

Asalah: Princess Warrior

By Braylin Keller



My name is Asalah. Formally, Asalah Keziah Ithatozia, Crown Princess of The Ithatozian Empire. However, I prefer simply Asalah, it flows off the tongue better. Today, I will be telling you a story, a story about my youth. A story of adventure, and danger. This is the story of me:

I stand in the wind, my red hair whipping around my face, my blue tunic pinned to my legs. My sharp violet eyes scan the landscape, the silver in them glinting in the sunlight. I see carriages rumbling into the castle gates, carriages carrying people who live far from my native kingdom, the Ithatozian Empire. If you want to know why they are here, I will tell you. They are here for me. More specifically, my 18th birthday celebration.

Today is the day I will turn 18, and my family is going all out. Not to celebrate my entrance into adulthood, goodness no. This is to announce my betrothal, a tradition that has gone back hundreds of years to our first reigning couple, King Fioux and Queen Anora. The only problem is, I don't want to be betrothed. I want to be free, to roam the hills and countrysides of our beautiful kingdom. If I could, I would run away, but I know I can't abandon my family and duty.

A few hours later, my mother and the royal seamstress Calico Lorel are helping me dress in my new ball gown, a rustling silver piece that, at first sight, I thought was lovely. Now, I'm starting to change my opinion. Calico has pulled my seams so tight, I can scarcely breathe. "Calico," I wheeze, "let it out some."

She shakes her head disapprovingly. "Nonsense, child." Calico scolds gently. "You need to look perfect for your future husband."

"Who I have yet to meet." I remind my mother.

"You will meet him right after the announcement." Queen Sylmae reminds me. "You needn't know who he is until then, it's not like you can change who you are fated to marry."

I roll my eyes, and listen to my mother ramble on about how wonderful the prince is, how he has impeccable manners and is very polite. I wish she would stop talking, and that Calico would stop pulling! Instead, I try to think about my mother's betrothal to my father, King

Vesryn. I picture her in my gown, her straight blond hair swinging and baby blue eyes sparkling. I think of her walking up to the stage to meet my brown-haired, brown-eyed father. I smile at the thought of my mother as a girl my age!

At the party, I dance with many charming young men, yet none seem the type my parents would select as a husband for me. I'm startled out of my thoughts when the song changes from a traditional waltz to a faster dance. This one switches partners after a few stanzas, so after a while I'm very dizzy. Then, I swirl into the arms of a young man I recognize. As I fall into his warm hazel eyes, I realize I'm dancing with our head knight, Kaden Hayle.

I blush as he lifts me up, then spins me into the dance. This is one of my favorite dances, and I have danced it for years. Even so, Kaden matches me step for step, and I'm amazed at how good of a dancer he is. After the being tossed around to about seven more young men, plus one elderly duke, the dance is finally over. I stumble over to the refreshments table, where I collapse into a chair, laughing. A hand reaches out to help me up, and I take it automatically.

As the hand pulls me to my feet, I realize it belongs to Kaden. I turn red, embarrassed. He laughs gently and leads me over to the drinks, and serves me a small glass of punch. He smiles. "Don't pull another Cinderella on me, OK?" I smile softly. I don't think I danced much after that, all I remember is spending the evening with him.

At midnight, my parents go up to the stage, and I know they are about to announce my fiancée. I realize I don't want to marry whoever they select for me, I only want to marry one person. And because of my parents and their silly traditions, I can't marry the one who I love. Shaking with rage, I murmur to Kaden, "I have to go." Then I run off towards the castle, knowing full well what I have to do.

In my room, I gather a few dresses, a hairbrush and other things I will need in a basket. I sneak down to the kitchen and take a few loaves of bread, some fruit, and a large flask of water. I run out to the stable and saddle my horse Noria, and call my dogs Cassin and Lucian. I quickly check my supplies, then ride into the woods, my pets following me.

Six days later, it registers that this might not have been the best idea. My water is gone, and I have little food left, only an apple and a few slices of bread. My rich, usually well-fed stomach growled, and I groan in hunger. I slump down on a tree and wonder why I did this; I'm sure it would have been better to live with a man I don't know than possibly not live at all.

