

Betsy Flowain

by Rachel Garner

CHAPTER 1

The clatter of breaking glass sounded close to my ear and some of it cut into my arm.

"Jarvis Flowain!" I shouted, even as the clock rang out ten at night, "You get off of me!"

At that moment the door opened. "Jonathan!" My brother exclaimed from the doorway.

Wait a minute, if he's at the doorway then...

My attacker stood and I sat up, scowling at my brother, who still stood at the doorway.

"I'm sorry, your highness," Sir Jonathan Thoran said.

"Goodness," I exclaimed as he helped me to my feet.

"What are you doing here Jonathan? And why--"

"I--there's no time," Jonathan said, "Jarvis--I mean, your highness--the wine is poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Jarvis and I said at once.

"Why on earth do you think that?" Jarvis asked.

"I don't think that, I know it--from the king's own mouth."

"Why would Uncle do that--if he did at all?" Jarvis asked, eying the liquid that lay on the floor and soaked the side of his bed.

A knock came upon the door.

"Under the bed!" Jonathan hissed, shoving me towards it.

I scrambled forward and threw myself down, getting glass in the palm of my hand and wine soaked into my dress.

Jarvis opened the door. "Y-yes?" he stammered. Just under the bed, I peered out but could see little; the cloth on his bed blocked my view. Beyond the door the armored feet of a soldier glittered in the light.

"His majesty, King John, wishes to see you immediately."

"I'm afraid that his highness was just on his way to bed," Jonathan said, his feet joining the others I could see.

"If his highness is not presented, then the king will want to see you, Jonathan, most loyal knight, who has no reason to be in his highness's chambers."

"All right: then I will come," Jonathan said, stepping beyond Jarvis, who took a few steps back. The door closed.

When the sound of receding footsteps died away I crawled from my hiding place.

"Well," Jarvis said. "What an unusual evening. Why where you in my room, anyway?"

"Doesn't matter now. What do you suppose we do now?"

"I propose going to bed."

"Jarvis."

"All right, then, m'lady, we can clean up this mess first!"

"Jarvis, what I mean is--"

Jarvis's sarcastic smile dropped from his face, and he looked past me.

"What?" I asked.

"Shush."

He scooped up the candle, advancing towards his bed and the window that the canopies of his bed touched.

"Well, I don't see any--" he started, but at that moment the heavy cloth rustled and a figure filled up the window, blocking off the stars.

One of us screamed--I say Jarvis, and he says me--and Jarvis dropped the candle. With a hiss and a splutter it went out.

A thud followed by a crash sent me scurrying to the corner of the room wondering; why is there no fire in the hearth?

"You get away from here!" Jarvis said, followed by the smack of someone hitting the floor, and a gasp of breath.

"I'm not trying to hurt you!" A stranger's voice reached my ears.

"Oh, is that right? Someone said you were!" Jarvis said.

"Why don't you light the candle again?" The voice asked.

"Yes, and then you will be able to see me. What a beautiful idea," Jarvis said in a sarcastic tone that trembled.

"I swear by good King Mark that I will not hurt you!"

He swears by my father?

Jarvis remained silent.

"I came with Jonathan," the person said. "Your highness? I--Ow!" a sharp crack accompanied his words, followed by a great crash.

"Jarvis!" I shouted, "What did you do?"

"I've got him! Betsy, find the candle!"

Crunch! I stumbled over the shattered glass and blundered into the table.

"Stay down!" Jarvis commanded.

"All right, all right..." someone moaned.

"Ow! Found some glass," I said, as I searched the floor.

"You are too close, Betsy; go out further. I think it rolled by the window."

"Oh, here it is. The holder is gone."

"Yes, I know."

I lit the candle and stood up.

A man of the castle guard lay on the floor, Jarvis held his arms to the ground. A thin gash ran across his head and blood soaked his blond hair.

He wore a mail shirt and leather jerkin; a sword hung at his side. One of Jarvis's hands still clenched the candlestick.

The light caught on the silver-plated table that lay on its side. The glass strewn even further across the floor crunched under my feet.

"All right, who are you?" Jarvis demanded.

"I am Philip Zarnor, and I tell you again that I am here to help--not to kill you."

"Well, we'll see about that." Jarvis reached for the man's belt and pulled the sword out of its sheath.

"Hey--what--?" The man started to protest but fell silent.

"Here Betsy," Jarvis held out the sword to me.

"Hand me the candlestick first," I said.

I placed the candle in it, set it on the side of the toppled table, and then took the sword with both hands.

"Why should we trust you?" Jarvis asked.

"He didn't draw his sword, Jarvis--"

"Be quiet, Betsy."

And he's of the castle guard I added to myself, looking at the symbol stitched at his shoulder. He would be beaten severely for leaving his post.

"Your sister has a point, your highness."

"Well, she thought of it--not you. What do you have to say?"

"It doesn't matter if she thought of it. It is a very good point. And here's another--"

With a sudden lurch the man freed himself from Jarvis's clutch and pinned him to the ground. He pulled out his dagger. "The king wants you dead, Jarvis Flowain," He said, his breathing labored. "In this moment, I could become of high station and quite rich." The air of the room felt thick, the scene before me unreal as I stared at the gleam of steel against my brother's throat.

"I believe that you should have the throne," Philip said, what seemed hours later; "I am here to help you."

He stood and Jarvis struggled to his feet, his face pale. The sword fell from my shaking hands and for a moment we just stared at one another.

"Can you trust me now?" Philip asked.

I nodded. "I think I can." Jarvis did nothing.

Philip reached for his sword; I placed my foot on top of it.

He did something close to rolling his eyes. I chose not to take offense. "I just hope no more of those men come to this door. I'm worried. Jonathan didn't expect the king to call for Jarvis."

"Why didn't he? And what was Jonathan's plan?" I asked.

"There is a problem there. I don't know all of it."

"What?" I said.

"Oh, that's just--just--wonderful," Jarvis said, breaking his silence.

"We must get you all out of the castle--that is what he told me. I think he told more to James--but he must not have been able to get away."

"James?" I asked.

"My brother. Now--we need to get the others."

"But--" I said.

"Just hold on a minute," Jarvis interrupted. "You two come in here in the dead of night, knock my sister over, threaten me, and expect us to follow you like dogs to who-knows-where?"

"I'm afraid so," Philip began, "but your highness, I swear--"

Bang! The door crashed open, hitting the overturned table before it went more than two feet. The candle tumbled to the ground.

"For the love of Lavora!" Jarvis yelled.

"Well, Philip Leara! Imagine meeting **you** here!" A huge bulk of a man stood in the door, a savage grin distorted over his face, a long scar on his left cheek.

Philip shoved me to the ground, grabbed his sword, and swung around to face the other man.

A clash of steel sounded and the other man stepped back a few paces, re-entering the corridor.

I screamed.

Jarvis pulled me to my feet, staring at the fight going on.

Both swords glittered in the torchlight outside of Jarvis's room. Philip just managed to duck out of the way of a slashing blade.

"Go!" He shouted.

"Where?" Jarvis asked.

"Go!"

Jarvis grabbed my arm and we ran to the door.

The other soldier swung round to stop us; Philip careened into him. Jarvis leapt back, pulling me with him. Both men fell to the ground.

Again, Jarvis pulled me along; he kept his head and got us out of there.

As we ran down the corridor the clash of swords came again; it grew fainter and fainter.

"In here," Jarvis grabbed my arm and pulled me through a dark doorway.

