

Third Place Prose – High School

“A Daring Dance”

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“Slip this on.” He meant the shoe, but it sounded like the hangman offering the noose.

She knew what was going to happen, what would take place. She raised her foot so the servant could slide the leather shoes on as the others pinned up her hair. She stood up and turned to the door, her long green gown billowing at her feet. Her chest plate covered the upper half of the dress, along with her shoulder pauldrons. She wasn’t supposed to be dressed for battle, it was merely etiquette in the warlord’s court, but she knew what awaited.

The closer she got to the chamber room the more her hands started to shake, and fear constricted her throat. They approached the large silver doors, ornately carved with designs of ivy and two large rearing stags. The guards pushed on the door and it swung open, revealing the chamber within.

She kept her head low as the guard escorted her in, her eyes on the black marble floor as she traced the gold veins running through it. Daring to take a glance at what lay in front of her, she quickly looked up as she took her place among the other ladies in gowns, already there before herself.

While she looked around she couldn’t help but let her eyes drift over to the figure on the throne. She could hear someone next to him speaking to him, and as she looked up to where his face was, she saw him staring right at her, and as their eyes met, his lips parted into a big grin.

She swallowed down the repulse and fear that arose, quickly averting her gaze.

He’d never seen someone look at him like that before... with disgust. Sure, he was used to hatred and fear, even desire from all the other ladies standing around his dias. He scanned them all, trying not to snarl at all the pretentious girls, batting their lashes at him. It was common practice to wear some form of protection in his court, it showed respect and discipline, yet most of these women wore tight leather corsets that emphasized their bosoms, or gorgets and bracers adorned with gems and gold, so unconventional, they obviously knew nothing about fighting.

Few of the seventeen women did wear truly functional equipment, and those who did also wore dresses with few layers about them, they knew that too much frill would restrict them. It was tradition for his prospective suitors to walk the embers, trial by fire had long been the way to prove loyalty, and although he despised most of the pretty faces vying for his attention, he still was reluctant to force them to go through the pain, especially when most of these women obviously didn’t have the resolve.

Even though she’d been tasked to come here, even though she was a lord’s daughter, she still felt powerless, no matter how she tried to steel her nerve.

The Warlord had turned eighteen, the eligible age to take a wife in their culture, and so, women from around the continent had been sent to be selected, and to bring honor and fortunes to their families.

To prove their loyalty they had to walk across a bed of hot coals. Her father had said his apologies for putting her through this, but it was the only way to get close to the Warlord, whose own father had subjugated the continent to terror and pain.

From a young age, she knew she would do something great, but becoming the Warlord's wife was not what she had imagined. The man, sitting on the throne with his bone crown and fur cape thrown over his shoulder, she barely knew him, but she knew of him, and hated everything about him. She couldn't think of the things he might try and do to her if she won this competition, all she could do was think about what was ahead.

"We may continue onto the fire trials," the Warlord declared, she couldn't tell what flashed across his face as she glanced up, startled by his voice, boredom? contentment? Pleasure probably.

The line of women were escorted out through the door on the side of the chamber and led out to the yard where the large coal pit sat, glowing faintly in the dark light of dusk.

As they approached, the first lady in line stared at the coals, obviously trying to hold back tears, as she had to walk on coals. She was shaking slightly, but ran across the coals, like a fool. The lady's feet sunk into the pile as she ran, screaming and sobbing the whole way. The rest of the line filed out as they crossed, some had the same reaction, some were better than others, and one even tried to bolt, but was tackled and taken away.

As she stared at the bed of coals, supposed to cross the great expanse, she felt a calm wash over her, she only had one choice and she might as well look confident while doing it.

Mustering up the last bits of calm, she raised her head to where the Warlord stood and stared him in the eyes, chin up.

"This is no way to choose a Warlord's wife, one who should be his equal and his lover, the only true way is trial by combat," she said, biting out the words as they became sharp and brittle.

The warlord looked to her, amusement shining in his eyes as he attacked. She had no time to think as she took up the defense. Their blades danced back and forth, but eventually her strength gave out and at last he knocked her down before she could catch herself.

The Warlord approached her, his form looming over her as she lay on the ground. "Yes, you'll do just fine," he said, extending his hand and grinning at her.