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General Roane Faxon, however, narrowed his fathomless black gaze on the queen's face, nodding to accept the obvious compliment. He watched like a hawk as she drank sensuously from her wine goblet and nibbled at the trenchered sweetmeats sitting between them. Tendra wanted to groan. Even the notorious "Darkson Axe" fell prey to the mercy of his hormones. But to his credit, at least he said nothing to encourage the vain, sex-starved queen.

If only the young woman possessed as much selflessness as she did beauty, the kingdom might not now be in such straights. King Norman, Tendra's uncle and Patrilla's father, had done the kingdom a true disservice dying so young—doubly so having died in the arms of his mistress, while his wife passed away giving birth to her still-born son.

"No, truly." Patrilla leaned closer, her abundant breasts pushing past the stays of her royal gown.

Tendra fought not to roll her eyes as the general reacted predictably. "All of my men are worthy," he said quietly, his gaze narrowed on her ample cleavage. He glanced up, catching Tendra's scathing glare. "And I imagine your warriors are as well."

BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

http://www.amberquill.com

DARKSON'S FORFEIT AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



CHAPTER 1

Standing at parade rest behind and to the right of her monarch, with her sword tip down squarely between her feet, Tendra Val'ore used every ounce of discipline in her warrior's body to still the overwhelming need affecting her sword arm. With just one well-placed blow, the queen would be struck speechless, the district once again at peace, and Tendra back leading her regiment against the insidious Darkson legions surrounding the kingdom, legions that waited eagerly to see how their precious general faired during an amicable supping with the enemy.

"Oh, General Faxon," Queen Patrilla tittered, fluttering her fan so hard Tendra worried she'd poke out her eye. "I'm so glad you suggested we put aside our differences for a short time. War is so very tiring. And I must say, if more of our Solorian men were as...experienced as you, I'm sure there'd be no need for war. Just time enough to indulge in the pleasures we all crave." She licked her lips,

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"All of my men are worthy," he said quietly, his gaze narrowed on her ample cleavage. He glanced up, catching Tendra's scathing glare. "And I imagine your warriors are as well."

"Oh, you mean my Royal Guard?" Patrilla waved, nearly catching Tendra's ceremonial overdress. The monarch whirled the fan back to her lap and grinned slyly, winking Tendra's way. "Our captain's pretty, yet so very deadly. The perfect leader of Solorian security. Practicality is one thing, but in Soloria, beauty always surrounds you. It's what we prize most here, isn't it, Tendra?"

Patrilla patted Tendra's arm as if petting a domestic animal, and Tendra had to fight the urge not to bite her and prove the similarity true. They'd bickered growing up, but when Patrilla had ascended the throne, she'd turned bitchiness up to a whole new level.

The queen looked back to Faxon and smiled, her perfect teeth as

white as snow. "I daresay Tendra could best any of your men in combat, or in any other area your men should care to challenge." Patrilla might as well have cast a gauntlet, and Tendra wondered if the spiteful brunette had an inkling of what she was about. "Come, General, let's play at war. A harmless little contest." She stared at him hungrily, but her words had captured his attention.

Faxon eyed Tendra up and down, his gaze curiously closed and not at all as speculating as the one he'd turned on the queen. When he glanced back at Patrilla, his expression was sincere, but Tendra could almost feel the swift calculation running through his agile mind.

"A challenge, hmm? What would be the stakes, Your Majesty?" he asked in a deep voice that hushed the surrounding guests.

Tendra held her breath. That Faxon hadn't yet tried to forcibly take the crown meant he either wanted the approval of Soloria's people, or his force wasn't as large as he'd lead them to believe.

Staring at him, Tendra wondered just how crafty General Roane Faxon truly was. His reputation spoke of a ruthless warrior, a cunning opponent both on and off the battlefield. Eyeing him, she had a feeling his mental acuity more than matched the sheer strength apparent in his massive frame. He was a skilled predator, and one who clearly wanted the crown of Soloria.

But then, who didn't want a piece of Soloria? Rich with fertile lands, a never-ending source of water in the Cojir River, and copious gem deposits in the Forgotten Caves of Mount Malinta, Soloria was indeed a treasure in its own right. Unfortunately, its voluptuous and astonishingly beautiful queen only added to its allure.

When Patrilla said nothing, Roane smiled, drawing the stares of every warm-blooded woman in the room, not to mention a few turn-flavored men. "Might I suggest a wager that would benefit us both?"

She nodded happily, as if unaware she played directly into his hands. The glint in her eyes said differently, however, and suddenly

Tendra understood. The narcissistic witch knew exactly what she was doing. Having captured and escorted the queen's latest lover from the castle and into the death squad's hands, Tendra had earned her cousin's enmity once again. No matter that her lover had been a spy from a rival district, that the knowledge he'd gained in her company was enough to ruin Soloria's fragile peace.

No, Queen Patrilla only cared that she'd lost a skilled lover and blamed her distress on her "aggravating, *unnatural* prig" of a cousin.

Commenting on Tendra's unique abilities, her *unnatural* grace with a sword—a testament to her father's deep-rooted magic—had been intended to stir old wounds. And Patrilla had left her mark. Tendra had wanted to protest, immediately reverting to the pained seven-year-old inured by bullying, rather than the confident twenty-four-year-old who helped maintain an empire.

Pushing aside the painful slur had been difficult, and not for the first time did Tendra wonder why she bothered at all. But she'd been raised to respect the kingdom and its royal seat of power, if not the person upon it. So she continued to protect Soloria under the careful tutelage of Lords Marwel and Pherlon, the Royal Advisors, men old enough and wise enough to know when to avoid a confrontation with a man like Faxon.

Right now Faxon eyed the queen like a hawk its prey. "You are as yet unwed," he said boldly. Though only a general, his status and wealth made him Patrilla's equal, at least to those not concerned with noble birth. "You reign over a kingdom constantly in danger from the greedy hands of those who surround you."

Of which you're the most dangerous, Tendra thought. "My warriors are battle-hard, seasoned, and have yet to be beaten in combat. With my force adjoined to yours, Soloria would never want for protection."