"Now what do we do? We should have stayed!" I said, gasping for air. "Wait until Uncle John hears of this!"

"Wait, Betsy. I believe him."

"What?"

"What are you two jabbering about?" A harsh voice broke through the silence and dark all around us.

We both started like rabbits and ran back out in the corridor. Light showed from around the corner and the sound of footfalls rebounded off the stone walls.

Jarvis clenched my arm, looking to the dark opening we ran from, the light ahead, and the grayness of the corridor behind.

"Back in!" He said; his voice a whisper but his tone frantic.

I couldn't seem to move, as is often true in nightmares. "Come on, Betsy!" He said, his voice rising in volume and earnestness. He pulled me to the doorway before I regained the use of my legs.

We both tumbled in; tripping over each other.

"Ouch!" A sharp cry came, and I cringed.

"I am Jarvis Flowain," Jarvis said, "and I demand that you shut your mouth."

I crawled to the right; feeling my way along on the smooth stones. They glowed with red light.

The noise of the soldiers' feet and the clanking of their armor resounded and echoed in the big stone corridor they marched in.

I cowered to the ground, scarce daring to breathe. The stones seemed to be made of ice.

At last the light faded; darkness again enveloped me. "They're going to get Philip," I said. "What do you want to do? Why do you even believe them?"

No answer.

Time stood still.

"Jarvis?" I whispered. "Jarvis!? Jarvis, where are you?" I crawled towards the place I thought I had last heard his voice. Fear pressed on my mouth; I could scarce make my voice audible. "Jarvis! Jarvis! Please, don't hide!"

A scuffling sound. Tripping over everything; my dress, the floor, my feet, I managed to regain the corridor.

I darted forward, heading for the distant light of a torch.

What has happened to all of the torches in this part of the corridor? The thought scared me.

Go to the soldiers. They aren't that far away.

Distrust of those soldiers built up inside me. Why where they heading for my brother's room anyway?

"The king wants you dead, Jarvis Flowain."

Clenching my teeth, I felt my way to the door of that dreadful room again. I placed my hand on the wall, ran around the circumference. I found it to be small; my hands felt nothing along the walls.

"Jarvis!" I called, crawling on the floor, feeling each way. No answer and no one there.

Maybe he's already gone to wake up the others.

Maybe...Or maybe, Philip spoke the truth...

I bolted from the room, and ran down the corridor, my mind made up.

Finally I stood, panting and gasping, in front of Roselatina's door.

Holding my breath, I turned the handle with care, but it still gave a metallic screech which soon accompanied the creak of the door itself as it turned on its hinges.

I grimaced at the sound but kept pushing the door. The next moment I slipped in and closed the door behind me. Roselatina's fire glowed low, bathing the room with a relaxing light. At least, it would have been relaxing if there hadn't been so many of the shadows I now feared.

I slipped past the servant's cot and crept to the left of Roselatina's bed, the side nearer the wall.

I crouched down, touched her arm, and whispered, "Rose,"

That woke her, as always. "What is it, Betsy?" she asked, sitting up, rubbing her eyes, and squinting at me.

"Shh!" I breathed.

The door creaked.

I crouched to the ground, but did not have the time to get under the bed.

Light streamed into the room, and I held my breath, wondering who it could be.

Rose, be silent, I pleaded.

Heavy footfalls came closer and closer to the bed. I gritted my teeth in the effort not to scream.

They stopped a moment and then the person got down, I assumed, on his knees. Light shown through the thick cloth that hung from Rose's bed.

The light vanished from under the bed and appeared again in the room. The person walked all over the room, armor clanking, and then the door closed with a decided thud.

I waited only seconds before I popped up to meet Rose's pale face.

"What was he looking for?" Rose asked, her voice trembling.

"Me--or Jarvis."

"What have you two done?"

"My royal highness," someone said, grabbing my left arm, "I wonder the same--and what are you doing up so late?"

He pulled me back, out of the small space between the bed and the wall. Rose gave a startled gasp.

"None of your business," I muttered as I kneed him the stomach.

He dropped me with a grunt of pain.

"Betsy!" Rose called, "Who's there?"

"I don't know," I said as I ran to the other side of her bed. "Get up!"

I tripped on something and fell down.

"Got you!" The man grabbed my hair as I stood again.

"Ow!"

I kicked backwards but hit the servant's cot instead of my intended target. It fell with a crash and the servant screamed.

The soldier cursed and tumbled after her.

"What is going on?" Rose said; her voice high.

Another curse from the soldier and the servant screamed again. The sound of a slap followed.

I rushed to Rose's bed, although hope of escape all but died within me.

"Rose, get up," I said, frantic.

The servant ceased her screaming and I assumed the soldier had dealt with her in a fashion similar to Jarvis's.

Rose grabbed my hand.

"Where did you go, you royal brat?" The soldier said.

Still holding Rose's hand, I leaped into her bed, pulling her along with me. We crawled to the other side, swung out of bed, and ran.

A sharp crack resounded as the soldier crashed into the canopy of the bed, shattering hours of workmanship.

We continued to run, heading for the door, overturning and crashing into everything in our way.

Rose reached the door first; she yanked it open.

Glowing torchlight struck our faces and caused me to blink.

Half a dozen armed soldiers stood outside.

"Oh!" Rose gasped, and we turned, thinking of running back.

"Not so fast," our pursuer said, as he blocked the way.

I turned back to the other men. "Well, what do you want?" I asked.

"Your highness, the game is over. It is time for you to be in bed."

"I do not need to be in bed if I do not wish. I am the daughter of King Mark, and my brother is heir to the throne--"

"The good King Mark is no longer king," the soldier answered in a mocking voice.

"Even so--" I said, but I didn't know what to say now. The nerve that I had found for a brief moment vanished as I stared into the face of the soldier holding the light.

"Back to your room, your highness, and after you get there you can tell us where the rest of your troublesome little family has gone."

"That I do not know," I said, no doubt as confused as they.

"We'll see," the man said, smiling down on me. "We shall see."

CHAPTER 2

A knock sounded on the door. "Your highness?"

"Come in."

Silly formalities. I was in trouble and I knew it.

Jonathan entered; closing the door behind him.

"Jonathan!" I exclaimed, "How--"

Jonathan frowned and placed a finger on his lips.

"Now," he said in a loud voice, "Your highness, why where you dragging your siblings through the castle and scaring servants out of their minds?" Then, in a quick, low, voice he asked, "Where is Jarvis?"

"I don't know," I whispered.

"Well that is a sad excuse," Jonathan said, back to loud. "Where is your royal brother?"

"I don't know," I said, sounding as innocent and naïve as I could, "It was his idea."

"Oh, was it?" Jonathan continued. Marylyn? Thomas?
He mouthed afterwards.

I shook my head. I don't know.

"Then where is he now?" Meet Philip?

"I tell you, I don't know." Yes.

Jonathan strode back to door and opened it.

"She denies knowing anything," he said before he shut the door.

If that is all than they sure are dumb, I thought.
Either that or they just believe everything Jonathan says.
How did he get out of King John's throne room?

The door opened again; Jonathan entered once more.

The heavy receding tread of someone moving away could be heard outside my room.

Jonathan went to the far end of the room, near the window, and beckoned to me. I rose and walked over.

"I convinced him to leave," Jonathan said in a low voice. "But one never knows when they will start to play the wiser."

"How did you get out?" I asked.

