

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Wild Kingdom

Deanna Ashford

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About the Book

'Sarin was infuriated by his own weakness, knowing he could not fight her forever and fearing that one day soon his resolve would give way. Uselessly, he pulled at the chain that held his wrists together, knowing full well his bonds were far stronger than his own self-willed determination.'

'Come to my bedchamber, slave,' he heard Danara say.'

Salacious excesses abound as war rages in the mythical kingdom of Kabra. Prince Tarn is struggling to drive out the invading army while his betrothed - the beautiful Rianna - has fled the fighting with the mysterious Baroness Crissana.

But the baroness is a fearsome and depraved woman, and once they're out of the danger zone she takes Rianna prisoner. Her plan is to present her as a plaything to her warlord half-brother, Ragnor. In order to rescue his sweetheart, Prince Tarn needs to join forces with his old enemy, Sarin, whose capacity for perverse delights knows no bounds.

About the Author

Deanna Ashford is the pseudonym of an author of historical, romantic and erotic fiction.

She is the author of *Barbarian Prize*, *Doctor's Orders*, *Templar Prize* and *Wild Kingdom*, all available from *Black Lace*.

By the same author

Savage Surrender

Doctor's Orders

Barbarian Prize

The Templar Prize

Wild Kingdom

Deanna Ashford

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Chapter One

THE GREY SWIRLING mist was like a living entity, swallowing up the forest and the path ahead. Lady Rianna of Harn shivered, feeling as though she and her armed escort had strayed into some strange netherworld, where nothing existed but endless gloom. All she could hear were the muffled chink of armour, the rhythmic noise of the horses' hoof-beats and an occasional strange, unidentifiable screeching from the forest that set her nerves on edge. The fog was so dense she could barely see the mounted man-at-arms in front of her, let alone the thick banner of trees which lined the narrow road.

The chill dampness invaded Rianna's weary limbs, numbing her fingers as she clutched on to her palfrey's reins. They had been on the road for three days now and the journey had been long and hard. She was unused to riding so far and so fast in such inclement weather. She was close to exhaustion and dusk was approaching: it was imperative that they reach a safe place to spend the night.

Captain Leon, and his small troop of well-armed soldiers, had been charged by her betrothed, Prince Tarn of Kabra, to escort her to the safe refuge of her father's kingdom of Harn. With Tarn's army increasing in size by the day, the final assault to drive the Percheron invaders from Kabra would soon be underway. This forest, which snaked along the borders between Kabra and Harn, was a haven for vagabonds and bandits. Captain Leon did not trouble to hide his concern as he constantly scanned the trees, which were still almost hidden by the drifting fog, looking for the slightest sign of anyone who might be about to attack.

‘It’s not far now, my lady,’ Captain Leon said, glancing over at Rianna. ‘The castle of Dane is close by.’

As Leon spoke there was an unholy yell and a number of savage-looking creatures, dressed in outlandish garments and brandishing swords, leaped from the trees. One lunged towards Rianna’s palfrey. Startled, she gave a sharp scream and her mount began shying nervously. The horse surged forwards as Leon hit it hard across the rump with the flat of his sword.

‘Go!’ Leon shouted. ‘Ride for the castle.’

Leon and his men were fighting for their lives. Rianna heard the resounding clang of metal against metal, punctuated by hoarse shouts and the loud cry of a wounded man. Yet she had no chance to even look back as her mount galloped wildly along the path and everything behind her was swallowed up by the mist. Filled with fear and anguish she struggled to control her horse, her heart beating out of control. She did not know how far it was to the sanctuary of the castle. The hood of her cloak fell from her head and tendrils of her red-gold hair escaped from their pins and whipped against her face as she prayed that Leon and his men would survive.

The ominous thudding sound of hooves approaching behind her made Rianna dig her heels into her mare’s flanks, urge it into an even raster gallop. Then she saw the walls of the castle loom out of the fog just ahead. The gates were open but there were no men-at-arms on guard nor any sign of life at all. She galloped into the deserted bailey.

She pulled agitatedly at the reins, her horse’s hooves sliding on the damp flagstones as she whirled around to face her pursuer. To her relief it was one of Leon’s men. He jumped from his horse and ran towards the gates, shouting loudly for someone to help him as he attempted to push one of the heavy oak doors shut.

