

Prologue

Moist fog, muffled sound, a minstrel's voice calling.

Blindly, she focused on the song and its sedate beat, moving with care over the uneven terrain. As she neared the music, she could discern other sounds: the tumbling of water and dove calls, gentle in the slight breeze. Her slipped foot stumbled over a rock, and she could hear it clatter against others, splashing. The wind picked up, brushing a lock of hair across her forehead, dissipating the mist before her. Flickering light beckoned her closer as she picked her way across a stream.

Motion caught her eye, and she saw the minstrel for the first time. His voice soft, he chanted a tale of war and betrayal. In contrast to his bloody story, a white dove in his hand cooed counterpoint to his words. She barely saw his musicians through the darkness behind him, the torchlight catching only their movement as they played the drum and lute. Walls rising steeply into the fog told her where she was, filling her heart with dread. She was outside the castle. Again. As if cued by her realization, the minstrel sang what she knew would be the last of his song. When he finished, he dropped his head, and the musicians paused in their playing.

Sharp strains came from the lute alone, eerie in the dark mistiness. Unease filled her heart, for she knew what was coming. She wanted to turn and flee, but her feet wouldn't move. The deep rolling of the drum caused her to flinch in apprehension.

Startled by a sudden, intense beat of the drum, the dove flew from the minstrel's hand. Her fearful eyes could not look away as the dove's path took it up into a clear blue sky. She heard the shrill cry of a hawk, felt the sickening impact and averted her eyes from the bloodied feathers floating through the air.

Another drumbeat. Another vision.

Sunlight and shadow, dust motes sailing upon invisible drafts, playful secrecy.

She waited impatiently, squatting beneath the table in her father's chambers. Her little sister should have found her by now. Just as she was about to climb from her hiding place, the sound of booted feet chased her underneath again. Wishing she'd never begun this game, she shrank back, watching several pairs of legs stomp into the room. The voices were quiet and serious, rough with concern, and her ears pricked up in curiosity.

"What have you learned, Angus?" her father asked.

"My liege, the Invader is closing on our southern borders. He's movin' fast, burnin' the farms behind him."

A younger voice, similar in timbre to the king's, cursed. "Why destroy perfectly good farmland?" he demanded in righteous anger. "Should he get too far past our borders, he'll need it to support his troops."

"Calm yourself, son," the king directed, moving toward his heir.

Waiting quietly under the table, she recognized her brother's boots. He fancied those silly flaps on the sides to help pull them on. She wanted to know who this Invader was and why he was being so dim, but if her father found her now, she'd be in real trouble. The voices continued above her, and she focused on them again.

"Send me, father! With the Third Army, I could lay waste to him!"

With reluctance, the king consulted his aide. "Angus?"

"Aye, Your Majesty. If we can get to him before he gets to the Wynsul River..."

"See?" the young man asked. "Please, father! I beg you."

In the following silence, she entertained herself with the notion of her strong older brother begging. She bit her tongue to keep from giggling.

“Go.”

After a startled pause, the son dashed forward. “Thank you, father! I’ll make sure that bastard never invades another kingdom!” He turned and clattered out of the room.

“Angus,” the king said, “go with the crown prince. He’ll have need of your wisdom.”

“Aye, sire.”

Another beat of the drum. Another vision.

A hoarse cry, shouts of dismay, footfalls and movement just out of sight.

At the sound of her mother’s voice, she looked up from her studies. Hearing something in the hall, she ignored her tutor and dashed out to see what the ruckus was about. Several people stood about the hall. Puzzled, she stepped closer. Her mother was on the floor, hovering over something, hugging it to her breast and sobbing uncontrollably. Others around her either stood back in embarrassment or tried to comfort her. The king appeared, face stricken as he clearly saw what his daughter could not. One of his aides gasped in shock.

“It’s your fault!” the hysterical woman spat at him. “Your fault!” Her voice faded into loud sobs.

Unable to stay away, fear and inquisitiveness filling her, she stepped closer. Others were in her way, blocking her view. She edged around them, peeking between. When she finally comprehended what she was seeing, tears welled up in her eyes. Her brother’s boots were bloody.

Another beat of the drum, the tempo increasing.

Dead and dying, razed fields lifting acrid smoke into the sky, enclosed, surrounded.