"Never mind that now--I have, well, influence. What went on between Philip and you two?"

I told him of our conflict with Philip and the ensuing conversation.

When I finished Jonathan frowned. "That's strange." He said at length. "The troop of soldiers that went to Jarvis's room said nothing of two men fighting and they hadn't sent a man ahead of them; but there was one near the room, unconscious. I wonder--" Jonathan paused and looked at me, uncertainty in his face.

The door opened and both of us started, and looked to see who dared to interrupt us.

"Have you finished, Sir Jonathan?"

"Nearly. I thought I told you to stay away so that she may tell the truth."

"The King grows impatient."

"As you do. I am almost done. You can wait until then."

The man scowled and closed the door.

"What else is there?" I asked.

"Nothing I can think of at the moment. Except one thing--you said that Philip had the castle guard symbol, not otherwise?"

"Yes, he did. And he told us his name was Philip Zarnor--but...the other soldier called him Philip Leara."

"All right. I think you will need to stay here, your highness."

"I think so too," I said with a small smile.

Jonathan did not smile back. He looked very deep in thought as he walked back towards the door.

"Well, my Lord Impatience. I have finished," he said in a carefree voice.

"And the result?"

"Meager, but it is for his majesty the king to hear the verdict."

I went to my bed.

* * *

When I awoke again sunlight streamed through my high window.

I stood up at once, and advanced on the door. I crouched down and put my face to the cold stone, in an attempt to see out. Straight in front of my gaze an iron-shod foot moved, and a great sigh came.

I scurried backwards, and sat down in my most comfortable chair.

I yawned. Today would be interesting, to be certain.

I got up and headed for the fire, seeking the warmth of its flame.

What happens now? I wondered, reaching out my hands. Jonathan has interrogated me, but they didn't learn much. Maybe they won't think it is enough. What if someone besides Jonathan tries?

The thought made me restless. What would I do then? I don't know where Jarvis is, so I can't betray him that way.

But I know what we were planning to do.

Sort of.

I stood back up but my mind would not rest.

"Where is your noble brother?" I asked in my head.

"I don't know--"

The door opened and a girl entered, holding a wooden tray covered with intricate carvings and laden with food.

"Here is your breakfast, your highness," she said, her voice soft.

"I see--uh..." I said.

"Lilly. My name's Lilly," she said, growing a little red.

After I finished my quiet meal she helped me get dressed and then said, "Here is your needlework, my lady. I was told that you aren't to leave your room today, except maybe for dinner."

"I understand. You may go; I do not need your help anymore."

After she left I rose and crept to the door. I could hear nothing.

I went back to the fire; doubt and fear again taking my thoughts. At last, a determination spread over me.

I've got to get out of here.

Jarvis is somewhere. Maybe...maybe...they might **have** him. But it can't be too bad if they do. What do they have against him?

They tried to poison him. What would stop them from doing something else, just as drastic?

With a sudden realization, I remembered that no lock had clicked after Lilly left. Perhaps they forgot about the lock. Perhaps they thought me too castle-bred to attempt to get out. Soldiers surrounded my door. But could there be a way to get past them?

Part of me whimpered; and then what?

Then...then...

I rose to my feet, surveyed my room. Some devices for coaxing the fire into flame lay against the stone wall of the fireplace, I had needles and scissors in my basket of ladylike supplies. Not much.

I picked up a two-pronged iron rod. It being much heavier than I anticipated, I wondered if I can manage to swing it at the head of one of those soldiers. Something twisted in my insides at the thought of doing such a thing, even if I could manage. I sank to the floor, gathering my breath. I must try it. Jarvis's life could depend on it.

What would you do afterward, oh wise one?

"Your highness! What are you doing on the floor?"

I jumped at the voice and looked up. Philip stood before me; he wore a different uniform, and looked more imposing than I remembered.

"Philip?" I questioned as I stood.

"No," he said.

I cocked my head and studied him. "You--?"

"That hardly matters right now. The king wishes to see you."

"Does he indeed? I do not wish to see the king," I said.

The man continued; "The king wishes to see you, and the king will see you, whether you want to or not."

"Oh, I see," I said, though I still studied his face.

"Come with me," He said, and he held out his arm.

We walked out into the hall, but the soldiers guarding my door did not challenge us or act as if the man leading me oughtn't to be there.

"Philip--" I began.

"Shush..." Philip whispered. "I am not Philip."

Puzzled, I still followed him, but then we took a wrong turn.

"Uh--we're not heading towards the king's chambers."

"Yes, I know," he whispered, and then he sped up.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"To your brother. Hurry."

I followed, half trusting, half fearing him, but unable to change my position. He held tight to my arm.

We turned down another corridor and at the end of this one Philip (after looking both ways) lifted a large tapestry, revealing a door behind.

"Well!" I exclaimed but I got no further, as he frowned at me.

The place we entered didn't look that much like a secret corridor; it seemed, rather, to be an abandoned servant's quarters--or perhaps a noble's room. When Philip opened a large cabinet it showed many clothes; long out of style.

He got in among the clothes, shoving them out of his way. Some looked like servants' others like nobles' and all abandoned for obvious reasons; stains, tears, and poor fabrics filled the most of that small space.

"Your highness?"

Feeling quite silly, I took the man's hand and stepped in among the clothes.

He reached over and past me to close the door.

"What are we doing?" I asked, my voice muffled by an ill-smelling garment that hung in my face.

A creaking, squealing sound interrupted my words and some light entered the dark space.

"Come towards my voice, your highness."

I shoved several dresses out of my way and the next moment found myself stepping from the clothes into some open space--or rather, falling, as the floor of the corridor lay lower than I thought.

The light came from a candle that sat on a small table.

"Now; can you tell me why you won't use your real name?" I asked.

"Even if it was my name, I would not use it just anytime, but I tell you it is not." He paused. "Philip is my brother, and he would have done best not to tell his name."

"Then what is *your* name?" I asked.

"I suppose you may know, though I don't know if--well, never mind. My name is James Zarnor."

"Thank you," I said; feeling quite pleased with myself.

"May we go on now?"

"When will we meet Jarvis?" I asked.

"Presently," a voice said, and Jarvis stepped out into the light of the candle, grinning. We both jumped at his voice, and it became apparent to me that Jarvis had disobeyed some instructions.

"Your royal highness," James said, in an exasperated voice. "You must learn to obey when Jonathan tells you to do something--or not to do something."

"But James, I made sure it was you--and my sister, of course."

"What if I had betrayed you? What if I had brought her to get you to come out, while a whole troop of soldiers wait behind that door?"

Jarvis looked startled and stepped a few paces back.

"No, I haven't," James said a moment later. He sighed. "I just want you to get the point. You wait there and don't let anyone in that Jonathan hasn't told you to expect, and who doesn't know the password. Understand?"

Jarvis nodded, and it surprised me to see the sincerity on his face. I expected a mocking glint in his grey eyes.

"Since fortune has decided not to punish you for your rashness, here is your sister. Now I must go, to keep up--well, appearances. Go back to Jonathan."

Jarvis nodded again, this time less sincere.

James opened the door again, and went through it.

Jarvis and I just looked at each other for a moment.

"Well. I suppose you have now met the cautious and nit-picking James Zarnor?" Jarvis said.

"Jarvis," I said.

"No, no, don't take it that way. I like him. It's just--well, it is just plain boring being disappeared like this, and I want to leave every once in a while and explore the corridors, the hidden corridors, mind you, and he is dead set against me doing so."