The soldier, who Captain Leon had sent ahead to announce their arrival and have the place properly prepared

for Rianna, ran from the stables and was followed by a grubby, poorly dressed servant who wearily rubbed his eyes as if he'd just woken up. They put their shoulders to the oak gate, heaving one side into place but leaving the other partly open; they were ready to slam it shut if the bandits reached the castle before Captain Leon and his men.

Rianna's heart was still pounding as she clung to the reins of her weary mount and watched the gate as more servants appeared brandishing an assortment of weapons. She heard the drumming sound of horses approaching, then Leon appeared, holding aloft his bloodied sword, followed by a number of his men-at-arms. Rianna counted them as they entered the bailey, relieved to find that they were all safe. Leon rode straight over to Rianna and stopped his mount a few feet from hers. Foam flecked the horse's mouth and steam rose from its flanks.

'As soon as they realised what they were facing, the bandits retreated in disarray, dragging their wounded with them,' Leon told Rianna, as the gates were slammed shut and barred by a heavy wooden beam almost the length of two grown men. 'They were a ragged, poorly armed band, who would never dare attack this castle,' he added reassuringly.

'I was concerned for you all,' Rianna said breathlessly, as she glanced around the bailey. The fortress was old and unimpressive: little more than a tall stone tower, surrounded by thick outer walls, and built, like many others, to protect the borders of Kabra. It was permeated by a very visible air of neglect. Chickens foraged amid the piles of rubbish heaped against the outer walls and, judging by the foul odour, excrement from the midden had not been cleared for many a long month. In the height of summer this place would be swarming with flies and disease, thought Rianna. For the first time on this journey, she was thankful that it was winter; it was so cold that every breath she expelled was visible in the chill air. Her horse snorted and lowered its

head as she struggled to recover from her fright. She watched the soldiers dismount. They were still exhilarated from the brief battle and talked cheerfully among themselves as they led their horses to the stables.

‘My lady,’ Captain Leon said worriedly, ‘we must get you inside. It is cold and damp, if you remain here you’ll be chilled to the bone.’

Rianna pushed back the stray strands of hair that had fallen across her face. Her ivory skin looked even paler in contrast to her still-flushed cheeks, and there were dark violet smudges of weariness under her large green eyes. Yet her dishevelled state only served to enhance her fragile beauty.

‘These last three days have not been an experience I would like to repeat often,’ she confessed. They had been forced to take a tortuous route in order to avoid groups of enemy soldiers, as the invading army of Percheron still retained control of large parts of Kabra despite Prince Tarn’s determined efforts to drive them from his land. ‘I will be glad of a hot bath and a good night’s rest in a comfortable bed,’ she continued, her voice trembling with tiredness.

Rianna always rode astride, and as she tried to dismount her movements were hampered by the weight of her velvet cloak, which was now saturated by the heavy moisture in the air. She almost fell into Captain Leon’s waiting arms and his strong hands closed protectively around her waist. ‘I fear I pressed you too hard,’ he said softly, his handsome features etched with concern.

‘Prince Tarn ordered you to make haste and escort me to Harn with expediency, did he not?’

‘He did.’ Leon smiled tenderly at her, his hazel eyes filled with far more than just loyalty and concern. ‘And the sooner I deliver you to your father, the sooner I can return to fight by his side.’

‘And may the gods protect you all,’ Rianna said, leaning against Leon’s firm chest for a moment, comforted by his

strength and the hardness of his muscular form.

Most soldiers stank of leather, dirt and sweat, but she had noticed that Leon was fanatical about cleanliness and the odour of lemon verbena always scented his clothing.

As his warm breath brushed her cheek a familiar lust flooded Rianna's veins. She and her lover, Tarn, had barely spent a private moment together for weeks and she craved the loving caresses of a man's hands and the joy of a hard male body in her bed at night.

Rianna pulled away from Leon. He was charming and very attractive but no real substitute for Tarn – the man she loved and wanted to be with for the rest of her life. 'We should make our way inside.' She glanced around the gradually darkening bailey. 'I trust that the inside of the keep is an improvement on this!' she added.

'Sir Olaf suggested his castle would provide a comfortable refuge on our journey east,' Leon commented. 'His staff have clearly grown slack and slovenly since his departure.' Keeping a firm hold on her arm, he escorted Rianna up the slippery stone steps and into the castle.