"Indeed," a nasty, little quack of a man sitting to Faxon's right agreed. "If I may, General, I am Lord Ivesto, her Highness' Forbearer

of Mines. We are forever dealing with bandits, who are the scourge of the northern lands. With a force such as yours, our army would not be stretched as thin as it is, more able to cope with the internal strife we suffer here daily."

Tendra clenched the hilt of her sword, regretting the fact discipline insisted she not move, unless to protect the queen from harm. The Royal Guard did just that—guard. Politics and cross words were best left to those more suited.

Ivesto, that treasonous bastard.

Marwel and Pherlon glared at him, but it was the queen's displeasure that shut his mouth tight.

"Really, Ivesto, it's not as bad as all that." She turned to smile at Faxon. "Ivesto exaggerates. Tendra, explain to the general how well-shored are our defenses. Tell him about our perimeter guards and such."

With dislike for her cousin warring with her love of the kingdom, Tendra gritted her teeth and glanced again at Faxon. This time he stared at her with prurient interest, a look that sparked a fiery want in her loins. Bemused, she met his gaze with a shuttered one of her own.

"The queen jests, General." She refused to acknowledge Patrilla's unhappy pout. "As she knows, I would never readily explain our defenses to the commander of an invading force, one that even now sits beyond our walls. Our crafty queen seeks only to prove to you that the captain of her guard cannot be swayed or tricked." She glanced subtly to Ivesto and saw Marwel and Pherlon hiding their grins behind muffled coughs. "Soloria possesses a formidable defense against all those who would take by force what our kingdom has preciously guarded for more than a hundred years, a treasure beyond compare."

"Oh?" Faxon murmured, his gaze assessing. "And what exactly is that?"

"Peace. The tranquility of a future, one not wrangled by brute force,

but won by hard work and dedication to life."

He stared at her, and she wished she could tell what he was thinking.

"Well said, cuz." Patrilla clapped, the hostility in her eyes contrasting with her soft smile and loving expression. "You can see why we prize our guard so much, General. Our captain is both strong and poetic. She's not only passionate about our land, but as fierce with a sword as our Gerina."

Several in the crowd currently in the queen's favor guffawed. Her advisors, however, and Tendra, positively glowered.

"Gerina?"

"Just a woman of exceedingly strong passions, General."

Comprehension swiftly dawned and he laughed.

Gerina, royal whore and mistress of the black passions. "Sword" indeed. Tendra glowered but said nothing, staring straight ahead. Damn Marwel and Pherlon for making her believe in a unified front. She longed to skewer Patrilla on the point of her sword. This insult only added to the heap the bitch had been piling up for years.

"Now enough about this challenge. Let us drink and eat and talk of more pleasurable things." Patrilla eyed Faxon like a midnight snack. "Tell me about yourself, General. What is your life like in the southlands?"

* * *

Hours later, her feet aching, Tendra watched as the last guest left the great hall before relaxing her vigil.

"I did not give you leave to stand down," Patrilla said absently.

"We're alone now, Trilla," she sniped, grateful not to have to perform any longer. For the kingdom she would sacrifice all, but for her cousin? Not a damned thing. "It is long past time I made things right between us."

"We're not alone." Patrilla sneered gleefully at the shadow

emerging from a darkened hallway.

Tendra tensed, her sword clasped and ready for action as Roane Faxon approached.

Faxon paused as he noted her stance. "I'm here as requested, alone and unarmed." He glanced at Patrilla before turning his attention to Tendra with a question on his face.

"Ignore my overanxious guard dog, Roane." Patrilla grinned coyly and gestured for him to sit next to her on a stone bench near the hearth. "Don't worry. Tendra shall be my chaperone. We are perfectly safe from harm or speculation with her around."

Don't bet on it. Tendra gripped her sword and moved to a nearby wall, close enough to intrude should Faxon do anything suspicious. Much as she relished the idea of injury to her cousin, a successful attack on Soloria's queen was a successful attack on Soloria itself. There would be time enough to deal with her cousin again once he left.

The general sat next to Patrilla, waiting for her to speak.

"I wanted to talk to you about that wager you proposed."

He frowned, and Tendra did the same. "What of it? I realize now you never had any intention of following through with it."

"So sure are you? Perhaps I've changed my mind."

He stared at Patrilla's ripe mouth, her creamy skin and burning blue eyes. Tendra thought her cousin's attributes most unfair. With an ugly queen, most assuredly rule would have been stripped from the hypocritical young woman and passed to one more worthy, most likely to one of the Royal Advisors, at least until Patrilla produced an heir. But too many men were taken with Patrilla's exquisite beauty. Even now the Darkson Axe sat too close to her cousin, his cock probably stiffening in his trou as Patrilla—

What the hell is my cousin doing?

"Majesty," she and Roane said simultaneously, both in shocked amazement.

Patrilla had her hands over Roane's crotch, artlessly stroking his burgeoning erection as he sat frozen beside her.

"Shh, Roane. Tendra will not tell, and we both know you want this."

Tendra gritted her teeth, both embarrassed and amazed at Patrilla's audacity. The great queen of Soloria was no more than a wanton slut, and now their enemy knew it as well. Had Patrilla no shame? There were plenty of males here eager to bed the depraved monarch. What did she hope to gain from this?

Though Faxon physically responded, he regarded Patrilla with suspicion. "Your Majesty," he began, his voice raspy as she ran her fingers along his growing cock.

Tendra couldn't help but notice how extremely well-proportioned he was. Lord, but he was large, and growing larger.

"I fail to see what this has to do with the challenge."

"It's simple," she said on a breath. "You give me this." She grasped him hard, making him growl as he pressed into her touch. "And agree to let your best man fight Tendra, and I'll agree to your conditions. But we have to maintain this agreement in secret. Should your man win, my people cannot know I wed you because of a wager. Instead we'll say it was because I knew you to be the right man to protect our kingdom."

She quickened her hand over him, and when he stopped her, she smiled. "Should Tendra win, which she will, I'll have one hundred thousand gold coins from your coffers. And for a year I'll have you, anytime I want you, as my consort."