I hear horses, and bury myself under a log, telling Cassin and Lucian to hush. I hear Kaden's voice calling out my name, and all I want to do is run out there and fall into his arms. But I stay where I am, knowing that if I go out there then I will have to go back home. And I can't do that, no matter how hard it is in the wild.

Later, when my heart has settled and the riders are gone, I come out of the hole. I stumble around in the forest, crying and alone. My dogs and Noria follow me, making sad noises. But even my beloved pets can't cheer me up. I fall onto my knees, weeping as my heart is broken.

I feel a strange item under my leg and pick it up to see what it is. To my surprise, it's a flute. I don't know how it could help me, but I stick it in my pack anyway. Maybe I can trade it for food or something I need. I spy a small note on the ground by where the flute was, and read it. It says,

BLOW IF IN TROUBLE OR HELP IS NEEDED

Puzzled, I pick up my things and start walking through the forest, unsure of what to do next. As I wander, I think about the turns my life has taken. I've gone from a rich city princess to a poor forest girl. My picture perfect life has been annihilated. Never will I be the same.

In a strange spell of delirium, I start running. Wind whips my tears off my face. I see a large rock face coming up in front of me, the forest so thick I didn't see it until it was mere feet away. I try to turn, too late to stop, and trip on an unseen rock. As I black out, I hear the yipping and howling of coyotes in the distance.

When I wake up, I see a trio of the largest coyotes I've ever seen circling me. I close my eyes again, not wanting them to know I'm awake. I brace myself for death, sure it's near. I breathe in the animal's awful stench, and swallow to keep from vomiting.

Then, I remember the flute. With utmost care, I slowly move my hand towards my back, where I stashed the instrument. I pull it out, but one of the dogs grabs it, salivating. Disgusted, I snatch it back; I ignore the coyote spit all over the flute and blow a random note. To my amazement, the coyotes run away, whining in fear. The flute glows, and melts away all the liquid on it. However, I'm not burned in the least.

A beautiful song pours out, my hands dancing over the silver tool involuntarily. I listen carefully, and hear words mixed in with the music:

With a song and a kiss,

Away you go,

Just a sweet summer's kiss,

And I can't follow.

A rush of air ends the magical moment, and I turn to see the wall of stone, which I had quite forgotten about, had a large, gaping hole in it, and from that hole emerged a majestic young she-wolf. A thick, well-kept silver coat glistened, and her violet eyes that matched mine twinkled as though she had a secret that she would never share.

Although I regret this, I jumped back, screaming bloody murder. Mainly because I was sure one of those was about to happen. However, the wolf did not move to eat me, so I hushed up and sat up to face her. She spoke to me, but her mouth did not move. I realised her voice was in my head, and squealed in surprise. *Relax, girl. You are safe with me.* She told me.

“H-how do I speak to you in our heads?” I stammered to her, rather flustered.

All you have to do is imagine speaking to me, then say the words you want to say in your head. I will hear them. The wolf replied.

I focus hard on her, and then think the words. *What is your name?* I ask, impressed that it was so easy to communicate.

My name is Achirebalteryniela. But you can call me Achilla, most humans have a hard time saying my full name. I can't imagine why, however. It's a common name where I'm from.

Achirebal... what? Yeah, I'll just call you Achilla. My name is- I get cut off when Achilla speaks to me again.

I know your name, girl. Your name is Asalah Keziah Ithatozia, Crown Princess of The Ithatozian Empire. But you prefer Asalah.

I blanch. *How did you know that?*

It doesn't matter now. Now, we must get to the witch. She sent the coyotes to kill you, I'm sure she will be angry it didn't work. We must get to her and defeat her before she defeats you.

Who is this witch? Why does she want to hurt me? I ask, dismayed.

Achilla didn't answer, just walked away into the woods, her tail beckoning me to follow. She leaped through the trees, power and grace tumbling out of her. Gathering my supplies, I got up and scampered after her, wondering what kind of crazy adventure I was falling into. Little did I know what awaited me through those mysterious trees...

A few hours later, my initial worry and excitement was gone, replaced by an extreme boredom. The only “threat” we had encountered was a skunk, and that had not turned out well. On a related note, Lucian and Cassin needed a bath when we got home. We tromped through the woods, tired, exhausted, and desperately needing a nap.