The great hall was dimly lit by smoking torches that gave off an acrid smell. It was sparsely furnished and the rushes were almost ankle deep on the floor. One layer had been laid upon the other and, judging by the musty, greasy odour of rotting food, they'd not been replaced for some time. Close to the large soot-stained fireplace two scrawny hounds scrabbled and snarled over pieces of meat.

A stooping, grey-haired man shuffled forwards and bowed low before her. 'I am the steward, Bayliss. Welcome, Lady Rianna,' he said in a quavering voice. 'A chamber has been prepared for you. The maidservants are young and unused to attending a noble lady, but they are all I could provide at such short notice.'

'I am certain they will be more than able; my needs tonight are simple.' Despite her disappointment at the state of the place, Rianna felt rather sorry for the old man. He

looked ancient, and well past working age. If he were her servant he would have been assigned far lighter tasks than caring for this castle. She turned to glance at Leon. 'I'll see you on the morrow, Captain.'

'On the morrow, my lady,' he agreed with a warm smile. 'If you have need of me, you have but to call,' he added, then strode off, glancing back at her again for a long penetrating moment before he left the great hall.

'My lady, your chamber is this way,' the steward said, shuffling forwards to slowly ascend the broad stone staircase. Rianna followed him, moving stiffly, her damp skirts clinging to her legs.

When Rianna reached her bedchamber she was pleasantly surprised to find the room spacious and spotlessly clean, with a welcoming fire blazing in the hearth. The bed, with its fresh linen sheets, looked comfortable, despite the fact that the red velvet curtains were worn and faded. What pleased Rianna most was the large wooden tub, placed close to the fire, filled almost to the brim with steaming water.

A servant entered the chamber, carrying Rianna's small travelling chest. He then left, along with the steward, while the two young maidservants, waiting to attend Rianna, just stood there staring at her nervously, not daring to say a word. They were cleaner than the other servants Rianna had seen, with spotless white aprons covering their simple woollen gowns. Judging by their red, work-roughened hands, they were more used to heavy household tasks than attending to a lady's needs.

Rianna smiled, sensing their nervousness. 'Your names?' she asked.

'Hiller, my lady,' the taller dark-haired one said, curtseying clumsily.

'Agnes, my lady,' added the younger and prettier of the two.

'Hiller, you unpack my chest,' Rianna ordered. 'I shall need a nightgown and my rose-scented soap,' she added,

having noticed the bar of coarse lye soap that had been left beside the tub. 'I'll bathe and then retire,' she added, longing to be rid of her damp clothing and luxuriate in the hot water.

She went to unfasten her cloak, but her fingers were too stiff and cold to undo the heavy clasp. 'Let me,' Agnes said, rushing forwards.

The maidservant lifted the sodden cloak away from Rianna and draped it out to dry across a chair near the fire. Then she unlaced the back of Rianna's plum, woollen dress. As it fell in a pool at Rianna's feet, Agnes uttered a faint gasp of surprise.

'Have you not seen a woman in breeches before?' Rianna asked with a soft laugh. She wore supple formfitting leather breeches beneath her long skirts. Usually she wore men's clothing when riding, not caring if it shocked those who saw her. Last night they'd slept out in the open and she'd put on her dress as well in a vain effort to keep warm.

'I have not,' Agnes replied. She seemed unable to keep from staring curiously at the garment which clung very tightly to Rianna's long, shapely legs.

'Help me off with my boots,' Rianna said, leaning back against a chair while lifting her left foot.

Agnes eased off one boot, then the other. Rianna stepped on to the rug of wolf-skin pelts, which partially covered the cold stone floor. The thick fur felt warm and tickled her bare feet as Agnes awkwardly helped Rianna unfasten her breeches and peel them off. Rianna was left wearing only a very brief silk shift - one far more revealing than the heavy linen shifts most noble ladies wore. Feeling more comfortable devoid of her damp clothing, she moved closer to the fire to allow the heat to start warming her stiff limbs. As the maids fussed around the room, unpacking her garments and gathering up linen towels left warming by the fire, Rianna stared pensively into the flickering flames, thinking of Tarn and praying that he would remain safe.

‘Should I take down your hair?’ Agnes asked, touching the thick red-gold coils that had not escaped from their pins.

