

The Rose of Shanhasson

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By Joely Sue Burkhart

ONE

BLESSED LADY ABOVE, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?

Scanning the waters of Dalden Bay, Shannari looked for some sign of hope. Ceaseless prayers throughout the night, at the holiest site in the Green Lands, had been offered for naught. The silvered full moon mocked her with its silence.

The thick bayside air tasted like tears. Shannari swallowed the choking lump, her shoulders drooping with misery. Weary, she rubbed her aching, dry eyes and turned from the mist-covered waters. Power pulsed with the gentle moonlight, resonating in her blood and soul. Her skin tingled with the sweet melody, her heart aching, yearning to use that inborn gift.

If only she could find some way to restore her magic...

But no. That was another failure entirely. Her heart was dead.

Waiting at the last column, the High Priest took her chilled hands between his own. Father Aran's snowy white hair and beard gleamed against his scarlet robes. "Our Blessed Lady has heard your prayers, Your Majesty."

Shame clawed her chest and she dropped her gaze. She didn't deserve the title, let alone his respect. "Please, don't call me that."

"I've known since your birth that you would be the next High Queen. I saw the Rose Crown on your head even in the cradle."

"So you say." Shannari jerked her hands back and clenched them into

fists at her sides. “You also told me of the great power I would have as the Lady’s Last Daughter. Yet here I am, my magic crippled, my country surrounded by enemies, and betrothed to Prince Theo, the one person who most wants me dead.” Her voice broke. She would never forget the malice in the Crown Prince’s eyes, nor the suffocating horror that came over her when he’d touched her. “I’m trapped.”

The High Priest flinched. “The mistake was mine, Your Majesty, I—”

“How can I refuse to marry him now without starting a civil war?”

“Our Blessed Lady wants Her tainted son removed from the High Throne at all cost.” The High Priest stared through her, deeper, seeing beyond to some future that made his eyes flash with hope. “A way will be provided.”

Shannari refused to let that gleam of hope move her. She’d seen the same look in his eyes too many times to no avail. Seeing a possible future and knowing the Lady’s prophesy didn’t make it happen.

“Dark at times, clouded with Shadow and fraught with peril, your path is steep and treacherous with ravines on either side. If you fall, all the Green Lands will fall with you. This I know in my heart. Yet hope comes, though from where I cannot see.”

She knew all too well the dark prophesy of doom waiting for her people if she failed. Other children grew up on nursery rhymes and fairytales; she had learned a destiny of blood, and darkness, and death. Death loomed closer than ever in these dark times.

Inwardly sighing, she joined her waiting father, King Valche. Surrounded by guards, they walked toward the village curved along the

shoreline. Chittering raucously, gulls fought for scraps on the beach of sand and broken shells and the stench of rotting fish made her stomach churn.

Vessels ranging from local fishing boats to sea-worthy trading ships lined the docks. From crates full of rare spices from the jungles of Mambia, to exotic furs from the frigid ice of Jjord in the extreme north, exotic things from all over the world came through this port,. Without Dalden Bay, Allandor's tables might miss the sea's natural bounty, but the largest blow would be felt in the merchants' pockets.

Shannari ran through her options again and came to the same conclusion. Surely an alliance with Allandor's greatest enemy was worth the risk to herself if it would save the Green Lands. Shivering, she rubbed the nape of her neck. She had the nasty feeling that an invisible axe loomed over her head.

"I despise Stephan," King Valche muttered beneath his breath. "I hate his clingy, sneaky ways, how he always cozies up to Theo, oozing snake oil promises."

"Tell me any other way, Father, and I'll do it."

King Valche sighed heavily and ran a hand through his silvered hair. "We need him, slime or no."

Dressed in Allandor's regalia of midnight blue trimmed in gold braid, he presented the perfect image of control and regal civility. Ruefully, Shannari wondered what image she projected in her leathers and chain mail, sword within easy reach at her side. Her father had begged her to wear a court gown to emphasize her lineage and legitimate claim to the High Throne. Nevertheless, Last Daughter of the Blessed Lady or not, she went nowhere

unarmed, even when escorted with a full contingent of guards. She'd learned that lesson at a very young age.

"Let's try polite conversation first and see where we stand with Stephan," King Valche said. "Maybe he'll surprise us. Maybe he'll take a stand against Theo for once and do what's right."

"No, I'm afraid not. Stephan knows nothing but taking. The only bargaining chip we have is Dalden Bay." Well, that wasn't entirely true. Lightly, she touched the hidden scar on the left side of her chest above her breast. "I'll marry him if I must. Anyone's better than Prince Theo."

A silent warning shrilled in her head, and ice chilled her blood. Her heart pounded as adrenaline surged through her. Crippled and stunted her magic might be, but she knew a warning from the Lady when she felt it.

Struggling to maintain a normal demeanor, Shannari looked about them, her hand nonchalantly stroking her sword hilt. While the docks were busy this early in the morning, the main cobblestone street was deserted. The appointed meeting place, the best inn in Dalden Bay, towered above the smaller shops and houses of the villagers.

