

SWORD OF THE GUARDIAN

A LEGEND OF ITHYRIA

by

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CHAPTER ONE

At our Divine Lady's command I, Qiturah, Honored Mother of Verdred Temple and most reverent scribe to the Goddess Ithyris, have taken up quill and ink to chronicle the events leading up to the dark days of the recent Monderan Rebellion. Far more than a mere account of the times, this is the story of a princess and her champion, of a love that changed the course of our history, and of the eternal battle between darkness and light that will forever define this world.

My tale begins, as many do, with a journey...

The kingdom of Ithyria had entered the Firstmoon of its nine hundred and ninety-sixth winter when the Goddess Ithyris began whispering to Her Daughters of a grave threat to the royal house. Hoping to prevent a tragedy, the Honored Mother Qiturah set off one bright spring morning for the palace of Ardrenn, a royal birthday her excuse for the rare visit. For a full day and night she and her traveling party rode, bareback according to priestess tradition, across the meadows of the Verdred countryside and into the forests of Olsta province. Little did the priestesses suspect that they were about to witness a blow struck to the very heart of the kingdom.

Signs of the Goddess's warning were already manifest in a growing civil unrest that plagued Ithyria. Qiturah knew she was not the only one who feared the King had lost the love of his people. King Soltran Novaris was sovereign by marriage only; it was Queen Talia, his late wife, who had been heiress to the royal house of Rane. Until their son Daric was old enough to take the throne, Qiturah could see no hope of a return to the peace and harmony of former times.

With a sense of deep foreboding, she stared up at the four border towers that marked their passage from Olsta into the capital province of Aster on the second day of their journey. Ithyria's greatest hope lay in Crown Prince Daric, who was everything that his father was not. Handsome, intelligent, and above all, honorable, he had already demonstrated a gift for diplomacy and leadership that proved the royal blood of Rane ran strong in him. The Prince and his twin sister, Shasta, were about to celebrate their sixteenth birthday, and Qiturah was looking forward to seeing them at the festivities.

She supposed King Soltran would stage another of his costly banquets, with fantastic entertainments and exotic foods imported from far and near. While no one in the kingdom would begrudge the Prince and Princess their rightful birthday feast, Qiturah had heard grumbles about the King's extravagance. Too many Ithyrians would spend another winter starving.

It was not for the Daughters of Ithyris to interfere in politics, but as Honored Mother of Verdred, Qiturah was one of the most revered spiritual leaders in the kingdom. She could no longer ignore the widespread suffering of the Goddess's people. In the north, barbarian tribes from the mountains of Dangar attacked villages and temples without reprisal from the provincial governments. Throughout Ithyria, greedy nobles violated laws with impunity, preying upon the people under their protection. They taxed produce unfairly, then seized lands when tenants couldn't pay, killing or indenturing any who resisted.

These raids left countless orphans, who flooded the temples in search of sanctuary and food. Those who came were fortunate. The rest were at the mercy of the corrupt, their exploitation a blight upon the kingdom.

It was time King Soltran acted to protect his people. Qiturah had set herself the unhappy task of telling him so, though in truth, she held little hope that he would act. In her heart she knew he lacked the necessary confidence.

Smoothing the edge of her veil as it was caught by a breeze, she tried once more to clear her mind of shadow. There was still time to reverse the descent into chaos that she and the other priestesses had foreseen. At least, that was her fervent prayer.



Talon absentmindedly scratched the back of her neck where the collar of her brightly colored costume was rubbing unpleasantly against her skin. Her eyes never left her two sisters, who sat on the floor of the great hall listening as Showmaster Naurin introduced their troupe with his usual blustering zeal. Lyris and Bria didn't seem to share Talon's distaste for these events; hardly surprising, since these were the only duties they enjoyed and both girls had such skill that they did not fear failure.

