

The Woman of Shadows

by Scott Cimarusti

He awoke with a start, which sent a fresh surge of pain through his aching head.

He opened his eyes slowly to reveal a darkness barely discernible from what he had seen from behind closed eyes. He blinked owlishly, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the meager light provided by a single guttering torch at the top of the rotting wooden stairs that led to the iron-banded door that was the only way in or out of the dungeon.

He tried to adjust his arms to restore some of the blood flow lost from them being shackled high over his head, but there was almost no slack in the chains, and any movement only dug the rusted iron manacles deeper into his numbing wrists.

The constant throbbing in his head made it difficult for him to manage a coherent thought, much less accurately recall the chain of events that led to his injury and imprisonment.

The last thing he could remember with any certainty was that he and his fellow Archers had somehow managed to drive back the horde of sword-wielding marauders from across the Bahraq Sea. The invaders had landed on the eastern shores of the provinces only to be met by a formidable force of Laummoren's finest Archers, who turned back the invaders with a skillfully coordinated assault of fatally accurate arrows. A few of the younger Archers—he among them—had even commandeered a few of the enemy's abandoned boats to continue pursuit across the narrow channel; which was when his memory became hazy.

He could remember stalking an enemy swordsman through dense brush farther up the foreign beach where he had landed his hijacked boat. Then the wind had picked up, and the rustle of the leaves which had served to conceal his footsteps must have done the same for his pursuer's. He could vaguely recall sensing a presence behind him before drawing his bow and turning—and then everything went black.

And then he found himself here in this dank earthen dungeon, shackled to a wall, his head throbbing, and his bow and quiver of arrows nowhere to be found.

He sighed heavily, noting the mud- and bloodstains on his once pristine forest-green tunic and silver cloak, the uniform of the Archers of Laummoren. Perhaps being a young Archer, he had been a bit too eager in his pursuit onto foreign soil. But there would be no regrets; for he had sworn an oath of allegiance to protect the kingdom of Laummoren—with his very life if necessary.

His eyes were now as adjusted to the dungeon's gloom as they were ever going to be, so he began surveying the room for a means of escape—or at least a makeshift tool or weapon that could be of use. When out of the corner of his eye, he thought he detected movement among the

impenetrable shadows of his cell—it was too large to be a rat or any other such dungeon-dwelling vermin.

Digging his boot heels into the earthen floor, he scooted himself back closer against the wall into a defensive posture. Unfortunately, with his hands chained to the wall, he had very few options. But at least his legs were free—and he knew how to deal a well-timed lethal kick to an adversary's throat if need be.

A figure then emerged from the darkness as if it were made of shadow itself.

The figure approached, and something about its gait gave him the impression that it was not a man.

The flickering torchlight soon revealed the silhouette of what appeared to be a woman clad in the customary robes worn by women in this region, her head and face covered by a scarf—except her eyes, which even in the meager torchlight, blazed with intensity.

She approached him hesitantly, yet clearly without fear. He reflexively tensed his legs in preparation for delivering a defensive kick, if necessary. Yet, he found himself strangely unthreatened by her.

The woman crouched before him, bringing her face within inches of his. Then she unwound the scarf obscuring her face to reveal a woman of what he could only describe as haunting beauty.

Her oval face was framed by waves of raven-black hair. Even in the flickering torchlight, he could tell that her skin was the color of creamed coffee. Below a proud nose, her hint of a smile was a string of shiny pearls set between full dark lips.

This close, with their noses almost touching, she enveloped him in an intoxicating haze of jasmine, her expressive brown eyes almost filling his field of vision. He was struck by how powerful the woman's gaze was—it rendered him speechless, as if she held him spellbound without having uttered a single word. He couldn't help but wonder how easy it would be to drown in those eyes if he let himself.

Then she spoke; her voice sultry like the caress of silk as she uttered words in a tongue he did not understand. He could feel his muscles uncoil as the feeling flowed back into his shackled hands and the insistent throbbing in his skull subsided.

Her eyes never leaving his, the woman reached into her robes to reveal a gemstone that glowed lavender as if it burned from within. She reached up and placed the stone in his right hand—which had somehow been freed from its manacle along with his left.

Then, flashing him a smile that made his pulse quicken, she replaced the scarf over her face and melted back into the shadows from where she had seemed to emerge.

Mystified by this bizarre encounter, he quickly stuffed the stone into one of his pockets without thinking and leapt to his feet to begin planning his escape—with the woman, too, if he could convince her to comply. Unfortunately, standing too quickly after having been chained in a sitting position for so long, his head swam and his knees buckled. He collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

He was awoken an indeterminate amount of time later by loud shouting from outside the dungeon door. After what sounded to him like several minutes of an intense melee, a series of powerful blows began to shake the door. He rose to his feet a little steadier this time, and immediately scanned the room for any sign of the mysterious phantom woman he vaguely remembered from what he now realized must have been an intensely vivid dream. Something about a lavender gemstone...

Cursing himself for entertaining such ridiculous notions and chasing hallucinations, he began searching again for a makeshift weapon since he was without his trusty bow and arrows. The dungeon door continued to rattle in its frame from the repeated blows—though not for much longer, he surmised.

And he was right. The door suddenly crashed in, followed by a squad of his fellow Archers brandishing bows and torches. They were shouting at him and motioning for him to follow—and he was all too eager to obey.

As he bounded up the rotting wooden steps two at a time, he felt something heavy bouncing in his pocket. He hesitated just long enough to reach inside to find out what it was.

As his fingers closed around the object, he was stopped in his tracks by a sudden whiff of jasmine and a vivid vision of a pair of eyes the color of the darkest chocolate.

Opening his hand, he discovered a glowing lavender gemstone.