I see that my dress is ripped up, and I imagine what Calico would say if she saw me. “Child, you look a fierce mess! Come here and let me fix you up.” I smile sadly at the thought, and a small tear carves it’s way down my face. Cassin notices the tear, and licks it up, while Noria whinnies kindly. Lucian is off somewhere else, he has a tendency to wander off.

Suddenly, I hear a high-pitched, doggy shriek off in the distance. In a flash, I drop my stuff and run to Lucian. When I get to the clearing he’s in, I cover my mouth in horror. My Lucian is lying on the ground, bleeding out. A green troll stands over him, licking it’s grimy chops greedily. Angry now, I yank a stout branch off a tree and charge the beast.

Achilla darts in front of me, and I trip over her, no harm done to the troll. *Let me handle this.* She scolds. Leaping onto the troll’s back, she snarls and tears at the fleshy shoulders and sides of the monster, him squalling in pain and me watching, awestruck.

I snap back to my senses, and race over to Lucian. He whines, and relief washes over me because he is still alive. I grab my empty food bag, and rip it open to create a sling. I gently slide him into it, and wince when I hear him cry out in pain. I tie the sling around my neck, and walk away slowly, not wanting to hurt Lucian.

By this time, Achilla has killed the troll. She picked over it, trying to find a piece of meat that isn’t rotten. Giving up on this, we scavenged the troll’s supplies, finding spoiled milk and poisonous berries among the various tools. I took the troll’s dagger and knife; I had wanted to take the sword as well; but Achilla said dragging it would not help.

Hours later, we reach the edge of the forest. These plains are on the opposite side of the forest from where my castle and kingdom are, and so I have no sense of direction. However, Achilla clearly knows exactly where we were. She starts off immediately in one direction, never hesitating. *How do you know where we are going? Have you been here before?* I ask my companion.

I have been to this country several times before. But never before to confront the witch, always just to defend against her.

“Wait.” I stop in my tracks, forgetting not to speak. “Are you telling me your kind have faced off against the witch before? And you never told me?”

I probably did tell you. You just didn't listen. She just kept going, ignoring my various comments and questions. Finally, we reach a small, well-kept cottage with a neat little garden and a homey atmosphere. *Don't be tricked by the witch's kind appearance. She is evil.* I remember that, and bravely knock on the door.

“Well hello! Who are you? My name is Skylann Ladean.” Chirps the elderly woman who answered the door.

“Uhh, my name is Asalah. Asalah Ithatozia.” I wait for the flash of recognition, the sudden respect, but it never come.

“Ithatozia... hmm, I might have heard that once.” It hits me that she doesn't live in our kingdom, so this woman most likely has no idea who I am.

Don't tell her your identity. The witch might want to use your political status to her advantage. Achilla warns.

This sweet old lady is not a witch! I reply. She just shakes her head.

Inside, Skylann sits me down. She serves me warm tea and cookies, and we exchange small talk for a little while. I begin to feel a little drowsy, and I ask her if she has a spare room I could rest in for a little while. She leads me down a suspiciously large hallway, considering her house was so small on the outside, and I lay down on the bed, relaxing.

Skylann brings in Achilla and my dogs as well, and lets them sit on the bed with me. “I put your horse in the stables. By the way, where did you get that wolf-dog? It’s gorgeous.” She strokes Achilla’s luscious fur. Achilla bristles, and her hackles rise.

Tell her to stop petting me. I am not a dog, and certainly not an it!

“Err, I don’t think she likes being pet. Do you see her hackles? That means she’s unhappy.”

Skylann stops petting her immediately, and apologizes profusely about not reading Achilla’s body signals. Finally, she leaves. I remove my clothes and put on the warm nightgown that has appeared. *Skylann must have brought it up here. What a nice lady...* I tumble onto my pillow and fall fast asleep, unaware of what was about to happen.

I wake up feeling refreshed. I sit up, and hit my head. I look around and realize I’m not in the guest room anymore. I’m in a dark closet-like room. I hear Achilla’s voice as well. *What did I tell you? Now look what happened.*

I’m sorry, you were right about Sky- the witch. Where are you? I’m in some sort of closet. I mentally hit myself in the head, over and over again. Achilla warned me not to trust her, but I did. Now we were trapped, because I was foolish enough to trust a witch.

