

Warrior Or Woman



Rebecca Rafferty



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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WARRIOR OR WOMAN

by **Rebecca Rafferty**

“I’d get my hair cut if I was you,” my father told me gruffly from the balcony of our clanhouse. “When you walked down with that blanket about your shoulders, Maran, I thought you were a girl.”

Naturally, my cousin Batera snickered at me. She’d draped her sleeping blanket about my shoulders as my arms were already laden with her basket of knick-knacks, the sort that women always carry with them.

“Or grow a beard,” my father growled at me. His hair was almost as long as mine, but no one would have confused him for a woman with his stocky, muscular build and his hairy, covered face.

That was a sore point. I’d love to have a beard. Younger men than me had straggly growths the girls always teased them over but I was still beardless at eighteen years. My mother only laughed at me and tended to the needs of my latest brother when I complained.

“You do have hair on your face,” she laughed, touching me, “only it’s fine and golden, just like your hair. You take after your uncle, Maran. He married before he had whiskers and look at him now!” Grevel had a beard almost to his belly. “Your aunt wishes he’d shave, like Southerners do. Most women would like that. Beards are awfully smelly, itchy things! Your girlfriends don’t know what they’ll be missing when you finally cover those soft, enticing cheeks with hair!”

What girlfriends? I wanted to ask my mother. I wasn’t tall and dark-haired like Tessen. I didn’t have thick, muscular arms like Firres. He used an axe all day long to cut and shape logs “because,” as he’d once whispered to me through his thin whiskers, “the girls are watching!” He’d flexed his biceps and I’d been awed. They were enormous!

“I need someone to carry my perfumes and washing needs,” whimpered Batera, batting her dark, painted eyelashes at me. “You can do that for me, Marana, can’t you, darling girl?”

“You know,” I said to her, forcing a smile as I was seething inside. “Some day, cousin, a man is going to grip that nasty tongue of yours and slide his knife across it. You’ll be just like Notran.” He was a man who had told lies once too often. The clan conclave had ordered that punishment on him. “Wouldn’t he make the perfect spouse for you? I wonder how the two of you would kiss.”

“A man might do that to me,” said Batera sweetly. “But dearest Marana wouldn’t, would she? Because she’s a girl!”

I didn’t speak to her again as I knew she wouldn’t give it up. Batera was like that. I ignored her, my father, my brothers, my uncles and their families, and got on with the other tasks the trading party needed done. I loaded trade goods, watered the mules and

brought the horses down from the paddocks, hitching them to the right wagons and carriages.

I saw the Clan Chief coming down to the walkway on which we were assembled, leading a white horse, a battle horse, which he attached to the back of the women's carriage.

"Kun is too old to fight again," I heard him say to Plever, leader of this trading party, of which I was part, a groom no less. "One of the girls can ride him, which is why I included the woman's saddle in the tack. Batera thinks she can be another Asara." Asara was a legendary woman warrior who'd once ruled over all the clans. We'd called her 'queen,' that foreign word for an unheard-of thing, a woman ruler. "You've got enough young lads along to act as grooms," the Clan Chief nodded to me as he said that, "and Kun might be of use if you run into trouble."

"We always do lately," said Plever darkly. "Maybe we should leave the lasses ..."

"You'll meet up with the Dareth party at the Black Forest," snapped the Clan Chief. "They expect you and will have more warriors than you. It couldn't be a safer trip in days like this!"

For the meeting with the Dareth, I saddled Kun with the pink harness and high lady's saddle, placing Batera's thin, woman's sword in the saddle scabbard. "One of us, sweet Marana," she'd said to me, still teasing me unmercifully in front of older, women traders, "can look like a warrior when we meet with the Dareths!"

We met with them all right. I was sure I heard the calls exchanged between our forward scouts and theirs. Later, I'd find out I was wrong. The Dareth for-

ward scouts weren't Dareths, something Plever should have known. I did hear the call to stand down arms from Plever, riding up on his hack. Batera flung her lace-edged coverlet at me as she stalked on foot from the trade wagons halted in a favoured, shady spot. She smiled as she admired the female tack on the white horse.

"He needs a run," I shouted to her just as this enormous battle-horse and warrior bounded into the clearing. A huge arrow pierced Firres, his arms full of kindling, and pinned him by his neck to a tree. The screaming was awful, from the attackers, the defenders and the women.

