

Arasya

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Two young girls get taken to a magical place where they have to take on the roles of their other selves. But what really awaits them in this land called Arasya? The story you've all been waiting for! Read and tell me if I should continue!

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1 - A Beautiful Princess and A Tragic Death (Prologue)

A young maiden of only fifteen sat in a throne room, the walls and floor made of all marble. There were pillars that stood erect against the walls between each of the five windows. On each side of the room were chairs and between them a crimson carpet that led from the main doorway to the throne in which she sat.

She sat on the elegant throne, her white and gold dress floating around her feet. The dress hung on her shoulders, the sleeves covering her arms and hands. Around her waist was a large lavender bow, flaring out in the back. Placed on her shoulders, sleeves, and bottom of her gown, were extravagant ruby red jewels. Around her neck was that same jewel, placed on a band of gold.

She stood up, her long skirts filling out beneath her. She walked to a window in the throne room, looking out towards the kingdom. The young maiden opened the window, letting the fragrant breeze blow her long brown hair back. She closed her sapphire eyes and leaned out of the window, almost losing her balance.

Strong hands gripped her waist before she could fall.

"Be careful highness. We wouldn't want to lose our beloved princess."

The princess turned around to see a female warrior of twenty years looking back at her with commanding and gentle green eyes. Her short black hair was placed on a stubborn yet gentle face. She wore a gray mail suit, the links small and lightweight, with mail boots and gloves that wrapped around her middle finger. She had gold bands across her wrists, shoulders, waist, and across the top of her boots. Just above the center of her chest was the same jewel that the princess wore; a jewel was also placed on each gold band. At her left hip hung a narrow sword with a jeweled handle. Her back was draped with a dark crimson cape.

"Ramyna," said the princess, "I need to get out of this palace! I feel so confined. Can't we go into town for just a little while, please?" The princess had a pleading look in her eyes that the warrior just couldn't resist.

"Princess Ares," the warrior sighed, "you know I would love to take you into town, but as your personal protector, I don't believe it's safe. There are many bandits and spies from the other Kingdoms that would want your head."

The princess was silent for a few seconds. "I know," she whispered quietly. "But keeping me in this forsaken palace is just making me want to run away. Couldn't we ask my father if I could go?"

"Your father's away on a trip to the Western Kingdom, remember? We cannot get permission from him."

"What if we ask Azshiu if we can go? Maybe he can even come with us."

Ramyna smiled. "You really want to go, don't you princess?" Ares flashed a white smile and nodded her head. "Alright, let's go ask Azshiu."

Ares yipped in glee and hugged her protector. "Thank you Ramyna!" she said joyfully. She let go and, lifting up her skirts so she wouldn't trip, ran down the hallways toward Azshiu's chambers.

The princess could hear Ramyna's cries asking her to wait call after her. The princess did not listen to them and kept running.

Down the corridor she went, turning left, then right, then right again. She went down a flight of stairs and turned to the right. She was running so fast, she didn't realize that she had collided with a wooden door in front of her. It was beautifully carved with a gold handle and a jeweled plate going across the center of it. Above the door was written, in the Arasyian language, "Domain of the Protector."

The door opened to a young man of twenty years in age and about six feet in height, his copperbrown hair cut short and his purple eyes looking down at the princess. He was dressed in a simple pair of baggy dark blue breeches and a baggy white shirt. Layered black boots were on his feet. He bent down and gave the princess a hand to take.

"Are you alright Princess Ares?" the man asked. Ares accepted the hand gratefully and rose from the ground, standing elegantly and erect in front of him. She was only about up to his shoulders he was so tall.

"Yes. Thank you Azshiu," she said.

Ramyna bounded around the corner then, skidding to a stop in front of the princess. Both she and Azshiu looked at her.

"It's about time I caught up with you," she said. Ares giggled slightly.

"As a warrior you should be able to out run me, who, I might add, is wearing full skirts," the princess said.

"Very funny," the warrior responded tartly.

"Anyways," she said turning to Azshiu again, "I was wondering if I could go into town with Ramyna. She doesn't think it's safe for me to go, so could you go with us?"

"Honestly, I don't think it's any safer if I go with you," said Azshiu. The princess had that pleading look in her eyes that could make anybody's heart melt. He smiled a hearty smile and continued, "but for your sake, of course I will go."

She yipped gleefully and bobbed up and down before she stopped, laughing at her own silliness.

"Alright! Let's go!" she said. She turned on her heel and headed down the corridor but stopped when a callused hand rested on her shoulder.

"First, we might want to change into slightly less noticeable clothes," Azshiu said.

"He's right," added Ramyna. "We stick out like sore thumbs in these clothes." She gestured to the elegant clothes that they were wearing.

The princess sighed and nodded in agreement. They all decided that they would meet in front of Princess Ares's room when they were done. So, Azshiu turned around and closed the door to his room and Ramyna and Ares walked up the stairs. Ramyna's rooms were right by the princess's, so they separated almost as soon as they got into their own rooms.

The princess stripped off her clothes and chucked them on her bed in haste. Reaching behind her neck, Ares removed the necklace that showed she was royalty and placed it on her dresser. She was actually going to town! She ran over to her chest and knelt down, opening the top of it. She took out a baggy white shirt that hung off the shoulders. Placing that on her bed, she also pulled out a blue skirt and black bodice. She slipped the white shirt on and then pulled on the skirt, tucking the shirt in as she did so. She grabbed the bodice from the top of her bed and wrapped it around her.

Closing the chest top with her foot, she tied the lacings in the front. She sighed and looked at the dress she had crumpled up, which had now found its way to the floor. She leaned over her bed and grabbed it from the floor. Standing up, she walked over to an armoire and placed her dress in there.

"A responsible princess is a neat and tidy one," she quoted from her etiquette teacher. She had been getting extra lessons in etiquette since she was bound to the palace and boy did she hate it!

Bending down, she grabbed a pair of black slippers and slipped them on.

Walking across the room, she opened the door to see that Azshiu and Ramyna were already outside. Azshiu was dressed as he was before, only he wore dark green breeches instead of dark blue ones; he wore brown boots instead of black ones and he also wore brown gloves; he wore a green cape that went half way down his upperbody in the front then went all the way to the floor in the back. Ramyna wore a simple pair of beige breeches and a simple white shirt. Over that, she wore a red tunic with two slits on the side for easy movement. On her feet were black boots and, of course, her sword hung from her left hip.

"It's about time you've changed," said Ramyna. "We've been waiting for a while." She handed Aresa string, suggesting that she braided her hair so she looked more like a commoner. When Ares finished braiding her hair, Azshiu stared.

"Even dressed as a commoner, you're still the most beautiful girl of all," he commented quietly. Ares blushed. She knew that Azshiu cared for her deeply; some could almost call it love; and not the kind of love friends and guardians shared, but the kind that a man and a woman shared. She felt the same way, too.

"Thank you Azshiu," she said just as quietly.

Ramyna cleared her throat to get their attention. They both turned towards her and blushed.

"Either we can go into town, or we can stay here and I can watch you two flirt," she said shortly. They both blushed even deeper. Ramyna wanted them to be happy: to express their love and get married, but she knew that it could never happen. Her princess had to enchant a prince- which she could do easily- on her sixteenth birthday and marry one on her seventeenth. It was her job to keep all suitors, besides princes, away from her- even if it was Azshiu.

"She's right," said the princess, her blush still showing slightly on her cheeks. "Let's go." They all turned towards the main door and walked off.

They went out the extravagant doors of the palace and walked down the stairs to the main gate that separated the palace from the town.

Two guards stood at the gate, dressed in red tunics and silver mail. They had a sword on each of their left hips and held a spear in the right hands. They stood in front of the gate, reminding the princess that she wasn't allowed outside the palace. She told them that they were going into town for a little while and would be back before the sunset. Hesitantly, they let Ares and her companions pass, opening the gates for them and closing them soon after.

Ares danced around the cobble streets, Azshiu and Ramyna close behind. She spun around and did a traditional jig. She almost lost her balance before Azshiu gripped her and straightened her up. She took the hint and walked the rest of the way into town.

When they got there, all that the town had to offer fascinated the princess. There were stands full of cloths and food, jewels and books, and more. She gaped happily at all the sites, rushing to each one and looking over all the items. She walked over to a clothing stand first, picking up an extraordinary piece of cloth. It was a piece of red fabric, gold thread embroidered into it to form designs of birds and vines. She held it up against her chest, letting the long fabric drape down to her feet.

"Oh, Azshiu! Look at this fabric! Even some of the fabric at the palace isn't this beautiful," she said, admiring the embroidery work by running her hand over the stitching. Azshiu came over, placing a pair of leather gloves in a pouch attached to his waist; Ramyna was behind him at a stand, looking at a wide variety of daggers.

"Yes," he said, running a hand over the fabric himself. "You're right. The stitching is very neatly done."

"The finest stitching in the land of Arasya." Azshiu and Ares turned around and looked at the young woman behind the stand. She had long black hair that tumbled to her waist and wore a dark blue tunic-wrap dress over a white and light blue cotton dress; matching slippers were on her feet. Her hazel brown eyes looked at them kindly. "I did it myself," she continued, referring to the cloth that the princess held up and the rest of the fabric that was at her stand.

"You did all the stitching yourself?" the princess asked, aghast.

"Yes, miss. My mother taught me how. She said that I was a better embroiderer than she was. Of course, I don't believe so."

Ares folded the fabric up carefully and placed it back on the stand. Behind the stand owner was a beautiful lavender colored fabric; below that was a fabric of a darker shade. The stand owner noticed her customer's stare and took the two fabrics from behind her, splaying them out on the stand in front of

them. Like the last fabric, Ares ran a delicate hand over the fabric, admiring the weaving.

"You may or maynot be able to see, miss and sir," she said politely, "but there are small threads of silver in the lavender. It shines and glistens when it moves. This is a personal favorite of mine." As if to see if what the stand owner said was true, Ares unfolded the fabric and placed it up against her body, moving slightly and looking in admiration as she saw the sun light dance on the silver strings of the fabric. She smiled and folded this piece of fabric too, placing it on top of the red fabric; she also placed the dark lavender fabric on top of it.

"I'll take them all," she said. She took a silk pouch from her waist and gave the stand owner ten pieces of gold. The stand owner looked at the gold with embarrassment and shock.

"Miss," she said, "this is too much for my work. The most it's worth is five gold."

Ares shook her head politely. "Good quality work should be paid for properly." She took the stand owner's hand and placed the gold firmly yet gently into her palm, closing the girl's fingers around it.

"She's right, you know," said Azshiu; the girls had forgotten that he was there. "Do you make dresses, young miss?"

The young stand owner nodded. "I was hoping to be hired as a weaver and seamstress for the princess herself, but I highly doubt that will ever happen," she said. "But, if you like, I could make a dress for you out of the fabrics you bought; the extra gold that you gave me would cover the cost for a dress."

The princess smiled at the offer. "I would be delighted," she said. "Come by my house tomorrow at noon. You can bring all your materials, and we can do measurements. My house is down the cobble road and behind a set of giant gates." The stand owner smiled and nodded.

"Okay. I'll be there at noon. Thank you for your service, miss."

"Wait," Azshiu said. "Before we leave, could you tell us your name? We've been talking for quite a while and yet we don't even know your name."

The stand owner grew wide-eyed. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Where are my manners? My name is Trisaria Arimaria. But, I'm Trisa for short."

"Well, Trisaria Arimaria, we'll see you tomorrow," said Azshiu walking away.

"Bye Trisa!" the princess said, waving a goodbye. Trisa waved back and smiled.

Ares and Azshiu walked around for a while, looking at the other stands. They met up with Ramyna and they compared purchases.

They were at the jewelry stand when Ramyna caught something out of the corner of her eye. She glanced and saw that there were two cloaked figures watching the princess. She stood behind the princess, blocking their view of her.

Whispering in her ear she said, "Ares, we must be careful. There are two people watching you. We should leave soon." Ares looked at Ramyna and then out into the crowd- she saw no one.

"We're fine, Ramyna," she said. "We can stay a little longer." They soon moved on and Azshiu felt the presence of the cloaked figures as well. He glanced at Ramyna who was looking at him; her look confirmed his suspicions.

"Princess, I must caution you that there are people following us. We must return to the palace," he whispered.

"Azshiu, Ramyna said the same thing; I don't feel or see that someone is following us. We can stay a little longer."

Azshiu gripped her by the shoulders and made her face him. Ramyna stopped next to Ares, her eyes wide with surprise at the sudden gesture.

"Ares!" he said in a harsh whisper. "We must head back to the palace. Your life is in high jeopardy right now!"

As if to confirm his words, a small silver object spun towards the princess. Azshiu caught it between his two fingers as Ares flinched. He held the small blade just centimeters from her neck.

“Azshiu! Lookout!” shouted Ramyna, drawing her sword. Balls of liquid blue fire shot at him and Ares from a roof. Thrusting out his left hand, he produced a shield of white and copper magic, absorbing the blue fire. Ramyna jumped up and thrust her sword at the assassin on the roof. He fell to the ground, dead. She grabbed her sword from his chest and charged as another assassin shot liquid fire at Azshiu and Ares. She killed him too, but wasn’t quick enough to stop him from producing the fire.

The protector picked up his princess and jumped out of the way before any damage could be done. He ran through the crowd, which was now in a state of panic, while Ares clutched to his shirt. He stopped at the end of the street and placed Ares behind him. Casting his arms out palms forward, he produced six threads of magic that wove through the crowd, killing the assassins on the ground.

Ramyna was on a roof close by. A group of three assassins were in front of her. She charged and thrust her sword out, slicing and killing an opponent. She did a crescent swing as another opponent charged at her with a dagger. Once he fell, she grabbed the dagger to kill the last assassin who was charging her. But she was a second too late and cried out in pain as his dagger blade left a deep gash in her arm, tearing her shirt. Her arm dripping in blood, she stabbed her attacker fast and hard in the chest, watching him drop lifelessly on the roof, then rolling off and falling onto the cobble street below. Tearing a strip of cloth from her already torn sleeve, she wrapped her wound tightly to stop the loss of any more blood. She removed her sword from the body of the other assassin and wiped it on her torn sleeve. Sheathing it, she jumped down to the ground where a group of onlookers were staring at the body.

“Alright!” she shouted, the attention on the crowd now focused on her instead of the body. “Everybody, step back and go home! There’s nothing to see here!” Murmuring, the crowd slowly disappeared until the only people on the street were the princess, her protectors, and the stand owners who were quickly collecting their belongings and heading for their own homes.

Ramyna bent down and removed the assassin’s face cloth as Azshiu and Ares walked up. Disgusted, she turned him over with her foot and spat by his head.

“Ramyna!” the princess exclaimed, appalled. “You should respect the dead! No matter who it is!” “This assassin doesn’t deserve my respect, nor does he yours,” she said, glancing at the corpse behind her. “He’s a paid assassin sent by the Eastern Kingdom to kill you.”

Ares gasped. “It’s not surprising,” said Azshiu. “They know that if they kill the successor to the most powerful Kingdom of Arasya, then their heir will take over the throne. What puzzles me is why it took so long for them to figure that out.”

“Does it *matter*!” exclaimed Ramyna. “They figured it out and they’re going to do all it takes to kill her.”

“Then why haven’t they gone after Ypae?” asked Ares, referring to her younger sister.

“Because Ypae is too young to take over the throne as princess. She must be fifteen years of age to pose a threat. She still has two years to go before the other Kingdoms come after her,” said Azshiu.

“Wouldn’t it just be easier for them to just have the heirs to the Kingdoms ask for my betrothal? It would save them their hired assassins.”

“Yes, it would be, but it seems that killing you is more fun to them.”

“Now we should head back,” said Ramyna. “There’s nothing left for us here.” The others agreed and walked off. Ramyna looked back at the assassin one more time and looked away in disgust, catching up to the princess and Azshiu.

When they got to the main gates, the palace guards said that Ares’s sister, Ypae, had urgent news to tell her. Bewildered, Ares and her companions hurried to the palace. They pushed open the doors and went to the throne room.

In front of the throne was a young girl, wearing a white and lavender dress similar to Ares’s. She had a gold band around her waist, where a dark lavender bow hung. She had two blue jewels on the gold band and one on the top center of her dress. Her coal colored hair was cut short on top but it went to

about her knee in the back; it was tied with a dark lavender bow.

She turned around when she heard the footsteps of Ares, Azshiu, and Ramyna.

"Sister, what's the matter?" said Ares.

Princess Ypae looked at her sister and friends with tears in her crystal blue eyes. She was as if she were a spitting image of her mother, the queen, and had a blue jewel on the middle of her forehead.

Rising from her position from the floor, Ypae ran to her sister, tripping and almost falling to the floor before her sister caught her and hugged her tightly. Ares cooed to her gently and stroked her hair. Ypae's tears dripped off her cheeks and rested on her sister's dress.

"Ypae, what's the matter?" asked Ares again.

Ypae was silent for a while, choking only on her tears, before she spoke. "Father's dead," she whispered silently. "He was killed by an assassin from one of the Kingdoms." Ares took in a sharp breath, and then rested her head on her sister's shoulder, her eyes brimming with tears. *I have to be strong*, she thought, *for Ypae's sake*. She bit her lip to hold back her tears.

Behind them, Ramyna clenched her teeth and punched the wall closest to her, cursing as the wall cracked slightly. Cradling her throbbing hand, Azshiu calmed her down. He knew how upset she was—he felt the same way. However, he controlled his temper a lot better than Ramyna did.

Ares pulled away from her sister and stroked her cheek lovingly, forcing a sad smile. Placing Ypae's hands in hers, they rose from the floor; Ypae went to Ares's chin.

Turning to Ramyna, Ares said, "Ramyna, calm down. I know you're upset like the rest of us, but you need to control your temper." Ramyna bowed her head and nodded solemnly, embarrassed. Turning back to Ypae, Ares continued, "How did you find out about the death of our father?"

"The Head Councilman told me. They said that they had received the body after you left for town," answered Ypae. "They said we could go see him when you got back."

"Then that's what we'll do. Come on, let's go see our father."

The princesses walked out of the throne room, the warrior and mage following behind. Ramyna and Azshiu knew what to do whenever royalty died; they were taught what to do: they would wait until immediate family had visited with their lost loved one, then, if permitted, they would be allowed to go in. They all walked to their rooms and changed silently. When they emerged, the princesses wore identical outfits: dark silk dresses with embroidered black bodices. The dresses went to the floor and flowed elegantly, covering matching slippers; the sleeves clung to their arms and went slightly past their wrists. They each wore slender black bands around their heads and black veils hung from them, covering their faces.

Ares looked at Ramyna and Azshiu sadly. Ramyna was dressed in her mail and cape, her sword, as always, at her hip. Azshiu was dressed the most simply of the group: he wore a black cape and breeches, as well as black boots; he wore a simple gray shirt as well.

Silently they walked down the halls to where the king's body was. The hallways seemed darker in those few minutes, the sadness of the Royal Family filling every corner. Finally, they arrived at a dark wooden door. Two guards, dressed like the ones at the gate, stood in front of the door. They opened the door and bowed at the waist as the princesses walked in.

Ares bit her lip at the sight she saw. Her father, who was handsome in life, looked like a ghost in death. His skin was paper-thin and ghost white. He had several holes in his chest where arrows had been; on his throat was a thin slit where a knife had dealt the final blow.

Behind him was a beautiful figure, shrouded in darkness. The woman wore a dress of silk and lace, the skirts flowing from her minute waist. Her blonde hair was tied in a loose bun and a black veil covered it; it also covered her face. She rose from her seat and lifted up her veil. She, the queen, was beautiful. She had a gentle face and full red lips. Her eyes, though filled with tears, shined like green gems.

She walked around the dead body of her husband, her long skirts dragging on the floor behind her. She

stood in front of her daughters, her posture elegantly erect. The queen smiled weakly at them. In respect, her daughters bowed their heads slightly and lifted up their veils. Ypae's jewel, which changed a different color for each emotion, was black.

The queen embraced her daughters and held them close. She was the most heart broken of them all; being only thirty-four, she had been married to the king for half of her life. She sobbed quietly, Ypae joining her, and even though she tried not to with all her might, Ares cried too. For a while, they cried silently, until the queen pulled away from her daughters and looked at them.

"How are you doing?" she asked silently.

"We're doing fine," said Ares.

"Yes, mother. How about you? Will you be okay?" said Ypae.

The queen, Sarya was her name, looked away from her daughters. She whispered, "I'll be fine, eventually." She walked back to her seat slowly and sat down. "It's just that," she continued, "it happened so suddenly." She placed her hand to her heart as a new flood of tears came from her eyes. She looked at her daughters and choked, "But I will never be able to overcome the grief and pain that my heart now holds." She removed a cloth from her sleeve and wiped her eyes. Ypae walked over and sat down next to her mother, whispering words of comfort to her.

While her sister did that, Ares walked towards her father's body. The king, Nicholas, looked peaceful, his strong and gentle face calm; Ares stroked it gently, and then kissed his forehead. Straightening up, she walked to the door.

"I'm going to let Azshiu and Ramyna in," she said. Opening the doors, she summoned them in to the room. They bowed respectfully to Sarya, who bowed her head in return, and walked over to the king. They both studied the body for a while before Azshiu straightened up and walked to the queen. Bowing again, he said, "Your Highness, I will be able to find out which Kingdom killed the king. All you have to do is-"

"No!" the queen interrupted, standing up abruptly. "I will not let you use magic on my husband!"

"Mother," said Ypae, "you can trust Azshiu. His way is probably-"

"I've spoken!" she said. "Not a whisper of magic will touch my husband."

"As her Highness wishes," Azshiu said, bowing again slightly.

"If I may be so bold," said Ramyna, "I can find out which of the Kingdoms killed his Highness. If you permit it of course, your Highness."

Queen Sarya nodded solemnly and walked past the others; Ypae rose from her seat. "If you don't mind," Sarya said, "I would prefer not to watch this. Please excuse me." She walked to the doors and opened them, the guards outside bowing.

"I'll go with mother," Ypae told Ares. She nodded and Ypae followed her mother out the doors.

As the guard shut the door, Ramyna ran her hands over the king's chest. She felt each hole in his chest slowly and carefully then traced her finger over the line on his throat. After doing the same process again, she bowed respectfully to the body.

"Well?" asked Ares anxiously. "What did you find out?"

Ramyna was silent for a while before responding, thinking over what she had just recently discovered carefully. "I may not be completely correct," she said, "but I'm pretty sure about what I've found out." She waited again before continuing, "These holes in his chest are definitely the effect of arrows. I know for a fact that they're not from the Eastern Kingdom- they prefer to use blades and daggers. The Southern and Western Kingdoms are known for using their arrows, but the slit on his throat means that he was attacked at close range, which is like the Northern Kingdom; but the only way that slit could've been caused was by a blade or magic, which the Northern Kingdom uses." She began pacing in front of the body, thinking intently.

"Do you think that the Kingdoms are forming an alliance?" asked Ares, sitting down. Azshiu and Ramyna

looked at her.