Talon was less fortunate. Acrobatics did not come as naturally to her as music did to her sisters, and she'd suffered for it. Every failure meant a beating, or extra backbreaking chores, or a meal that was withheld—often a combination of all three. Talon was a successful acrobat only because she pushed herself to the point of breaking. Her real value to the showmaster lay in her ability to coach Lyris and Bria. She knew if it were not for that he would have gotten rid of her long ago, and she could not allow herself to be separated from her sisters. They were her responsibility, and they needed her.

At a sharp elbow in her spine and a warning glare from the showmaster, she sprang forward, mentally cursing herself for nearly missing her cue. Leaping to the center of the room, she launched right into her routine, executing two cartwheels and a front flip, bending backward, and then kicking into a handstand. With exquisite precision, she lifted one hand off the ground and held the position while one of the smaller troupe members placed delicate cups of steaming tea on the tips of her toes and in her open hand.

Knowing that if she spilled so much as a drop she would pay dearly for it later, she closed her mind to everything except the tea. Bending one leg carefully, she took the cup from that foot so there were two in her hand. She then pulled herself into a standing position, balancing on one leg without letting the cup on her other foot waver. Passing one of the cups to her head, she balanced it there as she used her free hand to grasp the ankle of the foot holding the tea. Slowly, she stretched her leg behind her into a graceful arabesque.

The teacup routine involved several more manipulations, and then each cup was replaced by a lit candle. Talon carried those through another set of poses, tying her body into various knots and unwinding it again, narrowly avoiding catching her hair or parts of her costume on fire.

Afterward, she had a brief moment to catch her breath and gauge the audience's reaction. For the first time she glimpsed the people at the head of the room. A bearded man sat at the center of the table, a large gold crown displayed prominently on his brow. On either side of him were a boy and a girl, about Lyris's age, wearing miniature versions of the same crown: Ithyria's famous royal twins. In her nineteen winters, Talon had never seen the royal family in person. She supposed she should feel thrilled, but unlike the rest of her performing troupe, she took very little interest in political figures, royalty or not.

Talon was not scanning the royal faces out of curiosity; she needed to evaluate the effect of her routines. Even after a flawless performance, she could still be punished if the showmaster felt she'd lost audience interest. The young Prince appeared engrossed, grinning and clapping, but the Princess only stared down into her goblet as though she found its contents more intriguing than the entertainment. Talon frowned slightly, but there was no time for further contemplation. The troupe musicians had begun to play her next piece, and her partner, Boleyn, was already in position.

Their duet performance was always a crowd pleaser, and was far more difficult than any of her solo routines. Talon spun quickly and back-flipped toward Boleyn, who dropped to the ground, planted his feet into her chest, and lifted her into the air with his legs. She arched her back and posed before giving a guttural "Ha!", Boleyn's signal to kick his legs and roll forward. As he did this, she contracted her abdomen, flipped her legs over her head, and flew through the air to land on her feet exactly where Boleyn's face had been a moment before.

Holding her final position, she risked a glance at the Princess, whose face now showed faint curiosity—an improvement, but not the excitement Talon had hoped for. Deciding to try something different, she swirled her hand in front of her face and exchanged a look with Boleyn to be sure he understood. His eyes widened but he nodded slightly and dropped to one knee, hunching his shoulders.

Talon executed a series of back flips as far as the hall's doors, putting as much distance between herself and Boleyn as she could. They usually reserved this dangerous move for outdoor arenas and had never tried it in an enclosed room like this one.

Arms extended, she carefully judged the distance between herself and Boleyn, and between Boleyn and the King's table. One

miscalculation and she could land on someone in the audience, perhaps the Princess herself, and that would be an unforgivable offense. The showmaster would probably kill her if the King didn't. But if the stunt worked, she'd spare both Boleyn and herself a night of empty bellies and bruised backs.

She could feel Showmaster Naurin's gaze burning into the back of her head, and with the discipline born of nearly ten winters of rigorous training, she cleared her mind of everything but the sensation of blood pounding through her veins, the tension in each muscle, the contraction of her back and abdomen, the strength of her legs. Drawing a quick breath, she ran forward lightly, launched herself into the air, and sprang onto Boleyn's shoulders. He jerked up and tossed her, providing the momentum she needed to soar high above the floor.