He held her hand as he considered, his dark eyes burning, and gazed from her greedy stare to Tendra's incredulous one. "You would agree to this simply because you desire wealth?"

"That and your body." Patrilla shrugged. "What can I say? I have expensive tastes, and we don't tax here as much as we should. I'm thinking of increasing that as we speak. I like large amounts," she

purred.

"You conceited bitch—" It popped out before Tendra could silence herself.

"Yes?" Patrilla hissed. "You were saying, loyal subject to the crown?"

Were it not for Faxon, Tendra would have dragged her cousin in front of the Royal Advisors and demanded she be dethroned. Enough was enough. But until she could take the queen aside, she had to appear as one with her queen for the sake of her kingdom. She could only be grateful the man hadn't agreed to her cousin's plan.

"I agree." Faxon's eyes gleamed.

She gaped and Patrilla chuckled with pleasure.

"But your captain has to watch."

CHAPTER 2

Roane waited, anticipation making his breath heavy as Queen Patrilla slowly unfastened his trou and took him out, holding his pulsating cock in her dainty hands. It was not the queen, however, that had him so hard. No, it was the defiant warrior-woman Tendra who aroused him.

The minute he'd laid eyes on the dark-haired beauty, he'd wanted her. The play for the queen was a means to an end. Winning Soloria would cement tomorrow, for both himself and his men. Though Roane was fortunate enough to possess a touch of magic, the strong pull that ran though his father's line was not enough to overpower all that stood in his path.

Faxon Draw, as his father had referred to it, allowed the Faxon men more of an edge in battle. They could, at will, pull their opponents closer and wind their energies around the enemy, as they both physically and mentally wore them down. Roane used his power, and

the more he used it, the stronger it grew. Yet he still had to fight to hold onto the southland's plains and fields that produced far too little food to sustain his growing army. All the magic and raiding in the land couldn't compare to the magnificence of Soloria's promise. That the land came with a queen attached annoyed him, but he was man enough to admit being forced to endure Patrilla's lust was no hardship.

He glanced down at her hand pumping his thick cock. Already a drop of pre-come leaked from the tip, and he heard her murmur her appreciation. But surprisingly it was not the queen, but the captain of her guard, Tendra, whose full lips parted in shock, who made him that much harder.

Long, dark hair pulled back into a braid left a proud, striking face. She had flawless skin, a rich gold from her time spent training outdoors. Her amber eyes burned with indignation, and, if he wasn't mistaken, the signs of growing arousal.

He groaned when Patrilla tightened her grip. Apparently, she'd seen the direction of his gaze and was displeased, perhaps even jealous. But instead of harming him, her tight hold increased his ardor. As she worked him, he stared into Tendra's fascinated gaze, imagining her touching him, her calloused hands cradling his shaft, fondling his balls.

Spreading his legs wider, he glanced at the woman pleasuring him and saw her smile with satisfaction. Petite and innocent of face, the voluptuous queen could not hide her true colors from a man who'd seen the worst this land had to offer. Her glittering blue eyes sparkled with avarice and a need to control all those around her. Holding him in her hands gave her a perverse sense of both power and pleasure. He could see her squirming in her seat, rubbing her thighs together. She might have started this little game to control him, but her lusts were readily apparent.

Deciding to up the ante, he reached out and caressed the back of her chestnut-colored curls. Allowing some of his core energy to seep

through his pores, he entangled the conniving queen's desires with his, drawing her deeper into his web. "Patrilla, sweet," he murmured, enjoying her hands as they brought him closer to orgasm. "I want you to suckle me." He stared down at himself.

Her eyes flashed. "Are you giving orders to a queen, General?" Though she spoke coldly, an answering heat lit her eyes, along with a quiver she clearly tried to suppress. As he'd thought, the queen liked subtle games of domination. He hoped she liked submitting, for he bowed to no one.

"I give orders all the time, sweet," he said huskily, running his thumb over her pouting lip. He glanced up at Tendra. "And nothing has changed now but the hall in which I sit." He gripped the queen's hair harder, not enough to hurt, but enough to let her know who had the power at this moment. Tendra took a step forward, and his cock hardened further, seeping with the need for relief.

"Roane." Patrilla licked her lips as she stared at his erection.

"Swallow me."

"Such strength," she whispered, handling his shaft like a prized possession. She bowed her head, leaning over his cock, but glancing at Tendra. "I can only hope my dear cousin won't think ill of me."

Roane, too, wanted to see Tendra's reaction. Patrilla's contrary words confused him. Either the captain was a lustful whore or a prudish wench disdaining sex. He stared at the dark-haired warrior to see how she'd handle this. The heady scent of sex spread through the room, and had they been in the southlands, he'd already have fucked Patrilla and her cousin several times.

Though Tendra's cheeks were flushed and her breathing heavy, he wanted to know if it was from arousal or anger. To her credit, she hadn't accosted her royal cousin for her many insults, an astonishing degree of discipline he admired. He knew the captain distrusted him, that he'd expected. He wanted control of Soloria. But for Tendra to

disdain for him for personal reasons didn't sit well.

"Well, Tendra?" he asked in a gravelly voice, irritated he cared what she thought one way or the other. "Would you deny me the queen's pleasure?" He closed his eyes as Patrilla blew a warm breath over his cock. "Or is this too much for your delicate sensibilities?"

Tendra stiffened. "I can stomach this well enough, Faxon. Get on with it already, my queen."

He opened his eyes, desire raging at the need to watch Tendra while another serviced him. Patrilla's mouth closed over him without hesitation, confirming another suspicion he'd had about the "innocent" queen. Not that he begrudged her any past liaisons, but he had a feeling marrying her wouldn't necessarily secure her fidelity.

Patrilla sucked him like an expert, licking and stroking with just the right amount of pressure to set his desire ablaze. But Tendra's clenched jaw and gaze that missed nothing made him want to burst. He didn't blink as he stared at her, captured by eyes so dark they looked black. Her chest rose and fell rapidly under the short, blood-red overdress she wore, unfortunately baring little of her perfectly formed breasts but their shape.

The queen gently pressed her teeth against the underside of his crown, and he groaned at the ecstatic sensation. Gripping her hair, he pulled her head harder over his cock, expecting the ease with which she accepted him. He slid to the back of her throat and still she sucked him, fondling his balls as she stroked.