"It could be possible," said Azshiu. "Even though our army is large and powerful, the Kingdoms know that if they join forces, they're more powerful."

"But what does that have to do with killing my father?"

Ramyna stroked her chin thoughtfully, an idea forming in her head. "I think they're trying to kill off the Royal Family," she said finally. "The Eastern Kingdom tried to kill Ares today, another Kingdom killed the king a few days ago..."

"One Kingdom for each member of the family," Azshiu interrupted. Ares and Ramyna looked at him in bewilderment. "Don't you see? Each Kingdom is aiming to kill *one* member of the Royal Family. So, we know that the Eastern Kingdom is aiming to kill Ares, so that eliminates them from the list of suspects. That leaves the Southern, Western, and Northern Kingdoms."

"Then," said Ares, "if what you suspect is true, that eliminates the Northern Kingdom for my mother. The Northern Kingdom has formed a peace treaty with the country my mother's from. They wouldn't try to kill her."

"That's right," said Ramyna. "I'd completely forgotten about that."

Azshiu traced the slit on the king's throat with his finger then pulled away. "It's not the Northern Kingdom," he concluded. "I don't sense any magic on him." Calculating the facts in his head, he said, "That means that the Northern Kingdom will come after Ypae, leaving the Southern or Western Kingdom aiming to kill the queen."

They all were silent, deep in thought, until Ares rose from her seat. Her protectors looked at her. "I think I know which Kingdom killed my father," she said silently. She looked at Ramyna. "Ramyna, didn't you say that my father was on a trip to the Western Kingdom?" The warrior nodded. "Maybe," she continued, "the Southern Kingdom was afraid that we were forming an alliance with the Western Kingdom and that we would attack them."

"Yes," said Azshiu. "That makes sense. The Eastern Kingdom is aiming for Princess Ares; the Western Kingdom, Queen Sarya; the Northern Kingdom, Princess Ypae; and the Southern Kingdom, King Nicholas."

They all agreed that they should tell the queen and went out to find her. When they told her, she was angry, but she did nothing. She was too overcome by grief to do anything.

The next day, the guards came to Princess Ares with news that a visitor had come to see her. Puzzled, Ares went to the throne room where her visitor was. The visitor turned around and curtsied.

"How are you, your Highness?" she said.

Ares walked towards her guest. "Oh my goodness! Trisa, I'm so sorry. With all that has happened, I completely forgot that we had a meeting today. Please forgive me."

Trisaria Arimaria, or Trisa for short, shook her head. "Nothing to forgive, your Highness. I'm terribly sorry about your father, the king. May he rest in peace. Would you like me to come back another day? It would be no trouble at all for me."

"Oh, no! You're already here. Shall we get started?" Trisa nodded and they walked off to Ares's room for the fitting.

A week later was King Nicholas's funeral. The Royal Family as well as the town attended the ceremony. Below the palace was the Tombs of Royalty, where only the Royal Family was allowed. There, the king was buried, and the Kingdom went into mourning for two months; some, even longer.

For months after the funeral the queen went in to seclusion. She didn't eat or drink anything; she only stayed alive due to the persistence of her daughters. Everyday, she'd only accept one meal of water, bread, and some fruit.

She would sit in the room where her husband's body had been, cloaked in darkness. There was no light in the room except for the sun that came from the only open window. Her eyes could no longer adjust to the light of the outdoors; she could no longer eat three meals a day; and she could hardly even talk. The Western Kingdom gave up on trying to kill her because she was already so close to death.

While her mother was in seclusion, Princess Ares had to take over all the tasks and responsibilities. She dealt with all the affairs as if she was queen; the only thing she couldn't do was leave the palace for meetings and such.

Eight months after the funeral, she was still playing the role as queen. It was only two months until her sixteenth birthday, and she was nervous. She knew that with so many people at her birthday celebration, assassins from the Eastern Kingdom would be able to disguise themselves. Even though Azshiu and Ramyna never left her side, she still felt that they would not be able to protect her.

One month before her birthday, her suspicions were confirmed. Each night she would have the same nightmare of her death, always waking up in a cold sweat. She knew that she was going to die soon after her sixteenth birthday. So, she did the only thing she could do: she prepared for her death.

It was the night of Princess Ares's sixteenth birthday. In her room, she looked at herself in the mirror nervously. She was wearing the dress that Trisa had designed and made for her. The light lavender silk was a strapless dress and flowed elegantly to the floor; it had a low back with a dark lavender jewel at the end; a silver band was connected to that and went to the front where it ended with two more jewels; another silver band went across the top of the dress, a dark lavender jewel hanging from the center. Hanging from the top silver band were long layered sleeves of the dark lavender fabric; long layers of the fabric hung from the silver band on the waist and went all the way to the back, forming a train.

Placing her hands on her stomach, Ares walked over to her dresser where a manikin head held her crown. It was a silver band that went around her head and almost connected in the front; two dark lavender jewels were placed on the sides of her head on the band. Taking the crown from the manikin, she walked back over to the mirror. Slowly, she put it on her head. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, a nervous lump formed in her throat. She swallowed it hard and gasped for air; she was having difficulty breathing.

"Princess, are you ready?" Ramyna had come into the room. She was a strange beauty in a dress, although you could still tell she was a warrior by the sword at her hip. The top part of the dress was light mail and armor of silver and gold. A gold band was placed on one of her upper arms, long crimson sleeves hanging from them; along a slit went from the top to the bottom of the sleeves, showing armored gloves with a red jewel on the top of them. A gold belt was on her waist, another red jewel placed where the buckle should have been; an elegant crimson skirt flowed from her waist.

Ares swallowed again and shook her head. "No. I'll never be ready for this," she said. Obviously uncomfortable, she changed the subject. "You look really nice in a dress, Ramyna." The warrior blinked then blushed.

"Maybe, but not as nice as you. I couldn't stand wearing one of these every day," she said jokingly. Noticing the distracted look on Ares's face, she asked, "Is something the matter?"

Ares, who was looking at the floor, looked up at her friend. "Hmm?"

"Isaid, is something the matter?" she repeated.

"Ramyna, you know as well as I do why I'm nervous."

Ramyna walked over to her princess. Placing her strong hands on her friend's shoulders, she said, "I know. But I will never let any harm come to you. I promise."

Ares looked at her friend smiling. "Thanks Ramyna," she whispered.

Someone knocked on the door then opened it; it was Azshiu. Although simply dressed, he had an

air of authority about him. He wore a red tunic, a black belt pinned with a jewel on his waist, over white breeches and a gold shirt; he wore a black cape, boots, and gloves; the boots and gloves had red jewels on top of them. On his head was a crown like the princess's, except that a white cloth hung from it, covering the back of his head; these jewels were also red.

"Could one of you tell me why women take so long to get ready?" he asked jokingly. Ramyna smirked and walked over towards Azshiu. Friendly punching him on the shoulder, she left the room saying that she would give the two love birds a minute alone. Of course, both Azshiu and the princess blushed at that.

Shutting the door behind him, he walked over to the princess. Taking her hands in his, Azshiu kissed them both and then her forehead. "You look extremely stunning tonight, Princess Ares," he said. Ares was not surprised by the compliment but she still blushed. She thanked him and looked down at the floor. Concerned, although it was natural behavior, Azshiu lifted her chin up and looked at her; she wouldn't look him in the eye. "Why won't you look me in the eye?" he asked. "That's not like you."

She paused before answering. "Do you know how nervous I am?" she whispered. "Do you know that I will never be able to see you or Ramyna or Ypae ever again?"

Azshiu gently grabbed her face, turning it towards him, and looked at her quizzically; she had no choice but to look him in the eye. "What nonsense are you speaking of?"

Ares explained to him about her dreams recently. When she was finished, he sighed. "Ares, dreams are only dreams. It doesn't necessarily mean it will happen."

"These aren't dreams Azshiu. Every time I wake up, I'm short of breath, like somebody was trying to strangle me in my sleep. And why would I dream of my death? In case you don't remember, you've been the one who's been teaching me about the meanings of dreams. And you were also the one who said I had the Sight. Or have you forgotten?"

Azshiu sighed again. "No, I haven't," he whispered.

"Then why don't you think my dreams aren't going to happen?" Now it was Azshiu who looked away. A few seconds passed before he answered.

"Because I don't want to believe that they're going to happen," he said looking back at her. Ares blinked, shocked by his answer. She looked into his eyes and saw fear in them.

"W-what?" she stuttered. Azshiu was never scared and to see that he was scared Ares. Again, a few seconds passed between them. Looking at him in somewhat disbelief, she said, "You're scared, aren't you?"

Now it was Azshiu who looked at her in disbelief. "Of course I'm scared!" he said in a harsh whisper. "I'm scared, because I don't want to think of losing you."

Ares placed a delicate hand on his cheek. "Azshiu, you'll never lose me. I'll always be in your memories and" -she blushed at this- "in your heart." Azshiu blushed at this too and smiled.

A silent moment passed between them. However, that moment ended when Azshiu leaned in gingerly and placed his tender lips gently on the princess's. Ares blinked but then closed her eyes as the sensation of his kiss swept through her body and filled it. When he removed his lips from hers, the sensation stayed in her body. He nuzzled against her ear as she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"How was that for a first kiss?" he whispered into her ear. He began to kiss her neck tenderly.

She leaned her head against his and whispered in his ear, "Don't you ever stop." He didn't; he kissed her lips again repeatedly, each time the same sensation sweeping through Ares's body. Azshiu ran his hands down her back, making her arch her spine.

When Azshiu freed his lips from Ares's, she said, "I wish that my party was over and everybody had left. Then we could be alone." They both blushed at that thought, but they also smiled.

"So do I," he whispered. "So do I."

Ramyna's voice from outside the room shouted, "Do I have to split you two up in there? Or do you think

you're capable of making it out on your own?"

The two lovers laughed and blushed at Ramyna's comment. Offering his arm, Azshiu smiled down at Ares; she placed her hand on it and smiled at him too. Together they walked outside her room. Ramyna had been leaning against the wall the whole time. "I didn't think you guys would ever come out!" she said sarcastically. "Are you about ready to go to the party?" The two nodded and they walked down the hallway to the Grand Ballroom.

The Grand Ballroom was filled with nobles and suitors, all dressed in their finest clothes. The Ballroom was large with four massive marble pillars at each corner of the room. Red and gold drapes were hung between each of the pillars; they glistened in the light that the massive chandelier in the center of the room produced. At the front of the room was a hallway, a red rug draped on it. Paintings of the Royal Family hung on the wall behind a grand staircase, which protruded from the hallway. On the left side of the Ballroom was a large glass door that led out to the gardens. A large glass arch was above the doors. Across from the staircase was a throne with four chairs: two smaller chairs sat on each side of two larger ones. On the marble floors of the Ballroom were tables, draped with red cloths, filled with delicate foods.

The room silenced as the princess and her companions reached the top of the staircase. Ares let go of Azshiu's arm as both he and Ramyna stepped aside, leaving her the center of attention.

Looking at the crowd, Azshiu spoke loud and clearly. "May I present to you, her Royal Highness, Princess and heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Arasya, Princess Ares Shyra Sarya." A loud cheer came from the nobles and suitors in the crowd below. Ares smiled a white smile and walked elegantly down the stairs. Following behind her was Ramyna, then Azshiu.

When she got to the bottom step, the crowd split in two, making a pathway for their princess. Taking a deep breath, she walked down the pathway as each lord and lady bowed and curtsied to her. In respect, she bowed her head slightly to each of them. She looked to her right at a large balcony. On it was the Royal Court Advisers, the Head Council, and all her teachers. They were looking down at her, seeing if she would mess up. They knew that if she ruined this, it would bring shame to their reputation. *Perfect*, thought Ares to herself, *just what I need right now*. She looked away and continued walking down the pathway until she got to the throne.

Turning around, she looked again at the crowd. Again, she took a deep breath and began, "My fellow lords and ladies, welcome to the celebration of my sixteenth birthday. I would like to say that even though King Nicholas, my father and our king, has passed on, I, as well as the rest of the Kingdom, have worked hard to make the Central Kingdom of Arasya a better place for all of us." She smiled and continued, "Now, without further ado, let the celebration begin!" Another cheer erupted from the crowd as each lord and lady found their partner to dance with. Soon after that, a line of suitors came up to Ares and asked for her to dance. She accepted and danced with each one of them in the classic ballad of Arasya.

While she was dancing, she was brought into familiar arms. Looking up at her suitor she was happy and a little shocked. "Only suitors can dance with me you know," she said. Azshiu smiled down at her. Together, they spun around the marble floor.

"Am I not a suitor?" he asked, laughing slightly.

"The only suitors that can dance with me are princes."

"Well, how do you know I'm not a prince?" Ares looked at him, disbelief in her eyes, as they continued to dance.

"How do I know that you aren't?" she replied, laughing herself.

He smiled back at her. "Ah, I guess you'll have to wait until our wedding day to find out," he said as they were separated again. Ares was now dancing with another suitor as Azshiu, to his surprise, was dancing with Ramyna. For a while they were silent, dancing around the room; Ramyna was dancing quite

well for a warrior.

"What did you tell her?" asked Ramyna, breaking the silence.

Azshiu said in response, "You know, you dance quite well for a warrior."

"Thank you, but don't avoid the subject. Now, what did you tell Ares?"

"I told her nothing." Ramyna glared at him. "Okay, okay! I was just talking to her about our wedding day."

Ramyna laughed at that. "Your wedding day? Why would you be talking to her about that when you know you two wouldn't be able to marry?"

Azshiu grinned at her. "Ah, that's what you think." Leaning in towards her, he whispered in her ear. When he pulled away, Ramyna looked shocked.

"Is that true?" she whispered. Azshiu nodded. "When are you going to tell Ares?"

"Soon," he replied. "Very soon."

That night, Ares lay in her bed panting heavily. She was having the same nightmare of her death, but this time the feeling was stronger. She jolted up in her bed in a heavy sweat, clutching her throat. She looked across her bed and saw a dark figure there. Lifting up her covers, she slid over to the side of her bed.

"Azshiu?" she whispered into the darkness.

The figure turned around and looked at her with cold eyes. Grinning wickedly, he said, "Not tonight princess." He lifted up his sword, already in mid swing. Ares screamed, closing her eyes as she awaited her fate. But after a few seconds, Ares was still alive. Opening her eyes, she gasped at the sight she saw. The attacker had stopped his attack, the blade only a few inches from her neck. The cause of that was the slender blade in his gut. The wielder of the blade was Ramyna, dressed in breeches and a baggy shirt.

"Not tonight," she said through gritted teeth. Pulling out the blade, she sliced off his head. It fell on to the bed and rolled off, making Ares place a hand over her mouth to stop the vomit rising in her throat. Ares got up from her bed and ran to Ramyna, hugging her tightly. Ramyna pulled her away and grabbed a robe from her armoire. "Put this on," she said, thrusting the robe at Ares hastily. "It's cold."

Doing as she was told, Ares put on the red silk robe and tied it. "What's going on?" she asked as Ramyna led her to the door.

"The palace is under attack," she replied, peering through a crack in the door; the hallway was clear. Leading Ares out, she continued, "It turns out that the Eastern Kingdom wanted to launch a surprise attack on the palace. They didn't expect that we would be ready for them." They walked quickly down the hallway, going down flights of stairs and turned left. The princess recognized the hallway they were now walking in. Arriving at a door, Ramyna opened it and dragged the princess in. Ramyna barred the door behind them.

"Azshiu!" cried Ares happily, as she ran to embrace him. Azshiu returned the embrace quickly then pulled away.

"Ramyna, did you hide Princess Ypae and the queen?" he asked. Ramyna nodded.

"They're hidden in one of the secret chambers below the palace. They're safe until the raid will be over," she responded. She walked over to a statue by the wall and turned it, opening up a secret passage way. "Come Ares. We have to get you out of harm's way." Ares looked at Azshiu sadly and leaned up to kiss him. "Ares!" Ramyna shouted from the passage. Ares looked at Ramyna reluctantly, then leaned up and kissed Azshiu tenderly. She hugged him again and he returned the embrace, hugging her tightly.

"I love you Azshiu," she whispered.

"And I you," he said.

Ramyna, frustrated, grabbed the princess by the arm. "We have to go now!" she hissed. "I promise you

that you'll see Azshiu again." Pulling her away from Azshiu, Ares looked at him. As the door to the passage way closed, Ares knew that that would be the last time she would see him.

The warrior barred the door and pushed the princess forward down the dark passageway. A light emanated from the jewel on Ramyna's sword. The warrior explained that she had magic of her own, but it wasn't as powerful as Azshiu's.

They continued down the hallway, the light from the sword showing the way. They turned left into another passageway with stairs. Briskly, they walked down them, following the stairs as it spiraled. When it came to an end, they turned right down another passageway. They continued to go down passageways for what seemed like hours. Finally, they came to a hallway with doors. Opening one, they walked into the room. It was completely bare except for a few furnishings.

Turning to the door, Ramyna placed her hands on it. As she concentrated, green threads, Ramyna's magic, came out of her hands. It flowed to each side and went through the walls. Green magic began to go around the border of the door. When she lifted her hands, the green light remained around the door. Turning towards Ares, the warrior wiped the sweat off her face. She walked past her and opened up another door. Ares, who knew what would happen if she didn't follow, walked behind Ramyna through the doorway as the warrior barred the door.

Following Ramyna down the passageway, the princess asked, "What was that?"

Ramyna, gasping for air, said, "It was a spell to lock all the doors in that last corridor we were in. If they have a mage powerful enough to uncover that spell, all the doors will be outlined with green, making them think about which door they will have to choose to find us. The only mages powerful enough to undo the spell completely are Azshiu and a few others, so we have a fair chance that they won't find it." After this passageway they came to another door. Opening that, they came to a room with stone walls and floors. A large stone platform was in one corner of the room, a short pile of steps leading up to it. Torches on the walls and a candle chandelier on the ceiling were the only sources of light.

Ramyna closed the door that led into this room, barred it, and took in a deep breath. Smiling weakly at her princess, she said, "I haven't completely mastered that last spell. I didn't think it'd take this much out of me." She wiped a new layer of sweat off her face and sat down on the platform. Ares sat down next to her.

"Are we just resting here or is this where we're hiding?" she asked.

"Both," she said. "They won't be able to find us down here."

Together, they sat down there in silence, listening to what they could hear of the battle. After about an hour, they heard footsteps coming down the passageway. Ramyna and Ares sprang up as the warrior instantly drew her sword.

"Hide," she whispered harshly. Ares nodded and looked frantically for a place to hide. She saw a dark corner and hid there, not moving an inch. She had hidden just in time; by the time she had gotten to her hiding spot, the door smashed open.

Ramyna instantly charged at the first person to come in the door. The assassin, caught by surprise, didn't have time to bring up his sword; he was brought down in a matter of seconds. The other assassin already had his sword drawn and swung it down hard on Ramyna. She lifted up her sword and blocked, gripping her handle with both hands for more support. Pulling away, she stepped back and charged again. He blocked and pressed down hard on the sword. Ramyna gritted her teeth to hold back a scream of pain. Pulling back, the assassin circled her, eyeing his opponent. Spinning, she did a half crescent swing and came down hard on his shoulder that held his sword. He, unlike Ramyna, cried out in pain. Switching the sword to his other hand, he slashed at Ramyna, leaving a gash in her stomach. She stumbled back and gasped for air.

During the battle, Ares looked on in her hiding spot. Suddenly, she bent over, clutching at her chest. Some force was trying to drain her life force from her; it was working. White threads of hair were starting

to appear in her brown tresses. She was turning ghost white as she fell on her knees, grabbing the stone under her hands.

Ramyna looked over and cried, "Ares!" She ran to her aid, completely forgetting about the battle she was in.

The assassin laughed wickedly. "Ah!" he said, "It seems as if Master Sarmin's spell has taken its effect." He walked towards them, his blade gleaming in the light.

Ramyna awoke from her concern of Ares when she felt a sharp pain sweep through her back and stomach. She cried out in pain as the sword was pulled from her back; it had gone all the way through her body, leaving a deep wound in her stomach. Clutching her stomach, she fell to the ground, her blood coming out of her body heavily. Ramyna would normally be able to get up, but she was so weak from using her magic and fighting the assassin, she just couldn't.

The assassin turned the warrior over with his foot and kicked her in the rib cage, making her gasp for air. Smirking, he said, "I'll let you die a slow, painful death." Turning to the princess, he looked at her with an evil grin on his face. "As for you, princess, a beauty such as yourself should not die a slow death. So, I will ease your passing."

Gripping his blood-soaked blade, he walked over to Ares. Ares was still clutching at the ground, her hair almost completely white now. Leveling his sword with her neck, he laughed. Bringing up his sword, he was stopped, like the other assassin, from killing Princess Ares. However, this time it wasn't Ramyna's sword that stopped him, but her remaining magic. She was propped up on her elbow, her right hand pointing at the assassin. Green threads of magic were coming out of her fingers, going right into his head.

Dropping his sword, he put his hands to his head, crying out in pain as the green magic wove through his skull. Blood with tints of green was dripping from his mouth as he screamed, his eyes rolling back. Seconds later, he burst into flames of green magic and disappeared, the only thing remaining of him was the sword he had dropped.

Ramyna collapsed on the floor, a few silver strands in her black hair; almost all of her life force was spent with that last bit of magic she used; the warrior was dying, and she knew it. Ares looked at her fallen friend. All her brown hair was completely white, her skin ghostly pale, and her lips, cracked. She crawled over to the warrior and held her strong hand in her delicate ones. Kneeling, Ares closed her eyes. A sapphire glow formed around her and a green glow formed around Ramyna as she spoke. "By all the power of Arasya," she said in a hoarse whisper, "I, Princess Ares Shyra Sarya of the Kingdom of Arasya, give you the life force of Ramyna, the Warrior of Arasya and Protector, and my own life force, to call to this land the people who have a part of our souls in their hearts. Bring them here, to the Kingdom of Arasya!" Spirals of sapphire and green magic shot up from the princess and warrior. White magic, their life forces, wound around their magic and brought them together, forming a crystallized sphere. Ares collapsed next to Ramyna, whose hair had now turned completely white, and smiled. She had saved the Kingdom of Arasya, her Kingdom. With that final thought, she, Princess Ares, and Ramyna, the Warrior of Arasya and Protector, died.

2 - Welcome to Arasya

At a private high school in New York, a fifteen-year-old girl sat at her desk. It was the end of the day and she was glad- the weekend had finally come. Grabbing her bag next to her, the young girl stood up and tried to fix her wrinkled skirt. She hated her uniform- mostly because of the skirt. She was a tomboy, a girl who preferred to wear jeans and a t-shirt to a skirt and blouse. Walking out of the classroom, she pushed open the doors of the nearest exit and headed outside. It was a great day, the sun shining with a slight breeze blowing through the trees. A gust of warm air came towards the girl and blew her short blonde hair back. She smiled and began to head home.

The girl, Shyra Sera was her name, looked over across the school courtyard when she heard laughter. A group of girls were surrounding one girl in particular, all eager to be near her. The one girl they were surrounding was in Shyra's class and one of the most popular girls in school. It was obvious why- she was beautiful, smart, and was loved by all. She was average height and skinny, with long, waist length black hair and green eyes. Another breeze swept through the trees, blowing back her hair and making her flash a white smile. Laughing, she and her "clique" kept walking. Shyra looked away and continued walking herself.