Flanked by guards, she couldn't identify a visible threat, but the chill increased. Her teeth chattered and her fingers cramped on the hilt. Danger approached, but from where?

An alley opened up on her right. As they walked past, the shadow of deadly intent raised the hairs on the base of her neck. Choking back a cry, she took another step, waiting, waiting...

Behind her, steel whispered in the crisp dawn air. Shannari whirled and drew the sword. The nearest guard reached for his, too, turning too late.

Slipping around him, the assassin rushed the last few steps, closing quickly so she couldn't entirely block his thrusting blade. She fouled his aim and the knife slammed into her right side.

An iron fist of pain exploded in her ribcage. Grunting, she took a quick step back to gain some space. Thank the Lady for chain mail. Swinging the sword in a hard arc, she slit the assassin's throat.

Blinking in shock, the man fell to his knees, his hands wrapped around the gaping wound in his neck. His mouth opened and closed wordlessly and he pitched face first onto the ground.

Eventually, she would fail. A knife would find her back, this time slicing her heart beyond repair, just like her mother. She would never forget the dark pool of blood spreading on the floor, her beautiful mother shattered like a porcelain doll.

I must wrest the High Throne from Theo soon, before one of his assassins succeeds in killing me.

King Valche bellowed, his face dark with fury. Shamefaced Guardsmen crowded closer, their swords at the ready. More soldiers raced down the street led by the always reliable Sergeant Fenton. The baker across the way poked his head out the door.

Firm but polite, Sergeant Fenton brought the baker outside his shop. "Do you know this man? Did you see anyone about this morning?"

Shannari pushed the assassin over onto his back with her boot.

The baker recoiled and shook his head, wringing his hands in his apron. "No one, sir, other than the King when he passed right at dawn. I heard the guards about at The Slumbering Lion, but nothing else."

Turning her attention to the body, Shannari dismissed the witness with a nod.

The assassin stared upward with glazed brown eyes. He was perhaps thirty years of age with nondescript features. She didn't recognize him. His brown coat and breeches were clean and cut from quality cloth but not extravagant. His boots were serviceable and scuffed but well made. He wore no jewelry or insignia. Anyone could have sent him.

So many enemies, so much blood on her hands. Her ribs ached and she resisted the urge to hunch over in pain. Wincing, she bent down and wiped her sword and hands on the dead man's coat. At least the blood hadn't splattered her leather pants too badly.

"Are you hurt?" King Valche's voice quivered with rage. "Should we cancel the meeting?"

She stood and sheathed her sword. "We can't wait, Father. We need the Duke now more than ever."

"This attempt could very well be his doing."

"He won't assassinate me before he learns how much we might offer. I'll do whatever is necessary to secure this treaty."

"I wish there were another way." King Valche stared down the street at The Slumbering Lion, his jaw clenched. "I've delayed with every tactic I know. High King Rikard has every right to demand your presence in Shanhasson. If we don't gain enough support, he'll send an army large enough that we'll be forced to accept his terms. Allandor is strong, but could we stand against the entire might of the Green Lands?"

He turned his tired, concerned gaze to Shannari. "I did my best. The

betrotal bought us a little time, but I wish I could keep you from bartering away your life and your hand in marriage for a crown, even the Rose Crown of all the Green Lands. Your mother chose me, chose love, instead of the High Throne. I hoped you could have both. I failed you, Daughter, just as I failed to keep her safe.”

Years ago, Shannari had almost made the same mistake as her mother. She'd foolishly believed that love's power would make her magic invincible. Instead, she now bore the vicious scar that proved love could never be trusted. “Oh, Father, we haven't failed. Father Aran said Our Blessed Lady will provide a way. We have to believe.”

“What I believe is that Theo would rather see you dead than beside him on the High Throne.”

The pulse of ice through her veins echoed the assassination warning and confirmed her father's fears. Shannari hardened her voice to steel. “Then Lady help me, I'll see him dead first.”

* * * *

Stephan waited in the inn's private dining room. Sitting across from him at the wooden table laid out for breakfast, Shannari scrutinized the Duke of Pella and Allandor's sworn enemy.

Every inch the nobleman, he was dressed smartly in a dark blue coat and breeches, his hands well manicured, his fingers bearing several expensive but tasteful rings. His dark shoulder-length hair was neatly pulled back in a queue.

Despite his gentlemanly appearance, fierce cunning glinted in his light gray eyes and his mouth reflected a hard slant of cruelty. He didn't rise

when she and the King of Allandor came into the room.

His message was clear.

Her palms dampened and she carefully kept her hand near her sword when she sat down at the table. This man was dangerous in ways that Theo would never comprehend. No doubt Stephan had a knife or two hidden on his person, while she'd be forced to clear the table before unsheathing her sword if he attacked. She hated the disadvantage but couldn't bring herself to carry a knife. Not yet. Murderers carried knives, assassins in the streets, shadows in the hallway leaping out to kill her mother. She wasn't quite ready to stoop so low yet, but with Stephan sitting smugly across from her, she was sorely tempted. "Thank you for agreeing to this meeting, my lord Duke."

