodging it, she went head on exasperatedly charging towards them. The archer closed his eyes and desirously set free his thirsty arrow; it got to her, she made an attempt to back flip but unto the ground she fell, motionless and couldn't flex a muscle as dust fumed from its resting place. There was a moment of silence. The archer gave a self-satisfying smile as he opened his eyes.

“Come on, Ghart!” said Simo, “Don't you ever let us have fun before you kill your prey?”

Like a wild stallion, Aaricia jumped back to her feet, throwing the arrow with her bare hand straight through Ghart's throat, the other gladiators turned, watching as his body fall irresistibly to the charm of gravity, by the time they turned to look at her, she had thrust her sword into Tarragan's chest, pulled it out and slit Boswa's throat. Their lifeless bodies kissed the soil at the same time.

A pause of silence engulfed the crowd, none of the men could believe their eyes, including the young prisoner, who was speechless in admiration. The leader could not but leave his jaw wide open in amazement. Aaricia bent to her left knee, wiped the blood off her sword with Ghart's garment as she made her way out of the arena. The leader stood to his feet gently but frightfully, watching her majestic walk, like a feline through the marshes. He swallowed his saliva and coughed a mucus bubble out of his nostril.

“Move!” she commanded walking to the chair, “I kept to my

words! I believe you still want your tongue attached to your mouth!” gently, she sat on the chair.

“You’ve proven yourself, woman!” he stated as he nearly missed his steps.

“Set him free!” he said, wiping his dripping nose, “Set him free!”

Four of his men rushed to the cage and broke its lock, setting free the young prisoner.

“Now, you will tell me your name,” she said, “and I shall tell you what I need you to do!”

“Karazan Jazan Kazan,” he answered, “But you may call me the Noose, for my word is my bond, and your wish is my command!” bowing before her, “Tender mercy upon your subjects!” he added.

The entire men were frightened and bedazzled, their mind still trapped and frozen in the moment before the fight began, as they tried to trick their minds into not believing what their own eyes have seen, but the event was as clear and crystal to them as the heat of the hot sun on their weak backs.

Aaricia sank her sword into the soil and held its handle, staring at the men profoundly.

THE HOLLAND ARMY

Dirty Simo fell to his knees, wet from his own urine, followed by Karazan, the Noose and all the men. As the young freed man made his way through the loyal crowd to meet Aaricia, Simo quickly stood to his feet and began to run away.

“Dirty Simo!” she yelled.

He stopped, scared of what might happen to him, he began to tremble. Simo turned with his grimed fingers stuck between his brown teeth.

Aaricia picked her sword and walked to him, all the men turned to watch. On reaching him, she raised the blade, staring into his affrighting eyes.

“I am sorry, missy!” he squeaked, sweat slid down his forehead, “I-am-so-sorry! I was only...playing, you know, joking?”

“Hmm!” responded Aaricia as she swung her sword three times; his pants and entire clothes came down. The rest of the

men burst into laughter but went mute when she turned and stared at them.

“Go take a shower!” she yelled, “Now!”

“Yes! Yes-of-course, missy! Shower!” he creaked, running to a nearby stream, blocking his nates with his left hand and his crotch with the right, “Water! Water! Oh no! I hate water!” he cried.

Aaricia shook her head and walked back, “You shall receive your instructions from Karazan!” she said, “No one leaves this camp, do you hear me?”

“Yesss! Our lady!” said the men in unison, as they turned and stare at their three dead friends.

“Thank you!” said the freed young man, dusting the dirt off his knees.

“Now, we’re even, Zack!” she said to him, walking into the tent, “Karazan!”

“Come on, Aaricia!” Zack panted as he followed her, “I want to be with you,”

Aaricia stopped, turned and stared at him.

“I meant to say, fight with you?” he added, in a playful manner.

“You saved my life and I just returned the favour, my friend!” she boasted, “Like I said; we-are-even!”

Zack moved a bit faster and touched her by the shoulder.

“Don’t you ever approach me like that!” she yelled as she swept him off his feet, placing her sword on his throat.

“Easy! Easy, beautiful!” he begged, “Easy now, it’s me.”

“And don’t you call me beautiful!” she hollered, “Ever!”

“Okay. I’m sorry, please!” he implored, “I have nowhere to go to, you know they torched my place the night they came!”

Aaricia withdrew her sword, stood upright and gave him a lifting hand. Zack grabbed her hand, but his weight pulled her down on him.

“You’re lucky my sword isn’t between us,” she said.

“I’m...I am sorry, again!” he begged, his eyes lustfully sank into her beautiful green eyes. They were both frozen for a moment, their lips almost touched. Zack tried to avoid her gaze, so he looked away, down into her cleavage.

“Really?” she reacted.

“Oh, I am...um!” he stuttered, “You’re going to have to get on top of me. Sorry, I meant, get off of me!” he breathed heavily.

“Huh um!” Karazan cleared his throat, “Am I interrupting?”

“Sure!” responded Aaricia.

“Okay then, I come back later!” said the teasing Karazan.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Karazan,” she said as she slowly stood up, “I think you’re going to have to run down the stream too, Zack.”

“Men are naturally rough,” he remarked, “That’s part of what makes us tough!”

“I’m afraid but, the young man is right!” said Karazan.

“The only men I know that enjoy looking soiled are the ones I see here,” she said, “How many are you?”

“Just thirty six,” he replied, “That’s inclusive of the three men you um...”

“You’ve got thirty three men left?” she asked, “You inclusive?”

“Yes,” he sighed, “We’re just thirty three, now! But well skilled”

“Skilled?” Zack snorted.

“Hmm! Well,” she responded, “I guess we’re going to have to make do with that which is available!”

Karazan, the Noose walked close but keeping a clear distance from her swing, “You’re not thinking of using only thirty three men as an army to attack the...”

“Oh! Ah! Hey, guys!” Zack called out, standing to his feet, “I think that makes thirty five of us now?” raising his finger up like a child, “You know; me, the thirty three of your men, and the iron lady!” he scratched his head, “I’ve got skills too, you

know!”

“The only skills you’ve got, is changing a woman’s clothes, after you pick her lying unconscious by the river!” she pointed her sword at his direction, “Don’t speak to me about skills, Zack!”

“Well, I’m still good at something! Are you still mad at me over that?” Zack asked, “I was just being a gentleman! Come on, you were all wet, and cold, and...”

“That’s enough!” she said.

“The boy does have skills,” said Karazan, “A smooth talker, I’ll give you that, but we’re going to need more hands, if you’re really serious about this,” he proposed, “Either way, to me, this is a suicide mission. We cannot face the Azzodonians, even if our number was ten times as much.”

“I have friends in high places!” responded Aaricia, “Have your men ready, tomorrow we shall head to the land of Ghourak by dawn!”

“Ghourak?! ‘The-land-of-Ghourak?’” Zack asked, “The land of the feathered felines?”

“Yes, you do have skills, Zack,” she said, “The naivety of a child!”

“They are called gryphons!” said Karazan correcting Zack, “Hmm! Ghourak, the smallest of all the lands yet, the only domain the Azzodonians dare not step a foot on!” he took a

deep breath, “You indeed are looking for trouble, woman! The Ghourakans would smell an approaching fly thousands of sea miles away, I don’t think this is a good idea!” he added, as he began sniffing once again.

“Like I said,” Karazan continued, “It’s a suicide mission! Maybe if you let us in on your objectives, we’d be obliged to...!”

