

Once upon a time there was a princess who lived with her father, the king, in a sprawling kingdom on the edge of a great desert. This was a time of horses and swords and, unfortunately, warfare with neighboring kingdoms, so the king took great pains to protect his young and only daughter. On her 14th birthday, the king bid her come to the throne room and there he presented her with the gift of a scorpion guard to protect her person. Scorpion guards were legendary protectors, having the cunning and intelligence of their namesake, as well as their deadly sting in battle (and, some said, in love). It was said, too, that they carried scorpion blood in their veins and that no mere human could stand against them in combat. The cost of obtaining one's services was more than most kingdoms could afford. The princess accepted the gift gravely and from then on, Sir M was with her wherever she went.

The princess was betrothed at an early age to her cousin in a neighboring kingdom, a simple young man toward whom she felt a sisterly affection but nothing more. Being a young girl herself, and rather impetuous, the matter did not overly concern her. Twice she trekked across the desert to the coastal city of Pzek to visit her cousin and although perils befell her party, with Sir M by her side, no ill befell her. Despite their close quarters, the princess learned little about her guard. He was much older than she and seldom spoke; when she asked him questions, he provided answers in as few words as possible.

One day just before the princess came of age, the kingdom was sacked. Hordes of attacking marauders swarmed over the walls and even dropped from great balloons they floated over the palace. The battle was brutal and brief. The marauders were put down but alas, the king took a sword through the leg. Even as he lay bleeding, he ordered his guards to carry him to the princess's chamber and there they met a gruesome sight.

The princess sat alone on her bed in a robe of white silk, her long hair loose around her, eyes wide and staring, lips parted. Twenty-four marauders lay dead on the floor of her chamber and between them and the princess lay Sir M. He was alive but bleeding from many sword thrusts. The palace medics labored to save him, but in vain.

Although deeply shaken by the incident, the princess was in command of her senses enough to comprehend why she had survived such an onslaught untouched. She would never feel secure again without Sir M by her side and she grieved his death for many weeks. There was no doubt in the king's mind that he would secure another scorpion guard for his daughter. As soon as he recovered, he sold off a northland kingdom and so purchased another scorpion guard's service. Sir S came to the princess on her 18th birthday and assumed his duties with grace and authority.

One day, after Sir S had been with the princess for some months, she ventured to ask him of his life. She was older now and more aware of her surroundings and she no longer took her guard or her security for granted. Sir S explained that he became a scorpion guard upon coming of age himself and that it was his family heritage to do so. She asked of his life outside of his profession and he reminded her that as he rarely left her side, his life outside his profession consisted solely of self-maintenance. Chagrined, she asked if his vambraces were really made from scorpion scales and he replied that they were indeed.

The princess grew fond of her new guard. On occasion they would share a jest or a sunset, and since they were so often near to each other, a bond began to form. He was not so old as Sir M and the princess found him more relatable. Over the course of a year, their bond deepened but no impropriety occurred between them. In the princess's still-young mind, it passed as friendship, and Sir S was scrupulously circumspect in his dealings with her.

One evening the king informed his daughter that as he was now an old man, he needed to secure his heirs. She was of age to marry her cousin, and the wedding date must be set. The princess was brought up short, having long pushed thoughts of marrying the young man to the back of her mind. She did not love

him, was happy in her life, and dreaded the thought of taking a husband who would never be her equal. She ran to her chamber, sore distressed.

Sir S listened helplessly as she wept her frustration. He watched as she paced the floor in her white satin peignoir. When she came to him, pressing against him in her grief, and begging him to deliver her, he was overwhelmed. He stroked her hair and tried to soothe her. Then he gathered her in his arms and stung her.

The princess swooned and Sir S carried her to the bed, not realizing what he had done. He called for servants who ministered to her while her temperature soared and her head rolled restlessly from side to side. The king's medic was summoned and he found no explanation for the mysterious affliction.

After a few days, the princess could sit up but complained of a pain in her lower back and of a headache that persisted. What she did not mention was that Sir S was constantly in her thoughts and that these thoughts were of a rather inflamed nature. A week passed and she was able to get up out of bed, but being near her scorpion guard now was like walking through fire. Her body burned for him and her heart wrenched in her breast. At night he came to her in dreams where she gave herself to him willingly and thoroughly. In the mornings, Sir S avoided her gaze and she knew he was a party to these dreams. Wracked with guilt and feeling herself doomed, the princess went to her father and begged him to trade Sir S for another guard. When the king saw the desperation in his daughter's eyes, he asked no questions and agreed. Sir S was dispatched to a far kingdom and Sir K was brought to serve the princess. From the day Sir K arrived, she kept her distance.