Even at this distance, the stench made her nose twitch. Less than a mile away, burning fields gave evidence of the Invader’s progression toward her home. Below her window, she could see increasing activity in the courtyard: the injured straggling in from the front lines, women and older children providing supplies to the overworked surgeons. The guards on the walls had been tripled in response to the threat, but half of them were walking wounded. She’d heard the orders given by her father’s aides: in the event of a siege, all foodstuffs and potables were to be brought into the castle.

A lone rider approached from the battlefield, his horse galloping at full tilt. Reaching the castle, he nearly toppled his steed as he pulled it up short. Even at this distance, she could hear a captain’s voice challenging him, could distinctly hear his response.

“The king is dead! The king is dead!”

Drumbeat.

Darkness, whispers, rustling noises. A hand across her mouth, smothering her, scaring her. Startled shriek, heart pumping.

“Hush, lass!” a servant’s voice said. “It’s time to rise and dress. The Invader’s at the castle walls. We must get you and your family away!”

She hurriedly dressed, barely having enough time to grab a favorite doll as she was hustled from her room. In the hall, her mother clutched an infant brother, her sister stared wide-eyed at the small gathering of loyal guards and servants. She grabbed on to her younger sibling, felt the smaller girl tremble.

As they were herded from the castle, the ringing of metal on metal filled the courtyard.

“They’ve breached the walls!”

Drumbeat, relentless nightmare.

Flash of moonlight on water, gentle music of the horses’ tack, muted whispers, arms wrapped about a servant as their mount swayed gently.

“There’s a small boat ahead, Majesty,” a voice drifted back.

The world suddenly turned to thunder as hooves pounded and armor rattled. Crying out in alarm, she clutched the servant before her as their steed leaped into a full gallop. Branches tugged at her clothes and hair. And then she was flying, landing with a grunt on a patch of peat as she tried to catch her breath.

Standing alone, she listened to the horse’s hooves racing away. In the near distance, she could hear fighting, angry curses, and her sister’s cry. Terrified and frozen with indecision, she clutched her doll to her chest. The baby was

shrieking in the dark, a man's scream mingling with the sound for just a moment before choking into silence. Unable to stay away despite her fright, she pushed through the foliage.

Bodies lay all around, evidence of the guards' attempts to save the royal family. On a small strip of sand next to the river, her mother was on her knees, clutching the screaming baby to her chest. Before her was a man in armor, holding a sword. Several other soldiers and horses were gathered around them; some of the remaining servants huddled in a small knot nearby. Her sister was nowhere to be seen.

The armored man pulled off his helmet. His air of command reminded her of her father, though he wasn't as handsome. An ugly scar ran across his face from the base of his nose to curve down and around his cheek. He was saying something, his voice so low that she couldn't make it out.

When the blade pierced her mother's chest, pinning the babe to it, her scream matched theirs.

Drumbeat.

Panting, heart thumping, crashing through the wilderness. Noises everywhere, the call of wild animals urging her on.

She knew the Invader and his soldiers were chasing her, tracking her down to kill her. She was royalty, and her life was forfeit. Since she was a toddler she'd been instructed that she lived for her people; her people were gone.

Bursting from behind a bush, she screamed silently at the armored figure barring her way. Moonlight flashed on the blade above her, and she covered, afraid of the deathblow that was coming. Cuddling her doll to her chest, she heard only the scuffle, the jangle of armor, felt the ground tremble as a heavy body hit. Then a gentle touch fell on her shoulder, and she peered fearfully at her savior.

The minstrel smiled, a bloody dove in his hands. "Hush, child. You're safe now."

As she struggled with the familiar nightmare, barely surfacing into consciousness, she felt fingers caress her forehead.

"Shhh. It's just a bad dream," a familiar voice murmured. "You're safe now."

Sighing, she relaxed back into sleep.

Part 1

Furtive movement alerted her.

To her credit, her flinch to wakefulness was minor, causing hardly a sound. Her mind raced as she struggled to remember where she was. Cracking her eyelids a fraction, she surveyed her situation. Warmth was behind and beside her, evidence of her sleeping handmaiden. A root had dug its way into the small of her back; she'd been so exhausted when they'd stopped running, she hadn't realized it was there. Her cloak was wrapped about both of them, scarcely protecting against the chill of the early morning mist.

