

"Mistress Sara! Mistress Sara, please wait!"

Concealing a sigh, Sara stopped and turned around to see a large man running towards her much faster than his towering height should have allowed. "Yes, yes, what is it?"

As the man came to a stop in front of her, she examined his appearance. He was dressed in dark garb and a chain vest, like a proper blacksmith should be, but he seemed to lack the hammer he usually lugged around. She had to incline her head sharply to look him in the eye, as he rose far above her accursedly small frame. "I am not in a good mood, Harold, so please make it quick. I have a million things to do before the celebration begins."

"I apologize, Mistress Sara," he said in a voice so deep that it seemed the rocks should be shaking. "The matter simply could not wait. I believe that I have completed your ceremonial blade, and I wish to be sure that it is balanced well for you."

Her bad mood disappeared in an instant as Harold drew a beautifully forged rapier from a sheath he wore on his belt. It was a stunning blade, indeed. "Thank you, Harold, but I don't see why this is such a desperate matter," she said, taking the blade from him, "I don't intend to use it after the ceremony."

"We needn't cut corners though," he said, oddly downcast. "Well? How is it?"

Sara tested the blade, slicing through air once or twice. Of course, she hadn't a clue how to use a weapon like this, but it was an important part of this silly ceremony. "Its balance is amazing, I feel like I could tear through an army." She handed the rapier back.

Harold accepted the blade, chuckling. "Perhaps you should learn how not to tear through yourself first." He returned the sword to its sheath. "I will deliver it to the cathedral now. Thank you, Mistress Sara."

For the first time since they had started talking, Sara realized he was patronizing her. "Drop the 'mistress,' Harold, or I'll make sure you're leading that army." Harold didn't provide any response but to laugh as he walked away.

Continuing on her original path, Sara headed towards the palace. Although she knew Harold was only joking with her, maybe he was right. She knew nothing of swordplay, and should she find herself in a situation where she had no alternative, she would certainly not regret having learned. She was so deep in these thoughts that she hardly noticed that she had arrived at her home. Darting inside, she maneuvered the halls until she came upon her own room. After she had thrown the door open, she stomped inside and flung herself onto the queen-sized bed.

Of course, she couldn't really allow herself any time to rest. Her coming-of-age ceremony was soon to begin, and she had to make sure she was ready.

Groaning as she stood back up, Sara walked into her closet and, amid the collection of clothes, found the dress she was to wear. In all honesty, it wasn't a half-bad outfit; the dress was a forest green with silver trim, and reached down to her ankles. It was long-sleeved... As if the entire idea of the ceremony wasn't bad enough, she was going to be sweltering all throughout it.

After changing into the dress, she looked into the mirror to finish getting ready. Of course, she could have one of the servants apply her makeup and brush her hair, but she had insisted on doing it herself for so long that her father had just given up.

"Fine," he had said, "you may do it yourself. But you must do it, and if I find that you aren't, then you'll be right back to having it done for you."

That was enough incentive for her. After she was finished, she looked at herself in the mirror and found herself satisfied by what she saw. Certainly passable – pretty, even - but not so horribly gaudy like everyone insisted on. Good.

“Make sure the area is safe,” said Jarrell in a commanding tone. “If the ceremony is disrupted, it will be on your heads.” The guards nodded and quick-walked out of the cathedral, their swords not-so-softly bumping against their armor.

“How would anyone have the nerve to try 'disrupting' something as important as *this*?” Sara asked dryly.

“Now, now,” Jarrell said, “you know we have to do this. Everyone will be expecting you to follow tradition.” He straitened a golden scepter that was lying on the altar. “Everything should be ready now.”

“Except for me.”

He ignored her comment. “Does the dress fit you?”

Exasperated, Sara let out a sigh. “Yes, Father, just like the last dozen times I had to try it on.”

“Only making sure. And that tone is not suitable for speaking to your elders, so take it down a notch.”

She altered her voice to a high-pitched, overly polite tone. “Yes, sir, of course.” Her father huffed with frustration and left the room.

After that exchange, she stood and faced the massive doors. The cathedral was quite a spectacular building; the smooth stone walls rose far above her head, joining together in a sharp point at the top. Above the heavy wooden doors was a stained glass window with a representation of the sun.

Sara had always found that window funny. It wasn't as if anybody in Chal actually worshiped the sun, even if some nomad tribes did in their neighbor to the south, Taidal. The religious services in the cathedral were always a bit strange, because the residents wouldn't agree on what their religion was. Some people claimed that there was only one deity, some claimed there were too many to count. Others believed that there either was no god, or that even if there was a supreme being of some sort, there was no way to know about it. Sara didn't spend much time thinking about religion, but she thought she was in the last group. After all, no god had ever shown himself to her, why should she believe in what she had no evidence for? It didn't make sense.

Snapping out of her pondering, she realized that the room had been filled. Pew upon wooden pew was filled with Chal's denizens. She recognized several faces, such as Harold and her friend Connie, who sat with a big smile on her face. Connie was always excited about these formal events for some reason.

The doors opened, and the bishop walked through, Sara's father behind him and to his right. The bishop wore bright white regalia, as always, and carried a purple cushion with gold trim. On the glorified pillow sat nothing but a ring. Jarrell was wearing a long silk cloak over his tall form. The cloak had a darker red spiral design along the hem. Instead of jewelry, he carried a sheath flat across his hands, with a familiar ornate hilt jutting out from one end.

As the two men walked towards the back of the room, Sara recalled the steps she was supposed to take when they reached her. They stopped in front of her, and she kneeled.

Her father spoke, loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Mistress Sara of Chal, my daughter." He drew the rapier, and touched it to each of her shoulders – she felt like she was being knighted – then he resheathed it and stepped back.

Next, the bishop spoke. "You are now a woman, old enough to begin taking on the responsibilities of Chal's noble lady. Do you accept these responsibilities?"

"I do," she said, being sure to sound like she had a choice. "I am ready to take on the mantle of those before me."

"Then rise, and receive them." She stood, and the bishop slipped the ring on her left hand. Then her father handed her the rapier. The two men turned towards the observers present.

"You are the witnesses," said Sara's father, "of the passing of the proverbial torch. My daughter has been well-taught in her duties, and will begin the process of becoming the lady of Chal."

Now it was her turn to speak again. This part was her own, not scripted by old traditions. "I do know my duty well, and I swear that I will do what is best for Chal. I will make this province the greatest of the eight, freeing us of the moldy shackles that have held us back for so long.

"Justice will be given to all who have been denied it previously, and it will be dealt to all who have evaded it because of internal corruption." She allowed herself a satisfied smile as uneasiness swept over the building. "Underhanded dealings will be strictly abolished, and we will revel in the results; honesty, and by extension, strength and unity."

Those in the back, the lower class, stood and roared in approval as she applauded her. She noticed that many members of the higher class took longer to rise, but they too gave their applause and smiles. Fake, of course.

Her father and the bishop made sure to look happy with her, of course, and they did a good job of it, too. The ceremony over, Sara followed them out.