



SARNA'S  
RANSOM



LEE ANDERSON



BOOKS OF JYN:  
BOOK ONE

SARNA'S RANSOM

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# I

## Princess Sarna

**She spotted** someone watching her. Her school group approached a low sandstone bridge and she saw the top half of a man's face there, peeking from over the parapet. Sarna stopped walking.

By her side, her dearest friend Lalya stopped too. "My love, what's the matter?" she asked her.

"I saw someone."

"Where?"

"Up there. He ducked back down."

They were part of an all-female art class. Each student held a sketchpad made from linen rags. It wasn't until a few days ago the class would even brave these field trips, though they never veered far from the kingdom walls. It was still a somewhat risky outing because of the princess, but Sarna assured the headmaster it was fine, so long as they brought guards. Would be worth it to get some grass between their toes, catch some fresh air. Naturally, Sarna had been offered private tutoring but preferred being treated like anyone else, weary of the castle's isolation. She even wore the same dark-blue tunic as the other girls, the same gold threadwork.

Six knights protected the class, riding horseback with two in the lead, two astride, and two watching their flank. The students walked single file down a narrow, forested path led by Master Reglan, an elderly teacher with wild, white hair.

Sarna heard a quick zing, then an airless gasp. The front guard clutched at an arrow, which had pierced his throat. He made a gurgling noise and toppled from his horse. The class screamed. A second arrow skewered the eye of the guard behind him. Yet another

arrow bounced off his helmet. A third punctured his neck and he too spilled to the ground. He fell with a clanging thud.

Screaming louder, the class dropped their sketchpads and ran back up the trail. Master Reglan remained, immobilized from shock. Sarna and Lalya also stayed, inadvertently blocked by the two rear guards who fought to control their horses while also unsheathing their swords. Before the rest of the guards could establish a defensive stance, men with swords and axes erupted from the foliage. Outnumbered, the guards were swiftly dismembered, then discarded to die in the grass.

Lalya clenched Sarna's arm so hard it hurt. Her friend sobbed hysterically as the bandits surrounded them. The bandits were a dozen strong, at least. Every man became focused on Sarna, obviously informed on who she was.

Realizing no one cared about him, Master Reglan fled back up the trail after the other girls. In his panic, he fell several times but eventually disappeared around a corner.

The bandits closed around Sarna and Lalya, forcing them to shrink their space until they embraced one another. The bandits grinned, seemingly made cocky by the easy success of their attack, pleased by the terror they were causing.

Sarna could tell by their armor they were former soldiers of the Great War. Since the conflict had ended, many of these unemployed soldiers had turned to banditry to survive.

"Your Highness," a bandit called to her.

The voice came from atop the leafy arch of the bridge. Sarna realized this was who she'd seen spying at her. This bandit wore a gray, cotton-padded tunic with an orange sash around the waist, a quiver of arrows riding his back. She noticed the bow in his hand and understood he'd been the archer who killed the first two guards.

"Don't hurt us," Sarna said to him. "Please."

"Don't give us a reason to and that won't be a problem, Your Highness."

"Let my friend go? You don't need her. I'm the one you want, right?"

Lalya whimpered from the attention. She hid her face in Sarna's shoulder, horrified from even being looked at.

"We'll be keeping her too," the bandit on the bridge said.

One of the men pinched Lalya's thigh. She yelped and scrambled to be on Sarna's other side, nearly slipping on an abandoned sketchpad. The area was littered with them.

Sarna turned on her friend's assaulter. "Don't touch her! Don't you dare!" She used her arms to shield her friend.

The bandits laughed. Sarna could see that having these spoiled royal bitches at their mercy was hilarious for them.

"Control yourselves!" the archer commanded his men, apparently their leader. He motioned his hands down, a signal for calm. "We talked about this. We have to do this right."

"Do *what* right?" Sarna asked him. "We'll hide with you somewhere while you wait for a response to your ransom note?"

The bandits' leader nodded. He grinned, bemused. "Something like that. Yeah, let's do that. Good idea, Your Highness."

"My father will hunt you down if it takes him the rest of his life."

More laughter. Sarna felt a hand on her rear, and she spun away. The molesting bandit grinned at her with yellow-brown teeth. She noticed how his erection visibly pushed at his trousers, and she increasingly understood just how perilous their situation was. They were going to be raped. Among other things. There was no telling. These men could do whatever they wanted and there truly wasn't much she could do about it.