The princess ailed. Although her father suspected it was her way of further delaying her nuptials, he had also noticed the change in her pallor, and that she had grown thinner and more somber.

One day a traveling band came to the palace offering entertainments and services. One of the princess's serving women brought an old woman, a healer they said, to see the princess in hopes that she might know a cure for her. The woman bid the shy princess to undress and lie down, then looked her over dispassionately, and then again with her second sight. With a grunt, she told the princess to turn over onto her belly. Suddenly the woman shrieked and jumped away from the bed.

"What is it?" cried the princess.

"You have a strange and unnatural wound on your left hip. Be still."

To the servants, the woman seemed a fraud, working inches away from the princess's body, seeming to lance empty space with her jeweled knife. But as she drew a glass-like sliver from the very air above the princess's flesh, they knew her to be a true sorceress. The princess cried out but did not resist as the woman cleaned the wound that was now visible to everyone.

"She will improve, but will not fully recover until this runs its course," said the woman as she packed up her things.

The princess had her own suspicions about the wound and dared not press the woman for fear the truth would be revealed to all.

In the days that followed the princess did indeed improve. Her color returned, but not her appetite. She did not resume her usual activities but turned to simpler things and stayed mostly in her rooms or for long hours in the chapel. It was at this time that her father fell ill and became bedridden. He prevailed upon his daughter to gather her wits about her and prepare to take over the kingdom. She had been too long without duty, he said, and would recover more fully when she had an obligation from which she could not shrink. Two weeks later, the king died and the princess was crowned queen. Despite her father's prediction, she ruled the kingdom through a parliament and held court as little as possible. She walked the halls of her palace at night wearing layers of fine white silk and chiffon and people began to refer to her as the Ghost Queen.

One day she allowed her thoughts to turn to Sir S, whom she had forced from her mind since he'd left the kingdom. In an instant the fever was upon her again and she knew that it was from his sting that she continued to suffer, just as the old woman had said. Once admitted, he filled her dreams again and now, weakened, she was unable to resist. Sometimes even in the day she would see him as an apparition beseeching her. The strain of the situation took its toll. She grew more reclusive and began to doubt her

own sanity. Finally she could endure no more. She called for a royal emissary as she planned to send a missive to Sir S. When the emissary arrived at her chamber, he was holding a letter from Sir S, addressed to the queen. Remembering the pain on his face when she last saw him, the queen suspected that he, too, suffered. Indeed, as his letter indicated, he was not able to maintain his new post. He asked after her welfare and her new guard. She sent a brief reply bidding him to come to her at once. Afterward, she went to the chapel to pray.

The queen knew not what she would do. She could not take up with a scorpion guard, nor he with a charge. Night and day she prayed for guidance and release. The day before Sir S was due to arrive, the traveling band came through the kingdom again, on their return trip home. The queen sent her handmaid to see if the healer was with them, and she returned shortly with the old woman in tow. The queen took the woman to her private apartment and told her of her woe. The woman had the queen hike up her skirts and examined her bare hip.

"The wound is healed," she pronounced, "but the sting is real. My dear, you are in love. Nothing in this world can stop such a force."

The queen was taken aback at the stark truth of the healer's words and she begged her for help.

"I can do nothing for you, child," said she. "Once started, the cycle must run its course. But beware! You must not receive him in this condition else he will know you for what you are—a sitting duck!"

The following day Sir S returned to the kingdom and the distraught queen received him in her private garden. Although she was intensely relieved to see him, she tried not to show it. They spoke quietly together and she confessed as much as she dared.

He was haggard and drawn, and told her his misery was boundless. Somehow during his assignment to her, he had fallen hopelessly in love and the night of their embrace, he had irrevocably lost his heart to her. With what strength she had left, the queen asked him to release her, for she had a kingdom to rule and theirs was not a love that could flourish. Sir S told her he would support her in any way he could but that although he could be banished from the kingdom, he could not banish her from his heart.

