

Fields of Gold

by Vernanne Bryan

*With gentleness I will seek you.
I am coming home at last.
I'm done with fields of gray and blue,
and will place them in the past.*

*I will wipe away your sorrows.
I will take away your fears.
I will pledge you bright tomorrows,
that we'll spend in all our years.*

*I will keep you close beside me.
No more battles will I fight.
I will come to you on bended knee,
and hold you through the night.*

*Everyday we'll seek life's treasures.
We'll find joy as we grow old.
You, my love, will be all pleasure,
till we go home to fields of gold.*

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PROLOGUE

A Small Kingdom off the Coast of the Mediterranean Sea

January 1848

Three men stood by the young queen's bed in the royal chamber. Two were tall powerfully built men dressed for battle, the eldest of which was the captain of the palace guard, who stood in a state of restless agitation next to the young king. The third man present was a modest graying physician that had served the monarchy for three generations. It was he who dared to break the awful silence hanging like a black shroud over the gilded room.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," the physician said. "Elena was too frail to withstand the strain of bearing one child, let alone two. I warned you when you bedded her that this could happen."

"Silence!"

Unshed tears hung in the king's eyes as he tore off his helmet and threw it across the marble floor with a clatter. He wore the sweat and grime of recent battle and he ran powerful fingers through his matted blonde hair. The king was heedless of the ever increasing sounds of clashing arms in the palace courtyard below or the nervous pacing of the captain of the guard. Grief stricken passionate green eyes looked down on the pale still face of the woman who lay there. Her expression was finally at peace and free of the pain, fear and suffering he had seen on it the night before. Her eyes were closed in death, but he would remember the violet color of them until he too lay unseeing in the grave.

One of the guards outside pounded frantically on the chamber door. The king did not stir from the cold place where he knelt by the bed. The captain strode hurriedly to the door and spoke in hushed heated conversation for a few short moments with the guard outside. Their voices rose to an audible pitch and then the captain violently slammed the chamber door shut, bursting forth as he did with a sacrilegious expletive. The king visibly winced at the reverberating noises that intruded harshly into what should have been a quiet sanctuary. He finally lifted his fair head. A dark scowl covered his handsome face and his green eyes flashed in anger.

The older man who had been in charge of the king's welfare for years was not in the least cowed by the thunder on the regal countenance. He turned intense unflinching burgundy eyes into the full fury of those of his monarch.

"Sire, the Austrians have broken through the palace doors. We must hurry."

The barbaric cry that had begun on a battlefield many miles away was now resounding through the palace like the shrill whine of a great wind. It had been that way since the right division of the king's forces had broken and a chaotic and terrible retreat had begun. Soldiers and horses alike had slipped on the blood slick ground and the shrieks of animals and men could be heard crying in death and agony. They had fought for their king and their homeland and for days they had managed to sustain their position. But, in spite of all their valiant efforts, the Austrians had held the day upon the battlefield.

Caught in the melee of the retreat, the king had whirled his great war stallion about and stared at the line of his soldiers still trying to hold a small ridge. Thousands of the invading forces had died; more men came to replace them. Though he had led his army with genius for one so young, in despair the king realized that the outcome was hopeless. He had turned his mount

toward the sea then and inch by bloody inch had surrendered up the soil of his kingdom to stand and make his last defense protecting the palace walls.

It began as a murmur in the courtyard; it had risen to an awful chant. This time the news was true. The Austrians were within the palace. The king's valiant forces had scattered like leaves in the wind and the last wall of defense was the palace guard. The clash of arms could be heard now in the distant throne room.