Tessen's head separated from his shoulders, a big man on a brown warhorse careering among the wagons and slashing at anything moving. I shoved Batera beneath the nearest wagon. The huge horse bellowed as his rider turned him like a festival dancer, slashing at the line of grooms standing still in shock. Kun reared, striking out with his hooves, hurling a challenge of his own. Only the fact that I'd secured the pink reins around the wheel of the women's wagon prevented him from lunging immediately at the oncoming horse and rider.

I did the only thing possible in all the confusion. I released the reins holding Kun and instinctively drew the woman's sword from its sheath, the only weapon within reach. The huge, black-bearded rider bore down on us, his yellow teeth snarling, fighting to control his horse as Kun lunged and the big brown reared. A warhorse needs a rider to control him but Batera had scrambled away, screaming. I vaulted onto Kun's back, cursing at the woman's saddle I'd put on him.

I saw the smile on the other rider's face. "Asara!" he sneered. My spirits sank as I recognized he was a Rur, just like me. No, not like me, a renegade. I had no shield. There was nothing I could do. I had to get inside the other's defence. I urged Kun forward. He

leapt, as he'd been trained to do, at the other horse's neck, biting, grasping, not letting go, as he pulled the other warhorse to one side. The brown screamed as it began to fall.

The rider's eyes showed his horror but still he swung his sword at me. If it had connected, it would have taken off my head like Tessen's. I've always hated the short, springy, thin women's blades, toy blades we called them on the practice fields, laughing silently at the patient men who tried to make fighters out of useless girls.

The brown, sliding horse, rearing to avoid Kun's teeth, pushed the renegade's blade so high into the air that it passed over my head. Kun let go suddenly and his hooves drove into his enemy's chest. The warrior sprang up, lifting his sword back to chop at me again. I threw the woman's sword in desperation. It went right into the big man's eye.

Kun bucked me off as he did what any battlehorse would do. He smashed his enemy and its rider into dog meat I ran about him, wanting to pick up the man's sword but Kun was trampling what was left of a human body into mush, the sword beneath him. The woman's sword stood up from his eye for a moment. I grabbed it and finally caught a trailing rein, using it to help me jump onto Kun's back, fighting him for control, urging him into the melee that Kun knew well how to fight in, if he was guided by a proper rider.

I slashed at the men in furs, slashing faces, arms, hands, screams of anguish all about me. I saw men I'd known for an age falling under axe blows as I ran the butchers down with the agile Kun. Too old to fight and me too young to be a wagon guard? We were both eager to prove the words wrong.

I saw Batera scuttle from beneath a wagon, this huge bear-skinned warrior charging after her. Kun was aiming at the enemy fighting those in the clan

colours he knew. I did the only thing that came to mind. I leaped from Kun's woman's saddle right onto the bearskin chasing Batera.

The bearman laughed as he threw me from him, picking up his huge axe. The woman's sword was good for something more than throwing. I could whip it much faster than a huge man's broadsword. I slashed the bearskin's face as I rose into a crouch, and back across his eyes before he even got his axe all the way back. I drove the blade into the armpit exposed to me as he groped at the blood that was blinding him.

His foot came up and struck me with numbing force in my throat. I went down, gasping for air, hanging on to the bloody sword that slid out from the bearskin's body. I stood, looking across a battlefield. There were bearskins all about me, staring at me. Several suddenly screamed and went down under arrows released by charging, mounted warriors. The Dareths had arrived on the battlefield.

Kun rose up at another bearskin about to crush me. The man fell forward right onto the woman's sword I still held. Frantically, I tried to work it free as the man threshed and died.

"Let it go, woman!" someone on horseback called to me, the rider slashing out on all sides. "That horse is your weapon! Control it!"

Kun was making bloody pancakes out of dead warriors and horses. Again, I caught his reins. He turned his head, not biting me for once as I climbed onto the pink saddle once more. Yes, Kun was a weapon and he answered to me trustingly. I don't know how many of the enemy we rode down but I did become aware that there were men on either side of me protecting Kun's flanks as we rode down an enemy that was by then trying to run from us.

“Gods, woman!” yelled one of the men, pushing his horse in front of me. “You’re not even armoured!”