Another bandit reached for her, and she backed even further away. The men cheered.

"Easy, I said!" the bandit leader called. "The money is more important. The king isn't likely to hand over a ransom without his precious daughter unharmed. Isn't that right, Princess?"

Sarna swallowed hard, nodded empathetically. "Yes, that is very true. Either of us."

"She's got a pretty little mouth though," said the bandit who had first touched her. "Let's just see if she knows what to do with it. The king won't know."

"Is this really the princess?" asked another, blocked to her by the others. "How could she be caught so easy? Maybe this is a decoy princess."

Their leader seemed entertained by this notion. "Are you the real Princess Sarna? Or the fake one?" he asked her.

In her nervousness, she considered agreeing to the "fakeness" idea but decided against it. Her being the real princess was the only reason they were still alive and untouched.

She took Lalya's hand and led her as she nudged their way free from the circle of men. She suffered a pinch here and there but kept walking until she reached the bottom of the small bridge. She looked up at the bandit leader. "Yes, I am the real Princess Sarna. And who are you?"

"My name's Ereem. I've been waiting a long, long, long time to meet you, Your Highness."

Sarna turned at the sound of Lalya crying out. A bandit had grabbed her from behind while working a hand between her legs. A second bandit grabbed her breasts.

"Let go of her!" Sarna yelled. She slapped at them.

"Listen to the princess!" Ereem called. "Cut it out!"

The bandits became more excited instead. The situation was a breath away from escalating into a full-on gang rape. "Hey! Hey!" Ereem kept shouting. Finally, the men stopped to look up at him. They frowned.

Ereem scooted onto his haunches and jumped down from the bridge. He landed on his feet, a graceful brute. He came closer to everyone.

"What did I already say to all of you?" he asked his men.

The men traded glances, seemingly unaware of what anyone had ever said to them about anything. "I told you to listen to everything I tell you," Ereem continued, "and this will go perfectly smooth. But you have to keep calm. Be smart. Don't get so crazy." He sauntered closer to Sarna, and she could smell him. He smelled earthy with a trace of musk and sweat. "See? Everything's going to be fine, Your

Highness. Your father gives us what we want, and no harm will come to you. I guarantee it.”

“How can I trust you?”

“You have no choice. I mean, do you?”

Sarna looked around at the smelly, cockeyed, slobbering pigs around her. She looked at Lalya, then back at Ereem. “It would seem I don’t have a choice, no.”

“I have to confess something.” He bent down and picked up the decapitated head of a guard. He looked it over as if considering it for purchase. “You’re not what I was expecting,” he told her.

She tried her best to ignore the object in his hands. “Look, I understand why you’re doing this.” She surprised herself with how undisturbed she managed to sound. “I don’t necessarily agree with every economic policy my father has come up with.”

“That so? Those are big words for a young girl. What are you, sixteen?”

“Seventeen.”

A shout came from a bandit stationed further up the trail. Someone was coming. Her rescue perhaps. The bandits had lingered too long.

Before Sarna could react, Ereem dropped the severed head and lifted her over his shoulder. He ran with her. She squirmed but he was too strong. When she tried raising her head to check on Lalya, she didn’t see her anywhere. As the bandit ran with her into the woods, sheltered by his men, she bounced on his shoulder like a sack of straw. Branches whipped at her face, so she lowered her head. She went limp and closed her eyes, surrendering to her fate for now. She didn’t know what else to do.

## Prince Kuu

Prince Khüükhed (or “Kuu” for short as he preferred) entered the king’s chambers, an immense room with a beamed ceiling and stone inner walkway. There were large windows on all four walls, which

offered sweeping views of the kingdom and countryside. Handcrafted furniture complemented an enormous, paneled dais bed, the headwall adorned with various pieces of armor, worn by the king during past battles.

Prince Kuu was astonished to find his father the king undressed and still in bed. There was once a time when King Xaah would have arisen before dawn, accomplishing more before daylight than most men would their entire week. Those days had apparently expired.

Ohmaar, King Xaah's counsel for the last six years—before his own father retired from having been the king's hand for nearly his entire life—sat in the corner at a small reading table, appearing morose. Something was off. Both men appeared listless.