Steam rose from her mouth and she tried to keep her breathing even. There, the movement again — a rustling of cloth, just outside her vision. A twig snapped, sharp in the hush, and her heart fluttered in her throat. Unseen beneath the cloak, her hand grasped the ornamental dagger her father

had gifted her on her last birthday. Despite her attempt to appear asleep, her dark eyes widened; she held her breath.

The bush to her left rattled — someone trying to get into the tiny clearing where the women were hiding. Unable to keep up the pretense, she threw off the cloak, pulling the dagger from its sheath. Her handmaiden, rousing at the sudden movement, looked wildly about, keeping her tongue at the warning gesture from her mistress.

A figure on all fours pushed slowly through the thick undergrowth. Gripping the hilt with white knuckles, hand shaking, she prepared to launch her attack. The figure raised its head; their eyes met.

“By the gods, Your Highness!” the man breathed. He used one grimy hand to tug at his forelock. “It’s me! Hector!”

Terror quickly faded to elation, and the princess scabbled forward to draw the servant in. “Hector! You survived!” Her hands were frantic on his shoulders, grasping at his tunic and pulling him, unable to believe he was still alive despite the tactile proof. “Mother? Prince Liam?”

Hector’s weathered face sagged. “Nay, Your Highness. I saw the Invader run them through.”

The heaviness in her chest threatening to overwhelm her, she drew away and sheathed her dagger.

“I’m sorry, Your Royal Highness,” the man whispered.

She flinched at the added “Royal”, an indication of her new status as Crown Princess. “Nay, Hector.” Taking a deep breath to quell the need for tears, she looked at her two servants. “Call me Katerin. *Both* of you. If we’re to survive this night, the Princess Sabine must not be mentioned.”

The handmaiden, Ilia, made a soft noise in her throat and reached out to grasp the younger woman’s shoulder.

Survival first. “Hector, did anyone see you escape?”

Hesitantly, he said, “I don’t think so, Your...Katerin. The guards were busy with the royal family. Two of us slipped away, but Matteo was killed by a patrol after we’d gone less than a league.”

Nodding, she looked up into the foliage. “Get some sleep, Hector. Ilia and I will remain on watch.” With a sad smile, she leaned forward and touched his shoulder. “It’s good to see you, my friend. I’m glad you stayed alive.”

Hector’s face twisted into a smile. “And I am greatly happy to see you, High...Katerin.”

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“Have you found her?”

Swallowing, the captain fought the urge to tug at the collar of his uniform. “Nay, we have not, sire.” In a rush, he added, “All but one of the men have reported back. And he’s not been seen or heard from in two days.”

Thoughtful, the Invader stroked his bare chin and stared out over the city with muddy blue eyes. He held himself with the power and grace of a man half his age. His hair was turning gray with a vengeance, the rich mahogany color of youth fading away, and a scar marring his lower cheek drew his mouth into a permanent frown. He stood on a balcony, behind him the main chamber of the previous Dulce king — victim to the ordained destiny of the Invader, one of many who’d attempted to resist the inevitable. Below the Invader, tendrils of smoke still rose from outside the castle walls, smoldering remains of a long siege and ultimate success. He inhaled deeply, the acrid scent reminiscent of so many other battles in his long and bloody career.

“In which direction was my man riding before he disappeared?” he finally asked, voice gravelly from an old scar across his throat.

“Southwest, sire,” the captain reported, hard put to refrain from wiping at the sweat on his face. “I’ve already taken the liberty of sending a full patrol in that direction.”

“Good.” The Invader turned, eyeing the guardsman. “Catch up to them. If you don’t personally bring her head back, I’ll take yours in its place. Is that understood?”

Ashen, the captain, nodded. “Aye, my liege,” he whispered, swaying on weak knees. He flinched a bit when a hand waved at him.

“Get out.” A worried frown crossed the Invader’s face as he watched the man stumble out the door as though all manner of demon were upon him. Sardonicly, he thought, *I suppose I’m close enough to that particular description.*

He approached a large oak table in the center of the room. Beneath a layer of expensive clear glass laid a map of the kingdom he’d just taken, and he regarded it with partial satisfaction. Hearing movement, he looked up and saw an aide standing at the door leading into the king’s bedchambers. Frowning, the scar only making him look fiercer, he growled, “You said you’d take care of the royal family. I should send you out with my captain...and the same instructions.”

The man bowed obsequiously. “My apologies, Your Royal Majesty,” he said, voice oily from many years at court. “You’d be well within your right. I’m afraid my success would be limited; I’m not well versed in tracking errant princesses.”