Another mounted warrior grabbed Kun’s head. The old horse was too tired, I think, to resist. He stopped, breathing really hard, about to keel over, I thought. I dismounted the only way I could, by jumping over his head. The Dareth rider gasped as I reached back and stroked under Kun’s chin, reassuring him that I was leading him to food and water.

“Guard her!” yelled the Dareth. I had two mounted men following me as I led Kun to the dead mount of a fallen warrior, picking out his water bottle. I let the old horse take it all, chucking and caressing him as his shuddering and heavy breathing lessened.

The man who’d yelled at others to stay with me returned with other men guarding him. “My lady,” he said to me, lifting the face guard of his helmet. I stared in shock at someone as beardless as me. He smiled dryly at me as if he understood I was gaping at a beardless man. “If you will accompany me, my brother wishes to thank Queen Asara for her invaluable assistance in destroying his enemy, Cadan the Rur, and the tribal leader, Gelesh Bearskin. You and your white battlehorse were an inspiration to us in the way you fought, my lady. It isn’t often that one learns that the old legends are true!”

“I’m not ...” I began. My voice came out in the softest of whispers. I clutched at my burning throat. The man standing in front of me leapt from his horse and lifted my hand to look at my throat.

“Scath!” he called to someone. “The lady has been hit! Ride for a healer to look to her when we join my brother.”

I was sitting in a padded chair by a sturdy carriage, all kinds of recovery and salvage going on, when I saw a dirt-streaked Baretta stumbling across the clearing towards me.

“Baretta!” I called, standing, but was immediately drawn back by the old, white-haired man, the healer, Ollosanth.

“She cannot hear you, my lady,” said the old man, smiling at me. I’d heard the strange whisper that emanated from my mouth, not disturbing any of the guards just feet away from me.

“I’m not a lady,” I croak-whispered to him, trying to signal Baretta to come to me. She’d be able to tell these fools what was going on. Beside me, the old battlehorse, Kun, was snuffling away in a feedbag at the oats brought for him. He was still breathing very heavily which I didn’t like. He should have recovered more quickly from exercise as all horses did. I think I’d really overextended the old lad. When I looked at him again, he actually seemed as if he was sleeping on his feet.

“Your maid servant is being brought, my lady,” said the irritating Ollosanth, who must be deaf as he didn’t respond to anything I said.

Baretta eyed me in her surcoat that I’d pushed away; it had been constantly replaced about me by Prince Alloth, his brother Baleth, or this irritating healer. “My, don’t we look pretty,” she sneered at me, going down in a wide curtsy to me.

“Don’t you start!” I screamed at her.

Baretta stared at me, coming right up close to me. “What’s the matter with your voice?” she asked with a

frown, studying the tight bandages about my neck which were helping to restrict my voice, I was sure.

She had to lean right against me, her earring bouncing occasionally on my lips as she finally grasped what I was trying to tell her. The Dareth warriors had seen a beardless me, my fair hair streaming out behind me, on a white horse, with pink saddle and tack, a woman's saddle. With a pink and gold surcoat hanging from my shoulder, using a woman's sword on the attackers, I was, to the Dareth princes, a woman.

And they kept trying to make me more womanly! They draped the surcoat about me as Baretta would have worn it. They were setting up a private woman's tent where I could bathe! Some men were gathering women's clothing, perfumes, toiletries and jewellery, earrings, brooches and hair pins, all for me, the incarnation of Queen Asara.

I could barely understand what they said. They couldn't understand me and the name I gave myself. So I was 'Queen Asara' to their grinning faces. The smiling princes, Alloth, with light brown hair and a neatly combed and shaped beard, and Baleth, his beardless brother, insisted on calling me that, bowing to me, having their men do the same. It was a relief when they went off, "dispensing justice" to various captives in the attack in the Black Forest.

"You want me to tell them who you really are?" asked Baretta, flouncing her dress skirts at me. She watched in surprise as several warriors carried women's clothing into the tent they were preparing for 'Queen Asara.' I'd been asked constantly, of course, who I was. I'd told them I was Maran, son of Melland, but they didn't seem to understand.

"You're the only other Rur woman left alive," Ollosanth said sadly to Baretta. He'd already called her my maidservant as if he expected to find out I was a highborn woman. Was he ever going to look like a

fool when Baretta explained who I was. “You can tell us who this woman is.”

