

FROM A
Garden Evening

by Karalynn Lee

They had always told her that subtlety was best, but in their excitement they gave her a gold-embroidered robe to wear, and set jewels in her hair, and sprayed too much perfume upon her wrists, behind her ears, between her breasts. They all but pushed her through the curtain of tiny threaded bells, which announced her presence to the man sitting patiently upon a cushion on the garden patio.

She sank to the ground and made obeisance gracefully, not looking up until he said, “How are you called?”

“Mayremie, my lord,” she said. He was, of course, quite unlike all the descriptions. But no seated man was that tall, especially if he was usually astride his war-steed, and no shoulders could be as broad without armor. It had taken no giant to conquer all the known lands of the east, only a man. This man.

The dread general, right hand and sword of the emperor, turned back to view the gardens. “You may join me.”

She rose, then knelt by his side to pour the wine. It was the finest vintage they had to offer. He sipped, then lifted his glass and gave it a long look of appreciation that she hadn’t gotten.

The splashing of the fountain filled the silence.

After a time, he said, “You are not doing a very good job of seducing me.”

She said honestly, “I’m holding my breath against the perfume.”

He laughed. “Of course, it’s even worse for you. Why were you chosen to suffer this?”

She knew what he was asking. “I’m the youngest of my father’s four daughters,” Mayremie said. “The others are already betrothed. My father reasoned that I had a better

chance of catching your eye, and perhaps bearing your bastard.”

This time he looked at her.

She picked up the bottle. “More wine, my lord?”

He set his palm over the mouth of his glass. He seemed intrigued rather than affronted by her frankness. “Your father seeks leverage by having me take you as a concubine?”

She allowed a single finger’s width of wine to trickle into her own glass, so she wouldn’t look foolish with the bottle in her hand. “You should be flattered, my lord. My father is a shrewd judge of power, and he wants to be certain of your goodwill.”

His eyes were still steady upon hers. “And where exactly do you disagree with your father’s plan?”

She drank the wine. It burned its way down her throat. “The part where I will be obedient to him.”

He took up the bottle and refilled both their glasses. “So you would not sleep with me.”

His voice was mild, as though she had not offered a grave offense. She said carefully, “Not if it were only my father’s desire.”

He smiled. “A reversal. A challenge. You were the one

who was supposed to seduce me.”

“There isn’t much for you to gain by it,” she admitted. “My father would bring you a tangle of alliances in a land still raw with terror of you. But you need nothing more than that fear.”

He sighed. “You say you are here only as part of your father’s designs. And I have led the armies which have overrun your land and many others at the bidding of another man. It is no lust of mine, for blood or power.”

It was hard for her to imagine; she’d always thought of the distant emperor as the shadow on the general’s war-trail. He was her ruler now, but she knew nothing of him. The man before her had been all too much of a reality in the past months, though, ever since a messenger had brought word of his impending armies.

She yielded to curiosity. “What manner of man is the emperor?”

“He rules well,” he said. “His only hold over me is my respect for him. He has a vision for the empire, of how great it will be. I know he will govern better than many of the kings I’ve defeated. He only asks of me what I can give.”

“Will he ever be satisfied?”

He raised a brow. “You ask for details of our conquest strategy?”

Mayremie colored. He had been so open, so easy to talk with. “I meant no impertinence.”

He touched her wrist to put her at ease. “Jest, Mayremie.”

She was startled he remembered her name. He had seemed ready to dismiss her when she had first come to him. He waited a moment to make sure he had reassured her before removing his hand, but she felt more unsettled than before. His fingers had been rough with sword-callus, but warm. All too human. To hide her disquiet, she drank her wine. That gave her a different warmth, gathering in her belly.

“What is it that you want, then? If your father’s plans aren’t yours.”

No one had ever asked, really. She looked at him, and saw how he waited for her response, and gave him truth. “I want to travel from the Red Coast to the Crater Islands.” Away from the manor she’d been trapped in all her life, with only the twisted hope of a marriage to take her away, and into yet another manor.

“The length of the empire.”

“Even farther, if I could. Although I’m sure you’ll have annexed all that too by the time I reach the present borders.”

His mouth quirked, and she knew he was pleased with her arch tone, the way she dared to tease him after his previous bantering had failed. She could read him now. She was watching him for small signs of emotion. And so she knew he was watching her too, with a carefulness that meant her reactions mattered to him.

It pleased her, and frightened her. No; her own pleasure at it frightened her. She had come here tonight, rebellious yet showing a token of duty, because she had wondered about the general about whom there were so many rumors. She had not thought about what she would do if she found the actual man fascinating.

He shifted a little on the cushion, leaning back to sip his wine, and she knew it was to keep her from feeling crowded by his presence. “There are fish as large as men that leap out of the water off the Red Coast. And on the Crater Islands, there is a palace covered with glass tiles. It can blind a man at sunrise.”

This was no taunt. He spoke as though he believed she would be able to see these things someday. Her sisters had only

mocked her whenever they found her in her father's library, looking over his maps and tracing the borders of distant realms.