Stephan inclined his head slightly. "Princess, Your Majesty."

At such blatant disdain, she knew the situation required a full-on assault. A quick glance to her father confirmed the change in plan.

No one performed the political waltz as well as King Valche. "You and I have shared many disagreements over the years, Duke, mostly over this very port. In exchange for meeting with us today, I propose to sign Dalden Bay completely over to Pella."

Stephan leaned back in his chair and propped his boot in the chair beside him. He took a long drink from the heavy cup in his hand—his own, of course, for he would never trust anyone enough to allow unknown food or drink to pass his lips—before answering. "You must desire a very great boon from me."

Ignoring the fluttering of nerves in her stomach, Shannari matched his

flippant tone. “I desire the High Throne, and I want you to help me.”

“Marry the Crown Prince as you agreed two years ago and the High Throne is yours.”

“I will rule the Green Lands alone.”

A small smile played about his lips. “What you speak of is treason.”

Damn him. Her lips compressed, and she fought to keep her calm, political mask. He knew exactly how crucial his country’s support would be in her bid for the High Throne. “Treason? When I am the Blessed Lady’s Last Daughter; when more royal blood flows in my veins than in those of the Crown Prince Theo?”

“I care nothing about Leesha’s Last Daughter or how much of Her blood you might claim.”

“What do you care about?” King Valche demanded. “If Shannari is on the High Throne, she will be a true protector of the lands, not simply a royal brat with too many perversions to count.”

“I am loyal to my liege. He has rewarded me richly over the years.”

Her laughter wiped the smugness off his face. “Come now, Duke. You and I both know who your true liege is.”

Stephan paled. He reached for the cup again and his hand trembled.

She spared a quick glance at her father and he shook his head imperceptibly. Interesting. Where else did Stephan owe allegiance? “Pella and the North Forest have long been allies. With King Challon’s support, the entire north would follow.”

Stephan’s tension eased and his mouth quirked with amusement. “If I present your cause to my great uncle, I’m sure he would seriously consider

giving you his support. What you ask is unreasonable, though, without a great deal of protection and assurances. I have been a loyal subject to the royal family and to Crown Prince Theo personally for many years. What can you do for me that the Crown Prince can't?"

Clenching her jaw, Shannari wanted to punch the arrogant smirk off his face. All he cared about was more power, always more power, while people died and their homeland slid a little further into Shadow with each passing day.

She slammed her palms flat on the table and pushed to her feet. "The High Priest publicly refuses to coronate Crown Prince Theo, and Leesha's Temple in Shanhasson is closed. If we sit back and allow Theo to rule the Green Lands, we doom our people to disease, starvation and suffering unlike anything we've ever seen before. How can you—"

A queer look flickered across Stephan's face. "Why Princess Shannari, whatever do you have on your hands?"

Following his gaze, she glanced down. Blood crusted her fingernails and stained the grooves of her knuckles. She shrugged and raised her gaze back to Stephan's. "Someone tried to assassinate me."

His chair scraped on the floor and he rose slowly to his feet, his gaze still locked on her hands.

Cold chills raced down her spine, raising goose bumps on her arms. Dread rolled in her stomach like a cold ball of lead. The Lady's warning screamed through her a hundred times more desperately than before. She felt ill, as disgusted and terrified as when Theo had touched her at their betrothal. She snatched her hands off the table and took a wary step

backward.

Stephan raised his gaze to her face and she recoiled. Lust darkened his eyes. “How much blood is on your hands, Shannari? How many men have you killed? I look at your hands and see blood dripping to the floor. An endless ocean of blood, all from you.”

She unsheathed her sword and pointed it warningly at his chest. The table’s width was suddenly quite inadequate. “Touch me and die.”

“I’m yours. Make your offer and Pella will become your closest ally. I’ll defy Crown Prince Theo and the High King. I’ll bring King Challon to your side. All I ask...”

Panic flooded her heart, racing so hard and fast that black spots floated into her vision. She hated using herself as chattel. She hated arranging her marriage like some stablehand plotting a breeding program for a blooded mare. She hated the thought of living her entire life trapped with a man like Stephan or Theo, cringing each time he touched her. Rubbing her skin raw afterward in a futile attempt to remove his stench and foulness. Hating herself more and more every day.

“Marry me instead of Theo. I’ll even kill him for you if you wish, although it will be much more entertaining if you do it yourself.” Stephan leaned across the table, the ghastly light from his pale eyes flashing like blades. “And for that, my lovely High Queen, I want to taste the blood on your hands each time you kill.”

Horror roared in her ears and she swayed. Shadow threatened to overwhelm her, the Shadow always waiting for her to stumble, to relax her guard for just a moment. Blood and darkness already stained her soul, but

she would never murder for the sole desire for blood. Would she? Would all the killing—even in self defense—add up over the years until she was as corrupt as Theo and Stephan both?