"Come in my mouth, Roane," she whispered around his cock. "Let me swallow the golden seed of our world's greatest champion." She sucked him hard, and he felt his climax gathering.

He heard Tendra's breath catch and she leaned forward, no doubt unaware of her telling interest. Her gaze was like a physical caress, and he had a hard time remaining still as Patrilla licked his balls and added a hand to pump his cock.

"You like this, don't you, Tendra?" Patrilla murmured. "Even though you preach about my morality, you want sex so badly you're wet just watching it."

Tendra flushed, and it was all Roane could do not to toss Patrilla from him and thrust deeply into Tendra's proud flesh. That she might fight her sensual nature excited him. A good battle always made the conquest that much sweeter.

Instead of the warrior-woman, however, he penetrated the queen's mouth, and, pulling her tighter, imagined Tendra sucking him. He focused on her firm lips, the ruby-red ripeness that would swallow his every last drop.

Patrilla's fingers reached under his sack toward his anus, and, as she sucked particularly hard, she edged one finger into his hole, overstimulating his senses. He jerked inside her lips, shooting deep into her mouth as he continued to stare at Tendra, releasing a thread of his energy to fill her too.

Grunting as she swallowed him, Patrilla lifted her head and her skirts, and straddled his thigh. She thrust his hand between her legs and began riding him. She came within seconds, her shout not at all circumspect, and no doubt familiar in these royal halls.

Tendra stared at them, her eyes fixed to his hand on her cousin, and he wondered what raced through her mind. She'd said she could "stomach" his sex, but her shallow breaths and flushed cheeks showed an aroused woman just waiting to be eased by the right man. Too bad she wasn't more accommodating. He had plenty of will and the energy to satisfy her more than once before morning.

Patrilla broke his stare by clearing her throat. She flushed and smiled, an expression of sheer satisfaction. She righted herself and stood, gazing at her cousin with a sneer. "Do tell me how it was. I hope we entertained you? You do know what I just did, don't you? Or should I have Roane explain what the word 'come' means?"

"You're nothing if not entertaining." Tendra managed to appear bored.

Roane wanted to laugh at Patrilla's stomp of frustration, but kept a blank gaze on Tendra instead. Incredibly, he began to harden again, and to his dismay, Patrilla eagerly pounced on the fact.

"Oh my, your reputation truly is well-earned."

He smiled and stood, aware Patrilla wasn't the only one interested. He gripped his shaft, wishing Tendra would spread her legs and open for him. Unfortunately, he knew that wouldn't happen any time soon, and he focused on the need to return to his men, to explain to Reaper what he required.

"I have skills that extend to more than the battlefield," he murmured, pleased when her dark eyes widened. He moved slowly, putting himself back in his trou and tightening his uncomfortable stays. He glanced at Patrilla, aware she witnessed the thick tension between him and her cousin. "We have more than solidified our wager. I'll see you early in the morn."

"On the central training field. Our master illusionist will display it so all your men can see."

He nodded and bowed his head to Patrilla, inwardly wanting to refuse any more deference to the unworthy queen. Soon enough he'd bend her to his will. But, until then, he remained smart and in control. "Until tomorrow then."

"I'll guide him out," Tendra muttered reluctantly.

They walked in silence before he asked what was utmost on his mind. "Did you like it?"

She jerked her head toward his and blinked. "As I said, my cousin is ever entertaining," she said and looked forward.

"Yes, she is that. But did you like it?"

Tendra continued walking until he pulled her to a stop. Surprised, she let him, and he could see she was troubled.

"Captain?" He stroked her bicep as he murmured the word, fascinated at the contrast of such smooth skin over such tight muscle.

"Yes," she admitted in a hoarse voice as they locked gazes. "I liked it. Now let go of me before I remove your arm from your body. I'm not my cousin. I don't appreciate mauling."

He stared at her, enthralled at the disparity between what she said and what her body told him.

They walked in silence through the castle toward the outer Solorian city drawbridge. Once there, she waited in silence while it descended.

"Good luck tomorrow." He looked forward to the fight, not only to finalize his hold on Soloria, but to see another dimension of the intriguing warrior-woman before him.

She nodded stiffly. "Once your man has lost, you'll vacate the upper slope immediately, or I will call our archers to rain hell upon your forces."

The threat against his men cured his desire in an instant. "To do so would be foolish. But since you'll not see victory tomorrow, there's no need to threaten my men. I would leave you one piece of advice, however."

She glared at him. "Yes?"

"Watch Reaper's sword arm most carefully. I would have you whole before I marry your cousin."

"Why? So I can dance attendance on you both whenever you beckon?" she snarled.

"Of course. And so there's no doubt in your mind, I expect you on your knees when you suckle me. And when I mount you, moan your pleasure, love." He chucked the underside of her chin before she jerked out of reach. "I like a woman who enjoys herself."

CHAPTER 3

Tendra stood next to Reaper, a giant of a man with limbs like tree trunks, eagerly awaiting this battle. She could feel the thrill of combat zinging through her blood, stirring the magic that would surely aid her win today. Though she didn't care to be the center of attention, she couldn't wait to best the Darkson champion.

The training field was large enough to house both Soloria's and Darkson's armies. Thick green grass surrounded the dirt field, providing a welcome cushion for the district's onlookers. She wanted to grimace at the sheer number of villagers present. Had everyone in Soloria decided to watch? The noise around them quavered when Patrilla welcomed everyone to today's match.

Her box floated above the ground at the north end of the field, her voice resonating with energy thanks to a powerful spell, cast to reach the masses here and atop the plain, where the Darksons lurked. Orik, Soloria's new sorcerer, provided them with a viewing spell as well,

since much of the training field was obscured by a forest of trees and stone.

Feeling a decided pull, Tendra glanced at the queen's box to see Roane Faxon staring down at her. Images of his raw desire, of his naked flesh spearing her cousin's mouth flew at her, clouding her mind. Disturbed at the quiver of lust that suddenly pierced her, she looked away, focusing on the weapons and the coming battle.

