

A LORD, A GIRL AND A KING

BY SAMANTHA BAUGUS

Chapter One

"The date is set - Harvest Feast."

For what? I backtracked, crouching behind the wooden door I heard the voices coming from. Almost all residents of the palace were either at the feast tonight or serving the feast. So why any would be in here, in an antiquated and rarely visited section of the the palace meant something secretive, very secretive.

"Were you able to get it?" the speaker continued.

Get what?

"Yes," a second man answered, "and for a reasonable price, only one thousand gold," he added, sounding pleased with himself.

"Very good," the first chuckled, "Finally that idiot will be removed and some improvements can be brought to the country."

Mantrin. Lord Cody Mantrin. What in all of the earth is going on? Who does he mean... He can't possibly mean the King! Never! I

leaned closer against the door, my brown hair falling into my face.

The second speaker chuckled. "No one will suspect us, my lord, and then you will be instated on the throne and the country will be much better off."

Does this mean... He is.. What? From what I could tell, Mantrin wanted kill King Ajax and make himself king. Why? What did he plan to achieve? Killing anyone was trouble and should be punished, killing a king? Our king? One of the most beloved kings ever in Mertia? That sure sounded far-fetched, but not impossible I guess...

Lord Mantrin chortled. "Yes. Everything is going splendidly. I'm brilliant."

"Yes, of course!" the other agreed.

"Let's go and rejoin the rest at dinner before anyone investigates our prolonged absence."

Could Mantrin be talking about assassinating a different king?
No. Drat.

I heard chairs being pushed back and some pleasantries. The discussion of assassination was over and I stood up to go, halfway down the hall, hoping I wouldn't be cau-

"YOU!" I froze, cursing myself for lingering. I should've just run, no reason for me to even be in this part of the palace anyway. "Yes you, boy, come here." I turned around licking my dry lips.

"What exactly are you doing?" he asked, arms crossed over his

chest.

I shuffled forward a few paces. I felt like retorting with the same question, but knew better. "I was bored, my lord, after performing for the king and wandered through the hallways - to amuse myself."

"Are you allowed to be back here?" he demanded.

I stared at the ground. "Not exactly, sir."

"So your explanation for being here better be a very good one, won't it?" he asked, smiling in the most condescending way possible.

That mattered? I just heard you plot to kill the king! "No..."

"No what?" he asked, examining me with a patronizing gaze. The stare sent bile to my mouth so I refused to look at him. What right did he have to be staring at me like that? All the right in the world, moron, you are not even a servant here!

"No sir?" I asked, hoping that would please him. I knew it wouldn't, but it was worth a try. I dared one glance at Mantrin and found his eyes boring into my face. Trying to discern what more to do with me, even though his face kept its almost sickening calm and collected expression. For the moment I felt like he could see right through my disguise and see all my secrets - my true gender, my history, my true name, my parentage, my heritage. Secrets I wanted to keep buried away, very deep.

"No sir what?" he stressed.

I glanced at Dorlin. He leaned against the wall, seeming to not

even notice the proceedings. "No sir, I do not have a good reason for being in this part of the palace."

"So you are here why exactly?" he asked.

"I was bored," I admitted.

He dropped his hands by his side and rolled his eyes. "And since when does being bored entitle you to break rules?"

I hung my head. "Never." The little charade is stupid; I think we both know what is really going on here. He's not stupid.

He sighed. "Go on! Before I report you to his Majesty."

I bowed to both men. "Thank you sir."

He nodded. "Go then."

I bowed again and ran off, not wanting to be questioned anymore.

What now?

Moron, tell the king. Don't you think he'd have to know first?

Of course!

I slipped into another hallway to circle back toward the Great Hall. For an unknown reason to me, the king had thrown a feast. I had performed for him and his guests earlier, but left right after I finished, a few minutes ago.

Seems longer.

The servants and performers entered the Hall through a set of double doors; a waiting room lay behind these doors, accessible by the kitchen and door in the hallway; I made for the hallway door.

"Waverly!" a nasal voice called.

I winced and turned around. "Yes, Regin?"

"Sir to you, young man!"

I nodded. "Yes, sir?"

"What do you think you are doing?" he demanded

"I really have to go and see-" I started.

"You will not reenter the Great Hall - unless summoned. You know the rules," the steward yelled, trying to make up for his short size with a loud voice. No one ever paid much attention to the tiny steward. His actions were comical, not threatening. Although he did pay us and could have us fired - well, not me, the king liked me.

I sighed. "Of course I know the rules, but I really must see the king!"

"Why?" he asked, suspicious.

"I can't tell you! I have an urgent message!" I tried to get away from the pipsqueak steward, but his glare of distaste kept me glued to my spot. No one liked him, but everyone listened to him. He paid us after all.

"You can't go and see the king. If your message is so important, you should be able to tell me."

I weighed my options. Regin's position was higher than mine and the king would listen to him more than me. He ran the king's household; I entertained him at dinner. But Regin did not like me at all, well for that matter he did not like most people, but he singled me out for years. The likelihoods of him doing as I requested was

slim.

Besides that, his whole attitude screamed an unusual amount of suspicion. Did he know something? Was part of something? Who all was in on this plot? I couldn't take the chance that Regin would not tell the king or, even worse, figure out I'd overheard Lord Mantrin and Sir Dorlin and do who knows what to me!

All these thoughts rushed upon me in an instant and I made up my mind in a few moments. "No, I have to tell his Majesty personally."

"Then you'll just have to wait. Goodbye." He started to walk off.

"Wait!" What am I doing?

He turned around. "What now?" he said through his nose.

"You have to let me to see the king! Or at least pretend you knew nothing about me going in there." I pointed to the door.

"Can't do that," he said, walking off again.

"And why not?" I asked, grabbing at his arm.

He pulled his arm away from me, looking disgusted. "Let go of me!"

"Listen to me then!" I demanded.

"What?" he said, stopping. "I'm not letting you see the king, so forget about it!"

"And why not? What if I had to tell him something of dreadful importance - a hoard of a million on the border!"

He laughed. "You haven't left the palace, you can't possibly

know anything of that much import."

"How do you know?"

He paused. "I don't..."

"Then let me see the king!"

He looked edgy. "Not tonight."

"Urgent message."

He sighed, tired of dealing with me and making it clear. "Can it not wait until after dinner at least?"

I narrowed my eyes. Should I comply? Two weeks until Harvest Feast - that's time, right? "Fine."

He turned and walked of, leaving me in the hall with the distinct feeling he would *not* do as he said. *I have two weeks, right? One more night will not make that much difference, right?*

Ha, likely. You know your luck, Wave.

Or lack thereof.

So what do I do?

I paced up and down the hall for half an hour getting a few puzzled looks from those who walked by. But I didn't care in the least. My mind tossed in such turmoil I couldn't just sit still.

Then do something!

Like?

Is there another way into the Hall?

I stared at the opposing wall for a few minutes and came up dry. Of course, the guest entrance and the King's entrance, but both of

those doors were shut and guarded. I could never get in that way. Outside of that I knew no way of getting into the Hall. Of course, the one room I want to get to has no known secret passages leading to it! I could always just explore a little bit, but I've explored every nook and cranny of this palace... Oh well, may as well, not like I have much else to do.

I ran through the hallways until I reach a large tapestry hanging along one of the walls. I swept up the huge piece of fabric, ducking under the heavy piece and slipping behind it into a small opening. I knew my way around most of these passages better than the open hallways and did not mind the lack of light in the small corridors.

I could stand straight in the tunnels but someone a few inches taller than me wouldn't be able to. I followed the twists and turns of the stone tunnels, going over my mental map of the secret ways to locate where I could find another entrance to the Hall.

I could keep a hand on each wall in the narrow passages, feeling for any opening. Two people could not walk abreast in these small paths and sometimes one struggled. But skinny me ran into no problems. Any passageway I missed. Or any slim crack in the walls which could be a hidden corridors - although a secret passage in the secret passage seemed unlikely, but my options narrowed.

I kept my ears open for sounds of the feast; any clue would be useful, any smell or sound floating around the tunnels from anywhere.

The only sound, my own breathing and footsteps; the only smell, the slightly musty odor of the unused passages, the only sight, the darkness of the narrow passages around me. No feast. I searched in the tunnels for hours without turning up anything I didn't already know. Not even a hint of the festivities going on in the palace.

Sound proof building. Makes my job harder. Of course, that was the intent - sneakers and spies would not be able to hear - or be heard if you think about it that way. Which may not be good...

I shook my head clear of my musing. Ah what to do? I have no more ideas!

I decided I might as well go look, not like any other matters pressed upon me. I walked back along each passage, hands on the walls, searching for any hint of a secret door. May have just been me, but I didn't think having a secret door *in* the secret passage didn't make much sense. But no one consulted me on the secret passages design, so who knew, maybe one existed.

As expected, I found nothing. I sat down in the middle of the stone paths, eyes shut, my hands limp over my knees. What now? Nothing, at least not here. I wandered back out of the tunnels into the brighter hallways.

Having no real option before me, I decided to see if I could get into the Hall - again. I managed to get into the small waiting room without Regin apprehending me. Only a few servers and some bards remained. Time for drinking and leaving.

"Waverly! What are you doing here?"

I turned to see who said that, trying not to bolt. "Uh, message."

"For?" the server asked.

"The king," I said.

He laughed. "You've got to be kidding! The king?"

I nodded. "Yes!"

"Really Waverly, what has gotten into your head?"

"Please, can you just believe me?" I pleaded.

"Not really," he said, drawing out his words, "That sounds too preposterous for me to believe without more evidence."

"Evidence?" I asked, my voice jumping an octave. "What kind of evidence?"

He waved his hand in the air, as though some sort of evidence would just appear there. "You know..."

"No, I don't really or I wouldn't be asking."

"Er, I suppose so," he said, his cheeks turning a shade red - in shame or anger I don't know. Nor had I time to find out since at right then Regin stuck his head in the room and commanded my conversation partner and his fellows to serve some wine to the king's guests. I tried to slip into the Hall with the servants when the doors opened, but a waiter pointed me out to the watchful Regin.

"Waverly!" he shouted, grabbing the back of my shirt.

"Yes, sir?"

"Where do you think you are going?"

I stammered out some sort of reply, but it did me no good.

Regin dragged me into the kitchen where one of the cooks gave me a severe beating with a bread paddle.

As soon as I could, I raced away from the kitchens and its paddle wielding cooks. I decided I would be safer staying away from Regin and the kitchens, no need to center any more attention around myself. Last thing I need is more suspicion. Like I don't have enough. The stables were a safe place - no one besides grooms and stable hands and such ever went to them, never busy and, besides all that, one of my closest friends Collin worked there. He would at least listen to me, maybe help me.

As I walked, my mind kept coming back to Regin. Something seemed suspicious about the steward's behavior. His usual brusque manner seemed to grow when he found about my mission to see the king, almost as if he suspected me of something. Did he? Or was he just frazzled? Or was my imagination getting away with me again?

Everyone in the palace, maybe the whole city, knew Regin held a grudge against the king. His whole family did. Why they continued to work for the king remained a mystery to everyone, but the oldest son of each generation always worked as a steward to the king. Maybe it was just habit now - the hate and the job.

But something did seem strange about Regin tonight...

I shook my head. You are paranoid sometimes Wave.

I clambered on to the fence, watching the horses. As always at the king's parties the number of horses quadrupled and even with the extra stalls, all the horses did not have room to sleep in the warmer stables. So about a dozen horses milled around the corral, most huddled in circle, a thick cloud of frosty breath hovering above them. A few pranced around the open area, trying to stay warm.

At the end of the squared off piece of land the study stable sat, the large door for releasing horses into the field rested snug in its lock, but a window hung open and I glimpsed Collin dozing in it. Poor boy. He's probably exhausted. We all are. At least Collin hasn't been here all night. Only the past hour or so. But the horses almost never get along. I winced as I heard angry nickers from somewhere else in the dark.

I breathed in the cold night air and also inhaled the dirty odor of horse. I relished the farm smell for a moment before releasing my breath in a cloud of white air. One of the horses trotted over to me and I stroked its head, murmuring to it. I jumped on the friendly horse's back and trotted it over to Collin's window and tapped him.

"Waverly!" Collin shouted, jumping.

I waved. "Hi Collin."

"Get out of the cold, silly!" he called, laughing.

I slid off the horse. "What's her name?"

"His. And I don't know."

"Aw, why not?" I stroked the horse.

"There are one hundred, eighty-nine horses here tonight, not mentioning his Majesty's thirty-one. I can barely keep those thirty-one straight. You want me to keep track of the rest?"

"I get the point," I said, pulling myself into the window.

Collin, woken from his nap, continued with various chores, exchanging boring pleasantries with me. I looked around the stable. Every stall contained a sleeping horse, the stalls lining one wall. Well most of the stalls' occupants slept. A few were awake and watching Collin and I. I gathered some hay and fed it to the nearest one, stroking its strong neck. The sweet odor of hay mingled with the putrid odor of horse manure and the musky smell of the horses themselves, creating a curiously pleasant aroma.

I threw down the remainder of the straw in my hand and swore, unable to contain my frustration and anger any longer.

"Wave, what is wrong?" he asked, putting an arm around my shoulder, stopping my course up and down the stable.

I swore. "I heard bad news."

"What kind of news?" he asked, concern flooding his voice.

"The worst kind. I overheard a plot to - to assassinate the king!" I winced when I said the awful truth. I could not yet fully believe my king was the target of an assassination - neither did Collin. After his initial relief at the 'bad news' not concerning myself or himself, his expression changed to one of anger and dismay.

"Are you sure?" he asked, "I mean, I can't imagine anyone would

want assassinate King Ajax. He's the best thing to happen to Mertia in three hundred years!"

"Yes! Or a plan to assassinate some king..."

"Wait. You don't know its Ajax?"

I looked at the ground. "No... No, I guess I don't."

He ran his hand through his hair. "So, it could be any other king?"

I ran one foot across the packed dirt floor of the stables.

"Well, yes..."

"So why have you assumed it's *our* king?"

I thought for a moment. "Because Lord Mantrin said he'd kill the king at Harvest Feast!"

"You know there will be two kings at Harvest Feast, right?"

"Really?" I asked, crestfallen.

"Yes. Princess Sadie will be there with her father."

"Oh... Right," I muttered looking at the ground. "But why wouldn't Regin let me into the Hall?"

"Because there is a feast going on!" Collin pointed out.

"I said I had an urgent message though!" I insisted

"And I suppose you didn't tell Regin, hm?" he asked, looking skeptical.

"No, of course not! What if he was in on the plot?"

"I think you are being a bit paranoid, Waverly," Collin said, arms crossed, still looking as though he might start laughing at me.

I frowned. "But whoever it is that will be killed Harvest Feast, King Ajax or King Ripley, we must still warn... someone!"

He nodded. "Of course, we have to but how?" He frowned, staring at a clump of straw on the ground.

"I have no idea! I tried to get into the Hall to warn the king right now but was unable to - no thanks to Regin."

"Well, it *is* his job to keep people out of the Hall who aren't supposed to be there..."

"But I said I have an urgent message to deliver to his Majesty! I bet if Captain Raleigh said the same thing, Regin would lead him right in. It's only because he doesn't like me."

"You sure are the wrong person to hear this message."

"You think?" I shouted.

"Calm down," he soothed.

I huffed and threw myself back into the straw. "Two weeks are left until Harvest Feast, two weeks to warn King Ajax of the coming doom."

He nodded. "I'm sure you'll be able to get it done. Regin can't keep you away forever. Especially seeing as you said it was an urgent message."

I nodded. "Regin said he would get me an audience later. Don't know how much I can believe him though."

"As you said, he doesn't like you."

"Not in the least! And I don't know why!"

Collin shrugged. "I doubt we will ever know; he's a very nasty man just in general."

I growled. "Is he ever! You are lucky not having to be under his control!"

He smiled. "Nope. I get to listen to the ever gruff head groom."

"Gruff, maybe, not cruel and demanding."

"Oh, he can be."

We both lapsed into silence. Just talking to Collin helps me.
He was the only one who reached out to me when I was alone. The left corner of my mouth tugged upward against my will. Him alone...
Where would I be without him?

Still hating the world?

I was hurt!

True, but that's not reason to hate the world.

It is too!

"I can see you are thinking about something," Collin said, "What?"

"I was thinking about when we first met and how you saved me."

"Saved you?"

"From depression. I wanted to kill myself."

He looked shocked. "Really?"

"Yes. You know the story," I bowed my head, a sheet of brown falling over my eyes.

"Collin! What are you doing?" a tall man called, poking his head into the stable.

"Talking to my friend, Sran. Why?" Collin responded, turning to face Sran.

"Feast up at the big house is over, it ended early! We have to get the horses and carriages up there! Quick!" Sran disappeared from view. "Quick!" he called back.

"I better go. Talk to you later, Wave." He ran out of the stables to go and help with the horses.

I sighed. Now what?

I exited the stable grounds and made my way up to the palace using a back door. The kitchens and main part of the palace would be crawling with people - far too busy to be of any use for slipping around. I wonder...

Once I managed to slip back into the palace I used my secret passages to get as close as I could to the Hall as I could. "Do you know where his Majesty is?" I asked the first servant I could find.

"Aye. Still in the hall as far as I know," he said, walking on.

"Thanks," I threw after him.

Good. Maybe I can still catch him.

I wormed my way through the press of people to the Hall, searching for his Majesty. Where is he? He can't have left yet. You are looking in the wrong spot! I tried to hurry through the mess of people at both doors and crawling all over the Hall. Great, now

you have to run all the way around the palace! I took off, hoping I would not be too late.

The king could have left by the king's entrance by now; in fact it was more than likely. Even though called the 'King's Entrance', in reality the door led straight from the royal family's quarters to the Hall. So if I wanted to speak to him yet tonight I would have to catch him before he went into his quarters.

I ducked under the big tapestry and ran through the stone tunnels, a far quicker route than through the open hallways. I exited as near the royal quarters as I could. Being the royal family's quarters, it was one of the most guarded and protected spots in the whole palace. The designer of the palace - and the secret halls - made sure no one could access the king's quarters or any of the royal family through secret tunnels. Even though the royal family could access most of the main rooms of the house from their quarters (Throne Room, Council Room, Armory, Treasury and Hall) one could not enter through those doors. They only opened from the royal quarters and the guards would only open for one of the family. I was not sure how the guards knew one was part of the royal family. Because of this only one door remained for accessing the royal quarters and it was far away from the other rooms, requiring one to go into the part of the palace reserved for over-night guests and then all the way through the corridors of bed rooms, libraries, sitting rooms and parlors. In short, a complex system to say the

least.

Because of this, another useful thing about my path was it came out on the other side of the big door, separating the royal quarters from the rest of the palace. Stationed outside this door were six guards and - unless you were a royal family member, escorted by one, or held a special note to enter - you could hold no hope of trying to get past those guards.

I looked over my shoulder at the big door. Guarded on this side by only two guards, the door posed no threat. The guards did not even see me enter the hall way. I smiled to myself and ran on up the hall to the *other* big door, this one even bigger and more extravagant than the other one. The one at the other end of the hall led to the Hall of course.

I skidded down the hall, almost missing the turn and running into the wall. I slid to a stop and looked down the empty corridor. A large mirror on one wall, a fancy rug on the floor, walls painted in bright reds and golds. Other than that an empty, still corridor. I listened. Silence! Does that mean the king and his sister aren't back yet? All the hallways are empty! The hallways were empty, no guards. There would be guards in the hall way if the king was in his room. He wasn't back yet! I could sneak into his chamber and wait for him.

"YOU!"

I have a name, you don't have to just call me 'You!' like

everyone seems to be doing...

I turned around. "Yes?"

Guards, shocking.

"What are you doing here?" one demanded.

"Looking for his Majesty," I replied, peering behind the guards for the king.

"Come see his Majesty tomorrow! He is very tired now."

"I have an urgent message!"

"It can wait a few more hours, can't it?"

"Yes, but--"

"Then save it until then!" the guard reprimanded.

I scowled. "I need to--"

"Off with you!" a guard said hitting me with flat of his sword.

"You heard what we said!"

I swore under my breath. "Tomorrow then?"

"Yes, tomorrow, get along with you!"

I stalked off, toward the main door. The two opened it without word. Anyone who wanted out could leave, getting in was the hard part. Without even bothering to stop in the kitchens to help the over-worked kitchen staff I marched up to my small bed room and threw myself into my cot, kicking off the soft leather boots I wore for performances.

Well this has been a fun night.

Oh, very fun.

Your sarcasm is not amusing.

I turned off my thoughts and rolled over, wrapping myself in my blanket, not even bothering to take off my bright harlequin outfit. I fell asleep in a few moments, exhausted from being up all night.

Chapter Two

"WHAT?"

"You heard me Anise," I said, rolling my eyes. "Keep your voice down! We don't need the gossips in here to go blabbing."

She reduced her voice to a whisper, "What?"

I rolled my eyes again. I loved Anise, but she could be really annoying sometimes and even more so when my nerves frayed at all ends. "King Ajax or King Ripley is going to be assassinated at Harvest Feast and Lord Mantrin is going to make himself king. Because Lord Mantrin lives in Mertia I'm assuming its King Ajax, but I'm not completely sure," I repeated. Even though we sat in the kitchens with dozens of other people around, we could talk freely. Almost no one paid any attention to the two of us in our corner.

"That's insanity!" she said, still whispering.

I nodded, my whole attention focused on the potato I peeled, feeling the rough, gritty skin and the smoothness of the potato itself. I threw the peeled vegetable into the pile and picked up another.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Anise whispered.

I growled under my breath. "I don't know yet. I need to tell the king, but I think that Regin is in on the plot. When I asked him last night he wouldn't let me into the Hall."

She shrugged. "That's not really shocking."

"Even after I said I had an urgent message?"

"Well... Maybe not..." Anise conceded.

We both fell into silence. I inhaled the smells of the kitchen. A strange mingle of food and people. So many different odors mingled to create the homey, delectable smell I could not discern any one smell at all. The smell soothed and comforted me. If not for the exotic smells I could imagine my mother sitting across from me instead of Anise, teaching me the names of the birds singing outside the window and the best way to cook apples, directing the cheery cook and giggling maids...

I shook myself out of my thoughts of the past and back to the present.

I hoped Anise would have a new outlook on things, but held no expectations. She had never been the best for original thought. "I have no way of telling the king, because Regin did not do as promised - as expected - and get me an audience with the king."

"And there are no more feasts between now and the Harvest one. So you can't see him that way," she pointed out. I don't know what she found so exciting.

"I suppose I could try to warn the king at Harvest Feat, but there so many things which could go wrong with that scenario. I doubt I'll show up until after the seventh course, Regin likes to place me that late so that people are paying attention to my act. That gives almost five hours for the deed to be done," I said, edging

around saying the cold, hard truth.

Anise nodded, fondling her potato for a moment before throwing it into the pile of creamy white oval vegetables.

"So what are you going to do?" Anise asked.

"I don't know!" I snapped, frustrated.

I finished the potato in my hand and left the kitchens, off to see Regin - again. Three days passed since I overheard Lord Mantrin's plot and I made no progress in revealing him to the king.

I knocked on the door of Regin's quarters, consisting of a type of study and bedroom. The study contained records of everything which happened in the king's house. Not even one apple left the grounds without Regin knowing. The steward worked with the cook - Jolene - and Captain Raleigh, captain of the palace guard, to make sure of this.

"Yes?" he asked in his squeaky voice.

"May I come in sir?" I asked, trying to keep my voice level and calm. I really disliked the man and he returned the feeling.

"Yes." I could hear the annoyance in his voice. I tried to calm myself before opening the door, being mostly successful I managed a small bow after opening the door.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I need to see the king."

He rolled his eyes, rising, resting his hands on the desk.

"Waverly. You've asked me twice a day, every day, for three days. And

I've given you the same answer: I'll try."

He's right, this is getting repetitive, I need to figure out something better to do! "You said that three days ago and here I am again."

He sighed. "The king is busy, everyone is. Except you," he sneered.

I bit back a retort. "I know, but I have a *most* urgent message. You must get me in!"

He frowned. "I said I would try and get you in."

I crossed my arms. "I don't think you've tried at all! I've said I have an urgent message - a message which could save the king from great trouble, danger. Your reluctance to let me see the king makes me think you don't want me to see the king. Since my message is directly related to the king and the safety of the country, I'll have to assume you are aware of the contents of my message and don't want them delivered. In short, you are a traitor," I concluded with a bang. I hid a grin of triumph and waited for the steward to respond.

"Don't question my loyalty, boy!" he snarled, face red. He is hiding something, look at how angry he got about his loyalties. He composed himself and continued, "I've said this before: If your message is of such dire importance, you should be willing to use any means necessary to communicate it. And I'm more than willing to pass the message on to his Majesty at my audience this afternoon."

I still didn't trust Regis. "With all due respect sir, the sensitive nature of my message requires me to deliver it in person."

"Well then, I'm sorry, but I can't help you right now. You'll have to wait until an available time to talk to the king!" While he spoke, he advanced on me, backing me against the door. With the final word of his sentence he threw open the door, pushed me out and slammed it shut. I stood, looking at the door for a minute, then swore and stormed off. If people were going to be unhelpful, I'd just have to do it myself!

I ran through the servants' quarters up to my room. The king liked me and often gave me extra money or gifts, such as the table in my room and the warmer sheets. As well as my cloak. No one else had one as fine.