She said, low, "You honor me, my lord."

"I am called Darren."

It was unthinkable to address him without a title, but she knew it was that directness which drew them to each other. His smile came and went, as though he could see her struggle. It stayed when she finally said, "Darren."

He raised his glass, as though to toast her achievement. She touched hers to it, and they drank.

There was the wine, and the warmth in his smile, and the gift of his name. An acceptance of her dream. She wanted to offer him the same openness. "If not conquest," she said, "what is it that you long for?"

He looked out toward the fountain, but she could still see his profile. "Peace." He gave that irony some time to settle, then went on, "A simple life. I was raised on a farm. But I was good with the horses, and that led me to training war-steeds. And from there to here. And there will be more of these wars. But at the end of it, I hope that there will be horses whose love for me will not lead them to death, and perhaps a family that

will know me foremost as a man.”

His words were matter-of-fact. She tried to see him as a boy on a farm and surprised herself by succeeding. It made no less real his feats in battle. Her father would have seen this as a vulnerability, but she knew it only meant he was that much stronger, to hold to duty against desire.

“I wish you that peace,” she said softly. “I am sorry your reputation troubles you.”

“It’s not undeserved. Make no mistake, Mayremie. I have killed men. I am good at it. I will do it again, because I believe in what the emperor is trying to achieve. Still, it’s disturbing to see children drawn away from me as though I would do them harm.”

She laughed a little. “Yet your reputation lured me out.”

The mood shifted again. “Oh?”

“I wanted to compare you against the rumors. I was curious.”

“I am glad to be sating that.”

He was and he wasn’t. There was more to this man than she could have dreamed.

“And how do you find me?”

“As formidable as they say,” she said slowly. “But in different ways. More complex. There’s even more for me to wonder about, now.”

“There is more,” he said, “that could be sated.”

Her eyes went to his. He was smiling. He had turned slightly, so that he faced her directly. His knee was touching hers. Her body felt confused: flushed, yet at the edge of trembling.

She wrapped both hands around her wineglass, drank. There was no mistaking his meaning. “You are a man of no lusts,” she reminded him. She was the one who was supposed to tempt him, and yet she felt to be the prey.

“For blood or power or wealth,” he said. “I said nothing about a woman who is lovely and fearless.”

He took her wineglass and set it down, then placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. She could summon no resistance. He tasted the wine on her lips lightly at first. Then his mouth covered hers in an easy kiss, one she could slide into and drown in. Her hands came up and pressed against the edge of the table to keep herself steady.

“Too much wine?” he asked archly.

She said with what little breath she had, “I must be dizzy

from the scent.”

He laughed and let her pull away.

This was her fault, for challenging him. But she was unwilling to cede him the upper hand in this game.

She walked to the fountain and rinsed her wrists in its spray, playing upon her excuse. Then she filled her hands with water, threw back her head, and splashed it upon her neck. She turned, knowing that her carefully coifed hair was damp, that her wet skin shone in the moonlight, and that a droplet was tracing its way down her throat and lower.

He walked over to her. “Your robe is quite ruined,” he said, touching the cloth. His fingertips burned through it. He was standing an entire half-step away, but it was as though she could feel the imprint of his presence.

She closed her eyes, surrendering. She was so attuned to this man she knew their bodies must merge. “I won’t need it, will I?”

He slipped it off her shoulders, then stroked his fingers through her now-slick hair, pulling out the jewelled pins. “No,” he said, and kissed her again.

Mayremie let the robe fall to the ground. When his hands glided down her back to palm her buttocks, they ran

over bare skin. She was close enough now to feel his reaction.

“You’ve made your point. Enough of standing in this icy spray,” he said, and he bent to lift her in his arms.

“I can walk,” she protested, laughing.

“Any reason to touch you,” he said.

She wanted to touch him too. She began undoing his shirt but, fascinated by the texture of skin and muscle, abandoned the task in favor of caressing what she had exposed of his chest. She could feel the quickening beat of his heart.

He laid her down gently on the cushions they had been sitting upon earlier, then straightened and pulled the shirt off entirely. Then he unlaced his trousers.

She forgot to be embarrassed about her nakedness in the face of his. He was a well-made man, as any warrior would be, his body strong and hard. She propped herself up on one elbow and reached out to trace a scar down his stomach. Her thumb grazed his manhood, not quite accidentally, and it jerked.

“My turn,” he said, and he joined her on the cushions. He touched her temple, her cheek, her ear, her neck, her collarbone. She had not thought of these parts as sensitive, but even his delicate touches made her shiver. “See how cold you were?” His fingertips dropped lower and studied one of her

nipples with a care that made her gasp. He spiralled outward to circle her breast, then began to trace her ribs. She counted each line he drew, all too conscious of how each one was closer than the last to the growing wetness between her legs.

His fingers skimmed over her navel, then down to that very place.

She understood that earlier jerk of his, now, as she involuntarily twisted away from the intensity of the sensation. "I'm sorry," she said, not sure how to explain that her own body's reactions were foreign to her. "It was too much..."