‘Leave it.’ Rianna repressed a shiver as Agnes’s callused fingers brushed the nape of her neck and a tingle of desire slid slowly down her spine. They reminded her too much of the hot purpose of Tarn’s sword-roughened hands when they’d last made love. ‘I’ll manage it myself. You may both leave now.’

‘Do you wish for something to eat? The cook has prepared a light repast,’ Hiller said. ‘After such a long journey, my lady, you -’

‘No,’ Rianna interjected impatiently. ‘Just leave.’

Agnes and Hiller seemed to be relieved that their duties were over as they hurried off, pulling the heavy wooden door shut behind them. Once she was alone, Rianna removed her shift to revel in the feeling of nakedness as the flickering flames cast dark inviting shadows over her pale skin. Gently she cupped her full breasts, running her thumbs over the soft tips of her nipples, imagining it was her lover’s hands caressing her. She teased the tiny peaks until they hardened and felt an answering tug in the pit of her groin.

Rianna did not handle enforced celibacy with ease. Lately she’d resorted to pleasuring herself. She climaxed easily enough but she was always left feeling partially unfulfilled. Soon she would be with Tarn again, she thought, as she picked up her precious bar of scented soap and stepped over the rim of the tub into the steaming water. It was warm, but not uncomfortably so. She sat down, her back pressed against the smooth wooden side, her knees bent and slightly apart.

A faint sheen of perspiration formed on her brow as the heat seeped slowly into her muscles, easing her weary limbs. The water lapped comfortingly against the narrow valley between her thighs and cradled the undersides of her full breasts. This tub in front of the fire was a far cry from the elaborate bathing facilities of her former husband’s

palace in Percheron, but in Rianna's estimation it was infinitely preferable. She had been forced by her father into a marriage of convenience with Sarin, the ruler of Percheron, in order to prevent him invading Harn as he had Kabra. But that episode in her life was now over. Sarin, the man she'd come to loathe and despise, was part of her past and Tarn was her present and future. Yet still, even now, memories of Sarin and his erotic sexual excesses invaded her dreams at night.

Tonight she would dream only of Tarn. She would close her eyes and see every inch of his tall muscular body and imagine that she could feel his magnificent cock sliding deep inside her. Tarn was even stronger and braver now than when they'd first met; he had been toughened by the time he'd spent as Lord Sarin's prisoner and slave. Tarn had suffered at Sarin's hands but now he was free and Sarin was the slave. Unknown to the people of Percheron, who believed their ruler dead, Sarin was a captive in Freygard, the land of Rianna's mother, Kitara. In Freygard women ruled, while men were consigned to being mere chattels and slaves. Rianna felt no pity for Sarin's plight, only relief that he would never be free to hurt her or Tarn again.

Rianna picked up the muslin cloth, which had been draped over the side of the tub, and covered it with her rose-scented soap. Her thoughts still centred on Tarn, she rubbed the cloth over her arms and breasts, down over the swell of her stomach and between her legs. She pressed the cloth against her sex, and the dull ache of longing increased into a restless fire. The red-gold hairs of her pubis tickled her fingertips as she discarded the cloth and gently caressed the thick bush of hair. In Percheron she had been forced to have all her intimate hair denuded, but thankfully it had grown back thicker and silkier than ever.

Her fingers stroked the valley of her sex, where the flesh was as soft and supple as the finest velvet, and she began savouring the first faint flutters of pleasure. With Tarn's

image vivid in her mind, she touched her clitoris, rubbing it gently at first and then harder. Soon it became firm and tight, the heat of her desire magnified by the subtle sensations of the warm water gently caressing her open quim.

A sudden blast of chill air crossed her shoulders, blowing out the candles, leaving only the flickering firelight to illuminate her room, but Rianna was too lost in her fantasies to care. She was almost able to smell Tarn's familiar musky male scent and feel his strong fingers sliding deep inside her, his knuckles brushing her warm moist folds, while his lips nuzzled her breasts. She barely heard the sudden gust of wind that howled noisily around the castle walls, like a banshee haunting the night. All her attention was centred on pleasure as she slid the tip of her finger into her soft, welcoming opening.

The wind died as suddenly as it had appeared, and the silence of the chamber was filled with the quick, sharp sound of Rianna's agitated breathing as she strained towards the climax that remained just out of her reach. Then the skin on the back of her neck began to prickle, as she was filled with the knowledge that she was no longer alone.