“My plight should not be of concern to your feeble mind,” Aaricia interjected, “Descendant of Ogrieh!”

Zack coughed contemptibly muffling his giggle, mocking Karazan as he walked to her but keeping a safe distance as well.

“You have a face that would make a King swallow a sip of boiled venom in the wake of dawn, to prove his affection for you,” said Zack, “Why tempt the sharp edge of a sword to abrade the second wonder of the world?”

“And which is the first, in accordance to your findings?” she asked.

“Your essence,” he said, “It brought me back from the dead this morning!”

“This one has fallen in love!” Karazan suggested, “His pounding heart seeks for a mate!”

“Karazan, how about you go and have your men prepare for the long journey tomorrow,” she said.

“As you wish, my lady!” he replied, gently making his way out of the tent.

“You know what my problem is with you, Zack?” she said, “It took you too short a time to fall in love with a woman you know nothing of.”

“So, you can tell that I’m in love with you?” he fibbed.

“Well,” she said, concealing her blush, “You knocked at a locked door at the wrong time.” As she stared at him pitifully,

“I’ve already made it clear, and I’m sorry not to reciprocate your hopes.”

“But I want to be with you, Aaricia, to fight by your side!” he said proudly, “I can’t imagine a world without you.”

“Our meeting was an accident, Zack!” she said, “You of all people should know that.”

“It was fate, we were destined to meet. Can’t you see it?”

“I’ve got better matters to worry about.” she said, walking up to him, “And I’ll need some alone time, to think about things, maybe we’ll revisit this conversation some other time.” She reposed, “Look, you and I are not...”

“A worthy match?” he interjected, “I understand!”

He began walking away.

“Zack,” she called, “It’s not what you think, okay? I like you, but I don’t expect you to understand!”

“Then make me understand.” He said, angrily.

“I can’t,” she muttered, “For now, this is the least of things we should be concerned about.”

“Okay then, I’ll give you some space, some time!” he said disappointingly, “I’ll be with the men outside!”

“Zack! Zack!!” she called as he walked out of the tent. She sighed unhappily. She turned away from the exit as she gazes on her image on a reflected armour that hung on a central post, as she thought to herself, *‘Why me?’*

While outside, Zack was being cautious around the grumbling men.

“Hey, young thief!” said Karazan.

“I’m no thief,” he replied sadly, “Why do you keep calling me that?”

“That’s the name given to those who take any property belonging to someone else with the intention of keeping it or selling it!” he giggled, “The dame inside, you’re certainly not her type. So when I saw you, I really thought you had her kidnapped, little did I know that you were just a love puppy who has been chasing a dangling bone too large for it to clinch on!”

“For your information,” he said, “I rescued her, I saved her life!”

“Of course, you did,” said Karazan, “Spoken like a true loser,

and from who did you rescue her from, hero?”

“Nothing that I’ll expect you and your pathetic excuse for an army to understand,” Zack angrily replied, “You call me a love poppy? At least, I have the dignity of making my nature apparent. You on the other hand, are nothing but a clown who lost his own authority by a foolish wager.”

There is a sudden whiff and Zack finds his face dented with a swift punch from Karazan’s heavy fist, which finds him on the sand. His chest pressed by his assailant’s feet.

“Hmm!” Karazan grunted as he gobbled a pouch of water, handing it to Zack, he said, “You look dehydrated. I have killed boys like you for the fun of it, and though I’ve sworn my allegiance to lady Aaricia, I owe you no such mandate!” with a smile across his face, “I want to like you, kid!” he emphasized, “But don’t push your luck! Go to sleep, lover boy. Tomorrow will be a busy day!”

PERFIDIOUS

The moon has never been as beautiful as it appears, and the perfect solace for a perfect evening is what Aaricia sees of this moment, as she holds within the warm embrace of Gerald. The night couldn't be any better, save for the sudden bashing of the advancing armed guards, who kick down the front door.

A fleeing Aaricia and Gerald quickly run through a secret passage leading to a rear exit. The guards persistently chase after them through the thick woods and unto to the cliff.

As the armed guards surround the pair and with no way of escape, fear grips the couple and they know they wouldn't come off it alive.'

"Do you trust me?" Gerald asks as he turns staring into her eyes.

The moon radiant shining upon her face.

"You know I do, my love!" she says as she gazes into his eyes, burying her head unto his chest, "You're my all!" she whispers.

He kisses her, smiles and pushes her off the cliff. As she spirals to a fall, she watches how the armed guards ferociously attack her love, and into a body of water, she plunges, just inches away from a rock and her consciousness dissipates from her as she sinks deep under.

Motionless and still, she desperately tries to breathe as the approaching behemoth of the sea opens wide its jaw for the swallow.

“Aaagh!” Aaricia screamed, swinging her sword in the air, only to discern that the creature was actually Zack, whose throat rest at the sharp end of her steel blade.

It was a dream.

“Don’t you ever sneak up on me like that!” yelled Aaricia.

“You had a nightmare,” he said, “You were screaming, I came to wake you up!”

“Is it just me, or did this situation occur before?” said a curious Karazan, while standing by the entrance to the tent.

Aaricia gently withdrew her sword, “I’m sorry!” she said as she sighed heavily.

“It’s okay,” he said, as he stroked his lucky throat to be sure she didn’t cut him, “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine!” she said in a low tone.

“Ah! Good morning!” Karazan said, “I heard a scream! All is well, it seems! The men are ready, awaiting your command,

once you're done with your lover boy!"

"We're not lovers!" Zack and Aaricia said in unison.

"Oookay!" Karazan teased, "I'll be outside with the rest of the men. When you're done!" Winking at Zack.

"You look worried," said Zack to Aaricia, "Maybe I should tell them to wait for a while."

"I said I'm fine," she exclaimed.

"That symbol on your wrist," he said, "What is it?"

"I told you it's nothing," she replied, "Why do you keep asking." she gently concealed the mark with the arm of her sleeve.

Zack could tell she didn't want to talk about it.

Moments later, Aaricia and Zack joined the men as they set out to Ghourak, the land of the gryphons.

As they marched through the woods, some on horses and others on foot. Aaricia was silent and so was Zack, they both walked far from each other, acting unconcerned for each time their eyes met.

They moved through a series of shanty hamlets and villages. The unending sights of filth and disease stricken people. The depth of poverty displayed, made Aaricia's eyes drown in tears.

No sign of hope in the midst, only the desolate sign of

emptiness and despair. To control her spirit, Aaricia would get off her horse and tender a bit of supplies, bread and water to the impoverished children, and to the old, words of comfort and hope.

“Give them all we have, my lady,” said Karazan, “And we shall be left with nothing to take us to our destination!” Shaking his head as he rode his horse.

They kept moving until dusk and got to a valley, where they made camp in order to stay the rest of the night. Many of the men were exhausted. They roasted what they had within their reach, ducklings, rodents and crawling reptiles made for pleasant delicacies.

Aaricia came to the company of Zack, bringing him water and bread.

“I’m sorry with the way I reacted the other time,” she apologized, “I want to thank you for everything.”

“It’s okay, you obviously have gone through a lot” he smiled, “Do you wish to talk about it?”

“Yes, I would,” she said, “But maybe not today.”

“It’s alright,” he responded, “I understand!”

“You’re a good man,” she smiled.

