

Jonni Anderson's

Cranwold

CHAPTER 1

THE SUN rose above the horizon, staining the sky the color of blood and flame. Unaware my world was ending, I surveyed the valley below me with quiet satisfaction. My hand rested on the hilt of my sword, a special treasure presented to me when the clan elected me Captain, and Bryan—dear Bryan, he of the laughing blue eyes—dubbed me “Maiden Warrior.”

“The land looks good, old friend,” I murmured, leaning forward in the saddle to pat Storm Dancer’s neck. “I think we could settle here, if Conol is serious about making peace. There are rocks for walls and houses, and it’s on a rise easily defended. It would be a good place for Justin and Eliantra to raise a family. What do you say, old friend? Are you as sick of this endless killing as I am?” Storm nickered, his ears twitching. Sometimes I suspected my beloved stallion understood more than I gave him credit for.

Suddenly he snorted and tossed his head, eyes rolling fearfully toward Lochlan's Falls where my people had made camp.

"Hey, easy! What's spooking you, Storm?" Then I smelled it: Smoke! Coming from the camp! I jerked his head around and screamed, "Go, Storm! Get us back there!" He leaped into a flat-out gallop, but we were far from camp and it seemed to take hours to get there. I tried to reassure myself my lieutenants were entirely capable of handling any emergency, but fear gibbered deep inside me. Garrow wasn't at his post as we thundered past the first lookout point. What was lying in the grass nearby? I didn't stop to investigate.

Storm Dancer whinnied and reared at a wall of seemingly impenetrable smoke that hung in the trees and stung my eyes. Coughing, I urged him on. I was fighting my own terror of fire now, and I nearly lost control of him as I screamed for my lieutenants: "Carroll! Marcus! Timothy! To me, to me!" But there was no answer.

Before Storm Dancer could skid to a halt, I was off his back, running toward the center of the camp, stumbling over bodies. Timothy, with two lances in him, stared unseeing at the sky. I tripped over a headless corpse, blood still oozing from the neck. Turning away, I screamed as I nearly ran into the head, impaled on a spear stuck upright in the ground, eyes wide in death-terror. *Daniel!* Near him lay Nadia, one arm still holding her sword, her other shoulder split from neck to navel. I wondered at the strength of the man who must have made that strike.

But then I recognized the emblem carved on the spear's shaft: Creight Ashe! This was Conol's doing! Conol, who had only weeks before sent emissaries to negotiate for peace!

Stunned, I nearly backed into my own blazing tent. I whirled, my face and hair scorching, fighting a mysterious compulsion to rush into the roaring flames. Most of the other tents were afire; grass and trees smoldered.

I raced through the chaos, pausing to check bodies for signs of life, shouting for my companions to help me put the fires out. But except for the roar of flames, the camp was eerily silent.

I dashed toward the river—perhaps some had found shelter in the little cave—but the butchery was the same there. Bodies lay on the rocks; more floated in the reddened water. Rivulets of blood still crept down the embankment. The only sound was the murmur of the river and the low thunder of the waterfall.

Then I saw her, face down near the far bank. Without taking off my boots, I swam across, praying to gods I didn't know for one small mercy. Her face had been slashed several times, her belly sliced open. Eight months pregnant, my friend Eliantra was dead, the body of her unborn son dangling half out of her womb.

Something in me snapped. I screamed at the sky, calling down damnation on her killers. I threw rocks and pulled up saplings until my hands were bloody. But none of it brought Eliantra back—didn't bring any of them back. Exhausted, still sobbing, I knelt and rocked her cold body in my arms.

Horseshoe clicked on rock. Dazed, I reached for my sword, but I had dropped it back in camp, and I was too tired to care. Wrapped in a dark woolen cloak, long golden curls falling to his shoulders, Conol of Creight Ashe gazed down at me.

“Is this the way you negotiate a peace treaty?” I shrieked. “Go ahead! Slaughter me like you did all the rest of them! See—I'm unarmed!”

Conol just stared at me. Our eyes met, and I read a strange haunted sorrow in his. He tried to speak, but no words came. Something warm exploded in my heart and I looked away, confused. Drenched and cold, too exhausted to be afraid, I shivered. With one quick movement he pulled off his cloak, still warm from his own body, and dropped it around my shoulders. The warmth

came as a shock. I shivered again, unable to tear my gaze from those sad grey and strangely familiar eyes.

“Don’t leave me here alive!” I cried. “Kill me now!” He hesitated a moment. Then, still silent, he turned his horse and trotted away in the cold rain.



I don’t know how long I wandered, wet and trembling, through that blood-washed camp, looking for signs of life. Some of the bodies were still warm, but I was too late—much, much too late. As night came on the rain increased and I whistled for my horse, but the only reply was the moan of the rising wind. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and eldritch shapes prowled the shadows.

I grabbed my sword and ran.

When I finally dropped from exhaustion, I was miles from the carnage and the sun was high in the sky. But I would never walk far enough to outrun the memories that pursued me: Eliantra, Timothy, Carroll, Daniel, Nadia . . . all bloody corpses.

All except me.

Why? Why? Why? Who was I, to be left alone like this, to live the rest of my life haunted by the ghosts of my loved ones? Too tired to go on, I curled up on a sun-warmed boulder by a stream and cried myself to sleep while the sun dried my clothing.