

Excerpt

Ristèard's Unwilling Empress

Lords of Kassis book 4

By S. E. Smith

"Where is she?" Ristèard demanded before his brow creased even further. "And what the hell happened to you?"

Sadao gave a nod to Andras. "She is somewhere in this wooded area, and she is what happened to me. There was a low limb along the path I didn't see. She pulled it back and let it go just as I was about to catch her. It knocked me on my ass. She is fast, Ristèard. I swear I have never seen a woman run as fast as she can."

"Are you sure she is there?" Ristèard asked, looking into the small clump of trees.

Sadao nodded. "I could see all the way through them. There is no way I could have missed her. She went in, but never came out."

Ristèard studied the wooded area carefully before he nodded to the other two men. With a wave of his hand, they split up. He took the center, while Andras took the left and Sadao took the right.

Stepping onto the dark path that cut through the thin grouping of trees, he listened intently as he scanned the path. He paused when he caught a glimpse of pale yellow under a bush. Bending, he picked up a slender shoe. Looking around, he tried to

see if he could find any other clues as to where she could have gone.

He paused when he saw another piece of yellow. This time it was her sweater caught on a branch. He glanced around, puzzled, before his gaze rose upwards. He would have missed her hiding among the branches if not for the light breeze that suddenly blew her dress outward.

A grin curved his lips before he pressed them together and emitted a low whistle. It didn't take long for Sadao and Andras to join him. With a nod, he pointed her out to the other two men. She was hiding about ten feet off the ground on a low branch. He could tell she was trying to remain as still and quiet as possible.

Pushing through the bushes, he stepped up under the tree. "I see you, golden hair," he called up to her in a quiet, husky voice. "Come down."

For a moment, she remained frozen, pretending she hadn't heard him before she slowly turned her head and glared down at him. Even from this distance, he could see the stubborn thrust of her jaw. He reached up and rubbed at his chest when a strange tightness pressed against it. She looked so damn beautiful with her bright yellow dress blowing around her. She gripped the tree with one arm while she reached up with the other to impatiently push her long, tangled hair away from her face.

"No," she hissed, wrapping her arm back around the thin trunk of the tree. "Go away! I swear I'm going to scream so loud if you don't... that... that every

member of the circus will be able to hear me from here.”

“Don’t,” Ristèard warned sharply. “I mean you no harm. Come down and I will explain.”

He released a low growl of frustration when she shook her head again. Holding out her shoe, he muttered for Andras and Sadao to find the other one. He needn't have bothered because the moment he gripped the lower branch of the tree, it hit him on the top of his head with a loud thump.

Stumbling backwards, he would have fallen again if Andras hadn't reached out and grabbed him. He glared up at her, rubbing his now aching head. His heated gaze quickly turned to both Andras and Sadao when they chuckled. He turned back in time to see why. Ricki was now sticking her tongue out at him in defiance.

Andras shrugged when Ristèard glanced back at him with a pained expression. “You’ve got to admit, she has a good arm,” he said, completely unashamed of his amusement.

“And great legs,” Sadao added, grinning up at her.

Ristèard punched Sadao in the jaw, knocking him backwards a few steps. “Quit trying to look up her dress,” he snapped.

Andras chuckled and stepped back with his hands in the air. “I didn’t say anything about her long legs, or about the pretty yellow lace under it.”

Ristèard turned when he heard Ricki’s outraged gasp. His heart skipped a beat when she let go of the

tree and frantically tried to catch her dress that was blowing in the breeze. She wobbled for a moment and almost fell before her left arm caught the trunk again and she pressed herself against it.

“Come down before you fall,” he ordered, staring up at her.

She shook her head and pressed her cheek against the smooth bark. Making a decision, Ristèard gripped the limb above his head again and began climbing. It didn't take him long to get to the same branch she was on. Stepping around her, he wrapped his arm tightly around her waist.

“Release the tree, Ricki,” he whispered in her ear as he pressed his body against hers.

It took less than a second for him to realize that she was not only trembling violently, but that she was drawing in quick, tiny breaths of air. He could feel the terror running through her body and see the death grip she had on the tree. Steadying himself, he reached up to peel her arm away from the smooth surface.