Kiyera Anymar, thought Shyra to herself, *a living, breathing object of perfection*. Every guy wanted to date her and every girl wanted to be just like this fifteen-year-old beauty- all except Shyra. She was happy with herself, had no insecurities to the eyes of her peers and yet nobody wanted to be like her. Maybe it was because no guy thought of her as the girlfriend type or maybe it was because she wasn't beautiful, like Kiyera Anymar. Either way, she was a tomboy and nothing more.

When she got home, she ran up the stairs in her house and went into her bedroom, tossing the bag on her bed. She was an only child that lived with a mother who she hardly saw. Removing her school uniform, she grabbed a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt, hastily putting them on. She sighed happily when she put her boots on. *This was what she was comfortable in- it was who she was.*

Walking down the stairs, she walked over to the counter and wrote a note for her mother telling her that she was out for a walk and would be home before sunset. Opening the door, she ran to the park. When she got there, she panted slightly- it was about a mile from her house but being the athletic type, it was nothing to her. Looking around, she saw a bench and walked over to it. Sitting down, she stretched and closed her purple eyes. The sun was warm against her skin and she couldn't help but fall asleep.

She woke up an hour later to the same laughing she had heard at school. Sure enough, Kiyera was walking with her "clique." She was a true girly girl wearing what seemed like her own version of the school uniform- white knee-high socks with brown loafers, a yellow pleated skirt, and a red vest over a white shirt. It amazed Shyra how girls could wear such things and not be uncomfortable.

Kiyera waved goodbye to her "clique" as she walked into the park, the others heading in the opposite direction. When she walked past Shyra, they both made brief eye contact. However, Kiyera stopped when she heard a noise; Shyra heard it too. The noise came again, this time a little clearer. One more time and they could hear it clearly: "Bring them here, to the Kingdom of Arasya!" As quickly as it came, those words seemed to disappear.

"Did you hear that?" asked Kiyera, quite confused. Shyra nodded. Suddenly, a giant sphere of sapphire and green light engulfed the two girls, spinning them as they traveled through a white luminosity. Kiyera and Shyra screamed, but they were overpowered by the sound in the sphere. Shyra closed her eyes, hoping that when she opened them that she would be sitting on the park bench and the sphere would be gone. Abruptly, they stopped spinning and all was quiet.

Shyra opened her eyes slowly; she was afraid of what she might see. Slowly sitting up, she rubbed her eyes to try and get rid of the blotches appearing in front of them. When she stopped, she looked at her surroundings. She was in a dark room and she was sitting on a stone platform. Looking next to her, she saw Kiyera lying there. Grabbing her shoulder, she shook her slightly.

"Kiyera?" she said. "Are you alright?" Kiyera slowly sat up and looked at Shyra.

"Yes," she replied, "I'm fine. What about you?" Shyra nodded. "What happened? Where are we?" Shyra stood up and offered a hand to Kiyera; she took it and stood up next to her.

"I don't know, but we're not in New York anymore." Cautiously, Shyra walked down a small set of steps and looked around the room. "This room seems slightly familiar though, like I've been here before." Kiyera walked down the steps and over next to her.

"Yeah, I have the same feeling too," she whispered. "But that's impossible; I've never been here before in my life!"

"Neither have I," said Shyra as she looked over at a door. Walking over to it she continued, "But it still seems so familiar." She opened the door to a corridor. It was dark and surprisingly there weren't any torches on the walls. Intrigued, Shyra began to walk up the steps.

Kiyera, who didn't want to be left behind, called after her, "H-Hey! Wait up!" Running after Shyra, she closed the door behind her. Quietly, they went up the stairs, not knowing where they would lead. Shyra had a hand in front of her, feeling her way through the corridor. After a while, her hand touched what seemed to be a wooden door. Feeling around, she found a knob and turned it, opening up to what seemed to be a deserted den. There was light in this room and she saw another door. Turning around she called behind her, "Kiyera?" Footsteps responded and Kiyera appeared at the door.

"I don't like dark, confined spaces," she said, hurriedly walking into the room. Shyra rolled her eyes and closed the door.

"Don't be a sissy," she said. Walking over to the other door, she opened it and gestured Kiyera to follow her. That door led into a corridor with lit torches and many other doors. Looking to her left, Shyra saw a set of stairs and began to walk up them, Kiyera not far behind. There were many stairs and corridors that followed this one and it seemed like Shyra knew where she was going. After quite some time, they came to another wooden door. Grabbing the knob, she twisted it and opened the door. It was a door to someone's chambers. There was a desk next to shelves full of books; quills and papers covered the desk completely. Another door next to the desk must have led to the sleeping quarters of the room as well as the private bath; Shyra had no idea how she knew this, but she did.

Looking around the room, she saw that no one was there and walked in. This room also seemed very familiar to her. Again, she looked back to see Kiyera right behind her. They walked into the room and shut the door behind them. They both walked to a door to their left but stopped when they heard footsteps behind them. Turning, they saw the door next to the desk open. A tall, young man walked out wearing breeches and a pair of boots, a cotton shirt in his hands. He was muscular and handsome, his gentle face surrounded by a mane of copper brown hair. Surprised purple eyes stared at them.

For a while he just stood there, looking at his two guests as if he couldn't believe they were there. After a few brief moments, he began to walk toward the girls.

"May I ask why you're in my bedroom?" he said. Frightened, Kiyera and Shyra opened the door and ran out of the room as fast as their legs could carry them.

The man blinked, surprised at their sudden gesture. There was something familiar about their faces, especially the blonde haired one. His eyes grew wide as he realized why. Putting on his shirt, he ran out of his room, following the footsteps of the two girls. Running up a set of stairs, he thought to himself, *How? How is it possible that she looks so much like her?* He was gaining on them quickly and he knew exactly where they were heading: the throne room.

Shyra and Kiyera kept running up stairs and through corridors. They both stopped at the top of a set of

stairs to catch their breath. Shyra looked down the stairs to see if that man was following them; she didn't see him, but she heard footsteps. Her eyes grew wide and she turned around.

"Run Kiyera!" she said. "That man's following us!" Again, they ran and they turned right into a giant room. It was large, with a giant red rug leading up to what seemed to be a throne. A young girl, younger than Kiyera and Shyra, sat in that throne. She stood up when she saw the two girls enter. Lifting up her skirts, she walked over to them.

"Hello!" she said happily, stopping in front of them. "And may I ask who you are?" A little frightened and confused, Kiyera and Shyra stepped back and collided with something soft. Turning slowly, they looked up into the face of the man who had been chasing them. Stepping away from him, they started to move back toward the young girl.

He took in a breath and said, "You *are* her double." Shyra and Kiyera looked at him puzzled.

"Azshiu," said the young girl, "do you know these women?"

Azshiu, Sorcerer of Arasya, bowed respectfully. "Princess Ypae, these women appeared in my quarters just moments ago." He gave the princess a look when she giggled; both Kiyera and Shyra blushed. Shyra cleared her throat and turned around, facing the princess. Bowing, she said, "My name is Shyra Sera and my companion's name is Kiyera Anymar. I can assure you, Princess Ypae, that we did not intend to appear in his quarters." Kiyera turned around too and curtsied, nodding her head in agreement. Ypae smiled and bowed her head respectfully.

"Ypae," said Azshiu, "don't you think that these two women look familiar?" Ypae looked closely at Kiyera and Shyra's faces. She nodded in agreement. She looked again closely at Shyra's face. Straightening up, she looked at Azshiu.

"She *is* her double," she said. "But how is it possible?"

"Umm, excuse me," said Shyra. They all looked at her. "Could you tell me why you're saying I'm 'her double'? And how do we look familiar if you've never seen us before?"

Azshiu sighed and gestured for them to follow him out of the throne room. Leading them down a hallway he said, "Do you two believe in reincarnation?"

"Not really," they said in unison.

Leading them down another corridor, they entered a grand ballroom. "Well, you should," he said, "considering that both of you are reincarnations of two people from our world." He turned and pointed to a picture on the wall. Kiyera and Shyra looked to the picture he was pointing at and grew wide-eyed at what they saw. The painting was of a young girl their age, with long brown hair and sapphire blue eyes. She was dressed in an elegant red dress and had a crown on her head.

Walking directly in front of the painting, Shyra asked, "Who is she?"

Princess Ypae replied, "This is a painting of my sister, Princess Ares. Azshiu and I believe that you are her reincarnation. It is quite possible- you have her face." Shyra looked at the princess.

"That can't be possible," she said. Looking back at the painting, she continued, "She's so beautiful. There's no way I have her face."

Azshiu stepped next to her. "She was very beautiful," he whispered. Shyra looked up at Azshiu and saw that his eyes were full of sadness.

Looking at Ypae, she said, "'Was'? What do you mean by that?"

The princess took in a sharp breath at the memory. "On her sixteenth birthday," she said sadly, "my sister was murdered by an evil sorcerer. It happened only a few months ago."

"Oh," Shyra said sadly, "I'm terribly sorry." Seeing the sadness in Ypae and Azshiu's eyes, she changed the subject. "So, which person is Kiyera the reincarnation of?"

Azshiu looked back at Kiyera and sighed. "She is the reincarnation of the great warrior Ramyna. She died with Princess Ares at the age of twenty. She did all she could to protect her."

"I'm sorry," Kiyera said. "Is there a painting of her that I may see?" Azshiu nodded and led them down

some small steps. They turned left which led them to a new set of paintings. There were paintings of what seemed to be the protectors of the Royal Family. A painting of Azshiu was there and next to it was a painting of a woman. She had short black hair and green eyes, dressed in extravagant armor; a narrow sword hung at her left hip.

"You are her exact copy," said Azshiu. "The only difference is your hair length."

Shyra said, "Okay. That was nice to know and all, but what are we supposed to do? I mean, we can't stay here; we have to get back home."

Azshiu looked at her. "Well, I don't know a spell that can send you back to your home- I don't even know how Princess Ares was capable of bringing you here to Arasya."

"Well that's just great!" she said. "So what are we supposed to do while we're here?"

There was a long pause between them. In her heart, Shyra didn't really want to go home. This place, Arasya, was wonderful. It really felt like she belonged there and Kiyera felt the same way too.

"Well," said Ypae, breaking the silence. They all looked at her. "Since you are the reincarnation of my sister and I am not yet of age to take the throne, it seems that you, Lady Shyra, must become the heir to the Kingdom of Arasya. And you, Lady Kiyera, since you are the reincarnation of my sister's protector, you must become Lady Shyra's sworn protector and a Warrior of Arasya." All three of them- Shyra, Kiyera, and Azshiu- gaped at that.

"Now where would you get a crazy idea like that?" exclaimed Azshiu. Apparently, he was close to her for no person could talk to Royalty like that.

"Hey!" she said defensively. "I'm sure you were thinking the exact same thing! I just spoke up first. And think about it- since I'm not of age to come to the throne, it's quite likely that one of the Kingdoms will try to arrange a marriage with me with one of their older heirs. Now would you want that to happen?"

Azshiu looked away in slight embarrassment. He mumbled an apology and Ypae smiled proudly.

"Okay," said Shyra, "so what do we have to do until Azshiu finds a spell to send us home?"

"Well," the young princess said, "since you're going to be taking on the role of my sister, you'll have to practice *being* a princess. In other words, you'll be taking lessons. And Lady Kiyera, since you are her protector, you must undergo the training of an Arasyan Warrior. You'll have to learn all the battle techniques of the sword, spear, bow, and hand-to-hand combat."

"Umm, excuse me," said Kiyera, "but I'm not the kind of person who would be a warrior. I'm not cut out for it."

"No surprise there," muttered Shyra. Kiyera gave her a glare out of the corner of her eye. "Anyways," said Shyra to Ypae, "why can't Kiyera and I switch? I'm more cut out for being a warrior than she is. Besides, I don't wear dresses." She folded her arms across her chest as if to make her point clear.

Azshiu, who had been silent this whole time, finally spoke up. "Whether you wear dresses or not, you don't have a choice in the matter. You cannot switch because you are Ares's reincarnation, not Ramyna's." Shyra was about to speak up again, but Azshiu silenced her with a raise of his hand. "It's been decided so we won't discuss the matter any further. Now, I'll show you to your rooms. You'll both need your sleep- your training starts early tomorrow morning."

Again, he gestured for them to follow him. He led them out of the ballroom and walked down a few corridors. Princess Ypae soon split from them, retiring to her own room for the night. Soon afterwards, they stopped at the room where Kiyera would be staying. It was a simple room with only a chest, a small armoire, a mirror, and a low bed. Kiyera thanked him and walked into the room, closing the screen door behind her. They walked two doors down and Azshiu opened the screen door to Shyra's room. It was much like Kiyera's room, only more extravagant. There was a chest at the end of a large bed, an armoire opposite the door and a large, full-length mirror next to that.

"Well, these are your quarters," Azshiu said. His eyes saddened again as he turned. "There should be some sleeping garments in the chest. Good night." With that, he walked away down the corridor. Shyra

blinked and closed the screen door, leaning against it. She sighed and walked over to the chest. Opening it, she was slightly disgusted at what she saw- it was a chest full of bodices, skirts, blouses, and other feminine clothes. Digging through the clothes, she found a long linen nightgown and kept digging. She thought to herself: *Doesn't she have any shirts?* Finally, she found a long sleeved cotton shirt and smiled. "This will have to do," she said, pulling it out. Placing it on the bed and closing the chest, she began to remove her clothes. When she was almost completely naked, she put on the cotton shirt. Folding her clothes, she placed them on the chest and crawled under the covers. She shoved her face into the soft pillows, taking in a deep breath, the scent of lavender filling her nose. She closed her eyes and took in another deep breath, the lavender having a hypnotic affect on her. One more breathe of the lavender, and she fell asleep.

The next morning she woke up early. Rubbing her eyes, she sat up. When she opened her eyes, she saw a note and some clothes at the end of her bed. Removing the comforter, Shyra crawled over to the clothes and picked up the note. It was in a strange type of text- Arasyian, she guessed- but she was still able to read it. *Does that have to do with me being Ares's reincarnation?* she thought to herself. Focusing her attention back on the note, she read:

Lady Shyra,

The clothes that have come with this message are standard clothes for a lady of fifteen years. When you wake up, please put these on and walk to the Indoor Garden for your etiquette lessons.

Your first part of lessons will consist of proper etiquette and conduct. You will then have a one-hour intermission to do as you please. Then, you will continue your lessons with studies of Arasya.

I expect you to arrive promptly at the Indoor Garden at two-hours past sunrise.

*Madame Mira,
Etiquette Teacher*

Shyra put down the note and looked out a window in her room. Sunrise. Looking back at the clothes, she lifted them up to inspect them. It was a long sleeved lavender colored dress with cuffs at the end of the sleeves. A beige bodice embroidered with purple and blue flowers went over that. Shyra looked behind the dress and saw that a breast band, slip, loincloth, and a pair of dark lavender slippers were folded in the dress. Standing up, she shook the dress, trying to get rid of any wrinkles. While she shook the dress, a package wrapped in waxed paper fell out. Shyra blinked and placed the dress on the bed, picking up the package. Sitting next to the dress, she began to open the package. She was shocked at what was inside it: a pair of purple breeches, beige boots, and a white shirt. She found it slightly odd that it matched the colors of her other garments, but thought little of it when she saw another note. Unfolding it, it read:

Take these garments as a welcome gift. I hope they please you and your need for less formal attire. Meet me for breakfast in the Dining Hall if you wake up early enough.

Azshiu

Shyra blinked again and silently thanked Azshiu. Taking off her nightshirt, she put on the shirt and

breeches. Finally slipping the boots on, she walked over to the mirror. She smiled at what she saw: she wasn't wearing a dress and the garments that the sorcerer had given her suited her perfectly. Walking back over to the bed, she made it up and folded her nightshirt, placing it back in the chest. She walked over to the door and opened it, closing it silently behind her. She turned right and walked over to Kiyera's room. She knocked on the wooden frame of the door and was answered by silence. Opening the door, Shyra peaked in.

"Kiyera? Are you awake yet?" she called in. Kiyera was sound asleep. Closing the door behind her, she walked over to the bed. "Kiyera?" she said again, shaking her shoulder. Kiyera shifted in her bed and turned. Opening her eyes slightly, she closed them again.

"What time is it?" she asked, rubbing her forehead.

"Sunrise," Shyra answered. She lifted the covers off of Kiyera and walked over to a window, opening the shutters and letting the rising sun's light stream into the room. "You might as well wake up," said Shyra, noticing Kiyera squint. "Besides, you have a package that you have to open."

Kiyera was now sitting up in her bed, the package already in her hand. A note was also on top of this package, also written in Arasyian, and she, like Shyra, understood it perfectly. She read it out loud:

Lady Kiyera,

Everyday, you will begin your training by waking up at sunrise, dressing, eating breakfast, and arriving at the Courtyard. You will arrive promptly at one hour past sunrise and no later. Your training then begins with classes for the entire part of the morning. A short intermission will be held soon after and then your lessons will continue with combat until sunset. Eat and then continue your studies until complete.

Your attire consists of a pair of breeches, boots, a tunic and shirt, as well as a sword. This sword will not leave your side under any circumstance.

Your training begins now.

*Sergeant Bain,
Commander of the Arasyian Warriors*

Kiyera removed the clothes and laid them out in front of her. It was a white shirt, dark crimson tunic, black breeches and brown boots. Accompanied with those was a short sword in a sheath, a black belt wrapped around it.

Taking off her linen nightshirt, she said, "I didn't think princesses wore breeches and a shirt Shyra." Slipping on the shirt, she found the undergarments that came with her soldier attire and put them on, removing her old ones.

"Yeah, well, Azshiu gave me these to wear in between my lessons and such," responded Shyra. Kiyera put on the black breeches and then slipped on the crimson tunic. After putting on the boots, she undid the belt around the sword's sheath and placed it on her waist. Finally, she began to braid her hair.

"How do I look?" she asked when she had finished, spinning around. Shyra walked over to her and smiled.

"You look fine. Man, I wish I could take your place. You're so lucky." She eyed the sword enviously then looked back at Kiyera. "C'mon. Azshiu told me to meet him in the Dining Hall for breakfast. You might as well come along considering you have an hour before you have to start training." Kiyera nodded, straightening up her bed as she did so. Walking out of the room, they walked down the hall and turned left down another hall; they had passed the Dining Hall the previous night and knew where it was.

Soon, they arrived at the Dining Hall. It was a simple room, with a long table surrounded by twelve chairs. Tapestries hung next to each of the six windows in the room; an embroidered rug underneath the table and chairs. Azshiu was already at the table and being served his breakfast of fruit, bread, and porridge. As they walked in, two attendants came out with their breakfast and placed them across from Azshiu.

"Welcome ladies. I trust that your first night was pleasant?" he said, taking in a spoonful of porridge. Kiyera and Shyra nodded and began to eat.

"Thank you for the clothes," Shyra said as she swallowed a mouthful of bread. "I greatly appreciate them." Azshiu smiled.

"You're welcome. I had a feeling you would like them." Taking an orange, he began to peel the skin.

"You do know that you can't wear those whenever your etiquette teacher is here," he said, removing the skin and placing a piece of the orange in his mouth.

Shyra took a sip of juice that an attendant had put next to her plate. "Well, duh. Of course I know that."

Taking a spoonful of porridge, she asked, "When exactly is she here?"

"Madame Mira lives in the palace, actually. However, you receive lessons four days out of the week. The first day and last two days of the week are the days you do not receive them. Luckily for you, your first day of lessons is on the last day of your lesson cycle." He placed another piece of orange in his mouth, and continued to eat it.

Kiyera, who had been eating the whole time said, "So, is it the same cycle for soldiers?"

"No," he said plainly, finishing his orange and working on the rest of his porridge. "Soldiers work five full days of the week. The sixth day is a half-day to practice what you've learned the previous days. The seventh day is a day totally to you."

Kiyera finished her porridge and began to work on the rest of her meal.

For the rest of the meal, Azshiu began to tell them about everyday life in Arasya and what life was like in the palace. In return, the girls told him about what New York was like and what they did everyday. After they had all finished their meals, Kiyera got up from the table. Excusing herself, she told them that she had to head to her first day of training. Waving goodbye, she ran out of the Dining Hall to the Courtyard. Azshiu and Shyra left the Dining Hall soon after that and he escorted her to her room, telling her that he would wait for her outside the room while she got changed. He would then show her to the Indoor Garden. She thanked him and walked into the room.

Reluctantly, she removed her breeches, boots, and shirt and slipped on the undergarments and slip. After putting on the dress with disgust, she put on the beige bodice and tied it in the front. She slipped on the slippers as she walked to the door.

"Okay Azshiu, I'm ready," she said.

"Well then, let's see," he replied.

"I really don't want to. I look terrible in dresses."

"If you don't wear dresses then how would you know?"

"I looked at myself in the mirror and it looks terrible on me."

"Now why would you say that?"

"It's too..." She blushed slightly. "It's too... tight."

"Listen Lady Shyra, if you don't come out, I'm coming in."

"Alright, alright!" she said. "But I'll only come out if you promise not to call me 'Lady' Shyra anymore."

"Fine. Now let's see, Shyra."

Taking in a deep breath, she gingerly opened the door and peeked out. Azshiu was leaning against the opposite wall. He smiled at her encouragingly and she blushed faintly. She didn't know why, but that smile made her blush. She stepped out into the open and put her hands on her hips as he said, "What do you mean 'it's too tight'?"

“Just that: it’s too tight,” she said. “It amazes me how girls are able to breathe in these things!” She pointed to the bodice accusingly.

“It is not too tight. It’s too tight when a woman’s breasts are being squished together or if they’re half hanging out,” he said.

“You’re a pervert!”

“Call me what you want, but you know that it’s true.” He began to laugh and walk away. Shyra followed him, having no choice in the matter. Silently, they walked down hallways and corridors and then down a flight of steps. A large set of double-doors was at the end of the steps. Around it was a metal frame of leaves and birds, intertwined with vines and flowers. Above the door was the Arasyian text.

“That’s written Arasyian,” said Azshiu. “It says ‘Indoor Garden’.” She already knew that, but she kept her mouth shut. Grabbing the rings on the doors, he pulled them open, revealing a sight that Shyra would never forget. It was like a tropical jungle with a stone pathway leading through and around the entire Garden. Birds and other animals were in the areas above them, in the trees, and on the ground. A small clearing was by the main doors where Shyra’s etiquette lessons would be held. Gesturing a hand out to the Garden, Azshiu said, “Welcome to the Indoor Garden.”

Kiyera arrived just in time for her training. The Courtyard was massive! Trees and a set of buildings where her lessons would be held surrounded it; behind her was the palace. She surveyed her surroundings and realized that nobody was there. She turned in the direction of the buildings when she heard footsteps. Someone- a man- was running towards her. He looked tall to Kiyera, but she didn’t realize *how* tall he was until he stopped in front of her. He was about an inch or two taller than Azshiu and she barely came up to his shoulder. He was handsome with tanned skin, hazel-green eyes, and short sandy blonde hair pulled back into a horsetail. He wore a long gold and dark lavender tunic over a white shirt and black breeches; brown boots were on his feet and a sword hung at his left hip. He smiled at her.