“That’s what I fear the most,” he responded, “Being good enough to be noticed, in a world that only embraces intense ill will and hatred!”

“Yes, you’re right, Zack,” she said, “But we mustn’t give up on the world. As much disheartening as it may appear, if the few good people in the world would join hands, we could make the world a better place!”

“Yes, you’re right about that!” he said, “We mustn’t give up on the world!”

“Stealing my lines as well,” she teased, “No wonder Karazan calls you a thief!” she smiled.

“If I’d ever been a thief,” he replied holding her hand, “It’d be just for one relic, and one only...to steal your heart! Besides, I’m not the only thief here, for you stole mine first!”

“Hmm!” she blushed, “You won’t just be a thief for that, you’d be a hero for it’s heavily guarded!”

“For that possession, I’d be a conqueror,” he smiled, “I’d die or kill for it!” he said as they stared into each other’s eyes passionately.

Within the warmth range of the fire and under the gaze of a guarding Karazan and Simo.

“Funny how you let a bird slip through your fingers unto a sheep’s watch!” said Simo to Karazan, “Such taste of beauty shouldn’t be shared.”

“I know you didn’t just try to entice me, Dirty Simo,” said Karazan, “For I know you should know better than to lecture me on how to behold beauty.”

“I’m only echoing out what you’re thinking!” Simo responded, “Your charm is miles away from what some of us have to offer. Just thought you should know!”

“Charm like milk, has it potency, Dirty Simo,” Karazan said, “But honour lasts forever. Even amidst the unworthy, though, they are virtues I never expect you to understand.” He smiled, “you’ve had your own fair share of the lust for life, and while your wretched being rots away, you still clamour for what you will never possess. The lad may be young and inexperienced, but he still has value for love. A pity, not many are that lucky! Goodnight!”

Four armed guards rush through the busy market, one of them hits an old blind beggar, who just got a few coins in his dish.

“Watch it, you crud!” says one of the guards to the beggar.

“My child, help the needy!” The beggar cries.

“Needy, eh?” answers the guard as they halt, “Let me help you.” He plunges his hand into the blind man’s dish, “Vagabond!”

“Please!” the blind man cries again, hearing the sound of his coins being stolen. The old beggar stands to his feet in protest, “What are you doing?”

“Silence, scum!” the guard pushes him to the ground and spits on him. “You lazy old mendicant!”

The rest of the guards laugh, shaking their heads as they

share the helpless man's stolen lot among themselves.

"Hey! Stop that," Aaricia yells, "This is not right!" rushing to help the old man, "You should be ashamed of yourselves!" she snatches some of the coins from them.

"Woman," says one of the guards, "The beauty you have should not go untasted. Come and feel the succulence of my tongue!"

"Let her go!" says the second guard, "Not now!" as he stares at her.

She turns to the blind beggar, and reaching to a small wrapped garment, she gives him some alms.

"What is your name, my child?" The beggar asks.

"My name is Aaricia," she replies, with a warm smile as she helps him up.

"Such kindness," he says, "Aaricia, Even to the most fiddling of men your beautiful heart stretches down its warm hand!" he manages to stand on his feet with her help, dusting the sand off his person as he wears a smile of gratitude, "Oh, such beauty, even the sun couldn't wait to spring up once it goes beyond the western mountains just to set its gaze upon thy fairness!"

Aaricia smiles, shying away from the old man's compliment, "Have you ever heard," she remarks, "A blind man that speaks as though he sees!" Using her veil to cover half of her

face.

“Your beauty cannot be hidden even to the likes of those in the dark,” says the beggar, “Take this, you deserve it,” handing an amulet, “I cannot let such kindness go unrewarded!”

“No, I can’t accept this. You don’t have to reward me like this, my service was nothing,” she says, “I have all that I need, I only wish I could give more to you such as to restore the sight you’ve lost, but that’s an act for the one who controls all affairs from above, not mortal men!”

“It’s not mine, it belongs to you!” says the beggar as he gently takes her hand, placing the amulet, “Peace shall find thee, and in forgiveness, that which is rightfully yours shall seek thee!” he whispers.

“Is everything okay, my love?” asks Gerald, as Aaricia turns to see him.

He pants as he holds her, “I’m sorry it took this long to get here. Who was the beggar?”

“Was?” she turns but could not see the blind beggar, she looks about wondering where the beggar went, “he gave me an amulet, saying the world will...”

“The world will what?” Gerald asked, holding her hand tenderly.

“Nothing!” she answers as her eyes wander in the busy

market place, “Let’s go home, my love!”

The night is cold. Aaricia opened her eyes and realised she just retracted from another phase of a reoccurring dream, but this time, found herself snuggled in a sleeping Zack’s warming arms. She smiled as she moved her cheek to Zack’s warm lips.

“Good morning, Princess!” Zack said.

“Yes!” echoed another voice from above, “Good morning, Princess!”

A startled Zack and Aaricia arose to realise they were surrounded by an array of armed men, pointing spears and arrows at them. They turned and noticed Karazan, Simo and the rest of the men subdued as they lay on the ground.

One of the armed men spoke, “Welcome strangers, to the end of the road!”

GHOURAKAN BLOOD

A moment of silent anticipation spread through the camp. Their impending victory is obviously short-lived as they await their fate at the mercy of their captors.

Zack, bracing himself to defend his newly found companion, tries to shield Aaricia from the unexpected fire. The subdued Karazan maintains his bravery before his men as he whispers to Simo beside him, “Be a man, and stop wetting yourself.”

But on the face of Aaricia however, lay a smile as she walks towards the vanguard.

“I’m Aaricia, and these are my companions,” she said as she began discerning the identities of their captors. “My maternal marrow was birthed from these mountains, I’ll like you to take me to your elders!”

“You know them?” Zack whispered.

“Yes,” she responded, “They’re the Ghourakans, we have nothing to fear!”

“You mean your mother was born in these mountains?” Zack asked relieved.

“Get moving!” ordered the leader of the troops.

Seizing their belongings, the Ghourakans escorted them up the mountains to a settlement.

As they were being ushered into the community, many of the mountain dwellers stood to their feet in stare, wondering who they were.

“What brought you through our valleys and unto our peaceful grounds?” Asked a limping old man, holding on a rod, “Speak!” his face concealed under the hooded robes he wore.

“I am Aaricia, daughter of the late king Jazekiah of Azzodonia,” she said as she bowed before him in friendship, “My friends and I came seeking for your help, Grapapa!”

“These matters must not be spoken in open grounds,” said the old man, “Assemble the council!”

Five Ghourakans quickly ran to announce the meeting that came on such short notice.

Only Aaricia was allowed into the council’s chamber, as Zack and the rest of the thirty three men were asked to stay behind.

As she made her way into the hall, the armed Ghourakans detained the men and locked them up.

While in the chambers, the council racketed as they stare at Aaricia, who stood upright before them.

“There’s only but one surviving daughter of the late king Jazekiah of Azzodonia,” said the old man, “And she is seated on the throne of Azzodonia,” he snorted pulling off his hood, “I have gazed on her, and you are not she!”

“Grapapa,” said Aaricia, “Don’t you recognize me? Your little Ricia?”

“Don’t lie to me, young woman!” said the old man, turning away his face, “Ricia is dead! Report of her demise came to us years back,” he added, “We have mourned her death, along with the rest of the royals! You’re not Ricia, you’re an imposter! Get her away from my sight!”