I seated myself at my table and scribbled out a note (pen, paper and ink provided by his Majesty). If I could not see the king, I'd still send word to him. I folded the paper and rushed out of my room. I made sure not to include an incriminating evidence in the note, just enough to get me into the presence of the king, to worry him. Who knew who stood stationed at the Throne Room doors and if one of the guards would even deliver it. Why do you always think up the worst possible things to happen?

I approached one of the guards stationed outside. "Sir?"

He glanced at me. Everyone knew the household staff and the guards had an ongoing feud, something about who was more vital to the

running of the palace. And most of the servants disliked me, so the guards disliked me all the more. Pretty hopeless situation. After a moment, the guard replied in a bored tone: "Yes?"

"I was asked to deliver this to you to give to the king," I held out my note.

"By whom?"

I froze. I hadn't considered being asked about the note. I had to come up with someone the king trusted - and fast. This note *had* to reach the king. "Its from Lord... Mantrin."

The guard nodded, "I'll be sure to get it to him." He pocketed my note and my hopes. I could tell the note would never reach the king. The guard could not care less. I doubt he believed me at all.

"Thank you!" I said and walked off, a smile on my face. I rounded the corner and swore. I could cry. Everywhere I turned to solve this problem - save a king's life - someone or something got in the way! Didn't people realize I had something very important to tell the king? No one seemed to care. I'd been trying to get in to see his Majesty for three and a half days.

#

I waited two days. Maybe the guard would think of the note at some point and deliver it. I had tried my best to seem urgent *and* I said the note came from Mantrin. But my waiting produced no results.

I could've waited longer I suppose, but eight days remained until the Harvest Feast. Eight short days.

The whole palace was in a frenzy preparing for the feast. This year the staff brought out all their tricks; Princess Sadie and her father would be attending. Of course, the palace had to look its best for the king's love interest. The whole country hoped King Ajax would propose to Princess Sadie at the Harvest Feast, or when she arrived - in four days.

I wandered around, helping where I could, when I could. I still spend most of time focused on the problem at hand. Most of the servants were so busy they took little to no notice of me. Regin had not even yelled at the 'lazy, slacker buffoon' in two days. After all, his job was to make sure everything was *just* so. And he made sure everyone knew such.

I felt unsure and uncomfortable around the other servants. I was neither servant nor guard nor anything else. I made up the eight people who lived in the palace for the king's entertainment only. This difference set me - and my seven comrades - apart from the rest of the people.

"Waverly!"

I glanced up, "Yes miss?"

"Could you come and help me? This basket is very heavy," the girl said, motioning toward the basket of apples at her feet.

I nodded and picked up the bushel basket, musing over how well

my disguise worked. She actually thought I was a boy.

She talked on about who knows what. No doubt existed in my mind of her ever thinking a serious thought in her life. I guessed she was seventeen, eighteen years old. Not much older than me, but the difference between us could not be more marked. I bit back a scowl and smiled at her.

"Well thank you Waverly," she said, taking the basket from me.

I turned to leave the kitchens, when an older female voice called me back. "Waverly, dear?"

I muffled a sigh and turned back around. "Yes ma'am?"

"Could ye help me, dear?" I recognized Roxanne's brogue right away. Roxanne had been the head chef for over thirty years, but she grew too old for the job and retired - soon after I arrived five years ago. But she could not leave the palace, too many years working for the royal family. She remembered when King Ajax was born after all.

"Of course I can." I hefted the tub of string beans on to my shoulder and followed Roxanne outside. "'tis so much nicer to work ou'side, don' ye think so?" she said as we stepped out in the kitchen gardens.

"Mm-hmm," I agreed.

"Especially on such a lovely day."

I nodded.

"I do love this time of year; 'tis warm in the day, but it cools

off enough a' nigh' ta keep the day jus' warm enough."

"Yes, quite. After the sun goes down it gets colder, keeps the day cooler. Although it rarely gets warm here in general."

She nodded. "An' the fog. I love the mis' in the moun'ains." She breathed out in long, drawn-out, contented sigh.

"It *is* quite beautiful," I agreed, only to be polite. It was fog, so what?

"Very much so. Young people these days ne'er s'op ta no'ice these things." We walked for a few more yards in silence, "Thank ye," she said, stopping under an old tree. The branches bare except for a few leaves clinging to the tree for dear life. The scattering of dead leaves crunched as we walked across them.

"You are quite welcome Roxanne," I said putting the basket on the ground and touching the brim of my hat.

"S'ay a momen'."

I focused my attention back on the old woman, "Yes'm?"

"Is somethin' wrong, Waverly?"

"No, ma'am," I lied.

"Are you sure?" she questioned, "Ye've seemed quie'er than normal of la'e."

"Just tired from preparing for the feast." What did she know?

"All righ' then, ge' on with ye."

I hurried back to my rooms, tense after my brush with Roxanne. Why were old women so perceptive? I threw myself on my bed,

frustrated with the world. Of course, by some route I have yet to discover, my thoughts took me to the most prevalent and urgent matter. Doors closed at every turn. Maybe the king was supposed to die. Fate conspired against me in my attempts to save the king. Maybe I should just give up.

"No! Waverly, you are better than that!" I jumped up, yelling at myself, "It doesn't matter if Ajax is going to die, you must be loyal. It is part of being a 'loyal subject to the crown'." Reassured, I began to think.

I spent a moment on the thought that someone may have heard my outburst. I hoped not. Since no one came to check on me I figured no one heard me.

I had no way of seeing the king between now and the Harvest Feast. Regin refused to give me access to the throne room. Unless the king called for me I'd not be able to see him. And I couldn't base a plan on potential happenings. Especially with a matter of such importance.

I stared out the window, hands clasped behind my back, unsure of how in the world to go about alerting the king to his eminent death. The sun hung mid way down the sky. The king would still be holding free audiences for the public, so I couldn't tell him now.

Oh you are smart...

I dashed around the palace, through the grounds, and to the courtyard. Dozens of people stood waiting. At least three hours

remained before the king called an end to the day. Everyone and all their cousins had to come and tell the king something - there were so many people. No one could be turned away until the allotted time ran out. I doubted his Majesty enjoyed listening to people complain all afternoon. I hoped my message would reach through his tired mind.

Time seemed to have stopped. I could hear a few babies crying and some children whining. Somewhere nearby a husband and wife fought. I leaned against the nearby wall, trying not to breathe too much. The stench of the courtyard reached a level unknown to me.

Living in the palace for the last three and a half years spoiled me. The two hours or so I had spent waiting reminded me of a world existing outside the palace. The farthest outside of the palace I had been in the past two years was to the fancy neighborhood surrounding the place. The richest and most powerful lords and such lived there. The only other times I left the palace and surrounding neighborhood was to go with the king on one of his journeys, then we stayed in expansive manor houses. I lived an easy life, really. Even if I complained about it.

I disliked living in the palace. I was not enslaved, but I may as well have been. The king just about refused to let me leave. I sighed and redirected my attention to the matter at hand.

I could count the number of people left. Fourteen. Oh please, oh please! I prayed, Let me in. Please. I have to see the king. Twelve more. Please. Eleven. I don't have a complaint! Ten. I live in the

palace for pity's sake. Number ten took longer than numbers eleven through fourteen. Ten came out and the captain of the palace guard, also one of the king's most trusted advisers, followed, "I'm sorry, but the king is seeing no one else today." He was about to slam the doors when I raced up.

"Sir! Captain Raleigh!"

He turned around to see who called him. "What?"

"I must speak with the king. I've been trying for three days now!"

"Waverly?"

I nodded. "Yes!"

"How long have you been waiting?" he asked, taking me inside with him.

"Three hours at least. Probably longer."

He shook his head, "What in the world is so important?"

After a pause to consider the matter I replied: "I can't tell you!"

He gave me a quizzical and disbelieving look. "I respect secrecy, especially with matters concerning his Majesty, but I'm the captain of the palace guard, Waverly. Anything which must be communicated to the king will most likely end up communicated to me - or affecting me in some way. And," he added, "you must accept the fact my word will carry more weight with the king than yours. No one thinks you are more than a buffoon."

"I know," I weighed my options, "You are right. I will tell you. I overheard Lord Mantrin and Sir Dorlin discussing assassination plans. They plan to assassinate the king at the Harvest Feast. I also strongly suspect Regin, the steward, is involved in the plot."

Captain Raleigh stared at me a second, then burst out laughing. "Waverly! Lord Mantrin? He's the king's closest advisor! He'd never do such a thing. Sir Dorlin wouldn't either. They both have strong records of loyalty. Are you sure of this?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

"Are you sure it wasn't someone else? Sir Mackintly maybe? I've suspected him of treasonous behavior for a while."

"No! They caught me in the hall."

He frowned. "I don't really believe you, but I'll bring the matter before the king. But I don't think anything will come of it."

"Thank you! I know what I heard and saw!"

He nodded, "Even if you are wrong, you have done right. You are a good and loyal citizen. Maybe when you are a little older you could join the palace guard."

"Thank you sir!" I saluted the captain.

He smiled. "Dismissed."

I walked off and I could hear the throne room door slam shut as Raleigh entered.

I stormed into my bedroom, cursing my own stupidity.

"Waverly, you always over think things. Just go for the most

obvious and straight forward approach. Almost always works better.”
I threw myself on my little cot. “Really, how moronic can you get?”

#

Two days later, I received summons to the throne room. I ran my fingers through my hair and tried to look presentable. I hoped to heaven the matter the king wanted me for would concern the Lord Mantrin and Sir Dorlin.

I adjusted my clothes and donned my hat before dashing out of my room and through the maze of hallways and rooms before arriving before the throne room door. I reported my business to the guards posted outside and they pulled open the doors for me.

Neither of the traitors stood in the room, no one waited upon the king - just two bodyguards.

“Waverly,” the king said without preamble, “Captain Raleigh,” he pointed to the captain behind him, “reported you had heard an assassination plot against me, is this true?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“And whom did you overhear?”

“Lord Mantrin and Sir Dorlin, sire.”

He sat in thought for a moment. I stood, in an uncomfortable silence before him. The king was buried in his thoughts, with any luck he believed me. His brow furrowed in thought, his lips pressed

together, fingertips just touching. He rested his elbows on his knees and bowed his head, touching his forehead to his fingers, his dirty blond hair falling over his shoulders.

"Thank you," he said looking up, "Captain Raleigh!" he called, turning his face away from me.

The captain came forward and saluted, "Yes your Majesty?"

"Bring me Lord Mantrin and Sir Dorlin."

Capain Raleigh saluted again and left the throne room.

"Your Majesty?" I asked.

"Yes Waverly?"

"Lord Mantrin threatened me. If I told about the plot...Could I possibly hide somewhere - so he doesn't know I told on him?"

He smiled and nodded, "Stand over there," he motioned to a tall, thick column I could easily hide behind. I ducked behind the pillar and waited.

In a few minutes Captain Raleigh returned with the traitors. I dared not peek around the pillar, but I could hear them walking up to the throne and present themselves to the king.

"Lord Mantrin, Sir Dorlin. Good morning to you," the king said, "I have recently heard a most distressing lie." I cringed. "You two were reported to be plotting my assassination."

Silence for a few moments. I pictured Mantrin and Dorlin trying to arrange their faces into an expression of proper horror and dismay, while their brains honed in on me.

Lord Mantrin spoke first, "Your Majesty! This is *some* lie! Who in the world told you such a thing? I am one of your most loyal subjects, and a friend! I could never *dream* of your demise! Nothing is farther from my mind!"

Silence again. Now I pictured the king with steepled fingers, leaning on his knees, deep in thought. "Dorlin? Anything to say for yourself?"

"I second all that Mantrin has said, sire," the knight replied.

"Very well then." Silence resumed.

I fidgeted, but remained silent. The last thing I wanted was Lord Mantrin to know for certain of my involvement. The five of us - the king, Captain Raleigh, Lord Mantrin, Sir Dorlin and I - remained quiet as death for what seemed hours, although I'm certain only five minutes passed, if that.

"I have nothing further to say, you are dismissed."

They thanked the king, for what I don't know, bowed and exited . Another few moments in silence passed - I never knew a room could be so quiet! - before the king called me.

"Waverly!"

"Yes your Majesty?" I replied, coming out of my hiding spot and bowing.

"You heard all that transpired, but you didn't see what did. Neither Lord Mantrin or Sir Dorlin acted guilty in any way, just horrified."

"With all due respect, they both have fooled you for the past few years! Lord Mantrin is trying to get close to you so he can kill you more easily and not be suspected!" I blurted out, ignoring the proper reverence I should show the king. Could he not see what was right before him?

"Waverly!" the king snapped. If he knew my surname I'm sure he would've used it then.

I bowed my head. "I'm sorry, sire."

"Forgiven, but do not speak out like that to me ever again," he said, giving me a hard look.

"Yes sire!" I responded, raising my head.

"Now I want you to go and return to whatever you were doing before and do not bother me with such tall tales again, is this clear?" He thought I was just a prankster!

"Yes sire," I said, dropping my head. No!

"Good, you are dismissed."

I bowed and left; feeling despondent, depressed, miserable and angry all at the same time. What now?

Chapter Three

I pushed my chair against the wall, running my fingers through my hair, pulling my hand away black. Why the stupid dye never stuck I didn't know, but Regin continued make me put in my hair for whatever costume I happened to be wearing. He claimed it made me look better and added flair.

I looked around me at the servers and performers waiting to go into the Hall. The smells were tempting and seductive. And I was hungry. Such happens when you don't eat all day.

Not that I could eat anything.

The Harvest Feast arrived and only three major accidents had taken place in the preparation stage. All of which were somehow *my* fault. No idea how I managed to burn a roast boar when I was outside, helping pick apples, but there you go, I did. Maybe I have magical powers.

I do not know why, but Regin liked to blame me. Even before I started pestering him about seeing the king. I could not care less; the biggest 'accident' of all was yet to come. I shut my eyes, faking sleep just to get on Regin's nerves. I could be fully alert and waiting by the door, but he would still yell at me. Why bother even try to stay out of trouble.

Despite my calm appearance, I had been a wreck all day. When I dyed my hair earlier I must've spilled more of the disgusting smelling dye than got in my hair and even now my foot tapped by itself. My nerves were frayed, tangled and torn. I alone knew the king would die tonight and despite all my attempts I couldn't stop it! Anyone in their right mind would be all jittery and anxious too! I told myself. Or not. Since everyone I told seemed to be very nonchalant about it. Well, maybe that's an exaggeration...

Tonight the king could be poisoned. Tonight a new regime could be set up. Tonight I could be proved right. Tonight was my last chance to stop Mantrin.

"Well Mister Special, do you deign to get off your lazy behind and actually *do* something around here? Hm? Or are you going to sleep all night?" Regin hissed in my ear, coming up beside me.

I rolled my eyes. "Sir, I still have ten minutes," I pointed out, my voice calm and even.

"Oh do you? Well while you were enjoying your little nap, your summons arrived."

I inclined my head toward the door, "No, I have not been summoned. Sounds to me like Carlie is still performing." Strains of flute music drifted toward us.

He swore. "Well you might've been."

"I have not slept the entire time I have been sitting here, so it would be impossible for me to have missed my summons." Or in almost two days, I added in my head.

"Don't argue with me! Get ready! Princess Sadie is here and we want to impress her, yes?"

"Of course we do," I responded without enthusiasm.

"Exactly!" he said and moved on to yell at someone else.

Carlie's song ended and a pair of minstrels entered the Great Hall.

I continued to wait.

I hated the waiting times before every performance and tonight I endured the worst wait of all. I knew the king would be poisoned tonight, but I did not know when or how.

I couldn't sit still any longer so I started walking around pretending to look at the food and talk to people. In reality I was just trying to stop my twitching and jitters. Rickety tables and chairs lined the waiting room. I use the word 'room' loosely. What I really waited in was a long, narrow hallway hidden way in a spare stretching from the kitchen to the Hall and with dozens of people bustling around the 'room' looked even narrower than it actually was.

Jolene, the chef, could be heard screaming and yelling at each other and everyone else even over the din of the waiting room. But no one at the feast ever complained about the two of them. I guess the thick door separating the hallway from the Dining Hall muffled the noise out either enough or completely. But they both managed to shut up when the doors were opened. I would never understand how they timed that.

A butler from the Hall came in and called for me. I sighed and started weaseling my way through the crowd of anxious performers and servers. But, being such a narrow passage, squeezing through the press proved more difficult than I thought it would.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING STANDING AROUND?" Regin screamed at me.

"I'm going, I'm going!"

I hid a smile. He may hate me, but the king loves me and I'm one of the highlights of the night. Even though dark thoughts about the king's death crowded my mind, I still liked being able to lord something over Regin.

I stood in front of the door, ready, but heart pounding. I tied a black mask over my eyes. At the last minute I managed to convince Regin to change from a blindfold to a mask. I needed my eyes to try and spot Mantrin trying to slip any poison into the king's food or drink. Regin, of course, resisted, but caved after I pointed out the king or princess (or anyone) may shift during the routine and mess me up - or even worse - make me kick or hit someone.

The two men in charge of opening and closing the door slowly pushed the door outward and I moved into the doorway, staying in shadow. I had to wait for the servants to finish shifting chairs and platters of food into planned positions so I could perform without spilling anything or hurting anyone.

I gave a signal to one of the servants and very torch, lantern and candle in the Hall were put out. I stepped into the Hall, the doors pulled shut behind with a soft thud. I may have the concerns of the world on my shoulders, but as soon as I turned one cartwheel I would be in my element. I would be in my only true refuge. Even with hundreds of pairs of eyes looking on, in my little world of spinning, leaping and twisting through the air I could be alone.

I closed my eyes and inhaled the sweet smell of the feast. Oh it made me hungry. I opened my eyes again and looked around. The tables were arranged in a "U"-shape. Everyone of royal blood and the King's Lords sat at four tables on dais, about twenty tables extended from either ends of the dais.

I climbed on to a pile of crates at the open end of the 'U'. I lit the match left for me on the pile of crates and looked at the king. He seems fine for now... I held the spark of brightness from the matches near my face, feeling the slice of heat from the match bounce against my face. To the crowd, only my mask and hood were visible, the match lighting them up from below.

"Good evening to you all! Your Majesty." I bowed to King Ajax.

"Your Majesty." I bowed to King Ripley. "And your Highness." I bowed to Princess Sadie. I made a general, sweeping bow to the rest of the assembly. "Ladies and Gentlemen. I shall begin my performance shortly. I would ask that you do not move anything in this room for it shall disrupt the performance, thank you!" I douse my torch and retreated to the huge doors and the end of the Hall, the king's table being at the opposite end.

Char, one of the court musicians, started up a beat on his drum and the nearest pair of torches lit up. A pair of torches hung from the wall every two feet. The hall was approximately one hundred and twenty feet long. Sixty pairs of torches. Hanging up high from the wall. Various lanterns and candles really brightened this place up.

With every fourth beat, another pair of torches lit up. I waited for four pairs of torches to be lit and I started walking. I sped up with the music, as did the lighting of the torches. I do not know how those poor servants lit the torches so fast, but they were never even half a beat behind.

As I gained momentum, I performed four handsprings in a row ending the trick with a front flip, landing on the lowest of my crate staircase. I dashed up the rest of the stairs and, without even pausing for a moment at the top, launched off them and flipped through the air, landing on a stack of barrels placed where I would, hypothetically and actually, land.

I paused to catch my breath and balance as Carlie held out a

long note on her flute. As she took up a happy melody I back flipped to the floor and back handspring-ed on to one of the tables, the dishes clearest of my landing spot. I landed in front of the princess. I pulled a purple flower out from under my cloak and handed it to her with a flourish. She inhaled the sweet aroma of the flower and smiled. "Thank you, tumbler."

"Waverly, if it pleases your Grace."

She nodded. "Waverly then."

I launched myself backwards off the table to a raised platform in the exact center of the 'U' of tables; landing cat-like on one bent knee and one straight leg. The music heightened and I jumped, spinning like an arrow on to a table, pausing only long enough to change direction and double flipped to another table. The crowd remained silent, waiting.

It was during this flip I realized I paid almost no attention to Mantrin. I did not even mark his location relative to the king's. I paused a moment on the table to try and spot him. Two down on the king's left. So not directly in front of him. I need to try and do something to stop him... I ran over some options in my head as spun, twisted and jumped.

I finally came up with a plan, but it would involve deviating from my original routine. The only problem would be making the deviation look natural. Would, could, Carlie and Char keep up? I prayed they would and jumped off the table and to the platform in the

middle of the 'U' and bent over backward and then over myself again into a split. Then pulled myself up into a hand-stand. Using only my arms, I propelled myself off the platform and on to the closest table. Standing on my feet now, I jumped forward and landed on my hands. I jumped from my hands, backwards, and landed on my feet, between two platters. I jumped again and this time landed on just one hand.

Carlie and Shar barely faltered in their music. They are great!

I continued my see-saw jump all the way down the table, spinning around the corner between tables with a flourish. When I past by the king's chair I knocked his goblet, unnoticed, off the table with a small flick of my wrist. My goal accomplished I jumped down the rest of the tables without giving much though to were I went. I threw in a few twists and back bends when I got bored.

I gave a small signal to Carlie and she took off into the final crescendo of my routine. I backed against the big door and took off running toward my crates in a flat out spring, up the improvised staircase and landed with a bang in front of the king. Not even pausing, I jumped over the king to a rope hanging from the ceiling. I shimmied up the rope and on to a huge beam which held up a tapestry behind the king.

Char kept a steady pound on his drums, building the tension in the room. I could almost feel everyone hold their breath.

I slipped on the beam and looked away from the crowd, intent on

keeping my balance.

The princess screamed, causing me to look down. I swore. The king lay on the floor, unconscious, I assumed. NO! The whole room turned to utter chaos. The guests running back and forth, ladies fainting and going into hysterics. Men trying to get close to "assist". All of the noise and movement I barely comprehended. A faint buzzing became the shouts of people and general babble of talking and blurs of dark colors became the scurry and frenzy of the people below.

In a few minutes Captain Raleigh arrived. "SILENCE!" he bellowed and the room plunged into a strained, tense silence. He looked up at me and frowned. Why'd he do that? Ah, he must be realizing I was right. I found this thought pleasing for some reason. I'm not all that stupid, am I Captain? I ignored the fact his Majesty himself didn't believe me either. Kings can be forgiven, guards can't.

By the time I got the floor, the a large crowd gathered around the king and I could not get close to the king. I did not really need to see the king; I had done my job and now Captain Raleigh must discover Mantrin's involvement and convict him and cure the king. I no longer needed to be involved. Feeling confident my civil duty had been performed to its fullest, I started making my way to the open door.

But I stopped when I heard Mantrin's announcement.

"I need everyone to step away from his Majesty so physicians can attend upon him." As he said this four people rushed into the room and knelt by the king. "As the king's closest friend and advisor I have the privilege of being regent in times of the king being... unable to attend to his duties. I shall conduct a full and thorough investigation of this crime. Poison is the obvious cause, for, not two minutes prior, the king was in full health. I am pleased to announce, though, the king is not killed." One of the men who came in earlier whispered something to Mantrin. "The intake of the poison was not lethal" Mantrin declared, smiling. Not because of the king's surviving, but because of a plan well executed. Oh well... I guess the Captain will figure it out. And King Ripley and... REGENT?! When did he get that privilege? No wonder he was so confident.... With no heir, Mantrin will get the throne as soon as the king dies. But when will that be?

Cheers erupted through the crowd.

I looked up at Mantrin and found him staring at me. Hate flooded his gaze. I turned away; terrified of Mantrin. As regent he could now order me executed and I would be out of the way. Although Captain Raleigh would be the real issue, not me. But... Mantrin could get rid of him too! Well this has gone well... I frowned.

Everyone stood in silence with bowed heads as servants lifted the king and carried him to his rooms.

"The feast is over - if all guests could please leave in a calm

and quiet manner." Servants started flooding the room, helping their masters and cleaning up the multitude of uneaten food.

In the rush I couldn't escape the Hall so I slipped into a quiet corner of the Hall and waited. I watched the goings on with glassy eyes, not really caring what happened around me. If Mantrin gets rid of Raleigh and me then who is going to save the king? No one... No one can save the king. He is dead. My only hope is that I manage to evade being arrested. A small girl who is hated by most can hide much more easily than the Captain of the King's Guard.

I refused to look at Mantrin. I didn't know why, but his gaze terrified me. Something, something about it. Part mockery, part triumph, part pure hatred, part boastfulness. He would triumph over me. He would make sure I would be taken care of if I honed in on him and showed I knew. He already suspected me, the glimpse of his face I saw proved such. If I concerned myself with something else, maybe he would drop his suspicions, he would let me be. I had no intention of involving myself any further. Others could take care of this, not me. I couldn't. Raleigh knew the truth and he would arrest Mantrin and arrest him and King Ajax would be saved and everything would end happily! That's the way it has to go!

"GUARDS! Arrest him!" Mantrin shouted.

I looked up, shocked, having missed the past few minutes of conversation to my thoughts. I saw Captain Raleigh and seven other men approaching me. "Waverly..." Captain Raleigh chided.

"What, what is going on?" I demanded.

Mantirn laughed. "You should know. You were the only one who could have put that poison into his Majesty's cup! You flew right over his head!"

"NO! I didn't do it! I swear!"

No one listened. My arms were bound behind my back and two guards grabbed my arms and dragged me out of the Hall.

I glanced back on my way out and met Mantrin's eyes. I would destroy him, pound him into the earth until nothing remained.