“Hello,” he said; his voice was strong and melodic. “You must be Lady Kiyera. I’m Sergeant Bain.” He bowed to her; Kiyera bowed in return.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “Where is everybody? I thought that I’d be taking lessons with them.”

“Oh, you will- that comes tomorrow though. Today, I’m going to get you caught up on as much as possible. I’ll give you a tour of the grounds though. C’mon.” He turned and walked toward the building. Kiyera had to jog in order to keep up with his long strides. They entered a door into the set of buildings. Bain told her that each building was there for each different subject- seven in all. He told her what her subjects were: History, War Tactics, Math and Science, Language, Sorcery, Geography, and Etiquette. These buildings were arranged in a circle around the Training Court, where combat training was done. After they passed the buildings, they came to a large pond.

“Do you understand everything so far?” he asked looking down at her. She looked up and nodded.

“So when are we going to start my training?” she asked as they walked down to the pond.

“We can start now if you want,” he said. He looked out across the pond and smiled. “I love it here.”

Kiyera walked over to the pond’s edge and took off her boots. Sitting down, she placed her feet in the pond. She sighed and looked across the crystal water. “I can see why,” she said.

Bain lied down next to her. “We can’t put off your training for long, Lady Kiyera.”

“I know,” she responded. “Can’t we stay here a little bit longer though? It’s so beautiful.”

Bain closed his eyes and stretched. “I guess so; but not too long. You have a lot of catching up to do.”

Kiyera nodded and a few moments of silence passed between them. “You know,” she finally said, “you’re not what I expected you to be.”

Bain opened one of his eyes. "Oh? How so?"

Kiyera hugged her knees. "Well, I expected you to be a big, burly man with tons of battle scars and almost no hair. I expected you to be tough and unkind."

Bain closed his eye again. "I see." He took in a deep breath and then got up. "We should start your training now, Lady Kiyera." Kiyera sighed. She didn't want to leave the pond; she wanted to stay there all day. She put her boots on slowly to make her time there longer; Bain took the hint. "We don't have all day, Lady Kiyera," he said. She looked up at him as she put on her other boot.

"I know that," she responded standing up. "So, where do I train?"

He began to walk away. "Where do you think?" Kiyera narrowed her eyes and caught up with him.

Sarcastic much? she thought to herself. They continued to walk until they got to the Training Court. It was massive with a large rectangle in the center for combat practice. Outside the rectangle were racks full of practice armor and weapons. Bain walked over to the swords and grabbed two of them. He tossed one to Kiyera and moved to the large rectangle, the Combat Field; he took his sword off and threw it to the side.

"Take off your sword," he said. "Until you master that practice sword, you will not draw a real one." Kiyera stuck the practice sword in the ground and unbuckled her sword belt, tossing it to the side like Bain had done. Grabbing her practice sword, she walked onto the Field. "Do you know how to hold a sword?" Bain asked. Kiyera put her hand on her hip.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked. "I've never held a sword in my life!"

"Stupid question; okay, put your weak hand on the bottom of your hilt and your stronger hand on top. I'm going to teach you how to wield a sword with both hands before I teach you how to wield it with one. Are you with me?" Kiyera put her hands on the hilt, weak hand on bottom, stronger on top.

"Yes," she said. She looked down at her grip. "Is this right?" Bain walked over behind her and looked at her grip. He smirked.

"Close," he said. "Twist your wrists more outward." He grabbed her hands with his and showed her. Kiyera blushed. Her back was against his chest and she could feel his heart beating. *I've never been this close to a boy before*, she thought to herself. *His body's so strong... and warm...* She shook those thoughts out of her head and nodded.

He walked back to his place. "Now, I want you to try a practice stroke. You know how to do that, don't you?"

"I'm not that stupid!" she said defensively.

The Sergeant laughed. "Alright then, show me." Kiyera focused on her sword and swung it, slicing through the air. "Good! Keep going." She swung again and again, knowledge of the sword growing stronger within her each time she swung it. Bain smiled in awe as Kiyera swung her sword in complex movements with grace and speed. She stopped when she noticed the way he was looking at her.

"What?" she asked. He gripped his practice sword.

"You're trying to deceive me or something?" he asked accusingly. "There's no way you've ever held a sword before. You're too good."

"You really think that?" she asked hopefully.

"Only one way to find out," he said, charging at her. "If you are truly Ramyna's reincarnation, fight me!"

"What!" she exclaimed, dodging him.

"If you're the Great Warrior's reincarnation, then fight me."

"Just because I'm her reincarnation, doesn't mean I'm her."

"I saw you with a sword, girl. Now fight me!" He charged again. Kiyera yelped and dodged. Bain

charged again and swung at her; she blocked, but he was too strong. He was pushing her down until she got on her knee. "Move my blade!" he said. "Fight back!"

"I can't, Bain!" she said. "I'm not strong enough!"

"Ramynacould easily get out of this situation!"

Kiyeragritted her teeth. "I'm not her!"

"Yes you are! You have her strength! I can see it in your eyes."

Shelooked up at him, and saw that he was being honest. Closing her eyes, she focused all her energy and strength on her arms. Slowly, she began to rise and push his sword back.

"Good!" he said. "Keep it up!" She twisted her blade and pressed down, flipping the blade away from her. She raised her sword and swung it at him; he blocked. "Keep it up! You've almost beaten me!" Suddenly, he swung his sword out from under her and swung at her legs, right above her ankle. She fell and in a split second, the practice sword was at her throat. "But not quite," he said.

Kiyerapanted and closed her eyes. Her legs and arms were killing her!

"You're deceitful," she said. He laughed and drew the practice sword away, offering her his hand.

"You're gullible," was the response. She took his hand and got up. "Not bad for your first try. I thought we would've had to work on this until sunset."

"O... kay," she said. "So how much longer for training? Or are we done?"

"Are you kidding me?" he laughed. "We're far from done. Now, pick up your sword and get ready." Kiyera sighed, bent down and picked up her sword, gripped the hilt, and smiled.

"Ready," she said.

Shyra walked into the Garden as Azshiu shut the door behind them. She was in complete awe- she had never seen a place so big! She walked down the stone pathway and took in the sweet air. She turned and faced Azshiu.

"It's so beautiful here," she said. "I love it."

Azshiu smiled at her. "Ares loved it here, too. It was her favorite spot in the palace."

"I can see why. Are there any other creatures here besides birds?" she asked. With such a large space, she thought that there'd be more than one type of creature. The mage smiled and nodded.

"Of course there is. This place is larger than you think. They're probably in the back. When you're done with your etiquette lessons, I'll give you a tour of the place."

"I'd like that," she said. She gave him a smile and at that moment, Azshiu could've sworn he was looking at the face of his princess; he turned away to hide his blush. Shyra blinked, confused.

"I'm glad to see that you're on time, Lady Shyra," said a voice behind them. The two turned and saw that a lady had been there the entire time. She was like an undiscovered gem- with a little work she could be beautiful. Her curled, white tresses were pinned up into a bun, a few curls caressing her smooth and gentle face. Her intelligent hazel eyes looked at them. She wore a white gown underneath an emerald and pale green wrap-dress; a sapphire brooch was pinned at the top of the wrap. Her long, white skirts flowed around her legs as she walked towards them, her emerald colored slippers gently padding against the cobblestones. She curtsied and continued, "Good morning. I assume that your first night was pleasant?"

"Y-yes, very," Shyra responded. She wasn't sure what to do. A nudge in her side made her look at Azshiu. He mouthed the word "curtsy" and bowed. Looking back at the woman, she curtsied as best as she could. Madame Mira, the Royal Etiquette Teacher, walked around her, inspecting every inch of her body. Shyra placed her hands behind her, ringing them nervously. Azshiu noticed and placed a hand on her shoulder comfortingly; she relaxed a little.

Mira faced them and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. She began saying, "She's going to need a lot

of work, Lord Azshiu.” The mage removed his hand from Shyra’s shoulder and nodded. “I assume you’ll be staying and watching then?” she asked. Again, he nodded. Shyra didn’t think that Azshiu would be staying with her during her lessons. Honestly, she didn’t want to embarrass herself in front of him. Mira beckoned Shyra to follow her to their teaching area. It was simple: a low, wooden table was set between two cushions; books and other tools for Shyra’s training were placed on and beside the table. Mira grabbed a stack of two books and handed them to her. She took them and looked at them.

“I’m assuming you want me to read these?” she asked. Her teacher gave her a look.

“First of all, when you address me, it’s madam or Madame Mira. Secondly, those are for balance practice. You will, however, be studying those over the next week or two. Is that understood?” she asked.

“Yes,” she sighed, and then corrected herself when Mira glowered at her. “I mean, yes, Madame Mira.”

“Good. Now place the books on your head- or are you incapable of that, Lady Shyra?” Mira said accusingly.

Shyra glared at her. *I’m not stupid!* she thought to herself. Carefully, she placed the books on her head. She looked at her teacher, who nodded, and began to walk down the cobble stone path.

“Try to keep you back erect and walk in a straight line,” Mira said. She watched her student as she tried to keep the books balanced on her head. “Keep you neck straight!” she ordered. “Pick your chin up and look forward! Don’t hunch your shoulders; it’s bad for your posture!” Shyra did as she was told, losing her balance quite a few times. Finally, she tripped over the hems of her skirts and fell, the books scattering out in front of her. Azshiu laughed, amused with her clumsiness. Shyra grabbed a book and threw it at him, hitting him square in the face; she was quite accurate with her aim.

“What was that for!” he shouted, rubbing his nose.

“Don’t laugh at me! I’m new at this!” she said defensively.

“Ares was much better when she started! And she was only thirteen!” he replied.

“She was born into a life of royalty, of course she would know how to walk properly!” she retorted.

A loud whack made them stop their argument. “I won’t tolerate bickering!” Mira said. She had grabbed a stack of books and slammed them on the table to get their attention. Shyra lowered her eyes; so did Azshiu. “I am ashamed of the both of you, especially you Azshiu. Growing up in the Royal Court, I thought you would know better.”

“It was funny, though,” he mumbled. Shyra slapped him in the gut.

“I don’t care if it was riotous!” she retorted. “And don’t you hit him again! Women of Court never raise a hand against men or women,” she said to her student. “Now pick up those books and start over.”

Obediently, Shyra grabbed the books and placed them on her head. She took her place on the cobble stone path and heard Mira tell Azshiu to sit down and behave. She had to smile at that.

Slowly, she began to walk down the cobble stone path. When she reached to where the trees started, she turned around, the books almost falling off her head. Regaining her balance, she walked the path until she got to her teacher and Azshiu. Mira smiled slightly. “Better, but there is plenty of room for improvement,” she said. “We’re going to keep at this for a while,” she continued. “Until you can walk perfectly with these two books on your head.” Shyra gave a look of distress. She didn’t want to do this anymore, but it’s not like she had a choice in the matter. Silently, she turned around and walked down the path countless times until she had got it down perfectly. Mira smiled and nodded, acknowledging that that would be enough for the day. She took the books from Shyra’s head, gesturing for her to sit down. Shyra took her seat on the pillow and laid her hands in her lap.

“Beg your pardon, Madame Mira,” Shyra said. Mira looked at her. “If you don’t mind my asking, how old are you?” Shyra was very quiet; she knew it was impolite to ask women their age, but she was curious: Mira’s face was young, but her hair was completely white.

Mira sighed. "I'm twenty one," she replied. "Many people mistake me for an older lady due to my white hair. I'm assuming you made that mistake too?" Shyra nodded. "I thought so." Reaching next to her, the teacher placed one closed fan on the table and handed the other one to Shyra. She opened it and Azshiu, who had been lying back leisurely, sat up.

"A fan?" she asked as she looked at it. It was a beautiful fan made with dark wood. The interior of the fan was made of lavender fabric with streaks of gold in it. It looked like an ordinary fan to her, but a gleam at the tips of the fan made her think otherwise.

"A *riaha*," Mira corrected. "It's a fan used for dancing and fighting. Women at court always carry one with them just in case they are attacked." Mira flicked her own fan open, revealing a cream colored fabric with two red stripes. "They're also used to show displays of emotion as well as to hide them." Shyra nodded. Mira stood up, gesturing with her fan for Shyra to get up as well.

She did so and straightened her skirts. Mira bent down and grabbed a large bamboo mat. Opening it up, she spread it across the area behind the table. She removed her slippers and stepped onto the mat; Shyra did the same, the bamboo feeling familiar and comfortable beneath her feet.

"Now, I'm going to show you a simple *riaha* dance," said Mira. She got in the starting position: her left foot pointed towards the ground and her fan, held in her right hand, was parallel to the floor; her head was turned to the left. "Lady Shyra, I expect you to do as I do," she said. Shyra blinked and got into the starting position. Mira started the dance by crossing her right arm over her chest and spun, thrusting her arm down so that her fan was pointing down. Flicking her wrist, she tossed her fan up into the air and spun while raising her left hand; the fan landed gently in her palm.

Mira looked at Shyra. "Make sure that you do not catch the fan tip first," she said. "The tip of a *riaha* is an extremely narrow blade. It can sever flesh and bone in one swipe." Getting back into her starting position, Mira continued, "That was only the first part of the dance, I'll show you the rest later on. Now, I'll go slowly so you can memorize the steps." Shyra nodded and moved her head back into position. As soon as she took that first step, she knew exactly what to do. She did all the steps perfectly, tossing the *riaha* up in the air and catching it gracefully. Before she could stop, she continued the dance, moving her body in complex patterns and movements. She finished her *riaha* dance by tossing her fan up in the air, spinning, then catching the fan in her right hand and thrusting it to her side. Shyra looked up and blushed; Mira and Azshiu were staring at her.

"You are a swindler, aren't you Lady Shyra?" Mira said as she closed her fan.

"Excuse me Madame Mira?" Shyra asked startled.

Azshiu whispered behind them, "It's her Spirit." Mira and Shyra turned to him, confused. "It's Princess Ares's Spirit that has allowed Shyra to dance the *riaha* dance. Her forte was always the *riaha*." Shyra closed her fan. "That explains why I was able to do that dance," she said. Azshiu nodded.

Mira sighed and placed her fan on the table. "Alright then, Lady Shyra," she said. "Let's get back to your lessons, shall we?"

After lessons, Azshiu gave Shyra a tour of the Garden. It was one of the biggest places Shyra had ever seen. It was like a tropical garden, complete with a miniature waterfall and swimming pond. They both walked to the waterfall and sat, Shyra removing her slippers and dipping her feet in the crystal blue water; it was warm. While they were sitting, Azshiu told her all about the creatures that lived in the Garden as they came to inspect their visitors. Shyra was amazed at the creatures and their appearances. One small creature in particular caught her attention. It seemed to be a cross between a feline and a rabbit: it had long ears and large, lavender eyes set in an adorable face with a small nose; it had small paws and a long, furry tail; its entire body was covered in a copper red pelt.

The creature walked over to Shyra and nuzzled against her hand. She looked down and smiled. "Well, hello there," she said. "And who might you be?" The creature climbed onto her leg and sat up on

her lap, its intelligent eyes looking up at her; a closer inspection of the face showed a small jewel in the middle of its forehead.

Azshiu looked over at them. "Oh, that little creature is Ikurymato," he said. "We call her Iku for short though. She had taken a fondness to Ares; I guess it's the same with you, Lady Shyra."

Shyra picked up Iku and placed her on her shoulders. "I thought I told you to not call me 'Lady Shyra,'" she said. Azshiu shrugged.

"What do you want me to call you?" he responded. "'Sir' Shyra?" Shyra narrowed her eyes and grimaced.

"Very funny," she retorted. Iku nuzzled Shyra's right ear, making her giggle. She looked back at Azshiu; he was smiling at her. "Will you every stop calling me 'Lady' Shyra?" she sighed. The mage shrugged again.

"If it truly bothers you, I will," he replied. Shyra scratched Iku's head and got up. Grabbing her slippers she put them back on; Azshiu looked up, startled.

"I guess it doesn't really bother me," she said quietly. "I'm just not used to it." Azshiu stood up and they began to walk down the cobble stone path out of the Garden.

At the door, Azshiu replied, "Don't worry about it. You'll get used to it, Lady Shyra."

By the time Azshiu and Shyra returned, the red-golden sun was setting behind the horizon. They both walked to the Dining Hall to find Kiyera there, eating her supper stiffly. She looked at them and smiled, but winced at the movement of her sore muscles.

Azshiu and Shyra sat down and two servers came out with their dinner: seasoned pork with a side of potatoes, bread and butter, and a small bowl filled with different types of fruit. Another server came out with two goblets: one was filled with wine for Azshiu and the other was filled with water for Shyra. Curtsying, the two servers left the Dining Hall to let them eat. Utensils had already been placed on the table.

"So Kiyera," said Shyra, "how was your first day of knight training?"

Kiyera looked at her and cried, "Do you know what I had to do! First I had sword practice for three hours, then pole combat for two hours; after that I had studying for another two hours then lunch, which was the only point during the day I had peace and quiet. Then after that I had archery for two hours, trying to learn all the different styles of holding and shooting a bow! But the pain doesn't stop there," she said, taking in a deep breath. "I then had hand-to-hand combat with Sergeant Bain for two hours! I have bruises all over the place!" She slouched in her chair, but winced at the pain her body caused her. "I don't know how Ramyn was able to do this everyday," she said.

"You'll get used to it," said Azshiu reassuringly. "After a week or so your body will get used to the training."

Iku peered over Shyra's shoulder, looking at the fruit plate that was part of Kiyera's dinner. Leaping from her perch, Iku scampered across the table to the fruit plate. Picking up a strawberry with her paws, she sunk her teeth into it, savoring the sweet juices. They all laughed at this and began to eat. While they ate, Shyra and Kiyera told each other about their days of training.

After supper, Azshiu escorted them to their rooms. Both Shyra and Kiyera were tired and yawned as they arrived at their doors. Before they entered, however, Azshiu spoke to them.

"You have completed your first day of training," he said. "I can officially say," he continued, bowing, "'Welcome to Arasya.'"

3 - Lessons

The next day, Shyra woke up again at sunrise. Iku was nuzzled deep into the pillow, her tail wrapped around her like a blanket; Shyra smiled at how cute the creature was. Looking down at the end of her bed, she saw a set of packages. She was confused as to why they were there; Azshiu said that her lessons yesterday were the last of the cycle. Sighing, she removed the blankets placed on her, and moved to the end of the bed to open her packages. She untied the first one and saw a note, yet again, from Madame Mira.

Lady Shyra,

Part of today's lesson will be based on one small piece of information that you give me when you arrive. Until then, do not open the second package until you arrive at the Indoor Garden.

Now, today's attire is one that Lord Azshiu picked out himself. (Shyra smiled at this.) It is a casual outfit for Women of Court in Shioa, a country in which Lord Azshiu himself has visited often.

Please, get dressed, eat breakfast, and meet us, myself and Lord Azshiu, at the Indoor Garden.

Madame Mira,

Etiquette Teacher

Shyra opened the package eagerly; maybe women in Shioa wore breeches instead of skirts. She looked down at the package, disappointed. It wasn't breeches and a shirt; it was a dress and tunic. She took the dress out and saw a note at the bottom of the package. She read the note silently.

I will not be joining you for breakfast. As I'm sure Madame Mira put in her note, I will be waiting for you in the Indoor Garden. So, enjoy the garments I have given you (Shyra stuck her tongue out in disgust) and

meet us at two hours past sunrise.

Oh, I almost forgot, your lady-in-waiting, Ayami, will draw you and Lady Kiyera your baths before you get dressed. She should be arriving soon after sunrise.

Azshiu

As if right on cue, a knock came from the door. Shyra looked and the door opened to a young woman standing there. Shyra realized that the woman couldn't be older than sixteen, for she still had a young face. She had ebony hair that came down to the middle of her back and a set of bangs across her forehead. Brown eyes looked at her happily. She wore the traditional lady-in-waiting outfit: an ivory cotton dress underneath a navy blue wrap; navy blue slippers were on her feet. Draped over her right arm were a towel and cleaning supplies. Curtsying, she walked into the room.

“Good morning, mistress,” she said as she walked over to Shyra. “I am Ayami, your lady-in-waiting.” She curtsied again.

“G-Good morning,” she said, embarrassed. She wasn't used to people curtsying to her.

Ayami walked next to the bed and opened a door that Shyra never noticed before. She walked in and Shyra could hear the water filling up the tub. After a few minutes, Ayami came back out and she curtsied again.

“Your bath is drawn, mistress,” she said. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll wake up Lady Kiyera.” Shyra nodded and Ayami curtsied again, walking to the door and shutting it.

Shyra got off the bed and walked into the washroom. Shutting the door behind her, she looked around. It was a simple yet extravagant bath: on top of a wooden floor was a marble sink and tub; next to the tub was a set of shelves which held a few sets of towels, soap, and a silk robe. Shyra thought that the bath would be more extravagant, with gold and silver, since it was Princess Ares's. She smiled at the fact that Ares did not let the spoils of being a princess go to her head.

Undressing, she stepped in to the warm water of the bath. Sighing, she let herself sink in up to her shoulders, and rested her head against the tub. Wetting her hair, Shyra grabbed a bar of soap and rubbed it in her hands until it was mostly suds, and massaged it gently into her hair. After she had finished, she dunked her head into the water and grabbed another bar of soap. This time, she washed her body, the soap removing all the dirt from the previous day. After she had finished washing, Shyra just sat in the tub and enjoyed the silence.

A knock on the door disrupted the silence. “Mistress,” said Ayami. “It's time for you to get dressed.” She sighed and rose from the tub. Grabbing a towel, she dried her body off and then dried her hair.

Grabbing the silk robe, she wrapped it around her body and tied it. She opened the door and walked out, Ayami curtsying to her. She had laid Shyra's clothes out on the bed and left the second package where it had been. Ayami walked into the washroom and drained the tub, picking up Shyra's old clothes as she did so.

While Ayami did this, Shyra got dressed. She first put on a white, form fitting, off the shoulder gown and tied the lacings in the back. After that, she put on a strapless lavender tunic with gold trim. Slipping on the lavender slippers, she looked at herself in the mirror. The dress wasn't *that* bad, despite the fact that it was totally form fitting and showed every curve on her body. Ayami came out and curtsied again.

"You look beautiful in that dress, mistress," she said, smiling. "Lord Azshiu has good taste." Shyra blushed and thanked her.

Stepping away from the mirror, she said, "You know, you don't have to call me `mistress'; Shyra is just fine."

"As you wish, Lady Shyra," Ayami said, curtsying. Shyra gave her a look of distress and slight embarrassment.

"And you don't have to curtsy all the time!" Shyra said, blushing again. "I'm not use to this kind of treatment, so please, just treat me like a normal person." She looked at Ayami's shocked face. "Sorry to be so bold," she added.