Arms crossed in front of her chest, Talon held her body in a straight line, and flipped and twisted at the same time in a half circle before curling into a ball and using her abdominal muscles to swing her legs up and over her head. That provided the inertia she would need for landing, and as she came down she envisioned where her feet should land—there and there on the table, right in front of the Princess, without disturbing her plate or goblet.

Time stood still in those split seconds and she knew this could very well be her last performance if she failed. But her lucky streak held out. She landed on the table a little more heavily than she would have liked, but the royal family's plates and goblets merely shook at the impact. Not a drop of wine spilled.

The audience erupted in a cacophony of applause and cheers and the Princess looked up at her with astonishment that faded quickly into awe.

So that's why the legends of the royal house always speak of "the amber eyes of Rane," Talon thought bemusedly. The Princess's eyes were an unusual pale golden shade that almost exactly matched her golden brown hair.

Struck with sudden inspiration, Talon sank to one knee on the table, tugged a red silk flower out of a hidden pocket in her sleeve and presented it to the girl with a flourish and rakish wink. As she hoped, the Princess's face reddened and she accepted the token with a giggle.

The court cheered again at this little exchange. Talon grinned, well aware that her dark Outlander coloring and androgynous, elfin features

were quite attractive to most of her female audience. It was one of the benefits that came with her masculine disguise. She'd fallen into the pretense by accident, initially. But impersonating a man had turned out to be the best protection she could offer her sisters, and moments of flirtatious fun like this one almost made it worth the considerable inconvenience.

Somersaulting lightly from the table, she bowed deeply to the royal family amid renewed applause and resumed her position against the wall with the other performers. Showmaster Naurin caught her eye as she fell back into line, disapproval and greed warring on his face. She knew she'd probably get an earful for the risk she'd taken, but he couldn't deny that she'd just delivered a powerful performance, possibly the best of the night. The golden coins showering the stone floor proved that.

A brief delay before the next act allowed the smallest performers in the troupe to scamper about collecting the coins. They delivered these to the showmaster, who filled the leather pouch at his belt and bowed to the audience with exaggerated gratitude. Talon gave a smug grin. Naurin was fond of reminding her that he only tolerated her presence in the troupe because of her sisters. Occasional triumphs like this one meant she could be an asset all on her own.

Lyris and Bria performed next, and Talon was finally able to let her body relax. Her part in the show was over, and better yet, had been a great success. She watched as Lyris's harp was positioned in the center of the floor and Lyris settled herself on the small stool before it, stretching her fingers experimentally over the strings. Bria stood near her shoulder. A respectful hush fell over the audience when Lyris began to play, and after a few notes Bria's sweet crystalline soprano rose above the delicate tinkling of the harp, filling the entire hall with a sound so achingly beautiful that all eyes were drawn to the sisters in the center of the room.

Talon's heart swelled with pride. No one would know from just looking at her sisters that they were near-penniless vagrant troupe performers. When Lyris and Bria made music together, they appeared as elegant and cultured as the wealthiest of noblewomen. They could have become real ladies one day—with their lovely faces and sweet dispositions they certainly would have married well. If only the raiders had never come to their village...

Her face burned at the memory. Nearly ten winters had passed since barbarians had killed her parents and kidnapped Talon and her sisters. Life as traveling entertainers was certainly not the worst fate that could have befallen three young orphan girls; Talon knew from terrible stories she had heard that it could have been far, far worse. That was why she pushed Lyris and Bria so hard. Even at a very young age, she'd understood that to survive they would have to make themselves indispensable, profitable, and irreplaceable to Showmaster Naurin.

Listening to her sisters perform now, Talon knew that was exactly what they had done. Lyris and Bria cast a spell over their listeners no matter what kind of audience they performed for. They always pulled in the greatest profits and were obviously the showmaster's favorites. This made it easier for Talon to look after them. Lyris had reached sixteen last Twelfthmoon, and Bria would be fifteen this winter, yet due to their value to the troupe and Talon's close watch, both remained untouched by the hands of men. Such innocence was unheard of among girls in the entertainment trade.