Chapter Four

Captain Raleigh slammed the door to my cell shut with a bang, locking the door and spinning his ring of keys on his finger.

"Sorry, Waverly," he said, not looking one bit sorry.

Raleigh too...

"Raleigh! How could you!"

"Could what?" he asked, sneering.

"Nothing," I murmured.

"Good." He left out the big door blocking off the cells from the guardhouse, locking that door too.

I felt hot tears come to my eyes. What had I done to deserve this? Haven't I done what is right and good, haven't I? Have I done something wrong? What am I supposed to do now? I covered my face with my hands and sobbed.

#

When I woke up the next morning I could not figure out where I

was. A strange odor reached my nose and I looked around the dark closet to find a plate of food scraps and a clay jug which upon further inspection was found to hold water. I raised the jug to my lips and downed the water before I could think about the disgusting liquid I just poured down my throat. At least I quenched my thirst.

No longer dying of thirst, I examined my cell. In the most simple of terms, it was nothing more than a wooden box, although the door has a few slats in it, plus a metal plate covering the lock. Of course, I attempted to remove the metal plate, but that endeavor only resulted in bloody fingers. I swore and threw myself to the ground, leaning my head against the wall.

I jumped out of half-conscious state when the door to my cell flew open and Raleigh followed by a tall guard walked in.

"Lord Mantrin says we don't have enough evidence to keep you here, Waverly, and we've been commanded to let you go," Raleigh reported.

I narrowed my eyes. "This sounds suspicious."

He sneered at me. "You'd rather stay here?"

"I'm just saying I don't trust any of you."

Raleigh shrugged. "If you want to stay here, be my guest. Matter of fact do stay here. I don't think you should be released at all." He thrust me backwards, scowling.

The guard spoke up then. "But Lord Mantrin is right, the possibility that he," the guard jerked a thumb at me, "could've

dropped the poison in the king's cup is slim."

I tried to stop from rolling my eyes. This whole conversation was planned, I could tell by the way their exaggerated voice they rehearsed this. And just the subject matter. Why in the world would they discuss trying to rid me of blame in front of me. But why are they saying this all in front of me, what is the point... I hoped they would reach some point of this conversation shortly.

"Of course I want out," I snapped.

"The door is right there," Raleigh said, pointing.

I glared at him and stalked out. I needed to stall, I need them to keep talking.

Raleigh grabbed my arm and leaned close to my ear. "Just be careful, Waverly. I'm watching you." He released my arm with a shove, just as I yanked the limb away from him, giving a withering look of disgust to both men. I stormed toward the exit of the jail. So there's the reason behind all this, they don't have 'evidence', I assumed. Raleigh and Mantrin could easily keep me locked up though. So why are they letting me go? They both know I know about their plan. I told Raleigh after all. So why are they letting me out? Appearances? Maybe. I pushed the matter out of my mind and focused on that 'what to do next' problem.

Out of jail now I could do anything. Well not anything.

Raleigh warned me he would be watching me. Therefor I couldn't go off doing whatever I pleased. I doubt that I would be able to leave

the palace grounds.

A hand latched around my forearm and I wrenched away, snapping out of my thoughts to the present.

"I'm sorry to startle you," the owner of the hand said.

The guard who accompanied Raleigh. I snorted at him.

"I just wanted to tell you something..." he said, spreading his hands before him.

"Hurry up," I said, crossing my arms.

"You must stop with Mantrin. Being jailed is just the start of what will happen to you if you continue this way."

"Thank you for the warning," I told him, putting as much poison into my fake gratitude as I could.

He sighed, his shoulders drooping. "If that is what you want..." He sighed again and walked off.

I dismissed the guard from my mind and focused on more pressing troubles.

Starving, I wandered toward the kitchens. Big mistakes I realized when I walked through the swinging doors. As soon as I walked in someone noticed me and whispered to her neighbor about my entrance. In moments the whole kitchen knew I stood in the door way and they loathed me. I could feel the dislike pouring down upon me from every side.

I left the kitchen almost as soon as I entered, still hungry.

I went back to my rooms, decided the best course of action at

this time would be to avoid people. The heat from the looks cast my way in the kitchen showed Mantrin and Raleigh 'forgot' to tell the staff about my release. I scowled. Dirty scoundrels.

I lay in my bed for the next few hours, refusing to move, telling myself I couldn't, wouldn't, shouldn't. But in my heart I knew I could, would and should move. A few dirty looks from people who didn't like me all that much to begin with should not frighten me off what I know is right.

In the midst of convincing myself lounging in my room would accomplish nothing, a knock sounded at my door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Wave," Anise said, "I brought you some food."

I hauled myself off of my cot and opened the door. "Thanks," I murmured, taking the tray of food from her and placing it on the table.

"Eat, before it gets cold," Anise said in a soft voice, sitting on my cot.

I nodded and sat down, nibbling at the food. I glanced at Anise and found myself surprised by her calm manner. She should be bursting with questions about why I sat in my bedroom and not a jail cell. But she just sat on my cot, hands folded in her lap, watching me eat. I turned back to my food, waiting for her to start a conversation.

I didn't have long to wait.

"Waverly?" she asked.

"Aye?"

She paused and exhaled loudly. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, knowing exactly what she wanted to know.

"Why did you get arrested?"

"Because Mantrin through I poisoned the king. Of course, I didn't," I replied.

"And you got released why?"

I stalled on this answer, by taking a large bite from a piece of bread and dallied over chewing and swallowing. Should I answer her with the truth as I know it or with what Raleigh told me? "Because they don't have enough evidence to keep me locked up."

She nodded. "Make sense."

I shrugged.

"So what are you going to do now?"

I shrugged again.

"You have to have some idea," she said, flinging her arms wide to emphasis the fact I must have an idea.

"I know I should, Anise, but that doesn't change the fact that I don't!" I scowled at the plate of food in front of me.

I heard Anise sigh and stand up. "I have to go Waverly, I'll see talk to you later, sound good?"

I nodded, still glaring at my plate.

She walked to the door, stopping in the doorway. "If I may be so bold..." she hesitated, "you should go she Madam Reichan." With that, she fled the room, back to her duties in the kitchen.

#

Four days later, Collin and I sat on a fence, watching the horses run. Or we both looked at the horses running. My eyes may have been pointed at the beasts of burden, but my mind stayed lost in my self-assigned mission. So far all I'd done was lurk around the palace trying to make myself invisible.

Easier said than done.

We spoke little. With Collin, words were optional. But I felt reassured and encouraged. He always had that affect on me.

He sighed. "I better get back to work, Wave." But he made no move to jump off the fence.

"I suppose you should," I agreed, but didn't budge either.

"Collin?"

"Yes?" he asked.

"What do I do?"

He gave me a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what do I do now about the king," I said, wondering why I had to explain.

"I know that part, but what do you mean specifically. I would think your course of action would be pretty obvious," he said.

"Oh? And what course of action do you see staring before you?"

I snapped.

"Getting a cure," he replied, his tone clam and even.

"Anise told me to go to Reichan, but I can't do that."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because Raleigh told me he had people - I assume guards - following me so I wouldn't do anything I shouldn't."

He frowned. "Captain Raleigh told you this?"

I nodded. "Didn't I just say that?"

"I know, just making sure." He jumped off the fence and started pacing. "Just listen. If Captain Raleigh *said* you were going to be followed, why would the guards hide?" He stopped in front of me, waiting to see my answer.

"What do you mean?" I asked, although I began to catch his drift.

"I mean," he said, looking me in the eye, "that if someone was going to tell you they were going to do something, why would they hide it?"

"I-I guess they wouldn't..."

"Exactly!" he said, pointing one finger at me for emphasis.

"I suppose that makes sense, but...why would he even mention it then?" I asked, not seeing the full logic in Collin's argument. Although the potential for a good argument lay somewhere in his reasoning.

"To scare you I suppose." He shrugged.

"That doesn't seem to line up..."

"Do you have any better ideas?" he asked. "You've been sitting here for almost three hours and I've not seen any guards of any sort!"

"Maybe they just know I'm down here and didn't bother keeping a close eye on me," I countered. Then a second idea hit me. "What if they are hiding to make me think all these so that I'll go do something I shouldn't and then they can arrest me..."

"But you aren't going to be doing something you shouldn't," Collin said, "As a matter of fact, you'll be doing something you should be doing."

"I know! But that's not what Mantrin thinks I should be doing! Which is the problem."

"And I think you are a little paranoid, Wave," he said, putting both his hands on my knees.

I shrugged. "Or maybe I'm just cautious." I jumped off the fence and started back to the palace. Collin has very good point. How do I know if anyone is actually following me? That's very logical actually. If Raleigh told me I was being watched, why would the guards even try and hide? Wouldn't they make themselves known just so that I would know they actually were watching me? This seemed to make sense, although I knew I only reiterated Collin's words. For some reason when I through through the train of logic myself the idea made much more sense.

I might as well risk it... Although if I'm captured that will make a visit to the prison twice in the same day. Pleasant thought that... Before I lost nerve, I turned myself around and marched toward one of the small servant exits in the palace wall. Outside lay the homes and shops of the wealthy.

Being the middle of the day, the little gate stood unlocked and unguarded. No formal guard being assigned to this door due to its constant use. Knowing kitchen staff came and went through this door all the time, I set myself to be ready to hide or run. I did not want anyone to see me. Mostly because I didn't want to explain my reason for leaving the palace grounds or getting more ridicule. A small voice in the back of my head warned me that being seen could also mark the end of my brief career as an agent for the king.

I clambered into a tree a few dozen paces from the gate and waited to see how many people walked through the gate in an hour.

A boring hour, but one I benefited from. Only lower ranking servants walked through the gate and only a dozen or so of those. Most of them returned before the hour finished. This provided me with two bits of information. Not very many people used the gate at this time of day and not very many people who would recognize me on sight will be in town. Armed with this I waited until everyone on the path leading up to the gate cleared then sauntered on over. In case anyone saw me, I wanted to look unconcerned and *not* in anyway connected to that gate. With a quick dash I slipped through the gate

and stood in a small street leading to the main road.

Still not ready to rest easy, I hurried on to the main road, then through some other streets. I didn't catch the names nor did I know where they led. I wandered through this neighborhood a few times before and I knew my way around well enough to make my way back to the main street.

All the houses and shops in this part of town looked the same - like the palace. All these rich merchants and noblemen wishing to impersonate the king. I found nothing more despicable than greedy noblemen - like Lord Mantrin. The traitor owned a house in this neighborhood, but also a manor in the country. I passed by his house, pausing for a moment to consider the house and its occupants. What secrets did he hide in his house? I shrugged. Probably something useful, but I wasn't about to go digging through his house to find out, such an act screamed idiocy to me.

The houses, of course, were not sitting right on the street, but set back from the road by spacious grounds and gardens. I scowled at the overabundance of luxury and grandeur. Why can people just all live simply and functionally? I knew, no matter how hard one tried, there was no way on the green earth that any noble would ever consent to living 'simply and functionally'. After all - they were nobles, it was their job to live an extravagant life. I scowled, exiting the street of locked gates and glass windows and turned on to a street of stores.

Banish the thought that these lovely rich people actually go to a *common* marketplace for their goods. Oh heaven's sakes no! They must go to stores and shops designated and run by them. I rolled my eyes. So petty.

I wandered down the street, trying to remember which door led to Reichan's store. Unlike most marketplaces, any marking of business was small and hard to see. No flashy signs or merchants calling out their wares here. Just a sign above an open door. I glanced at each sign, walking down the middle of the street. Few people wandered the streets. The homeless, ruffians, drunks and other dregs of society were forbidden to come beyond the shiny gate separating the wealthy from the not as wealthy. The only people who did wander about were a few servants shopping for their masters and some ladies browsing stores for dainties and baubles.

Locating Reichan's store, I pushed open the door, the twinkle of silver bells alerted the herbalist to my arrival. A wild rush of aromas arrested my senses, the herbs and remedies on the shelves giving off strong and subtle smells. Tangy, musky, sweet, spicy, sharp, smooth, enticing, repulsive. So many scents filled the room making me dizzy and lightheaded.

"Well hello sir," the herbalist said, inclining her head to me, her soft brown locks falling over her shoulder.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," I said, coming back to earth and sweeping my hat off my head and bowing.

She cocked her head to one side, thinking. "I know you," she said, half to herself, half to me. Her brow furrowed in thought and she squinted her eyes at me. "You are the young boy who comes with Miss Anise sometimes aren't you?" she asked, her voice musical. I imagined her singing voice charmed anyone and everyone.

"Yes ma'am, I am," I replied, unable to look her in the eye. Just as I walked through the door the utter stupidity of my task crashed upon me in a huge wave. I'm about to ask someone who has never examined the king to tell me what kind of cure he needs.

Wow... This sure will go over well.

She smiled. "Good girl, she is. What can I do for you?"

"I just needed to ask you a few questions," I said, examining some object on the shelf, trying to look casual and nonchalant.

"Ask away," she said, sweeping the floor, seeming to not notice my unease.

I took a deep breath and spat out my question: "I need to ask you about the poisoning of the king."

Reichan froze, the broom in her hand clattering to the floor. Her clear blue eyes widened and her face and hands paled. She leaned close to me. "Listen, I sold no one any poisons! I do not sell poison! If you are here to try and get a confession from me you are very wrong." Her voice was urgent, hard, and worried.

I reeled back, shocked by the severity in her voice. I didn't think such a quiet person could be capable of sounding so harsh.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm not here to try and blame you for anything, ma'am. I wanted to ask you a question!"

She glared at me. "Nothing concerning my sales?"

I stared up at the taller woman and shook my head at a furious rate, trying to instill as much confidence in the apothecary as I could. Yet another instance of your stunning brilliance, Waverly m'dear. "Not at all!"

Reichan looked me over with an unsure glare. "If I find out you are lying, you will regret it, clear?" she asked, her tone making me sure she would and could carry out this threat.

"Yes ma'am!" I said, resisting the urge to salute her.

She flashed her stunning smile, returning to her normal quiet, calm self. Although I could still detect an unease in her - she forgot to pick up her broom. "Good. Now then, what do you need?" She realigned some jars on a shelf as I gathered my thoughts.

"I was wondering if there was any way you could tell me what poison was used on the king," I ventured. After the reception of my previous statement I feared what kind of response this one would bring.

She shook her head, her dark brown locks quivering, "Alas, I'm sorry, but I can't. Not without examining the king. I expected to receive a summons, but none has come."

Oh what a surprise. "What if I could describe the king's symptoms?" I pushed down the feelings of despair over not being able

to see the king myself and know his current symptoms. Not that this response was completely unexpected... How I could even expect her to be able to correctly determine the king's illness without every having seen him?

"I might be able to..." she said, stopping her tidying to focus on me, her arms crossed over her chest.

The fatal night remained vivid in my mind still. "The king collapsed, fainting. Struggling for breath, body rigid - or I think so, I could not see clearly due to the masses of people surrounding him - and he became very pale."

She pursed her lips and pressed her fingertips against her forehead in thought.

I remembered my one piece of knowledge no one else had. "Oh! I know one other thing - the poison is expensive, presumably rare. One thousand gold coins is considered a good price for it."

"That does narrow it down," she agreed, her mouth twitching upward.

I remained quiet, allowing her to think, myself going over the new information. Reichan, the best apothecary and herbalist in the city, in the entire country for all I know, has not been summoned to the king's side. I wonder why? Oh, let's think. Mantrin wants the king to die. A cure would defeat that purpose. Despite my efforts to hide it, a smile crept across my face. I should suggest to Princess Sadie to summon Reichan. Mantrin would not dare refuse her.

Everyone loves her too much.

"Is there anything else you can tell me? Anything more current?" she asked, interrupting my newest plan formation.

"Um..." I stalled, trying to bring my mind back to the present, "I heard the king has almost no control over his own body - can't speak or eat."

"I have a few ideas of what it *may* be." I felt a wave of hope sweep over my whole body. She walked into a back room and fetched a large book, which she lay across the counter. The book absorbed her attention and she paid me no heed, but I could not tear my eyes away from her and the huge volume. A cure? Finally? Good luck at last! Progress! Maybe fate is not conspiring against me. Maybe it was just my own stupidity. Of course, you are an idiot Waverly. What did you expect? But finally, finally you've don something right! Fina- Reichan slamming the book shut roused me from my exultant thoughts.

"Anything?" I asked, fighting to keep the excitement and anticipation from my voice and face.

She must have seen the light in my eyes or picked up some tone in my voice for she took on a pitying expression. "I'm sorry Waverly, but I need to know more - or do my own personal examination of the king. If you can bring me more information, I'll surely be able to help you. I have a list of possible poisons, but I would never dare just experiment with the remedies. Some can be just as

dangerous as the poisons themselves. So I'm afraid I can't help you." She smiled, trying to look reassuring.

I could feel my heart drop to my toes. "Thank you Reichan, ma'am," I said, bowing. "I should be going now, I've used up enough of your time. Good day."

I turned to walk out, but decided to ask Reichan one more question. "If you don't mind me asking, why do you think you haven't been summoned to examine the king. You are reported to be the best herbalist in the city, the whole country!"

She smiled. "I probably am. And I'm definitely the only righteous person who knows enough about poisons to be of any use."

"So why do you think you haven't been summoned, seems a little... strange, wouldn't you say?"

Reichan narrowed her eyes at me. "Why do you want to know?"

I shrugged. "Just seems like the obvious thing to do."

"OUT!" Reichan shouted, "You do want to get me to confess to selling a poison!"

"No, no! I do not!"

She glared at me. "You know what's more puzzling than why I haven't been invited to the palace is why some entertainer is asking me about cures."

I backed up. I would not tell Reichan about what I knew, but I need a way out of the mess I just got myself into. "I was curious," I tried.

She stared at me, seeming to examine my whole being. "Just curious?" she asked.

Committed to my excuse of being curious, I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She sniffed. "I'm not sure if I believe you, curiosity rarely leads one to come all the way out here and ask."

"I don't have much to do in the palace, ma'am. I thought I would come and find out if you knew anything."

She still stared at me with suspicious and skepticism. "I still don't entirely believe you, you seem to be hiding something..."

"I'm not, I swear!" I lied.

She sniffed at me one more time and picked up her broom, turning her back to me, signifying the conversation at a close.

"I better go now, ma'am," I said, thinking it best to flee the shop before she threw anymore accusations at me. "Good day."

"Good day, Waverly," Reichan threw over her shoulder, her tone still brusque.

I exited the shop as quick as I could, the bells jingling as I threw open the door and slammed it shut behind me.

Well what now? I came all the way out here and learned nothing. Besides the fact Reichan is trying to hide from anyone asking about the king's poisoning. As the only herbalist anywhere near the palace I would be too So what do I do now?

I took my time to get back to the palace. I needed a new plan

of action, but could not come up with one. I clung to the small thread I could figure out a way to see the king myself and get more information about his condition. I knew a way to see the king would show itself. If not a very safe or logical way, but there would be a way!

"You! Boy! Get away from here!" someone shouted and I realized I stood in the middle of the street, gazing at the sky, lost in my thoughts.

I turned to see who yelled at me and saw a serving man of some sort standing at gate to one of the huge mansions near the palace.

I walked on a few steps then backed up, realizing I just passed by Mantrin's house. In that instant I my mind formulated a new plan.

In the next instant I knew it was the singular most moronic, idiotic, stupid, insane, foolhardy and just plain dumb plan ever created. But then again I fit into the same category.

I walked back the way I came, looking for a way into the mansion. I knew a small side gate would be somewhere along the wall separating the house from the rest of the world. Rich men did not want their parade of appearances spoiled by servants going out the front door after all. I figured a rich, important man like Mantrin would have many servants and not everyone would know everyone and everything. With any luck I would be able to slip in unnoticed and make my way through the house without too much suspicion.

Although I wondered if the traitor told anyone in his house to

be on the look out for me. *No... That's impossible! Raleigh is 'watching' me. Why would anyone else need a warning?* I chuckled at my own paranoia and unlatched the small side-gate I found and made my way through the refuse of the day and to the kitchens.

Kitchens in any mansion are the same, be it in the palace or a manor house, so I knew my location pretty well. Just as expected, the cooks and servants scurried around the kitchens. No one noticed me enter and make my way out of the stuffy rooms and into the hallway leading to the rest of the palace. Although I took especial care to act natural and belonging, trying to keep myself as far from suspicion as possible.

If the architects of the mansions continued to base their buildings off the palace, the left hallway led to the servant's rooms and the right to rest of the house. I walked left. Every house with staff had small hidden hallways for the servants to come and go unseen (again, the utter pettiness of anyone with a little more gold than the next person). I could use these hallways to sneak around unseen, for one *had* to lead to Mantrin's study.

Of course, that would only be if I got lucky.

And I knew how often *that* happened.

I opened every door along the hall way, looking for another a narrow passage. As expected at this time of day - nearing dusk - the servants' quarters lacked any servants. Bedroom, bedroom, bedroom... How many servants does he have? Bedroom, bedroom, bedroom... HA! I

flung open one door and found, not a small table, cot and chest, but a dim passage made of rough stones. I walked into the hall, closing the door behind me. I started looking for another door, knowing many would be in the access hall, they led to most rooms in the house. I opened the first door I came to and was rewarded with... an empty room. I closed the door and continued up the hallway, searching for something along the lines of a study. I figured any sensitive documents Mantrin would keep would be either in his personal chambers or in his study.

I froze at the sound of footsteps in the hall and searched my brain for a good excuse about why I walked up and down the hall flinging doors open and slamming them shut again. Doors! Go in a room! Move!

I pulled open the nearest door and ran in, pulling the door shut behind me. I leaned against the door, nervous, eyes shut trying to listen for the footsteps to walk by. I heard them walk by and drift away into silence. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned to open the door.

"Excuse me, but what are you doing in here?" a soft, but forceful, feminine voice asked me.

I froze. "Honestly, ma'am," I said, walking forward into the room a little bit more. "I am playing around with a friend. I am sorry to disturb you..."

She glared at me. "You know much better!"

I nodded.

"Go now!"

I left, surprised I got away so easily. I really hope that little run-in has no other affects...

I continued to look through the narrow doors and halls of the house, but my search still refused to yield anything useful.

Mantrin probably wouldn't keep anything of importance here anyway. Too out in the open, you know? And if anything was here, he'd have it hidden where any nosy person like you wouldn't be able to find it. But even though my rationalizations made sense, I knew I would stay and search anyway. Some sort of internal 'leave no stone unturned' idea I adopted without knowing.

I opened the last door in the narrow hall and at last my search paid off. A large oak desk rested in the middle of the room on an ornate rug. Two bookcases leaned against a thick stone wall to the right of the desk. A large window covered half of the wall behind the desk. Four chairs sat before the desk and a fireplace lay cold opposite the bookcases.

I blinked a few times, adjusting my eyes to the new light. After I grew accustomed to the fading sunlight, I attended to the bookshelves. I ran my finger over their spines, reading the titles, but nothing seemed to be important. The books were either records of the goings on of the Mantrin family and house or the few books people could read for pleasure. No, not people, nobility. Which couldn't be

counted as people because people was too generic. I rolled my eyes and attended to the desk.

Large and oak with big drawers, the desk looked promising for any loose papers about... Well I wasn't sure what about, but something important. I opened the nearest drawer and pulled out a stack of papers, settling on the floor to look through them.

Letters. As I suspected the top drawer held the most recent documents. I supposed the last drawer would hold the least recent papers. I started flipping through each paper, scanning them for anything useful or incriminating. The letters seemed pretty innocent. Basic correspondence between other nobles and such, nothing seemed out of place.

I replaced the pile of papers and closed the drawer. Opening the next one I peered in. Just pens, ink and parchment. I closed that drawer with care so as not to break the glass inkwells. I eased open the next drawer, just in case something breakable may be in it. I pulled out a stack of papers, triumphant. I started thumbing through them. No, no, no. Just letters from other nobles and knights. Nothing I could even pretend to use. I threw the stack of papers to the ground in anger and frustration. The papers flew everywhere and rushed to pick them up. Stacking the papers in an even pile, I put them back in the drawer and slid it shut.

Getting up from from the floor, I looked around the room, hands on my hips. Where could anything else be hidden in this room. I

shuffled through the few papers on the desk and held up a small slip of paper in triumph.

"The good will be delivered tonight. Send your man with the full payment to the warehouse."

This is a bit suspicious... Reasons why this could have nothing to do with the assassination came to me, but I forced myself to believe the note referred to the poison. But what did this do except confirm what I already knew. I scowled and crumpled up the note, not catching myself in time. Oh great, now Mantrin will now you've been here. I tried to smooth the note out, berating myself.

I froze as I heard the door knob turn. I dove under the desk, the only spot near enough to hide under, pulling myself into the tightest and tiniest ball I could.

And prayed.

Chapter Five

I clutched at my knees, trying to squeeze myself into an even smaller ball, trying to quiet my anxious breathing and pounding heart. The door swung open and two men entered, talking - one in rich leather boots and one in standard boots issued to palace guards.

"...that tumbler is a problem. Will remain a problem. We need to get rid of her."

"Aye," a second speaker said. I thought I recognized his voice.

"He knows what we are doing," Lord Mantrin said, pacing the floor with sharp steps. Despite my fear, I felt pleased at causing the traitor so much trouble. If couldn't save the king I would cause Mantirn as much trouble as possible.

"I am sure of it!" the second speaker - the one in the uniform shoes - agreed. Something nagged at the back of my mind. I know his voice too... Where have I heard it before?

Mantrin stopped in front of the desk, so close to me I could make out the stitching on his boots and pants.