The queen replied that he was not to call upon her and assigned him to be captain of the palace guard for she could not bring herself to send him away again. She sold off two southern kingdoms to pay off Sir S's former employer.

Day's passed and the queen tried to take up her duties more fully. She felt better having Sir S back in the palace, except that her scar now itched and nagged her and her dreams if anything were even more inflamed than before. She went out of her way to avoid seeing Sir S but made sure he was given the finest quarters, equipment and provisions available.

At this time a young bard came to the kingdom and was brought before the queen to sing his songs. He was compelling and talented and he clearly found the queen alluring. With almost clinical interest, the queen allowed the bard, whose name was Kalen, to entertain her. She wondered if she took up with another man if it might break the spell between her and Sir S, at least for one of them if not both. As she dallied with the young singer, she learned two things. One was that his advances repelled her and she could not respond. The other was that Kalen was a magician. She explained her dilemma and he agreed to help her with her plight.

Locked in her private apartment, the servants gossiped that the queen had taken a lover. In reality, Kalen was performing complex rituals to free the queen from the effects of the scorpion sting. He summoned elementals and angels to shield her, first two, then four and then more. When he had surrounded her with thirty angels, and used all his skill in warding, the queen rested easily for the first time in over a year. In the morning, Kalen began to bind the angels to the queen with a silver bell that he tied around her neck. At her request, he sent half of the angels to Sir S to relieve him as well. The queen knew Sir S would have heard the palace gossip and hoped that between the rumors and the angels, he might truly release her. It was her only hope, as she was now convinced she could not release him; her angels merely postponed the inevitable. Upon hearing that Sir S had taken to his bed and would not speak to

anyone or even take food, she knew she had made a grave error. A few days later, Kalen left to continue his travels.

The queen sat quiescent. Despite Kalen's efforts, once he was gone, her longing for Sir S returned. Her mind was clear but she could think of no right action to take. She hadn't spoken with Sir S since that day in the garden and knew only that he had returned to his post, spoke to no one and spent much time in the chapel. In her dreams, she confessed to him and they embraced with tears of relief and joy. Mornings brought only guilt and pain. Feeling the bell at her neck, she tried to draw her angels close about her but each day it was as if there was one angel less to call upon.

Finally the queen could take no more. Her only thoughts were on surrender now, even though she knew their love must be doomed. Perhaps therein lay their succor, she speculated. She sent word to Sir S to attend her but he did not respond. Though she was queen, she did not react as though her order had been refused. If he had indeed released her, she wished to leave him be that one of them might move on. The hours ticked past. Each knock at her chamber door might be him. Each servant entering the room might bear his message. At length she lay down to rest, heartsick and exhausted.

*She lay abed... Sir K was telling her that Sir S had not been seen for two days, that he, Sir K, had initiated an investigation, that Sir S's chamber was found in a disturbing condition and that the queen must appoint a new captain forthwith. She went herself to see the chamber. It was indeed alarming. An acrid scent stung her nostrils as she entered to see the walls, floor and ceiling rouged red from a powdery substance. No surface was left uncovered and in the corners the substance was so dark as to appear black. There was a thin layer of ash on the furnishings around the bed. The bed itself was completely ashes yet there was no sign of fire anywhere. "Search for his sword," she commanded weakly and the guards obeyed. She hoped it was gone as she knew he would never leave it behind—at least it would mean he left of his own will. She watched as a guard used his own sword to probe the ashes of the bed until it clinked against something metal. He dragged the thing out into the clear...it was the hilt of Sir S's sword. The queen sank down on a divan in shock. As she gazed at the candles flickering on the table before her, she fancied she could see Sir S in the flame. In fact she saw him in each of the flames. She looked up at the sconce on the wall --he was there as well. In every flame she saw him reaching out, calling to her...*

She awoke with a start in her darkened chamber, a single candle burning on her bedside table and beside it a note with Sir S's seal. She tore it open to read, "YRM, I am undone. I beg you to banish me. I will fail you should you summon me again. I wish you all strength and happiness. Your servant, Sir S."

She replied, "I must see you though it dooms us both. If you have the strength to leave here, I grant you your freedom with goodwill."

His reply was immediate. "In your garden, on the morrow, at noon."