“Had you fulfilled your bargain, no one would need tracking. If I recall, you were to drug the royal family and get my men into the castle with a minimum of fuss.” The Invader studied the aide, disgusted with the finery the man insisted on wearing. “You failed, Dominic.”

“Aye, sire,” the aide responded with another bow before stepping further into the room. “But had it not been for my assistance, you’d still be outside the walls. It’s hardly my fault that Cook decided to have a go at the stew before it was served.”

Turning away in distaste, the Invader picked up a goblet of wine from the table and sipped it. “What’s done is done.” He returned to the balcony and stared out over his kingdom. “Get out, Dominic. Pack your belongings and see my quartermaster for your reward before you leave.”

The aide froze before a flash of anger crossed his face. He took an automatic step forward as he spoke. “That’s not what you promised me. You said I’d remain as a member of your court.”

“Yes,” the Invader agreed, turning to glare at the dandy. “And you promised me the royal family and a good number of the guard would be drugged before you opened the gates. Too many of my men died as a result of your failure. Since you did not accomplish your end, I hardly need to hold up mine.” He padded closer to Dominic, circling him, his manner that of a beast hunting. “You betrayed a king to whom you had sworn allegiance; did you think I would trust your oath of fealty to me?”

Dominic ground his teeth, but forced himself to remain prudently silent.

“You’re a traitor now, and you’ll be one in the future; you don’t fool me.” Stopping behind him, the Invader leaned close, voice soft. “Now get out, before I decide to add another head to my walls.”

With a swallow, the aide turned and backed away. When he reached the door, Dominic intoned, “Your Majesty,” and then stepped into relative safety.

The Invader sighed and resumed studying the map of his new acquisition — the fourth in his military career. He was now master of more land than all remaining realms put together. Sipping his wine, he recalled the witch who had set him on his path.

Fidgeting on the stool, young Prince Germaine peered at the strange designs on the witch’s cards. He wasn’t supposed to be here; his father would have a fit if he discovered his youngest son had visited a soothsayer. But when the teenager had ridden past the witch, he felt something call to him, and here he sat.

The decrepit woman cackled, rubbing stones together in her hands before casting them upon the cards. Leaning close to study them, she said, "You'll be a great warrior, a great king, young pup. You'll not be defeated in battle."

Germaine puzzled over that. "But I've two brothers before me in line for succession. How can I be king?"

"Never mind the present." The hag dismissed his statement with a wave of her wrinkled hand. "You will be king."

Leaning closer, dread and fear and intense yearning filling him, he asked, "Can you see my death? If I am never to be defeated in battle, how will I die?"

The witch clucked a bit, poking at this stone and that as she muttered to herself. "You will die by a sword, kingling. It will be wielded by the child of your enemy, one of royal blood who will avenge those you will have wronged."

Her prophecy had proven true. After his brothers had been killed in war, his father gasping his last at the end of an enemy spear, the Invader had stabilized his hereditary kingdom and begun his campaign of conquest across the map. Within the four kingdoms he'd taken, every person of royal blood had been slain. There'd been an instance or two of difficulty in expunging the existing royal line, but ultimately, he'd been successful.

"And I'll be successful now," he stated, finishing his wine.

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Stepping into the courtyard, Dominic cuffed a page that inadvertently impeded his path. He smiled in grim satisfaction when the lad yelped and ducked away from a further beating. The physical attack did nothing to ease the deep anger in his heart. *Bastard! How dare he toss me off as so much rubbish?*

Dominic made his way across the crowded courtyard, ignoring the soldiers still in the process of sorting through the Invader's new wealth. "Wealth he wouldn't have if it weren't for my intervention."

"Eh? You say somethin'?" a passing guardsman asked, carefully balancing a large tapestry on one shoulder.

Startled, his anger deepening at his slip, Dominic growled, "Nothing for *your* ears."

The guardsman snorted derisively but held his tongue.

Without further encounters, Dominic arrived at his destination — a low door on the east wall. The hall he entered was dark with an aroma of coolness and death, the scent of musty stone mingling with a coppery tang. As he closed the thick door behind him, the rattle and activity of the courtyard faded away. Sighing in relief at the audible reprieve, Dominic moved silently through the hall. He sidestepped a drying pool of blood, thoughts intent on his abrupt dismissal. *Bastard would never have taken the castle without my help*, he grumbled.