Some guards made their way to seize her.

“I have only come to ask for your aid,” she said, “Help me take back my father’s kingdom. He was good to all of you and your lands, let’s join hands and reclaim the lands and build the kingdom back together from its ashes, help me usher in a new dawn; of peace, prosperity, unity and development in all the lands!”

“And what makes you think this mountain does not relish in the valley of peace?” said another man, who gestured the guards to stop “Besides, we have enjoyed long years of peace with the Azzodonians, and have signed a treaty to allow the waters of chaos lay dormant between our lands!”

“You basked in peace because the late king found love in your land,” said Aaricia, “And have promised never to let the dark

clouds of war hover above thy mountains!”

“Yes, and we shall honour him, even in death,” said the elder.

“You do not honour him,” she dissented, “You’re dancing on his grave!”

“How dare you speak in such hush tongue, lass!” shouted someone amidst the council, “Have you no respect for the elders?”

“This is why we cannot let the mountains be ruled by women!” said another, “Ramon is right, how dare you, woman?”

“Gentlemen, let us hear her! Please,” said the old man, as he moved closer to her, supporting himself with his rod “So, what tangible proof have you, young one. Which makes you believe that we will abandon our beloved peaceful mountains and valleys to go fight your war, which to us all, appears self-destructive! We all know how mighty and great the army of Azzodonia is!”

“Such peace you speak of is made possible because my father, the late great king offered it to these grounds!” she said, “If you do not help me, not only would that legacy be dishonoured, but you and the beds of your mountains and vales shall be awakened by the drums of war, drums made from the skins of sons and daughters of our once beautiful kingdom. Do not wait for the clouds of death to rain down ruins and brimstones upon you and your children while you

feast in your sleep, while you dream dreams that is envenomed by doom!”

“I told you,” said Ramon, “She is the spawn of a madman! No one in their right mind would go against the Queen. Poppycock!”

“My child,” said the elder, “We are experienced enough to know that the Queen’s presence on that throne shall one day spell the end to our own civilization, she had sent us letters and we have visited her castle and we have agreed to keep the words of the late great king.” He sighed, “I’ll ask again; what tangible proof have you, convincing enough to make us support your dream in order to bring peace? And what army do you have to back this plan?”

“I have with me thirty four men,” she said, “And all I ask is, you give me half of your riders, put them under my command.”

“This is madness,” rattled the council.

“Child-talk!” shouted the one called Ramon, “I have better things to do in my farm! I am out of here!” as he walked his way down the gallery.

Aaricia pulled the rope that held her cape, and as it made its way down. All the men stood to their feet.

“Impossible!” some shouted.

“This cannot be!” said another.

“Where did you get the belt?” said the elder, “From whom did you steal it?”

“This is my mother’s!” she answered.

“Your mother’s?” asked the old man, “Impossible? This belongs to Athena, my own daughter!” the old man managed to sit on a chair, shaking.

“I am Aaricia, first daughter of the great king Jazekiah of Azzodonia!” she said, “My father and brother were killed, poisoned in their sleep years ago, by someone dear to their hearts! When my mother found out who was behind it, she kept it to herself and never revealed it to anyone. According to the story I heard, she was ashamed and heartbroken, she could not share it with anyone. When she felt that my own life was in great danger, she arranged to fake my own death, so I would escape the enemy’s snare. She handed me over to someone my father so much trusted; a peasant farmer! This man, looked after me like his own daughter. He taught me a lot in the way of combat and self-preservation!”

“My child, our weak ears cannot just swallow your words as though they are sweeteners!” said the old man, “I know the king was murdered along with his son, months later, we received news that our daughter and her first child were killed as well. If you are Athena’s first child as you claimed, then it means...”

“You’ve got to help me bring an end to the evil Queen’s reign of tyranny,” she interrupted, “We need peace in all the lands,

and you are my mother's people”

“Yes, there is no disputing that, child,” said the elder, “But we are a people of peace, and problems? We have none with the Queen!”

“So, because your land is peaceful, you do not care about the others and the sufferings they faced?” she said, “Why stay ignorant to destruction until it knocks on your doors?”

“Maybe this is how things are supposed to be,” said the old man, “In order for peace to reign!”

“Grapapa,” said Aaricia, “This is my home as it is my mother's! I am doing this for us all, for the children of tomorrow! The Queen would not spare even your cattle! I grew up alongside her, I know her heart more than you know the smell of the trees in your mountains!” tears rolled down her eyes, “Help me, let's ride into Azzodonia. They greatly fear the riders of Ghourak. If you love your daughter, and if you truly value peace as you claim, then release the gryphons and their riders, put them under my command. Let me reclaim all the lands from the wicked Queen. Let us bring peace and prosperity in all the lands!”

“But she is your sister,” said the old man.

“My sisters are the ones who stand by my side in light,” she replied, “Not those who collude against me in the dark! If my mother had not saved me from the wicked claws of the Queen, I would've been dead by now! Please, release the gryphons!”

Release your fighters! For it is the only thing that would strike fear in the hearts of the Azzodonian army, and they shall surrender even before a gryphon lands its foot on the soils! The Queen lurks in the dark, waiting, waiting for the right time to take your mountains and your valleys!”

The old man stood up, facing the council who were all mute. He hobbled back and forth lacking what to say.

“She is our own, alright,” he said, “She bears the mark of Azzo’s sword on her right hand! She’s my...granddaughter! Just as stubborn as her mother, and her mother before her!”

“Griftbear, you told me never to bad mouth my mother-in-law!” said one of the men in the crowd.

The council began to laugh.

“Griftbear, may I be permitted to speak?” said one of the men, clearing his throat.

“Yes, Ammakia,” answered old Griftbear, “You may speak!”

“Neither we nor the gryphons would blindly follow the footsteps of anyone who comes forth claiming to be who they say they are,” said Ammakia, “If she’s truly your granddaughter and the rightful heir to the throne of Azzodonia, and she possesses the mark of Azzo’s sword. Does she possess Azzo’s sword as we speak?”

“Yes!” they cried, “Ammakia is right!”

“Yes, show us Azzo’s sword and we shall march beside you,

fearlessly!” yelled another.

“And even die for a good cause!” shouted another.

“The Queen, according to what we heard, also bears the mark of Azzo’s sword!” said Ammakia.

“All the royals possess the mark,” cried another, “But doesn’t the Queen possess the sword? Isn’t it why she is on the throne?”

“Brothers,” said Griftbear, “Don’t we all know where it is? Have we all forgotten that the sword is said to be kept safe?”

“Yes,” cried Ramon, “The prophesy says that on the days the daughters of the great king shall dominate the greatest of all the kingdoms, where one shall rule and the other lead; Azzo’s sword shall be found hidden in the house of wisdom, that appear old and wilted, where the heavens caresses the earth!” he giggled, “We all heard the stories told when we were born, and so did our fathers; before their own time! We all know this has proven to be a myth so far, if not, then Queen Assiana possesses it, which makes sense why she is the one ruling the lands!” he cleared his throat, “She hardly spares her own pets when they’re not loyal, let alone anyone who dares rise against her, we all know that!”

“I thought you left to attend to the ladybugs in your farm, Ramond,” said a joking old Griftbear.

All the men laughed.