"He causes me more trouble than any one person should. The king will die, even if I have to kill a few clowns along the way." I never knew the suave Mantrin could sound so angry.

The other man did not respond, so I assumed he nodded, for the lord continued in his angry rant. "I can't believe I didn't just kill him on the spot when I found him spying on Dorlin and me! I could've just made up some accusation against him and no one would be the wiser. But I didn't. Foolish I! That tumbler is far smarter than anyone believes, or he lets on."

"I'm sure." The guard did not sound like he agreed very much about my intelligence. Or maybe his disinterest expressed a disinterest in Mantrin and his plots.

"Isn't that right Waverly?" he asked. "You know far much more than you let on! And you aren't who you say you are, are you?"

I held my breath, wondering if he just yelled out for no reason, knowing full well I could not possibly be in the room.

"Oh yes, laddie, I know you are in here. Under the desk, right behind me actually." To prove his point he kicked me.

The guard hauled me out from under the desk, holding me half a foot off the ground by the collar of my shirt. I caught a glimpse of his face. The guard from the prison! What was his name?

"Yes, Waverly, you cause me more trouble than you can ever imagine."

I gave him the cockiest grin I could.

The guard shook me hard and Mantrin continued after sneering at me. "You should give this whole thing up, Wave. I am one step ahead of you. As you can see, since I have you now." He started and started into space like he just remembered something important. "Oh that's right! You have given this whole thing up. Or I have forced you to. Since you are the one dangling above the ground and I'm the one about to be made king. Don't you just love this game?"

I spat on him. "You are never going to get away with this!"

"Oh how cliché! I shall go along with you, just for fun, and reply 'I already have!'" His laugh annoyed me. "Although, in this little game of ours you really were never even a player. By some small, manageable misfortune you appeared to have overheard my discussion with Lord Dorlin. Ah well

I felt uncomfortable hanging in mid-air, but didn't let my worry show and stared Mantrin right in the face. "So? It's true! You cannot, will not and shall not get away with this! You are a traitor and tyrant! Nothing more!"

He chuckled. "That's all true. I admit it. I'm also a cheater, liar, murderer and a few other things. Doesn't bother me one way or the other." He shrugged. "You have to do what's 'right' all the time, yes?"

I nodded out of sense of defiance.

"Then you just can't understand how I can do what's 'wrong'. I know what I do is wrong. Why do you think I don't just give the good

captain his answer - the one you so graciously gave him before?
Derrek, remind me to get rid of Raleigh when I'm king - he's an
idiot."

"Yes sir."

"Good. Carrying on, let's stow you away where you won't be
found. No need to worry his majesty, yes? He is in a poor state of
health you know." He laughed and the guard forced a chuckle at the
joke. Mantrin left the room and Derrek, as I now knew his named to
be, followed, his hands around my wrists in vise-like grip. We
walked to the back of the mansion, wending our way through small
alleys up to the palace.

The night hung heavy over me as I tried to keep my dread from
making me do something irrational. Just think, there is a way out of
this. But my panic stricken mind refused to believe that. I knew
what lay at the end of this route, just as I knew every nook and
cranny of the palace. Some thoughtful architect built a door leading
straight to the dungeons. A well hidden door to be sure, but there
nonetheless. Besides the time I managed to wrench it open, I never
saw anyone use it. But Mantrin found the perfect use for the
forgotten door - he could sneak me down into the dungeons without a
soul knowing. I doubt many souls even knew the door existed.

As we walked, thoughts of the legends of the dungeons came back
to me. Stories about utter blackness and creatures, spawned just
from that darkness. I always - and still did - laugh those stories

off. No place could be so horrible. Maybe dark, but not utter black. Maybe some rats and bats, but not twenty foot long snakes and spiders big enough to eat a man. Nothing to be scared of. Worried about, yes. How could I escape? What would Mantrin do while I was locked up?

Yet again, I proved myself incapable of completing this task and wished someone else, *anyone* else, would take it up. I could never do it.

"How can you imprison me without a trial?" I asked, not expecting an answer, but just needing to have the feeling of doing *something*.

"Have you just forgotten the past few weeks? Or are you just being stupid? Maybe both so I'll remind you of recent events. I poisoned the king after procuring the spot of the king's most trusted friend and adviser and - this part is important - regent. Are you following me so far?"

I glared at him.

He ignored me and continued. "Because I'm regent - remember that part? - I can do things like throw people into the dungeons and keep them there."

I wracked my brains for some way to combat this. "You do not have full power. You don't have King's Right."

"No, I don't. But once the king dies, I will."

"And who said you were going to be king?" I asked. "What if

King Ajax has given his entire kingdom to Princess Sadie or King Ripley or someone else entirely."

He laughed. "Once the king is dead, I'll just takeover."

"Oh? And who said that this is going to happen? Besides yourself. I don't think King Ripley will take too kindly to you taking over - if you aren't the one who is *supposed* to be king."

"You know, I'm the one in charge here, don't you think I've covered all these details?"

I shrugged. "Just asking."

He slapped me across the face. "No more questions. We are here anyway." He pulled open the heavy wood door and lit a torch. "Don't trip Derrek, the stairs are steep."

We eased down the stairs. The stairs went beyond steep. Ladders look like grand staircases compared to these deathtraps. I doubt the stairs gave Mantrin such trouble. He still retained use of his hands to balance himself. Derrek still clutched my wrists in a vise-like grip. Not that I'd know, my hands had lost feeling five minutes ago.

Mantrin unlocked a cell near the door and shoved me in. "You can stay there until you rot for all I care. Which could take a while - you are still young." He laughed and walked off.

Derrek lingered for a moment. He gave me an apologetic look and followed Mantrin out.

I glared at his retreating back. Who is he? Is he working for

Mantrin or against him? Why can't anything be laid out simply for me? Who is Derrek and what am I supposed to do about him? Well nothing now because I'm stuck down here in this... I looked around, or, more accurately, moved my head around with my eyes open, for I could not see anything. Not even my hand in front of my face. Pure darkness. What a happy place. I felt something crawl over my foot and shivered in disgust.

The tales of the dungeons came back to me.

Spiders seven feet across, spiders big enough to swallow ten men whole, bats which would suck the blood right out of you, ghosts and the Dungeon Dragon - a vicious beast who hoarded the souls of condemned men and sent them to do its bidding. When I first heard these tales I passed them off as just myths and legends, but now being in the dungeons and seeing - or *not* seeing - them for myself, my level of skepticism dropped to almost nothing. Right now, I could believe anything lived in the Darkness.

The total absence of light unnerved me and I heard scrapes and slithers and scratches. Growling, hissing and screeching. I felt my heart pounding against my chest and my breathing became labored. I felt stick drops of water running down my back and forehead. I walked forward, breathing heavily, even though I had not exerted myself. My pace grew quicker as I walked and my breathing heavier. The sounds and smells around me seemed to intensify and I broke into a run. I ran into a wall and backed up, dizzy, holding my head. Got

to get away, got to find safety, got to move, got to run. They will
get me!

"Weel, looky 'ere!"

I screamed and fainted.

#

I revived to find a light held in my face, piercing my eyes.
The sudden light blinded me and I recoiled from it. *Light? Here?
How?*

"Sor'y to sceer ye li'e dat," a grizzled old man apologized.

His dialect was undecipherable to me and twisted my face up in
confusion, backing up and squinting my eyes, trying to stay away from
the bright light.

He chuckled. "De leeght dooes hur'."

"Excuse me?"

"Wha'?"

"I, I can't understand you!"

He scratched his head, "Weel, I doo nowt know wha' ta doo 'bout
dat."

I picked out a few words. "Um... Try talking slower."

He shrugged, "Wor'h uh try."

I could understand him a little better, "That's better. I can
understand you much better now."

"Oy! Dat's gued!"

I nodded. "I'm Waverly. I, until recently, worked for King

Ajax II."

"Aye. Ah 'member dat li'l prince, 'e's da keeng naow, iz 'e?" he stroked his chin as though the succession of kings was a new idea to him.

I took a minute to figure out what he said, then nodded, "Yes, Ajax is king now. When were you put in prison?" Ajax had been king for three years after all, must've been just before his coronation.

"Oy, weel nigh 'pon fiveteen yeers agow. Aye, yessire, dat be da numbah," he sat fondling with something in his hand.

My mouth dropped open. Fifteen years! Why in the world... I glanced around myself. How could he ever survive in this place?

"Wha' ye bein pu' in da Dar'ness for?"

"Dar- Oh," I sighed, "That's a long story. King Ajax has been poisoned. At Harvest, three days ago."

"Nowt gued," he interjected, still playing with whatever was in his hand. I tried to see what it was, but couldn't catch a glimpse of it.

I nodded. "Not at all," I surprised myself how quickly I took to understanding his dialect, "Anyway, he is very sick and I know who did it."

"Oy! Den why ar' ye 'ere?" he asked throwing up his hands, the object in his hands dropping to the ground. I grimaced when I recognized a human finger bone, but ignored it, even though he picked it back up and continued playing with it.

I sighed, mad that he kept interrupting me. "I'm getting there!" I explained, "So I've been trying to get the man who poisoned the king - Lord Cody Mantrin - bu--"

"'e ain't no leerd!" he exclaimed.

"Maybe not fifteen years ago, but he is now," I said, "He pois--"

"Da Mahntreen fam'ly ain't no leerdly fam'ly!"

I sighed, "Look, I'm only sixteen years old, I don't know what was going on fifteen years ago! Since I can remember Lord Mantrin has been one of the King's Lords."

He huffed. "Feene den."

Under normal circumstances I suspected the old man would amuse or frustrate me and on the surface he did, but I knew I would lose all sense of self and sanity if he disappeared. "Lord Mantrin has poisoned the king and I'm the only who knows this. Mantrin has managed to make most people believe that *I* poisoned the king. But I'm trying to get the king cured." He tried to interrupt a few times while I spoke, but I kept going so I wouldn't have to deal with this interruptions.

"Veery geud."

"Thanks. I do my best."

"Sooe, 'ow di' ye en' oop 'ere?"

"I sneaked into Mantrin's study and rifled through his papers and such. He caught me."

"Oy! Ye got caught'?"

"That is what I said," I agreed.

"Nowt geud. Ye sayed yer name were Wav'ly? Ah'm Ba'ger."

"Nice to meet you Badger," I said, proffering my hand.

He took my hand in his firm grip and gave it one good shake,

"A'ways pl'ased to mee' someon' dow' 'ere in da Dar'ness."

"I'm sure," I said, not quite believing anyone *could* be pleased to meet anyone here, although I could understand why someone would *want* to meet someone down here. Only humans and light could keep one sane in this pit. I glanced around again and noticed a pair of eyes watching. I tried to look away, but only to face another pair of staring eyes. I tried to turn away from them, but everywhere I turned, another pair stared at me. Reds and golds and greens. Matching orbs reflecting the candle flame, carefully guarded with a thin sheet of metal, between Badger and I.

What kind of place is this? Where these creatures live in the dark, feeding on the fear in this place? I wondered if they truly did just feed on the fear of the convicts in this hell-hole. If so, they sure got a tasty meal from me. I could feel my entire body, inside and out, shaking in fear.

The Unknown. The Darkness. The Creatures. Only a madman would put another human into such a vile place! Who designed this horrible place? Who put these creatures in here? Who locked other men away from the world? Away from Light. In the Darkness.

I focused my attention on the sole light source in the entire

dungeon. Every fiber in my being centered around this one light. No Darkness, no creatures, no Badger, no Mantrin, no Collin, no Anise, no King, no Waverly.

Just Light.

The light moved, breathed, lived! Light was all one needed to survive. With Light all things could be made possible. In the Darkness nothing could happen except evil. Darkness was the time of thieves, murderers and betrayal. Darkness hid hurting and killing lies. Nothing but lies.

Sometime during my hypnotic stare at the light, I fell asleep. Maybe the dark had one good purpose.

When I awoke, I half expected to find myself curled up in my bed in the servant's quarters. The Darkness, Lord Mantrin's treason, the King's assassination - all just a nightmare. Something left to the Darkness itself. But as soon as I opened my eyes I knew I had no such luck.

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling - or the Darkness which cloaked the ceiling - and eyes. The eyes of the Creatures of the Darkness. I shivered and felt the terror and oppressiveness of the Darkness. How could one live in the dark?

Badger was in the same position I left him in, fondling his bone, now humming to himself. I did not recognize the tune, but found it comforting all the same and lay still, listening to his gruff voice.

I stared out at the creatures

"Badger, what are they?" I asked in a dry whisper. He spent the intervening time alternating between humming and singing - both equally bad - old ditties. Thirty-two in all. Some longer than others. Most he forgot the words and made them up as he went.

I looked out beyond the small circle of light and saw the gleam of red, yellow and green eyes. Reptilian eyes. They stared at me and Badger without blinking. I shivered, trying to find a spot to put my gaze without the glowing orbs. I gave up and refocused on Badger, but the orbs were everywhere. "Badger.... What are they?"

He jumped and stared at me. "Wha'? 'ew are ye? Wha' are ye speekin' ewf?" he asked.

"Waverly, remember?"

"Oh. Aye. Wav'ly." He didn't seem to remember me.

"The eyes. What about the eyes? What are they?"

"Oh! Dem." His face took on an expression of fear and he seemed to not want to speak. "Ah dunno wha' dey are. Dey's jest alway' be'n 'ere. Ah 'spect dey alwa' will."

I wasn't sure I even wanted to ask the question which came unbidden to my lips, "Wha- What do they do?"

"Ah dunno," Badger whispered, "Ah've been 'ere for fi'te'n yeers and dey ne'er come close ta meh. Dey mees wit' yer heed." He glanced past the ring of light into the Darkness and the eyes. I could see the fear etched on his face. And understood. *Anyone* would

be scared of the Darkness and her children. A twinge of shame stung the back of my head; sixteen years old and still afraid of the dark? No. This wasn't just the dark little children feared. This was *why* children feared the dark. Why, deep down in every righteous man, he still feared the dark.

I tried to shake my head of the thoughts by focusing on Badger. The old man had spent fifteen years down here! No wonder his brain seemed to be somewhere else all the time. No wonder he couldn't speak properly. I was scared and had only been in the Darkness for a few hours at best; Badger had been here for fifteen years. What must go on in his mind?

The day - if they could be called such - drug on. Each like the next. The Darkness, the Creatures and their eyes. Our one little light. Badger didn't say much. What was there to say? We both struggled with the fear in our own ways. I could see Badger struggle with it just as much as I did.

The passage of days could be marked every time the container of food clattered down the stairs, accompanied by the blinding light from the upper regions of the world, the sunlight regions.

I wondered a few times if Badger felt the same way I did. A constant urge to go out, into the Darkness, to discover its secrets. A strong, tempting power waited out there, if I'd only go and see what it was. But somewhere in my - in my soul, I suppose - I knew once I stepped out into the Darkness I could never return.

And at all costs, I must return to the Light. I had a mission to finish. And now I knew, I had to finish it whatever it took. This thought alone kept me by the life-giving light.

After a six days, I started to pull myself together and think of ways out of this mess.

"Is there anyway out of here?" I ventured to ask.

"Ah dew nowt try," Badger replied.

"Why not?"

"De Dar'ness."

I looked back out in that expanse of terror and evil. "I understand," I whispered.

"No, laddie, ye dew nowt! Ye ken ne'er un'erstan'."

Can I? He may have a point. He is the only one down here alive still. He must know something. "Are - are there any other - any other people?" I asked, falling over the words, scared of what the answer might be.

He shook his head. "Nowt tha' I know ewf."

"Where there any other people - at some point?" This questioned scared me more than the last one.

"Aye."

I didn't even ask what happened to them; I already knew. The Darkness.

But I would fight. The Darkness wouldn't claim me.

Unless I had light, by no means could I escape. And Badger's

little flame was the only to be had. Of course every day the light appeared at the top of the stairs when the guard threw down some food for us. A new plan started to formulate in my mind.

"Oy, ye!"

"Aye?" I said, coming out of my thoughts.

"Ye air Wav'ly."

"Aye," I agreed, wondering how many times he would ask me what my name was.

"Ye sayed ye were a-tryin' to save 'is Mahesty."

"Aye."

"Wha' be a-bootherin' 'is Mahesty?"

No harm in telling him I suppose. Since it doesn't really matter anyway. "He is paralyzed, rigid, unconscious, fighting for breath," I rattled off, not paying much attention to the Badger, I doubted he could help anyway.

"Ah dew b'leve Ah knoew wha's a-bootherin' de Keeng," he said after a time. I could guess half a hour, but I lost my sense of time in this place.

This caught my attention right away. "You do?"

"Aye. Ah weere a smug'ler b'for Ah weere pu' inta de Dar'ness. Ah comed ac'oss many a poisuns. Ah knows o'wha' ye speak."

"Are you sure?"

"Aye," he said. "Ah us'd ta deel in such poisun much."

I hid a grin, pleased I finally I obtained an answer, at least

it sounded like I almost obtained an answer. I somehow overlooked the fact I was locked up with no way of contacting anyone.

"What?" I asked, eagerness bubbling over.

"Otrava it is. Aye."

I wondered if 'otrava' was the actual pronunciation of the poison, but now I had a poison. And was stuck in prison. About then I realized exactly the mess I was in. Great work, Waverly, you get yourself locked up in prison with the answer to your problems.

"Are you sure?" I asked again, still not believing this.

"Ah do b'leve Ah know o' wha' Ah speak," he stated sounding a little miffed I asked again.

"Sorry, no offense meant," I hastened to say

He nodded.

With this knew knowledge, I redoubled my plans of escape, but at every turn Darkness met me.

Chapter Six

Four more days passed, maybe five I lost count somewhere and I decided I couldn't stay another day down in this pit. "I'm getting out," I announced one day.

Badger laughed. "Shore ye air."

"I am!" I said.

"Seet yeself," he said and got back to humming and toying with his gruesome playthings.

I crept up the stairs and sat there waiting. I knew someone would come with our food. The only time of day the door opened. I clutched the metallic container used to throw the food down to use. Not much but the only thing I could lay my hands on to try and defend myself.

I waited for hours. Or longer. I don't know. I was determined to get out of this prison of body and mind. *Not my mind, no...*

Badger seemed to forget about my presence and continued with his usual tasks, completely ignoring my vigil at the door. I stared at

the door, refusing to look around me to see if any eyes watched me. Anyway, I knew they did so why bother scaring myself even more by seeing the floating eyes.

The door creaked open and I jumped up. The unlucky fellow to bring the dungeon's captives their food raised his hand up to throw the container down the stairs. But he never did. I tackled the poor man.

Not expecting the attack, he fell to the ground, even with me in my weakened state. I dashed off immediately, not believing my hopeless plan worked.

Not for long.

The man ran after me, calling for someone to come and help him. Four or five guards appeared and started chasing me. Three more appeared at the end of the hall, heading me off. I tried to duck aside but more guards seemed to just materialize from nothing.

I ducked and turned down a few more hallways, trying to evade capture and reach a safe spot. But everywhere I turned more guards appeared. With so little food and sunlight blinding me I could barely make my way and the chase lasted barely ten minutes.

The guards forcefully escorted me to the barracks and then into a small room partitioned off from the main rooms.

"Sir?" a guard asked, dipping his head.

"Yes?" Derrek asked, looking up from some papers on the desk before him.

Derrek! I glared at him, but too exhausted to do anything else.

"He escaped from the dungeons sir!" The guard sounded scared.

Everyone was scared of the dungeons and anyone who could escape from them must be some sort of magician. Or at least I'm sure that's what the poor guard thought.

"All right men, you are free to go," Derrek said. The distressed guards left quickly leaving Derrek and I alone.

"Well, Waverly, you escaped."

"Aye."

Derrek studied me for a moment. "I don't see why I should put you back down there."

"What do you mean?"

"You shall return to the palace. Although since your job as an entertainer is no longer wanted I think I shall reassign you." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "What else are you good at?"

I remained silent.

"I would give you a specific job, but it would appear you are useless at everything. So go out to the stables and find work."

I nodded.

"You are free to go," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

I turned to go, pulling open the door, when he grabbed my arm. How he got so close to me in the few moments I had turned my back, I don't know.

"I want to speak with you tonight," he hissed in my ear.

"Aye..." I said, not sure how to respond to such a statement.

"Meet me behind the main stable," he released my arm with a shove, pushing me through the door and slamming it shut behind me.

Stunned at this turn of events I walked out of the barracks, head down. You know, I think I'll just give up even trying to understand what is going on here. First Derrek says I need to watch my back and be careful not to get put in prison. Then he puts me in the dungeons - or Mantrin makes him, I'm not sure... And then he lets me go, but after some random ramblings about changing my job. Then tells me to meet him in secret tonight.

Aye, basically useless trying to figure this out.

Mostly.

I walked out of the barracks and into the bright sunlight. I turned my face up to the sun, grinning. The sun, the source of all light and to me the most beautiful thing in the world right now. I stood outside, relishing the life-giving light.

I walked back up to the palace, needing something to eat. I'd spent who knows how long in those dungeons - ten or eleven days by my counting - and I needed food.

I pulled open a door into the palace, still gazing at the sun. I did not want to go back inside, I wanted to stay in the sunlight and fresh air. But my stomach disagreed with me. I made my way down the hallway, happy to be free, even if I no longer felt the sun's

rays on my head and back. In the back of my head some small voice told me I couldn't start feeling reassured and happy with myself. After all the king lay in this palace dying and no one seemed to care to do anything about it!

But how could I not help feeling a least a little happy? After all I escaped the dungeons and the sun shone! Everywhere! I laughed out loud. Yes! The sun shone!

Pleased with the sun and confident it would still be there when I returned to the outdoors, I went inside, my stomach still demanding food. As I walked through the hallways, humming to myself, taking my time, I found Anise, or she found me. She carried two buckets of dirty water, obviously just come from some sort of cleaning. Dirt cover her apron and dress, wisps of hair sticking off her head in strange directions.

When she caught sight of me, she dropped the buckets, brown soapy water going everywhere, drenching herself and sending dirty brown water all over the hall and walls. "WAVERLY!" she screeched, running at me headlong and grabbing me in a huge hug.

For a moment, I forgot who I was supposed to be. "Anise!" I cried, returning the warmth and tightness of the hug. "I'm so glad to see you."

She backed away from me, holding me at arm's length. "You look different. Like you died and returned."

I sighed. "I'll explain later, but I only want to do so once,

if you know what I mean."

She nodded, still smiling. I grinned back at her. "We need to clean up this water."

"Aye... I suppose we do."

"Yes, Anise, we do," I said, enunciating each word.

She laughed. "Here." She pulled a large rag from one of her pockets and handed it to me. I knelt on the floor, trying to mop up the filthy water.

"So how did you get out?" she asked, wringing her sopping rag into one of the buckets.

"I was let out." *That's not entirely a lie...*

"Why?"

"I'll explain it to you and Collin as soon as I can, deal?"

She nodded, still grinning. "No problem."

We mopped up the rest of the floor in silence until only a slightly damp spot remained on the hard stone floor.

"Well I think that is good enough," Anise said, getting off her knees.

"I hope," I said, getting up too. "My knees are sore." I rubbed the said offending body part. "I really need something to eat, so I'll see you later."

She hugged me again. "Go ahead then. I need to get back to work." We continued down the hallway in opposite directions, my growling belly telling me to hurry up.

Hurrying as fast as I could I made it to the kitchens and slipped into the crowded room, steeling myself against the glares and whispers I knew would come upon my entry. I just wanted to get something to eat and then leave.

I edged around the back wall of the kitchen, looking for the large pot of stew kept for any servants who needed a little something between meals, or at least some bread. Anything would be better than the garbage I'd been forced to eat for the past few days. I found the stew and filled up a bowl, sneaking away a spoon, piece of bread and cup of ale. I hid in a small corner of the kitchen, hoping, praying, no one would bother me. I just wanted to get some warm food into my stomach

Somehow I managed to evade being cornered and questioned and vacated the kitchen as soon as I could for the stables.

I meandered through the hallways and passages, taking my time. Just breathing and absorbing fresh air and light. Not until one is put in utter black does one realize how priceless light is. Never before had I looked at light this way. If I could hoard light, I would. I would've spent the rest of the day and the next day and the next and the next, maybe for a month or two or three just feeling light, basking in it, breathing it, loving it.

I stepped out of the palace and into the sunlight and stood just beyond the doorway, just feeling the sun's rays warm my body and cover me. I could almost taste it.

When I revived from my ecstatic commune with the sun's light, I continued my course to the stables, but even slower than my trek through the palace. My walk was almost a glide as I shuffled my feet, trying to make my moments in the sun last forever. For a moment, a brief, wonderful moment - the world was right and no one was hurt, injured, dying or lost.

I waved to the horses in the corral by Collin's stable before going inside.

"Hello?" I called out, not seeing Collin around

"Waverly?" I heard Collin ask from above in the hayloft.

"Yes! It is me!" I called back to him, sure his reaction would be just as shocked as Anise's.

I could hear him stumble across the floor of the hayloft and soon his feet appeared on the ladder to the ground floor of the stables. Jumping off the ladder halfway down, he stood still, staring at me. "Waverly," he breathed, "You are here!"

"Yes!"

Next thing I knew his arms encircled me, holding me tight against him, "I thought Mantrin had killed you." He buried his face in my hair, his voice thick with emotion. "I was so worried, I have barely slept the whole time you've been gone."

"You haven't," I said, my voice choked as the magnitude of Collin's devotion to seemed to reveal itself. "How long have I been gone?" I asked, worried about him.