Talon watched Bria work the room slowly as she sang, fluttering her eyelashes in the direction of men sitting on either side of her, and paying special attention to those at the King's table. The Prince in particular seemed to have caught her eye, and Bria began directing her graceful arm movements toward him.

Talon felt an unpleasant mixture of dismay and annoyance. Bria didn't seem to realize that what happened to the other girls in the troupe could easily happen to her. So far the showmaster had turned down every offer he'd received for either of the sisters, convinced that their purity and innocence was part of their charm for the crowds. But that could easily change the day someone made an offer he could not refuse.

With Bria older now, and constantly flirting with the men in every audience, the risk was steadily growing. Talon wasn't sure what she'd do if Showmaster Naurin ever accepted an offer for one of her sisters. She didn't want to think about it.

Fortunately, the young Prince seemed unlikely to inquire after such a thing. Talon kept her eyes on the other men in the room, trying to evaluate any potential danger to her sister. Everyone was watching both girls, only a few with undisguised lust on their faces. After assessing their various wardrobes and positions relative to the head table, Talon

was satisfied none of them could afford to make the kind of offer the showmaster would require for either of her sisters' favors.

Her gaze returned to Bria, who suddenly struck a high note of such clarity that the walls of the hall itself seemed to strain to contain it. Lyris's hands ceased to move on the strings, allowing only the sound of her sister's voice to carry above everything and everyone else in the room. She stood up from her seat at the harp. Together the sisters approached the head table, Bria still holding that one glorious note.

Bria extended her hands to the Prince, while Lyris did the same for the Princess, beckoning them to step out from behind the table. Prince Daric took Bria's hands willingly, but his sister seemed uncertain. When the Princess finally did reach out and take the offered hand, Bria let go of the note she was holding, and Talon was able to breathe easy again. A moment of rapt silence ensued as the sisters led the royal twins out into the center of the floor.

In a split second dancers surrounded them, and the group of musicians at the back picked up where the music had left off, beginning with the sweet sounds of a flute. The tempo increased slowly, and both Bria and Lyris began to sing, Lyris's warmer, fuller tones supporting Bria's airy soprano. The two girls whirled the Prince and Princess into the center of the dancers, and the music became more lively with each step.

Talon grinned. Another perfect performance for her sisters this evening. She turned to peek at the showmaster's face, and movement caught her eye. A hooded figure in a dark cloak left his position by the door and glided smoothly among the lords and ladies of the hall without eliciting so much as a curious glance. He moved more like a shadow than a man, and Talon's nostrils flared. Whoever this person was, she felt certain he was dangerous. Her eyes tracked him as he moved, straining to catch a glimpse of the face concealed within the deep hood. Suddenly there was a flash of silver from his sleeve.

What happened next took only a split second, yet it seemed like an eternity. The cloaked man threw a knife into the party of dancers, with an aim so swift and deadly that it had to be expert. It flew over Bria's shoulder, missing her by a hairbreadth, and embedded itself in the chest of the young Prince. Bria screamed, and the hall erupted in chaos.

That scream wiped out every other thought for Talon, whose eyes had never left the dark figure. She caught a second flash, and with the

intuition born of a lifetime of brutal training, she knew where the next knife was headed...toward the two girls who had been dancing at the far side of the room. Toward Lyris!

With a cry, she leapt from her spot at the wall, planted her feet on a nearby bench and catapulted herself into the air. She shoved Lyris in the small of her back and pushed the Princess to the ground, then landed hard in front of them. At the same instant that her knees buckled with the impact, she was aware of an explosion of pain in her abdomen. Her hand came up instinctively, and when she pulled it away her palm was slick with blood. She did not bother to ponder this but regained her balance, frantically seeking out her sister's face.

The pain in her abdomen increased when she tried to straighten and she found herself strangely dizzy. Looking down, she was stunned to see the hilt of the assassin's knife sprouting unnaturally from her stomach, above the left hipbone. She must have caught it with her own body in her attempt to save her sister. Again she sought out Lyris, but a pair of warm golden eyes arrested hers. Princess Shasta's disbelieving stare was the last thing Talon saw before her vision clouded and she lost consciousness.