"He is also right, if you have read any history at all."

"Of course I have, but how could have say--oh, I don't know, dozens of the kings, surely, have upset usurpers and defeated betrayers if they had hid in a room with their younger siblings?"

"Siblings??"

"Oh, he didn't tell you? We were able to get Mary and Thomas down here too."

I breathed a sigh of relief, but couldn't resist adding, "But most of those rulers were not twelve years of age."

"How about the ones who were thirteen years of age? I'll be thirteen before you're ready for it, dear sister."

"Oh, let's just drop it. Where are we to go?"

"Straight there, as Sir James said."

He picked the candle up, and we both walked forward.

We walked on a strip of rug, very worn and faded, so faded I couldn't tell what design it held.

I wondered why even a worn strip of rug graced the floor of a hidden corridor until we walked across some bare stone. In the silence, with no sound of servants and no guards, our footfalls clunked and echoed. I grimaced and tried to step lighter.

The light illuminated very little of the corridor around us, but it caught on spider webs and the walls; ragged strips of some kind of wall covering hung and appeared to sway in a nonexistent wind.

We continued our journey, turning left and right or going straight, skipping corridors that opened on either side of us.

Some of the archways soared above our heads, others we had to duck to get through.

Jarvis stopped, two corridors branched off in front of us, and he looked at them with intensity.

He muttered something, and then chose the right-handed corridor with an unsure air.

"Uh--Jarvis?" I asked. "Are you sure of your direction?"

"Oh! Just let me think."

A door came into view on our right.

"Let's check this one out." Jarvis said.

"Check it out? You don't know where it leads?"

"No."

"Jarvis, don't. Maybe we could go back and--"

"I need to get my bearings. If I can see what is behind that door, than I will be able to take us where James wanted us to go."

If I only paid attention! I thought. Jarvis's complete lack of a sense of direction baffled me. I should have known better than to just lean on Jarvis's directions.

"Jarvis, no," I said. "Think of what James said. Anything could be behind that door."

"Well, do you know the way to the place you haven't been to?"

"Well, no--"

Jarvis placed his candle on the floor, went up to the door, and opened it.

The door squealed in protest, as did all of the doors of the castle.

A scream followed. Jarvis jumped back, pulling a servant girl of about his own age out through the door. I rushed forward and closed it with a bang.

"Oh, do be quiet!" Jarvis pleaded, as he clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Lilly!" I gasped.

"You know her?"

"Yes, she waits on me in the mornings."

"Great, great. I'm sure Jonathan will be very pleased to have a captive."

"Well, do you know where we are now?" I said.

"No. I didn't have a chance to look."

"Then, make her tell us," I said.

Jarvis nodded, I helped them both to their feet, and we began walking. Jarvis kept his hand over her mouth.

She remained very compliant and walked without trying to escape.

"Just keep this up and you shall remain in my good favor," Jarvis said.

"Now, I think we are far enough. Listen, Lilly, if you get too loud we may have to do--something," I said.

"Knock her on the head, of course," Jarvis said, without any graciousness.

"Do you understand?" I asked.

She nodded.

Jarvis lifted his hand, and she looked to me.

"Do you understand that you are not going to be able to go back to your duties for awhile?" I said.

"I'll get it hot if I don't," Lilly pleaded.

"I'm sorry about that, but we simply can not have you blabbing about this," Jarvis said.

"Jarvis, need you be so rude?" I asked.

"I can be as rude as I want. I'm next in line for the throne of Triendo."

I rolled my eyes.

"Are you rather conceited?" Lilly asked. Jarvis's face got angry.

"Lilly, you mustn't speak like that," I interjected, fearful of what Jarvis may do next.

"I'm sorry," She said. "It just popped out of me."

"I could pop you too," Jarvis grumbled.

"Jarvis," I protested, stifling my urge to laugh, "Lilly, where were you in the castle?"

"King Frederic's old room," she answered.

My eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"Why there?" Jarvis asked, in a choked sort of voice.

"I was told to go there, and clean out the closet."

"Oh dear," I said, blinking hard. "You don't suppose--?"

"We have to get back to that room!" Jarvis said, and he began down the corridor at a quick pace.

I ran to catch up with him, holding to Lilly's arm.

"Did they say why?" I asked her.

"No, I was just told to take the clothes out."

"That is not good," I said, and we all began running.

"Here it is!" Jarvis said, sooner than I had anticipated.

A door stood before us.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

He knocked a complicated pattern on the wood, and the door opened.

"Jarvis, there you are! Good heavens you had--" Jonathan started and then, "Who is she?" He asked in a sharp voice.

"No time for that now," Jarvis said. "Jonathan, this girl was sent to clean out Frederic's closet. It opens onto one of the corridors."

"I know that, but--what were you two doing over there?"

"Jarvis got lost," I said, when Jarvis did not answer.

"Philip?" Jonathan said, and he walked away from the door.

We followed him into a small room with three mattresses stacked up in a corner. A door of wood and iron stood at the opposite end. The space held Marylyn, Thomas, and Philip.

"Betsy!" Mary and Thomas said, running towards me.

Philip came towards us, "What is it, Jonathan?"

"They may be on to us. Come on."

Both men soon left us, though what they hoped to do I couldn't even guess.

As we stood looking at each other the doorknob clanked and the door swung open.

Jarvis gasped; I prepared myself for anything.

This man's hair showed black beneath his helmet, his brown eyes stared at us; he wore more armor than Philip, James, and Jonathan put together.

"Who are you?" Jarvis demanded.

"Who am I?" The man repeated in a gruff voice, trying to hide his surprise, I did not doubt. "Who are you?"

Jarvis stiffened.

"I do believe it would be better that we hear your answer first, good soldier." It surprised me as much as anyone when these words came out of my mouth.

The man scowled at me, but I walked up beside Jarvis and stared back; not scowling perhaps, but meeting his gaze.

"I don't go giving my name to just anyone," he said.

"And neither do we," I said, in a calm voice.

Marylyn and Thomas got up and went to the other door, and Jarvis grasped my arm, pulling me as he backed up. Lilly grasped my hand and we all backed up together.

"Where are you going, my royal friends?" The soldier asked, in an unkind voice.

Thomas and Marylyn opened the door, and Jarvis shouted, "Run!"

This, although it may seem that I ought to have expected it, surprised me, and it seemed to take a great while before I got myself turned 180 degrees, running the opposite direction.

The door slammed behind me, leaving everything in total darkness. Jarvis fumbled with the lock.

I jumped up, leaned against the door, and gritted my teeth. Come on, Jarvis...

"There!" Jarvis shouted.

"You run fast for little shrimps!" The man's voice came to us, a growl of anger.

Shrimps indeed, I thought, he must have been six feet tall.

"Now what?" Lilly asked.

Blows shook the door, but it sounded as if there were little chance of it giving in any time soon.

"All right," Jarvis said, with a sigh. "We need to go."

"We don't have a candle," Marylyn said, sorrowful.

"Yes. They should have stocked us with one. But we must go anyway. Everyone grab hands--"

"Jarvis, where are we going?" I asked.

"Somewhere else, of course. You don't want to be around when *he* breaks through, now do you?"

"Well, no, but couldn't I have a bit more of the plan?"

"Betsy, this is the plan. We're going down a tunnel to get our horses and get out of here because someone has discovered us, and Jonathan and Philip aren't here to advise us," Jarvis said, all in a rush.