"No. Ten days. I'm exhausted, but you are here now, that's all that matters. And safe." He held me in front of him, both hands on my shoulders. "You are safe?"

"Yes. Safe as I can be in this situation." A smile I thought would never fade lay on my lips and on my face. My ecstasy from a moment ago returned. For facing a hoard of horrible, unconquerable obstacles, I sure was happy.

He hugged me again. "Thank heavens. I was so worried."

I didn't say anything and just let him hold me, Warmth and confidence flowing back into my body. Light.

After what seemed an instant he let go of me. "What happened to you?"

"That's why I came down here. I already met Anise and she asked the same questions, obviously. I don't really want to tell this story twice, its terrifying." Memories of black and eyes washed over me.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to you," he said. The terror must have shown on my face.

I swallowed as much of my fear and hate as I could. "No, I will. Anise will pester me about it anyway."

He smiled. "Yes, this is true."

"So I might as well tell the two people who care enough to hear it and matter enough to me for me to tell them."

He nodded.

I calmed myself down, trying to bring my thoughts back to the present circumstances. "Do you know of a Derrek? On the Guard?"

I could see his mind shift gears. "Um... Aye, new. Tall, brown hair, bright eyes, why?"

"He was the one who assisted Mantrin in kidnapping me and also one of the ones who released me. But he also wants to meet tonight. Not sure about what though. Although he seemed to have something to tell me... He didn't seem like he fully supported Mantrin..."

"Do you want me to be around - just in case?"

I shook my head, touched by the thought, but still wishing to go solo. "No, I don't think that'll be necessary."

"All right then."

I needed information on this guard. Even though I refused physical help, all knowledge could be useful. "What do you know of him?"

"Not much. I don't know where he came from, he doesn't talk, but then again I don't have much interaction with guards. I do know he has a nice ranking and seems to be a confidant of Mantrin's, maybe looking to replace Raleigh?"

I thought this over. "I wonder why he wants to speak with me - and in such secrecy."

"Maybe, since he is around Mantrin so much, he wants to find some way to get rid of you, I'd be careful around him."

"Oh I will be! Don't worry. I'm always careful."

The look he gave me dripped with disbelief. "If you were so careful you wouldn't have disappeared for ten days."

I knew his words were true, but how could I let him know that? I'd explain later! "I guess."

He sighed. "I could come with you," he suggested again.

"No. Derrek would be suspicious."

"If you insist." He hugged me again. "I'm just glad you aren't dead."

#

As I walked back to the palace I realized the full extent of my exhaustion. The initial rush after being released, getting mysterious summons from Derrek, seeing Anise and Collin - especially Collin - began to wear off and a sledgehammer of weariness dropped on me. I staggered under the blow, only long enough to trudge up to my room and collapse on my bed.

I slept for hours, a deep, fulfilling sleep, and woke rested and ready to face the crazy world I'd been shoved in - or more ready. I doubted anyone could be ready and able to face all the twists and turns this adventure led me on.

Dusk light fell through the tiny window of the room. I peered out, wondering what a more exact time for my secret rendezvous could be. 'Tonight' did not get me very far.

My stomach roared, shaking me out of my thoughts and I made my way to the kitchens in search of a crust or two of bread and goblet

of ale. I obtained such with the same ease as before, but the frosty glares and whispered-behind hands gave me jitters for some reason and went outside to eat my dinner. I ended up with a bowl of stew in addition to my crusts.

I finished my meal just as the moon rose over the palace roof. I shivered, watching my breath form clouds around my face. I should've gone to another room to eat. The palace at least was warm. Winter made itself very well known to everyone and everything. No plants grew and few animals roamed the dead forests and meadows. I never liked winter, too dead.

I retreated in the palace in search of something warmer to wear for my outdoors meeting with Derrek. Tying a warmer cloak around my neck, I decided I needed to stop stalling and just go see what the mysterious guard wanted, I wouldn't find out anything by searching for warmer clothes all day.

Really, what is the worst that could happen?

You get killed.

Besides that.

Do I really need to list everything?

Forget I asked, really...

I bucked up courage and left the palace, walking with determined steps toward the stables.

I bet this is trap?

Oh please, last thing I need is to start thinking 'trap.' Can't

anything just be what it is for once?

No, not really.

Great.

I slipped behind the the stable and looked around. *Not here.*
Of course not. I leaned against the wall of the stable, wondering if
he would show up at all. Probably not. After all, the henchman of
your enemy just asked you to wait in a dark, secluded spot. That is
definitely not anything to be wary of at all.

Oh shut up.

I'm just pointing it out.

He appeared from the shadows without warning. "You are here,"
he said, without any form of greeting, his tone even and cool, maybe
a little taunting and condescending.

"As you see," I said, matching his tone.

"I have much to tell you."

"I may or may not know what you have to say." Why are we
speaking like this?

"You probably don't."

"Why don't you tell me and find out?" Our conversation could
only be described as a battle. Each of us speaking in a flat tone
with a hint of challenge around the edge.

"I may just do that."

"That's why you wanted to see me."

He nodded. "It concerns Mantrin and the king."

"I figured as much."

"I'm sure," he took a deep breath and dropped into a more natural tone, "As you know, Mantrin *is* the one who poisoned the king. What you may not know - or have noticed - is that the King's Lords are being replaced. There are sixty-two, King's Lord - sixty-three counting Mantrin - and out of that twenty-eight are for Mantrin, a dozen or so are on the edge of either changing sides or being removed in favor of someone else. The remaining twenty-two are still on the side of the king, but that won't last long if Mantrin continues like he has been."

This was news to me. Neither of us had to say what Mantrin's intentions were. Only a complete idiot, when faced with all these facts, would say the regent did nothing wrong nor was intending to do. If Mantrin continued like this, soon no one would care at all if the king lived or died... I didn't say anything, waiting for the guard to continue.

"Mantrin also plans on forcing Princess Sadie to marry him and then assassinating her father to take over *her* lands as well, then he wants to start branching out further. Mantrin is not going to stop with Mertia, but plans on taking over as many pieces of land as he can get is hands on."

I gulped down the lump in my throat. *Oh lucky me.* This mess has just grown far bigger than I want to deal with... Or can deal with!

"I know what you are doing,, how you are working to save the king." He circled me, making me feel as if I committed some crime. "And I know you know things and I know how to make sure your knowledge is used."

I realized what he wanted: Information. I turned the corners of my lips up in a faint smile. I worked for weeks to get information, he wants information. Everything revolves around information. I considered what I knew and how I could use it, silent, my faint smile across my lips.

"Well?" he asked, growing impatient.

I thought about my reply before speaking, double-checking to make sure I didn't say anything which would endanger the king, Collin, Anise or myself. "I do know 'things' as you put it, but how do I know I can trust you."

"Because you have no choice."

"I do so have a choice. I can, for all you know, choose to not do anything with my information. Or I have my ways to use my information. You don't know know everything I know."

"You are like me, Waverly," he said, "You won't do that."

How am I like you? "If I am so like you, you can understand why I can't trust you."

"Yes, I can understand that, but I can also understand your despair and your discouragement and not getting results. I can help you." His tone almost sounded pleading.

"How can you help me?" I asked, knowing I needed his help and knowing he knew that. Not a good situation to be in.

"Mantrin thinks I'm working for him. I can use this connection to get much done."

I nodded. He made sense. But how can I trust him? I can trust no one.

"If you refuse my offer we will contin--"

"I know what poison Mantrin used," I said, deciding to take a chance and trust him - at least a little bit.

He looked shocked. "How did you figure that out?"

"What do you mean 'How did you figure that out?' Was it a secret?" I snapped.

"Of course it was! What are you implying?" He narrowed his eyes, glaring at me.

"I'm just wondering whose side you are on. A reasonable question."

He nodded and relaxed his eyes, still looking a little suspicious of me. "Even if you have a cure, but what exactly are you supposed to do with that information?"

"Isn't it pretty obvious?" I asked.

"You could think that, but just we - or you, I mean - know what the poison was, doesn't mean we can get a cure."

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Well you can easily get a cure, from any apothecary, but what

if the cure requires medicinal expertise? That I have none of. Even though Mantrin trusts me, he doesn't trust anyone completely. Few people are allowed to see the king. Even Princess Sadie can't see the king whenever she wants. So even if you can figure out a way to give the cure to the king, I doubt you'll be able to figure out a way to even see the king!"

"Well if we are going to be working together I think you should start trying to figure out a way."

He frowned, staring at the ground. "Princess Sadie."

"What?"

"The princess. She is still allowed to go and see the king. Good appearances after all."

"Right. So... Oh!"

"Exactly. The princess has to be kept happy so that no one starts to suspect things..." he said. "You can get the cure, right?"

I nodded. "I think so. I know Madam Reichan well."

"Very good then. When you have the cure, we'll have to tell Princess Sadie somehow..." he said, seeming to expect me to come up with a plan.

"If you are expecting me to figure out all the plans then I don't think I really need you... I only need you to get to Mantrin and in the palace. If you aren't going to do either then I can just go on by myself."

He nodded. "I'll see what I can do... I need to get back to

the barracks before someone realizes I'm missing."

"Good then. Goodnight."

He nodded to me and walked off.

That was a bit rude.... I wonder what he'll come up with to get into talk to Princess Sadie. I'm sure that he has his ways, he is a palace guard after all.

After having slept for most of the day I couldn't sleep and roamed the palace and the grounds, but the darkness of the everywhere scared me, even though the moon shed enough light for me to see. I scrounged the spare and empty rooms in the palace looking for all the candles and lanterns I could find. I dragged them all up to my room and lit them all. My room just about glowed after I finished lighting them all. I curled up on my bed, loving the light.

#

The next morning I brooded at the huge kitchen table the servants ate at. I sat there for three hours just thinking. And I had a lot to think about too. Now that I could think properly I could consider problems like how did Mantrin know I was under his desk. Did someone see me? Was I really being followed?

On that thought, did Mantrin know I was even out of prison? If he didn't... The possibilities of what I could accomplish if he did not know I was out of the dungeon seemed endless. As long as I could remain that way... But what if Derrek told Mantrin? But why would the guard tell him if Derrek was trying to help me? Not making much

sense there.

Unless the traitor ordered my release, which I doubted.

So then I must have actually been followed earlier when I went into town the first time. I needed to ask Derrek if Mantrin knew anything about my release.

You need to get up and go see Reichan.

Yes, I do... Listening to myself, I got up and left the kitchen through the back door, going straight to the side-gate.

"Waverly."

I turned around. *Derrek.* "Aye?"

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Why are you asking me this?" I asked, wondering if maybe it was his identical twin last night.

"Just making sure..."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"Meet me at the same time, same place."

"Why?"

But he was gone. Again. *And you didn't ask him about Mantrin.*

Brilliant.

I sighed and pulled open the gate. I didn't bother this time to check to see if anyone saw me. I knew I needed to be careful, but I managed to make it through town before without being stopped.

Until Mantrin found you in his study.

Well I'm not going to Mantrin's study, now am I?

No, but you still need to be careful.

I know... I've know that for years, thanks.

I walked down the main street, not even bothering to blend. I looked wildly out of place I knew. In my defense, I just spent ten days in the dungeons. Few people could lay claim to having spent any time in the dungeons and return.

I did spend ten days in the dungeons and return - alive and mostly in one piece. Why do I need to be afraid of anything? Well, as long as there is light.

I threw open the door to Reichan's story, the bells overhead jangling. "Reichan!"

Chapter Seven

"What?" she demanded, coming out from the back of her store.

"I need your help."

"Not very wise to come storming in here and demand help, shouldn't you ask?" she asked, composing herself.

"Cure, I need one."

"I thought I told you once that I couldn't get you one!"

"I have more information now."

"Oh?" she asked. "What?"

"I know what poison was used."

"How did you find this out? How do I know if you are right?"

"Otrava," I said without emotion.

She frowned. "That fits with what you've told me. But like I said it could be many poisons, how do you know about this one?"

I felt fear creep across my mind. "I... just know..."

She gave me a critical look. "You just know."

"I know that sounds bad, I know! But I that's all I can tell you!" I said, my voice cracking with emotion.

Reichan continued to stare at me. "You aren't what you say you, are you?"

I bit my lip and shook my head.

"Then who are you?"

"This has nothing to do with a cure. We don't need to trust each other to do the right thing. Which is get a cure and save his Majesty. Let us stay focused."

She frowned and nodded. "I know of the poison... It's a very rare, deadly poison. Kills slowly, from the inside out. I also know how to cure it, but the king has been infected for a long time now - relatively - and it takes three days to make the cure and I'll have to administer it directly. If not handled properly the cure can make the sickness even worse."

I nodded. "I thought of that I do believe that I have a plan to allow for that..." Oh Derrek please come through with Princess Sadie...

#

I walked straight back to the palace, not wishing to get caught outside by anyone who would get me into trouble again. What I need to do is talk to Derrek.

You can wait another few hours.

I suppose.

I walked down the stables, although I felt that seeing Collin right now would be stupid. I knew he would not approve of me going to see Derrek again tonight. Not that it really matter what he thought. No matter who did what or thought what I would continue with the task I assigned myself. Saving the king was the right thing to do - at all and any personal cost. The king mattered more than me anyway, an orphan with no home, no name and no past.

I jumped over the fence. "Collin?"

"Wave!" he shouted, looking out a window in the stable. "One moment." I heard him shouting at the horses then he came outside, looking a little upset. "Stupid beasts," he muttered.

"I wouldn't really know. Although Derrek said, when I got released from prison, that I am supposed to be working here." I rolled my eyes. "I don't think that news needs to be spread around quite yet though."

"If you do manage to save the king I bet that he'll restore your titles," Collin said, "so I doubt it will matter."

"Ha! Likely. That little secret will, well, remain secret! As long as I can. I don't want to go... back."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Would you want to go back?"

He shrugged. "I would want revenge probably."

I shook my head. "I don't even know who killed them. Some barbaric tribe of some sort. That's all I know."

"Aye. So you've told me."

I sighed. "My past is dead. Buried. Gone. It burned in the same fires my parents did."

"You aren't the only one who is an orphan," he reminded me.

I looked at the ground. "I know... It is selfish of me."

He raised my head up. "Don't think I don't understand. I know what it is like to lose it all."

"I know. I'm sorry. So sorry."

He smiled. "It is not your fault, Wave." He took my hand. "I know what it is like, don't worry." He raised my hand to his lips and gave me a light kiss on the back of my palm. "Don't worry."

I smiled, cheeks growing warm.

"I better get back to work," he said, letting go of my hand.

#

I leaned against the back wall of the stable waiting for Derrek. Why isn't here? Isn't this the exact same time as he met me last night? I growled under my breath and shifted, trying to get and stay warm. A hard task in this miserable winter air. A silhouette stepped in front of me and I almost screamed. "Waverly," it hissed.

"Aye?" I asked, a little breathless. Why does he keep sneaking up on me like that?

"Waverly," it said, "It's me."

Collin? Why is he here?

"What are you doing Wave?" he demanded.

"Meeting Derrek again, why?" Oh no, you know what is coming now...

"Do you really think that's safe?" he asked.

I looked at the ground.

"Waverly?"

"Yes," I replied after a moment, "I do."

"Why? He could be double-crossing you for all you know and there is nothing you can do about it? Nothing!"

"What do I have to lose? My life? Worthless. My freedom? Gone already. My family? Also gone. I could lose you and Anise, that's the only thing."

"Waverly, first, your life isn't worthless. Second, what about the king's life?"

"Then promise me something."

"What..." he asked. He would do a lot for me, he knew my mind only cared about saving the king and this promise would revolve around such. All the same, I must get this promise.

"Promise me, if I die, you'll continue."

"Continue what? Doing what I already do?" he asked, sounding angry. You'd be angry too Waverly, don't blame him.

"No, my mission," I corrected, trying to keep my voice calm and gentle, careful not to sound too pushy.

He looked at a loss. "Waverly, what - how- why?"

"Because the king's life is more important. We are just lowly

servants. He runs a country, soon to be two. Plus Mertia is a big country - both in land and power," I explained, my voice smooth and soft. I didn't want to anger him any more.

"Waverly, you are insane. And I am too. Because I'll promise you."

I smiled. "Thank you. A few things you need to know. Otrava is the poison, Reichan is making a cure. It'll be ready in three days. I'm meeting Derrek -" He winced at the name. "- shortly to come up with a plan to get the cure - and Reichan - to the king. I'll explain it all to you tomorrow. Anyway, I promised to explain what happened in dungeons anyway."

"You really are insane," he said, shaking his head.

"I know." I gave him a quick hug. "Now go! Before Derrek shows up and wonders what you are doing here!"

He hesitated. "Are you sure you want me to go?"

"Yes! I'm sure. I need this to work and if you are here that is not working as planned."

He frowned. "I still don't trust him."

"I know. Thank you for caring." I hugged him. "Now please - go!"

He nodded. "I sti--"

"Please..."

He left without another word, only one distressed look.

You should listen to him.

Why? What if he is wrong?

He loves you; Derrek has no such care. You can't even entirely sure that he is really working with you. Collin is only looking out for you, can't you appreciate that?

I felt someone tap me on the shoulder.

"Finally. You are late."

"Or you are early."

I almost started to argue with them, then decided the battle would be beyond pointless and let the matter go.

"Well? What did you find out?"

"Reichan said she'll be able make a cure, but it'll take a few days."

"How many are a few?"

"She wasn't sure."

"I need something precise to get this plan to work!"

"What plan?"

"Well my plan was to get Mantrin and the other guards distracted when Reichan needed to go in. Princess Sadie would help get to Reichan into the palace and to the king's chambers."

"Why does that require knowing the time *right* now? Couldn't you pull it off with only a few hours, or even few minutes, notice?"

He frowned. "I suppose I could..."

"Good, then what is the problem?"

"Nothing."

"So is that our plan?"

"Yes."

"Good! I'll ju-" But I found myself talking to air.

You know, you really have to wonder how devoted is to this if he keeps disappearing and reappearing like that.

You don't have to. Maybe he is just bad at greetings and farewells.

Why are you making excuses for him?

I'm not, I'm just sa-

You are making excuses.

So?

You are that desperate?

No, but... Yes, yes I am.

You still don't know if you can trust him.

Why do you think I lied to him?

Smart. So are you going to involve him in the plot.

Oh I'm sure I will. But I'll find out if he is really a traitor or not in three days.

You know, you took no precaution to hid yourself in this trek, I wonder if anyone saw you.

You just had to bring that up didn't you.

Yes.

#

The plan I refused to tell Derrek was basically his own plan,

but with a few modifications. Instead of looking conspicuous and distracting people so we could sneak in, I wanted to get the cure to the king in plain sight. Not pointed out and obvious, but not hidden either. I heard once that the best place to hide something is in plain sight.

The only problem was getting to Princess Sadie. I knew the princess would cooperate, but she was the legal way I had into the king's chambers. There was a *chance* Derrek could get into the chambers, but getting Reichan would be a different story.

Who could I ask, who would answer me?

Anise.

I ran down to the kitchens, looking for my friend. "Anise, Anise!" I cried, locating her and tapping her on the shoulder.

"What, what?"

"I need to ask you a question!"

"I don't have the time right now, Wave," Anise said, looking around. "And calm down."

"Calm down? I'm not excited!"

"Yes you most certainly are!"

I exhaled, quelling my excitement. "Sorry. Can you come to my room tonight?"

"Sure..."

"Thank you!" I said, running off to find Collin. I ran down to the stables and extended the same invitation to Collin as I did to

Anise. Of course he agreed.

I went back to my rooms, wondering why I was either running everywhere at once or waiting for hours at a time. I restocked my room with candles and lanterns. I still didn't like being in the dark. For that matter I didn't think I would ever be comfortable in the dark. Not after the dungeons. Not after the Darkness.

After dinner, both of them showed up in my room as soon as they could get away from their jobs.

"I promised you two I'd explain what happened to me while I was... away." I walked around the room lighting all my collected candles. "And so I shall. But first I need to ask Anise something."

"I need a way to see Princess Sadie, is there anything I can do achieve that goal?"

Anise frowned. "Um... She has her breakfast delivered to her every morning. I don't know if you could get in, but I think I could."

"How?"

"I think that I could get permission to deliver breakfast to Princess Sadie, then I can deliver her any message you want me to," she said.

"Sounds good. Thank you!" Both of them were eager to hear about the dungeons and wanted me to get on with the story. "All right, I'll see how well I can tell this..."

"After I went to see Reichan I passed by Mantrin's house on the

way back here. For some reason, I decided to go into his house and snoop around." I could see Collin about to interrupt, but beat him. "I know it was a stupid thing to do, I'm not even sure why I did it, but I did. Predictably, Mantrin caught me." Collin muttered something under his breath, but I paid him no heed and moved on. "Mantrin took me to the dungeons and left me there."

Fear overtook me and I shuddered. They don't need to know about the Darkness did they? No, of course not. It's too hard to talk about anyway...

But nothing escaped Collin. "Wave, you all right? You look terrified."

I broke. "It was awful down there. Dark, so dark. No light at all. And the... the eyes. The creatures. Always there, always watching, always hungry. Horrible, horrible, horrible..." I started crying, the memories of the awful time taking over me. "And the nightmares. Always black, always dark..."

Anise hugged me. "You poor dear." Collin put a hand on my knee, trying to reassure me.

I let them comfort me for a few minutes, but shook them off me. "I'm good, really. It's over now."

Anise shook her head. "I don't think so. You look terrified."

I shuddered. "I am."

She held me again, soothing me with words I didn't even hear. I didn't need to. I was comforted anyway. I caught a glimpse of

Collin's face. He made no move to comfort me physically, but his face showed greater concern and worry. He looked as though he'd reach out to me at any moment embrace me, but restrained himself. I smiled at him and he gave me a small smile in return.

"After I got released from the dungeons," I said, trying to move on; the less I thought about the Darkness the better off I would be, "Derrek, one of the guards, asked me to meet him."

Collin didn't say anything for a few minutes, thinking. "I like it. Not too much danger for you two, but sounds like it will work. And it also pulls Waverly out of this mess."

I smiled and nodded.

"What about me?" Anise asked.

"You tired your best *not* to be involved," Collin pointed out. "Not as important."

Anise looked offended.

"Oh, Anise, get over it!" he snapped.

I thought Anise would say something in reply, but she silenced.

"Thanks for explaining, Waverly, see you in the morning."

"Aye, g'night Wave," Anise said.

With that they both left, leaving me alone. I looked around the room. Still bright, just like I wanted. I did want that right? But this wasn't the Darkness. This is just my bedroom. I'd slept here every night for five years. Nothing new.

This isn't the Darkness, this is Light. Not being light, but

this, this world, it is Light, even if it seems pretty Dark.

I walked over to one of the candles and blew it out. I looked at the next candle and blew it out as well. I walked around the room blowing out each candle until only one was left. I looked around the darkened room. What was I scared of? I leaned over and blew out the last candle.

#

I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling, hands behind my head. Nothing to be scared of. I shook my head at myself. Why was I scared? No, everything is finally going right. In few days the king will be restored to health and everything will be righted. I jumped out of bed and pulled on some clothes, grabbing my hat and cloak as I ran out my bedroom door. I felt a need to just do something.

And I had a new idea.

I debated going to tell Collin about my idea, but decided against it. He would refuse to let me go, he'd say it was too dangerous, not to risk something so foolhardy.

But I would anyway, we both knew that.

But, I had to wait. Since that was all I seemed to do.

#

I waited until after the moon was high in the sky to act upon my latest plan. I crept outside, feeling along the smooth stone of the palace walls, seeing if I could climb them. No, the palace walls had

been made smooth, to look like marble. But they weren't. I could feel the mortar lines under my fingers.

But I came prepared.

I twirled my grappling hook and launched into a window. I tugged on it and it caught on the sill of a window. The thick outer ledges used for decoration also made a convenient hold for my rope. I tied the rope to one of the huge trees planted to give the appearance of a small forest around the palace. The slack in the rope allowed me to use it to walk up the wall so to speak.

I somersaulted into the chambers and looked around. I wasn't entirely sure what room I would end up in and I had to basically guess at what room was the king's, hoping I didn't actually end up in his bedchamber for I was sure there would be some sort of nurse - as well as guards. Even if Mantrin could care less if the king lived or died, appearances always mattered. And no one in all or Mertia had better gossip than the palace servants.

The room seemed to be some sort of private study or library. I opened the door a crack and looked out. By some good fortune the nightly nurse dozed in her chair. I saw no guards, but that didn't mean they weren't any. I could never be too careful, as I'd told myself time and time again.

I crept over to the king's bed and pulled back the heavy curtains and slipped them shut behind me, sitting on the edge of the bed and lit my bit of candle.

Upon seeing the king's face I almost dropped it.

The happy, but serious young man I knew existed no longer. In his place was left this shell. A pile of bones with skin stretched over it. His white skin stretched so taut over his face I could make out the exact shape of his skull. I touched his hand and all that greeted my touch was five fingers of bone. Only the knowledge the king still breathed kept me from turning away in disgust. I drew back the warm blankets and stared at the king's bare chest. I counted his ribs and my eyes drew a line around his guts. His skin an almost transparent white and covered in sickly green spots. I felt bile rise to my mouth and blew out the candle, replacing the heavy blankets.

"I swear upon the souls of my parents, I will save you, your majesty." I raised his sickly hand to my lips and kissed it, sealing my oath.

Without further ado, I slipped away from the king's bed, into the little study and out the window.