At the center of the training field, two wooden tables sat next to each other, one in Solorian colors, the other in Darkson black and gold. The Solorians provided both challengers with daggers and swords. The Darksons lent axes, no doubt to remind Tendra of their leader, for whom the weapon held special appeal. Unable to stop herself from sneaking a peek at him, she glared when he followed her gaze to the axes, a grim smile on his face.

"I would spare you this fight, Captain," Reaper said in a deep, quiet voice, drawing her attention.

She blinked at him, surprised by the sincere and even regretful look he gave her.

"I do not brag, but tell you plainly I have never lost. And though our leaders have declared us opponents, it does not sit well upon me to willingly fight you."

She studied him, seeking some means of trickery but saw only a seasoned warrior filled with pride and quiet confidence. A trickle of doubt seized her before she hastened it away. "I believe you think me inferior because I am a woman."

He shook his head. "The Darksons have no women warriors, this is true. But we have fought the savage Hellen Horsewomen and other tribes who battle alongside their females in battle. I cannot say I like fighting the fairer sex, but I only granted you this opportunity because I know of your skills and have no wish to defeat such grace before so many, and for such a needless reason."

He knew of her skills? She paused in thought as his words penetrated, causing her to fume. "Needless reason? Keeping Soloria free from tyranny is more than reason enough to fight you."

"And yet, when this is all over, you will still bow to my overlord." He glanced up at Roane with a reverence that surprised her. "Were my general to fight you now, you would fall in seconds. He sent me because he wanted the challenge to be more entertaining, and a fair one."

"And so it shall be." She walked to the Darkson table and turned to face him. "To ensure neither your party nor my own would taint our combat by trickery, we shall use each others' weapons."

He nodded, approval in his eyes. "A wise offer. I would assure you we do not cheat. On our honor, we fight true."

Tendra glanced at the queen and saw shock and dismay on her face when she noted what Tendra was doing. *I wish I could say the same*. "Then choose your weapon."

He shook his head. "This I will not do. The choice is yours."

Wanting to argue his crazy notion of chivalry that had no place on the battlefield, she nevertheless picked up a short sword and waited. He took his short sword and waved it through the air, testing for balance.

"I am ready."

She nodded and joined him before the queen's box.

"Today's entertainment is graciously provided by Her Majesty, Queen Patrilla, and her guest, General Roane Faxon, ruler of the Darkson clans." Lord Ivesto spoke from the royal box, apparently forgiven his earlier stupidity. "Soloria's champion, Tendra Val'ore, remains undefeated in challenge, as does the Darkson champion, Reaper."

The crowd cheered, and a cacophony of noise echoed from the nearby hill. From what Ivesto said, both she and Reaper were wellmatched. Physically he looked as if he could crush her with one fist, but

when the familiar charge of lightning coursed through her body, she knew she would not only fight the massive blonde, but defeat him before the kingdom.

He sliced his blade through the air and she frowned.

I'll defeat him...that is, if I can keep from letting that tainted weapon touch me. What the hell was Patrilla thinking to cheat her way to a win? Should the Darksons glean Patrilla's cheating intent, Tendra had no doubt the festivities would erupt into outright war. It was up to her to make sure Soloria remained protected.

Ivesto shouted, signaling the commencement of the fight, and Tendra leapt backward to avoid Reaper's sudden thrust. He gained on her steadily, pressing her to give way as he rained blow upon blow to her sword arm, making her regret her short instant of distraction.

Thoughts of Patrilla, Soloria and Roane Faxon faded from her mind as battle lust called forth her latent, extraordinary skills. Reaper lunged again, but this time she jumped back and flipped over him so quickly he was just turning to face her as she swung. He barely met her attack before she moved again, flowing in the steps of combat, the air around them teeming with magic.

The crowd gasped and cheered, the sounds mixing with the pounding of her heart and the swelling need in her blood to win. Excitement churned within her, and she felt both surprised and strangely glad she had finally found a worthy opponent, even if it was in the form of Soloria's enemy.

On and on she danced around Reaper, her agility and precision an even match for his strength and resilience. They fought in silence, each focused on the other. She could see the grudging respect he felt as he met and parried her thrusts, heard his intake of breath when she managed to slice his upper arm. The rush of energy filling her swelled, singing in her veins like wind over water.

And then the unthinkable happened. As she turned to block

Reaper's thrust, she glimpsed Faxon beyond the warrior. That brief inattention cost her her balance, and a quick jab to her side. She rolled to her feet and returned a blow of her own within seconds, but the damage had been done.

As they continued to circle one another, Tendra felt her energy begin to dwindle. A foreign sense of unease passed, and she knew without a doubt Patrilla had not only tainted Tendra's intended weapons, but poisoned them, so the Darkson challenger would not simply be beaten, but killed.

Knowing she had little time to reason, Tendra had to quickly figure the best way to play her hand. The more she moved, the faster the poison spread through her body. She needed to slow, but to do that she would lose. Her pride demanded she fight to the end, but how could she when she knew death would follow her short-lived victory? And then where would Soloria be? Everyone had seen her switch weapons with Reaper. It would be obvious to the Darksons that Soloria had intended to cheat. And war would definitely follow.

But if she lost, Faxon would win the wager, marrying into the monarchy and stealing Soloria's lands. Sweat beaded on her temple and Reaper frowned. Not wanting to give him an inkling anything was amiss, she used a burst of energy she couldn't really afford to push him back, drawing more shouts of encouragement from her people.

As she met Reaper's grim smile, she wondered if a melding of Darkson and Solorian people would be such a bad thing. From what she knew of the district, the Darkson were a warrior people who, though brutal in combat, had a reputation for being fair to the civilians in the lands they conquered. And Faxon was no weakling. He would not let Patrilla lead him by the balls.

The thought made her grin and her eyes blurred. She felt herself tripping and rolled to narrowly avoid Reaper's blade.

He could have followed but didn't, and she knew he'd given her a

short reprieve in which to catch her breath. He most likely thought her tiring, but such was not the case. They circled each other, and Tendra knew she'd have to concede, but it had to look real. She didn't have much longer before her strength totally gave way. Already her sword arm had begun to shake.