King Soltran stared at Qiturah, weariness etched into his features. "Are you certain?"

"I assure you I could never invent such a story. I have examined the acrobat myself, and..." Qiturah pursed her lips. "Your Majesty, he is not a boy at all. The person lying in that room downstairs is unquestionably female." She was still astonished by the discovery.

The King rubbed his temples. "My apologies, Honored Mother. Of course I believe you. It's just been..." His sigh was heavy, and slightly choked. "It's been a very hard few days."

Qiturah laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, aware that the royal family had not a moment of rest or privacy in which to grieve their loss. "The thoughts of the entire kingdom are with you and your family right now, Your Majesty."

News of Crown Prince Daric's death had rocked Ithyria within hours of the chaotic events at the celebration banquet. The assassin had disappeared without a trace. It was as if the mysterious cloaked man

had been absorbed right into the stone of the castle walls. The royal guard had no luck so far tracking him down. The hunt continued, but there was precious little information to go on.

All anyone could be certain of was that the assassin had two targets, both the Prince and his twin sister. Now the court was in general disarray, with rumors flying at every turn, and the young performer who had saved Princess Shasta had become, instantly, a national hero and a curiosity.

Qiturah, however, had more pressing concerns, and here in the King's study she was afforded, for the first time since the tragedy, the opportunity to do what she had come to do. The unusual situation presented by the Princess's savior gave her the perfect opening. "I've spoken with the young woman's sisters, the harpist and the singer. Evidently they are the only ones who know her true gender, and they virtually begged me not to reveal her secret. From what they say, their sister has lived as a male for nearly ten winters."

"And I suppose you want me to have her executed for it?"

"What?" Qiturah exclaimed in horror. "No, Your Majesty, not at all."

The King regarded her with a curious expression. "You surprise me, Honored Mother. Isn't dressing contrary to one's sex considered blasphemy against the Goddess? I thought such sins were punishable by death."

"Dressing against one's nature is blasphemy, Your Majesty, which isn't quite the same thing. And the Goddess Ithyris is far more interested in the preservation of life than the preservation of fashion."

Soltran's brow wrinkled. "Your Honor, I do not have the capacity for riddles today. Speak plainly."

Qiturah gave a little smile that the King would not be able to see beneath her veils and launched into her argument smoothly. "Very well. According to the sisters' story, they were orphaned in a barbarian raid ten winters ago. As you are aware, Majesty, over the past decade nobles have overrun the provincial governments. Many now sit as senators and use their positions to further their own selfish interests. The nobility has become corrupt and greedy, waging small wars between one another and killing thousands of innocents in the process. Not only do they prey upon their own people, they do nothing to stop the barbarian invaders from the Dangar Empire who constantly terrorize the northern

provinces. These girls come from the eastern Outlands, as I'm sure you could tell by their coloring. Of all Ithyrians, the Outlanders face some of the worst persecution. They're a simple people, nomadic hunters, and easy prey for those who would seek to raid their lands and homes."

She paused to note the effect of her words. The King's face was beginning to darken rebelliously, so she gentled her sermonizing tone. "Majesty, imagine three small Outlander girls, mere children, alone and defenseless against a world that is often particularly brutal to women." She waited for that image to sink in, then asked quietly, "Can you truly see no reason that the oldest would disguise herself as a boy?"

The King's cheeks flushed. "I am not so far removed from the realities of human nature, Your Honor, that I cannot understand her reasons. Nor do I fail to empathize with their plight. But what do you expect me to do?"

Annoyed, Qiturah closed her eyes and breathed a quick prayer for patience. "You are the King of Ithyria, Your Majesty. I expect—the kingdom expects—that you will act accordingly. Stop your nobles' petty bickering. Remove the undeserving from power. Reinforce our defenses along the northern border. Save the children of Ithyria from lives of starvation and abuse." She wanted to add "Grow a backbone," but was far too diplomatic to let the words leave her lips.