Yes. I will save you.

#

My first thought upon waking was my promise of the night before.

My second thought was that today was the day my plan would finally be put to action.

My third thought was about breakfast.

I dressed in a dash and thundered downstairs to the kitchens.

On the way I decided not to mention my venture last night to anyone. Just be easier and safer that way.

Anise flagged me from her spot by the fireplace, turning a spit. I nodded to her, downed my mug of ale and ambled over to her. "Yes?"

"I was able to get permission," she said, her voice hushed.

"Good!" I said, smiling.

"I'll be leaving in two hours."

"I'll be around."

She nodded. "Don't look too conspicuous," she warned.

I smiled. "I'll do my best."

I spent my day in the kitchens most of the time, so me hanging around for two hours did not seem very out of place. But I danced on on needles, anxious to finally finish my mission of the past three months.

My mind was clear, a refreshing break from the usual turmoil which infested my poor thoughts. Since I talked with Anise and Collin and my promise to the king, I felt calmed and soothed. Everything is going to work out and all will be fine. There is no more danger, no more fear. Everything will be fine. Content with this thought I spent the time until Anise would leave just milling about, chatting with various people. I almost felt like before this whole mess started. Before I overhead the conversation, before Mantrin took control, when my biggest problem was boredom.

I saw Anise leave, pushing a little cart with sweet delicacies

and coffee. I allowed a few minutes to pass before I followed.

Yesterday I grabbed a chance to brief Anise on what she needed to tell Princess Sadie. Now I, again, just had to wait.

I strolled along the hallways, trying to look bored and doing nothing specific. I watched Anise enter the area of the palace reserved for the royal family and their guests. Only those with special permission were allowed into that area. I nodded to the guards and turned down another corridor to wait for my friend to reemerge.

I went into a random room nearby and settled down to wait. I pulled a book off the shelf and flipped through it, keeping an eye on the door. I knew Anise would pass through this hallway to get back to the kitchens and so I could keep an eye on the going ons from my chair and book.

I must have been waiting about ten minutes when I heard someone approaching. If it was Anise already, the princess must have been quite ready and willing to hear her out and agree...

"Waverly?" Derrek said, poking his head in the room.

"Oh, hello!"

"I suppose you are waiting for Anise?"

I nodded. "Yes, she is doing exactly what I planned."

"Glad everything is going well with your little scheme," he commented, entering the room.

"Aye, everything according to plan."

"You are right about that," he said, picking up a heavy
candlestick.

Then everything went black.

Chapter Eight

When I woke up, I found myself being drug by two guards, led by the dark-haired Derrek. I could not think for a minute, then the truth of the matter rushed down on me.

Collin had been right. Derrek was a traitor.

"Sir! She's awake!"

Derrek turned to look at me. "Ah, yes. She is."

The fact the guards referred to me with the correct pronoun took a minute to come to the point of full realization. They knew...

"Yes, we know all about you, you little pest," Derrek said, laughing. "But you won't be much of a problem for very long."

I gulped down fear and set my face. No one could see my fear.

He spat at my feet, turned around and continued leading the three guards (for I now noticed one walking behind me and my captors) to our destination, which I assumed was the throne room. How did Derrek know about the plan? I refused to tell him and he didn't come to me. Why didn't you listen to Collin? Why, you moron?

The longer I walked behind Derrek the more I hated him. So much betrayal going on. Derrek knew about everything, all my secrets. He managed to get me to trust him and now he knew all. He would soon deliver Reichan and Anise to Mantrin and everything would fall apart. All my careful planning and plotting and scheming and devising wasted. No, not wasted, worse than wasted, used. Used in a most horrible way. I just could not believe it... Tricked into revealing my plans, myself, my purpose to someone and then... Betrayed. I stared at the ground. Why couldn't people just say what they mean? All this lying and backstabbing only resulted in people becoming bitter and hateful.

We stopped at the big double doors to the throne room. Derrek chuckled at me, pulled himself and his men to attention and pushed open the doors. Mantrin sat on the throne, a crown on his head and a cloak of the royal blue around his shoulders. Sure liking this role?

"My Lord Mantrin!" Derrek said, with a sweeping bow.

He looked down on me, hiding a faint grin, but turned to address Derrek. "Why have you brought me this entertainer?"

Oh like you don't know.

"Sir, it has been discovered this entertainer has been lying!"

The two guards holding my arms walked forward with me.

This is what they are bringing me down on? What a firm and sturdy reason, no one will see through that!

"Lying?" Mantrin asked, faking shock well. "About?"

"Her gender!" Derrek proclaimed.

"Excuse me?" Mantrin asked, looking puzzled.

He should be an actor.

"This girl has impersonated being a boy to get work at the palace," Derrek said.

Wait, is this even a crime?

"Hm..." Mantrin said, brow furrowed in fake thought.

We all waited in fake tension. Half of my brain told me to keep my mouth shut, but the more reasonable side of me said, 'What difference does it make? Fight for your life!'

"Sirs," I addressed Mantrin and the rest of the King's Lords, "how is that a crime?" I asked, voicing my thoughts.

One of the lords looked down on me from his bench. "You, young lady would best be advised to keep your mouth shut!"

I gave him a dirty look, then turned to look directly at Mantrin. His gazed rested somewhere in my vicinity, for when he saw my eyes turned on him he jumped a bit, but hid it well. He looked triumphant, but maybe a little nervous.

"This lie cannot go unpunished," he finally said,.

Oh, no one saw that coming.

Shouts of "No, it cannot" and "Agreed!" rang through the room.

"What do you suggest, my lords?" Mantrin asked.

Various ideas were suggested. I kept my mouth shut tight. I really didn't want to cause some of the worse options to be picked,

life time work in the mines for example.

"Banishment from the palace sounds like the punishment would fit the crime," the regent said.

Most of the crowd seemed to agree with this, even as the few remnants of hope left to me.

"Then, Miss Waverly, you are banished from the palace. Corporal, escort her out."

Derrek saluted and motioned to the guards holding me to follow him out. I stumbled after the guards, my feet not cooperating.

"Derrek, why? Why did you do this?" I said to his back after the throne room doors thudded closed behind us.

He turned around and faced me. "Because you are a pest to Lord Mantrin's plans!" he hissed.

"But why do you even follow him! You know the crowning of the Mantrin will never come to pass! Why did you lie to me?"

"You lied to me, so aren't we now even? Except I am the better liar because I'm the one winning and you are the one being kicked out of the palace," he said, sounding shocked by this finding.

"Mantrin will *not* win!"

He tightened his grip on my arm. "Yes, he will. You know why?" He grinned. "Because you, the main problem, is gone. Without you, there is very little opposition."

I sneered at him. "Glad to be of service."

He slapped me across the face. I felt a trickle of warm liquid

run out of my nose. "Am I clear."

I sneered at him again. If I was beaten to the ground then I no longer needed to fear. We walked on in silence until we left the palace. I felt the eyes of everyone we passed on me, but what could I say? I only wished to see Collin before we finally left the palace.

"If I'm leaving, you won't mind answering me this," I said, blocking out the the stares of people.

"Maybe."

"What was with letting me out of the dungeons? If I had just stayed in there then I wouldn't have been a problem."

He stopped walking and faced me. "Mantrin guessed you would try to escape. We need a sure way of keeping you out."

I forced myself to laugh. "Oh? And he doesn't think that I'll try and get back into the palace?"

"Oh yes, he is counting on it."

I tried not to tel my confusion show on my face. "And why would that be?"

"Because if you try and break back in, you can be killed on sight." He grinned at me again.

Why does Mantrin have to be so blasted smart?

"Come!" he said to the guards still holding my arms. We almost had reached one of the exits to the wealthy neighborhood outside. I knew I would have to leave that too, but at least I could stay there

for a little bit. Warn Reichan.

When we reached the door Derrek motioned for the guards to let go of me and he grabbed me himself. "It has been nice working with you, Waverly. Enjoy your life." He pressed me against the door, putting his face next to my ear. "If you are trying to play a boy, don't let boys hug and hold you so much," he whispered, flinging open the door and pushing me out.

"What did you do to Collin?" I screamed.

Derrek laughed and pointed to a black cart and slammed the door.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" I screamed, pounding on the door. I heard the rattling of the cart's wheels as the driver urged his horse forward. I ran after the cart. "Sir! Sir!"

"Aye?"

"What is in your cart?"

He gave me a quizzical look. "Don't you recognize the cart of the gravedigger when you see it? Who else drives a black cart?"

I caught my breath. "Sir, may I... may I please look in your cart?"

He shrugged. "Friend of yours?"

"I hope not..." I climbed into the cover cart, leaving a crack of light to see. "Please... Please..." I pulled back the black shroud around the only body in the cart.

The body underneath I could recognize as Collin, but his face

and clothes were covered with blood. "What have they done to you Collin?" I whispered, brushing his hair back and trying to wipe away the blood over his face. I could feel the sharp ridges of his broken nose. I shivered in the cold and used the shroud to clean off his face. "I'm so sorry Collin, I'm so sorry..." I covered his body again and jumped out of the cart, wiping the tears off my face.

"Thank you sir," I said to the cart-driver.

"Sorry about your friend," he said, sounding and looking truly upset. "He is in pretty bad shape."

I nodded.

"Well I have to back to work..."

I nodded again. "Thank you again."

The cart rolled off, leaving me standing in front of the palace.

I cried. I sobbed. I wept.

"Pull yourself together Waverly!" I reprimanded myself. "You have to figure out how to do this. You have overcome everything before, this will not be any different."

I drew my shirt sleeve over my face and wiped away my tears. I would make it through this. Maybe the country would now fall into an utter state of tyranny, but no one could say I didn't try. Maybe I should just leave the country. Hide in some little village and ignore the world. Maybe....

I shivered and also wished for a cloak to keep myself warm. I wrapped my arms around myself and tried to decide what made the most

sense to do first.

Reichan. I said I would warn Reichan. She doesn't need to suffer too...

I started off at a run toward her store, banging open the door with a loud slam accompanied by the discordant jangling of the bells over the door.

"Reichan!" I shouted, "Reichan!"

"Yes, what, what is the problem?" she asked, rushing out from a back room, "Waverly! What happened to you!"

"Nothing, I'm fine, but you may not be!"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, a bemused look on her face.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down before explaining. "I came up with a plan to get Princess Sadie to summon you to the palace. She wouldn't be denied."

Reichan looked surprised. "That was very smart, so what's wrong?"

"Well, one of the guards, Derrek, helped me to formulate the plan and get it to work, but he ended up being a traitor," I narrowed my eyes and growled under my breath.

"Calm down," she said, sitting me down on the low counter.

"Then what happened?"

"He betrayed me to Mantrin, revealing my gender and then I got banished from the palace and... and..." I felt tears running down

my face again.

Reichan put an arm around me, little comfort considering how horrible I felt.

"He's dead Reichan, he's dead," I managed to say. She didn't ask any questions, just let me cry.

After a few minutes I pulled myself together. "You need to get away from here."

Reichan nodded. "Yes, I do. Are you going to be all right?"

I nodded, wiping off my face.

"Let me get some money, something to eat and a cloak," she said, disappearing into the back room again. I jumped off the counter when Reichan reappeared with a bowl of water and a rag. "Wash your face off."

I dipped the rag in the water and scrubbed my face. "Thanks."

Reichan nodded, packing things I might need into a satchel. She handed me a cloak and hat. "It's bitter outside." I nodded and thanked her. "Look out for yourself," she warned.

I nodded. "Same to you!"

She smiled. "Ah, I'm always careful."

I thanked her again for the food and cloak and left the shop.

I walked down the street, toward the city outside the wealthy neighborhood. The neighborhood marked its start and end with a small wall. The wall stood about ten feet high, tall enough to keep the rabble out, but not so high it looked unseemly. A wrought iron gate

barred the way to the outside world. To pass through to the outside one had to approach the guardhouse and ask the guards therein to open the gate for you. Unless you happened to be the king. Then a messenger would be sent in advance so the gate would stand open ready for you. But the king lay in his room dying. He would never be leaving through the intricate gate again.

I stood staring at the gate, unable to move. The only time in the past five years I'd left through the gate was in the king's retinue. Come to think of it, the only time I'd ever passed through the gates *not* accompanied by the king and his court was when I first entered looking for work. I took a deep breath and walked up to the gatehouse.

"Hello?"

"Aye?" the guard said, leaning his head out a window.

"Could you open the gate for me?"

He shrugged. "You have to pay. And sure."

PAY! Since when? Oh well. I pulled out a silver piece. "This enough."

He tapped a sign below the window. "Can ye read?"

I had not noticed the sign before. "Yes I can read."

"Well then show those powers now."

I read the sign and dug into my purse for three copper coins to add to the silver one. I handed the coins to the man and he turned a crank in his gatehouse, opening the gate just wide enough for me to

slip through.

"Thanks," I muttered as he shut the gate.

The area of town on the other side of the wall was well to-do, but those were not wealthy enough to afford to live in the gated neighborhood near the palace.

I kept my cloak clutched tight around my shoulders and my hat pulled over my face. I looked no one in the face, my head down. You've been here before! Why can nothing in your life ever just work out? You've been lost and alone before. When you first came to the palace. Collin helped you. Collin showed you life could continue.

But now... No, I would not think about that. No. It just caused... Too late. A tear rolled down my cheek. I reached up to brush it away and looked around, wondering where my mindless wanderings took me. The streets were no longer paved and the walls dirty brown colors, although upon closer examination I could detect traces of whitewash, too old to be of any use now. Street vendors sent a ruckus to raise the dead to every passerby, be he beggar or workman, diseased or housewife.

My depressing surroundings did not help to cheer my mood. I doubted anything would help me cheer my mood. I walked into what appeared to be a tavern or inn of some sort. I ordered a mug of something and retreated to a corner to mull over my horrible life.

Maybe an exaggeration. But I don't think so. Orphaned at eight years old by some unknown barbarians. Or at least that is what I was

always told. I don't know. And now Collin was dead. Gone. The only thing which still kept me alive. But now, now he was gone... I felt tears come back to my eyes.

No! Stop it! Don't cry!

I dashed my sleeve across my face. I dashed out all the thoughts in my mind. But I couldn't. The world recently came crashing around my ears for the second time in my life... The first time... eight years ago. The fires destroyed everything I loved and knew.

#

"I can beat you!" I called, kicking the flanks of my little pony and trying to beat my aunt's mare.

"I bet you can!" she called after me.

I laughed, calling out how fast I could ride all the way up the hill. I slowed down as I neared the crest of hill, my uncle calling for me to wait for them there.

Not that I needed to be told to wait.

"Aunt Stacy..." I called, confused at the scene below me.

"What, Waverly?" she asked riding up behind me.

Then she saw it.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Come away," she said, pulling on my shoulder to direct my horse away from the view in the valley formerly known as my home.

"What happened? Where is Mama?" I asked, pulling away.

"Come with me Waverly!" my aunt commanded.

I ignored her and thundered down the hill into the black destruction of my town and house. As I neared what used to be the town, I slowed my little pony down, looking around at the burnt husks of houses.

"Waverly! Get back here!" my uncle called after me.

I jumped off the pony and walked among the shops and houses. "What happened?" I asked, turning to face my uncle who followed me down.

"I don't know, Waverly, but please, come back with me."

"I want Mama! Where is she?"

"I don't want know, Waverly, please, come."

I ran toward large, but simple, manor house - or what was left of the wooden structure. "Mama?" I called, opening the charred door. "Mama? Papa?"

I searched through the lower level of the house and found no one. My uncle ran after me. "Waverly, stop!"

"No! I have to find Mama!"

"Waverly, please stop!"

"Where is Mama?" I ran through all the rooms trying to find Mama. "Where is she?" I pulled open the door to my mother's bedroom, but I found no one inside. "Where is she? Where is she? Where did she go?"

I felt the tears running down my cheeks with the memory. I laid my head down on my head on my arms. Calm down Waverly, calm. *It is over now.* I laid a coin down on the table and left the tavern.

Five years ago I came to the capital after running away from my aunt and uncle. I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to die. I came to the city to find life, to escape my past. And even though I was only eleven years old, I thought I could make it on my own. But I couldn't.

Collin found me. He gave me the life I searched for, that I needed. Without him, why should I keep on living?

I smelled some warm bread and followed the smell to its source, realizing my stomach grumbled for food. A short brown-haired girl held an over sized basket against her hip, selling the warm loaves.

"'Ello miss," she said, "would ye like tae buy a loaf?"

I nodded. "Aye, how much?"

"Will be two-penny," the girl said, her bright eyes staring up at me as I fished the coins out of the pouch Reichan gave me.

"Here you go," I said, dropping four pennies into the girl's small palm. She looked about my age, very small girl.

"Thank you miss!" she said, handing me two loaves, her green eyes shining as she secreted the coins in her dress somewhere.

I smiled and bit into one of the loaves, putting the other in my satchel and walking on.

The loaf was good and I felt much better after it. I looked

around for someone selling ale or wine. I found a skinny, oily man selling something which could be called ale and bought a skin of it off him for far more than it was worth.

I washed down the bread with a few swallows of the ale and stashed the skin in my satchel, which held far more than I thought it would or could.

This area of town is really poor. I'm surprised, I thought that the country was doing well... Maybe there is something I don't know going on. I decided the only way to find out was to ask one of the merchants.

I walked up to a merchant selling cloth, he looked like a more quiet, thoughtful man.

"Good afternoon sir," I said.

"Woud' ya like tae buy some clot'?" he asked, his dark eyes brightening at the prospect of selling something.

"Ah, no, not today sir, sorry," I said.

"Oh." He sighed and turned away.

"But I was wondering if you could give me some information!" I said, before he left me alone entirely.

"Aye?" he said turning back to me, half interested.

"I've never been in the city before," I said, figuring some lies would make him more open, if he knew I lived in the palace he might clam up, "and from I all I heard the city was a wealthy prosperous place! From all I've seen the city is poor and in shambles."

"'A'en't ya 'eared?" he asked, shaking his head at me. "T'e king is sick, dyin', and 'is regen' is doin' a 'orrible job." He swore. "Lor' Mantrin will pro'ly be king. King Ajax di' nowt mar'y an' nowt spoke of an heir."

I nodded. "So what happened? Even if the king was sick for a few weeks, wouldn't business continue as usual?"

"Aye, so ya'd think. But Lor' Mantrin 'as chan'ed t'e way things air ru'. 'E tooked away t'e wa'ches on t'e stre'ts an' so crime is a-hap'enin' al' t'e time. If ye airn't carefu', ye'll be rob'ed wher' ye stan'. An' 'e's givin' ou' fa'ors tae t'e 'igh an' mi'hty lor's an' ignorin' t'e people. King Ajax ne'er di' t'at."

"Thank you sir," I said, handing him a small silver coin.

He grinned, revealing black teeth. "Bles' ye!" he said, kissing the coin before hiding in on his person.

How can this possibly be the condition of the city?

I cursed myself over and over for failing in my mission to stop him, my anger toward myself and hatred toward Mantrin growing with every step I took and I every thought which entered my head.

I wandered through the town. My thoughts running around in circles about my past, Collin, Mantrin, Derrek, the king, my banishment and my future. Par t of me, a large part of me, wanted to flee the tone, but the rest of me, the part that still insisted on finishing what I started, wanted to find a way back into the palace.

After an hour or more of aimless wandering I reached the huge

city gates, open until sunset, which would be soon.

I should leave. I've wanted to get away from the palace and my bondage for awhile. Now's my chance. It would be easy. I could go and do what I please, no more being a buffoon and joker. I could be whatever I want. I walked toward the huge gates with slow step.
Yes, leave...

No! You can't leave! Look at those people! They are poor! If you can save the king they will not be oppressed by a dictator and tyrant! Look around you!

I looked around at the guards who stopped and searched every single person who walked through the gates, making the trudge through the gates, going in to or out of. Another thing put in place by Lord Mantrin.

Every face looked tired and haggard, weary of life and existence.

I had to figure out a way to get back to the palace at all costs. I stepped off the road to stop blocking traffic, but I had no plan - yet.

I'd figure something out - I always did.

Chapter Nine

I stayed by the road for an hour, just sitting. I needed a plan to get back in the palace and I needed one fast, a way to sneak into the palace without being noticed. Some how a course of action must provide itself to me. All entrances to the palace were guarded, by no means could I slip past the guards.

Was there any entrance to the palace no one knew about, cared about or guarded?

Yes.

The dungeons.

The Darkness.

My fear.

But no, I had no fear. Nothing in the Dark to be afraid of, right?

Who was I kidding, the thought of going back in there, for even a few minutes, filled me with terror. I did not care how desperate the country was, I would *not* go back into that place.

Yes I would.

For I had nothing to fear.

And a promise to keep.

I would need light though. No way would I brave the Darkness without sufficient lighting. No one in their right mind did that.

I spent most of the remainder of my money on procuring an ample supply of materials to keep a lantern lighted. I would still need something to pay the guard at the gate to get back to the palace.

"Sir?" I asked, approaching the gatehouse.

"Hey, didn't I see you earlier today?"

"Aye, sir."

He shrugged. "Want back in?"

"Aye." No, I was coming here for a nice chat and a cup a' tea.

He held out his hand I and I dropped the last of my coins into his hand. His eyes lit up at the two silver pieces in his hand - six pence more than the actual cost of entry - and he turned the crank for me without a second thought or look. I slipped through the gate in a heartbeat, not wishing for him to change his mind about his sudden good feelings toward me.

Getting to the palace itself was easy; even exclusive neighborhoods like this one had their back alleys and secret ways, useful for sneaking around in. No problems presented themselves as I slipped through the narrow alleys to the small door hidden in the side of the palace. Pulling away the ivy which grew all over this side of the palace, I revealed the heavy wooden door. Sending a

prayer to any god who would listen to me, I wrenched open the big door.

I stepped on to the first stair and slammed the door shut behind me. Pausing for a moment on the top step, I lit my lantern. I waved the lantern all around me, trying to keep the Darkness as far away as I could. I wanted to run, to flee from this hell. But no, I couldn't run. I started descending the rough stairs, the light held far out in front of me. In the glow of my lantern I could only see the stairs in front of me - and the drop on either side of the stairs.

Aw, no hand rail? Tsk, tsk.

I chuckled, being careful where I placed my foot on the next step. Even through my thick boots I could feel the uneven surface of the stairs. As I descended lower into the pit of destruction, I noticed a pungent smell. What is that? I don't remember that the last time I was here. I sniffed the air for a moment, but I could not tell what it was.

The farther down the stairs I crept the more I wanted to turn and run. To scream and yell. To hide and die. Anything other than this oppressive black - the unending black.

I held the light high above me to cast the light all around me in as wide a circle as possible. Every slight movement in the shadows terrified me and I jumped around like a grasshopper. I thought for a moment of Badger and wondered if he was still here.

Although it's not like he 'went' anywhere. I shivered and tried to dismiss the thought, but it lingered.

Why would you think about that? My whole body started shaking, the lantern quivering, the circle of light jumping around, making the shadows dance even more, my terror growing. How anything or anyone could ever live in this place astounded me. *You did so for ten days. You can make it for a few minutes.* With any luck you won't even startle any creatures into investigating your presence.

Oh, comforting thought, thanks for reminding me.

No problem.

I shut off the annoying second voice in my mind who never seemed to help me. *Stupid mind.*

I can hear that you know.

Oh shut up.

Why was I talking to myself?

I reached the bottom of the stair case and looked around; seeing nothing but black, my own shadow and the slick stones beneath me. Water hung in the air, giving the whole place a sickly damp smell. I wonder if death smells like this. I wouldn't be surprised.

I started forward, walking in circles, trying to keep my eye on all sides at one time. Every flicker of the shadows I caught out of the corner of my eye, every dance the fire created in the ring of black, I jumped. My heart felt about ready to charge right up my throat. I fought down the urge to run and kept walking. Straight

line, straight line, I repeated to myself. Walk in a straight line.

Straight is good.

What happened to shutting up?

You don't listen well.

Sounds all around me, nothing I could see, but I knew things were out there. I could hear metal scraping across the stone floor, raspy breathing of... of something, my own fast heart beat and quick breathing. I saw two glowing orbs out of the corner of my eye, but ignored them, praying the creatures had as hard a time seeing as I did. And that the sudden source of light would scare them off long enough for me to reach the stairs. From my previous time here, I knew they did not like the light; they never approached the little circle of the light Badger's dim flame gave off. My lantern shed a brighter light - I made sure of that. The lantern would be a better perfection than any weapon

I tried to shake off the feeling of creatures all around, but I knew from experience strange beasts lurked in this impenetrable black. I tried to spot the stairs in front of me.

And then I remembered I was an idiot.

So Miss Genius, how are you going to unlock the door?

Oh shut up already. Yes, I'm an idiot, you don't have to rub it in.

You are talking to yourself again.

I swore, louder than I wanted to. Sets of eyes appeared all

around me and something scaly moved by my leg. I froze, tightening my grip around the handle of my lantern. I felt myself go cold and a sweat break out on my brow. *Where is it?*

I could hear it moving nearby, its hissing tongue and scratching scales and rasping claws. I woke it up...

Not very smart, that.

I had no energy to waste on my own mind's chastisements, so I ignored them, trying to move my feet and keep walking, but found myself unable to move an inch. Just walk. You are not in the dark, you are alone. Just walk.

I let out a deep breath and managed to take a few steps forward, my eyes and ears hyper alert for even the slightest flicker in the shadows or breath. I would just go up the stairs, open the door and get out. Easy.