“Of course,” said Baretta with a smile. Ollosanth whistled and, within seconds, Baleth came loping up, smiling.

“Another woman alive?” he asked incredulously. “We thought everyone from where Queen Asara launched her attack was dead!”

Baretta listened, her mouth open in amazement, as mine had been when I heard it the first time! Baleth had explained with a laugh and a gleam in his dark eyes to his brother, Alloth, the leader of the Dareths, that I was the incarnation of ‘Queen Asara.’ I’d risen like the golden woman of legend to smite the mightiest of warriors who’d ever raided and destroyed towns in the lands of the Dareths.

I’d used my white battlehorse to save scores of men from death in the unannounced attack. I’d rallied the Rur forces and killed the great leader of the Bearskin tribe. I’d driven them from the battle, leading the Dareth riders with such spirit that the Bearskins had given up and turned tail, a most wondrous thing to the Dareths, many never having seen such a thing before. It was the stuff of legends, men led to victory by a golden-haired woman who must have had all the goddesses smiling on her.

“Now we do know,” admitted the wryly smiling, beardless Prince to me as he begged me to whisper my name to him, “that you’re not the real Queen Asara, one of the heroines of the Rur, who we learn about as children, but who are you, really? We hadn’t heard of any princess riding with the trading party, not one with such a weapon as that white battlehorse!”

“Tell him who I am!” I whispered to Baretta. Yes, I’d have to withstand sneering looks, gibes and jests of the Dareth princes, and their warriors, about me, a

mere groom, to atone for how they'd mistaken me for a girl. Yes, my father was right. Until my beard grew in, I must cut my hair, the way that it curled being praised many times by the men who talked about me, saying I'd led them with unbound, woman's hair. They'd felt compelled to follow such a queen, they said laughingly, even to the death she seemed intent on but she, they'd meant me, had led them all through unscathed, showing how she, they meant me again, was favoured by the true gods and goddesses!

"We have no princesses, or queens, my lord," said Baretta prettily with a curtsy to Baleth and the assembly of men that pressed in to hear her. "Not in the land of the Rur. That is not our way. Marana is the daughter of a clan warrior, as I am the daughter of the clan chief and her cousin."

"Baretta!" I gasped. "What are you doing? Tell them who I am!"

"Marana," went on Baretta, smiling at me, "has been trained by her father as he has no sons. You know our ways. Each family of the clan, to partake of any fruits of trading, must send a member of the family to assist in the trade. Marana represents her family in Plever's trading company as a wagon guard, that is all. She guards us women at night from molestations."

"A warrior woman, then," said Baleth quickly. "We knew it. And we acclaim Marana as a heroine. Our harpers will immortalize her in ballads of the fight that went on here today!"

"You can't!" I gasped out, taking Baretta's hands and urging her to tell these people the truth about me.

"We all knew that Marana," said Baretta, curtsying to me again, pronouncing my name in feminine form as she and the Dareths had said it, "would one

day be a great heroine! If we can retire, my lord, for just a short time, she will be able to return dressed in a way a woman of her distinction should be dressed!”

“Bareta!” I screamed silently, trying to explain but Bareta got Ollosanth to help her. That old man had a fierce, wiry strength. In no time at all, I was led most unwillingly into the tents set up for Marana, whom Baleth said should be called Lady Marana and be accorded the privileges of a princess, whatever those were among the Dareths.

“I told you that you should be a girl!” laughed Bareta at me, lying back on the soft-cushioned, luxurious bed. “If you play your cards right, cousin Marana, you can be trysting here with any of that mob out there. Did you see their faces, Maran? How does it feel to have a hundred men in love with you, willing to die for you, for a single kiss from a lovely princess?”

“Bareta!” I screamed again. And still my voice didn’t reach her.

“Ooo, look, Marana,” said Bareta, bouncing to her feet. She lifted a long dress that would have suited her wonderfully. “Look what these poor idiots have given you! Have you ever seen such beautiful dresses? And such jewels! Oh, Marana, you’re going to be the prettiest girl in the world after I’ve finished with you.”

I shook my head violently at my cousin since she refused to hear what little voice I had. No, there was no way I was going along with whatever jest she wanted to play on the Dareths. Didn’t she have any feelings for all our friends who’d just died here in the Black Forest? I hadn’t seen anyone alive, save her, from Plever’s trading company.