Her father tugged on her arm, trying to remove her from the room, but all she could do was stare at the hunger on Stephan's face. Stare and wonder if the same foulness would someday twist her soul as well. She tightened her fingers on the sword, adjusting the hilt in her sweaty palm. She must kill him before he touched her.

If she killed him, she would lose everything. King Challon would never support her claim for the High Throne. Even the full might of Allandor's Guard could not stand against Crown Prince Theo if the North Forest and Pella both supported him.

She was good with a sword, but not that good. Eventually, the assassins would succeed. Without enough allies, Allandor would be razed to the ground.

Stephan licked his lips, and she shuddered. Desperation squeezed her throat and lungs so tightly she couldn't breathe. There had to be some other way.

Blessed Lady, help me!

Sergeant Fenton charged into the room and went to one knee before her. "Captain, Dalden Bay is under attack by the Sha'Kae al'Dan!"

King Valche tightened his grip on her arm and pulled her toward the door. "What, here? The barbarians haven't left their Plains for generations!"

Stephan came around the table toward them. "I brought three hundred

of my finest soldiers with me.”

Yanking her arm free, Shannari gripped the sword before her with both hands. Stephan didn't carry a sword and his men waited outside. She could eliminate him in one blow. “Get out of the way, Fenton, so I can end this.”

The grizzled Sergeant looked into her face and paled. Instead of moving aside as she ordered, he stood and took position before her.

“Shannari, please.” Stephan smiled, holding his hands up before him soothingly, well away from the jeweled dagger at his waist. “Accept my troth and I'll drive these barbarians from your land. Then we'll march to Shanhasson and the High Throne will be yours. My life on it.”

Fenton drew his sword free, his voice carefully polite. “You will refer to her as Princess Shannari or the Lady's Daughter.”

Stephan sneered. “You call her Captain, do you not? We ridicule the Allandorian Guard for letting a woman lead them.”

“She is the finest Captain in the Green Lands. Under her leadership the Guard has never been defeated, yet we've certainly defeated your pitiful excuse for an army numerous times. Remove yourself from Dalden Bay, or I will personally skewer you and save her the trouble. *My* life on it.”

Mocking her with a full court bow, Stephan exited through the opposite door, but tension still screamed through her body. Shannari rolled her shoulders to loosen some of the strain. One enemy retreated but would inevitably regroup with the Crown Prince, while a foreign army advanced on her country.

Waiting until she could no longer hear the Duke's retreat, she turned to

Fenton. “How bad is it?”

“Bad, Captain. Two hundred barbarians mounted on massive warhorses. I don’t know how long our infantry lines will hold.”

“I expected trouble, but not from the south.” King Valche rubbed a hand over his weary face. “How many troops did we bring?”

“Five hundred.” Sheathing her sword, she headed for the door with Fenton. Ordinarily she would scoff at the odds. Fenton did not exaggerate the Guard’s fame and success. If he was worried, then they faced one hell of a battle. “I want the front line doubled with half our men in reserve behind them.”

“Shannari, please, don’t lead the Guard today.” Shedding his normal regal reserve, King Valche clutched her hand. “If you’re killed in battle, the Green Lands are doomed.”

“You made me Captain, Father. You enabled me to learn and practice strategy and battle techniques all these years. You’ve never tried to keep me out of battle before.”

King Valche sighed heavily and released her. “I’ve just been reminded of exactly how twisted our enemies are. You’re precious to the Green Lands, but you’re my daughter, first. Lady help me, I wish I could spare you from all danger.”

Shannari smiled grimly. She needed no one to remind her of her responsibilities as the Blessed Lady’s Last Daughter, let alone the father who had drilled her ceaselessly in politics and strategy ever since she could remember. “If Allandor falls to barbarians then all our work over the years is for nothing. I know my duty, Father, perhaps better than you. I’ll do

what I must.”

No matter the price.

* * * *

“Have you ever seen such green grass?”

Shaken to silence, Rhaekhar, Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha’Kae al’Dan, could answer his nearest Blood with no more than a nod. Instead of rolling hills of tall golden-brown grass, startlingly brilliant green fields stretched as far as he could see, dotted here and there with squares of rich black earth. As brightly colored as the emerald *memsha* about his hips, the grass must also be flavorful. His warhorse took every opportunity to snatch a muzzle full each time he loosened the reins.

“Even the air smells strange and foreign,” Varne continued, a frown creasing his forehead. The other eight Blood fanned out around them. “I hope we don’t tarry long in these Green Lands.”

To his left, Gregar asked, “Where, Khul?”

“In a dream.” Rhaekhar cleared his throat, his mouth dry. He never knew which would be quicker, Gregar’s mouth or his blade, so the last thing he expected was solemn reverence on the Blood’s face. “I saw bright green grass like this in a vision from Vulkar nearly twenty years ago.”

A trick of the sunrise made flames dance in the Blood’s dark eyes. “A green valley with a special tree?”