“You all know that many decades back we took an oath of allegiance to the throne of Azzodonia!” Ammakia added, “And our mountains have experienced peace ever since, even after the great loss of the great king, his son and his Queen, our very own daughter, whose hand we gave in the greatest of all unions, may their souls rest in peace.” he turned to the council, “If the one who stands before us is the heir, as she claims, let her show us Azzo’s sword.”

“Yes! Yes!” the men cried.

“Also, we all know that the elders who went to congratulate the new Queen years ago, have witnessed Azzo’s sword hung in her throne room!” Ammakia added.

“Only seven men can identify Azzo’s sword and now, only the great old Griftbear is alive to attest that,” yelled another, “And we know the Queen barely allows him get close enough to see it properly!”

The rest of the council nodded, saying, “Yes!”

“So what are you insinuating, Bouziah?” Ammakia asked.

“All I am saying is, even a blind man could tell the Queen was hiding something on the day of the ceremony!” said Bouziah, “We all know none of us is happy with what the rest of the lands are facing, with all the sufferings and sights of malnourished children. It’s only a matter of time before the Queen lifted her scepter against us!” He emphasized, “Just because our mountains and valleys are green and our cattle,

wives and children are living in abundant wealth and peace, doesn't mean we should turn our backs on our brothers and sisters." he turned to Griftbear, "We cannot deny that they are our blood, and we are all one. We were one big family. Whatever happened to love? Whatever happened to unity? And if drought befalls upon thy neighbours, should you smile and be glad simply because it hadn't touched thy roof?" he paused, turned and looked at Aaricia, "I will give my vote to the young woman, not because what she says makes sense, but because it's the best for the whole of mankind! Queen Assiana's sword shall soon stretch to our valleys, and maybe we would be deeply asleep to hear the footsteps of her army coming. And maybe then, just maybe, the words of this young woman would bring folly upon the wise. When it is too late!"

"Hold your tongue, Bouziah," said Ammakia, "Speak for thyself, and not all men!"

"You're both right," said old Griftbear, "So, I urge you to raise your hand, if you agree that we release our riders in support of the dethronement of Queen Assiana!"

Only Bouziah raised his hand, the rest of the men turned their faces away. Aaricia was disappointed in her grandfather, wondering why he didn't raise his hand.

"Well," said old Griftbear, "All those in favour of keeping to the treaty should raise their hand"

All the men, exclusive of Bouziah raised their hands, and so did her grandfather.

“Free the men, escort them down to the valleys,” said the old man, “Offer them food and water for their journey!” he limped his way out of the council looking sad.

Aaricia felt let down by what she witnessed. She took a deep breath, bowed and left the assembly in tears of disappointment.

THE FEATHERED FRIENDS

Griftbear walked to Aaricia as her men were being moved from their confinement and were provided with bread and water as instructed.

“You turned your back on me, Grapapa!” she cried, “You turned your back on me! You let me down!”

“It is for the good of us all,” he said softly, as he sat on a small rock, “I love your sister as much as I loved you! You are both my own, I cannot choose sides even though her ways appear evil and dark. But here’s something I’ve written, it’s not much but maybe if you lend it your eyes, you might find a better way to approach your sister, without any bloodshed.”

“Then you are on her side,” she said, “She has Azzo’s sword, she has the throne!”

“Says who?” asked the old man as he laughed, “Your father

trusted his wife, the Queen, she on the other hand trusted only two people in her life; her father, and the other, her husband's secret adviser."

"You chose Assiana over me," she cried, "You refused to stand by me! You even acted as if you didn't know me!"

"No! No, little Ricia!" he said, "You know, you are the apple of my eyes as was your mother. You have no idea how these bad tidings weakened my frail heart about your mother, and what happened to the rest of the family. I cannot afford to lose you, again. Stay with us, let your sister rule as long as the world would tolerate her. From the day her soul crossed through the star dust and into this world, I sensed her as a vessel darkness would use to rain terror in the kingdoms. But I was hoping to be proven wrong, I'm still hopeful! Do not worry, her heart would be bitten by its own fang in due time. And then, we would march into Azzodonia and hand you over the very throne that's rightfully yours."

"I can't, I have waited long enough!" she said, "I want the peoples and the lands be free from her wicked chains, if it'll cost me my own life, then so be it."

"Such sacrifice is not necessary!" he said, "Just like your mother, compassionate and always motivated by challenge!" he smiled, "Are you going against her over the man she snatched from you or for the sake of the subjects that suffer under her reign?"

Aaricia turned and looked at her grandfather, "You know

about...”

“Yes,” he interposed, smiling, tapping the rock as he beckoned her to seat next to him, “When your mother faked your death, she made it appear as though you accidentally let the candles in your bedroom burn to the extend it suffocated you and burnt down your bed while you slept.” he giggled, “The entire kingdom bought it, and the matter was not properly looked into. Well, when she asked Nigel to look after you, he came to me but I told him to take you to a much safer place, away from the oculus of the kingdom.” he snorted, “If you were here with us, the Queen, your sister might have launched an attack on these mountains, because she would fear you would one day fly the gryphons over her castle and seize that which is hers’.”

“She was a wise woman, mother!” said Aaricia.

“Her mother taught her well,” he said, “And I did the best I could as well! The gryphons cried all day when she passed away, even before the news got to us, they could tell!”

“Can I see them before I go?” she asked looking into his eyes.

“Yes!” he nodded, “Why not! But I’m more interested in knowing how you were able to raise these royal subjects of um...handful of an army!”

“They’re not an army,” she said, “They are family now!” she sighed.

“Hmm, I see!” he remarked, “Family indeed!”

“Well, Grapapa, since you’ve asked,” she sighed, “The young one...”

“The young handsome one among them?” he asked, “He likes you, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, the uh...good looking one!” she grimaced, “He found me lying unconscious by the river, months back. Took me to his place and looked after me. Well, these men came one night, burnt down his place and took us hostage!”

“Hmm! Interesting!” said the old man, “And how were you able to transform such foes into allies?”

“Well, Grapapa!” she said, “Let’s say it’s just a girl’s little secret!”

“I see fate in action, little Ricia!” he stood to his feet grunting, “Sometimes the best things come to us in our darkest moments but, because of our condition and situation of things, we hardly notice those great things or even acknowledge their presence!”

“This is no time for love and play, Grapapa,” she said, “I just want to...”

“Take out your sister, the Queen, bring peace to all the lands and maybe sit on that throne alone and basked in your lonesome!” he giggled, “Do not act like a blind man sitting next to fire, don’t say you don’t feel the passion burning from this young man’s heart towards you! He has a good heart and, I think he’d make a good mate for a great and beautiful

Queen!” he turned and smiled at her, “Unless if you’d allow your sister to see this one too, and seize him like she did Gerald!”

“You’re right, Grapapa!” she said, “You’re right!”

“Look,” he knelt and plugged a beautiful flower, “This one I just plugged off, will wither, it is cut from its lifeline, cut off its life support, and the rest will continue to grow and blossom.” he sighed, “The heart is like that, Ricia. Assiana might think she took away the only man that had ever loved you, but what she did is, she plugged his heart from its life support! He shall wither and would not experience true love, because he is a flower plugged from the ground and placed in a vase!”

“Grapapa,” said Aaricia, “What do you know about Azzo’s sword?” she smiled, “And why does it matter so much?”

The old man looked at his granddaughter and stretched his old face muscle to smile, “The sword amplifies, strengthens, and obeys the heart of he that wields it, instantly executing the true desires of his heart. The blade shall first set an example with he that handles it, and show that which is bound to come to the kingdom, if such a man reigns over the kingdom!”