"Father," Kuu said, "is everything all right?"

King Xaah edged to the side of his bed. He placed his feet on the floor. "Kuu," he said. "Everything is fucking perfect. What do you want?"

"I told you I was coming to speak with you this morning. About our situation with the Cathyrnee and the Yelkin. Did you not remember?"

The king spoke over him while pushing himself to his feet: "Ah, spare me! To hell with the Cathyrnee. *Joppa!* Why do you keep bothering me about them?"

Kuu raised his brows, threw a look at Ohmaar. The counselor sat with his fingers laced and shrugged helplessly. "Father, I keep bothering you because they're about to be wiped out. Finished. Gone. Not one more of them."

"Didn't we just defeat them in a Great War? Are they our friends now? Our kingdom has its own problems."

Kuu closed his eyes and inhaled slow. This had been happening far too often lately. He would hold entire conversations with his father, only to have to repeat everything he'd said the next day. Or even the same evening. Was the relentless pressure placed on the king catching up to him? King Xaah wasn't so old, though lately, he moved with the slow deliberateness of someone twice his age. His

stubble was well on its way to becoming a beard and he'd never grown a beard. "Father, this is not what you said yesterday."

"What did I say yesterday?"

"That I should go and speak with Chief Arlyn. See what aid we could offer them. It's the humane thing to do. They're so weakened from the war, they're getting attacked and slaughtered by the Yelkin. Almost daily."

"What are Yelkin?"

Kuu had to focus on maintaining his composure. *What are Yelkin?* Had his father actually asked that? The prince cleared his throat. "They're giant beasts from the mountains. They've all but completely destroyed the Cathyrnee. If we don't help them—"

"Good! Praise the Yelkin! I would adore it if they killed off the Cathyrnee! That's what I wanted to do in the first place. Show no mercy."

"I understand they're not your favorite people, Father. Mine either. But this isn't right. Letting them just get massacred like that. They're still human beings."

King Xaah walked past his son. He gave his shoulder a quick, hard slap. "You're too burdened with your emotions. The Cathyrnee are still our enemies, and they deserve no sympathy. I regret not having them all killed, even the women and children. I don't know how I was talked out of it."

"Because we're not barbarians, Father. If you ask me, the real enemy anymore is Burnya. They made out handsomely from sitting aside and watching us kill each other."

Another glance at Ohmaar. This time Ohmaar took his eyes to the floor and frowned, embarrassed, having no idea what to do or say. The useless twit. Some counselor.

Kuu pondered if it was even worth it to continue this discussion. Or would the king once more dismiss everything being said to him, only a few hours from now? What was going on with him?

"Father, we have to help these people," he said. "Or at least make the attempt. I assume I will have to go over this same speech later today?"

The king had nearly reached a window to look out of but about-faced on his son. "Don't talk to your father like that! The throne isn't yours yet, you fuck."

The shock of hearing his father say this to him was enough to make the prince take two large steps backward. Prince Kuu started to point out the absurdity of what his father was accusing him of, then felt the futility of this. "I'm going to meet with Chief Arlyn," he said. "See how bad it is. That's all."

"Meet with him? Why? So you can both plot against me?"

"Plot?"

"I already know you want me dead. You just can't wait to be king, can you?"

"How could you even say such a thing? That's madness."

Another hard glare at Ohmaar brought the counselor to his feet. "My Lord, I think what Prince Kuu—"

The king cut him off, still addressing his son: "Answer me! You want me dead, don't you?"

Kuu held his hands up. "Father, everything I do—and I do mean every single living thing I do from the moment I awake to the moment I sleep—is for the benefit of our family and this kingdom. No other concern occupies my mind. Ever."

King Xaah responded with such vitriol the spittle flew from his lips. "I already know everything! I've known it for years now!"

The king collapsed onto his bed and kicked his feet in the air until this seemed to wear him out. Sniffling, running a finger beneath his nose, he lay there while gazing at the ceiling. He cleared his throat and said, "Ohmaar, bring me some tea."

Ohmaar looked back and forth between father and son. "Now, My Lord?"

"No, tomorrow! Yes, now! You bumbling, shitty knave! Move!"