Rhaekhar’s heart pounded so loudly that his ears roared with rushing winds. He never forgot the wondrous things he’d seen as a fifteen-year-old lad camping alone in the foothills of Vulkar’s Mountain. Details of the dream had faded over the years, but the sense of hope remained with him

always. “A tree with a bone-white trunk and leaves both black and red.”

The Blood rode closer, his low voice pitched for Rhaekhar’s ears alone. “And the lake of fire in the heart of the Mountain?”

Squeezing his eyes shut, he saw again the fiery lake, smoldering black rock, and the Great Wind Stallion wreathed in flames. “Aye.”

“What did He give you?”

Glancing again at Gregar's serious face, Rhaekhar hesitated. He’d never told anyone but *Kae’Shaman* about the vision’s promise. Besides, it was the Dark Mare, not Vulkar, who showed him the green fields, shimmering white walls and the garden inside where he would find his own beloved. “A Rose.”

The Blood smirked, his eyes flashing as he lightly touched the wicked six-inch knife sheathed on his hip. “All I found was my ivory *rahke*.”

“Where is this thing?” Varne demanded.

“I don’t know exactly.” Truth be told, Rhaekhar almost despaired of ever finding the Rose. The permanent dwellings lining the bay before them didn’t resemble the protective white walls of his dream. “I suspect I shall find the Rose somewhere in these Green Lands.”

“I would rather have Gregar’s *rahke*.” Varne stole a longing glance at the blade on the other Blood’s hip. “I shall win it from you yet.”

Gregar laughed softly. “I would take the Rose in a heartbeat.”

“You speak of a woman?” Varne gave the other Blood a dark look of irritation. Gregar only laughed. “Khul, I don’t know who you might find here, but surely you don’t expect to take an outlander woman home to the Plains. There’s already enough dissent among the Nine Camps. An

outlander woman would split the Sha’Kae al’Dan asunder!”

Rhaekhar tightened his grip on the reins, but he couldn’t dispute the Blood’s words. His enemies were quite vocal in their disapproval of this journey to the Green Lands. Bringing home an outlander mate would be like oil cast on wildfire. “The Great Wind Stallion promised me a love like no other. The Rose of Shanhasson will be my Khul’lanna. I simply must find her first.”

Drawing rein, Gregar nodded toward a force amassed against them outside the village. “If the approaching outlanders are any indication, Khul, all you will find at this time is a *kae’don*.”

Rhaekhar shaded his eyes to estimate how many outlanders gathered against them. Easily ten fists of men awaited his warriors’ charge. “Great Vulkar, they’re on foot!”

“There will be no honor in this *kae’don*,” Varne muttered gloomily.

Even with their greater numbers, the outlanders had no chance on foot, not against the *na’kindren*. Higher at the withers than the outlanders stood tall, the warhorses would crush them beneath churning hooves until the ground ran red with blood.

“I almost feel sorry for them,” Gregar said, shaking his head. “Let us finish this quickly, Khul, so you may find your Rose.”

TWO

A LITTLE BATTLE IS GOOD FOR THE BLOOD!

Kneeing his stallion forward, Rhaekhar pressed the ragged line of outlanders even harder. His golden warhorse plunged and another outlander screamed as he disappeared beneath the massive hooves.

The raw, thick scent of blood and death filled the air, and his warriors whooped with pure battle joy. Dodging a wild, desperate thrust, Rhaekhar slipped the point of his sword through the shoulder joint of the closest outlander's metal clothing.

The man dropped his sword and ran, glancing back over his shoulder, only to be trampled from the side by one of the Blood. Gregar's eyes flashed with dark pleasure as he saluted Rhaekhar with his sword.

More outlanders turned and ran, discarding their swords on the field. One man cowered on the ground, his arms over his head, wailing like a lost child. All across the green fields, the outlanders' defenses trembled and shattered in the wake of powerful *na'kindren*.

Disgusted, Rhaekhar shook his head. What honor could his warriors expect to find against these pitifully inferior outlanders? They knew nothing of honor. Killing them was a wasteful blood sacrifice, bringing no glory to the Great Wind Stallion.

Rhaekhar decided to end the battle without further delay and reined Khan toward the outlander leader. Only this man's determination had prevented the outlanders from scattering within moments of battle.

Mounted on a small pony, the leader might provide at least some entertainment in this *kae'don*.

Sheathing his sword, Rhaekhar drew the smaller blade on his hip. The outlander deserved at least some honor in death, so he would sacrifice the leader's blood with *rahke* only.

With fiercely bared teeth and punishing hooves, his warhorse shouldered through the panicked outlanders. They parted like silk, giving him a clear path to their leader. Khan reared, screaming a challenge.

The outlander's red pony shied and squealed with terror. Another outlander on foot grabbed the leader's leg and gestured frantically toward the village. Rhaekhar expected the leader to drop his sword and gallop to safety like his men, but he adamantly shook his head. The two outlanders argued briefly, but the one on foot finally nodded. He sheathed his sword, stood aside, and shot a fierce glance at Rhaekhar.