'Who's there?' she stuttered, her heart beating out of control. Suddenly she feared that the castle was haunted by some unhappy restless spirit who had come to do her harm.

Rianna tensed nervously as a hand touched her shoulder, but it was no ghost: the flesh was firm and warm. Terrified for a moment, her mind froze into absolute stillness. The faint scent of lemon verbena drifted towards her as she willed her numbed limbs to work. It could only be Captain Leon, but surely he would not be so bold, she considered, knowing that she should speak out, order him to leave. Yet for some unidentifiable reason she could do nothing but remain where she was as warm fingers moved caressingly across the nape of her neck. Her skin prickled with pleasure

as the hand moved seductively up and down the line of her spine. The alluring sensation was just too delicious to resist.

‘Fear not, my lady. I come to worship at the altar of your loveliness,’ a deep voice whispered in her ear. ‘Would you deny me that small pleasure?’

‘How could I?’ she gasped, her heart leaping at the familiar sound of his voice. She was hardly able to believe this was happening as he cupped her left breast, and tugged teasingly at her rosy nipple. Wine-tainted breath brushed her cheek, as she inhaled his musky odour, now overlaid with the rich aroma of lemon verbena that clung to his clothing. ‘You surprised me,’ she added, in a voice trembling with emotion. ‘How came . . .’

‘Hush, my sweet lady,’ he murmured, his mouth caressing her neck, his warm tongue tracing a line to her ear, before he pulled the tiny lobe between his lips and sucked on it gently.

Rianna was hungry for this man. He was all she wanted. Her pussy ached with need for him and she was desperate to feel him driving deep into her tight core. ‘Please,’ she whimpered, as his hand slid into the water, stroking her stomach and the tangled curls of her pubic hair. ‘I want to feel you inside me.’

‘Soon,’ he murmured, pulling away from her, ignoring her soft moan of displeasure.

Rianna heard the faint sound of movement as he pulled off his clothes. She waited, tense with excitement, not daring to turn her head and look at him, unwilling to break the circle of sexual magic that surrounded them.

She shivered with excitement as he eased her forwards and stepped into the tub behind her, lowering his bulk into the water, which began to spill over the sides of the tub, gathering in puddles on the cold stone floor. Rianna gasped as she was pulled back against his warm naked flesh until her buttocks rested on his muscular thighs and her back pressed against his firm chest. She was faint with desire as

the hard line of his cock pressed demandingly between her bottom cheeks.

She was so aroused she could barely breathe, and she wanted him inside her so much it was like a physical pain. Yet she also needed to savour every precious second, every sweet moment. She glanced down at the hands that cupped her breasts. In the flickering firelight his flesh looked dark against her pale skin as he rubbed her nipples, squeezing them roughly until she moaned with pleasure.

Rianna ground her buttocks against the hardness of his groin, forcing his cock further between her arse cheeks as she heard his breathing quicken.

‘So eager,’ he said, with a soft chuckle of amusement. ‘So greedy for me, my sweet.’

‘Why not?’ she asked breathlessly. ‘I’ve been starved for so long,’ she added as his hand slid downwards, tracing the smooth curve of her belly. Her legs opened of their own accord as he ran his fingers through her crisp pubic curls and caressed the wet valley of her sex.

The fleeting pleasure she’d managed to arouse with the pressure of her own hand was nothing compared to the hot rush of bliss as the rough pads of his fingertips stroked and teased her clit. He played her body as a master of music would his instrument, his touch setting her nerve endings alight and sending wheeling arcs of pleasure through her. Then he slid two fingers inside her, and began thrusting them in and out of the slippery wetness.

‘How I’ve longed for this moment,’ he said softly, his voice taut with passion as he lifted her, tipping her buttocks away from him so that he could slide into her with one smooth stroke. He jerked her back against his rigid stomach, filling her with the hot hardness of his flesh as he held his hand across the soft swell of her lower belly. The pressure of his fingers further increased the sensation of fullness she experienced as he began to roll his hips and thrust at the same time. A low moan escaped Rianna’s lips as he

compounded the assault on her senses by lightly tugging at her clit, rolling the swollen flesh smoothly between finger and thumb.