He sat up and firmly caught one of her ankles, then drew it closer so that her leg was bent and laid her open to him. "If you think that was too much," he said, "there's even more."

Then he deliberately set one finger inside of her.

She froze, panting, until he moved his hand slightly and spread her slickness in small circles that centered about her aching flesh. Then he began a series of deft strokes that left her arching, trying to rub harder against him.

"Too much?" he asked teasingly, bringing more pressure to bear upon her, faster.

"Yes. No. Please, oh, I—" She bit down on the string of

incoherent words and found herself whimpering instead. She was moving entirely in response to his demanding rhythm, reaching for something—

“Take your pleasure,” he said, and suddenly her body clenched tight and she cried out as she crested.

She stayed poised there for a moment, then was astonished to feel herself release and tense again, riding the successive waves until a gradual contentment unfolded her limbs and left her boneless on the cushions.

He settled himself beside her. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. He kissed her, gently, but she could feel him jutting against her stomach and excitement stirred again.

“Is it my turn yet?” she said, stretching. She felt aware of every inch of her body as she never had before.

He lay back with a sigh. “I wouldn’t stop you from taking it.” There was an undercurrent in his voice that belied his easy words. “It may be short. The sight of you would undo any man.”

She started again with the network of scars, but couldn’t help herself. Her fingers moved down to his erection and traced its tip.

“Remember when I said you weren’t seducing me all

that well?” he asked, his voice distant.

She moved back a little and stilled, feeling awkward all at once.

He pulled her back to him and continued gravely, “Forgive me. I lied.”

Mayremie laughed and relaxed in his arms. “In truth, I don’t know who seduced whom.”

“It was you. You only needed to say my name, and laugh, and I would have entered any of your father’s snares.”

She moved her hand between their bodies, curled it around his shaft, and stroked it firmly. “Let’s not speak of my father.”

His head went back. “No,” he agreed after he recovered, and then he pushed her onto her back and pinned her beneath him, his body lying between her parted thighs. “I will speak, instead, of how your beauty drives me mad.” His tone was only half-playful, and there was a dark heat in his eyes that warned her of no return.

When she had walked into this garden, there had been reasons to sleep with this man, and reasons not to. None of them mattered now. She let her legs rise along his body, and wrapped them around him.

“I’ll speak,” she said softly, “of how I want this. You.”

He pushed into her.

“Ah!” She gripped his shoulders, then opened her eyes to see him watching her, rock-steady while she absorbed how she felt beyond that opening pain. His face showed the strain of waiting. But she didn’t want him to wait; she was feeling an urgency build where their bodies were joined. “Darren…”

He braced himself up with a single arm, still unmoving, and laid a hand upon her throat. “Say my name again.”

“Darren,” she said, helpless, and felt it vibrate into his palm.

“Again.”

“Darren,” she breathed, and this time he leaned down and captured the word with his lips. He moved then, and it centered her world along that long slide. She mewled into his mouth.

He tantalized her with slow strokes until she pushed her hips up to meet him, desperate for more; then he began to pound into her with almost brutal force. She was caught up in his need, trying to match his relentless pace in filling her again and again.

Then there was one final thrust, and his body was

straining as deep as it would go for a long moment, and she felt the rush of his seed. Then he gave a shuddering breath, and carefully laid his body down over hers. A hand strayed into her hair and stroked it.

He murmured into her ear, “Mayremie...”

The tenderness in his voice undid her. She lay a careful kiss upon his shoulder. Then she caught his hand and pressed her lips against the palm, and closed his fingers over it. “For you to keep of me,” she said. She was proud of how clearly she spoke.

He was silent for a while. When she reached up to trace the scar on his face, she felt the furrow between his brows. At her touch, he finally stirred and said, “If I wed you, you would be expected to remain somewhere safe, and bear a son with all haste.”

She tried to slide herself out from under him, but he didn't let her. “I never said I wanted to marry you.” Hadn't she made it clear that it was her father who schemed for the connection?

“Dear heart,” he said, “I know you are proud enough not to ask it for yourself. And I am telling you why I can't marry you. We couldn't manage it before I have to leave,

anyway, and there would be political repercussions. But you must realize what it will be like for your reputation to be tarnished when you accompany me.”

“Accompany you?” she asked.

“Past the end of the empire,” he said simply.

She untangled it all. He wanted her to come with him. But no proper wife would ever travel with a soldier. Only one kind of woman was found with an army, and camp follower was one of the worst slurs, given to those who were ridden with disease and desperate enough not to care which rough soldier had her. Her sisters would never speak to her again, for fear of lowering their own statuses.

But she would be able to explore those distant lands she had always longed to see.

“I want more,” he said, opening the closed fist that held her kiss, “than this.”

And she would be with him.

She pushed at his shoulder, and this time he rolled aside. There was sorrow in his face, briefly, before he masked it; he thought she was leaving.

She placed one knee on the other side of his body and leaned down to bring her mouth almost to his. “So do I,” she

said, then kissed him. There was no farewell in it this time, only a beginning, as his hands came up to hold her hips and start anew their lovemaking.



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