The outlanders' leader raised his sword, his gaze steady. Rhaekhar nodded back respectfully. Good. The leader understood the challenge and accepted. Some small honor might be found in this *kae'don* after all.

The leader leaned forward and the red pony charged.

Anticipation surged in Rhaekhar's veins. Khan laid his ears back and pawed the ground, waiting for the signal to attack, but he held the snorting warhorse in place with a firm hand on the reins.

Stretching out well beyond his defenses to compensate for his inferior mount, the leader swiped at Rhaekhar's chest. He easily leaned aside to avoid the blow. It would be ridiculously easy to slit the leader's throat as he galloped by, but Rhaekhar stayed his hand. He wanted to see exactly how much heart this outlander might have.

Pivoting, Khan struck viciously with both front hooves. The weary pony

stumbled and fell to its knees, and the leader flew out of the saddle. Tucking his head, he rolled and thumped across the torn ground. He struggled to his feet and pushed off the metal covering his face.

Rhaekhar's heart raced, and his hands clenched on the reins so hard his stallion reared again. *Great Vulkar, a woman!*

A black braid as thick as his wrist tumbled past her waist. She stared up at him, her dark blue eyes shining with fierce determination. Even defeated, unhorsed and unarmed, she stood before him with more courage than any of her men.

Facing insurmountable odds. Battling his warriors when she had no hope of victory. Challenging him, Khul of all the Nine Camps, with a glint in her eye and pride in her heart.

Such courage—he had never seen her match.

Emotion crashed through him. Bands of iron tightened about his chest until he could barely breathe. His whole body resonated, tuning toward her with vicious, single-minded joy. He'd found her at last.

Sucking in a long, deep breath, he sought her scent over the rawness of mud, blood and terror. Too far away to identify her from the remembered dream. Still, heat twisted his gut, muscles tightening, bracing for battle. Surely she was his Rose, but he could not know for certain until he stood close enough to breathe her scent.

Twenty mounted men galloped out of the village and slid to a halt behind the woman. She walked toward them, and blinding panic nearly sent him charging after her. How could he claim this outlander woman for his own when he knew nothing of her customs?

The nine Blood rode close, Gregar and Varne on either side of him as usual.

“Will another outlander step forward in challenge?” Varne asked. “Or do you think they’ve had enough?”

Irrational yet adamant, every instinct urged Rhaekhar to haul her up on Khan’s back and gallop for the Plains without delay. “It matters not. For her, I’ll fight them all one by one if I must.”

* * * *

“Please, Captain, ride for Rashan,” Fenton pleaded. “Let me take your place in the surrender.”

Defeated. Under her leadership, the Guard had never lost. Until today.

The morning sun had barely climbed midway into the sky, yet sweat trickled down her spine. Her arms were so tired she feared she wouldn’t be able to lift her sword again. All her plans, all the years of careful political maneuverings, all for nothing. “You know I can’t, Sergeant. I’m responsible for our soldiers. I led them, and I failed them. It’s my duty and my right to stand in their place.”

“It’s your duty to live!” King Valche retorted. “Lady only knows what these barbarians will do to you if you surrender to them. Think, Shannari! Think of the Lady’s Green Lands devastated by plagues, war, and famine. You’re the Lady’s Last Daughter. You must not die!”

“What else can I do?”

“I agree with Fenton. Someone must take your place. You can’t do this!”

Fury raged through her, and she clenched her hands into fists. “I will not run! How could I ever sit on the High Throne and demand the full respect of our people if I did such a thing?”

“Sweet Lady above, what if they don’t execute you? What if they torture you first? Or rape you? Please, Daughter—”

Her stomach rolled queasily. “They could have slaughtered us to a man

without even breaking a sweat. You saw how easily their warlord waltzed through our lines. I was foolish enough to accept his direct challenge, and he toyed with me. He could have killed me at any time, but he acted honorably. Besides, I can't believe Our Blessed Lady would abandon us. Father Aran said She heard my prayers this morning."

"What are you going to do?" King Valche's voice broke with his sorrow. "What can I do?"

"Pray for me. Keep the faith that Our Lady will intervene. Otherwise, I'll do my best to die with honor." Choking back her tears, Shannari turned and walked toward the waiting barbarians. She fought another battle now, to keep her shoulders squared, her chin high. She refused to reveal how much the fearsome barbarians intimidated her. There was nothing she could do to hide her shaking hands.

The barbarians watched her approach with hooded eyes and fierce expressions. All of them were well over six feet tall—giants by Green Land standards. The warlord's implacable face was carved from granite and he gripped a vicious dagger at his waist.

Halting before the warlord, she held her sword as loosely as she dared in her sweaty palm, blade down. She'd never seen such magnificent warriors before, and their horses were equally impressive. She didn't know how to fight massive warhorses that plowed over her infantry. If she lived long enough, she would rectify that deficiency in the Guard's defenses.