“Could you simplify that just a little, Grapapa?” she said as she held him.

“That’s simply put, Ricia!” he replied, “If I am to say it as written in the scrolls, in the Zodan tongue, none a word you

can comprehend! The sword was given to your great-great-great grandfather, Azzodo, after he found a man at night who was wounded and left to die. He took the man home and treated his wounds, unknown to him, that man was a being that fell from the stars. So when the man was about to leave, he told Azzodo to ask for anything.” He smiled, “Well, Azzodo begged the man to give him some time to think, and after days of thoughts, he came back and told the man he wished for one thing; a sword that would amplify, strengthen, and obey him. The man agreed, but he warned him also by saying, ‘I thought you’d ask for wealth like all men do, but I can see in your heart, you desire peace for all mankind. I shall grant you one wish and make your seeds and ones to come royal, and they shall rule the lands but know ye also; the sword shall not only amplify, strengthen, and obey the heart of he that wield it, but shall instantly execute the true desires of the man’s heart, by first setting an example with the man, that which is bound to come to the kingdom, under the man’s rule!’”

“So, that’s how the myth about Azzo’s sword came to be?” she asked.

“Myth?” asked the old man, “Hmm! We shall see!”

The old man led Aaricia and her men to an open green land on one side of the mountain. On their arrival, all they could hear was sound of the wind, as it blew and whistled through the meadow.

“Where are they?” she asked excitedly.

“You have Ghourakan blood in you,” said the old man, “Just whistle!”

“Whistle?” she asked.

“Yes, Ricia,” he added, “Just whistle!”

Aaricia began to whistle but only the echoes returned to her ears as it bounced on the mountain walls. The men looked around for signs of any gryphon but were welcomed by silence.

“Do it again,” said the old man, “There’s too much mix of fear and excitement in your tone. Good only attracts good. They won’t answer!” he laughed, “Let the love from your heart be one with the wind, clear off any ounce of hate and anger inside of you. Let the seed of peace be planted in you, then whistle! Close your eyes, Ricia!”

Aaricia turned and looked at Zack, who smiled back at her, she then closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Imagine putting a smile on the faces of all the subjects you wished to set free from the clenches of evil!” he added, “Now, whistle a song you think they’d love!”

Aaricia squeezed her lips and began to whistle a sweet song, the tone harmonized with the wind, and the wind in the meadow began to stir as they all felt the presence of something in the wind.

“Oh my God, look!” said Zack, pointing his finger up.

Aaricia opened her eyes and looked up, to see thousands of gryphons gliding above them.

“Wow!” she said in excitement, “I didn’t know they were this beautiful and this...!”

“Many? Neither do I!” said the old man, excitedly, “I’ve never seen them this much in my entire life!” looking up, marveled by the number of gryphons above them, “This is...incredibly unbelievable!”

The gryphons began to land as Aaricia ran through the field, a white one landed in front of her and she laughed joyfully.

Zack had never seen her this happy before, he too ran after her but was engaged by one of the big birds, who came to defend Aaricia from him.

About half of the gryphons landed as the rest flew above. They surrounded her, throwing their wings up and down as they let a cry out. Almost all the Ghourakans ran from their homes to the field, to see the wonders most of them had never witnessed.

Aaricia walked and gently touched the beak of the white gryphon, and it went calm and bowed before her, beckoning her to ride its back. She carefully rode the beast and without any hesitation, the beast ascended with her into the skies.

The rest of the big birds flew beside Aaricia like escorts and from the highest of the skies they descended in a fascinating formation. The gryphons divided into two teams, and like a squadron of voracious birds, she led them up in a high precision flight, then down into a portal made by other gryphons, creating two giant rings in the skies. She screamed in delight and jumped off its back, then all the gryphons disappeared leaving her on a free fall, but she was not afraid, instead, she continued to laugh joyfully on her descent. As she was about to hit the ground she whistled beautifully again, the men below watched how all the gryphons reappeared and made a ramp like a spiral stair down to the ground and she fell upon their wings and slid downwards gracefully.

Her grandfather took a heavy breath, he was filled with pride and joy and his face shone. As soon as she stood to her feet, she ran to old Griftbear and hugged him.

“Thank you, Grapapa!” she said, “Thank you for this, I needed this peace!”

“Anytime, my Ricia!” he said as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

She turned and waved a goodbye to the beautiful gryphons, but they began to cry and all flew into the skies and disappear.

“Just remember one thing, Ricia!” he said, “I know I cannot stop you from chasing after the beautiful rainbow of thoughts that ricochet on the walls of your heart of hearts. But know this; Light has no shadows, and in order to place darkness where it belong, you must let your light shine through love, kindness, mercy and forgiveness! Your father won the most deadly of all wars, not because of the sword in his hand but because of the love in his heart! That’s why he was greatly revered and all men in all the kingdoms call him Jazekiah the greatest of all the kings! I can see the wisdom and strength of your father in your eyes and the compassion and kindness of your mother in your heart. Therefore, go, you have all my blessings, I shall pray for you and your dear sister, and maybe,” he turned and looked at the field, “We wouldn’t need to make an attempt to see if the gryphons would hear the sound of our whistles miles away,” he winked, handing her something wrapped in a thick old garment. “It belonged to your mother,” he added, “You shall find it pleasing to the weather!” The old man ordered some men and women to offer to Aaricia, three big boxes.

“What are these, Grapapa?” she asked.

“Something you and your No-land army would find very helpful,” he said handing her a letter with the Queen’s seal on it, “In order to do the right thing the right way! The simplest of techniques have proven to bring down even greatest of walls and kingdoms, and not swords.”

“I don’t understand, Grapapa!” she said.

“There’s a ceremony at the great hall in Azzodonia,” he said, “If you and your army can make it in two nights, you might be able to save a kingdom!” he sighed, “When you reach the valleys, you shall meet the house of Bouziah waiting for you. They shall give to you six horses and a carriage, she’s old but she’s elegant and strong.” The old man winked.

Aaricia kissed him on the cheek and wiped her tears then walked down the valley without saying a word. Her grandfather watched her leave and he too, wiped tears from his old cheek. The men collected the boxes and followed her as she led them down the valley.

THE QUEEN OF AZZODONIA

Aaricia and her men, all dressed for the ceremony walked into the great hall, her arm tucked in Zack's. In the great hall were all the vassals, noblemen, knights, dancing girls and jesters. All dressed for the banquet.

As she stepped in with Zack by her side, and her men behind her, all the people in the hall turned to have a look and were astonished by her beauty and what she wore. With a circlet crown upon her head she smiled like the new bride of the kingdom. Zack helped her gently take off a blue wool coat she had on, leaving her in an extravagant light aqua green dress that exposed her exaggerated hips. Leaving both the men and women astounded with their jaws dropped.

“Princess Aaricia?” said someone in the crowds.

“Could it be?” asked another.

Those who were seated stood to their feet and those who held glasses of wine lowered it as they all struggled to the front to have a good look at the Princess.

“Aaricia, the lady of Noland!!!” Stuttered the announcer as he cleared his throat.

The Queen stood to her feet from her throne on sighting Aaricia but managed to maintain her modesty.

Aaricia and her men made their way up. Zack had on his other hand, an object wrapped in a garment.