So it ends. At least let me die to save my people. Better a merging of two cultures than out and out war. I can only pray Faxon will not ruin what Soloria stands for.

Tightening her grasp on her sword, she lunged at Reaper, intentionally leaving herself open to his counterattack. Sure enough he disarmed her, but instead of running her through, stabbed her left shoulder, leaving her sword arm and her body free to recover, had she not been poisoned.

The crowds grew silent, shocked that their champion had suffered defeat. The Darksons, however, cheered so loudly they might have been present on the field, instead of sheltered behind the Klor forest.

"You fought well," Reaper said, tossing down his sword and extending a hand in goodwill.

Unfortunately, Tendra could not grip it, nor could she stem the sweat saturating her tunic and forehead.

"Captain?"

"You've won," she said hoarsely and moved closer, as if to murmur words of congratulations. "If you would see peace between our people, dispose of my sword and get me out of here at once."

Reaper's eyes widened before narrowing on her sword. His mouth tight, he gave her a slight nod and turned to the queen's box. "With your permission, General, Queen Patrilla, I shall take my leave of this field. I think perhaps Captain Val'ore and I have another *score* to settle."

His innuendo not lost on the crowd, huge gales of laughter broke out. It was no shame for Tendra to concede her passion to a man

obviously stronger, and not unheard of for female warriors to bestow such honor to their conquerors in times of war.

Patrilla laughed gaily, the worry in her eyes clear, even to Tendra's bleary gaze. "Of course, Reaper, Darkson champion. Take your reward in whatever manner you deem fit, and the rest of us shall celebrate with a grand festival!"

At once, heaps of food and wine appeared on the training field, compliments of Orik and Soloria's farmers and winemakers.

Reaper practically dragged Tendra from the field, only to be stopped by Faxon.

"What are you about?" he asked quietly, though his words seethed with an anger that puzzled Tendra.

"Treachery," Reaper growled. "She tired too easily, almost instantly after being sliced by my sword—the sword that should have been hers had she not suggested we trade."

Faxon's eyes grew cold, so cold Tendra shivered at their hatred. "So, the bitch queen would cheat me out of her kingdom, hmm?"

Patrilla was ten kinds of foolish, but this was worse than even Tendra could have imagined. One thing she knew about the Darkson—they prized valor and courage above all else, and those who dared cheat them ended their lives most horribly.

"Wait." Tendra grabbed ineffectually at his sleeve, but Faxon stilled all the same. "Do not let her actions dictate Soloria's future." Her voice trembled, thready and weak. "You won the challenge. I have seen to it." She coughed, her vision growing hazy. "Confront her now, and make sure Marwel and Pherlon are present when you do. They'll make sure she values her pledge."

Faxon eyed her strangely before nodding. "Reaper, take her to Malian." Then Faxon did the oddest thing. He stroked her cheek in an almost tender manner. "And make haste."

Reaper nodded and threw Tendra over his shoulder, bounding

through the outer gates toward his people on the hill.

The last thing Tendra thought before blackness hit her was that she had saved her people after all. She had fulfilled her duties and could die in peace.

* * *

Roane stood in the queen's royal advisory chamber, the only secure room in her castle, with Marwel and Pherlon glowering down at her. She hung her head in shame, tears in her eyes as she said nothing to defend herself against his accusation of treachery. Had Roane not seen her true colors earlier, he might have believed her charade. As it was, she looked more than beautiful in her sadness, her bosom heaving as she cried and shook her head.

"Really, Patrilla, what were you thinking to cheat both the Darkson, and Tendra, out of a fair challenge?" Marwel asked, ice in his voice. "I know you've never gotten on well, but were you so worried she might lose a battle for you that you interfered in a sanctioned match?"

Patrilla shook her head, the sheen over her blue eyes making them look even bluer.

"I didn't want to tell you this," she said as she sniffled. "But I had nothing to do with Tendra's actions. I found out the weapons were poisoned just as she traded them with Roane's champion."

Roane scowled. What the hell was she talking about?

"Tendra's always been a winner." Pherlon frowned. "She would have bested their man, I've no doubt."

"I know." Patrilla dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. "But Tendra would have none of it. After I finished talking with General Faxon yesterday, she took me aside and convinced me she would win, no matter what. I thought her fanaticism a trifle odd, but then, I've never understood her."

Marwel and Pherlon stared, both uneasy.

And Roane had a bad feeling things were about to get worse.

"I should have told her not to worry, since it was only a challenge, not a real battle. There was no need for her to take it all so seriously."

Roane stared at her, disturbed when she met his gaze easily, as if their private challenge last night had not occurred. Obviously, she had told her advisors nothing of their agreement.

"But when Ivesto said he'd seen Tendra herself fiddling with the weapons before the match, well, I had him check one of the weapons afterward." She pointed at a dagger that lay on black-and-gold checked fabric upon a nearby table. "That one lay next to her short sword, and the edge is covered with deek root."

Roane cursed. "You would have killed my man with deek?"

"I told you." She continued to cry, turning to her advisors. "I didn't know."

"If Tendra planned on killing my man, why trade weapons before the match?" Roane questioned.

"I don't know. I can only assume she confused the tables before we added combatant colors. General Faxon, I'm so very, very sorry. I hope we can avoid a major fallout between us." She blinked earnestly, and he wanted to throttle her. "To ensure you feel no ill will between us, I have ordered Tendra's immediate execution. As soon as my men find her and bring her to me, her life is forfeit."

Roane stared, aware he'd been outmaneuvered, and that Patrilla had never planned on recognizing his victory. Had Reaper died, she would have held him to their bargain. But since Tendra "failed," the blame was all hers, their bargain no doubt an illusion.

"And what of our wager?" he asked, knowing what came next.

"Wager?" She turned to her advisors. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

Marwel and Pherlon stared at her grimly, the men not as dim as Roane had previously thought.

"No, my queen," Marwel said. "I'm unaware of any wager. Perhaps

the general would care to explain?"

Roane stared from them to her, frustration gnawing at him. "You know nothing of the queen's wager to deliver the kingdom to me, by marriage, should my man win the fight?"