"Oh, no, no," Ayami said, blushing. "I'm just not used to people of higher rank asking me to treat them as an equal." She paused for a moment "Well, actually," she continued, laughing, "everybody in this palace, except for Queen Sarya and our dearly departed King Nicholas, have asked me to do so. I just never really have."

Shyra sighed. "How long ago did King Nicholas pass away?" she asked.

"Oh, many months ago," she responded. "I'm guessing it's been a few months over a year now. But I shouldn't go into the matter any further; it's not my place to say."

"I'm sorry, Ayami," Shyra said, yet again embarrassed. "I didn't mean to be nosey."

Ayami shook her head. "No need to apologize." She looked out the window and estimated the time. Curtsying, she said, "Excuse me, Lady Shyra." She left and Shyra followed her out, going to Kiyera's room. She came in just as Kiyera was putting on her breeches; her movements were slow due to her sore and stiff body.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said. Shyra looked at Kiyera's arms and hands, almost completely covered in fresh bruises. Kiyera noticed her stare and put on her white shirt.

"Don't worry about it," she said lazily, slipping on the red tunic. She still noticed Shyra's stare and sighed. "It's not polite to stare, you know." She buckled the belt around her waist then sat on the bed.

Shyra clasped her hands behind her back and wrung them, trying to hide her embarrassment and slight

annoyance. "Sorry," she mumbled. Kiyera grabbed her boots and shoved them on her feet, wincing as she hit one of the bruises on her hand. "Umm.... Did Bain give you those bruises?" she inquired meekly. Kiyera simply nodded and stood up, routinely braiding her hair.

Silently, they both left the room to eat breakfast. Kiyera wasn't in a very chatty mood and Shyra didn't want to force her to talk. She knew that she was tired from the previous day's training; it showed in her face and posture. Shyra realized that she was actually lucky to have such easy training; at least she didn't receive bruises from it. No matter how easy her training though, she was still envious of Kiyera. She was lucky, being able to use a sword and a bow and many other types of weapons in combat. How Shyra longed to know such things; mid-evil weaponry always fascinated her.

After breakfast, Kiyera dragged her feet to training as Shyra returned to her room. Opening her door, she still saw the second package on the bed. She was extremely tempted to open it, curious as to see what was in it. Instead, she opened the chest to see what else Ares had in her possession. She dug through the clothes, bodices, skirts, shirts, and gowns, until she got to the bottom of the chest. At the bottom was a stack of books and a scroll. Taking them out, she placed them on the bed. Opening the scroll first, she saw the Arasyian calendar, which, to her surprise, was the exact calendar from her world. Little notes were made for days and Shyra browsed the calendar until she saw Ares's birthday, April tenth, marked on the calendar. Her birthday was on October tenth, only six months from Ares's. In only four months, she would be sixteen, part of her hoping that she would be celebrating her birthday back home in New York.

Pushing that thought aside for another time, she scanned the calendar for other dates: Ypae's birthday was on July twenty-eighth; Ramyna's would have been on October fourth; Queen Sarya's birthday was on January twenty-third; Madame Mira's was on June sixth; and Azshiu's birthday was on December tenth. Other dates were noted on the calendar, but Shyra really didn't care for them. Rolling up the scroll, she placed it on the bed and looked at the books. Carelessly, she went through the stack, not caring what they were about. At the very bottom of the stack, however, was a book covered in brown leather, a lavender ribbon wrapped around it. Dropping the other books on the bed, she closed the chest and sat on top of it, untying the ribbon on the book. Flipping through the pages, she stopped on a page. Curiosity overtook her, and she began to read:

The twelfth day in the month of November,

In the eleventh year of the reign of King Nicholas and Queen Sarya

Today was quite interesting, surprisingly. A young man has arrived at the palace and will now be residing with us as one of my personal protectors. Well, not quite yet, for he is of only fifteen years and I, only of ten, don't need the protection yet. Until the day I turn thirteen, he will be training as a warrior-mage. Oh, I hope he can teach me some things; I've always been quite fascinated with sorcery; maybe he can even show me how to use some weapons, such as a bow. But I highly doubt that will happen, for mother does not think it's proper for a princess to know how to fight, a ridiculous idea in my opinion.

Either way, Ypae is quite excited about this young man too. She's only seven though, and sees him merely as a new playmate. I hope that does not drive away, but he does not seem like the kind of person who would be so short with someone.

Now here I am rambling and I have not yet described this man. Well, he is tall and muscular, like a squire would be. He dresses plainly and yet his hair is anything but, being a copper color. However, the most intriguing thing about him is his eyes, for they are a bright purple. Such a strange color for eyes and yet they are so enchanting. Now listen to me, going on like a lovesick girl, which I am anything but at the moment.

Now to bed I must go, for the hour is late. And now, I forgot the most important thing about this young man. The name of this young man is Azshiu.

Shyra was shocked at how eloquent a writer Ares was at the age of ten. She expected to read something that sounded less educated. Azshiu's words echoed in her head: *Ares was much better when she started! And she was only thirteen!* Now Shyra understood why. She had so much catching up to do. She then thought back to what Ares wrote about Azshiu. She wasn't truly surprised that he knew the lore of weapons and sorcery; maybe he could teach her some things. Intrigued by Ares's life, she was about to turn the page when a knock on the door made her stop in alarm.

"J-just a second!" she stammered, closing the diary and frantically putting the books back into the chest. Closing it again, she straightened out her skirts and ran to the door.

Opening the door, a scolding voice said, "You're late for your etiquette lessons." Shyra looked up and smiled nervously at Azshiu.

"S-sorry," she said nervously. "I must've lost track of the time." Azshiu eyed her suspiciously, but didn't inquire as to why she was acting so. Sighing, he walked into the room and grabbed the package on the bed. Iku, still resting on the pillow, opened one of her eyes lazily, then closed it again as she went back to sleep.

Walking back to the door, he said, "C'mon. You have to face Madame Mira sooner rather than later." He looked back at her and asked, "So how do you like the dress I provided for you?" Shyra blinked; she had forgotten that he had given her the dress.

"You just *had* to pick a dress for me to wear, didn't you?" she responded, slightly annoyed. He shrugged and smiled; he knew she would react like that. Crossing her arms, they began to walk to the Indoor Garden. After some time, she asked, "So, what's in the package?"

"Can't tell you," he replied slyly. That made Shyra even more annoyed; she wanted to know what was in that package so badly!

Soon, they reached the Indoor Garden and Shyra was greeted with a lecture about tardiness from Madame Mira. She nodded, mumbled an apology, and then sat down on the cushion next to the table. Azshiu placed the package on the table and then took a seat on a cushion next to her.

"Madame Mira," she asked, "I thought that I didn't have lessons today; Azshiu said that yesterday was the last day of your teaching cycle."

Shyra's teacher looked at her. "I have decided that you will have lessons everyday until you have mastered all aspects of being a princess." Shyra opened her mouth to protest but stopped when Mira raised her hand. "I believe," she continued slowly, "that since you are new here, extra lessons are in order for you to catch up to where Princess Ares was." Shyra looked down at her hands. She didn't like being compared to Ares; she felt that her expectations were being raised and her status as a person was being lowered.

Madame Mira walked over to her and said, "That, however, can ultimately lie with one piece of information." Mira grabbed a large, folded screen with white cloth. With a heave, she set the screen in place. As she opened it, she asked, "Lady Shyra, when is your birthday?"

Shyra looked up and blinked. Why would she need to know that? "Um, it's October tenth, madam." Madame Mira sighed as she finished putting up the screen.

"That doesn't give us much time, does it Azshiu?" she asked; he shook his head in response. Shyra was about to say something, but she was silenced when Mira grabbed her arm and forced her behind the screen. Ordering Azshiu to turn around, Mira unwrapped the package and shoved its contents into Shyra's hands. Shyra held it up in front of her.

"What is this?" she asked in loathing.

"You know quite well what it is," retorted Mira. "Now be quiet and put it on, or I'll do it for you." Shyra unhappily did as she was told, for she didn't want Mira to put the clothing on her. To complete the outfit, she put on the green slippers and stepped from behind the screen.

"You love to torment me, don't you?" she asked. She was clothed in a flared white dress; a band of gold went around her waist and another one, with two sapphire stones on it, placed at the top of her dress; green fabric draped from them. Azshiu turned around to look at her as Madame Mira smiled.

"Here in Arasya, royalty hold a big celebration on their sixteenth birthday. Since you are only months away from that date, we must start training you in every subject of proper conduct," she said. Claspng her hands together, she continued, "So first, we will start with ballroom dancing."

Ordering Azshiu to stand up, she instructed Shyra in what to do. First she told them to greet each other: Azshiu was to bow and Shyra was to curtsy in response. They both did so, but Shyra faltered in her curtsying. Sighing, Mira showed her how to do it properly, and Shyra tried a few times until she had it

down perfectly. After that, she showed Shyra the position in which she was to be in when she danced with a partner. Lifting up her dress with her left hand, she placed her right hand in Azshiu's left as he placed his other hand on her waist. She felt herself begin to blush, but hid it well; she wasn't used to a boy, let alone a man, touch her this way.

“Okay,” said Mira. “I'm going to now clap out a three count, one-two-three, for you to dance to. Lady Shyra, just let Azshiu lead; he knows what to do.” Shyra nodded and Mira began to clap out the beat, Azshiu showing her the steps. It was awkward at first, but eventually Shyra began to get the hang of it. After what seemed like hours of practicing, they stopped; Shyra got behind the screen again and changed back into the dress that Azshiu gave her. After that, her lessons continued with lectures about etiquette and conduct in eating, sitting, standing, posture, and other things that Shyra did not care for.

She was extremely relieved when her one-hour break came; it gave her mind a chance to fully absorb all the information that Mira had crammed into her. To help her relax, Madame Mira served them all tea in cups made of fine china. During tea, they talked about many subjects, including clothing. When that subject came up, a question popped into Shyra's head.

“Um, Madame Mira?” she asked; Mira looked at her. “May I wear my own clothes? I'll still wear dresses for certain occasions and such, but I'm much more comfortable in my own clothing.” She looked at Mira nervously as she returned her gaze, contemplating the question. Azshiu looked from Shyra to Mira and then back to Shyra.

“Do you truly want that, Lady Shyra?” she asked. Shyra gulped and nodded; the tension between them was getting thicker by the second. “Fine,” she sighed. Shyra let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding and the tension between them dispersed. “However,” she continued, “when I give you a dress and tell you when to wear it, you must put it on without delay or complaint. Is that clear?” Shyra nodded, smiling. She was glad that she was able to wear the simple white t-shirt and jeans that she loved so much.

Mira took a final sip of her tea and got up saying, “I think we should continue with ballroom dancing. However, you don't need to change again, Lady Shyra.” Both Shyra and Azshiu got up and moved to an open spot in the Garden. “Now, take your places and greet your partner.” Azshiu bowed, Shyra curtsied, and they got into the starting positions. Mira clapped out the three count and they began to dance, gliding rhythmically to the beat.

Kiyera was extremely tired after her morning lessons; there was so much to remember! Her day started off with History, followed by Geography; after that was Language, War Tactics, and Sorcery; then ended with Math and Science, and Etiquette.

During her classes, Kiyera met Adalia of Syndaris, a tall girl with short auburn hair and gray eyes. She was fifteen years old and well built, being in her first year as a squire. Friendly and likeable, Adalia told Kiyera everything she needed to know about the training for becoming a knight.

She explained that a person who wanted to become a knight started their training at ten years of age, then trained as a page for four years; if they passed the Page's Exam at the end of the four years, they

would then continue their training as a squire for three years. After that, they would take the Squire's exam; if they passed that, then they would take a final exam, called Tribulation, which would test them of their worthiness of becoming a knight. Nobody knew what the actual test was until they took it, and after they did, they were forbidden to tell anyone of what occurred during it.

“So, what made you want to be a knight?” asked Kiyera at lunch. They were in the cafeteria, being served water, steak, bread, and fruit. The cafeteria was average size, with three rows of ten long tables; each table could sit twenty people, ten on each side. To the left of the entrance way was a kitchen and counter where the food was served. Spotting a free table, Kiyera and Adalia sat down on one of the benches, placing their trays on the wooden table.

“Well,” Adalia said, “I've always wanted to fight; dresses and being a lady never interested me. My parents said that the only way I could become a knight was if my older brother, Dominic, didn't want to become one. Luckily for me, he didn't; he never wanted to fight and became a priest, devoting his life to the gods and goddesses. So, he left for the Sacred City and I came here. So, we both got our wishes in the end.” She smiled and began to butter her roll. “So, I hear that your Commander Ramyna's reincarnation?” she said. Kiyera blinked in surprise; she didn't expect people to find out so soon.

“Y-yeah,” she said. “I didn't know that Ramyna was a commander. Was she that powerful of a warrior?”

Adalia looked at her in sheer surprise of the thought. “Of course!” she exclaimed. “Only the most powerful warriors are selected to protect members of the Royal Family; and then they are put through a series of tests to see who's truly worthy. Ramyna was one of the most powerful warriors to ever set foot here. It's a shame that she had to pass away; may the gods and goddesses give her peace.” Kiyera let this new information sink in; she had no idea that Ramyna was that highly respected and powerful. Now her expectation level had been raised and she felt minute in comparison to Ramyna, like a peasant compared to a queen.

Wanting to distract herself from those thoughts, Kiyera looked around the cafeteria at the pages and squires. The tables were being filled up fast, more students filing into the food line every minute. Kiyera's eyes landed on one table in particular. It was surrounded by a group of people, both girls and boys, and they were all hanging on every word that was said by a certain squire. The female squire was in her second year, being sixteen years old. To Kiyera's surprise, they resembled each other, in a way. She had waist length brown hair; it was in a loose braid and few wavy tresses had escaped to caress her face. Piercing green eyes looked at the crowd that surrounded her. Kiyera turned back to Adalia and asked, “Who's that girl over there?” She thrust her thumb towards the squire.

Adalia put her fork with a piece of steak on it back on her plate. Looking towards the squire, she said, “That's Kyra of Castell. She's one of the popular squires here. She comes from a family with three older brothers and a father; her mother died soon after she was born. So, Kyra decided to follow in the footsteps of her brothers and became a knight; all of her siblings have ranks in the Arasyian Army.” She looked back at Kiyera and leaned in, whispering, “I hear that she has an *extreme* fancy for Sergeant Bain. She always has, apparently, and works extra hard in her studies to impress him.” Leaning back, she continued, “Of course, *every* girl here, including myself, fancies him as well; and who could blame us? He's not only intelligent, strong, and kind, he's *handsome*.”

"Now, who's handsome, Adalia?" someone asked her. Adalia blushed as she and Kiyera turned to look up at Bain. He smiled warmly at them and laughed.

"N-no one, Sergeant," she stuttered in embarrassment. He laughed again.

Looking at Kiyera, he asked, "So, how has your first day been going so far, Kiyera?" Kiyera was grateful that Bain had stopped calling her "Lady Kiyera"; she didn't like being treated so formally.

She smiled and responded, "Fine. I almost fell asleep during History though. Is Lord Wyndham always so dull?" Bain laughed and tousled her hair affectionately.

"Yes, even when I was a page and squire, he would always put me to sleep. I'm surprised that I actually passed his class." Kiyera laughed. "Anyways," he said, withdrawing his hand, "can you meet me after your last class? I need to talk to you about your training schedule." She nodded and Bain smiled. "Good. I'll meet you at the Training Court." He patted her shoulder and with a final smile, left their table, stopping by others and talking to the pages and squires that sat there; the girls watched him intently, acting like lovesick girls.

"You are so lucky!" exclaimed Adalia, startling Kiyera; fortunately, there was so much commotion in the cafeteria that nobody heard her. "Sergeant Bain *totally* likes you!"

"What!" she said blushing, although she didn't know why. "We've barely known each other for two days; there's no way he could like me!"

"Maybe you're right," she said, taking a bite of her apple. She swallowed then said, "Or maybe *you're* the one who likes *him!*"

Kiyera blushed even deeper. "Of course not! We're just friends, that's all." Adalia smiled in a "Yeah, right," kind of way and took another bite of her apple. Kiyera felt a set of eyes burning into the back of skull, and turned to see whom it was. Kyra was watching her, hatred raging in her eyes. Kiyera turned back to Adalia and finished her meal in silence.

After lunch, the squires and pages split up; the pages went to the Training Court while the squires headed over to the archery field. The squires were divided into groups: first and second year squires in one group; and third year squires in another. Each group's field was set up with a line of twenty targets; on the ground were marks for how far away they would be shooting: five yards, ten yards, and twenty yards.

Unsure of what she should do, Kiyera followed Adalia; no one seemed to notice or care. Each of the squires grabbed a bow and a quiver of ten arrows, and waited in line for their teacher.

After a few minutes, a man came running towards the field. He had short golden-brown hair that framed his bearded face. He was dressed casually, wearing a simple pair of breeches and tunic with a pair of worn-in boots. Scratching the back of his head, he laughed. "Sorry I'm late everyone," he said. "I was caught up in a meeting. It turns out that Princess Ares's reincarnation's birthday is in a few months."

Kiyera lowered her eyes and looked down at the ground; so many people knew about her and Shyra, and they had just arrived two days ago. He continued, "As a change, all the squires have been requested to attend this, although it is not mandatory." The squires cheered and were filled with enthusiasm. Only third year squires were invited to large celebrations such as this, and the second and first year squires always missed out on the fun.

Kiyera scuffed the ground; she wasn't so enthusiastic about the celebration. She knew that the nobles and other people of Arasya would be judging her and Shyra, and she didn't like that. Adalia noticed her and rested a hand on her shoulder in a comforting way; Kiyera smiled in response.

"And you must be Ramyna's reincarnation!" Adalia and Kiyera looked up into the face of their teacher. "I never properly introduced myself," he said extending a hand. "My name is Lord Belen. You must be Kiyera?" Kiyera nodded and grasped his hand firmly; he smiled down at her. "Now then, shall we start with the lesson?" He walked behind the squires with his hands clasped in the small of his back, and said, "Today is a review of what you learned last week. You'll be shooting your bow like the archers in Kotauru. After you have finished with your arrows, wait until the entire row is done before you retrieve them." Kiyera knew that he said that last part for her sake. "Now, begin!"

The squires stood in their spots and knocked their arrows onto the strings. A few of the squires loosed a few arrows as Kiyera knocked hers onto her string. Holding the arrow between her index finger and thumb, she pulled the string back with difficulty. Her wrist began to quiver as she aimed at the target. Finally, she loosed and the arrow landed near the bottom of the target. Embarrassed and angry, Kiyera looked down at the other targets; most of them had gotten in the second ring, the one closest to the center, or the center ring; Adalia had almost all her arrows in the center. One target on the other end of the row had all the arrows in the center ring. Kiyera looked down and saw Kyra effortlessly drawing back her bow and loosing the arrow, where it landed in the center ring with her other five arrows. Kiyera was suddenly filled with this desire to do better than Kyra, to prove that she could be like her as a warrior. Grabbing an arrow, she thrust it on to the string and drew her bow. Her wrist began to quiver again, but she steadied it and took aim. Quickly, she released it; the arrow landed in the center ring. Smiling, she grabbed another arrow, knocked it on the string, took aim and loosed it; it landed in the center ring again. Confidence grew in her each time she shot her arrow and it landed in the center ring.

After everyone had shot their ten arrows, they walked to their targets and pulled their arrows out. Mimicking Adalia, Kiyera grabbed the arrow on the spot closest to the target; gripping it firmly, she pulled it out and placed it back in her quiver. After they had all finished withdrawing their arrows, the squires returned to their positions at the five-yard line. They shot their sets of ten arrows two more times, then moved to the ten-yard line. After they shot their arrows three times at that range, they moved back to the twenty-yard line. Once they had completed that, they continued with the archery styles from Hasarii and Shioa, repeating the same pattern.

Finally the squires' lessons were over. Kiyera was extremely tired, this being her first actual day of training. After archery, Adalia and she went to the Training court where she practiced Pole Combat for one hour, taught by Lord Palmer; Sword practice for an hour and a half with Bain; and hand to hand for one hour with Lord Killian.

The sun began to set below the horizon as Kiyera walked Adalia back to her quarters. They had been talking about their day and Adalia had been giving Kiyera very helpful advice, even though she teased her about Bain half the time. After they said goodbye, Kiyera walked stiffly towards the Training Court. She arrived to see that Bain was already waiting for her. They exchanged a quick smile.

"Have you been waiting long?" she asked. He shook his head. "That's good."

"Yes, but we must discuss your training schedule," he said. "It's June, and training will be over in a few weeks." He looked at the setting sun and continued slowly, "I feel that you won't be ready in time for the Squire's Exam next year unless you make up the training and courses that you have missed and take them this summer. Which means," he said, cutting Kiyera off when she was about to protest, "that you'll have to make up six years of lessons in one summer. It won't be easy, but I think you can do it."

"Are you serious Bain!" she exclaimed. "Making up the six years that I missed in three months time? That's preposterous!"

He sighed. "Whether it is or isn't, you really don't have a choice. As Ramyna's reincarnation-."

"I know, I know. As Ramyna's reincarnation, I have to train my self to be Shyra's protector," she rehearsed. "I'm not some super warrior like Ramyna, in case you guys haven't noticed. Although, from all I've heard, she's a great person, I don't want to become like her. I'm happy with who I am and that's the way I want to stay."

Anger filled his eyes as Bain said, "The Arasyian people are not asking you to *be* Ramyna, but maybe you should behave more like her. As a knight, you have to learn to follow orders and requests given out by people of higher rank, whether you like it or not. Ramyna wasn't only a 'super warrior,' as you call her. She was a great person who everybody respected, whether they liked her or not. And you know why? Because she never complained and always tried her best at everything she did!"

"Why don't you write a sermon about her then, since she's so great!" Kiyera retorted. Bain raised his hand as if he was going to slap her. Instead, he clenched his fist and thrust it back down at his side.

"Don't insult her in such a way. She deserves every ounce of respect that you have," he said coolly.

"I didn't know her, so how can I respect her?" she shot back. Bain's jaw tightened as he clenched his fist even tighter; he was using all the force in his body to keep himself from bellowing at her. Kiyera was beginning to regret her words, but didn't show it in her face; she knew that what she said was true, but there was this spot in her heart that was making her feel terrible.

She then looked at Bain's face and guilt consumed her. His body was trembling slightly, his mouth was set in a frown, and his eyes were filled with sadness beyond belief. Kiyera was so shocked at how upset he was that she gasped. A moment of silence passed between them. "Bain," she said, "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't know that Ramyna meant so much to you." She looked down at her feet and scuffed the ground. "I'm just tired from the training, and upset at how I'm always being compared to Ramyna." She continued, echoing her thoughts from earlier. "Now that people know about me, my expectation level has been raised. I feel minute in comparison to Ramyna, like a peasant compared to a queen."

Bain's fist loosened as he sighed. "It's alright," he muttered. He ran his fingers through his hair in slight frustration. "I don't like the arrangement either, but it *is* necessary." He crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. "I should've realized you would feel like this. Her shoes aren't going to be easy to fill." He looked at her. "Finish this year's lessons, then meet me in my office. We'll officially discuss your schedule." Kiyera nodded in reply and Bain walked off.