“Loyal subjects,” said the Queen, “Welcome to our presence, my sister, Aaricia!”

“I am here to take what’s rightfully mine!” said Aaricia, as she faced her sister, the Queen.

“You and what army?” asked the Queen, mockingly.

“She and the Noland army!” said a fancy dressed Simo, a bit frightened and shaky, standing behind Aaricia.

Both Aaricia and Zack turned and stared at Simo.

“Noland? Army?” the Queen laughed, “Is this a joke? Never heard of it!”

“Yes,” said Aaricia, “And that’s why you’ll never see your downfall coming!”

All the invited guest began to move back against the wall as the tension arose between the two sisters.

“Aaricia?” said an old man amidst the crowd, “You are alive?” he ran forward to her.

“Priest Jinson” she smiled, “Still looking strong!”

“Why present thyself like a sacrificial lamp within these dark walls?” said the old Priest. “You should’ve stayed away from the evil eye of the world, your sister has changed, and she is not good within!” he cried.

“I am done hiding,” she said, “I’ve come to do the needful!”

“Oh dear,” he said, “So, it is true what I’ve heard about what it is believed your mother did?” he smiled joyfully, “Oh, look how sweet your dimples beam up thy face when you wear such great smile, like your mother’s!” he marveled at her beauty, looking at her like a goddess, “Oh Aaricia! Save us, save us from the fangs of destruction!”

“I am a kind and merciful Queen,” Assiana bragged, “Just as my father and mother! I knew you’d come, someday, sister, if you had told me you were coming I would’ve made the feast more...warming and welcoming!”

“Yes,” said Aaricia, “Just as you welcomed death into the castle years ago, killing father, mother and brother just so your desperate wicked heart shall sit its dark bum on the throne!”

The Queen's laughter echoed through the banquet hall, "Oh, dear sister!" she said, "How I've missed you so!" she walked to embrace Aaricia, "All those silly prayers we said on our beautiful royal knees! If only we knew we needed not a God or gods for protection and provision! We were royal, we had everything. Because all we needed to do was to seize anything we've ever wanted, and make it ours!"

Aaricia then winked at Zack, who then brought forth a blade wrapped in a fabric and laid it on the floor.

"What's that?" asked the Queen, "Guards!" her eyes widened in fear as she moved back. The guards ran towards her, "Rid me of this filth!" referring to the blade.

"For your information, that's known as Azzo's sword!" said Aaricia, "The real Azzo's sword. Not the dummy you hung in your throne room to fool the great people of this once great, prosperous and beautiful kingdom." she then turned to the invited guest, "My sister, your so called Queen, killed your great king, also she took away the lives of our mother and brother, just so she'd satisfy her desperate and wicked heart. We all know that whoever wield Azzo's sword is the one fit to serve the great people of this kingdom!"

The people began to murmur and some pulling back.

"It's just a sword, sister!" said the Queen, "An old filthy metal! I do not fear no sword, for I do not fear no man nor God or gods. I should've had you killed when they told me they'd discovered where you stayed hidden!" she bragged,

“But you’re blood, and he was water. Hmm! You know what they say, blood is thicker than water. So, I used and dumped him for the rag that he was!”

“Lift the damn sword, and prove to your subjects that you are the rightful heir to the throne!” said Aaricia, “And that your hands are not stained by the blood of the late great king, his Queen, and Dassia, our brother!”

Some of the kingmakers, vassals and guards turned their gaze at the Queen.

“You cannot order me, sister!” remarked the Queen, “I am the Queen, I command, and not you, not the old sack of a man you called father. So what if I rid the great kingdom off some of its old roaches?”

“Roaches?” said Aaricia, “You my dear, is that cockroach!”

“I watched mother and father give you an exceptional treatment, placing before you all the necessary tools to become the next Queen...of the world,” she snorted, “Well, who owns the world now, big sister!?” she stood on her feet vexed, “Preparing you for a featherbrained fairy tale, leaving me overwhelmed by my own thoughts and tears!” she turned facing her throne, caressing the golden arm of her throne, “They prepared you to lead, unknowingly grooming me to rule, and a great ruler I’ve become!” she bragged, “Even better than all the kings in the kingdoms I’ve conquered!”

“Ever since you got on that throne, darkness made the lands

its dwelling. You've made all the men, women and children in almost all the kingdoms suffer in the hands of your unmerciful army, in all the lands you've conquered!" said Aaricia, "I've nothing against you, I just don't like the idea of you laying your wicked hands on things that do not belong to you, leaving them in worse conditions than you found them!"

"Things? That-do-not-belong-to-me? You said?" the Queen laughed maniacally, "Pathetic, this is why you will never own anything. You're weak, sister, you've always been weak!" she paused and sighed, "Same old prayerful, weak child, I guess that's why they spent most of their time trying to make you better. But you see, me, I was born strong! Strong enough to give myself that which the whole world and the entire stars could not make you own or become, sister!"

"Oh hush," said Aaricia, "You're a miserable excuse for a Queen!"

The Queen walked to Aaricia and smacked her, "Don't you dare squirm your smutty tongues at me!"

Karazan drew his sword, and so did all the Queen's guards.

Zack made an attempt to interfere, Aaricia stopped him.

"This young one seems to be concerned about you," she said, "Hmm! Young men and their superficial affection. I guess this one loves you too, just like your Gerald!" she smirked, "I've always wanted to teach you what mother and father couldn't, who would've taught I'd be a better teacher? You think all

these people love you? Gerald abandoned you and even arranged to have you killed in spite of everything you've done for him, just so he'd get to live in the castle and enjoy the spoils!" she laughed and sat on her throne, "Love," she sighed, "Men will always choose the best option over love and leave you drowning in your own scummy tears, big sister! Just like your love and blind compassion for the people, your heart is weak, and that makes you unfit to rule. Your kind is meant to be ruled!"

"Pick the sword, Assiana!" said Aaricia, "Or are you afraid, what they would find out?"

The Queen stared at Aaricia like a lioness locked in a cage.

All the people began to murmur and protest in agreement to Aaricia's proposal. The Queen became infuriated, uncomfortable on the throne.

"I have had enough of your contempt, sister!" said the Queen, "Raising my loyal subjects against me right in my presence?" furiously, "Guards! Bring me the gift from our western ally!" she commanded, "I've longed for this moment, and you offered it to me with ease!"

The guards sprang into action and quickly ran out. They came rolling a machine on wheels covered with a big black garment. They rolled it to the front of the throne and the Queen stood up as they unveiled the machine.

"With this, your guts and your filthy army shall be put to the

test,” the Queen threatened, “And all those who questioned my authority shall be sterilized. A thousand more headed the kingdom from the seas as we speak, with this, even Ghourak shall bow before the great Queen of Azzodonia!”

The Queen yelled at the guards to load the machine; a clump of mechanical metals fastened together with a long cylindrical snout, like an iron beast.

“I hope you’ve said your prayers before setting your foot on my palace, sister” said the Queen, “Prepare to meet your maker!”

“Assiana, I did not come here to fight you,” said Aaricia, “I’ve come so we’d talk.”

“You sound scared, sister!” said the Queen, “You look like someone who’s buried in the tomb of the absence of God’s presence!” raising an eyebrow, “You’ve walked into the beginning of your own doom, you and all those who gave the slightest thought of rising against me!”