"Jarvis, I'm not just going to leave the castle because one man has gotten through. What if he is a friend? He got through the door all right."

"The door was unlocked, like it shouldn't have been," Jarvis said, "I was a fool to forget it. Jonathan said that we must go."

"Go when?"

"Betsy!" Jarvis said, exasperated, "Go if someone gets in that doesn't know the knock and who seems very surprised at finding you. We don't want to need to go. I'd rather stay in there, as a matter of fact. But now we've got to. Now, Betsy, please--oh no!"

The sounds on the door stopped. Everyone fell silent. The sound of footfalls echoed through the other room, and the door shut.

"Oh dear, come on Betsy!" Jarvis's hand landed on my arm. "It may be too late already."

Fear awoke in me at those words. For a moment I couldn't move, and then Lilly grabbed my other arm and we all stood.

"Now, let's go," Jarvis said, sounding more confident than I felt. We walked forward, a long human chain.

At length the sounds of Jarvis fumbling with a doorknob came. The door opened, protesting, and I moved forward, bumping him.

"No, no," Jarvis said. "We need to get down, and crawl forward."

I lowered myself to the cold floor with caution and moved forward.

I wondered of a sudden why Lilly chose to follow us, instead of getting back to the people of the castle. Seeing no harm in her coming along, I said nothing. Jarvis let go of my arm, ordered Thomas and Marylyn to come up to him, and we moved forward again.

Jarvis's voice came back to me, sounding contained in a small space; "Are you still there, Betsy?"

"Yes."

At length I felt the stone of the roof of our corridor, if it could be called such, at my back. The floor sloped downwards at a steady rate.

"Everyone still there?" Jarvis asked.

"Yes," we all said.

"Who's that?" Jarvis asked in a sharp voice.

"Why, don't you know?" I asked, though there was no good reason why he should have, "Lilly is here too."

"Great," Jarvis said, in a voice suggesting that he didn't think it great at all. "We may need to crawl back out with her, and leave her in the other room, tied up or something."

This surprised me. "But Jarvis, why can't she come?"

"Because the provisions aren't enough for her to come."

"I think we'll have to just bring her with us. It'll be only trouble if we leave her behind, because she'll know where we've gone. Besides that, we'll waste ten or twenty minutes taking her back, and all that. And think of all she knows!"

"I would like to come, your highness," Lilly said.

"Why?"

"Jarvis, let her come."

"Fine, fine," Jarvis grumbled, sounding preoccupied, "she can come!"

"Thank you, your kind majesty Jarvis," Lilly said, making me smile.

"Oh, don't get started," Jarvis grumbled at her.

"Ow!--Well, here it is."

"Here's what?" I asked.

"Our way out." He opened a door; at least that is what it sounded like, though it must have been a small door. I could feel the walls on either side now, and the uncomfortable idea that I couldn't turn around began to creep through my thoughts.

When I moved forward again, rough wood brushed against my sleeve.

"Is everyone through?" Jarvis asked, after a few more minutes.

"Yes."

"I mean really and truly through. If a stone collapsed right onto that door, would you be safe?"

"Yes, your highness," Lilly said.

I felt like laughing at his choice of catastrophe.

"All right, well here it goes."

Wham!

The sound resounded through our close stone corridor, echoing and re-echoing.

"What was that?" I asked, with a gasp.

"The stone that landed on our door, that's what."

Jarvis said, and I could hear his smirk. "Now, shall we continue?"

The floor continued to slope downwards, steeper and steeper.

"I do say!" Jarvis said, "This must be it."

There came another sound, like the opening of a door, and then light flooded the tunnel. This came as quite a shock, and my eyes closed of their own accord.

Forcing them back open, I peered past Marylyn and Thomas, and saw Jarvis leaning over a hole in the floor. At least that is how I first perceived it. The next instant I saw it for what it was; a trapdoor.

Jarvis maneuvered for quite awhile in the small space of the corridor, but at length slipped through, feet first. Marylyn and Thomas followed in much less time, and so it turned to me.

I crawled up to it, and looked down. About seven feet down Jarvis stood looking up. He moved aside, I got my feet in front of me, dropped through, and landed so that I collapsed, but did not hurt myself.

Lilly followed and grabbed the door, pulling it shut behind her. Jarvis scowled as she dropped to the ground.

We all stood in a stone space the size of a horse's stall; some hay littered the floor. The whole space was illuminated by a single lantern that sat on the floor, looking quite out of place.

"Where are we?"

"I don't quite know," Jarvis said, and he went to the wooden door; also very much like that of a horse's stall.

Jarvis opened the door, and then shouted; "What?"

He jumped forward, disappearing from our sight.

A thud followed.

It took only a moment, and silence again reigned.

Jarvis appeared before us again, his face pale.

"All right, now we really need to go," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Someone was down here."

"Was?"

"Well, he still is, and he is resting comfortably, no doubt, but why he is down here, and what he was doing, I don't know."

"You didn't expect anyone down here?" I asked.

"Why should I?"

"Well, what about the lantern..." I said.

"I assumed James was down here. Foolish, but that is what I guessed. The way they spoke of this place I thought it was quite safe and hidden. Apparently it isn't; which is all the more reason we need to go."

"What about Rose?"

Jarvis ducked his head. "I believe," he said in a soft voice, "We will have to leave Rose here."

A horse's neigh broke the silence following his words.

"I don't want to leave Rose with the king!" I protested. "What might he do if we all disappear?"

"We are disappeared."

"If you don't mind, your highnesses both," Lilly interrupted. "Your majesty," she continued, to me, "I don't think there is very much chance of being able to warn the others, without getting caught ourselves."

"Ourselves," Jarvis muttered.

"Jarvis, do you know the plan Jonathan had for getting Rose out of the kings' grasp?"

"No. All I knew was that you were going to be brought today, because it seemed dangerous for you to be at place that the king could get you. I do not doubt that he will think the same of Rose, but not as much. Did you tell her about--well--the king's plan?"

"I told Rose that we all needed to leave. Jarvis," I said, "where did you go to that night, where I had to go wake up Rose?"

"Here, Betsy. James took me out of that small room. He was the 'servant.' And he planned to return for you, but you were gone. We need to leave now; Jonathan told me this whole plan."

"Why do you trust Jonathan on everything?" I asked, the thought occurring to me in a moment that he may not be trustworthy.

"Because of something he told me," Jarvis said, and he avoided my gaze. "He didn't want you to know--yet. But it is valid, Betsy. Can you trust me on this one? We need to get out of here."

He brought his eyes up at last, and the expression in his gaze startled me. What had happened to my brother? What had Jonathan done to him?

"Do you think Jonathan may help the others get out?" I asked.

"If it is in his power, he will, even if he risks his own life. He told me as much."

There were many stalls in the narrow corridor that the lantern presented to us, and to my great surprise, they housed our horses.

Twenty minutes later we were mounted and ready to go. Even Lilly sat on a horse; though it had surprised me when she said she could ride.

"Jarvis," I said, an awful thought striking me, "It can be scarcely noon. How are we to get out?"

It seemed to have occurred to no one else. We all just looked at each other for a moment.

"Oh dear," Lilly said.

"Jonathan said to leave as soon as possible. You don't suppose he meant leaving in the middle of the day?" Jarvis mused.

"Surely we can't just leave. They'll spot us--or just you, Jarvis--and that will be the end of that," I said.

"What I would give for--"

Boom!

