

Legacy

Luke's mind was whirling. He bounded like a deer through the stone corridors of Ethemont, dodging pages and maids. At the entrance to the royal family's corridors, he muttered a password that made the guards lift the spears blocking the hallway. A different password made a guard at an ornate wooden door raise the bar. Luke stepped in slowly, tentatively. Fifteen minutes ago he could have run in and out of his friend's rooms any time he wanted.

All that was gone.

The bedroom door was slightly open, creaking in the dawn breeze. He put a hand out and pushed, and at his touch it swung lightly. She was there, asleep, oblivious to the heartache she would awaken to. His own heart was a mass of pain; how much more so it would be for her!

Her back was toward him, and the hair spreading across it was like gold. Smooth and luscious ripples. A soft snore snorted out of her mouth with each breath, and Luke wished he could smile. He took a deep breath, blinking away a gathering tear, and steeled himself.

Shaking her shoulder, he whispered, "Anni! Anni, wake up. Wake up, Anni."

Her head turned toward him, eyes bleary, lips forming the half-grumbling question "What?" A hand tried to brush sleep from her eyes, shake it from her hair.

"Anni, wake up, please! It's Jonathan, Anni."

With a jerk and a choking breath, she sat up suddenly, eyes tortured, wide awake and more. "Jonathan? What's happened?" Her voice was terrified, begging, saying under the words, *Don't say he's hurt. Make this a dream. Just make it a dream. Please, Luke! Please!* Her eyes were the eyes of an animal caught in a trap, in pain, but numbed by fear as the hunter kneels next to him and reaches out.

Helpless.

Knowing his voice would crack, knowing he would half-sob the words, he choked out, "You've got to come see him, Anni." And then in a whisper so low he could hardly hear his own words, "You've got to say good-bye."

Her breath caught in her throat, but something told her this was not the place for tears, not if she wanted to be in time. She threw a robe over her nightgown and her searching feet found her slippers. She was out the door before Luke, darting through the passages like a frightened mouse.

Moments later, Luke stood at the door of a dim chamber feeling like an intruder. King Sheridan and Queen Narcissus were bent over their son's bed when the princess came flying in to join them. A faint smile flickered on Jonathan's face when he saw his sister, and when she took his hand, a faint tremor ran through as if he had tried to squeeze back. He lay still for a moment, and she touched his forehead, smoothing the bandages covering the wound that was sapping his life. "Anni..." he whispered. She brushed back a lock of hair that had fallen over his eye. "I'm here, Jonathan. I'm here." Her voice betrayed no hint of her anguish over his coming death, the death of more than her brother - the death of her best of friends. "I'm here."

Once more, "Anni....." Then his hold on her hand weakened and his eyes flickered shut. Faint as the touch of wind on a rainy day, soft as a floating bit of down, his last breath murmured, "Anni."

And he was gone.

Anni, Princess Anetra of Akoni'i, stood in a small valley under a massive willow, gazing numbly at the two mounds of fresh earth in front of her. The gravestones read *Jonathan, son of King Sheridan of Akoni'i. Killed in battle with Abdullah. We will remember you.* The second said, *Narcissus, Queen of Akoni'i, wife of King Sheridan. May you rest in peace.*

Anni bowed her head, sagging forward a little, blond hair screening her face from the world. She spoke to the wind, her voice the whimper of a child in the night. "Papa?" And again, "Papa?"

But he was gone. He had not come. He had left her alone. And in a few days, at best, if the doctors were right, he would be here too, here beside her mother.

Then she would be truly alone.

The wind whistling through the willow tree seemed to be crying with her.

Two days later Anni, dressed from head to toe in black, sat at the Council table with her father's board of advisers and top officers. Colonel Shimron, Weapons Master of Akoni'i and one of the late Sheridan's closest friends, stood when the opening formalities had been dispensed with. "Gentlemen and Princess Anetra, we have a solemn task before us. Our problems are clear - our nation is at war. Our king and queen are dead. The crown prince is also gone. Gentlemen, let us not waste time. What will we do? Who will rule our people? Command our armies? Lead us into battle? Who, gentlemen? This is, quite possibly, the most difficult decision the Council has faced in decades. Who?" He sat down, eyes on the table.