The guest became scared as they began to run out of the great hall. The Queen charged her weapon and without any hesitation made an attempt to fire a shot when all of a sudden, the roof of the great hall came crashing in; the gryphons have crashed the party, and the old beard Griftbear rode on the white one, holding an object wrapped in a garment in one hand.

Aaricia jumped happily, “Grapapa!” as he flew passed her and

landed right in front of the Queen.

“Enough!” he yelled, “When would you stop this madness!?”

“Stop stirring my business with your rod, you old buffoon!” shouted the Queen, “Enough of what?” she then noticed what he held, “What’s that you carry?”

“Something important,” he said, “That will seal the fate of this kingdom before dawn!” he turned and looked at Aaricia.

“Azzo’s sword,” said the Queen as fear gripped her heart, “So what she had, too, was a fake?” she laughed, “Old man, so you are the house of wisdom, that appear old and wilted, where the heavens caresses the earth...you had the sword all along. I should’ve known!” she frowned, “You tricked me, and lied to me when you last visited me. You told me that the secret location is not known by you. She’s always had favour in your eyes!” she charged her machine and fired a shot, a cannon ball popped out accompanied by dark powder sent the old man and his gryphon to the floor. The garment went up revealing the sword, and it fell from the fabric, half of it sank into the ground, the old man and his poor creature died on the spot.

“No!” Aaricia screamed, “Grapapa!” running towards him when another ball of fire came through but Zack was quick to push her away as they both dodged the deadly luminous ball.

“Kill them all,” the Queen commanded her guards, “All of them! Including the big birds!”

Aaricia rushed as she whistled and mounted on a gryphon that ascent along with the rest, flying beneath the shattered roof of the great hall. The Queen returned to her machine and continued to fire at Aaricia and the gryphons. While the guards and the Noland army clashed, Zack managed to run towards the Queen, he drew his sword, jumped and engaged her but he was no match for her skills, as she shamed him with a sword she pulled from underneath the arm of her throne.

“I made sure anyone who ever loved her dies,” she said, pointing her sword at him on the floor, “Fool! What do you know about love?”

Zack was in a frazzled state of mind, he could not meet up with the speed at which the Queen moved. She raised her sword to strike when Aaricia jumped off her gryphon and attacked her.

“I’ve longed waited for this!” said Aaricia, punching the Queen on the face, sending her to the floor. Aaricia tore off the elegant dress she wore to have a good balance, took off the circlet and tied her hair like a pony tail. Zack then passed his sword to Aaricia from where he lay.

“A dishonourable act,” said the Queen, “Don’t you think?”

“There’s nothing as dishonourable as your butt on that throne, little sister!” replied Aaricia.

“You don’t scare me, sister!” said the Queen, “Father never,

did, mother never did! No one in this kingdom and beyond can scare me!!!” as she rose to her feet and challenged Aaricia, who seemed outmatched as the Queen swung her sword in a fraction of a second, cutting about an inch deep on the thigh. The Queen appeared highly trained, but even though in the midst of danger, Aaricia remained focused on what was, as she engaged her sister with care. The Queen was balanced and put up a strong defence. She tried to push Aaricia against the dead end corner of the hall, Aaricia maneuvered to protect herself, handling her sword with ease.

All the gryphons and the men, including the guards and the nobles stood aside and watched the two sisters settle their feud in one of the most fascinating swordfight, each displaying their skills in a remarkable art of swordsmanship.

“She’ll be killed!” said Simo.

“Not with what I’ve seen her do!” answered Karazan, “Go get her, my Queen!”

“The moon nor the stars are up tonight,” said the Queen, “The sunlight isn’t here for you to take its advantage to block my eyes like when we were kids, huh?”

“You’re the one who always love to cheat your way through everything,” Aaricia remarked.

Their swords clashed. Both were skilful with their swords as though taught by the same master.

“Maybe your beauty has placed before you all the things you

needed to survive,” said the Queen, “But my zeal gave me all I’ve ever wanted. As I have taught you lessons in life, so shall I teach these ingrates how to appreciate what they would never find; peace! They never appreciated father’s work so they shall all die in immiseration! ”

After a long fight, the queen kicked Aaricia to the floor and stepped on her sword with one leg, holding Aaricia down with the other; with the tip of her sword, the Queen delivered a sharp strike to Aaricia’s chest, but a violent force thwarted the sword and it disintegrated. Some of the pieces from the broken sword pierced through the Queen’s face.

“What sort of sorcery is this?” cried the Queen, covering her face with her hands “Cheat! You cheat!” she sighted an amulet on Aaricia’s chest that blocked her strike. The Queen began to look around for another weapon, left with no choice on sighting Azzo’s sword, she went for it without a second thought.

“Assiana, no!” Aaricia warned, “It’ll destroy you!”

“Destroy me?” yelled the Queen, “I am the epitome of destruction, for to hell itself, many have I offered, sister!” she held the sword.

The men moved back in reverence as the Queen pulled out the sword from the ground, and it metamorphosed into a red flame. She laughed like a wildly disordered lunatic as the sound of thunder broke the surroundings, they all looked up as lightning lit the skies.

Queen Assiana and the sword became one. Every hair on her body rose and turned red, and so did her limpid evil eyes. Like a serpent on its feet, she arose and grew twice her size, the shape of her blood-red heart could be seen by all as it engulfed in flames.

“We’re dead!” cried Simo, “It was a lost cause!”

“It was nice fighting with you, my comrades” yelled Karazan to his stricken men.

The Queen laughed as the fire from her heart moved through her veins like a stream and down to the sword, the sword glowed and began to burn brightly and so did the Queen. Fear gripped all the men as the gryphons cried out in confusion, the Queen stood mightily before them like a dreadful storm that came to life. The men noticed some slimy dark roots cut through the floor and began to spread in the great hall and unto its walls.

“Such tremendous power!” yelled the Queen as she spoke like a legion, in many languages and voices, she spoke “Oh! If only I knew what I was missing!” she laughed, “Old fool!” turning to old Griftbear’s corpse.

“Stay away from him!” Aaricia cried.

Karazan and the rest of the Noland Army, including the guards moved to one side, the gryphons yowled and their voices filled the great hall, they all stood in horror as the Queen transformed into a new being.

“Nowhere to run, big sister!” she said, “Nowhere to hide!” she charged ahead flying into the air, raising the sword to strike Aaricia when a great lightning struck her, emitting an enormous spark. The only thing that descended was the sword, accompanied by flakes of ashes. The sword landed with one third of it buried in the ground still in flames.

Aaricia left the men and walked towards the sword, crying, she fetched the ashes, wetting the floor with her tears, the ashes absorbed her tears. She then stood up to pick the sword.

“Please don’t!” said Zack, “I need you!”

“Don’t do it, my lady!” cried Karazan, “The kingdom isn’t worth your life!”

She turned to them but ignored their warnings. Aaricia walked without emotions to the burning sword, and as soon as she touched it, the fire quenched and the blade turned blue and glowed, and so did she.

Light shone upon the men and the gryphons almost blinding them, they turned their eyes away, and the sword dimmed its light.

Roses and flowers grew beneath the men’s feet and in all the surroundings.

Aaricia’s smile was frozen by the sight of her grandfather. A relieved Karazan, an excited Zack and peeing Simo, the gryphons, the guards, noblemen and the Noland army bowed before her and embraced the presence and essence of a new

dawn of peace.

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APPRECIATION:

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Richard Shekari.

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