Kiyera turned on her heel and made her way back to the palace, pacing herself so she could think about things. If what she predicted about her schedule came true, then she would be training everyday of the summer and then take the Page's Exam. If she passed the exam, then that would mean completing her training as a squire for the next two years. In order to complete her training, however, she would have to remain here in Arasya. In two years time, Azshiu might find the spell to send Shyra and her back home. *That would mean abandoning the people in this world, though*, she thought to herself. If they left, that might mean leading Arasya into chaos, and with no heir of the proper age to govern the peoples of Arasya, Ypae would have to marry at a very young age.

Kiyera ran her fingers through her hair in frustration. What was she to do? Was she to complete her training and stay here in Arasya? Or would she train until Azshiu found the spell to send her home? A slight breeze blew through the grass, blowing back Kiyera's hair while a few strands caressed her face; she sighed.

I don't know what to do.

"So have you started research on how to send Kiyera and me back to our world?"

Shyra and Azshiu were sitting in the Dining Hall, eating their dinner. Iku, who had finally woken up from her daylong nap, was sitting next to Shyra, eating a plate of fruit. After her lesson on ballroom dancing, Shyra learned dinner etiquette, greetings, and other things that royalty had to know.

"Yeah," he said. "But I'm not sure how long it will take me." He sighed. "It could take me weeks, months, or even years to find a way."

Shyra moved around the food on her plate in slight disappointment. She wanted to go home but then what would she really be going home to? Her mom was almost never home and on the rare occasions that she was, she would be too tired or too busy to do anything. There were her friends, but would they really miss her? Maybe at first, but they would get over it eventually. She sighed. "It's alright," she said, smiling. "I really appreciate that you're helping Kiyera and me."

Azshiu looked at her skeptically but said, "It's no problem."

Just then, Kiyera walked in and sat down. A male servant came out with her plate and served it to her. Kiyera thanked him and ate silently; Shyra and Azshiu stared at her. Looking up, she said, "What? Is it wrong for a person to eat?"

"No, it's not," Shyra said. "But, usually you say 'Hello' or something."

Kiyera gritted her teeth in agitation. “Well, *excuse* me. I didn't know I always had to say ‘hello’ or something.” Pushing her chair back, she stormed out of the Dining Hall and headed towards her room.

Shyra blinked in shock and confusion. Kiyera was always so... bubbly. It wasn't like her to be short tempered; that was more like Shyra. Putting her utensils down, she said, “Maybe I should talk to her.”

Azshiu nodded in agreement. “Yes, but first...” He pointed at her utensils, which were laid to the sides of the plate instead of on the area in front of her, a lesson that she was taught just that day. Shyra sighed in impatience and straightened the utensils on her plate, then pushed back her chair and left Azshiu to eat alone.

As she left the Dining Hall, Shyra lifted up her skirts and ran to catch up with Kiyera. In a matter of seconds, she had caught up to her and grabbed her sleeve. “What's wrong with you!” said Shyra.

Kiyera shrugged her off. “I had a bad day,” she muttered.

“That gives you no excuse to act the way you did,” Shyra lectured.

“Who do you think you are!” Kiyera said facing her. “You're not my mother, so stop treating me like I'm your child!”

“If you're going to behave like a child, then you're going to be treated like one, Kiyera,” Shyra said.

Kiyera took in a deep breath. “I've already had my share of lectures for the day,” she said shortly. “So just mind your own business!” She turned on her heel and was about to go, but stop suddenly. Turning, she said sharply, “Oh, and don't think that just because you're the reincarnation of a princess that you can talk down to me like I'm vermin.” With that, she headed off to her room, leaving Shyra to think about many things.

4 - Protectors

Shyra stormed into her room and slammed the door shut. Her fight with Kiyera had really had an impact on her, although she had no idea why. She never hung out with Kiyera; they had hardly ever talked to each other. So why was she so upset? *Have I really been acting arrogant?* she thought. She doubted that she was acting so. Just three days ago, she had found out that she was the reincarnation of a princess and the chances of that knowledge having effect on her were slim to none.

And where did Kiyera get off acting the way she did? Maybe it was her that was being arrogant, not Shyra. Kiyera's personality and attitude were based on the fact that so many people adored her; the extra attention she was getting from being Ramyna's reincarnation must've made her feel even more superior. At least, that's what Shyra thought.

Could it be...? Shyra shook the thought out of her head. There's no way Kiyera felt the way that she did: feeling so small compared to someone who was so important and well known. Shyra was usually hiding in the shadows, and only really stood out due to her athleticism; Kiyera was always in the spot light though, and was looked up to by a vast amount of people.

Shyra sighed and walked over to the chest at the end of her bed. Opening it up, she dug through its contents until she came upon Ares's diary. Picking it up, she closed the chest and sat on the bed. Maybe reading more about Ares would help her better understand this fantasy world that she had come upon. Apologizing silently to the princess, Shyra opened the diary and began to read its pages.

Shyra and Kiyera didn't speak much over the next few weeks. Other than dinner and breakfast, which were the only times they talked and was merely polite conversation, they never interacted with each other. Both were stubborn and weren't going to be the first to apologize because they both thought that the other was at fault. Nonetheless, they continued their training and began to begrudge their extra lessons; they were boring and tiresome, lasting until late at night sometimes.

The lessons did begin to have effect on Shyra and Kiyera, however.

Shyra became more poised and elegant, and her knowledge of all things "proper for a princess", as Madame Mira put it, was growing. As she requested, Shyra wore her own clothes- jeans, t-shirt, and boots- as often as she could. She even asked Ayami, with much protest from the lady-in-waiting, to show her how to wash clothes by hand so that she could wear her clothes almost every day. Shyra knew that it probably wasn't the most hygienic thing to do, but her clothes were the only things that kept her tied to the fact that she might go home. The clothes almost made her lessons better, though, because she was more comfortable, although she did wear dresses and traditional clothing when ball room dancing, performing a *riaha* dance, or practicing other Arasyian rituals.

Kiyera's training, on the other hand, was making her more like a warrior than the dainty girl she used to be. Her arms and legs, although still quite toned, were beginning to develop powerful muscles that she would need as a knight, rippling under her skin every time she flexed. Kiyera herself was surprised at how muscular she had become. As her body became stronger, so did her skills. Her growing knowledge of battles and her fighting helped make her lessons much easier and seem less time consuming. However, as she became a more powerful warrior, the tension and rivalry between Kyra and herself grew. The fact that she was going to be having extra lessons with Bain had obviously reached the ears of her classmates and that did not help her situation with Kyra, who always seemed to be green in the face due to her envy.

In the weeks that they had been in Arasya, Kiyera and Shyra went through a growth spurt. Whether it was the atmosphere, what they ate, or the result of their training, they had reached their adult heights. Shyra was now as tall as the tip of Azshiu's nose, and Kiyera was at the same height as Bain's chin. Normally, as girls of only fifteen, it would be embarrassing to be that tall, but their sudden growth spurts seemed to make them fit in more and be treated more like adults than children.

Soon, Shyra and Kiyera formed a routine: They would wake up, bathe, eat breakfast, go to their lessons, eat dinner, then do extra work that had been given to them by their teachers. They continued this routine even after the lesson term was over, continuing into their summer lessons. Fortunately for both Shyra and Kiyera, they received one week off during July, during which the Mid-Summer Festival and Ypae's fifteenth birthday would take place. From what Shyra read in Ares's diary, Ypae would soon be able to take the throne and rule the Central Kingdom; it also meant that she would acquire personal protectors.

It was the week of the Mid-Summer Festival and Ypae was on her way to visit her mother. Ever since King Nicholashad died, Queen Sarya had not left the room where her husband's body had been placed. The knowledge of Ares's death only drove Sarya into deeper seclusion and she was even closer to death. Ypae, though barely, was always convincing her mother to hang on to the world of the living.

Ypae soon arrived at the door and wiped the palms of her hands on her skirts. She was always nervous visiting her mother because it was so disturbing to see her in her current state. She hadn't visited her mother often in the past few months and had not yet told the queen about Shyra and Kiyera. Inhaling, Ypae grabbed the ring on the door and opened it to the odor of rotting food. She closed the door behind her and walked over to the table; placing the lid of the tray over the food, she looked at her mother sorrowfully.

Sarya did not return her daughter's stare and instead looked at her skeleton-like hands. Her body was much like a skeleton, the skin literally hanging off her bones from the lack of food and movement. She was shrouded in a black dress, making her pale skin look even paler. Her blonde hair was knotted from lack of brushing, and her green eyes, which used to be so full of happiness, were lifeless.

Ypae sighed and sat down next to her mother, grasping Sarya's cold hands. For minutes, they sat there not saying a word or moving. The silence was uncomfortable, though, and Ypae shifted in her seat. The stone on her forehead, which changed colors for each emotion, was a gray, the color of solemnity. Sighing, she squeezed her mother's hand tightly. Breaking the silence, she whispered, "Mother... I'm sorry I haven't visited you as often these past few months. I've been..." She searched for the right word. "Busy," she concluded, "over the weeks. I'm almost fifteen now and I'm acquiring my personal protectors today." Ypae looked into her mother's face and saw no trace of emotion to what she had just said. Sarya was just sitting, her breathing shallow, her eyes, the only things that showed how she felt, full of sorrow.

Ypae, her jewel starting to turn red from frustration and anger, rose from her seat, letting her mother's hands fall back onto her lap. Her mother's sorrow and seclusion were getting out of hand. It had been over a year since her father had died and almost three months since Ares died. The Central Kingdom still mourned the losses of these powerful rulers, but they had gotten on with their lives; Sarya should be able to do the same.

"Mother," she said kindly, though her jewel was still a bright red, "this seclusion that you have gone in to has lasted far too long. We all miss Ares and father just as much as you do, but we have moved passed our sorrow." Sitting back down, she lifted her mother's chin so they were making direct eye contact. Slowly, she said, "It's time that you did the same. And besides, the ones we love are always in our hearts. In fact," she said, smiling, "Ares is still here with us. Her Spirit has taken form in a new body, and Ares's reincarnation, as well as Ramyna's, is here with us. They have been here for almost a month now."

Saryatruly looked at her daughter now, their eyes meeting directly. "Ar...es?" shecroaked. Ypae looked at her mother in amazement; this was the first time shehad spoken in months.

"Yes,mother," Ypae said, almost completely consumed with joy. "Ares is still withus. Her reincarnation's name is Shyra; Ramyna's is Kiyera. They're trying theirbest to take on Ares's and Ramyna's roles." Ypae smiled at her mother. "Andthey're doing a great job at it!"

Saryatook in a deep breath. "Wa...ter," she said. Ypae nodded and got up, pouring aglass of water from the pitcher. Putting the cup to her mother's lips, Ypaepoured the water down her throat until the cup was drained. Sarya licked herlips and said, "More..." Ypae did as she was told and kept giving her motherwater until the pitcher was about half empty. Sarya licked her lips again andsigned at the replenishment. Looking at her daughter, she reached for hershoulder and clutched the sleeve, unsteadily raising herself from her spot onthe bench.

"Mother!"Ypae said in worry, supporting her mother by wrapping her arm around her waist."You shouldn't get up so fast! You're still not well!"

Saryaignored her daughter's concern. "I want... to meet... them," she said, her voicestill barely a whisper.

"MeetShyra and Kiyera?" Ypae inquired, adjusting her grip on the slender frame ofher mother. Sarya was about to respond, but decided better than to use hervoice so much at once; she nodded. "All right, but you're going to have torecover more before you can even walk on your own." Ypae looked at her motherand smiled. "Maybe in a week or so."

PlacingSarya's arm over her shoulders, Ypae made her way to the door, moving slowly soas not to tire out her mother. Opening the door, she looked out into thehallway to see if anybody was there. She heard footsteps come from her rightand saw Azshiu walking towards her.

Spottingher, he picked up his pace. "Princess Ypae!" he called. "I've been looking foryou for quite some time now. It's time I..." He stopped when he noticed Sarya.Taking in a breath, he said in worry and disbelief, "Queen Sarya?"

"Yes,Azshiu," Ypae responded. "She's come out of seclusion... and she wants to meetShyra and Kiyera." Azshiu let out a quiet "oh," and continued to look at them;a silence stretched between them. "Do you think you can help me Azshiu?" sheasked, exasperated. "I can't walk her to her room; she'll tire too easily."

"Oh,yes!" he said, realizing what Ypae was asking. "Here." He finished walkingtowards them. Excusing himself, he grabbed Sarya and lifted her into his arms.

Walking down thehalls, he and Ypae arrived at Sarya's room. Opening the door, they saw Ayamicleaning the room. Even though no one had been in the king and queen's room,the servants kept it clean so no rodents or vermin would make a home there. Theroom was the largest sleeping quarters in the palace. The smooth floor was madeof cherry and was complimented by matching furniture: a table, dresser,armoire, and chest; a large mirror and dressing screen were placed next to thearmoire. Centered on one of the walls was a four-post, platform bed, dressed incrisp cream sheets and blankets; to the right-hand side of the bed was a doorleading to the washroom, which was the size of most of the sleeping quarters.

Ayami curtsiedat their presence.

"Ayami," Ypaesaid, "please get water, fresh clothes, and some food for my mother." Ayami curtsiedagain and scurried out of the room as Azshiu placed the queen on her bed. Ypaedrew back the curtains and opened the windows to let in fresh air.

Ayami soonreturned with two ladies-in-waiting, who carried the food and water. PushingAzshiu out the door, the ladies-in-waiting removed the black dress that thequeen had been wearing and replaced it with a clean linen gown. After Ayami hadtucked Sarya under the blankets, the ladies-in-waiting set the tray of food andwater down on the table.

"Anything else, your highness?" asked Ayami as the ladies-in-waiting curtsied and left the room.

"Yes, actually," Ypae said. "Could you help tend to my mother? I'll come back later on this evening to give you a break and I'll do so until she gets better." Ypae paused and scratched her hand, feeling embarrassed that she was asking so much. Sure, Ayami's purpose in the palace was to serve her, but she also attended to many other things and was very busy. "Is that okay?"

Ayami curtsied. "Of course, your highness. It's no trouble at all." She smiled. "I'll do all I can to help her majesty recuperate."

Ypae sighed in relief. "Thank you, Ayami." The lady-in-waiting curtsied again and Ypae excused herself. Walking to the door, she opened it and stepped outside. Closing it, she looked at Azshiu and smiled.

"She's going to be okay, Azshiu."

"That's great," he said, returning her smile. "Now, shall I take you to meet your guardians?" Ypae nodded in response and they set off.

They soon arrived at the Training Court, where Ypae would meet her two protectors.

Ypae wrung her hands nervously. So many things could ruin the relationship that she would share with her protectors. For all she knew, they could not like her and refuse to protect her. Or, even worse, they could be disguised assassins from the Northern Kingdom, the one Kingdom that was set on killing her. She shivered, even though the weather was quite warm; the thought that she was being targeted for death at the age of fifteen frightened her.

Azshiu placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "There is nothing to worry about," he said reassuringly. "Your protectors have gone through tests- both physically and mentally- and we would've discovered if they were hiding something from us." He squeezed her shoulder. "You must be strong for your people, Princess Ypae."

"Yes," she said. *Strong like Ares was*, she thought. Her sister had never shown any sign of fear for her own life. Ares always had put others before her, like when she let Ypae let out all of her emotions at the news of their father's death. Ares had been so young when she died, a death that was unjustly given to her. Ypae quickly wiped away the tear that trickled down her cheek as Azshiu looked at her in concern; she quickly put on a "Don't worry, I'm fine" smile.

Azshiu placed a hand over his eyes and looked out across the Court. He frowned in disappointment.

"They should have been here by now," he muttered. For a few minutes they waited, watching for the two forms of Ypae's protectors. After ten minutes had passed, Azshiu let out a sigh of annoyance.

Ypae clasped her hands behind her back and rocked on her heels. "Umm..." she said, "what are my protectors like?"

Azshiu thought about the question for a short while. "Your protectors," he said, "are a male knight and a sorceress. They're both strong in their lore and have earned the right to be your protectors. You can tell me what you think of them when you meet them." He looked across the Court again and grumbled with annoyance.

Ypae looked in the direction of the pond, its water as smooth as glass. The July heat was making her feel uncomfortable in the long dresses she was told to wear; she was always warm. A breeze rippled across the water and some of the coolness blew towards Ypae, giving her a small comfort in the heat. She looked at Azshiu, dressed in a cape, long garments and tunic, and wondered how he wasn't warm. She shook the thought out of her head and looked back to the pond. She couldn't resist it any longer; lifting up her skirts, she moved towards the pond as quickly and quietly as she could.

As soon as she got to her destination, she removed her slippers and waded into the water up to the middle of her calves. Ypae sighed in relief as the coolness swept through her body. The water quickly soaked her dress and skirts, making her slip stick to her legs. An idea formed in her head and she stepped out from the water. Walking behind a tree, she looked to see if anyone was around. She

noticed Azshiu pacing on the Training Court; either he had noticed that she was down by the pond, or he hadn't noticed she was gone because he was still looking for the knight and sorceress.

Ypae was wondering where her protectors were, too, but the strong urge to go swimming pushed the thought out of her mind. Stripping down to her slip, she hung her dress and skirts on a low branch and untied the ribbon in her hair. Looking around one more time, she waded into the pond up to her waist and then dove under the cool water. The pond's water caressed every inch of her body. She broke the surface for air and ran her fingers through her hair. The cool water felt so good! Tossing her hair, she swam leisurely in the pond for a while, letting the water flow over her body.

Ypae stopped suddenly, as she felt a pair of eyes fall upon her. Looking around the pond, she gazed upon a young man of eighteen looking right back at her. He was average height, dressed in casual breeches and tunic; a sword hung from a belt on his left hip. His face was soft and strong, and he had a mane of golden-brown hair; his bright green eyes appeared even brighter due to the color that had spread across his cheeks.

The princess instantly turned a dark crimson. Crossing her arms over chest, in a last attempt to protect her modesty, she let out a loud shriek of embarrassment. At first, the young man recoiled at the loud shriek, then advanced to where Ypae was. She stayed in the pond, unsure of whether or not she should make her way to the shore.

"Umm..." the man stammered, blushing even deeper. "M-maybe you should, um, come out of the water, your highness. I can, um, cover you to preserve your modesty." Ypae almost laughed at how embarrassed he was, but instead gave him a warm smile. Nodding, she made her way to the man, who was blushing even more the closer she came to him. Despite his embarrassment, and true to his word, the man untied his cape and wrapped it around Ypae as she stepped out of the pond, her slip drenched with water.

"Thank you," she said as she clutched the cape around her wet body. She came up to his nose and could clearly see how embarrassed he was as he mumbled, "You're welcome, highness." Abruptly, Azshiu stopped in front of them. "I heard you scream," he said, panting slightly. "Are you all right, Ypae?" The princess nodded in response. He then looked at Ypae, then to the man who was next to her, then back to her; they were both still blushing. "Ypae, why aren't you in your clothes?" he sighed. Ypae instantly turned crimson again; this whole incident was so embarrassing.

"Well, I, um..." she stuttered. Azshiu raised his eyebrow. She continued, "I was hot in this weather. I just wanted to cool off and relax, so I went swimming." Azshiu's eyes widened in shock of her immodesty and Ypae sighed in annoyance. "Or, for the gods' sake, Azshiu! I wore my slip! It's not like I was swimming completely naked!" Both Azshiu and the young man blushed, although Azshiu's blush was only a slight coloring. Ypae rolled her eyes at their embarrassment and immaturity.

Azshiu cleared his throat and looked at the young man. "As for you," he said, "why weren't you at the Training Court? We had been waiting for you there, Keyon!"

"I'm sorry, Lord Azshiu," Keyon said, "but Lady Xyza was being... difficult. She decided that she wanted me to see if I could catch her; she must've thought that was more important than meeting Princess Ypae."

Azshiu sighed and scratched his forehead. "Where is she?" he asked lazily.

"Up here, Lord Azshiu!" cried a voice from above their heads. They all looked up to see a woman lying on the air above them. Her outfit was formfitting, although much like a boy's clothes, and her long black hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail. A red pendant hung from her neck and burgundy eyes looked at them happily.

"Hey, Keyon!" Xyza shouted down. "You still didn't catch me yet!" She then looked at Ypae. "Oh, she's pretty, Keyon. I can see why you chased after her instead of me." She smiled and laughed at her own joke, although both Ypae and Keyon blushed deeply; they seemed to be blushing a lot that day.

"Oh, be quiet!" he retorted. "By the gods, you act more like a three year old than someone who's seventeen!"

"Agreed," said Azshiu, crossing his arms over his chest. "Now come down here and stop acting like a child."

"Ah!" she said, stretching. "You're no fun Lord Azshiu!"

"Now, Lady Xyza," said Azshiu in a warning tone. Xyza sighed and lowered herself to the ground where Ypae, Azshiu, and Keyon were waiting. Azshiu beckoned to Ypae; adjusting Keyon's cape about herself, she walked over and stood next to him. Xyza elbowed Keyon in a friendly way and smiled; Keyon looked at her with annoyance. Ypae bit her tongue to keep herself from laughing at Xyza's silliness.

"Now," Azshiu said, making the knight and sorceress stand at attention. "Princess Ypae, I would like you to meet your guardians: Lord Keyon of Teraas and Lady Xyza of Darzsa. Keyon was one of the best in his class when he became a knight and was trained by both Sergeant Bain and Commander Ramyna. Lady Xyza studied at the Sacred City from when she was six years old until the year she turned sixteen. She was given instruction from the top sorcerers and sorceresses in Arasya and excelled in her craft."

"It's nice to meet the two of you," said Ypae politely. Both Keyon and Xyza bowed in response.

"Well," said Azshiu, "now that you've met each other, I'll be on my way." Looking at the two guardians, he said, "You know what your duty is. Follow it no matter what." They both nodded and Azshiu whispered into Ypae's ear, "You might want to put your clothes back on." Ypae, blushing yet again, scowled at Azshiu as he winked at her and made his way back to the palace. The jewel on her forehead had turned a bright pink, the color of embarrassment.

"Um," she said, smiling at her two guardians. "I'm going to get back into my clothes, so if you could just, um..." Keyon and Xyza understood what she was saying and turned in the opposite direction. Sighing, Ypae made her way to the tree where her clothes were and removed Keyon's cloak. Grabbing her clothes, she began to dress and think about her new guardians.

Ypae knew that Keyon was a gentleman and must've been brought up in a proper household. He always seemed to blush at things that were related to sexuality, which would always make her laugh. From what she saw close up, he was muscular, but not as muscular as someone who was a black smith. His personality was that of an all-around good guy, the kind of guy you would want to be friends with. What Ypae truly loved, however, was his beautiful green eyes. They were filled with kindness, intelligence, and warmth; they were the kind of eyes that made you feel safe when you looked at them, the kind of eyes that would make any girl melt.