Most of his life at court had been orchestrated toward attaining power. Dominic wasn't presumptuous enough to desire the throne. He was a realist; no one would follow a king who had more interest in the fashions of the day than in his people. But to be the man who had the king's ear...that was a worthy endeavor. Things had worked in Dominic's favor, and his career had flowered as he progressed along the path to become the king's personal aide. But it all shriveled away when he ran into the stone wall called Queen Mugaion Caesarin Elizabeth Dulce Annaatje.

To say the queen disliked Dominic was to make an understatement of grand proportions. He was never sure whether he'd done something that offended her, or if she had a distinct loathing for him for no other reason than that he existed. Dominic assumed the latter, for nothing he did or said seemed to alter the queen's distaste. Unfortunately for the ambitious man, Caesarin *also* had her husband's ear.

Dominic slipped into the small chambers he called home. Throwing open an oak wardrobe, he looked at his clothes in dismay. There was no way he could take all his belongings. He began sorting through the clothing as his frustrated musings continued.

Every attempt he'd made to get into the monarch's good graces had been met with resistance. Dominic soon realized that his hopes were destined to be unrealized, and he began searching for another way to attain his goal. Moving on to another kingdom was out of the question; Dominic's network of informants and hoodlums couldn't be moved. He either had to find another king and start from scratch, or remain and bring another to power. It had been a difficult decision, but with no other way of reaching King Frederick, only one avenue remained.

The Invader had been a hard man to make contact with. After the initial meeting, however, Dominic felt a renewed sense of purpose. His proposals and offers had been accepted, and a pact was made that would further his desires. The fact that the Dulce king and his bitch would die was only added incentive.

With a frustrated sigh, Dominic slammed the wardrobe closed. Everything would have to be replaced. Opening a trunk at the foot of his small bed, he pulled out a travel pack. A few pieces of jewelry, a couple of changes of clothing, and three small scrolls were all he could afford to take in the small space. Shouldering his bag, he took a final look at his furnishings. *I must take the bastard Invader down.* Another sigh escaped him, and he left the room.

Thanks to his having heard Ashen's report, he knew that somewhere a renegade princess was on the run from a usurper. *I wonder, Dominic speculated. What if I found her first?*

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They kept to the forest, evading one patrol after another, with no chance to rest. The Invader was apparently not content with spilling most of the royal blood; he was obviously hunting for the last legitimate heir to the throne. Fortunately, Hector had served in the guard when he was younger. His experience was invaluable, as the need to hide their trail was tested again and again. A full day of travel had passed and Katerin was bone-weary. Now that night was upon them, the trio's pace had slowed to a crawl, and the smell of nearby wood smoke urged them to even greater caution.

Wrapped in the only cloak they had, the women waited in the shadows of a large elm while the ex-soldier scouted the source of the smoke. Stomach grumbling, the princess blushed in embarrassment. Just what we need — to be betrayed by the noise from my belly. Iliia heard the sound as well, and placed a hand on the young monarch's shoulder in a comforting gesture. Katerin's blush deepened, and she was happy that it was unnoticeable in the darkness.

Though the moon was full, clouds sent intermittent splashes of darkness upon an encampment in the hollow below them. The sight of Hector ducking back toward them through the undergrowth was a welcome one. He'd been gone for some time, and she had begun to worry.

Moving close enough for the women to see, Hector held a finger to his lips and urged them further into the forest. When they were far enough away from the encampment, he whispered, "It's a caravan of some sort, Katerin. Maybe merchants. I couldn't tell in the darkness." He pulled two sacks from under his shirt. "But here's some food and water from one of the wagons. We can get more before we leave." He pulled foodstuffs out of the sack: a half-round of cheese, a loaf of bread, and the roasted leg of some sort of animal.

Despite the ache in her belly, Katerin held her handmaiden back. "You stole it?" she asked, reprimand in her tone.

Drawing himself up to full height, Hector nodded. “Aye, Your Ladyship, I did.” He frowned, peering intently into her dark eyes. “We don’t have the crowns to pay for it. It’ll hardly be missed, and I’ll not have you starve out here in the wilderness! Your father would haunt me ’til the day I die.”

Realizing the truth of his statement, she dropped her gaze. With a sigh and a nod, she gestured for Ilia to take the food. “You’re right, Hector,” she murmured. “We must survive at all costs.” Glancing back down the hill, she vowed, “I promise to repay them...somehow.”