"Thunder!" Lilly exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Jarvis gave a loud sigh, and shifted his gaze heavenward. "Thank God."

We moved through the dark corridor littered with straw coming nearer to the outside of the castle. The sound of rain began to be heard.

Our horses now stood in front of the door that Jarvis claimed led out onto the moat. He blew out his candle, and darkness settled around us. It surprised me that Mary remained silent.

I drew a rough cloak about me--courtesy of Jonathan's packing--and readied myself for a long, cold, ride in the rain.

When Jarvis opened the door it crashed into the wall of its own accord. The rain lashed in and the cold air whipped about my face.

Jarvis mounted again, and urged his horse out the door. True to what he said, the door led right into the moat, and the horses were not eager to step off the ledge. It felt awful, to just ride into the frigid water of the moat, in full view of anyone on the walls.

The door stood far from the drawbridge, out of sight of the heaviest guard, and the storm provided wonderful cover. It seemed almost to be night.

My horse, Shadow, shivered as she entered the water. Marylyn began crying behind me. Her horse gave a short snort that sounded loud even in the sound of the storm.

I could hear Lilly trying to comfort her, and I wished now that I had taken Marylyn in front of me instead of following directly after Jarvis. A splash sounded, and I bit my lip, stopping a scream. Lightening flashed across the sky.

Shadow struggled in the rough water, but we surged forward, followed by the others. It took far less time than I anticipated for us to get across the moat. I breathed a deep breath of relief.

We had all agreed to follow Jarvis, because he knew where Jonathan wanted us to go, even though none of us wanted to go there.

CHAPTER 3

Jarvis twisted in his saddle. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" I asked, shaking myself and looking at him. I shivered.

The rain had ebbed but moisture still sparkled everywhere. The forest loomed about a mile before us.

He reigned in his horse. The other horses snorted behind as they were also stopped.

"What did you--" I began.

"Hssht," Jarvis breathed.

We stood a moment, unmoving. The water dripped off the trees, and then a burst of sunlight shot through the clouds. A steady drizzle still fell, but now the road glistened with the sunlight.

"What did you hear?" I whispered.

"I don't know, but I thought--" he shrugged. "It was nothing, I guess. We can continue."

After this I found myself looking over my shoulder at the slightest noise. The light continued to increase, and the rain to subside.

"Are we heading there, Jarvis?" I ventured, pointing to the forest.

"Yes--"

A horse snorted behind us, interrupting Jarvis. I wheeled in the saddle. As if he decided that hiding was no longer an option, a man on horseback rode into view, out from behind a deserted cottage.

"Where are you going, young travelers?" He asked, and for a fleeting moment I thought he asked out of friendliness, and meant no harm to us. Then I saw the glint of steel, and the sword that hung at his side. I now heard the mockery in his voice.

"I asked a question. Are you all dumb?"

"Go, Jarvis!" I said, and I set my heels into Shadow's side.

Jarvis's horse leapt into the lead, soon carrying him far ahead. The man kicked his own steed and started after us, must spraying out from him.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that Mary's pony had fallen far behind.

I slowed Shadow, my heart beating hard in my chest, looking to Mary. Mary screamed as the man on his horse pulled in close behind.

I yanked Shadow's head around; she snorted at me.

I kicked her again and she ran back, back towards Marylyn. Thomas and Lilly raced by; mud splattered in my face.

The man rode almost at Marylyn's side, he leaned out of his saddle, and I realized he planned to snatch her out of the saddle.

"Stop!" I shouted, and he looked up in surprise.

I could see his face in scary detail. He smiled in a self-satisfied way and nodded with courtesy. But he did not stop. The next moment he grabbed Marylyn around her waist, and amid her screams pulled her up, across his saddle.

Then he stopped, and I reined Shadow in.

What do I do?!

"You put her down!"

Her horse reared and took off.

"His majesty, King John, wishes to see her. And you too, as a matter of a fact."

"I don't have to do anything he says," I argued. Keep running, Jarvis. Go! If the king planned to be this blatant in his search, then I didn't know what he would do if Jarvis were in his power.

"Good day to you then, your highness."

"BetsEE!" Marylyn screamed.

"I'm coming, Mary," I said, and I dismounted, though what I planned to do I didn't know. A hand clapped over my mouth, and someone drew me into gripping arms.

"Good for you, William," The man holding Marylyn said.

Of course there are more than one of them. Elizabeth, you're a fool!

Another man appeared, and he mounted my horse.

"This will have to do, for now. They can't live for long in the forest."

My spirits sank, I struggled to breathe in the iron clutch of the man who held me.

They forced me to mount an old, slow horse with a bad back and muddy coloring.

As the horses started off, I tried to think of a plan, and fight off the panic that rose with each step the mare took.

Lilly, Jarvis, and Thomas reached the forest, hopefully.

No, no, that won't do. Surely they reached the forest.

Does the king mean ill to me? He can't be that brave yet. He may be that brave. He could have me killed for treason or--No. The substitute relative kings don't have that power. The people will revolt. Won't they?

Don't think like that. Can you get away now?

I looked around as best I could without raising suspicion.

Half a dozen men escorted us, but what did that mean?

Did they follow us from the castle, or were they tipped off by that other man?

New thoughts came into my mind; there was no reason to puzzle out these mysteries. Could I break away from them, run away?

On this old nag? That's why they put me on it, for sure. They'd catch me in a minute, unless...

I thought and thought, hoping that a way of escape would come to my mind. I could think of none besides just turning the horse and bolting, and I knew already that that wouldn't work.

The castle loomed up in the distance. If we went in there, what chance did we have of getting out again?

Run for it!

There is no place to go!

The horses quickened their speed.

Even as I thought again of escape, the soldiers closed in closer around me, making escape even more impossible.

Give it up, my good sense urged me.

Maybe I could go up ahead of the soldiers, then turn and run to the right...

I began to urge my horse forward, but she did not see the sense in going faster than the others.

Come on, I thought, in desperate panic as the walls of the castle rose ever closer.

Then I saw Marylyn, quiet and calm now. She thought herself safe, because I came along on this venture. She turned and smiled to me.

I can't leave Mary. What will the king do to her--and Rose? And I can't get away anyway.

I set my jaw, and determined to stay.

As we went over the drawbridge there came a slight chance for escape. My guards fell to the side, and they didn't look to me. The nag I rode fell behind. I was last of the company. I looked over my shoulder at the rolling hills.

I'm staying with Marylyn and Rose. I'm staying.
Staying.

I pressured the mare with my heels and rode under the castle gate.

People around stared at us with questioning faces.

The soldiers helped me to dismount, as soon as the drawbridge was up, and a servant came running up, her face scared and uncertain.

"I--I'm supposed to take you to your room, your highness."

"All right," I said, wondering what frightened her.

When we reached my room, she obliged me to change my clothes, which I didn't grudge doing at all. They were splashed with mud and wet all the way through. The girl took one look at the dress and decided it could not be saved.

"What now?" I asked her, as she helped me into a new, clean, dress.

She started at the question. "I don't rightly know, miss. Oh, I mean--" she stopped, horrified and reddening. "Your highness, please except my apologies, I didn't mean--"

"That is fine," I said, puzzled.

"Thank you, your highness. I'm new here, you see and--well..."

"Do you have an answer though? I asked you a question," I said, bringing her back on track.

"I don't know, there's been an uproar over the disappearance of your royal brother, and then you, and all sorts of strange things have happened."