Anni's face was immobile. Unshakable. The way it had been for two days. Shimron was worried about her. It seemed that she had shut herself into a box and melted the key into a formless lump of metal. He had known people who had withdrawn from the world, but that it could happen to Anni had seemed - what? Unlikely? No. More than that. Impractical? Maybe. Utterly unfeasible? That was more like it. She had been so full of life, so brilliantly original. And now she sat there, grim and silent, refusing to step up to the throne and take her father's place, to lead the kingdom she had always loved.

The Council argued for hours, first this, then that. None were foolish enough to try to seize power for themselves - Akoni'i's Charter was too clear for that. Once a member of the Council, never the king. It was too dangerous to allow a malevolent group to take control in the chaos of losing a king. So who? The day passed, but Anetra sat stone-still, refusing to bridge the gap between their position and peace. And when the Council finally adjourned, she stood and left the room, without having uttered a single word when hers ought to have been the only ones spoken.

Shimron sat across from Anni in the dining hall of Ethemont a week later, leaning across the table, hands raised imploringly. "Anni, Anni, listen to me! Akoni'i needs you, Anni! If the Council finally chooses a ruler and it's not you, the last of the royal line, the tension will tear apart our country! Abdullah will route us, destroy us! The whole of Akoni'i will be lost forever! Anni, your parents taught you to love Akoni'i. It's your duty to take the throne, to lead your people!"

Anetra cut in sharply, her voice hard and angry. "Colonel, you presume too much! Do not speak to me of duty. *Duty* killed my brother. His allegiance, his *duty* to his country took him to war. War killed him. And do not hold up my parents as examples. They were weak. Teaching their children of duty but unable to bear its burden themselves! My choice is made, Colonel. Akoni'i will have to fend for itself. When the Council chooses, I will leave. And once I have wrecked my vengeance on Abdullah, I, too, will die and join my brother in Mylath's halls. Do not try to dissuade me; you will be wasting your time." She stood up and walked away without a backwards glance. Shimron shut his eyes and buried his face in his hands, rocking his head slowly from side to side, wishing he could change the fate of the country he loved.

That night as he was banking the fire for the night, Luke said, "Father? What's going on? Why won't she use common sense? Why?"

Shimron leaned back onto his heels, shaking his head as he tried to answer his son. "I... I don't know, Luke. She could. I know she could. It's just.... She's under a great deal of stress, you know, a massive amount of strain. She... she feels that all she has to live for is revenge." In a voice so low Luke could hardly hear it, he whispered, "And that's an empty life for anyone. I should know."

"Then what will you do? There's got to be *some* way to convince her. There has to be!"

"And there probably is. I just don't know it. Jonathan could have done it. All I know to do is keep talking to her. But I don't want to make her really angry. She is royalty, after all, and even as a princess could probably have me imprisoned." A wry smile fluttered around his lips. "I doubt she would do that, but still, best to be cautious."

Luke nodded, but whatever he was about to say was cut off by a knock at the door. Shimron stood and dusted his hands on his trousers. "Come in." The door opened, and General Lesson, one of the highest officers in the Akoni'ian army, walked in. Shimron raised his eyebrows. "General! What brings you here at this time of night?"

"Colonel. If you don't mind, I'd like to have a conversation - and strictly off-record."

"Of course. Take a seat, please. Tea?"

Lesson sank into a chair. "No, thank you, on the tea. Lad, you needn't leave if you don't want to. You could be useful here." The last was addressed to Luke, who had opened the door and was on his way outside to give his father and the general some privacy.

The boy shrugged and closed the door. "I'll be happy to help if I can, sir." He sat on his bunk and listened in silence.

The general turned back to Luke's father. "Shimron, you've been a good friend ever since I came to Ethemont six years ago. But you've been Anetra's friend since she was an infant. Do you know any way to influence her? The only way to avoid a civil war and Abdullah overrunning our country is for her to take the throne. Surely she sees that! Can't you do anything, Shimron?"