Behind her, the servants looked at one another, worry lining their faces.

Much as she wanted to eat it all, Katerin knew to do so would be folly. As Ilia used the dagger to slice the cheese, the princess doled out a portion of meat, deciding to save the bread for later. Filling the sack with the remaining items, she tied it shut and patted it gently.

They made short work of their meager allotments, then shared the water skin among them. Acid burned in Katerin’s stomach as it demanded more, her appetite scarcely whetted. With a sigh, she put the enticing smell of meat from her mind. “We need to find a place to sleep,” she announced.

“Aye, Lady,” Hector agreed, glancing around with a calculating gaze. Pointing away from the encampment below, he said, “P’rhaps we can follow this ridge here and see if there’s a safe place.”

Nodding, she picked up her skirts with one hand and the sack of food with the other. Beside her, Ilia gathered what few personal items they’d been able to scramble for during the attack. *A lifetime ago*, Katerin mourned.

As the women stood, Hector suddenly grabbed both of them about the waist and pulled them back. Hissing to silence their surprised gasps, he cupped a hand to his ear and pointed up the hillside. They distinctly heard a horse whicker nearby. Sudden terror filled Katerin’s heart as her servant waved at the encampment below, urging them toward it. As quietly as possible, the trio moved along the hillside. Behind them, they heard a muffled curse and the heavy thud of someone dismounting. At the edge of the forest, clouds still covered the moon above, and Hector chanced discovery by herding his charges across a cleared area and into the encampment itself.

Ducking behind a wagon, the princess then leaned against it, watching her one and only aging guardsman peer around the side of the wagon, back the way they’d come. Before her were several other wagons, their coloring indistinct in the dim light. Her eyes narrowed as she studied one. *Is that a design painted on the side?* Hector’s hand on her arm refocused her attention.

With exaggerated movements, he urged them along the line of wagons until they came to the fourth. There, he stopped, holding his hands aloft to indicate they should wait. Stealthily, he eased around the wagon to have a look behind them.

The smell of food was so overpowering, it almost made Katerin swoon. She knew that this must be the wagon from which Hector had purloined their repast. Her stomach growling in demand, she grasped Ilia’s hand for comfort and closed her eyes against faintness. Above them, clouds drifted aside and the moon illuminated the area.

“Bleedin’ Sif!” came the soft curse.

Startled at hearing such language from her servant, she blinked.

Hector returned to the women, face visible in the moonlight, clearly concerned. Leaning his head close, he breathed, “Only one man. He’s got our trail, and he’s following.” Glancing about, assessing the situation, he grabbed the princess’s arm and pulled her toward the back of the wagon.

As he eased the wagon door ajar, the aromas that assailed her nearly made Katerin faint. Hector pushed her toward the opening, and she stumbled on her skirts as he forced her inside, her handmaiden following. Turning in the darkness, she saw Hector’s silhouette against the moonlit encampment — the tense set of his shoulders, his hand reaching out.

“Give me the dagger, lady.” He glanced backward at a noise. “Quickly! I’ll try to draw him away!”

Katerin knew there was no other choice. She handed it to him. “Be careful, Hector,” she insisted. “I need you now more than ever!”

“Aye, lady.” Hector grinned. “I’ll do my best. Now get back!”

She obeyed, darkness closing in as the wagon door was shut. With a thrill of fear, she heard the latch click into place. Groping about blindly, she found Ilia, and the pair sank to the floorboards. They heard cautious movement as someone in chain mail neared the wagon. Then quiet dragged on for what seemed like an eternity. Katerin felt her eyes widening as she tried to see in the pitch-black wagon, her ears nearly growing in length as she sought to hear. She held her handmaiden tightly, comforted by the arms wrapped about her. Then they heard a sudden blur of sound from some sort of skirmish just outside. The wagon thumped once, rocking at the impact of two bodies running into it, and the women were hard-pressed not to cry out in fear. Dogs nearby sounded an alarm as a man grunted in pain. Then there was ominous stillness, broken only by dogs barking in excitement.

Dread filling her heart when Hector did not reappear immediately to open the door, Katerin rose and pushed further into the wagon, pulling her handmaiden with her. Curling into a corner with Ilia, the princess drew her cloak over their heads and wrapped it tightly about them. Outside, voices were raised in sleepy question and irritation. The barking drew closer, and soon happily snuffling hounds were all about.