“Don't!” She whispered frantically, looking at him in panic. “I'm not... Just leave me. Please, just leave me alone.”

Ristèard tightened his grip around Ricki's waist, sliding his hand down her arm until he could thread his fingers through hers. He almost winced when she tightened her fingers around his in a surprisingly strong clasp. He muttered under his breath when she didn't let go of the trunk with her other arm.

“Ricki,” he started to say, pausing when she shook her head frantically from side to side.

“I can’t,” she whispered in a tearful voice. “I can’t.”

Ristèard wondered for a moment if he had made a huge mistake in planning this entire mission. He knew that Ajaska and Torak would never have understood his belief that Ricki was the mythical Empress sent by the Goddess to save his world. Hell, he didn’t believe it, but he was desperate.

He needed to return to his world before his absence was noticed. Already, he had been gone too long in his previous negotiation with the Kassisan Royal family. His absence had enabled the traitorous bastards on the council to set a trap for him and his guards. He was scheduled to meet with them tomorrow afternoon. That meant he needed to leave Kassis as soon as possible if he was to return before they noticed he was missing again.

“I swear I will not harm you and neither will my men,” he reassured her, wrapping their joined hands around her waist so he could pull her other arm free.

Ricki glanced over her shoulder at him and scowled. “You hurt Stan,” she snapped. “How on Earth do you expect me to believe you won’t hurt me too? You... What do you want with me anyway?”

Ristèard used her distraction to pull her other arm from the tree. Her loud cry and suddenly stiff body almost toppled them both. It took him a moment to regain his balance on the thin branch. He pulled her

close and braced his hand on the trunk of the tree as she dug her nails into his arm.

“Calm or you will make us fall,” he ordered, glancing down when Andras called up in a low voice that Harald and Emyr had arrived.

“Oh, God, please don’t,” Ricki muttered in a terrified voice. “Oh, please don’t, please don’t, please don’t.”

Ristèard gritted his teeth in pain. He was sure that he was going to end up with a bloody arm on top of everything else. He shifted his weight until he was balanced and called down to Andras and Sadao.

“I’m sorry, Ricki, but we have to leave now,” Ristèard said when the sound of alarms echoed from the direction they had come earlier. The human male’s body had been discovered.

Ricki gasped loudly before a loud, piercing scream escaped her as she felt herself falling through the air. Ristèard cursed, knowing that the authorities would hear her. Time was running out and he had done the only thing he could think of to get her out of the tree. He had picked her up and dropped her down to Andras, who was waiting below.

Turning, he jumped, landing on the ground next to where Andras stood holding Ricki in his arms. Taking her shoes from Sadao, he stepped forward and slid them on her bare feet. When he was done, Andras lowered Ricki to the ground.

“Get the...,” Ristèard started to order before his head exploded back and he swore he saw the stars up close and personal. “What in the name of the Goddess

did you do that for?" He hissed out, holding his now aching jaw.

"You ass!" Ricki hissed in fury, pushing her hair out of her eyes. "You arrogant, horrible excuse for a piece of blue toilet bowl cleaner! I'm *terrified* of heights and you threw me out of a tree! You are the most horrible, terrible... *meanest* person I have ever met!"

Ristèard backed up a step when Ricki swung her fist at him again. He caught it, twisting her around so he could pull her back against his body. A low groan escaped him when she stomped her foot down on his instep in an attempt to break free of his tight embrace.

"Ristèard, we need to leave," Harald warned, glancing down at a scanner. "I have movement headed this way."

Ristèard nodded. With a wave of regret, he knew he was about to make his new, very unwilling Empress even more furious with him. He glanced at Emyr and nodded. Tightening his hold on Ricki as she continued to struggle, he watched as Emyr pressed an injector containing the same drug they used to knock the alien male out against Ricki's neck.

She stiffened and cried out in surprise and shock before he felt her body began to melt against his. Bending, he slid his arm under her knees and straightened, cradling her against his body. With another nod, the small group moved quickly to the air-skids on the other side of the wooded area.

Ristèard adjusted Ricki securely against his body before he started the transport. Lifting upward, he

thought it was just as well he had ordered her to be sedated as they rose above the tree line. She would not have enjoyed this part of their journey.