His friend sighed. "I was just telling Luke that I've been trying all week. All I know to do is keep trying. She's furious with her parents and with everything they've taught her. I don't know what to do now. I just *don't know!*" The anguish in his voice was evident. "I want so much for her to step up and take her rightful place. Anni is the

daughter I never had – I want her to take the legacy her ancestors have left her – the legacy of a nation!” He paused and took a deep breath, calming himself before they went on. “But in the end, it's her choice. Akoni'i has never had an unwilling ruler, and the Council will never invoke that particular clause of the Charter now. Anni refusing to take the throne will lead to civil war. Anni forced into taking the throne will bring about a coup. There are half-a-dozen groups that would come together to remove the Council. The people love her too much.”

Lession dropped his eyes to the floor. “Then the only hope for Akoni'i is for the princess to come to her senses in time before she has to contemplate her decision for life in a prison of Abdullah. Not that any of our lives would be very long if Akoni'i is overrun.” He looked at Luke. “Any ideas, lad?”

Luke met the general's eyes. “That depends.” He glanced over to the colonel. “Father, do you think she's at all uncertain? If she is, I might be able to get her to see sense....”

Shimron shrugged. “Hard to say. I'll try one more time. One of two things is going on. Either she's as sure as anyone can be, or she's tortured by her choice, thinking maybe she's made the wrong one. She got angry with me today. I don't know if it's because she thinks I'm wasting her time or because she doesn't know what to do. One more time. That's all you'll get, Luke. I'll try one more time after the Council meets tomorrow. After that I should be able to tell.” He shook his head and stood up. “Well, General, there you have it. I'll let you know how it goes.” He ushered Lission to the door, exchanging farewells.

The Council meeting stretched on for hours. When it was over, Shimron cornered Anni again and began his arguments all over. After a few minutes, she dropped her head into her hands. When he finished and she looked up, her face was streaked with tears and her eyes reflected the desperation of a trapped beast. “Colonel!” Her voice held a trace of a sob. “We've been over and over it! Will you please let it go?” She stood and stumbled out of the room towards her own. When she reached it, she threw herself face-down on the bed, crying for all she was worth.

After a few minutes she stood up and washed her face before walking to her wardrobe and taking down a riding dress and a sack, which she began to fill. In a quarter of an hour she left the room and headed toward the stables. Waving away the grooms, she saddled her own horse and mounted, riding hard for the north.

Luke could see her ahead, silhouetted against the dusky sky. He walked his horse quietly toward her, then slipped from the saddle and continued on foot. When he was close behind her, he said, “Anni?” She refused to look around. He took a few more steps, then reached up to touch her skirt that spread across her horse's flank like the petals of a wilted flower. “Anni?” Still she refused to look at him. He began to speak softly, almost like talking to a spooked horse or a frightened cat. “I have a hard time believing this, Anni. You know, when we were small, I remember how you would scrounge the streets to find pigeons with broken wings. Remember how you took them back to Ethemont and tried to heal them? How you got yourself a whole flock of tame pigeons in no time at all? Remember how you never would turn away a lame horse, a starved cat, an abandoned

dog? You took them all in, and woe to the guard who chased one away from the gates! I just don't know how to reconcile it now.”

When he didn't continue, she couldn't help but rise to his bait. In the smallest of voices, she whispered, “Reconcile what?”

“That you wouldn't turn away a dog with its ribs showing, but you turn away all your friends when they need you most.” Her jaw tightened. “Anni, you seem shown that you don't care at all about Akoni'i as your country, so I'm not going to try to use that argument. I think you don't realize one thing, though. Your parents died because your brother left them, so to speak, Anni. If you leave us, everyone you know will die. My father will die. I will die. Jonathan's grave will be desecrated. Everything he died for will die with him, follow him like the king and queen did. Anni, you couldn't refuse a dog, but you refuse all of us? Does it mean so little to you that we die? If it does, you're not half the person I thought you were, Anni.” Her lip quivered ever so slightly. “Come home, Anni. See me in the light of a starving dog, if you will, but *come home!*” He reached out his hand to her horse's bridle. “Come home, Anni. Please come home!” She lowered her head and nodded ever so slightly, and he turned the horse's head toward Ethemont.

That night the celebrations began: Akoni'i had a queen again.