“Freya’s tears, Daiki,” somebody cursed, getting closer to the provision wagon, “your hounds raising a ruckus for a midnight snack? Thought you had ’em better trained than that.”

Someone snorted in derision. “If you wouldn’t sleep on watch, Tommaso—” He was interrupted by a gasp of surprise and another man’s curse.

“Ros is not going to be happy with this,” Tommaso commented. After a pause, he continued, “Both dead, and no good comes of that. What do you think they’re doing here?”

Katerin bowed her head in mourning. *Poor Hector... All this death and destruction. And for what?*

“Don’t know,” Daiki answered. Another set of footsteps approached. “Habibah! Get Ros.”

Further away, a woman answered. Only the men shuffling about as they waited disrupted the evening’s stillness. After a few moments, other footsteps neared the wagon. “What’s going on, Daiki?” The voice was low and gruff, filled with command.

“That, Ros.”

“Kemplak’s Hells!” Ros cursed. “Tommaso?”

“That’s how we found ’em, Ros,” the man responded, his tone a bit desperate. “I didn’t hear or see nothing. I was on the other side of camp when it happened.” A derisive snort came from one of those present.

“Well, we can’t stay the night here. Someone will be looking for the guard. And who knows what people are waiting for this poor fellow. Tommaso, wake Martim. I want you two to clean up this mess. Hide the bodies as best you can. Daiki, Habibah, lock up the dogs. We need to get water from the creek and clean up this blood before we move on.” As Ros walked away, the orders continued. “We leave within the hour. Roust everyone!” A chorus of acknowledgment followed, and soon, the encampment buzzed with activity.

Even if Katerin and Ilia could have left the provision wagon, there’d be no way they would get far without detection. *And now we don’t even have a weapon*, Katerin thought.

The wait was long, and the terror of the previous days was taking its toll. Katerin’s eyelids drooped heavily, startled wide only when the wagon jerked into movement. Making a decision, she sat up, pulling the cloak away from her head.

“Your Highness?” Ilia asked softly.

“Katerin’ or ‘lady’, Ilia,” she reminded her in the dark. She felt for the bag of food that Hector had stolen. “We’ll be here a while, I think. It’s high time we had more food, and some sleep. We’re not getting out of this wagon without help.”

“Aye, Lady.”

The women split the bread and devoured the meat and the remainder of the cheese. Finally sated, Katerin leaned back, weariness washing over her. After two days of running, Katerin was exhausted. A full belly and the lazy swaying of the wagon didn’t help matters. The gentle rocking of the wagon lulled her into sleep. Her slumber was sound, as was that of her handmaiden.

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Bright sunlight spilled across her closed eyes, and Katerin jerked upright. Wincing, she raised her hand to block the unwelcome light, turning her head to one side. Beside her, Ilia pulled the cloak over her face.

“Well, what have we here?” a gruff voice asked in amusement. “A pair of sleeping mice?”

Memory crashed in on Katerin, and her heart thumped in fear. She lowered her hand, peering out the wagon door at a dark silhouette. Her handmaiden peeked over the edge of the cloak.

“Well?” the voice asked again.

Swallowing, Katerin cleared her throat. “My name is Katerin.” She nodded at the woman beside her. “This is Ilia.” Then she became silent, at a loss.

They heard the sound of running, and a small voice piped, “Da! Mum says she’ll make cherry hotcakes for breakfast!”

“Hold, Wilm,” the man ordered, looking over one shoulder. “Go get Ros.”

“Aye, da.” Small feet pelted away.

Children. There are children here, so these people can’t be bad. Katerin pulled the cloak off her shoulders, preparing to rise and move toward the entrance.

“Hold there, girl,” the man said, his attention back on the women. “We’ll just wait until Ros gets here.”

Katerin nodded. “Of course,” she answered softly. Remembering the terror of the night, she recalled the sharp command in Ros’ voice and the obvious respect of the others. She could feel Ilia trembling and reached over to pat her knee comfortingly, dark eyes warming with the promise to get them both out of this alive.

As they waited for the mysterious Ros, the sounds of people making camp drifted through the morning air. Men and women called back and forth cheerfully. Somewhere in the near distance, a man yelled. They heard the rumble of a tree being felled. Footsteps approached.