The following afternoon shone bright but cool, foretelling the coming of the monsoon. Sir K stood guard at the garden gate. The queen wore a peach velvet robe trimmed in pink satin as she cut roses from her flower garden and set them in a basket she carried on her arm. She felt it the moment he arrived. When she turned and saw Sir S at the gate, the basket and shears fell from her hands. She walked, then ran to him as he strode toward her, throwing herself into his arms.

He embraced her and held her head to his breast, resting his cheek against her hair. Then he led her to a bench under an arbor and they sat together.

The queen found her way into in his arms again, spilling confessions of love so long denied. The extraordinary relief she felt coupled itself with a strange detachment. A part of her knew this for great folly, yet she also knew it was her only way forward. They talked through the afternoon. Neither had an answer for their plight, only the agreement not to fight any longer against feelings that were too strong for either of them to bear. Finally the chapel bells tolled four and the scorpion guard rose reluctantly to return to his post.

The queen took his hands and stood up on her toes to kiss him but he turned his face away from her and held her by the arms.

"We cannot, your majesty," he said softly.

Embarrassed and miserable, the queen bid him go.

That night a note arrived with Sir S's seal upon it. It read simply, "I live only for you." Several more notes flew between them that night, and the course of an entire relationship seemed to take place in a matter of hours. The following morning a final note arrived.

"My beloved queen, I took an oath to protect you that must supersede all others. Lest I be doubly damned and disgraced, I must flee or take my own life to ensure your welfare."

The queen wrote back that as his queen, she forbade him taking any actions other than his daily duties. He did not write again and the queen was inconsolable for five days.

On the evening of the fifth day, Sir S came to the queen's chamber begging an audience. She met him in her garden, a gibbous moon silvering the leaves. This time he did not refuse her kisses. At first he wept, begging her forgiveness for his weakness but she stopped his words with her own mouth. He wrapped her in his powerful arms and crushed her to him. They became as a single flame burning in the moonlight.

They met in the garden again the next night, and the next. Sir S, down on one knee before the queen, declared his love in torrents of tortured eloquence. They walked together among the roses, speaking of the agony of the past months and their perilous future. They embraced in the arbor where kisses fell like rain and burned like fire. On the fourth night, the queen took Sir S to a side door that opened onto her boudoir. He looked at her long and hard in the moonlight, then swept her up and carried her to the bed.

The cold light of day assaulted the queen with the reality of her actions. She could ill afford to have it known that she had taken the captain of the guard as her lover. Nor could he maintain his post as hers, he would be dismissed by parliament the minute they found out. Worse, his reputation would be shattered. Yet the two could not stay parted. Sir S came to her nightly and they reveled in an ecstasy known only to star-crossed lovers. Whatever Sir K thought about their affair, he kept it to himself. As the queen's personal guard, he was utterly loyal to her bidding.

The queen, while thoroughly doubting her sanity at this point, was nonetheless radiant. She dined with relish, took exercise in the vast inner courtyard or on horseback and even became interested in the workings of her kingdom. The pain from the scorpion sting was finally gone and with the consummation of their love, her heart was eased. Sir S seemed to be recovering as well. They agreed to let this time be a time of healing for both of them, with little regard for the future except the ongoing stealth they employed in seeing each other. Only Sir K was privy to their meetings, as Sir S now used a secret passage to visit the queen.

One morning, after a night of particularly exquisite passion, the queen had a major attack of conscience. It began as a series of slow suspicions interfering with her reminiscence of the prior night's glory. She tried to drown herself in its memory, but the suspicions gnawed their way back into her focus. She saw how she had compromised Sir S's position, reputation and future. She saw how she was building a relationship that was doomed, and only increasing the likelihood of tragedy for both of them. She felt guilty about her own interests; here she was, a queen with a duty to her realm and people and all she could think about was this torrid affair with her captain. She had long broken off her engagement to her cousin, but she still had a duty to marry strategically. Where was her sense of responsibility? Where was her sense at all? Now that she was no longer ill, it seemed all was to become painfully clear to her.

She penned a note to Sir S and told him that she could not let him risk everything he was for this fleeting affair. She herself had responsibilities she could no longer evade. They must break off their affair before it caused irrevocable damage. Off went the message like an arrow to pierce Sir S's already tender heart. His response was brief...he would forsake his scorpion guard vows for her, should she but ask.

