

## **The Qrim Chieftain**

By Stan Morris  
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### **After the Beginning**

When Gayiana turned the corner, the chatter of the other girls ceased. They stared at her, some with concern on their faces, others with sympathy, one with a barely concealed smirk. She joined the group, and they padded on bare feet along the cool, richly tiled corridor towards the room that had been converted into a classroom.

“Are you well, Princess?” Peppe, daughter of a formerly high noble whispered. “Has he...? I mean... does he...?”

“Shush,” exclaimed one of the other girls, and the rest, including the smirker, glanced nervously up and down the corridor in case one of the barbarians had happened to overhear.

“My name is Gaysha now, Peppe,” she replied, her words firm. “You must never call me by that title again.”

“I’m sorry,” Peppe answered, her eyes downcast.

“Come. Say my name.”

“Gaysha. Your name is Gaysha.”

Gay gave her friend a brave smile. “It’s a pretty name.”

“For a barbarian,” someone muttered, but they had arrived at their class, so Gay did not reply.

Sia Sterna was already inside waiting along with the rest of the girls, and when they saw their teacher, the late group hastily took their places on the grass mats. On the very first day of class, one of the girls had answered Sterna insolently, and the old barbarian crone had hauled the offender by an ear to the front of the class, and had repeatedly struck the poor girl’s bare bottom with a short thin stick as punishment for the offense. Sia Sterna was fond of her stick, and by now all of them, including Gay, had felt the stinging chastisement of that instrument on their tender rear ends.

*“E ador, zee,”* Sia Sterna began, and obediently the girls echoed her.

In the language of the barbarian Qrim, the words meant, “I love you, master.”

Each day the girls attended language class. Gay’s mat was one of four in the third row. She sat on the far right; one of sixteen girls in the class. Her mat’s position was unremarkable, and it was another indication of her diminished status, sitting as it did among girls who had formerly been palace servants, or her ladies-in-waiting. They were all the same now; the property of the Qrim invaders. Already this was beginning to seem normal to Gay, and memories of her brief time as ruler of her realm were beginning to fade.

Sometimes at night, she dreamed of the day the chieftain of the Qrim stood before her and asked permission for his people to cross her land to more distant places where the land was uninhabited, and there was plenty of water.