Except you are trapped down here because you can't unlock that door.

Reminder not necessary.

Oh you know, but you can't forget about it! Just think of this voice as the little part of you who has some sense.

Well I want that part to shut up about now.

Before I even finished the thought I found myself being thrown against the cold stone floor, the shock sending the lantern careening across the floor. The precious source of light bounced and rolled across the floor, the light dying during its fatal trip.

Before I could even try and fumble for a match, the creature jumped on me. Struggling, I managed to kick both my legs into its stomach and it recoiled. I took the brief moment when it removed some of the pressure off me to slip away and I raced up the nearby stairs. The complete blackness caused me to trip over the uneven steps.

I slammed into the door in my rush, the creature close behind me, and felt for some way of opening the door. No time. Spinning on my heel, I braced myself against the door for the coming attack from the creature.

It roared and jumped against me. I winced against the attack, but nothing came. I peeked open my eyes, wondering why the growling, roaring creature refrained from attack. I reached my hand out and felt for it. I touched the creature, but it just flinched and hissed, no attack. I struck a match to relight my lantern and saw the problem - or solution, depending on whose point of view.

The creature looked like a giant lizard, with white scales from lack of light and huge yellow eyes, teeth sticking out in every direction. Giant claws extended from its feet. Wonder what those feel like to have ripping through you?

Not good.

Wow, thanks, couldn't have figured that out on my own.

You are most welcome.

I sighed at myself and examined the lizard-thing. The best I

could figure, when it lunged at me, it reared up on to its back legs and kind of jumped at me. Its front claws missed me and lodged themselves in the wooden door above my head, rendering it immobile.

Fact, they can't see in the dark. I chuckled, wondering how long until it got free or one of the other creatures came up the stairs. No need to worry about problems which *may* happen. Worrying about the here and now took priority. And I needed to open this door.

The door sat snug in the door frame, no handle, no lock. I glanced at the hissing, spitting reptile and got an idea. A strange idea...

I braced myself on either side of lizard and grabbed its body. With a swift tug I pulled. The door opened a small crack, but Mr. Lizard's claws dislodged and he turned on me. I swung my light at his eye and he hissed, losing his balance and falling off the small platform at the top of the stairs. I slid my fingers into the crack between door and thresh hold. With a swift jerk, I yanked open the door and slipped outside. I pulled it shut behind me and sank to the floor, more than glad to be rid of that pit of evil and into the light, or, at least, some light. The sky had started to turn black already. If I would be able to do anything worthwhile I would have to get moving before the hallways got flooded with servants and guests of the palace.

Fortunately for me, I knew my way around the palace very well,

this including some secret passages. Unfortunately, I realized I had no idea what I was doing in the palace. I knew I had to be back in here, but I didn't know what I would do now that I was here.

Save the king?

And how will I do that? Reichan has probably left the city!

Figure som-

"Waverly?" an incredulous voice asked, interrupting my thoughts. I cringed. I knew that voice.

I turned around. "What do you want?" I demanded, putting as much hate, disgust and venom into the question as I could.

Derrek held out his hand in front of him, a sign of peace. "I'm not going to hurt you, I swear."

"I don't believe you," I said, glaring at him. Great, you've been caught, by the last person in the world you wanted to see.

"Please, believe me, I want to help you."

"Last time you said that I ended up with a dead friend!"

He looked at the ground, looking ashamed. I didn't trust anything about him. "I know, I'm sorry."

"If you are so sorry," I snapped, my anger growing, "why is Collin dead?"

If I did not hate him so much I might pity him. He looked very upset and lost. "Because I was an idiot in the most extreme fashion possible."

"You sure were," I said walking off. "Oh and if you tell anyone

I'm here, I'll slit your throat the same way you slit Collin's, got it?"

He nodded, not meeting my eyes. "I shall leave you alone then."

I stormed off down the hallway, furious. He actually tried to make amends? What does he take me for? A dummy?

Probably, that'd be pretty accurate.

I didn't even bother to tell myself to shut up, I knew I wouldn't listen. I still simmered over Derrek's impudent attempt to get back into my good graces. With his current record of behavior, I felt trusting him would be suicide. I twisted my way through the maze of hallways in the palace, wary of any sound of approach - the thump of soldiers' boots or shuffle of servants' clogs.

By some unknown stroke of amazing fortune, I made it all the way to the entry to the secret passages unseen. Of course it took me almost an hour, creeping around little used hallways and rooms, but I made it. Quick as a snake, I slipped under the intricate tapestry and into the narrow passage. All the sudden the dark hall seemed much lighter. An utter lack of light changes your perception on 'dark' I surmised, running down the secret hall. These tunnels may not end up in the Hall as I wished before, but they did go somewhere even more useful: Council Room.

I touch my hand against the door and slid forward only enough to let sound through. I pressed my ear against the paper thin crack and listened, holding my breath to catch any and every sound.

Nothing.

Lucky breaks huh?

Maybe.

I started to push open the door to go into the room, when I heard the real door opening. I slammed the door shut and tried to hear who entered the room and what he doing.

Another door opened and closed and I realized that whoever entered the room wanted to be *right* where I wanted to be - a large closet containing records of the King's Lords and Council. I needed to know who Mantrin instated for the rule of the Council and who I had to try and show down. How many people had been replaced to serve Matrín's will?

So I waited.

And waited.

And still waited.

What in the world could anyone being doing in a room full of records?

Looking at records?

For this long? What is he doing? Writing a seven volume history of the King's Lord?

Maybe.

That was not funny.

I didn't say it was meant to be.

I stopped trying to think, knowing my thoughts would just irate

me more and waited for whoever it was to come out for the room of records so I could go in and dig around.

After what seemed a lifetime of waiting, the person *finally* left. I'm sure my mind exaggerated how long I lounged in the dark tunnel, but look out a window proved I sat in there for at least two hours.

Still, I wonder what he was doing... I tried the handle of the room. *At least its not locked.* Pulling open the door I stepped inside the room, leaving the door open just a crack. I wouldn't shut it all the way because as soon as someone walked in they would know *someone* was in the room. So it had be shut. But the door being shut blocked out almost any warning I would have of anyone coming. And if the door *looked* shut I may be able to hide in the Records' Room without anyone noticing me *if* someone else *did* come in here.

So I pulled the door over, compromise type thing. *Why are you even considering this?* I shrugged and started looking around the room. What are you looking for?

The most recent records I can get my hands on.

And what makes you thinks Mantrin would keep the records of his treason right out in the open?

And what makes you think Mantrin wouldn't?

I looked for the least dusty of all the books. Hm.

Where are they?

Maybe whoever it was who walked in here earlier cleaned them

all.

Well look who is being optimistic.

Shut up.

I started running my fingers along the spines of the giant volumes. Each had a king's name on the back of it and the dates of the king's rule; each containing said king's actions. Pretty straightforward. I just had to find the one marked "King Ajax II, 1212 -" Seeing as his majesty wasn't dead - yet - his death date had yet to be engraved into the book. I found his father's book and then...

"Empty!"

Told you so.

So where is it?

Not here.

Brilliant.

I try.

So now what?

Good question, now what? First I'd leave this room, dangerous place to be. I hurried back into the secret passage and decided to think there, not like I could really go any other place in the palace. If anyone saw me they'd report me to Mantrin. What to do, what to do... I frowned. I really only needed to slip the king remedy. But a remedy I didn't have, nor knew any way of getting.

The only remaining option was to show Mantrin for the traitor he

was and... Well I don't know what would happen after that. If enough loyal lords remained in the council maybe my sudden outburst would spur them into finally doing something about Mantrin. But to rest so much on chance. It won't really matter. Either you are executed or Mantrin is cast down. I don't think a middling place is going to exist.

Fair enough.

But I couldn't just waltz into the Court and start yelling out about Mantrin's true self. I would most definitely *not* be believed that way. I would also like to know how many lords were not replaced by Mantrin's own choosing. I would not be able to find out how many were still loyal to the king of course. I frowned. Where would Mantrin set up shop in the palace? I walked down the hall, dragging my hand along the wall, wonder which door I should open and wander down. Pulling up a mental map of the palace, I started trying to pick a place Mantrin would hide documents and other important things. Of course, he may take them all back to his house. That's probably what happened since nothing can ever work out the way I need it too.

Got to start somewhere. I pushed open a door and walked into a smaller passage leading to a hallway of bedrooms. I started at one end of the hallway and started testing every door to see if any were unlocked. Most of them were, but it was obvious no one had been in the rooms in days. Three were locked. I frowned at one of the locked doors. How do you pick a lock?

No idea. Most people use a key.

Helpful. Next suggestion?

A thin piece of metal maybe?

I looked around for something which could fit into the lock on the door and maybe snap the lock. Something small, something thin. I felt the wooden paneling on the wall, looking for a thick splinter to pull off. Finding none I went into the nearest bedroom, looking for something I could insert into the lock.

I looked for anything I could use to twist the lock mechanism. Remembering my idea of pulling a piece of wood off the wall to use for a pick lock I ran my hands over the furniture looking for any place I could pull off a sizable splinter. Finding nothing on the polished surface of the wood furniture I lay on my back and scooted myself under the bed, searching for something on the rougher, unfinished part of the bed.

I found a small crack in the wood, but couldn't pull the piece of wood away from the plank with my bare hands. I undid my belt buckle and slipped the belt out from under me. Hefting the buckle in my hand I rammed it at the crack in the wood as hard as I could. The crack widened but nothing more. I frowned and hit the crack with my buckle again. The opening widened some more enough for me to slide my fingers into. I did so and pulled and a piece the length of my hand and breadth of my forefinger fell off. I bent the piece in both directions, to verify it wouldn't snap too easily under pressure and

went to engage in some lock picking activities.

I left the bedroom and went back to the locked door. Even though I now had all the essentials for lock-picking activities, namely, a lock pick and a locked lock, I lacked one very important thing: I had no idea how to pick a lock. I frowned at the lock and then at lock-pick. "So how does one do this?" I shrugged and stuck the piece of wood into the lock and twisted it around. A click sounded when the lock sprung open. I twisted the handle, releasing the door latch and pushing the door open. I poked my head into the empty room trying to ascertain who occupied it. A *woman*. I wrinkled my nose when I caught a whiff the strong perfume respectable ladies used. I frowned and shut the door. Unable to lock the door without a key, I had to leave it unlocked. I'm sure the lady would notice and wonder why she left her door unlocked. Or if she happened to remember locking it, why it was now unlocked.

Why are you thinking about this?

I moved onto the next locked door hoping this time I would find something of use. I picked the lock again, still not quite sure how I did it, and opened the door. I took one look at the strict tidiness of the room. A knight. Only a knight leaves his things in just pristine care. Or a former knight. Not Lord Mantrin. I shut the door, knowing the knight would know his door had been tampered with.

Well? Would the last room be Mantrin's?

You realize that there are three more hallways of bedrooms.

Oh thank you for the reminder.

You are most welcome.

I growled and started fiddling with the lock again.

"You!"

I froze. "Yes?"

"Turn around."

I turned around, trying to stall. He'll see my face and report me and... This will not be good.

"Look at me."

I lifted my head, wishing I had on a dress or something so it wouldn't be so obvious... I took one look at the man who called me and realized he wouldn't even recognize me! It was a guest. Probably the knight whose bedroom I looked into earlier.

"Who are you and what are you doing up here?"

"I am a personal servant and was sent to fetch something for my master," I replied.

"Ah. Very good then."

I turned back to the door, hoping it would unlock quickly so the knight wouldn't question my lingering by the door. As a personal servant I would have a key after all. I heard a door open and shut behind me and I knew the knight entered his room. At least now I had some more time because this door was not opening any time soon. I swore under my breath and continued jiggling my makeshift lock-pick

around in the lock.

After ten minutes of fiddling with the lock it snapped open. With an angry bang I threw open the door and looked around. Nondescript room and looked like the occupant used it for sleeping only. Nothing seemed to even be touched, maybe the room had no occupant, but no, some personal belongings lay on the shelves and some papers scattered on the desk. I went first to the desk as with Mantrin's study. Only then I knew it was Mantrin's study. Now I had no idea who slept in this room. I flipped through the papers and sighed. Not Mantrin's. I left the room, closing the door behind me. I ran to the other end of the hall way and up a small flight of stairs. Another hall of bedrooms waited for me there.

I repeated the process of the last hall. Although this time I already had the pick lock in hand and went down one side of the hall and back up the other, finding four locked bedrooms, but not Mantrin's. I began to wonder if the regent hid himself somewhere else. But where else in the pa- Of course! He wants to be king, he already took the role.

But just in case my theory proved wrong I went upstairs and checked the last hall of bedrooms. As expected the locked rooms I broke into showed no evidence of being Mantrin's current room. I scowled. Nothing is ever easy...

I ran back down to the first hall way and back into the secret passages, headed toward the royal quarters. Conceited jerk. I

slipped into the still and quiet hall. None of these doors would be locked since so many guards were posted at the entrance to the hall, not to mention the ones *in* the hall. I kept my head down and walked down the hall with purpose. I knew which rooms to avoid. I pulled open the first door. Empty. Second. Empty. Third. Occupied. I went and shut the door behind me.

I attended first to the desk. Sliding open one of the elaborate drawers I rifled through the papers inside. Most were blank. I frowned and opened up the next drawer. All blank pages. I opened up the last drawer. Empty. No, one quill pen inside. I slammed the drawer shut, cursing my luck, my life and just about everything else.

I threw myself into the desk chair, resting my elbows on the arms of the chair, fingers steepled together, touching the tips of my forefingers against my nose. I looked at the desk without actually registering what I looked at. What now? Another room? There are only six extra bedrooms up here! I've been in three. Of course, its always the last one. Even though I knew I had to get moving with my search, I still sat in the chair, tired. Something is strange about that desk...

I frowned and dropped my hands into my lap, tilting my head to one side. Wondering what was odd about the desk, I pulled open the empty drawer again and picked up the quill. I reached back down into the drawer and placed the quill down. *That's not the bottom.* I pressed my fingers against the bottom and slid my hand toward the

front of the drawer. I let out a small shout of triumph and the bottom slid away to reveal a small compartment in the drawer. A fake bottom. Ha ha.

I slid the piece of wood as far as it would go and looked into the compartment. Empty except for a small packet of yellow powder and a small note.

I picked up the powder and shook it. No... This couldn't be... With shaking fingers I unfolded the small piece of paper.

"Mantrin,

"I got two doses. Hope your problem is solved."

My hands started shaking. This, this is what I'd been searching for the entire time and now I'd found it. *What do I do with it?*

Go to the throne room and declaim Mantrin for the sickening traitor he is!

I stood up and, with fierce determination running through my vein, ran back to my secret tunnel entrance. I ran through the tunnels trying to get as close to the Throne Room (another very creatively named room) as possible. I had yet to discover any passage to the Throne Room, but one did land me in a room right behind the throne. I would just fly out and show Mantrin for who he really was.

I sprinted all the way to the small room and almost flew into the room, but paused, hearing angry voices.

"WHAT do you accuse his Grace of?" someone demanded.

"Of being a TRIATOR! He poisoned his Majesty, the *real* king!"

someone shouted back.

Who is this?

"How dare you say such things? Lord Mantrin has done nothing by help this country since the king's poisoning!"

"I've worked closely with Lord Mantrin and I know all his plans! I can prove he is a traitor."

Derrek? It can't be! He betrayed me! What is he playing at?

"Oh? And how will you do that?" someone asked.

Silence descended upon the other room. "Waverly, the tumbler, you know him - her?"

Grunts of agreement filtered across the room.

"Good. She was arrested that night - remember?"

"Yes!" someone shouted, "She poisoned the king! Why she was rel-"

"That is exactly my point. I was the one who released her. Lord Mantrin told me to. He said that he needed people to not trust her, to shun her and avoid her. And for her to trust me. So I could later betray her." Derrek paused.

"So you betrayed her?"

"Like I said, I was working for Lord Mantrin. That's what I got paid for."

I heard someone stand up. "It is true. Derrek here works for me. I did release Waverly in an attempt to wring a confession from

her. My plan was, if she was shunned by everyone in the palace she would realize that everyone thought - knew - she committed this heinous act and would come confess to me or Captain Raleigh."

I heard murmurs of approval and even I had to applaud Mantrin on a good plan. Too bad it didn't work, huh? I allowed myself to gloat for a minute before refocusing on the confrontation going on in the other room.

"But how did you know *she* did it? Its a cover-up! Can't you see it?" Derrek pleaded with the lords assembled there.

"She was the only one who could. Everyone one else was focused on her performance so no one noticed her slip some poison into the king's goblet," Mantrin countered.

"You don't know any of that for certain and I've heard from your own lips that you wanted to be king!" Derrek shouted.

"And only you say this."

Derrek had nothing to say to this.

"Arrest him," Matrin commanded with cold indifference.

"What? Why?" Derrek asked to the sound of armored boots approaching him.

"You have falsely accused one of the King's Lords of treason!" another lord said, "Why do you think you are being arrested?"

Derrek didn't respond as his own comrades started to lead him off.

He came through! He wasn't lying earlier! And now... Now he

is being arrested! I threw open the door behind the throne and charged out, taking note of Mantrin sitting *right* by the throne, but not on it.

"Stop!" I shouted. Everyone turned and looked at me, no one moving.

Chapter 10

"Why are you here?" someone demanded of me. I ignored them and look to Derrek. His eyes lit up for a minute and he gave me a small smile. I heard Mantrin stand up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. I tried to shake him off, but he get a firm grasp on me.

"It is a very good question, Waverly, why are you here?" he asked, his voice calm and soft.

I glared at him. "Why do you think I'm here? You are a traitor and you know it."

He laughed. "You still want to continue to believe that? You have no proof. Only some claims you overheard me making. You have no way to prove that."

"I do now!" I held out my clenched fist containing the powder and note.

"Oh? And where is this?" the traitor asked. Did I imagine the twinge of nervousness in his voice?

I turned my fist over and opened my hand, my palm facing

upwards.

"And what is this?"

I held up the yellow powder. "What does this look like to you?"

"Some yellow powder!"

"A remedy."

"A poison!" Derrek said. A guard cuffed his head.

"A poison or a cure. But who addressed their notes to lords of high esteem with just 'Mantrin'?" I asked. "Hm?"

"Where did you get this?" the lord hissed, snatching the paper and powder away from me. He scowled at me. "This is clearly just some ruse to get rid of me, or for you people to think poorly of myself." He pulled on his best innocent look.

"What does the note say?" someone asked.

He handed me the note. "Please read it for the company here."

I frowned, wondering if I should. I figured that no matter who read it the same message would get out.

"Mantrin,

"I got two doses. Hope your problem is solved." I finished and he snatched the note from me. I scowled at him, but he ignored me.

"What problem?" someone asked.

The lord looked uncomfortable. "I have a slight indigestion problem, my good sirs...."

A few of the men smiled and chuckled to each other and Mantrin flushed in accordance.

"Then why was this in a secret compartment in your desk?" I demanded.

Mantrin snapped his fingers. "You entered my rooms, you pest! Guards, arrest her too! She's not even supposed to be in the palace let alone breaking into my rooms and stealing things."

The guards approached me and I wondered if I should fight, flee or give up. I looked at Derrek. He bowed his head. The game is up.
We can't do much more.

But I'm not going down without a fight!

I dodged under the legs of the one of the approaching guards and spun around, gathering momentum. With enough speed, I charged back toward the guards. They were armored, but only with breastplates, greaves and helmets. I could at least take down two of them. I ran right into the middle of them, as they all started to come toward me I used one to jump off another and land my foot in another guard's throat, kicking in his windpipe.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Derrek struggling against five or six guards. I couldn't help him right then though, being onset by six or so guards myself. I felt a sting in my arm and blood run down my arm. I growled and lashed out with my fists and feet.

"Do not kill them!" I heard someone shout. Oh thanks, lots of help.

The flat of a sword came charging at my head. I ducked and slid between the legs of the guard. The guard behind him swung at me with

fist. I ducked away, but his hard fist caught my legs, knocking the sense out of them. I rolled over and jumped on to my hands, trying to get away, but with the reinforcements newly arrived in the throne room Derrek and I were subdued in a matter of seconds.

"What should we do with these scoundrels, m'lord?" a guard asked

"Lock them up - not in the dungeons, in the jail. I'll deal with them when I have time," Mantirn said, sounding tired and exasperated.

"Right away, sir." The guards rushed Derrek and I out of the room and put us into our own cells.

I punched the nearest wall with all my might. Here! Again! By some cruel twist of fate...

"Waverly?"

"Derrek?" *I think I owe him an apology.* "Derrek, I'm sor-"

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I betrayed you! And..." he trailed off.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you. Now look at us."

"You had every right in the world not to believe me. After what I did to you - and Collin."

At the mention of Collin's name I felt tears come to my eyes.

"Yes..." I muttered.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have.. I knew! And..."

I could hear the pain and anguish coming into his voice.

"Why? Can you tell me why?"

"Because I didn't know what to do... I'm alone. Like you."

I didn't have anything to say to him, not that I got the chance. The door to the jail banged open and Lord Mantrin himself entered. He told the guards accompanying him something and they waited outside. He shut the door behind him and walked over to stand before the cells Derrek and I were locked in.

"So!" he said and didn't say anything more for a few minutes.

"You thought you could try and declaim me before *my* Council of Lords? You actually thought you could?" We remained silent and he went on. "Well you were wrong! Hear me? *Wrong!*" He laughed. "You, Waverly, so brave and honorable. Trying to do what is 'right'. I have news for you, girlie. Just because its 'right' doesn't mean it wins." I didn't reply. He walked closer to my cell and peered inside. "No! You know nothing. The right doesn't always win - its the smarter, better and stronger which always wins. And I'm all those things. Over you, over Derrek," he motioned to the neighboring cell. "Over Ajax, over everyone in the palace, the city, the country! No one suspects me, Waverly." He leaned closer. "No. They suspect you."

I could barely restrain myself, but continued to do so. I would *not* give him the satisfaction of seeing me scream and yell. I would stay calm. I *would* stay calm.

"And you!" He left off staring at me and moved to Derrek. "You think you are going to save your skin in Heaven or something by

confessing to being a traitor after you already did what I needed you to? Boy, you had chance to become captain of the palace guard, but you just had to be all honorable, didn't you? Don't you get it? You lost! You both lost!"

Mantrin continued to rant and I ignored him; his attention wasn't focused on me anyway. I needed to retaliate some how. No matter what pleasure it would give Mantrin, I had to! I realized I still had my pick lock. Somehow during the struggle I managed to keep it on my person, secreted in my belt. I snaked my arm through the small slits in my cell door and twisted around to reach the lock. Still not entirely sure about how to pick a lock at all, I inserted my makeshift lock pick into the cell's rusty lock and started fiddling with it. Please... If ever you needed a stroke of good luck NOW would be that time. Please... The lock sprang open with a click. I door opened on silent hinges, the same miraculous force which allowed me to unlock the door coming into play again.

I glanced around for something I might be able to use as a weapon. Seeing nothing I decided I would take the direct approach of my fists. I backed up and ran at Mantrin, jumping and ramming my foot into his head. He fell against the bars of Derrek's cell. He looked shocked for a moments, but recovered the next instant.

Mantrin didn't have a sword, but he did have a dagger and a lantern. I had no weapons besides my hands and my feet.

I stood behind Mantrin while he turned around to face me. I

could see he didn't understand how I escaped from the cell. His hand went to his belt to check his keys still hung there.

I laughed. "If you continue to underestimate me you shall die." That sounded stupid, but I'm not thinking so clearly right now.

He frowned. "So you escaped a cell? What does that prove? You can't kill me. Then you really will be in trouble. Those men upstairs. I pay them. They have loyalty to me. If you kill me they will kill you."

"So? You aren't the king!" I shouted.

"You're point being?"

I roared and tackled Mantrin, pinning him to the ground somehow, probably just from the surprise of the attack. He threw me off him with ease and I thudded to the ground. "Very good, but you can do better than that I'm sure."

I snorted and swiped my legs out at his. He skipped over them, seeming not to even notice. "You can do better, I know."

I got to my feet, waiting for a chance. He grinned at me, looking all knowing and secretive. His grin infuriated me, rage growing in my mind and muscles. You can't let this... this.. swine become king! You have to stop him! NOW! I backed against the wall and used it to launch myself into the air, somersaulting over Mantrin, allowing me to kick him in the head with both my feet at full force. He stumbled forward but appeared unperturbed by my blow to his head, still grinning his haughty grin. I growled.

"Something the matter?" he asked, sounding patronizingly kind.

I resisted the urge to answer him, trying to calm down.

Waverly! Don't you see? He is trying to get you to do something rash. You can't play his game! I took in a deep breath and blew it out.

"Angry?"

"No," I replied, my voice light.

This caught him off guard, but he moved on. "So then why did you attack me?"

"Because you deserved it - not because I was angry."

"I deserve it? How do you figure that?"

"You are a traitor."

He started to get frustrated with me. "And?"

"You deserve to die."

He glared at me. "Who are you to say who lives and dies?"

"I know what is right and wrong."

"Do you now? Are you so sure about that?"

Don't let him play mind games with you! "Yes."

"How can you be so sure?" he questioned.

"Because I'm not a twisted, evil individual like you."

He laughed. "Fine then."

We stared at each other, daring one to make the first move.

Just haul off and hit him, Wave. You know he deserves it. Deserves that and a whole lot more - his whole head removed!

And he ordered Collin killed.