The water swirled and eddied around them, splashing over the sides of the tub in a steady stream as his movements became faster and more vigorous. All Rianna's attention was focused on her relentlessly rising pleasure as she felt his body power harder and deeper. She had no wish for this to end, yet all too soon her stomach contracted as the sensations erupted into an orgasm so sweetly profound that she felt faint from its power as it ripped through her flesh.

Panting breathlessly, she remained motionless, listening to the ragged sound of her lover's breathing. She was still feeling weak in the aftermath when he gently eased her round to face him. Rianna smiled, feasting her eyes on his handsome face; she was filled with indescribable joy.

'Fie on you,' she teased. 'Intruding on a lady's privacy unannounced. For a moment, you scared me near half to death.'

Tarn smiled lovingly. 'I had no intention of frightening you, my sweet.'

'At first, when I sensed a presence, I feared you were a ghost. Once I realised you were flesh and bone, I was unconcerned,' she said, with a soft teasing laugh, not about to confess she'd not known for sure it was Tarn until he had spoken. 'Who else would it have been? Your soldiers guard me well, they would never have allowed a stranger to enter my chamber.'

'Perhaps some poor fool captivated by your charms?' he gently jibed. 'Captain Leon, for instance. He seems very taken with you, my love.'

'You are the one who has cast a spell over my senses and captured my heart,' she swiftly countered. 'Although I confess that the scent of lemon verbena confused me for a moment. I know you prefer not to have it near you as the smell reminds you too much of Sarin's palace.'

'I had no choice.' He shrugged his wide shoulders. 'My own clothes were soaked, I'd ridden so long and so hard to reach you. Captain Leon's shirt was a tight fit, but it served me well enough.' Tarn chuckled. 'I fear I've taken the last clean garment he had with him.'

'No matter,' she replied, dismissing her brief attraction for Leon from her thoughts.

'The water grows cold,' Tarn said. 'If we stay here much longer, you might catch a chill,' he added, easing away from her and standing up. Water streamed from his tall, muscular body as he stepped out of the tub and took hold of one of the linen towels, wrapping it around his waist.

He scooped Rianna out of the water, and set her down on the fur rug in front of the blazing fire.' 'Tell me,' she said, unable to hold back the question that now consumed her thoughts. 'Is the battle won or lost?'

Tarn laughed as he set about tenderly drying her. 'Do I look like a fugitive fleeing for my life?'

'You do not, my lord.' Rianna touched the livid bruise on his sword arm. Praise the gods she could see no other damage to his flesh apart from a few very minor scratches and bruises. 'So you won, but at what cost?'

'None,' Tarn replied with a confident smile, seeming very cheerful for a man who had just fought a terrible battle. 'There was no need to fight. Orders came from Percheron for the army to withdraw and return home.'

'Why?' she asked in confusion, as he busied himself unpinning her hair, running his fingers through the silky red-gold strands and fanning them down across her back.

'It appears that once Lord Sarin was deemed to have perished during his sortie into Freygard, there was a struggle to gain control of Percheron. Sarin had no legal heir, and at first the army remained in total control. Less than a month ago, Chancellor Lesand and his supporters managed to gain the upper hand. Lesand now rules

Percheron as regent, and it was he who ordered the withdrawal of his troops from Kabra.'

Lesand had proven to be a loyal friend to Rianna during her time in Percheron and had eventually helped her and Tarn escape Sarin's clutches. 'He's a good man. I'm pleased to hear that he is safe and in a position of such authority,' Rianna said with relief. 'Now there can be peace at last.'

'We can hope for nothing else.' Tarn swung her into his arms and carried her to the bed. 'We can concentrate on rebuilding Kabra, making it a happy and prosperous land. But first there are more important matters to attend to, are there not?'

'If you say so, my lord,' Rianna said meekly, but she was far from meek as she jerked off his towel and pulled him down beside her. Then she pressed tender kisses to each bruise, each tiny mark that marred his golden flesh, as she ran impatient hands over his body.

She trailed her fingers slowly over Tarn's cock. 'Rianna,' he growled softly as she felt his balls tighten and saw the shaft twitch excitedly.

'Are you ready to pay your dues to me?' she teased.

'What dues,' he gasped as she wanked him with smooth firm strokes.

'I've waited for this moment,' she told him. 'Kabra is free and you can be mine at last.'

'I have always been yours in my heart, Rianna,' he replied, his voice trembling with the depth of his feeling.