The warlord stared back at her, his golden gaze strangely intense. His long brown hair was intricately braided at each temple, heavy with colored beads and rings. The only clothing he wore was a green cloth wrapped about his hips, leaving his legs from mid-thigh completely bare.

His immense chest gleamed like polished bronze in the sunlight,

crisscrossed with white scars. In fact, his entire body bore such fine lines, all except his chiseled face. Bands of gold, leather and horsehair encircled his biceps. A broadsword nearly as long as she was tall hung across his back, thankfully sheathed. She would have no hope of deflecting this warrior's blows if and when he decided to kill her.

She stopped as close as she dared, close enough to smell him. A barbarian had no right to smell so divine. No unwashed stench wafted from him, but the mouthwatering smell of baking bread and flowers of all things, combined with the raw, earthy scent of horses, leather and warrior. Swallowing the sudden moisture in her mouth, she tried to think of something to say. What did he expect? An introduction, a confession? "My men..."

"They are free to go."

His low, rough voice thrummed through her body. Trembling, she nodded and the sick knot in the pit of her stomach loosened a bit. Her soldiers would be spared.

"I'm Rhaekhar, Khul of the Nine Camps of the Sha'Kae al'Dan."

The barbarian spoke slowly in her language, heavily accented but understandable. His shoulders were tight, his jaw clenched, his fist locked about the knife on his hip. He looked like he was on the verge of tearing someone apart. Hopefully not her. Worried, Shannari waited silently for the rest of his demands.

"Do you yield to me?"

She nodded, barely daring to breathe. Her father and Fenton stepped up on either side to face the Khul with her. Grateful for their moral support, she prayed they didn't interfere with the inevitable sentencing. "What are your surrender terms?"

“One fist of my warriors will remain in this village to prevent further outlander encroachment on our Plains.”

Keeping her features smooth, Shannari resisted the urge to turn and question her father. The Madre Desert served as a forbidding barrier to the huge fields of grass that lay beyond the burning sands. To her knowledge, Allandor never intruded on the Plains.

“Agreed,” King Valche answered.

The barbarian’s attention whipped to her father. “Who is this man? Why does he agree to the terms your Camp must accept?”

“I’m King Valche of Allandor, and this is my daughter, Shannari dal’Dainari. She’s Captain of the Guard, Princess of Allandor and Our Blessed Lady’s Last Daughter. Someday she will rule all the Green Lands as High Queen.”

Standing defeated before the mighty warriors, she felt heat blaze across her cheeks and she struggled not to drop her gaze to the ground. She was embarrassed by the litany of titles, but she understood her father’s motives. He hoped to sway the barbarian toward ransom instead of execution.

The big Khul stepped closer to her, golden eyes blazing like the sun. He seized her chin in strong fingers, tilting her face upward. “Do they also call you the Rose of Shanhasson?”

The simple caress of his fingers on her face exploded through her starved body. Belatedly, she regretted her refusal to take another lover after Devin died.

Too late, she tried to jerk her head free, but he merely tightened his grip. She raised her sword, but he casually knocked her blade aside with his forearm, never looking away from her face.

In a husky whisper, he repeated, “Are you the Rose of Shanhasson?”

“No!”

Leaning down until his mouth hovered above hers, he breathed deeply. Tilting her head slightly, he sniffed at her neck. His long hair trailed across her face, sweet hay and flowers.

“I know your scent, Shannari. Vulkar help me, I recognize you. You are the Rose I seek.”

So close, so tempting, his scent and words and threats. Breathing shallow, she brought the sword up between their bodies and pushed the flat of the blade against his chest.

He didn't budge.

“You must be mistaken, Khul Rhaekhar. I've never been called the Rose of Shanhasson. In fact, I've only been to Shanhasson once in my entire life.”

Closing his eyes, the barbarian breathed deeply, still close enough to kiss. A smile suddenly broke the guarded expression on his face. The transformation from formidable warlord to seductive danger stole her breath. Full lips curved, baring strong, white teeth which softened the hard planes of his face. “You recognize me, too, or at least your body does.”

Her pulse raced, her heart thudded, and a hot coil of desire tightened deep in her stomach. Her body remembered the touch and weight of a man in her bed, and it yearned for this man, this barbarian. Fiercely. How did he know? Clenching her teeth with determination, she slid the sword up his body, deliberately digging the point into his neck. “I have no idea of what you speak.”

Ignoring the deadly weapon at his throat, he smiled and pressed closer. Blood dripped down his bronzed chest. His scent intensified, flooding her senses. His thigh brushed hers, his arm slipped around her waist, and it

was all she could do to keep from falling wholeheartedly into the barbarian's embrace.

Warningly, she said, "I will kill you."

"Wait!" Father Aran pushed his way through the Guardsmen. "She is the Rose of Shanhasson!"

Bewildered, she turned her head toward the High Priest. The barbarian released her. "How could you?"