King Xaah reached beneath the bed and lifted the chamber pot from there. He threw it, empty thankfully, and it missed Ohmaar by several feet, but not before violently indenting a set of velvet curtains. The pot clattered across the floor.

## Chief Arlyn

The Chief of the Cathyrnee awoke with a start, having fallen asleep by accident. The cool night air touched his bare chest. He lay with his wife Chieftess Yarlaa in a round hut with a collapsible wooden frame, covered in felt made from sheep's wool. He reached for Yarlaa beside him, felt her hip beneath layers of fox fur.

A tremor moved through the ground and Arlyn knew instantly what this meant.

"Yarlaa, wake up." He shook her shoulder. "Yarlaa!"

She raised her head, though still deep asleep, her hair a nest of tangles. She mumbled.

"They're here again!" Arlyn got onto his knees to grab her. Carry her if he had to.

A pair of attendant warriors rushed into the hut holding broadswords. "We have to get you to safety!" one of them bellowed.

The roof lifted off and exposed a dark and stormy sky. A Yelkin held the shredded remnants of the roof in its long claws. Tall as any tree, the giant's demented, drooling face was like something drawn by a child, its thick, red hide zigzagged with lacerations from previous battles. A set of enormous, multi-tined antlers sprouted from its head.

A section of the roof fell away and narrowly missed crushing all of them. Yarlaa cowered with her arms folded over her head. Arlyn lay on top of her. The nearest warrior rushed and stood above them both. Arlyn slid lower and searched for his sword, cursing his carelessness for not keeping it closer. The long, red arm of the giant creature reached in. The warrior dove to swipe at the arm but his sword merely bounced off. The blade broke, striking him across the brow. He fell back and clutched his hemorrhaging face. The other warrior was already there to take his place but a second Yelkin approached the open structure. It lifted the man with one hand and sank its teeth into his torso, tearing him in half, entrails gushing loose.

Chief Arlyn and Yarlaa were soon surrounded by the shrieks of people meeting similar deaths. Caught in a feeding frenzy, the Yelkin roared from every direction. An antlered giant reached inside for Yarlaa. Chief Arlyn cried out for his wife and raised his sword above his head. He brought his blade down across the giant's forearm.

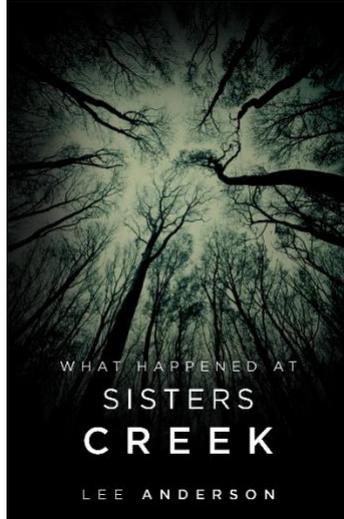
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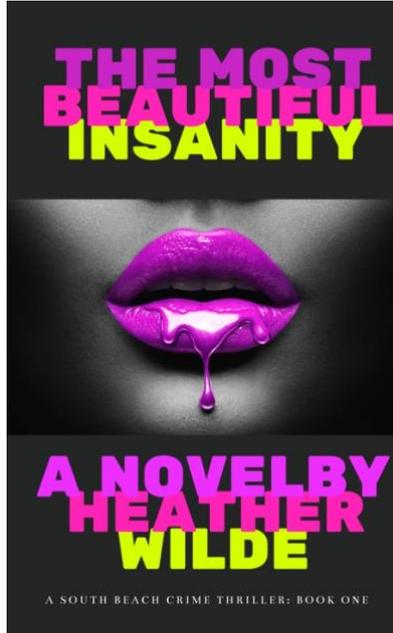
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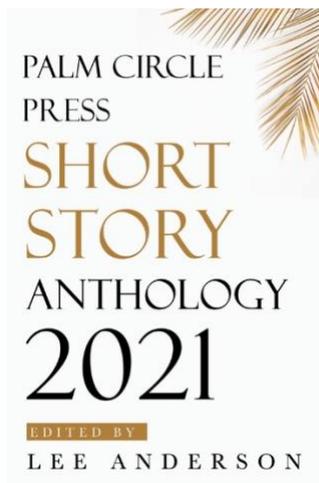
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