Pherlon gaped. Marwel cursed.

"Surely you don't believe him?" Patrilla asked, her expression suddenly sly. "I have three witnesses who can bear testimony to our meeting yesterday. Ivesto, Ratha and Lileth stayed until General Faxon left."

Her advisors looked sick as they stared from her to Roane.

"General—" Marwel started.

"My lord—" Pherlon said.

"Enough." Roane silently pledged his vengeance on the upstart monarch. She had no idea just what she'd done. No one cheated the Darkson clan and lived. No one. "I will leave you to your lies and deceit." He spoke quietly to the queen, pleased when she paled at his tone. "And, after we meet again, one of us will rule Soloria, and the other will be dead."

He stormed from the room, flanked by her guards who awaited him, his plans for the future taking a most ominous turn. It was through sheer instinct that he turned to avoid the dagger aimed between his shoulder blades. Sheer skill that allowed him to dispatch two guards at once as they struck one another down. Giving in to the rage surging within him, Roane let loose his powers and began to truly fight.

* * *

Marwel froze at sounds of a scuffling in the outer hallway. "Patrilla, please tell me you didn't—"

"But of course I did." She smiled and patted his cheek with affection. "Have no fear, my trusted advisor. As we speak, the Darkson army is under attack by our new allies, the Brozewan."

"But they're barbarians!" Pherlon blanched.

"Not to me," she said. "And not to our people. All they asked for in return for this favor is food and wine to fill their bellies and a cool wench or two to satiate their pleasure," she added, rubbing her lips. "Relax, my friends. Tendra, our traitor, is no doubt dead now. Our enemy, the Darkson, is under control, and our quest for viable protection against invaders is solved."

"You are going to be the death of us all," Marwel whispered, disgusted he hadn't seen what a danger Patrilla truly was. Tendra had tried telling him, but he hadn't listened. Now Soloria's champion lay dead, her guard scattered and desolate without her steady leadership. Their lands were in the hands of barbaric warriors from the east, and the kingdom lay at the mercy of a selfish woman's foolish whims.

CHAPTER 4

Tendra groaned as she sat up, aware she was in a strange, foreign place. The air was cooler than she was used to, the scent of the sweet flora abundant in Soloria replaced by beaten grasses and hickory smoke.

"Easy," Faxon said as he watched her from the foot of a large bed. Several candles lit the dim room. The canopied bed in which she lay was decidedly masculine, decorated in colors of deep gold and rich black.

Uneasy, she glanced down at herself and saw she wore a man's shirt, a shirt that gaped dangerously, allowing Faxon a clear view to her décolletage and upsweep of her breasts.

Clutching the pale fabric with a fist, she blinked up at the unfettered anger pulsating in Faxon's eyes. "General?"

"Call me Roane," he said in a voice filled with menace. "Only the fact that you would have selflessly given your life to save your land

keeps you in my good graces."

She blinked, confused. "Alive...I should be dead. Why am I here? And where is here?"

"You're in my room, in my keep in the southlands." His voice whispered through her, the heat in his gaze blazing a trail of want between her legs. "Tell me, Tendra, that you had nothing to do with the attack on my men. That you knew nothing of the Brozewan."

"Brozewan?" She snorted. "That scum couldn't take Soloria if they tried."

"No, but they could weaken my army if they joined in a surprise attack with your archers."

She stared at him, her mouth agape, as she realized what he had said. "No. Patrilla would not be so foolish. She would never dishonor the bands of truce she offered freely to you."

"She did." He stared at her and grunted. "And you knew nothing about it."

"T—"

"But still I need some appeasement. If not for my warrior's training, I'd have lost more than the handful, who even now recover under our healer's care."

"Malian," she murmured, recalling the gentle man who'd eased her aches. She rubbed her bandaged arm. "He cured me."

"At my request." Roane rounded the bed to stand next to her, his presence looming as he wore no shirt, his massive chest awash with savage muscle.

She swallowed loudly as she realized she wore nothing more than a shirt—his shirt.

"You have been declared a traitor to the Solorian crown by your cousin. And she tried to kill me as well." His eyes gleamed as they roved over her unbound hair and parted lips. "Oh, yes, I'm in a killing mood."

Tendra sat still, denying her urge to scoot as far back and away from him as possible. She watched, breathlessly, as he lowered himself to sit next to her on the bed.

"I saved your life." He ran a hand through her thick hair. "I own you now."

"You don't--"

"You're mine," he said, tightening his grip in her locks. "And I want to play with what's mine."

She opened her mouth to argue and found his lips instead. With a kiss, he stole her breath, her very will to deny him anything. Her mind blanked, her body flamed, and, as if she were engaged in combat, her energy gathered, spiraling through her body to enhance her response.

"By my oath, you are a fire that burns my very blood," he gasped as he broke free to look down at her. He ran his finger over her lips and she shivered. "I'm going to fuck that pretty mouth, my warrior. But first I must taste you, to see if you're as sweet as I've imagined."

Tendra stiffened in protest, unable to believe she'd just accepted his kiss after he'd declared ownership of her.

"No, love," Roane whispered and ran his hands over her body, tunneling them under her shirt and over her breasts. "That's it," he crooned as she swayed into him.

Damn, now her body turned traitor? "Have you enspelled me?" she demanded, moaning when he pinched her nipples and toyed with her swollen breasts.

"I have," he readily admitted, confusing her. "As you have me."

He stunned her by ripping the shirt from her body. She gasped and would have reacted if the sight of his smooth, overpowering chest hadn't stolen her breath.

"Touch me," he urged in a guttural voice and groaned when her hands stole across his chest. "Ah, Tendra." He lay beside her and shrugged out of his trousers. "Touch me lower."

She glanced down at the flesh that had refused to leave her mind's eye. Up close, his perfection glistened. The plum-colored head flared wide over a thick, veiny shaft. Unable to help herself, she touched it, and his jerk in response made her loins pool with want.

"You're so large," she whispered, drawn to his strength. She circled his shaft and ran her fingers through his pubic hair, finding it soft, his smell pleasantly mouthwatering. Licking her lips, she leaned closer only to have herself thrown backward. She landed flat on her back, his body covering hers as he demanded a soul-stealing kiss.