"And how exactly do you propose I go about that?" Soltran scowled. "The nobles pay lip service to my commands, then do whatever they please. The royal guard follows its general, not its King! I am well aware that my own son inspired more respect and obedience from the Ithyrian nobility than I do." He rose to his feet. "I may be King, but everyone knows it's in name only. The court tolerates me as a placeholder, awaiting the day when a descendant of Rane will take the throne."

Soltran paused and Qiturah stared at him pointedly until he seemed to remember who he was speaking to. One of the twelve Honored Mothers of Ithyria, Qiturah was a direct representative of the Goddess, and courtesy dictated that he show proper respect.

"Now that Daric is gone, what little power I had, as his father, has gone with him." The King sank back into his chair, his tone less belligerent. "Princess Shasta is the only remaining heir to the crown, and even if she survives the present threat, Ithyria will have to wait yet another generation for a king of the royal bloodline to take the throne.

I grieve for our kingdom, Honored Mother, of course I do. But I cannot save Ithyria if she will not allow me to rule her.”

The King lowered his forehead into his hands and Qiturah unhappily pondered a reply. It was not the nobles’ fault that Soltran was a weak ruler. He lacked confidence and authority, which ran strong in the blood of Rane. But such traits were not exclusive to the royal family. Soltran had simply never cultivated them, instead developing the habit of placing blame on others for his own failures. It was difficult to challenge his behavior without violating protocol.

“I know you are worried about your family,” Qiturah finally said, as gently as she could. “But your suffering is no less than the suffering of hundreds of other families in Ithyria, families who have also lost children, parents, husbands, and wives in the chaos that has swept this country. Your Majesty, how many more must die before you take action? You have already lost your son. Will you stand idly by and let your enemies take your daughter as well?”

As she had hoped, her words seemed to inspire a flicker of determination in the King and his eyes suddenly sparked. For all his failures as a ruler, Soltran was a devoted father who adored his children. “You’re right, Honored Mother. Shasta is all I have left. I’ll swear faith to cursed Ulrike before I let anything happen to her.”

Qiturah clucked her tongue. Ulrike, brother-god to Ithyris, was the antithesis of everything the Goddess stood for, and though his name was often used in casual swearing it was more powerful than most people knew. But Soltran seemed careless of this fact.

Sounding unusually resolute, he said, “Shasta will be the salvation of Ithyria and must be protected at all costs. With her there still lies a chance for a strong king on the throne, someone who can cleanse the provincial governments and restore order.”

This was not exactly what the priestess had meant, but she had no chance to interrupt. Tugging at his beard in agitation, the King continued, “What am I to do? I don’t trust the nobles. Any one of them could have sent that hooded devil. General Anjen is too busy trying to track down the assassin to provide sufficient protection for the Princess. She needs constant security. In fact, someone must attend her every moment of the day and night. Standing outside her chamber door just won’t be sufficient, not with this elusive assassin at large. I want a guard at her bedside.” This thought apparently gave him pause, and he

stood to pace the study. “But there’s not a man I would entrust with her so...intimately.”

Qiturah sighed. The King was getting sidetracked from the original subject. “Your Majesty, the Princess’s safety is indeed vital, but the problems extend far beyond one person. Take that brave young woman who saved Princess Shasta’s life...”

The King suddenly paused in midstep. “That’s it.”

Qiturah wasn’t sure he had even been listening. “Majesty?”

“The acrobat. She’s strong, isn’t she? She has to be, to be able to perform all those stunts. Quick reflexes as well, and I’ve heard Outlanders have especially keen senses. Best of all, everyone believes she’s a man, which makes her absolutely perfect.”

“Perfect for what?”

“For Shasta’s bodyguard.” The King smacked his hands together. “Don’t you see? As a woman, she could be trusted alone with the Princess. And as a man, properly trained as a soldier, she could be an effective deterrent to any assassin.”

The priestess was at a loss for words. Yet again the King was avoiding real action, instead making a token gesture. Not to mention that the very idea was rather bizarre. “Majesty, I really don’t think that’s the best solution...”