No! came her ruthless reply...much of what she loved about him was embedded in those vows. He could no more quit being a scorpion guard than she could quit being queen. They had known they had no future together...why had they let things get so far out of hand? It didn't matter that they loved each other, she wrote, they must use reason to vanquish the foolishness they had entertained. Sir S wrote back that he knew the truth of her words but was too far gone to care. Nevertheless, he would do her bidding.

The following day, quite by chance, the lovers passed each other in a corridor. Sir K discreetly stepped around a corner; he knew the queen was just as safe with Sir S as with himself, if not more so. When he peeked back around the corner to see if they were finished speaking, they were disappearing out the other end of the hall. Like children running from a prank, the lovers had ditched Sir K and defying all risk, ran to the queen's chambers and straight to her bed. And so the days went by.

One night when the queen lay nestled in Sir S's arms, her mind wandered along the various lines of potential outcomes for them, as it often did. She was horrified to feel the beginnings of true disappointment in both herself and Sir S for not having shown more forbearance. And she found herself unable to go further down the path on which they trod. A great sadness took her and she was unable to find comfort in her lover's arms. In the morning she was still of the same mind and he heard her out with downcast eyes. On his way out, he handed her the key to the secret passage and told her he would not be using it again.

The queen wept. Although she was certain their affair must end, she still loved Sir S and she didn't want to give up his company and friendship. He had told her she was the love of his life and she knew both how true and how costly the admission was for him. She had a strength now, though, that she hadn't had before and she forbore to summon him.

He did not write.

A few days later a messenger came to the palace to announce the approach of an eastern King's progress numbering over 500 people. This message held great import for the queen and her kingdom. Kings did not travel across the desert with that many people for no reason. The messenger indicated that the King had two score dancing stallions in tow as a gift for the queen, as well as fifty seasoned warriors to be presented with a petition for their training in the scorpion arts of defense and combat. It was a shocking request; the scorpion arts were handed down in secret and only to warriors of the blood. The messenger further reported that the King would pay dearly, one gold brick for each soldier accepted for this training. That sum was a staggering amount, exceeding the worth of the queen's entire kingdom. Surely this was a strategic visit which would also include a proposal of alliance in war...and marriage.

The palace went into a state in preparation for the arrival of the visiting king. Accommodations and feasts were prepared, floors scrubbed, rooms aired and lamps polished.

On the day of their arrival, the queen waited in her chamber for the announcement that it was time to go to the throne room. She was attired in her royal robes of state and for the first time since her ascension, she wore her crown. Also for the first time since her ascension, she truly thought as a queen, assessing her position and how she would treat with the king. A knock at the door revealed Sir K announcing not the King, but Sir S begging audience with the queen in her anteroom. The queen rose on weak legs. She hadn't seen Sir S since they'd parted in her chamber that last fateful morning. She went with Sir K to the anteroom where her attendants and various courtiers gathered.

Sir S, in his dress uniform, greeted the queen formally and told her that he wanted her to know prior to her meeting with the king that he would accept and oversee the training of the king's men, should it be the queen's wish that he do so. He pledged his loyalty to her in all regards and, kneeling, stated that his queen's word, for him, was law.

Their eyes met and she knew the intent of his words. To her entourage, it must have seemed a redundant vow, but she knew he was indicating his absolute acceptance of her decisions and offering his continued support, and love. Tears came to her eyes and as he began to rise, she stopped him. She motioned to Sir K, who drew his sword and handed it to her, hilt first. The queen took the heavy sword in both hands and rested it upon Sir S's shoulder. As she began the sacred movements, she declared, "Rise, Sir S, Knight of the Realm, Order of the Scorpion, Champion of your Queen. Your loyalty and counsel will be the

cornerstone of my reign." Sir S stood and the queen stepped forward and embraced him to the dismay of those present. The two gazed at each other for a moment, queen and guard, and then, with a nod, Sir S turned and took his place near the door.

Moments later a page arrived to announce that the visitors had arrived at the palace gate. The chamberlain ordered the queen and her entourage and they proceeded to the throne room in a stately procession.

The events that came next are for another time, for this is the tale of the princess and her scorpion guard. Suffice to say here that the queen's reign was a righteous one and that Sir S served her loyally and valiantly to the end of her days.