“What’s the holdup, Willem? We’ve got hungry people to be fed.”

The man at the entrance stepped back and to one side. “Looks like a pair of mice have crawled into the provisions,” he said with a grin, nodding into the wagon.

Abruptly, Katerin realized that the new arrival was a woman. She wore a black tunic and breeches, the only color a splash of light blue from her under-tunic. Her curly golden hair was cut scandalously short; it gave her a roguish appearance that was reinforced by the sword strapped to her hip.

Eyes narrowed, the woman studied the stowaways. “Come out of there,” she demanded, hand resting gently on her sword hilt.

Recognizing the voice as Ros', Katerin obeyed, helping Ilia to her feet. Making no sudden movements, she guided her handmaiden out of the wagon, wincing at the bright sunshine that assailed her eyes. Despite the circumstances, she sighed in happiness at finally being able to stand, and she surreptitiously stretched in pleasure. Eyeing the strangers before her, she subtly stepped in front of her handmaiden.

Ros raised an eyebrow. "I can only assume that you are the reason we had to leave in such haste last evening?" she asked, directing her question at Katerin. Her hazel eyes flickered up and down the smaller woman with disdain. "While you are beautiful, you hardly appear worth fighting over."

At first, Katerin was surprised; anger quickly followed. She'd been roused from her bed in the dead of night, had watched her family and friends being slaughtered, and had been running for two days. It took a supreme effort to hold her tongue. She bit down fiercely on her cheek. *Simpleton!* At length, unable to remain silent, Katerin responded, her tone icy. "A dear friend is dead, and you've been inconvenienced. My deepest apologies."

A faint glimmer of amused understanding lit Ros' eyes; a corner of her mouth quirked, and she bowed her head. "Apology accepted."

Katerin's teeth ground together.

Looking at the man beside them, the blonde asked, "Sati is making breakfast this morning?"

"Aye. Wilm says it's to be cherry hotcakes."

"Good," Ros said with a chuckle. "The troupe needs the extra sweetness." Her eyes returned to the two bedraggled women before her. "At the very least, to make up for the night's unscheduled festivities."

"What of these two?"

With a calculating look, the woman studied the stowaways, ignoring Katerin's obvious hostility. After a thoughtful moment, she said, "Have Lucinda and Gemma get them cleaned up. I think they might have some clothes that will fit." Her gaze became less guarded. "When they're presentable, I'll see them at my wagon."

"Aye, Ros."

Still angry, though relieved that they were not in any immediate danger, Katerin let herself be escorted toward a tall, colorfully painted wagon. Holding Ilia's hand, she watched the encampment's proceedings with a calculating gaze.

Ten tall wagons were in the clearing, each with its own intricate decoration. Nearly twice that number of people of all sizes and colors were out and about, working with happy industriousness. It appeared that most of the wagons were traveling abodes — the inhabitants were setting up awnings, chairs, and tables outside of them. To one side of the clearing, several men were unrolling a vast length of canvas. Ros was among them, calling directions and lending a hand. From what Katerin could gather, she and Ilia had stumbled into a circus.

As they neared the wagon, a voluptuous redhead looked up from the colorful flowers she was arranging in a vase. "Ho, Willem! What have you there?" she asked, a welcome smile on her face.

"Katerin and Ilia," he responded, pointing to each in turn. "Ros said for you and Gemma to assist them. They need cleaning up and clothing."

Hands on hips, the woman nodded, looking the pair up and down. "Aye, that they do." Looking over one shoulder, she called, "Gemma! We've guests!"

Katerin started when a shuttered window in the side of the wagon popped open. Another woman looked out, her hair and skin nut-brown. Solemn green eyes regarded them, and she nodded.

The redhead rubbed her hands together. “Well, let’s get started then, shall we?” Waving her hands at their escort, she said, “Shoo, Willem. I think Gemma and I can handle these two dangerous creatures.”

He chuckled. “Aye, I know you can, Lucinda. In the meanwhile, I’ll be helping the men with the tent. Give a yell when they’re ready.”

“I will that.” Lucinda remained where she was until he’d gotten out of earshot. Casting a conspiratorial look at her visitors, she winked. “Men! What they don’t know about women could fill a book.”

A smile crossed Katerin’s face. *I think I’m going to like this one.*

“Let’s have a look at you, eh?” the redhead insisted, waving the pair closer.

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