She milked him harder, easing her grip as she reached the tip, tightening it as she slid her fingers down to the less sensitive root. Tarn's blue eyes narrowed with passion as she smiled wickedly, then leaned forwards to trail the tip of her tongue over the taut cock head, running it teasingly around the sensitive rim, knowing the gentle touch would drive him insane with lust as it always did.

'Please,' he begged.

Rianna moved astride Tarn's hips. 'Do you submit?'

‘Do as you will with me,’ he groaned as she impaled herself on him, grinding her pelvis hard against his.

Tarn stood on the battlements of the castle oblivious to the chill breeze that stirred his long blond hair. He narrowed his blue eyes; the sun’s rays were bright, yet its heat was barely discernible on this cold winter morning. The forest looked far less threatening in daylight now that the wind had blown away the last vestiges of the heavy mist.

Sunlight pierced the leafless branches of the trees, bathing the roots where the first flowers of the approaching spring were stirring into life. Soon Kabra would be reborn also, stronger and more prosperous than it was before the invasion. Life was full of hope at last, Tarn thought, as he leaned against the icy moss-covered stone of the battlements.

He had woken just before dawn and lay by Rianna’s side watching her sleeping, her glorious hair splayed across the pillow. She looked so innocent, her beautiful features so pale – almost as if they were carved from the finest alabaster. She had the face of a goddess, yet when she was awake her beauty was even more moving, more profound, because it was enhanced by the fire in her green eyes and the warmth of her smile.

Tarn blessed the day he had found her – that fateful moment when, as a helpless captive of Lord Sarin, he had opened his eyes to find this glorious creature bending over him. In his fevered confusion he had thought her a faerie or some forest wraith come to lead him to paradise. Then he had discovered she was Sarin’s betrothed. He soon realised that in many ways she was as much a prisoner as he was. It had been both the best and worst time of Tarn’s life. He had found Rianna then she had been torn from his grasp, and he had almost lost himself in the dark carnal excesses he was forced to indulge in as Sarin’s personal body slave.

‘You seem troubled,’ said a gentle voice.

Tarn turned to look at Rianna as she stepped on to the exposed walkway. 'I was wondering what the future now holds for us,' Tarn replied, pulling her close.

Rianna's hair was loose around her shoulders, and she wore his thick, fur-lined cloak over her nightgown. The garment was far too long for her and fell in heavy folds around her slippered feet. 'Nothing but good,' she said confidently.

In the distance an eagle swirled majestically across the clear blue sky. It flew towards a narrow plume of smoke, which came from the village barely a league from the castle, then turned and rose high into the heavens aiming for a distant mountain peak.

'Soon spring will be here and with it the promise of new life.' Tarn smiled lovingly at her. 'A life filled with nothing but happiness.'

'Tell me,' Rianna prompted. She knew Tarn well enough to sense that something still troubled him.

'My father's condition worsens,' he admitted. 'A messenger arrived just before dawn. His doctors fear he will only last a day or so longer.'

After the invasion King Brion had been allowed to remain on the throne of Kabra, merely as a puppet dancing to the tune of his new masters. He had even been forced to send his only son as a hostage to the court of Lord Sarin, and his health had started to decline from that terrible moment. He was already gravely ill when Tarn had returned home. Brion had managed to cling on to life all these months, but now Kabra was free he appeared to have given up the struggle to survive.

'You must go to him,' Rianna said. 'Be with him at the end.'

'When I am declared king, I want you beside me,' Tarn said and hugged her even closer, unhappy at being forced to leave her again so soon. 'But I will not allow my future queen to be placed at risk. I have ordered Leon to despatch

most of his men into the forest to flush out any bandits remaining in the area. Once he deems it safe to proceed, you can follow me.’ Rianna was stubborn and self-willed at times, but Tarn was certain she would not disagree with this decision.

‘I wish I were a warrior like my mother,’ Rianna said frustratedly. ‘Then I could bear arms and always remain by your side, even in battle.’

‘Kitara was raised to be a warrior; you were not, my love,’ Tarn pointed out. He had great respect for the women of Freygard and even more respect for the beautiful Kitara. ‘Once matters are settled I can arrange for my swordmaster to tutor you – teach you to fight.’ He gave a soft laugh. ‘You already have the heart of a warrior, Rianna.’

