

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

Richard Shekari

**Aaricia
and
the Noland Army**

Aaricia and the Noland Army

By Richard Shekari

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgment

Dedication

Just a Woman

The Noland Army

Perfidious

Ghourakan Blood

The Feathered Friends

The Queen of Azzodonia

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DEDICATION

For *Marica Varron*.

JUST A WOMAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A stretch of booing echoed the tent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aaricia paused in silence.

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

“Yeaaaaah!!!” the amused men cheered.

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

“Over my rotten corpse,” she solemnly objected.

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

The rest of the men cheered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The mind of the men wondered as her eyes wandered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE HOLLAND ARMY

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

“Dirty Simo!” she yelled.

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

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

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

“Hmm!” responded Aaricia as she swung her sword three times; his pants and entire clothes came down. The rest of the men burst into laughter but went mute when she turned and stared at them.

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

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

cried.

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

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

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

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

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

Aaricia stopped, turned and stared at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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