Knock, knock!

We both jumped at the harsh sound on the door; the girl ran to the door and opened it. Rather too fast, and too wide, but I couldn't blame her for that.

"Her highness, Princess Elizabeth Flowain, is wanted by the King of Triendo, John." The whole speech held a ring in it that I didn't hear among the normal servants. It quite frightened me.

"I will come, as soon as I may," I said, hoping to hide my fear. "My servant needs to do my hair and other minor things first."

The man nodded. "I will wait for you," he said, and then the servant closed my door.

"Oh, we must hurry, your highness, because the king is waiting for you."

"He can wait as long as he likes," I said as I attempted to gather my scattered thoughts.

What do I say to him?

"Your highness!" The girl gasped, but she said no more. She led me over to a chair and began to work on my hair at a fast rate.

"Don't go so fast! It won't look good at all if you do it so," I complained, as I searched for a way out of this mess.

What do I say? Is it better to be blunt or...

"Your highness," the girl said, as she finished piling my hair, "you need to get up, because the king..."

"I know, I know. The king waits for me. He can wait a little longer without too much harm to him."

I can say Jarvis forced me to. No, that is the same excuse I gave before. They will want to know where Jarvis

is. I can tell them that I don't know. But then they will ask where he **has** been. How can I avoid a question like that?

I stood at my door, though I did not remember walking there, and the man, polite but firm, asked, "Are you ready, your highness?"

I nodded, unable to speak. I entered the corridor. He led me at a brisk pace.

Jonathan, where are you? I thought in despair.

We neared the doors to the throne room. So soon? We could not have walked all that way already. But there it stood, with soldiers protecting it. They made way for the two of us, and the man flung open the door. We entered, the doors swung shut, and I stood in the King's throne room; no one to help me, not a plan in my mind.

Many soldiers stood at the sides of the large space, and half of them stood covered in shadows. Someone, please...

We walked up closer to the king, but I lowered my head. I couldn't bear to look at him.

I stared at the rich carpeted floor beneath my feet.

"Stand up," the man that walked with me urged.

I stood straighter, but let my eyes wander over in every direction except the one ahead. Now I looked at the shields adorning the walls, now at a soldier who seemed to have a slight pity for me, but my gaze shifted forward as a familiar voice said;

"Her highness, Princess Elizabeth, comes, your majesty."

Jonathan! I kept my mouth from dropping, but I still stared at him. I knew that he held close counsels with the king, but it still seemed strange for him to be up there with the King, when he worked against him.

"Princess Elizabeth," Jonathan said, his voice reluctant, as if he knew that he must ask a question but wished very hard that he did not. I looked up into his face, pleading, for what I did not know.

"Why does she not look at me, Sir Jonathan?" At that moment, the self-satisfied voice of my uncle made my skin crawl.

"I do not know; your majesty," Jonathan answered, but he soon turned to me again. "Your highness, where is your royal brother?"

"I--" all of my thoughts fell to pieces, and a desperate plan came to mind.

I wavered and then sank to the ground, closing my eyes as I did so.

A murmur followed, and in a moment someone lifted me off of the ground.

I kept my eyes closed, and I felt myself carried away, with the buzzing of everyone in the throne room discussed.

"She's fainted!" Someone said.

"The poor child!" A female servant said, "Here, let me take her."

"No, I've got her," Jonathan's voice came to me.

Jonathan carried me all the way out the of the throne room and quite far down the corridor. When I heard no people, I opened my eyes, and almost at the same time he set me down.

He grabbed my hand, and we both took off running, though I knew not where we went.

He took turns that confused me, running through the unused parts of the castle, and then I realized that despite our odd way of getting there, we neared Frederic's room.

"Jonathan, is that safe?" I asked as we ran into the room itself.

"Yes, I know it is. Now, Elizabeth--" His way of addressing me sounded strange, and quite unnatural. "I need to go, right away. Go through that door over there, like James took you through the other one."

I nodded, showing that I understood, but became quite frightened that he did not intend to come with me.

"Don't go to the place where you all left from, but try to get deep in. I'm sorry I can't tell more, because I really must go. If you hear anyone else, run, and keep away from them. Oh, and Elizabeth--" he turned back from the door, "The king is not your uncle."

He then left the room, closing the door behind him.

The king is not my uncle! I thought; the room appeared to spin a moment.

Go through Frederic's door. I pushed past his clothes, still hanging there, and tears welled up inside me. I wouldn't let them get through. Frederic, why can't you be here?

"I'm going hunting, Bets, you watch the others, promise?"

"I promise. I'll take care of them."

"That's my little sister..."

Don't think!

I hit the back of the closet, and searched for what handle I could find. None presented itself.

The king is not your uncle...

"Bets doesn't mind--do you Bets?"

Yes, I do mind!

I found myself sobbing. Jarvis, Thomas, they were out there. What would happen to them? Would they ever come back?

"The king is shot..."

My brother is dead.

The back of the wardrobe swung open of a sudden and I tumbled onto the stone floor of the hidden corridor.

I got up. I ran. I needed to get away from the memories...

"Frederic, get off of your sister. It isn't princely to straddled a woman--or girl..."

"Yes, mother. Bets doesn't mind--do you Bets?"

Stop, Frederic! Why did you have to go hunting?

The king is shot.

I stumbled on a protruding stone and sank to the ground.

Frederic, I want you back...the king is trying to kill Jarvis and I don't know what to do...

"I love you Bets,"

"No!" I wanted to scream, but it came out in a whisper, "you don't love me or you wouldn't have died..."

* * *

Foolish.

I awoke, I know not how many hours later, and sat up. I rubbed my sore side, flexed my fingers, and straightened out my sleepy left arm.

Now what?

Here I sat, in the dark, alone. For all I knew, the king's men may already know about this place.

Jonathan thought they didn't. Could the reason that Lilly cleaned out the closet have been different than we thought?

The closet still held clothes.

Jarvis. Thomas. Where were they? What of Rose?

The sound of a door came to me, quite faint, opening and then closing. I got to my feet, though my body protested.

"If you hear anyone else, run, and keep away from them."

Jonathan, how am I to run? I'm going to see who it is, before I decide to run.

Don't do it.

I ignored the second voice, and crept along the dark hall. I didn't think there could be a chance that I would have the strength to run. I would see who stood in my dominion before I decided if I should run or not.

Footsteps.

I jumped; my pulse quickening.

I got up, and, my back still to the wall, felt my way forward. I always needed to feel my way in this place. The darkness pressed close about me.

"Elizabeth?"

A whispered word, not far from me, and I started.

Jonathan?

"Your highness, it is only me."

I started to speak, and then choked the words back down. I needed to make sure. Anyone could say, "It is only me," and still be an enemy. How could I make sure?

I backed up; hit the stone wall with a thump. I bit my lip.

"Elizabeth, I've told you this; the wine is poisoned."

He used my proper name again, and, except for Philip, he was the only person who knew of the things he spoke to us that first night.

"I'm--I'm here, Jonathan," I said, having difficulty talking into the silence.

The next moment, a light appeared. Jonathan held a candlestick in his right hand, and he lifted it in my direction. I walked to him.

"I didn't know what to do," I said.

"That is exactly what I would have wanted you to do, Elizabeth."

"Why--" I began, thinking of asking for the reason that he continued to use my name; no-one called me by it since my mother died.

"Yes?"

I decided not to ask, and instead said, "I mean, what is going on; out there?"