Xyza, on the other hand, acted more like a child than a guardian. True, her immaturity was humorous, but Ypae doubted Xyza's humor could protect her from her enemies. Other than her immaturity, Xyza seemed to be like a fun person to be around. She was not sure of her sorcery skills, but she highly doubted that she would have been assigned an amateur sorceress. Knowing that she was from the Sacred City, it didn't truly surprise Ypae that Xyza didn't know what she looked like. Ypae didn't think that she was all that pretty, and Xyza, who was quite beautiful herself, saying that she was flattered her; but of course, most girls don't think they're beautiful when they really are.

Stepping from behind the tree, she tied the ribbon in her hair and looked at her two guardians. Xyza was teasing Keyon, yet again. She had been levitating him, without his consent, while Ypae was getting changed. He was now hanging upside down in the hair, his face beginning to flush.

"Lady Xyza, put me down!" he exclaimed, flailing his arms in a futile attempt to grab her. The sorceress laughed in amusement and flipped him so he was right side up; he clutched his forehead as the blood drained from his face. She laughed again.

"Oh, Keyon!" she said. "You amuse me so much!"

Keyon scowled. "Only when I'm in ridiculous situations such as this!" he retorted. Xyza smiled and

nodded in agreement, chuckling at how flustered he was getting.

Ypae sighed and walked over to them, Xyza still levitating Keyon in the air. Claspings her hands behind her back, she cleared her throat to get their attention. Both Keyon and Xyza stopped their bickering and looked at her.

“Oh!” said Xyza “Princess Ypae!” Thoughtlessly, she released Keyon from his levitation and let him fall to the ground with a thud.

“You’re so aggravating,” Keyon muttered under his breath. Xyza chuckled and smiled. It was apparently her life goal to always make him irate.

Ypae scratched the top of her hands. She didn’t know what to say to her guardians; they had just met and knew very little about each other. Keyon and Xyza looked at her, seeming to expect her to say something. Their stares and awkward silence made Ypae uncomfortable. Finally, she spoke. “Lady Xyza,” she said, “since you’re new to the Central Kingdom, maybe you would like a tour of the palace?” Xyza’s face brightened and she smiled at the princess she was sworn to protect. Her face softened, and she truly looked like the seventeen year old she was. “I would love that, Princess Ypae.”

“Please hold still, Lady Shyra,” said Trisa.

Trisa and Shyra were in Shyra’s room, making a gown for the Mid-Summer Festival and Ypae’s fifteenth birthday. According to tradition, you were supposed to wear the traditional clothes of a certain kingdom and wear a mask to match the outfit. Of course, Shyra was ordered by Madame Mira to wear a dress from the Kingdom of Shioa, and Trisa was making it for her.

Shyra was standing on a stool as Trisa stuck pins into the dress, marking the lengths of the fabrics. Shyra turned the upper half of her body so she was facing the mirror. She was being fitted for a floor length gown made of silk, which was supposedly very light and wouldn’t cause her to overheat in the July weather. The dress was made from an iridescent fabric, shifting from silver to pink. Pink! Of all the colors, she had to wear a *pink* dress. It was most likely Mira’s idea, just to make Shyra irate; how Shyra loathed her at that moment.

Despite the color, the dress itself was beautiful. The sleeves of the dress were short and hung about her shoulders; two panels of silver fabric hung from the sleeves and looped around behind the dress, tying in the back. The top part of her dress clung to her curves, and billowed out around the waist. On the front of the dress was a panel of beautiful silver fabric, starting at the tip of the dress and reaching to the end of it; a similar panel was on the back, starting from the waist and ending at the end of the dress.

“You look so beautiful in this dress, Lady Shyra,” said Trisa, smiling at Shyra; Shyra looked at her and returned the smile. Trisa placed the final pin at the bottom of the dress and stood up, placing her hands on her hips and looking at her dress. “All right,” she said, obviously satisfied with her work. “You can take the dress off now. But, be careful not to poke yourself with the pins, Lady Shyra.”

Shyra nodded and slowly took off the dress, making sure not to move any of the pins that Trisa had placed in the dress. As soon as she had gotten the dress off, Trisa handed the clothes that Azshiu gave her to her; Shyra’s jeans and shirt were drying from the day’s washing. Slipping the clothes on, she saw Trisa pack up her things and delicately drape the material for the dress over her forearm.

“I’ll be taking my leave now, Lady Shyra,” said Trisa. “I should get to work on your dress.”

“Yes, of course,” Shyra responded. Trisa curtsied and left the room, walking back to her own set of chambers in the palace. Shyra sighed and walked over to the armoire; opening it, she shoved on a pair of boots that Azshiu had also given her. She looked back at the chest at the bottom of her bed, debating whether or not she should read more of Ares’s diary. Shyra decided not to, and walked out of the room. She needed some fresh air after all the time she spent in the palace.

She looked down at her feet as she walked through the corridors, and began to sort through her thoughts.

Maybe she should apologize to Kiyera; it really was a pointless fight, and to not be speaking because of it was stupid and childish. Both of them were really at fault, not just one person in particular. Shyra turned a corner and bumped into something, making her fall to the ground. Looking up, she realized that that something was a woman. She was tall, with long black hair and a pair of green eyes. It was Kiyera.

"I'm sorry," Shyra said, hoisting herself up from the ground. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Kiyera said. A brief silence passed between them as they looked at each other, waiting for the other to say something. Sighing, Kiyera stepped around Shyra and began to make her way down the hall.

Shyra bit her lip in hesitation. After a few brief seconds, she turned around and called down the hall, "Kiyera, wait!" Kiyera stopped in the hallway, and turned around to face her. Shyra bit her lip again, and then sighed. "Never mind," she mumbled. A tinge of pain shot across Kiyera's face, and she turned around and continued to walk down the hall.

Shyra turned around and clutched her fists as she began to walk to an unknown destination. Why was it always so hard for her to apologize! Maybe because she thought that apologizing was for people who were weak, as someone had repeatedly put in her head when she was a child. But she wanted to make up with Kiyera, part of it being that she didn't like fighting with other people, and the other part being that a guardian was useless if she didn't like the person she was protecting. Both of these were vital points in Shyra's mind, but she was too stubborn to apologize first.

She snapped out of her thoughts as she realized that she was no longer inside the palace, but instead walking towards the town. Two guards stood erect at the gates, keeping a watchful eye on who went in and out. They blocked Shyra's way out as she approached them.

"Excuse me," she said, "but I would like to go into town."

"Sorry, m'lady," said one of the guards, "but we have been given orders to not let anyone outside of the palace without an escort."

Shyra placed her fists on her hips in agitation. "You can't keep me caged in here like a bird!" she snapped. The guards stood firmly in their positions, making no sign to move out of her way. "I have special permission from Azshiu," she lied. "He said that I was allowed to go into town for a while, *without an escort*." The two guards looked at each other in silent discussion, and then hesitantly opened the gates for Shyra to pass. "Thank you," she sighed as she hurriedly walked through the gates.

"Just make sure that you're back in the palace grounds before sunset, m'lady," said the guard. "The gates lock after that time." Shyra nodded at them and continued to walk towards the town. She couldn't believe that her lie actually worked! It seemed that Azshiu made a lot of the decisions here.

Soon she arrived at the bustling town. It was large, with rows of stands and houses that surrounded a large well at the center of the town. People were selling everything from weapons to clothing to food. The stands were simple, yet at the same time they held an air of extravagance about them. They were made entirely of wood, except for the roofs, which were made of ornate fabrics that consisted of all colors and patterns. The houses were also constructed of wood, with wooden rooftops and glass windows in the walls that looked down into the street. Clotheslines hung across the streets and between the houses, drying freshly washed clothing.

Shyra took in her surroundings, enjoying every detail, every little nook and cranny of the town. Jauntily, she walked through the town, looking at all the stands and what they were selling. Eventually, she found herself at a horse dealer; a line of five beautiful and majestic horses were underneath a makeshift barn, each of them tied to a picket. Shyra had always loved horses and had wanted one of her own, but she was never able to afford one.

A loud crash came from behind the barn, followed by a string of curses and yelling. Shyra stepped back as the horses grew restless, lashing out at her and trying to pull their pickets from the ground. Concerned and curious as to why the horses were reacting so oddly, she ran to the barn. She turned the corner to see

a man beating a young girl with a riding crop. He was a big man, both in stature and in his midsection, dressed in simple and dirty clothes. He was completely bald, and had a dark beard; his cold eyes looked down at the girl.

Rage built up in Shyra and she crept up behind the man. As he was drawing the riding crop back to strike the girl, Shyra snatched it from his hands. He whipped around to see what happened, but she ducked out of the way and grabbed the girl, stepping away from the man. Shyra looked down at her, and saw that she was still conscious; the girl clutched her shirt in fright.

He turned and looked at her with rage in his eyes. "Hey!" he shouted. "Give 'er back!"

Shyra narrowed her eyes. "What do you think you're doing!" she yelled at the man, clutching the girl protectively.

"She's always in my stables!" he stated. "I've told 'er to never come back, but she doesn't listen."

"That gives you no right to beat her!" she retorted. "You're lucky you didn't kill her!"

"Bah," he spat. "If I was truly lucky I would've succeeded in doing so!" He advanced toward them, cracking his knuckles. "Now, give 'er back."

Shyra gripped the girl tighter. She had to protect her from this man. Suddenly, the girl shouted, "Behind you, lady!" Without even thinking, she released the girl and punched at whatever was behind her. Her punch was stopped by a firm grip, and angry violet eyes looked at her.

"Shyra!"

She snapped out of her fury and looked up at Azshiu. "A-Azshiu," she stuttered. Two guards that had been following Azshiu caught up with him and stood behind him panting; they must've run there.

"By the gods, do you always lash out like that!" he exclaimed, releasing her hand from his grip.

"I was just..." she trailed off, then whipped around and looked at the man, but he was no longer there. He had run off. She looked at the girl, who was on the ground hugging her body in a form of protection.

Shyra walked to the girl and picked her up, holding her in her arms. "Azshiu," Shyra said, "that man was beating this girl."

Azshiu turned to the guards and ordered, "Look for Conan the Horse Owner and take him into custody."

The guards bowed and took off; Azshiu turned back to Shyra, who was still holding the girl in her arms. "Shyra, you can't leave the palace," he said flatly.

"Well, it's a good thing I did," she said defensively. "If I hadn't, this girl would be dead now!"

"Even so, you could've been killed yourself!" he retorted. "There *are* people out there who will do everything in their power to harm you and Kiyera. You're not supposed to leave the palace without an escort for that reason!"

"Well I'm sorry Azshiu," she said sarcastically. "But you can't keep me locked up in that palace forever!"

He tensed up, and then relaxed as he sighed. "You're right," he said. "But these rules are in place for your protection. You have to understand that."

Shyra looked down, somewhat ashamed of herself. He had gotten so worked up because he was worried about her. "I do," she said. And, in a more silent tone, she said, "I'm sorry."

Azshiu smiled. "Well, it's all in the past now," he said. He looked over towards the palace, and saw the sun start to set. "We should be heading back," he said.

Shyra nodded and followed Azshiu as he made his way from behind the barn. She looked down at the girl and moved a section of her hair so she could see her face. She had tanned skin with dirty brown hair.

The girl was half asleep, so it was hard for Shyra to see what color eyes she had, but as she looked closely at the girl's face, she saw that they were a grayish purple. The girl was dressed in what seemed to be an oversized shirt, with a pair of worn brown boots on her feet. She couldn't have been more than ten.

Shyra looked away from the girl and at the horses as she and Azshiu passed the front of the barn. They

were shifting, looking at the girl and sniffing her if they got close enough. Shyra, taken aback, clutched the girl tighter and stepped away. The nearest horse, a bay gelding, snorted in agitation.

Azshiu stopped and looked back at her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Shyra shifted the girl in her arms; even though she was light in weight, it was tiring to carry her. "I'm not sure," she said. "The horses are acting strange. Come to think of it, they acted the same way when the man attacked this girl."

Azshiu walked over to the bay gelding and placed his right hand on its forehead. He closed his eyes and a white and copper glow came from underneath his hand. Slowly, the gelding settled down. Shyra blinked in confusion. Did he just subdue the gelding?

"Umm..." she said as Azshiu removed his hand from the gelding's forehead and continued walking towards the palace. Shyra gaped as she looked from the horses to Azshiu. Snapping out of her moment of idiocy, she ran towards Azshiu. "H-how did you do that?" she asked as she caught up to him.

"Did what?" he said, looking at her as if he was surprised by the question.

"How did you calm that horse down?" she responded.

"Oh," he said, looking forward. "I told the gelding that the girl was injured and we were just taking her back to the palace for some treatment."

"You can talk to animals?" she said, almost laughing at her own question.

"Only telepathically," he stated. "And I have to have physical contact with the animal in order for it to work."

"Oh," she said, as she looked down at the girl. She was asleep, nuzzled up against Shyra's chest.

Shyra walked out of her washroom, and looked at the girl on her bed. She and Azshiu had arrived at the palace a few hours ago and Shyra decided to draw a bath for the girl. One of the palace's nurses, named Kate, examined the girl and found no serious injuries just some bruises and cuts. Kate asked that Shyra give the girl a bath after the girl woke up and then call her to tend to the girl's injuries. Shyra looked down at the girl, at all the bruises and cuts, and sighed. The sooner she gave the girl a bath, the sooner her injuries could be tended to.

She walked over to the girl and placed a hand on her shoulder. Shaking it gently, she said, "Hey. It's, um, time to get up."

The girl grunted and opened one eye. "I'm sleeping, lady," she whispered. "Leave me be."

Shyra placed her fists on her hips. "Well, excuse me," she retorted, "but your injuries need to be tended to. And the only way that can happen is if you get up and take a bath."

The girl sat up and stuck her chin out in defiance. "Are you going to make me?" she challenged.

Shyra bent over and shoved her face in the girl's. "I have no problem picking you up and dropping you into the tub." The girl looked directly at her, crossing her arms across her chest in a form of assertion. Finally, the girl looked away and let out a silent "humph." Shyra straightened up and smiled. "I thought so."

Reluctantly, the girl slipped off the bed and walked into the washroom. Shyra followed her, making sure that she stripped down and got in to the tub. On top of her recent injuries, the girl was covered in old bruises and scars.

Shyra touched one of the scars with her fingertips; it ran from the top of her right shoulder to the bottom of her left shoulder blade. "Did that man give these scars to you?" she asked with concern.

The girl shrugged her off and started washing herself with the water. "You don't have to stay and watch me, lady. I ain't going anywhere."

Shyra grabbed a bar of soap and began to scrub the girl's body. "Yeah, like I can trust you to take a decent bath," she said. "By the looks of it, you haven't had a bath in ages." Shyra grabbed a bowl from the shelf and poured some water into it. She poured the water over the girl's head and began

to wash her hair with the soap.

"I'm not a kid, lady," the girl snapped, grappling at the bar of soap.

"First off," Shyra said, "you are a kid. And second, my name's not 'lady'; it's Shyra." She tried to make eye contact with the girl, but she sat in the tub, wallowing in her stubbornness. "What's your name?" Shyra asked, giving up and continuing to wash the girl.

A silence passed between them. "Kat," she muttered.

Shyra smiled. "Is that short for Kathleen?" she asked. Kat nodded. Another silence stretched between them as Shyra continued to wash her. After she had finished, she stood up and handed Kat a towel. "You're all cleaned. Once you dry off, come back into the room; I've got some new clothes for you."

Kat gaped at her. "You're getting rid of my clothes?"

"I'm just giving you new ones," Shyra stated. "You can keep your old clothes if you want to, though. But you have to at least let me wash them," she reasoned. "Until they're washed, however, it'd be best if you wore the new clothes." Kat nodded, and muttered a quick thanks to her.

Just as Shyra came out of the washroom, Ayami came into the room with a pile of clean clothes. She placed the clothes- a tunic, breeches, and shoes- on the bed and curtsied. "Shall I call for Miss Kate, Lady Shyra?" she asked. Shyra nodded, and Ayami curtsied again, leaving the room.

Kat came from the washroom, wrapped in the towel. She walked over to the bed and hopped on to it, looking at the clothes lying next to her. She delicately ran a hand over the clothing, her eyes glistening. "Are these my new clothes?" she whispered. Shyra nodded and smiled at the girl's happiness.

A knock came from the door and Miss Kate entered, holding a bowl of salve and clean linen clothes. "Now, miss," she said smiling, "let's tend to those wounds, shall we?"

5 - The Mid-Summer Festival

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The day of the Mid-Summer Festival had finally arrived
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The day of the Mid-Summer Festival had finally arrived. The town was beautiful, and all the houses were
decorated for the festivities. Banners of fabric and strings of paper lanterns hung across the streets,
connecting from one house to another. Each house was adorned with brightly colored flowers and
fabrics, hanging from the windows. Venders with food and jewelry and costumes from other Kingdoms
lined the streets below, decorated with beautiful fabrics and brightly colored flowers; the aromas of the
foods were drifting through the air, inviting all to eat. Everyone, from nobles to peasants, was dressed in
splendid costumes from one of the Four Kingdoms- Arasya, Hasarii, Kotauru, and Shioa- with matching
masks. Everything was set in place for the festival to begin at dusk.
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White; ">
In the palace, Shyra was in her room, tying the strings on her dress. In the three days since Ypae had
obtained her protectors, Trisa had been sewing Shyra's dress and working on the finishing touches.
Shyra couldn't complain, even if the dress that she wore was pink. She stroked her throat in boredom; it
hadn't taken her long to get dressed. She walked over to the armoire and looked through it, and found a
shelf above where the dresses hung. On the shelf was an assortment of jewels and head ornaments, all
of which were beautiful and adorned with jewels of various colors. All of them were too extravagant for
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Shyra's liking, and she closed the armoire doors with a sigh.

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Someone knocked on the framework of her door. "Shyra? Are you decent?" they asked.

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"Yeah, Azshiu," she responded. "You can come in."

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Azshiu opened the door and Shyra's heart began to beat faster. He was dressed in traditional Shioan clothing, as was expected, and they suited him perfectly. He wore a violet-gray tunic trimmed in gold over a white shirt and breeches; a gold sash adorned with a midnight blue jewel was around his waist. He also wore shoulder armor, a midnight blue cape cascading down his back and nearly touching the floor; connecting the armor was a gold chain with three gems placed on it; brown boots covered his feet. To finish the outfit, a midnight blue mask was set on his face, framing his violet eyes. She looked him up and down, color almost spreading across her cheeks. He was *handsome*.

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"Wow," he said, chuckling. "You can actually pass as a lady." He leaned on the doorway and looked at her, his eyes dancing with laughter.

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Shyra placed her fits on her hips. "Oh, ha, ha. Very funny," she said.

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He smiled and walked over to her. "Here," he said, pulling something from underneath his sash. It was a necklace, a pendant hanging from a long silver chain. Shyra took the pendant in her hand and examined it; on the back of it was an inscription in Arasyian. "It's a charm of protection," he said. "As long as you have it on, no harm can come to you, whether it's from magic, a hand crafted weapon, or from a human."

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"T-thank you," she said, a little taken a back by the gift. "But why would I need it?"

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"Well, I figured that since more people know about you and Kiyera, you two would be more likely to be targeted," he said. "You never know when it will come in handy."

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"You're right," she sighed. "Thank you." She took it from his hands and draped it around her neck,

trying to clasp it together. "Stupid clasp," she muttered, still fumbling with it.

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"Here," Azshiu said as he stepped behind her and took the chain from her hands and hooked it together; it came down to about an inch below the top of her dress. "There you go," he said. "Now, are you ready to go to the festival?"

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Shyra smiled and nodded. "Yeah," she said. Grabbing the pair of matching slippers next to the mirror, she slipped them on and walked out of her room. "Are we meeting up with everyone else?" she asked.

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"Yes," he said. "They're probably already down at the festival though." He chuckled as he said, "Except maybe Ypae. She and Ares always took forever to decide on what to wear. Oh, that reminds me." Azshiu reached into his pant's pocket and pulled out a light pink mask, trimmed with silver. Handing it to Shyra, he said, "Trisa just finished your mask. It'll look nice with your dress." He looked at her and smiled. The thought of her being in a dress, which she hated so much, amused him greatly.

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She snatched it from his hands and put it on. "You have too much free time to annoy me," she retorted; he laughed in response.

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They walked through the hallways until they reached outside, the red sun setting behind the mountains. Kiyera and Bain, both dressed in traditional Kotauran clothes, were waiting for them in front of the palace; Ypae, Xyza, and Keyon still had not arrived. Kiyera wore layered kimonos with an elegant *obi* around her waist, while Bain wore a kimono type tunic with a matching cape and armor.

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“Well, don't you two make a cute couple?” Shyra joked. Both Kiyera and Bain turned a shade of pink. Shyra and Kiyera looked directly at each other, their eyes connecting, but they didn't say anything to each other.

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Azshiu noticed the tension between the two, and said, “So, Princess Ypae and her protectors haven't shown up yet?”

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“No,” Bain said. “Not yet.” He looked up at the palace. “It can't take *that* long to get dressed,” he muttered. As if right on cue, Ypae and her protectors walked down the path from the palace and arrived in front of them. Ypae and Keyon, sticking true to their Kingdom, were dressed in traditional Arasyian clothing. Ypae wore a beautiful violet and blue dress that flowed out around her waist, the hem of the dress just touching the ground; Keyon was dressed similar to Azshiu, the Shioan and Arasyian cultures being closely tied with one another, but his outfit was a dark green color. Xyza, meanwhile, wore Hasarian clothing, her long black hair cascading down her back. The dress was form fitting, showing off her toned figure, and was made of burgundy silk with a black and gold trim; she wore gold

bangle bracelets and a gold necklace to complete the look. Greeting each other, they walked down into the town as the sun set behind the horizon.

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All of the town's residents were already at the festival, enjoying all the things that it had to offer, bustling about from booth to booth looking at jewelry and costumes, and eating the food. Performers were in the streets, leaping and dancing around, weaving their way through the crowds of people. The festival awed Shyra and Kiyera, never seeing one so grand in their world. Everything was colorful and beautiful, and everyone was happy.

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One performance made Shyra stop in the street. Her eyes lay upon a large wooden stage with four posts at each corner; patterned silk fabric hung between each post, framing the stage. In the back left hand corner were two musicians; one had a drum in front of them while the other held a *kotsuzumi*, a type of guitar. In the center of the stage was a beautiful woman, her long black hair swept back into a low bun decorated with jewels. Her face was decorated with beautiful makeup, her full lips painted red, and her catlike eyes rimmed with gold, black, and red shadow. She wore two long, layered kimonos that hung off her shoulders, with long sleeves that nearly touched the ground. Around her waist was an ornate *obi* that tied in a large bow in the back; a jewel was placed on the cord that went around her *obi*. In her hands, she held two beautiful *riahas* made with gold and white silk, and dark wood.

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Shyra looked at the *riaha* dancer in awe, as the drummer and *kotsuzumi* player began to play out the melody, the dancer getting into the starting position. Slowly, she spun the *riahas* in her hands, tossing them into the air and then catching them, spinning her body around as the music began to quicken. Her kimonos flowed around her as she moved across the stage, moving her feet and body in complex patterns, tossing the *riahas* into the air and catching them, spinning them in her hands.