I’m locked in the stables with Noria and the boys.

What boys?

Cassin and Lucian.

Oh.

Frustrated, I bang on the walls. I scream and curse at the witch, but nothing happens. I ask her why she wants me, and to please let me go. After what seems like forever, the door opens. I emerge from my cell, and follow the hallways down to mid-afternoon light. I step out... And fall into an arena type area. A large black-and-red horse is chained on the far side, flailing it's hooves and sounding angry. *No, wait, that's a unicorn.* I correct myself. Skylann strolls out onto a glass walkway suspended high above. Despite the height, I hear her voice clearly.

“Hello again, Princess Asalah. Are you surprised I know you? I know a lot of things. Did you like the sleeping tea? Anyway, back to business. You see my friend here?” She pointed to the unicorn. “This is Crimson. She will be your opponent. If you defeat her, then you will be set free, along with Achilla and your animal friends. If you lose, then you will be my slave- forever. That is, if you live.” She finishes her speech with an evil cackle.

I don't know how I can do this. I am weak, and Crimson is powerful and healthy. Nevertheless, I prepare for a fight. “Oh, and by the way, you have some help. I'm feeling especially benevolent today.” Adds Skylann. A hidden door opens and Achilla, Cassin, and Noria leap out. Lucian is carried down on a lift.

“I will defeat her! I will defeat YOU!” I scream in response. “You will never break me!”

“We'll see about that. You don't exactly seem to be in fighting condition.” I know she's right, but I can't let her see it. I thank Achilla mentally for robbing the troll, which seems so long ago. I hold the dagger in my left hand and the knife in my right. The chains binding Crimson release, and the massive animal plows towards me.

Running on sheer adrenaline, I dodge to the side, swiping my knife along the unicorn's side. She screams in pain, and turns. Charging me again, her horn pointed dangerously low, I duck. I feel the air whoosh over me as Crimson runs over me. We stand on opposite sides of the arena again now. Suddenly, I notice a small dark crystal on the top of her horn.

There is only one way to defeat Crimson, I realize, I need to remove that crystal. “Achilla! Hide my dogs, and come here!” She runs over, along with Noria. I leap onto Noria's back and the three of us pound towards the tainted unicorn. At the last second, I swing to the side and slice the tip of her horn off, hacking off the crystal.

A powerful blast rocks the arena. Skylann dissolves without a trace remaining. Crimson is no longer red-and-black, but pure white now. She speaks to me and Achilla. *Thank you, friends. The witch trapped me in evil, but now I am clean again. My name is no longer Crimson, but Azalea once again.*

Azalea canters over to where Lucian and Cassin are cowering behind a rock, and touches her horn to Lucian. He stands up and shakes out his pelt, then comes over to me. Crying with joy, I slide off of Noria and gather my pets in my arms. “Thank you! Thank you!” I sob to Azalea. *Say goodbye to Achilla, Azalea reminds me. It's time for both of you to go home.*

After more tears and lots of goodbyes, Azalea tells us it's time to go. Expecting to travel home the same way we had gotten here, I started getting ready to walk more. Azalea touched her now-clean horn to Achilla, and then she was gone. Azalea touched her horn to my dogs and Noria, and then they were gone. She came to me, and said *Thank you*. Then she touched her horn to me, and then I was gone. Alone in the arena, Azalea disappears in a veil of shimmer.

In Ithatozia again, Azalea erased the memory of my running away. I walk bravely up to my parent's chamber. I open the door, and swallow down my nerves. "Mom? ... Dad? I have to tell you something. I don't want to marry the prince. I want to marry the head knight."

My mother replies, "Darling, why would you want to marry him?"

But my dad interjects. "Sylmae, why not let her pick her own husband? She is a smart, strong woman. I think she can make the right choice."

"Thank you Dad!" I cry and run out of the room.

A few months later, I stand at the altar, smiling into the hazel eyes of my husband. I know that I did make the right choice. And now I can be not Asalah the princess, not Asalah the warrior, but Asalah, Princess Warrior.