“Of course it is. Fear not, Honored Mother, I’ll make it worth her while. So long as the acrobat is obedient, she and her sisters will be rewarded with positions in the royal household. The girls can serve as ladies-in-waiting to the Princess. Shasta will like having attendants her own age. She’s always complaining about the ladies the court chooses. Of course, if the acrobat fails in her duties, her sisters will pay the price. An added incentive.”

“Goddess save us!” Qiturah exclaimed. “Majesty, you simply cannot use people like this.”

“These are dark times, Honored Mother,” Soltran replied with a dismissive wave. “I’m not a cruel man, and I’m sure the Goddess will understand the need to protect Her chosen. Thank you for your guidance in this matter. Ithyria has not lost all its hope after all. If you will excuse me, there are many preparations to be made.”

Qiturah bit her tongue to keep from protesting. This was not at all the result she had desired, but she could not push the matter further now. She inclined her head, her long golden earrings jingling. “If this

is to be, I request Your Majesty's permission to remain in the palace until the young woman is fully recovered. I will entreat the Goddess's blessing on this task you are about to lay on her shoulders."

The King nodded. "An excellent idea, Honored Mother, and most appreciated."

Qiturah left the King's study, glad that the white veil covering the lower half of her face could hide her irritated muttering as she swept through the corridor in the direction of the infirmary. *Ithyris, help me*, she prayed silently. *This is going to be more difficult than I thought.*

She had been so sure of her mission in Ardrenn, convinced she must persuade King Soltran to control the nobility. Although this still seemed hopeless, she could not shake the feeling that somehow the events now in motion were part of the Goddess's will. It was confusing, but the enigmatic Ithyris often gave commands that seemed to make little sense. Only later did hindsight reveal Her wisdom. Qiturah had never known the Goddess to act without reason.

Ithyria was Her land, and had been so since the Great Division. According to historians, approximately one thousand winters ago the Goddess of the Spirit rose up against Her tyrannical brother Ulrike, God of the Flesh, and chose twelve from among the daughters of men to free Her people from Ulrike's oppression. Endowed with the Goddess's powers, the Twelve drove the followers of Ulrike out of the coastal plains and lowlands into the northern mountains of Dangar and established a new land where the followers of Ithyris lived under Her divine protection, in peace at last.

This land, Ithyria, was divided into provinces, with one of the Twelve governing a Great Temple in each. The Goddess appointed the house of Rane, a strong bloodline of charisma and wisdom, to rule sovereign over them all. As centuries went by, the kingdom of Ithyria remained in the hands of the Goddess, despite countless attempts by Ulrike and his followers to reclaim the lands taken from him.

Yet the war between brother and sister was far from over, and the Daughters of Ithyris shared a sense of foreboding. Ulrike was stirring again. Qiturah felt certain the recent civil unrest was his doing, with the death of Queen Talia a catalyst. Ulrike's dark power most readily influenced the northern provinces, which bordered the lands of his followers, and these had been the first to grow uneasy beneath Soltran's rule.

Qiturah feared that now, almost a millennium since Ithyris had established independence for Her people, their kingdom would soon face another deadly spiritual war. Her own role in the coming conflict was a mystery as yet, but she had a feeling it would be somehow significant. The Goddess would reveal this in Her own time. Like all priestesses, Qiturah trusted Her wisdom implicitly and would wait patiently for Her guidance.

She entered the infirmary, passing through a cluster of curious servants and nobles gathered outside. If they were hoping to glimpse the kingdom's latest hero, they would have a while to wait. The acrobat had serious injuries and would not be well enough to leave for at least three quarter-moons.

As she approached the girl's bedside and looked down at the handsome olive-skinned face resting peacefully against the pillows, Qiturah felt the sudden familiar clarity that she recognized as Ithyris's touch upon her mind. Whoever this girl was, the Goddess had important plans for her as well.

Qiturah let out a breath of apprehension and knelt beside the cot. Touching her fingers to her forehead, she began to pray.