‘But not the constitution.’ She shivered. ‘It grows colder. Come inside.’

‘If you wish it.’ Tarn guided her through the arched opening and shut the sturdy wooden door. The narrow stone-flagged corridor was far from warm, but at least they were protected from the chill breeze. ‘Come,’ he said, pulling her closer. ‘Break your fast with me. Then I must ready myself for the journey, tis getting late.’

‘Not yet,’ Rianna stared thoughtfully up at him.

‘What ails you, my love?’

‘Nothing.’ She smiled. ‘I was just thinking how blessed I am to have you, Tarn. Now kiss me, then tell me how long we have before you plan to depart.’

‘Long enough,’ he growled, his mouth covering hers. Tarn kissed her hungrily, his lips locked fiercely on hers, his tongue probing and plundering her mouth.

He slid one hand inside her cloak and cupped her breast. The heat of her flesh seared its way through the fine fabric of her nightgown, warming his icy palm. Kissing her with unrestrained passion, he stroked and kneaded her breast, feeling her nipple stiffen with excitement as she became more and more aroused.

Rianna moaned, her breathing becoming ragged as she pressed herself against him, twining her arms around his neck. He pulled roughly at the thin fabric of her nightgown, ripping it apart in his haste to expose her body to his hungry gaze. He felt her tremble as the cold air of the passageway hit her bare skin, yet she seemed too aroused to bother with such minor discomforts as she whispered sweet words of encouragement in his ear. Tarn tore the fragile garment further and thrust his hands between her thighs. His cold fingers invaded the slit of her sex and began burrowing into her warm depths. Her flesh felt hot and moist as he thrust his fingers deeper until she gave a breathy moan of bliss.

'Tarn,' she gasped, straining urgently against his invading hand as her juices began to flow in abundance.

Hot tremors ran through his body as Rianna pulled at the laces fastening his breeches together. They were only loosely tied and she easily jerked them apart to free his cock, which reared majestically out of the opening. Clutching hold of the rigid shaft, she wanked it until he gave a faint, almost despairing groan.

'I want you now,' he whispered, still continuing to rub her clit with rhythmic thrusts, while she milked his cock with long smooth strokes. He felt as though it would soon be ready to explode.

'Then take me,' she pleaded, trembling with passion. 'Right here. Right now.'

Tarn cupped her buttocks in his hands and lifted her until her belly was level with his. Rianna clutched on to his broad shoulders, uttering a small animal sound of pleasure as he jerked his hips, forcing the entire length of his swollen cock deep inside her. Pulling her hips closer, he paused for a second to savour the delightful sensations of her body tightly embracing his.

Rianna's head meanwhile was pulled back by the heavy weight of her fur-lined cloak, the metal clasp digging cruelly into the skin of her neck. Supporting her with one strong

hand, Tarn unfastened the clasp. She gave a faint gasp of relief as the heavy fabric fell on to the stone floor at their feet. Rianna didn't seem to care that she was left almost naked, the remnants of her nightgown hanging in useless tatters away from her.

'Now,' she demanded, digging her nails into the skin of his shoulders.

Tarn began to thrust into her with deep powerful strokes, feeling the weight of her body bearing down on to his straining cock. His movements became faster and he knew by the tightness of her cunt and the small whimpering sounds she was making that she was close to her climax. Her pale cheeks grew flushed, her lips trembled and her green eyes darkened as passion overwhelmed her. She burrowed her face into the base of his neck, nipping at the skin with her teeth as her internal muscles contracted in orgasmic waves.

Tarn climaxed immediately, giving a loud resounding roar that echoed around the narrow corridor, totally drowning out Rianna's mutual gasp of pleasure.

Queen Danara was nowhere to be seen as Sarin was dragged into her anteroom by two burly female guards. He shivered nervously. He had been here many times before in the six months he'd been in Freygard and he never knew what to expect from the beautiful cold-hearted Queen.

Sarin made no attempt to struggle as he was manhandled to the centre of the room and forced to his knees on the dark polished-wood floor. In a fair fight Sarin suspected he could probably have defeated both these female guards. Despite their muscular build they were still women and no match for a skilled warrior such as he. He couldn't fight them today, however, because his hands were fastened behind his back with metal restraints, while his ankles were hobbled together by a short length of timber, which made it difficult to walk in anything but a slow stilted shuffle.