Their lips meshed, his tongue forcing through her lips to capture her mouth. He stroked and prodded, much like his erection pushing insistently at her belly. Tendra throbbed, her womb wet and welcoming, her breasts tight and sensitive to his every touch.

He trailed his mouth down her throat, then back up to whisper illicit desires in her ear before capturing her breasts. He toyed and teased, licking and blowing over them until she couldn't stand it any longer.

"Damn it, Roane. Take me now!"

Wrestling him did no good. He weighed at least twice what she did, and rubbing against him only made him groan.

"Tendra, love, I'm going to lick you until you beg me for more."

"I don't beg," she said breathlessly as he kissed his way down her body. "But I will stab you with your own dagger if you don't—"

With a moan, she arched into his mouth, his lips stimulating her clit as he rubbed against her. Large, calloused hands held her legs splayed as he licked and teased through her folds, coating his mouth with her desire.

She was so wet and needy, and she needed to come so badly she thought she might go crazy. "Roane, please." She cared about nothing except having him inside her.

"Tell me, Tendra, am I your first?"

She tried to roll away from him, but he wouldn't let her. Instead, he

kept up the torturous pressure on her clit, enough to keep her half-crazed, but not enough to push her over.

"Tell me."

"Yes. My first man, but not my first orgasm."

She could feel him smile against her. "Did you service yourself, or was there another?"

"Myself. I had...help. Twice."

He kissed her clit and she melted. Warriors were allowed their lovers, and often had servants to sate their sexual desires, the better to keep them focused on battle and defense. Tendra hadn't cared much for sex with servants. She'd experienced only two men her own age, both who knew how to lick her and stimulate her to orgasm with their hands. But she'd refused to let them touch her with anything more, and she had to admit they'd never stirred her to passion like Roane.

"I'm going to breach you, love," Roane warned before he inserted a finger, then two, into her slick heat.

He kissed and licked and pumped her with his hand, and soon she was coming, tightening around his long digits with a loud, keening cry. He pushed further and she felt a small pressure that soon left as a second, surprising climax gripped her.

Before she could recover, he removed his hand and shifted over her. "I can't wait any longer," he rasped and drove into her.

His cock touched so deep inside her, stretching her with a pleasurepain that jolted her climax anew. As she convulsed, he thrust deeper and deeper into her, groaning her name when he stiffened.

She felt him shudder and knew he jetted inside her. Oddly, the notion of his seed coating her womb quickened her heart, making her wonder just how he could affect her so, when only hours before they'd been strangers.

"Tendra," he said on a sigh, "I wanted you so badly yesterday. You'll never know how badly."

Sated, she collapsed under him, her tension gone as her lids fluttered closed. "Good," she admitted, her resistance against her "enemy" all but disappeared. "Because even my cousin couldn't kill my desire as I watched her stuff your cock down her throat."

He chuckled and kissed her lips. "I was this close to throwing her off and fucking you. So damned close."

"I probably would have fought you."

"I know." He sounded smug, and she blinked up at him and frowned. "But in the end you would have succumbed."

"Your spell?"

"Your passion." He stared down at her, his need blazing in his eyes. "Your dignity, your pride, your honor. Everything you are cries out to me now."

She swallowed around a lump of emotion. "Everything?"

"Everything." He leaned down to kiss her. "Now sleep. You'll need your rest before I tell you how we're going to get Soloria back."

She nodded and closed her eyes, exhaustion taking her questions. The feel of his strong arms around her, however, had her smiling and snuggling deeper into his arms, at home in the place she never wanted to leave again.

CHAPTER 5

Roane woke to a pleasant stirring in his groin. Memories of Tendra's sweet taste, of her addicting scent, made him that much harder. Then he groaned at the warmth engulfing his cock.

"Ah, Tendra..." He stared down at her dark head between his thighs. Patrilla had been skilled, but Tendra was so much more. Her mouth felt like fire, her tongue a snake of rapture as it stroked his shaft, the sensitive spot under the crown, like a viper of never-ending pleasure.

His balls tightened as she caressed them, so full he wanted to come down her throat, spending until she could swallow no more.

"Ah, Tendra, I've wanted to fuck your mouth. Love," he whispered. He ran his fingers through her hair, easing her into a pace that would soon bring him to climax.

But he needn't have bothered, for his warrior nipped him erotically, making him see stars, before she licked at his slit and cupped his balls,

making him come so hard he nearly blacked out.

When he came to his senses again, he saw her sitting up, a cat's grin on her face.

"So tell me, Roane, how do we defeat the Brozewan and my cousin, the queen?"

"You mean former queen, love. You're of royal blood, aren't you? And I'm certainly king material."

She rolled her eyes at his arrogance.

"It's just a matter of time before you realize who Orik resembles."

She frowned, picturing Soloria's newest sorcerer in her mind's eye. "Oh, my stars, he looks just like Reaper, only smaller."

"Exactly." His grin was filled with menace, and she felt as turned on as she'd been when sucking him dry. "I tried to give Patrilla a chance. I want Soloria whole, not in pieces broken up by war. So I had a few back-up plans in place should the queen prove as treacherous as I'd suspected."

"And me?" She couldn't help but ask. "Did you know about me?"

"Of course. Reaper has kept an eye on you for quite some time. I only wish he'd been more thorough in his reports other than descriptions of your abilities with a sword."

"So you knew what I could do, yet you still sent Reaper to fight me? That sure you'd win?"

He chuckled, betraying the infamous Darkson Axe as a lighthearted rogue. "Love, I knew you would win. What you didn't know was that I planned on challenging you once Reaper fell, doubling my bet with Patrilla. She'd have jumped at the chance to own the southlands as well as Soloria, and I'd have earned my right to bed you once I won our battle."

She grinned. "Oh, really? How did you know I'd grant you warrior's forfeit?"

"You see, love, I have skills that extend to more than the

battlefield," he murmured. "Shall I show you?"

"Please do." She smiled as she lay back. "And remind me never to challenge you to a wager I don't want to lose."

MARIE HARTE

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-two years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.

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