Father Aran knelt before her and took her left hand, kissing the knuckles. "Princess Shannari belongs in Shanhasson with the Rose Crown of Leesha on her head. As the Lady's Last Daughter, she is truly the Rose of Shanhasson."

"You are mine, then, *na'lanna*. You will come with me."

Terror and dismay roiled in her mixed with betrayal. She stared into the High Priest's face as tears trickled down her cheeks.

What would become of Allandor and her people if she left them to Theo's merciless care? What of the darkness Father Aran prophesied for the Green Lands if she failed? Carried off by barbarians to the ends of the earth, she would never be able to wrest the High Throne from Theo. "What have you done?"

Father Aran pressed the back of her hand against his forehead and then stood, his face lined with guilt and sympathy. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but the way has been provided."

"I don't understand," she whispered, brushing the tears away impatiently. "How—"

The High Priest turned to the barbarian and raised her right hand to him. Wrapping his large, calloused palm around her fist, still gripping the sword stained with his blood, Rhaekhar kissed her knuckles, too. She

shuddered, swallowing the moan that threatened to escape.

“Will you let me claim you here and now?”

From the heated thickness in his voice, she dreaded asking for an explanation. “Claim?”

“Gregar, what is the proper word?”

“Marry, wed, consummate, pleasure, mate, copulate, tup,” the dark-haired warrior replied with a wicked smile of delight.

Her eyes widened at the progressively coarser descriptions of intimate activities. She jerked her hand free and stepped backward, giving herself room to fight. “Absolutely not!”

“This is an outrage!” Usually the calmest head during the most heated negotiation, King Valche was so angry that a vein thumped on his forehead. He glared at Father Aran. “Our own High Priest hands my daughter over like common chattel to a barbarian, who then demands she wed him on the spot! Are you forgetting the betrothal ceremony in which you promised her hand in marriage to the Crown Prince?”

Rhaekhar shrugged. “The man is not here to protect what is his. I’m warrior enough to take what I want and keep it. If this Crown Prince wants to challenge me, let him come.”

“Do you want the might of the Green Lands marching into your Sea of Grass?” King Valche retorted. “If you take the Lady’s Last Daughter into your Plains, the Crown Prince won’t challenge you. He’ll send his armies to murder her!”

The barbarian’s face darkened and he gripped the knife at his waist. “Anyone who attempts to harm her will suffer my wrath.”

“Silence!” Shannari yelled. “All of this arguing is pointless. The Lady’s will—”

King Valche broke in. “How can you trust the High Priest after he handed you over to the enemy? He could be lying! What if he’s secretly trying to eliminate you as a threat to Theo?”

“Impossible,” Father Aran retorted. “May the Lady strike me down if I lie!”

“It doesn’t matter.” Numbness filled her, for which she was truly grateful. So much arguing and political posturing left her feeling empty and sick. “I’m tired of being moved on the board like a pawn.”

She looked into the barbarian’s ruggedly handsome face and felt a piercing sorrow. She would never be free, never marry for love nor bear children without plotting to secure a throne and ensure the continuance of a dying royal line. He still dreamed that happiness, while she was surrounded by death. “While I appreciate your proposal, Khul Rhaekhar, I must decline. Although few nobles recall the truth of the legends, I must rule as High Queen or the Green Lands will fall into darkness. It’s my destiny and my duty. I can’t come with you.”

Rhaekhar’s voice echoed with silky menace. “As leader of these outlanders, you yielded to me.”

More barbarians fanned out behind and around him. Steel rang as swords were drawn. Cries echoed behind her from the Guardsmen. King Valche cursed and whipped out his own purely ceremonial sword.

Fear tightened her stomach and she shifted the hilt against her palm, her fingers cold and tingling. Her gaze darted from the big Khul to his guards, the massive warriors behind him, and back to his implacable face.

Nothing she did could save her father and her soldiers. Either she accepted the barbarian’s demands and left her people to die at Theo’s whim, or she died now with a sword in her hand. Either way, Shadow

would swallow the Lady's Green and Beautiful Lands. What else could she do? "Execute me, Khul, and leave my soldiers alone."

"I don't want your death. I want you. If you won't come with me willingly, then I'll take you by force."

"Please, Your Majesty," Father Aran said. "Don't make this any more difficult than necessary!"

"Difficult?" Shannari bit off the word. "You truly expect me to go meekly to some foreign land, leaving my country and my throne for which I've fought my entire life?"

"It doesn't have to be this way." The High Priest's tears startled her. "I didn't see suffering or unhappiness, or I never would have given your hand to him. I see only love."

Phantom pain blazed over her scarred heart. She laughed bitterly. "And you didn't see suffering?"

"Love is the greatest gift of all," Rhaekhar said, his manner carefully unthreatening.

"I know what love is, Khul. It's simply another way for the Gods to torment us. I will sooner kill you than love you."

"You are welcome to try."

The smug, condescending look on his face pushed her over the edge. Fury raged to life, blazing away the numbing fear holding her captive. With a roar, she swung the sword at his head.

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