That decided Mantrin's fate. I growled and charged into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him and tumbling him to the floor. I landed on top of him, groping for the keys at his belt, wanting to free Derrek. Mantrin slapped my hand, but I didn't move, trying to yank the keys from his belt.

He managed to draw his dagger from its sheath and stabbed at me. I rolled to the side, hand still latched around the key ring; the dagger hit stone with a clank. He rolled on top of me dagger pressed against my neck. "I should have killed you when I had the chance eight years ago!" he growled.

The world stopped moving.

"What?" I asked in cold voice.

He managed to chuckle. "You don't know? Why are you here Waverly?"

"I'm an orphan."

"Why are you an orphan?"

Why are answering these questions. "Because my parents were murdered." Because you have to know.

"And who did that?"

"Marauding wildmen."

"Are you sure? Who got your parents' manor? Who got the credit for 'killing' those wildmen. Who, Waverly, who?"

I couldn't answer. I couldn't say anything.

He leaned close to my ear, his dagger pressing into my neck. "I did Lady Waverly Thorton."

"NO!" I shouted and gave one more pull on the keys and they came free. At the same time I threw Mantrin off me, my sudden strength sprouting from my anger. He killed them! He did this to me! He sent me here! That... That... I bounded to my feet and jammed a key into the lock and twisted. I don't think the key was meant for the door, but the force at which I shoved and turned made it fit. Derrek shouted a warning as Mantrin bore down on me with his dagger. I dove to the side and Derrek swung open the door, smacking the lord in the face, sending him careening backwards, dizzy. I knew the guards stationed at the door would hear this struggle and come and investigate, but all was lost already, might as well go down fighting.

Derrek, being younger than Mantrin, matched him, if not outmatched him. The young man gripped Mantrin's wrists, holding the dagger away from him. Some time in the fight the lantern got tossed aside, although it still burned as the room remained lit.

Mantrin managed to free one wrist and tossed his dagger into his free hand. He tried to stab Derrek in the stomach. The guard jumped from side to side, moving backwards, trying to avoid the sharp implement.

I watched this struggle unmoving, standing behind the open door of Derrek's cell. I felt the need to involve myself somehow, but I

didn't know how. Mantrin advanced on Derrek, back to me - and I saw my chance. I slipped out from behind the barred door and crept up behind Mantrin on silent feet. I could see Derrek better now and noticed him bleeding from both his arms. *Will he die too?*

A few dozen paces from Mantrin I started to run, launching myself at Mantrin, landing on his back. I tightened my arms around his neck, trying to choke him.. He left off his attack on Derrek and proceeded to stab at my arms. He dove his dagger into my arm and it struck my bone. I screamed in pain, but didn't release my hold on him, although I could feel my arm weakening. He struck me again the dagger bypassing my bone and making it all the way through my arm. I screamed again, my blood running down his shirt, but still I held on.

He abandoned his dagger, tossing it aside to free up both his hands to try and pry mine away from his neck. Derrek snatched the dagger up from the ground almost before I heard the clatter of metal on stone. Although in my weakened state I could sense little.

Mantrin made some progress on trying to remove my arms, but sheer determination kept me clinging to him. He turned and rammed his back against the wall, banging my head into the cold stone. A horrible pain pounded through my skull. I grunted, gritting my teeth against the pain in my head and arms.

But Mantrin rammed me against the wall again. And again. And again. Each time the immense pain in my head doubling, reaching almost unbearable limits. Spots of color danced before my eyes, but

all was slowly being taken over by black. I remembered the black, the black which destroyed all sense and life. The Darkness. I shuddered and tried to fight it off. I couldn't pass out! *I could not pass out!* I tried to tighten my grip around Mantrin, but he rammed me into the wall one final time and I could not stop the black from over taking my senses.

Chapter 11

I woke to burning arms, achy body and pounding head. In a few moments I passed out again without registering anything around me. I roused myself out of unconsciousness a few times after that, but never for more than a few minutes.

At last, I awoke and could look around me without feeling dizzy or nauseous or any of the other nasty things I usually felt. I put a hand to my head. Not even the killing headache. I lay still, trying to recall what I last remembered. Being rammed against a stone wall hard, over and over. My arms cut through by a dagger. My arms wrapped around the stump of flesh between head and shoulders. Squeezing, squeezing. The rough surface the spine and throat rubbing against my arms as I tried to squeeze the life out of... out of Mantrin! The past autumn and winter came rushing down on me. I jumped up, ignoring the twinge of pain in my arms. "Anise!" I shouted.

A form stirred next to me. "Waverly?"

"Where is Mantrin? Where is the king? Where is Derrek? Where is Reichan? What happened?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Well hello!"

"ANSWER ME!"

"Calm down, calm down." She pushed me back on to the bed. "I need to make sure you are well enough to hear all this. You could get all excited."

"I am pretty excited right now Anise, TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED!"

She ignored me demands and ran her hands over my head, arms and chest. "You seem to be doing fine. Surprisingly strong for the ordeal you just went through."

"What ordeal? Can you talk already, I know you can!"

She laughed. "Yes, let me get Reichan, then we can tell you everything. His Majesty will probably want to see you too. Be back in a moment. She left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

What has happened? How long have I been laying here? She mentioned the king! Is it Ajax? Ripley? WHO? And where am I? And what am I doing here? What is going on? I shook my head trying not to think too much. Anise said all would be explained to me. I could wait for a few more minutes. I lay still, staring at the ceiling, trying not to think. The door flew open and Anise skipped into the room, followed by the stately Reichan. Two guards entered the room and King Ajax II himself entered. I tried to rise, but the king smiled. "Please. Stay where you are." He walked to the side of the

bed and sat on the seat recently vacated by Anise, who now plopped herself on to my bed.

"Please, Madam Reichan, attend to your patient."

The apothecary nodded and began checking my head, neck, arms and shoulders. I tried not to fidget through her administrations and the second she backed away I demanded, "Your Majesty, if it pleases, could you tell me what has transpired in the past few... I don't know, days? Weeks?"

He smiled again. I had never noticed how kind his smile was. "Of course I shall tell you, it would be cruel injustice to hide from you the events you set in motion. But first, I must beg your pardon, Lady Waverly, for not heeding your warning about Mantrin, that vile traitor."

I blinked once, stunned by my king begging for my forgiveness. What has happened? Why does he come to me not as king but as comrade - why does he come at all? "I forgive your Majesty of course, no pardon were necessary!"

"But still, I feel the imbecile for not heeding your warning." He frowned. "But all is well now, although getting to this point took far too long, but if I had been more heedful of your warning none of this would have ever happened." He sighed.

"But you don't want to hear me bemoan my stupidity and did not come to do so. I came to tell you of the consequences of your hard work and sacrifice." He smiled at me. "Although the first part of

the story is better told by Madam Reichan and Maid Anise." He nodded to the woman standing with arms crossed across her chest, silent. A small smile floated across her face.

"It'll be my pleasure, your Majesty," she murmured to the king before turning her attention to me. She paused to collect her thoughts as my patience with everyone in the room wore thinner and thinner.

"After you came to warn me about the foiled plans, I left the shop, but not to flee. I took the remedy for the king I concocted and headed to the palace. I know, risky, but then again, only risk would save the king's life." She nodded to the king himself. "And obviously, it worked. But back to my tale. I bypassed the main doors and went to the kitchen entrance - took some careful sneaking too. I found Anise and told her about what had happened"

Anise broke in. "I guessed something had happened when I came out of Princess Sadie's rooms and you were gone. But I didn't think you had been kicked out of the palace, nor that Collin was d-" she cut off seeing me look away. "I'm sorry Wave, so sorry." She embraced me and whispered in my ear. "He loved you, he really did." I nodded, sniffing. She released me and settled back into her spot on the huge bed. I pushed myself into a sitting position, instead of my lazy lounging, trying not to show my raw feelings over Collin.

"Anyway," Anise said, "I didn't find out about your banishment until Reichan came to me."

Reichan nodded, affirming my friend's words. "I came to Anise and told her you had been banished, to be killed upon sight if you tried to enter the palace." I scowled. "She immediately professed having no idea about this and asked what to do next. After all we had the cure now, but we realized we relied on you to get the cure to his Majesty. Besides that Derrek - and probably Mantrin and Raleigh - knew about our original plan, so we needed something else. But I knew Princess Sadie would not be denied access to the king." I glanced at his Majesty. He smirked at me, looking very pleased with himself. A suspicion started to form in my mind, but I ignored it for the minute, engrossed in the story.

"So I went to Princess Sadie. Getting to Her Grace was hard. I had to bribe and convince and lie to a few dozen people before I could get to her. Eventually I reached Her Grace and told her everything that had happened as far as we knew. We were all concerned for you, but we could do nothing to help you at that point - besides carry out your plan. So that's what we did. Princess Sadie managed to get to see the king and slipped the cure into him. In a matter of hours he woke back up." Reichan stopped then, handing over the story to the king.

"What they didn't know at that point was that you managed to sneak back into the palace. It would appear a lot was going on the day you arrived back in the palace!" he smiled and then picked up where Reichan left off. "Yes, I woke up, but I was still very weak.

Reichan hid the truth of this disaster from me for three more days. Of course, by that time you and Derrek had confronted Mantrin."

Anise tapped her hand and fidgeted. The king looked at her.

"Oh yes, Maid Anise had a role in this part."

Anise beamed. "One of the guards is sweet on me." She blushed. "And I managed to convince him to let me have you. Saying that I could return you to health to receive just retribution. But I knew the king would be back to health soon. I just had to keep you alive until Reichan and his Majesty could attend to things properly. So I did."

The king nodded and Reichan smiled at her pupil. "Yes, Maid Anise did keep you alive until Sadie told me all that happened. I immediately ordered Mantrin's arrest. Which proved much easier than I thought it would. Apparently, when Derrek and you went before the whole court, quite a few people, although not entirely convinced by your charges, had seeds of doubt planted in their minds. And either way, since I now returned to life all those who were only supporting Mantrin because it looked like I would die rejoined my side."

"Where is Mantrin now?" I asked.

"He is locked up in the dungeons."

I couldn't help the evil smile which came on to my face.

"Serves him right!"

"I suppose. Although I'm going to execute him, so I should've kept him in the jail..." the king mused.

"NO!" I shouted and everyone stared at me. I ducked my head.

"Sorry."

"Why so demanding?" the king asked.

"He locked me up in the dungeons for ten days. It was a living hell," I stated.

"Oh. That is kind of the point," the king said.

"I know, but I didn't deserve to be there." I smiled.

"True." He thought about this for a minute before continuing.

"So really the past few weeks have been very calm. I wanted to wait until you woke up before I executed Mantrin. As soon as you are well enough, a feast shall be held in your honor and Mantrin will be executed."

"Wait... How long have I been here?"

"Here, in this room? two weeks."

"WHAT?"

He nodded. "two weeks."

"Oh... Wow. I got hit pretty hard didn't I?" I grinned.

"Yes you did, but at least you are awake now."

I nodded. "Oh! One more thing."

"Yes?"

"Where is Derrek?"

The king sighed. "That was a hard one. He was a traitor, but then he did help you."

"No, I mean what happened to him after I passed out?"

"Oh! You had weakened Mantrin enough that Derrek just knocked him over and held a dagger to his throat. Your struggled actually only lasted a few minutes - or so says the guards posted at the top of the stairs.

"Derrek did the impossible after that. He locked up Mantrin and the guards. Although the guards later promised not to say anything and he let them go. He stayed in the jail until I could think properly again, attacking anyone - besides Maid Anise - who dared come down in search of Mantrin."

"He must've gotten beat up pretty bad..."

"Yes, he was. But he didn't get a head injury like yourself and he recovered with minor repercussions and quite a few scars. Although I got back to my feet only two days after you two attacked Mantrin so he didn't have to stay down there too long. I commanded him not to leave the palace grounds but outside of that I have not punished him in any way."

"I don't think you should punish him."

"What?"

"Without him, Mantrin might have gotten away. Even though he was a traitor, he changed sides. At least he should escape the hangman and the dungeons, maybe prison all together."

The king thought about my idea for a few minutes. "Yes, I see your point. But he did murder Collin," the king blurted, trying to ease over my wound.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak about Collin's death.

"He needs to be punished for that. I'll think about it. You need your rest, I shall see you later." He rose and inclined his head to me. "Good day and thank you Lady Waverly."

"It was only my duty, sire."

He smiled. "I wish I had more people like you in my palace." One of the guards opened the door and the king left.

I reclined against the pillows, thinking over everything Anise, Reichan and the king told me. Mantrin awaiting me to be executed. I'm sure that please him I chuckled to myself. But what about Derrek? What should be done with him? And why did the king himself come and see me? That part is still confusing. I guess he's just grateful.

#

I looked around at the somber gathering. Beyond the metal fence a large crowd watched. Not every day a King's Lord got his head removed. I shivered. I did this. He deserves his death though.

A gate opened on creaky hinges and four guards, their visors pulled over their faces, marched in. Mantrin walked between them, his hands and feet shackled. Even the wind seemed to have stopped blowing the square became so quiet. King Ajax debated executing Mantrin in the palace grounds away from prying eyes. But someone pointed out a spectacle of the traitor would discourage others.

Of course, being the hero of this whole adventure, I attended

the execution, sitting right by the king. Although, even if no one forced me to join the royal party at the grim event, I would've come anyway. A vicious streak in me reared its head and reveled in the thought of Mantrin's death.

The unknown guards led Mantrin to the dark stained guillotine and ordered him to kneel. The convicted refused, but a well aimed kick at his knees coupled with a downward shove on his shoulders brought him down. They forced his head across the block and pulled back his shirt, leaving his neck bare. They shackled his hands and feet to the gruesome device. One of the guards moved to a taunt rope holding the razor sharp wedge seven or eight feet above the neck of the doomed.

A priest walked out from the spectators. "Do you repent?"

"No!" Mantrin hissed and spat at the priest's feet.

The priest began to recite a prayer, making signs above the traitor's head. When he finished the king rose. "Lord Cody Mantrin, for high treason against the royal head, the murder of the Lord Jareth Thorton and Lady Jeanette Thorton, you are sentence to death by beheading." Although the sentencing had taken place a few days ago, the king repeated it for the benefit of the listeners. I steeled myself against the onslaught of emotion from hearing my parents names again and focused on Mantrin. His eyes met mine, full of hatred. I glared right back at him. From the loud curses, oaths and protestations from the trial a few days ago I knew he hated me

with every fiber of his being.

Just like I promised myself the night of Harvest Feast, I destroyed Mantrin.

And now, now his gaze gave me no fear. He could do nothing to me and I everything to him. I placed him underneath the guillotine's blade. I did. I felt a vicious pride come into my heart at the thought of me, *me*, having almost single-handedly destroyed a traitor. But no time for such thoughts. The courtyard became silent as death, all eyes focused on Mantrin and the guillotine.

The executioner raised his sword to cut the taunt rope. He paused for a moment, shifting on his feet and brought the sword down hard. The rope snapped and with a sickening crunch Mantrin's head rolled away, the blood from his severed neck flowing across the courtyard and drench the vile mechanism for death again in the thick red liquid.

The guards hurriedly cleared away Mantrin's body and four more armored and unknown guards walked in, this time Raleigh between them. The process repeated, although I cared not for the death of the captain. In the trial Raleigh admitted to having been bribed to show his support of Mantrin. He also orchestrated the deaths of some key supporters of King Ajax.

As the guards cleaned up Raleigh's head and body I wondered who the next captain of the palace guard would be. A very important person to say the least. The whole guard would need to be questioned

for alliances. Although reports of two hanging themselves and three falling on their swords seemed to show most of those who helped Raleigh in his deeds of murder served their own justice.

Four more guards appeared this time with Regin between them. Regin's involvement in this plot shocked everyone. According to Mantrin and Regin himself, Regin added poison to one drink and Mantrin had a small packet of the powder on his person. The seating arrangements were unknown to the pair so they prepared for both. Being seated too far away to slip the poison into the king's goblet unnoticed, Regin prepared a goblet with the poison in it, intending to switch it out as soon as my performance was over. My attempt to stop the king from drinking poison only provided a chance for Mantrin to frame me *and* slip the poison to the king. I berated myself about this, but his Majesty and Anise reassured me it could not possibly be my fault.

I shrugged and refocused my attention on the final execution. The rope broke apart with a snap and Regin's head rolled away. My grim pleasure remained with me as I rose with the rest of the royals and walked to the waiting carriages. But even though I felt pleased at seeing the traitors put to death, I knew that I shouldn't feel pleasure at death. I frowned. Death is nothing to enjoy. Ever.

It is not death you are enjoying. It is justice.

Anise - and the Reichan and the king - forced me to wear dresses again. I didn't really mind, but the long flowing garment tripped me

up. I shall have to learn to walk in these gowns. The prospect didn't seem to horrible. At least I could be a girl again.

I found myself in a carriage with Princess Sadie. "Your Grace," I said, bowing my head.

"Lady Waverly, I must thank you for saving Aj- I mean the king's life." She reddened.

I smiled. "You are welcome, of course, it was my duty as a citizen and loyal subject, though."

"So you've said quite a few times," the princess pointed out, "but thank you all the same."

I nodded to her, not sure what else to do. Others joined our carriage and we rode back up to the palace in silence.

They are dead. Everything I have worked for is finished. Over. The end.

#

A few days later, I lazed around feeling out of place. The whole place rushed around preparing for a feast and I visited with lords and nobles, speaking of my exploits in sugar-coated terms. As a newly made lady of the court I dared not speak of all my troubles in their horrible truth.

Oh the pettiness of nobles.

And now I was one of them.

I wonder what it'll be like to be at a feast and not perform...

Strange though, Wave. Foreign thought! I chuckled. May be fun.

You know it's your place. Its been so long since you last even wore a dress, let alone attended a party. Although most eight year olds don't attend parties anyway.

My mind drifted back to that fateful day. I stared at the fire, seeing the fires of my past, the fires which destroyed so much. I felt a warm tear run down my cheek. I brushed it away, scowling.

Don't you dare!

Someone knocked on my door, relieving me of my memories. "Come in," I called out.

The door opened and Anise followed by a maidservant entered, both laden with boxes. "Hello m'lady!" Anise said dropping a curtsy before hugging me.

"Anise..." I asked, looking at the girl. "Who is this?"

"Chrissy! She is your handmaiden."

"My what?"

"You heard me!" Anise said, bopping me on the head. "You are a lady of rank!"

I scowled. "So?"

"You need to be attended to as one." She grinned, looking at me with expectant eyes. She wanted my approval.

Her cheerfulness infected me and I couldn't help but grin too. "Fine," I said, trying not to sound too happy, but Anise knew me better.

She put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. "Good.

Since you aren't going to any gala event dressed like that!"

I looked down at the gown I wore. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

She looked me over. "Its not the silk gown his Majesty told me to get you into!"

I stared at her. "Silk gown?"

Anise and Chrissy rushed around ripping open their boxes and parcels, dressing and undressing me like a doll. I tried to protest, but the pair did not listen to me. Only when I mentioned something I liked or did not like about the ensemble they made up did they pay me any bit of heed. I gave up and let them have their fun.

After they finished, after almost two hours of hair, clothes and jewelry, they stood me in front of a full length mirror and let me look at myself. I looked far different now than in my usual ratty servant garb. I looked... feminine. For once. I'd hidden my gender the whole time I lived at the palace - five years. The last time I wore a dress I was eleven years old.

Although if someone told me to guess the girl in the mirror's age I would've said twenty-eight - at least. A very unhealthy twenty-eight year old to be sure. My cheek bones jutted out, giving me the appearance of starving myself. Thinking back, I realized I ate very little in the past few months. Well now I have time to gain back some weight. I took one last look at myself. You know, you could almost be pretty.

"You better go on downstairs..." Anise said, breaking me out of

my thoughts. "Too bad you don't have an escort."

I rolled my eyes. "Like anyone will want to be my escort. I showed most of the men they weren't the only tough ones. Men don't like to be outdone by a girl."

"You don't know that," she said, brushing Chrissy out of the room and shutting the door behind her.

An escort. Ha. I opened the door and stepped into the hallway. I remembered with a shock my bedroom lay in the royal apartments. I saw Princess Sadie and King Ajax conversing in low tones by the large door to the Hall. I hung back, afraid to interrupt their conversation, but his Majesty caught sight of me.

"Lady Waverly!" he said, raising a hand in greeting.

I tried to curtsy, but wobbled a bit.

"You shall enter with us, of course. And King Ripley."

"I-I shall?" I stuttered.

"Yes of course," the princess said, smiling. "Anyone staying here," she motioned around her, "does."

"Oh."

Silence fell upon us. In a few moments King Ripley joined us. The doors opened to the rustle of clothes and chairs as everyone stood up in reverence of two kings' entry. I felt a flush come to my cheeks as I walked behind King Ripley and sat down in the chair proffered by a manservant. I tried not to ignore the fact that I sat King Ajax's left hand and engaged myself in analyzing the stitching on my

girdle.

The talk around me flowed, but I took no part. The food I for so long yearned to have I only nibbled on. I felt so out of place, so... What's wrong with you? You aren't dancing in the middle of the room, you aren't showcasing your skills for the momentary entertainment of lords.

No, now I am one of those lords. And I hate it! I shouldn't be sitting here! I should be out there on the floor. I do not belong here.

Don't think that way! You have a home.

For the first time I thought of home. Could I really go back now... It seemed too good to be true. I can't go back! I doubt his Majesty would let me!

The king rose and motioned for one of the guards to call for silence. In moments the room fell to silence.

"As you all know we are gathered here today to celebrate my recovery to full health." He paused as cheers and applause filled the room. "And to honor Lady Waverly Thorton. Without her I would be lying in a cold grave right now." More applause and cheers, I flushed red. Being a performer I knew the sound of applause for yourself, but... this was somehow different. I tried to hide my face as every eye turned to look at me.

The king picked up his goblet. "To Lady Waverly!" he shouted, raising the jeweled goblet high.

"To Lady Waverly!" the mass repeated.

"Now, I do not wish to detain you from your food much longer, but I'm not quite done speaking." He turned to me. "As a reward for your service, I bequeath unto to thee, Lady Waverly Thorton, the estate of Shelsdale."

My heart fluttered. My home! My true home!

Too good to be true?

I ignored the sarcastic though. "My eternal gratitude, your Majesty."

"No, Lady Waverly, mine to you. Without you, I would not be here today." He smiled at me and the blood rose to my cheeks again.

"Thank you for your patience my friends, please, return to your meal."

#

"Your Majesty," Derrek said, "I fully admit to all wrongdoing on my part. I murdered the good Collin and took a large part in trying to bring about your demise."

"This is very true and very grave," the king said, looking suitably grave.

"I know and I shall accept any punishment you give. I deserve nothing less than execution." He bowed his head.

I could *not* let this go. No matter what he did, he ended up helping! I jumped up. "Your Majesty, if I may?"

The king nodded to me, a sign to continue. "Yes, Derrek

committed grievous crimes against yourself and others, but it is also true that without his aid none of would be here right now! I'm not saying he is free from all punishment. I am saying though that he did provide invaluable help, no, necessary aid to uncovering Mantrin's treason."

King Ajax nodded. "This is very true." Derrek said nothing, awaiting his fate. "Have you anything more to say for yourself?" he asked Derrek.

"No sire, nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"No. I said I know I have done wrong and deserve punishment. I await to hear such punishment."

"Do you agree with Lady Waverly's statements?"

"Yes, sire, I do. I did provide much needed aid to Lady Waverly when she fell unconscious in the jail, keeping Mantrin locked up until your Majesty returned to health. But no matter my better deeds, I still betrayed you and deserve the punishment due traitors."

"Sire," I interposed, "yes, Derrek deserves punishment, but shouldn't his later actions, the ones which saved your Majesty's life, nonetheless, at least grant him a less harsh punishment?"

The king nodded, fingers laced together and his head down, thinking. He looked up at the assembled group - Derrek, I and a few others. "Yes, this young man deserves a punishment just as severe as Mantrin's for his treason." A dread fell upon me. "But I believe he

has repented of his ways and, seeing as he amended his action, I sentence you to life-long slavery to Lady Waverly Thorton."

Derrek's and mine expressions matched - eyes bugged out and mouths dropped wide open. The king motioned me closer to him. "Anise told me how close you were to Collin." I blushed. "I leave Derrek to your judgment now."

"But sire..."

"If you do not wish to keep him, sell him."

I nodded. "As it pleases your Majesty," I said with a small curtsy. I walked back toward Derrek and motioned for him to follow me. Still dumbfounded the new slave followed his new mistress out of the court.

#

Finally, after eight long years, I would be going home! The thought Mantrin used my family's home for his country manor repulsed me and I determined to give the house a thorough cleaning, but just the thought of home brought a smile to my face and tears to my eyes.

I rode in a carriage most of the way back to the country estate, with Derrek and his sister. The adorable girl took up most of the conversation, not that either of us minded. She prattled in the sweetest fashion and Derrek and I were not ones for speaking too much. A few miles before we reached the - my - manor, I stopped the carriage and mounted a horse. I wanted to see my home properly.

As I reached the bottom of the hill hiding my manor and the

surrounding town from view I paused, taking in a deep breath.

Finally... I urged the horse onward, up the hill.

The horse crested the hill and I gazed down at the familiar landscape, an ache growing in my chest and water behind my eyes. A large bruise disfigured the forest and the hungry flames flashed before my eyes. My gaze moved from the forest to the manor - my home. Again the flames danced before my eyes. They took more than some trees.

I've come back Mama! I've come home!