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Shyra was so awed by the dancer, she didn't notice Azshiu step next to her, watching the performance with her. The dancer finished by spinning her arms in a circular motion, dipping and turning her body until she was back at the center of the stage. She tossed the <i>riahas</i> into the air and collapsed onto the stage. Swiftly but gracefully, she sat up and raised her hands, catching the <i>riahas</i>. In a final display of skill, she twirled them with her hands, threw one up into the air, and then caught it again in her hand. She finished the dance by crossing her arms, the <i>riahas</i> fully displayed with her eyes peaking out over the tops of them; the drummer and <i>kotsuzumi</i> player finished the tune, and the crowd in front of the stag applauded loudly. The <i>riaha</i> dancer closed the <i>riahas</i> and placed them within her sleeve. She then bent over and bowed, her hands out in front of her with the tips of her index and middle fingers touching.

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"She was amazing," Shyra breathed. The <i>riaha</i> dancer stood up and walked over to the <i>kotsuzumi</i> player and drummer, talking to them about what music they should play next.

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"Yes, she was," Azshiu said. "The <i>riaha</i> dance originated from the Kingdom of Kotauru, did you know that?" Shyra shook her head in response. "Come on, Shyra," he said to her. "There's much more of the festival to see." She nodded and followed him away from the stage, as the <i>riaha</i> dancer prepared for her next dance. Shyra continued to look at her in awe, silently wishing that someday she could be just as graceful and beautiful.

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Around midnight, the festival was coming to a close. As a finale, the crowds of people grouped together and gazed upon the display of fireworks. Up the fireworks shot, then making a loud <i>crack! </i>as they exploded in a brilliant display of colors, reflecting off the gazing eyes of the bystanders.

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Near the middle of the fireworks display, Azshiu got an uneasy feeling in his gut. He felt like he sensed something- or someone- watching him and his companions. He looked around at the town, at the rooftops, windows, and open areas of streets, but he saw nothing.

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Shyra looked up at him as she noticed he was restless. "What's wrong?" she shouted to him, as another set of fireworks crackled in the sky.

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He looked back down at her, and shook his head. "It's nothing," he shouted back. But that uneasy feeling was still in his gut, and he continued to look around the town for a while. Shyra, every once in a while, would shoot a glance back up at him to make sure that he was all right.

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As another set of fireworks finished, a loud shriek erupted from the crowd. Shyra, Azshiu, and the rest of the crowds looked behind them. Another set of fireworks illuminated the ten cloaked figures standing behind the crowd; seven of them drew their swords and advanced towards the crowd, while the remaining three placed their hands out in front of them and produced fireballs, shooting them at the buildings. The townspeople went into an instant state of chaos like wild animals, all running away from the cloaked figures together in a mass of people.

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Shyra looked to her left and saw Keyon and Bain draw their swords; Xyza protectively stood in front of Ypae, and Kiyera stood behind Bain. Shyra looked back at Azshiu, and saw his magic form in his left hand as he reached for her with his right. Before she could grab his hand, however, she was engulfed by the frightened crowd and was separated from Azshiu.

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Frantically, she tried to move through the crowds, trying to get back to Azshiu. Noticing that she had been separated from him, Azshiu's magic disappeared and he made his way towards her, running through the mass of people and pushing aside anyone that was in his way.

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“Azshiu!” she cried as she stretched her hand out for him to take. In a desperate attempt to reach her, Azshiu stretched his hand out. For a brief second, their fingers brushed each other's, then a man knocked Shyra out of Azshiu's reach, and she was off in the crowds again.

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“No!” Azshiu cried. “Shyra!”

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Shyra elbowed her way through the crowds, going against the flow of people. But she was running out of strength from the effort, and she wasn't able to push as many people aside as she could have. Suddenly, she was hit hard in the head, knocking her mask off and making her stumble. When she straightened herself, she realized that her head didn't hurt. Not even a tinge of pain. She touched the necklace Azshiu had given her, and realized that it was warm. What he said was true: she wouldn't feel any pain if she was physically hurt. “Azshiu!” she cried out.

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“Shyra!” Azshiu cried. Angrily, he pushed aside everyone that came close to him. “Get out of my way!” he shouted above the crowds.

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But no one heard him, and the mass of people continued to run away from the town, carrying Shyra farther and farther away from Azshiu. Shyra looked around at her surroundings, the light from the paper lanterns illuminating the buildings and townspeople. Over the heads of the people, she saw the stables where she had first met Kat. Some of the horses had broken free from their bonds, while others stood at their posts, stomping at the ground frantically. Shyra now knew that she was on the outskirts of town; she hadn't realized that the people had dragged her so far away from where she had been.

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Now she knew she had to get back. Gathering up the last of her strength, she pushed through the people. "Get out of my way!" she ordered, shoving a man, pushing past a woman, making sure not to hurt any children. "Azshiu!" she cried out, in a final attempt for him to find her.

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He heard her. "Shyra!" he called back, scanning the crowd for any sign of Shyra. Just as he was looking over, she jumped up and called for him again. The move was risky- she could've lost her footing and been trampled- but it worked. Azshiu spotted her and pushed through the people until he could visibly see Shyra. Finally, he reached her. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her to him, wrapping his arm around her waist in protection and so he wouldn't lose her again; Shyra clutched his shirt in response. "Are you all right?" he asked. She nodded her head in response. "Come on," he said, pulling her back to where the rest of the group was. "We have to help the others."

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During the time when Shyra and Azshiu were separated, the cloaked figures had advanced towards the others. The three mages were advancing towards Xyza and Ypae, while the seven swordsmen made their way to kill Bain and Keyon. The swordsmen divided, charging at the two knights.

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In a clash of blades, the knights and swordsmen moved with lightning speed. Keyon did a half crescent swing, slashing his opponent in the chest; Bain shoved his sword into his opponent's gut, letting him fall

to the ground, and moved to the next opponent. In a combination, Keyon and Bain slew two more opponents with ease.

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Meanwhile, the mages started collecting their powers, and preparing to aim them at Xyza. She put her hands together, palms out, and began to chant a spell. In a flash of light, the mages powers and Xyza's collided with each other. None of them could make separate attacks; if they did, their opponent would gain the upper hand.

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One of the swordsmen managed to slip away from Bain and Keyon, and spotted Kiyera. Grinning, he advanced towards her. "My, aren't you pretty?" he said, readying his sword.

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Bain glanced back at her as he blocked a stroke from his opponent. "Don't you touch her!" he shouted at the swordsman, forcing away his opponent's blade. Quickly, Bain slashed at his opponent, but only managed to graze his arm as the swordsman moved away. Grabbing the sword from one of his fallen opponents, he tossed it to Kiyera; the blade cut into the ground, so the hilt was upright. "Take the sword, Kiyera!" he said as he blocked another blow from his opponent.

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With great agility, Kiyera ran to the sword, barely avoiding a slash from her opponent. Removing the sword from the ground, she readied herself. "How do you expect me to fight in this dress?" she asked,

never taking her eyes off the swordsman. Behind her, Keyon finished off his opponent, and moved over to Ypae, placing her behind him so that way Xyza could fight the mages easier.

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Bain kept parrying with his opponent. "Just hold him off until I get there!" he shouted as he swung at his opponent.

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The swordsman charged at Kiyera, and she put up her blade to block the blow. Using her newly gained strength, she pushed the blade aside, and they parried each other. As she put her sword up for another block, Kiyera tripped over the hems of her kimonos, and fumbled. The swordsman swiped at her, leaving a large cut in her left arm. Kiyera let out a cry of pain as her warm blood permanently stained her kimono.

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Bain clashed his blades with his opponent, and saw an opening. In one quick motion, he swung his blade at his opponent's stomach, leaving a fatal wound; his opponent instantly dropped. Turning, he shouted, "Hold on Kiyera!"

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One of the mages noticed Bain, and chanted a silent spell. Suddenly, the mage separated into four solid images of himself, and they moved to stop Bain. This spell cost the mage, though, giving Xyza the opportunity to destroy him, leaving only two mages.

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“Keyon!” Xyza shouted, as Keyon was about to move to kill the clones; he stopped and looked at her. “Take Princess Ypae back to the palace! I’ll handle these two!” Nodding, he grabbed Ypae and they made their way back to the palace. One of the clones made a charge at him, but Keyon cut him down with a single stroke. Xyza focused her attention back on the mages, as their attacks slowly began to lose power. She ended her attack and chanted another spell. Sweat trickled down her face as she launched two streams of red magic; the mages threw up shields of magic, nullifying the attack. Xyza gritted her teeth in frustration.

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In the mean time, Bain and Kiyera had their hands full. The clones had the abilities of their master, and were able to produce two swords made of black magic. Bain gripped his sword, and shot a glance back at Kiyera; she was standing, her sword held in a defensive mode. He focused his attention back the clones; the faster he killed them, the faster he’d be able to help Kiyera.

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Kiyera panted, a bead of sweat falling down her cheek; the sword she had in her hands was a lot heavier than the swords she used in training, and the strength it took to use it was sapping her energy. It didn’t help the situation that her left arm was throbbing with pain.

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The swordsman smiled smugly at her, his sword hanging by his side. “Ah, pretty,” he said, advancing

towards her. "Are you getting tired?"

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Kiyera gripped her sword tighter. There was no way she was going to die at the hands of this man. All she had to do was wait for Bain, and then he would kill the man.

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But the swordsman didn't give Bain the chance. He raised his sword and charged at her, swinging directly at her stomach. She raised her sword and blocked the attack, a jolt of pain shooting through her left arm; she bit her lip to hold back a scream. She moved his blade away and swung at his side, but he blocked; stepping on her kimono, he pushed her back, making her fall on the ground. Quickly, he knocked her sword out of her reach and loomed over her, grinning. In a split second, Kiyera swung her leg at his ankles, swiping him off of his feet. Frantically, she moved towards her sword and reached for it; the swordsman grabbed her leg and pulled her to him, rage in his eyes. She just needed to reach a little bit farther.

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"Bain!" she cried out, as the swordsman readied his sword for the final blow. She stretched out her arm, her sword only centimeters away.

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Bain cut down one of the clones and blocked an attack from the other. He glanced at her and his eyes filled with fright. "Kiyera!" he shouted, swinging his opponent's blade away and parrying with him; he

had to kill the clone quickly.

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The swordsman crouched over her. "Now you may die!" he shouted, swinging his blade to cleave her in two. Kiyera was finally able to grab her sword. Gripping it, she thrust the sword into his body; he stopped, his sword only inches from her body. She tightened her grip on the hilt and twisted the blade, making the wound larger and killing the swordsman; blood splashed everywhere, dripping on Kiyera's kimono, and the swordsman's lifeless body fell on top of her.

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Behind her, Bain did a half crescent swing and beheaded the clone; the sword disappeared and the clone vanished into thin air. Instantly, he turned and ran to Kiyera, leaving Xyza to finish off the mages. "Kiyera!" he shouted.

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Using what little strength she had left, Kiyera pushed the swordsman off of her and pulled her sword out of his gut, the blood on the sword dripping on to the ground. Her body began to quiver, and she dropped the blood soaked sword on the ground. She was only fifteen years old, and she had killed someone.

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Bain knelt down next to Kiyera, and wrapped his arm around her. "Kiyera," he said concerned. He felt her body shaking, and he tightened his grip around her. She nuzzled against his chest, tears falling down her cheeks and onto his shirt; her throat tightened and became dry, and she covered her face with

her hands, crying into them. "Oh, Kiyera," Bain whispered, resting his head on hers.

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Just then, Azshiu and Shyra arrived. She looked at all the dead bodies on the ground, at the pools of blood that surrounded them, and felt her throat tighten in disgust. She looked away from the bodies and over at Xyza and the mage she was fighting; the lifeless body of the second mage lay next to him. He put up a shield, blocking one of Xyza's attacks, and looked directly at Shyra; his eyes went wide at the sight of her.

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Azshiu noticed him staring, and collected his power in his hand, launching the attack at the mage. Quickly, the mage put up a smoke screen, and Azshiu's attack went right through it; when the smoke cleared, the mage was gone.

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Xyza turned to Azshiu. "Did you kill him?" she asked. Bain and Kiyera stood up, and looked at Azshiu.

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He shook his head. "No," he said. "He got away. Where are Keyon and Princess Ypae?" he asked as he walked over to the corpse of one of the mages, and knelt down next to it.

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“They're safe at the palace,” Xyza responded.

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Intently, he examined the body and clothes of the corpse, and then moved to one of the corpses of the swordsmen; again, he examined the corpse's body and clothes carefully.

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“What is it, Azshiu?” asked Shyra, stepping towards him.

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He stood up and turned to face them all. “These are assassins from the Northern Kingdom,” he said.

“They came to kill Princess Ypae.”

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“Apparently, there were more assassins throughout the town looking for you, Princess Ypae,” Azshiu said. “At least, according to some of the knights and Council members also at the festival.”

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They were in the palace's den, a warm and inviting room lavished with rich furniture and paintings; an unlit fireplace was set in one of the walls. Ypae was sitting in a chair, holding her mask in her hands; Keyon looked at her, concerned. Shyra, Kiyera, and Xyza were also sitting down, while the men stood. Kiyera was still trembling a little from her experience, and Bain placed a hand on her right shoulder. Miss Kate had immediately tended to Kiyera's wound; it was deep, but it wasn't life threatening. She had stitched the wound up when they had gotten back, and was now wrapping a tourniquet around it so as to help protect the wound from infection.

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“So, they've finally come after me,” Ypae said, clutching her mask. “It's not like we didn't expect this, Azshiu. We knew it would happen eventually.”

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“Maybe you should've acquired your personal protectors sooner, Princess Ypae, like Princess Ares did,” said Bain.

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Shyra looked up at him. "I thought Ares was the same age as Ypae when Azshiu and Ramyna became her protectors," she said.
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Azshiu shook his head. "The legitimate heir to the throne acquires their protectors when they're thirteen years old. The remaining heirs each obtain their protectors when they're fifteen years old," he responded.
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"It wouldn't have made a difference if I had gotten my protectors any sooner," Ypae said to Bain. "Thank the gods that I had them tonight, though." She looked at Xyza and Keyon and smiled at them; they both smiled in return.
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Shyra then remembered the one assassin that had seen her. Maybe Azshiu was mistaken and the mages could've been from one of the other Kingdoms. It made sense, since news about Kiyera and she was spreading like wild fire. She bit her lip in thought.
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Azshiu looked down at her. "What's the matter, Shyra?" he asked.

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She looked up at him. "Do you think that it's possible that some of the assassins <i>weren't </i>from the Northern Kingdom?" Azshiu and the others looked at her inquisitively. "Well, one of the mages saw me and gave me a weird look, like <i>I </i>was the one he was looking for, not Ypae," she said.

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Azshiu thought about it for a moment. "It's probable," he said. "The Eastern Kingdom, maybe?" He looked at Ypae, as if he wanted her to give her own opinion of the situation.

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"I'm not sure," she said. "The Eastern Kingdom has no reason to kill Shyra, nor do the other Kingdoms have a reason to kill either her or Kiyera. Shyra's not of royal blood either, so she doesn't pose a threat to the other Kingdoms."

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Ypae was right; they all knew it. Shyra was just a reincarnation of a princess, so she didn't pose a threat. But that mage's look still made Shyra uneasy. She knew that he had been looking for her. Maybe aside from Ypae, but he had been. She didn't say anything, though. There was really no point; it wasn't the most important of everybody's concerns.

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Soon after the meeting, they all went to their separate chambers to sleep. It was about two in the morning when Shyra finally entered her room and closed the door behind her. She sighed and leaned against her wall; it had been a long day. Now that Ypae was of the proper age, the Northern Kingdom would most likely be attacking and trying to kill her more frequently. That meant that Kiyera, Azshiu, and the others would be fighting to protect her. Shyra didn't like standing around while the others fought. It made her feel weak and useless. If her friends were going to fight, then she was going to fight too. Maybe Azshiu could teach her how to use a bow, or even a sword. She would ask him tomorrow.

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Footsteps in the hallway outside her room made her turn her head. There were mumbled voices, and she recognized them as Kiyera's and Bain's.

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"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Bain asked.

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There was a short pause and then Kiyera said, "Yeah." She was still shaken from her experience, Shyra knew; she could tell by the tone in her voice.

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Bain didn't seem to believe her either, for he was silent for a while. Finally, he said, "All right. If you need me, though, you know where to find me." Kiyera must've nodded in response; Shyra didn't hear her say anything. Then she heard Bain leave, Kiyera open her door and then enter her chambers.

Shyra moved from the wall and began to undress, opening the chest at the end of her bed to find a nightshirt. Even though she and Kiyera weren't friends-and were in a fight at the current moment- she was still worried about her. She put herself in Kiyera's position: how would she feel if she had just killed someone? Especially at fifteen; she was young still; much too young to kill. She slipped the nightshirt on over her body and crawled into bed, covering herself with the covers. Stroking the necklace that Azshiu had given her, finding it comforting, she thought about Kiyera's wound and the experience she had gone through. If she were in Kiyera's shoes, she probably wouldn't be able to sleep that night.

Kiyera began to untie her *obi*, moving slowly and carefully so as not to strain her arm. Her arm was still sore and the cut on it was throbbing. She folded the *obi* and placed it on the bed, then began to take off her kimonos. She slid the first one off slowly and carefully, so as not to arouse any unnecessary pain. She placed the kimono on the bed, and saw the blood- hers and the assassin's- stained on the kimono. Gently, Kiyera touched it; the blood was still a little wet, and was cold to the touch. She drew back instantly, and grabbed the collar of her second kimono. She then looked down at her hands, and saw that they were trembling. She gripped the kimono and bit her lip to hold back tears. She then realized that the longer that she stayed in the kimono, the longer she would have to look at the blood on it. Quickly, she stripped herself of it, hissing as the silk fabric brushed against her wound.

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She went into the chest and pulled out her sleepwear. As she put them on, she kept looking over at her kimonos, her eyes always going straight to the blood stains. How could she have killed someone? Yes, it was out of self-defense, but it was still wrong for her to kill someone at her age. Ramyna might have, but it had to have been natural for her, being such a great warrior and all. Angry with herself, she swiped the kimonos off the bed, letting them fall to the floor in a heap.

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She crawled onto her bed and pulled her knees up to her chin, and rested her head on top of them. She was emotionally and physically drained from the day; it was finally weighing down on her. The swordsman's face kept showing up in her mind. His eyes were filled with fear and hatred, crimson blood dripped from his mouth; he had been looking right at her, his gaze piercing. She could recall how he felt when he had fallen on her: his body was heavy, muscular, still warm, but beginning to turn cold; his warm blood flowed from his abdominal wound and his mouth, seeping through the silk of her kimonos. She felt it touch her skin, having it drip across her torso.

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Kiyera sniffed and lifted her head as she felt a new flood of tears falling down her cheeks. She quickly wiped them away with her sleeve. *Bain...* she thought. He said that she could come and talk with him if she wanted to, but she didn't feel right doing it. He was older than she was, and it'd be awkward for her to go into a boy's room in the middle of the night. She looked to her door and sighed. There was one other person she could go be with. She didn't care who that person was. She just didn't want to be alone that night.

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A knock on the door woke Shyra. She hadn't been asleep long, but who would be calling on her at this late hour?

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“Coming,” she mumbled as she removed her covers. Quickly, she walked towards the door and opened it. She was shocked to see that it was Kiyera; her eyes were red from crying and she had fresh tearstains down her cheeks. “Kiyera?” Shyra said.

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“Hi, Shyra,” she said. She sniffed and tried to smile; it was a sad attempt. “Can I come in?” she asked.

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Shyra nodded and moved aside so Kiyera could enter; she closed the door behind her and walked over to her nightstand to light some candles. When she was done, she looked at Kiyera. She was standing in the room, just looking at her. She knew Kiyera was still shaken from that night; that's the only reason why she was there. Now was a good time to apologize for the fight they had had. It would help ease Kiyera's mind, even if it was just a little.

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"I'm sorry, Kiyera," she started, scratching the back of her head. "About our fight. It was a stupid thing for us to get so upset about." She paused then added, "I have a tendency to get hard-headed about things."

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Kiyera shook her head. "It was my fault," she said. "I shouldn't have got so worked up. I'm sorry, too."

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Silence. Neither of them knew what to do next. It was awkward, both of them just standing there, looking at each other. At least the tension between them was no longer there, lightening the mood, evening if it was by the smallest amount.

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"Are you okay?" Shyra asked, finally. It was a stupid question. Of course Kiyera wasn't okay. If she were, she wouldn't be there.

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Shyra was about to apologize, when Kiyera walked over to the bed and sat down.
She laid her hands on her lap and looked down at them. "Ever since I was little," she said, "I've dreamed of what my life would be like: going to school, graduating, falling in love, raising a family, and living my life to the fullest. And then," she paused. "And then I came here, and everything changed." She looked up at Shyra. "Ever since we've come here, I've been training myself to kill others. Honestly, I didn't think I'd ever use my training. I figured we'd be leaving for our world soon."

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Shyra walked over and sat down next to Kiyera; she was beginning to tremble. "I-I killed a man, Shyra," she whispered. "With my own two hands, I killed someone." She looked up at her, and tears were in her eyes. "Do you know what that's like?" It was a rhetorical question; of course Shyra didn't know what that was like.

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Shyra wrapped her arm around Kiyera in a comforting embrace. "I'm so sorry, Kiyera," she whispered. "I really am." Kiyera broke down, her entire body trembling against Shyra's. A new torrent of tears fell across her cheeks, soaking Shyra's shirt. Shyra cooed her, resting her head on Kiyera's. She had no idea when she had become so nice to Kiyera of all people, but she felt bad for her. In a way, Shyra was glad that Kiyera had come to talk to her instead of someone else. Maybe they really could be friends.

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Shyra shut her eyes tighter as the morning sun's rays shone upon her face. She and Kiyera had ended up talking early into the morning, and she was still tired; it was only an hour past dawn. She yawned and stretched, her back a little cramped from sleeping against the bed; she had let Kiyera sleep in her bed that night. Shyra looked up at her and saw that she was still asleep, her breathing rhythmic. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she had dark circles under them, but she looked so peaceful. Shyra smiled.

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Noise from outside of Kiyera's room made Shyra turn. Slowly, she stood up; she was still a little stiff. She walked to the door and opened it, peering out into the hallway. Bain was standing outside of Kiyera's door, dressed for training.

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He knocked on her door. "Kiyera?" he said. "Are you up?"

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Shyra stepped into the hallway. "Bain?" she said. He looked over at her.

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"Oh, Shyra," he said. "Have you seen Kiyera? She's late for her training." He was concerned for her; either that or he was upset. Shyra looked into his eyes; he was definitely concerned.

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“Yeah,” she said. “She spent the night with me in my room. She just needed to talk.”

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“Oh,” Bain said. He paused, then asked: “Is she all right?”

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Shyra smiled and nodded. “Yes,” she said. “She's all right.”

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