"A crazy search. You see, her highness fainted as the beginning of her interview, and a trusted court advisor carried her away, and soon came back, declaring that she rested comfortably. But, when she was looked for again, she had vanished! And not for the first time either, as you may well know. So the before mentioned court advisor was sent to the King of Revollin requesting assistance in brainpower and searching parties."

I couldn't tell if Jonathan told this as humor or just as facts in his usual solemn frame of mind. Whatever it was, I lost my chance to laugh at it long before I'd puzzled it out.

"Now, Elizabeth," he continued, "I need to be fair with you. I've told your brother some, but I think you, as the oldest, need to know all that you can take right now."

"Does this have something to do with the fact that you said the king is not my uncle?" I interrupted.

"Do you remember how your other uncle, Jonathan Siwel, and his family were all killed on their way here?"

"Yes, by outlaws."

"So it is said."

My insides felt strange. "You're--you're not..." I trailed off.

"No, I'm not your uncle," Jonathan said and then he began again, reluctant, "I'm--I'm your cousin."

"What?" The word came almost before the thought. "How can that be? My uncle and his wife and children were killed by outlaws. You can't be my cousin unless--" I could think of no way it made sense.

"Please, hear me out, Elizabeth. I didn't plan on telling you about this in quite the fashion it is taking. I

am your cousin, and I am almost sure that my family was not killed by outlaws but by--" he stopped a moment, seeming to struggle. "The man who sits on the throne,"

"How do you know that?" I asked, though I still couldn't quite believe the story that Jonathan told.

"I do not know anything. I have many reasons for believing that the king killed my family."

"But where in the world where you if you weren't killed and why didn't you come to the throne?" I asked.

"After the suspicious deaths of so many people I wasn't about to set myself in place to be murdered."

"Why suspicious?" I said, not taking the warning that Jonathan threw at me.

"Your highness, Elizabeth, think of your brother, the king."

"Bets..."

"Rest, your highness, you must rest."

I remembered all too well the paleness of my brother's face. So white. His hair looked unnatural against the white of his face. His freckles stood out: his eyes filled with pain.

"Let me go near!"

"Stay back, your highness, you will hurt him!"

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Of course, dear."

"Don't lie to the child!"

"He wants to talk to me!" I could see my brother struggling to speak.

I stamped on someone's foot, and tried to go forward again, but still they kept me back.

"Bets..." The word trailed off into a whisper, and Frederic's head fell against the pillows. White. He stared at me, but I knew he didn't see me.

"Elizabeth?"

I started, but couldn't answer, not yet. If I did it would burst, everything would come out. I stared at the floor.

"Your highness?" A hand on my shoulder. No one did that to me. Not since...

"Leave me alone!" I whirled away from Jonathan, all of the fear for my other siblings gone, all the thought for plan, for the overthrow of the man on the throne. I felt ten again, as if I had just seen my brother die. No, it

felt all the worse now. I knew what death meant. Once gone, Frederic would never come back.

Tears on my cheeks.

"Elizabeth, I'm trying to help--"

"Just go away, won't you? It isn't helping. I don't care about thrones or kings or even usurpers. Just leave me alone!"

"Elizabeth, do you want to prevent the death of even more people?"

"Of course I do," I snapped, but when I saw the look on Jonathan's face I stopped cold. "You don't mean--" I gasped. "He's not going to--to--"

"I don't know, your highness. But they are in his power and many laws of Triendo have been bent and broken, long before this."

"How would he dare?" I asked in a slow and angry voice.

"Look at this, your highness." Jonathan held towards me something that glinted in the light of the candle.

"It is my uncle's--the king's--necklace-thing. Or whatever it is. I've never really known," I said.

"Here is what it really is, Elizabeth." He took the round object that hung on golden length of chain, and

worked to pry it open, from a crack I only saw after he began the process. He looked rather like someone prying open clam shell.

At length, it sprung open, revealing a hollow little round chamber. "It is not a fair thing on the inside," Jonathan said.

He held it out to me and I looked. Engraved across the top inside part were these words;

I shall be King of Triendo.

Death to those that stand between me and my goal!

By my hand they shall fall!

I looked at Jonathan, my heart beating quicker from the terror of those words. His eyes held anger and sorrow.

Without words, he lifted a velvet bag or covering off the bottom part, and I peered in, dreading what I would now see.

Engraved in the space, a list met my eyes. The last two names sparkled with newness of recent carving.

Mark Flowain

Frederic Flowain

Jonathan Siwel

Mary Siwel

Charles Siwel

Judy Siwel

Henry Litonya

Gregor Nialliv

Thomas Jaray

Jarvis Flowain

I felt the tears come again, and then a surge of anger. "He didn't!" I shouted, and I threw the golden thing to the ground. "My father? He killed my father?" My voice sank to a whisper. "Oh, Jonathan, Frederic..." Tears again, running down my cheeks, and I needed something, anything, from the man who stood before me.

Jonathan reached his arms out, offering a hug. I melted against him.

He said, "Elizabeth, I'm not just a knight called Jonathan. I am your cousin, Charles Siwel, and I will help you in any way I can."

After a few moments, I drew back, wiped my eyes, and looked down at my bedraggled morning dress. The golden and red threads wove in and out of each other, forming useless

patterns. Still beautiful, but what did it matter? It could not speak to me, only to others. "Ah, this is the princess of Triendo." Things that really mattered couldn't be inherited or put on. The really important things sometimes couldn't even be touched, but they needed to be protected. I looked up at my cousin, my forehead wrinkling. "I'm ready."

"For what?" He asked in a soft voice.

"For--fight."

"Charles, I'm just supposed to *stay* there?"

"You need to be seen--I mean *found*--hiding in a room. As you said before, it would make them very suspicious if you where suddenly found back in your own room, which is guarded by the king's men. You can't be found in here, because they'll search everything. Are you ready now?"

Though I still felt uncertain, I nodded, and pulled my makeshift shawl around my face.

Charles listened at the door. "I don't hear anyth--"

At that moment the door began to open. I dove under Frederic's bed.

"Hmm, hmmm, hmm," A servant, I guessed, came in humming some improvised tune.

Where is Charles?

Footfalls sounded, and the bed creaked. I held my breath. The stones hurt my back. They seemed irregular and badly cut, compared the ones I walked on.

You came in to do what you were told, now please leave.

Light, pattering steps, as if she now walked on tiptoes, and then the door closed. I started to roll out, but I heard the sound of feet again. Whose feet?

I stayed where I lay. If Charles spoke to me, I would come out.

"Oh my!" A girl's voice gasped.

"No, don't run--" Charles began, and there came a sound of someone hitting a door.

I rolled out of my hiding place. "Rose!" I exclaimed, and she spun around, dagger in hand.

"Betsy!" Relief washed over her face, and she lowered the dagger to her side. I could see the fright on her face, and the desperateness of whatever plan she tried to carry out. She wore a plain, scratchy-looking dress, and the head covering of a servant.

Then she seemed to remember Charles, and her shoulders drooped. "He said that you got away," she murmured.

"I did get away. Ch--err, I mean, Jonathan is on our side," I said.

"Who spoke with you?" Charles asked, his eyes bright, he studied Rose.

"He didn't tell me his name. He was a tall blond soldier with green eyes. I wouldn't have trusted him if he hadn't helped me past the other soldiers. He said to come here."

"I haven't had contact with J--him," Charles mused,
"So I'm not sure what he's trying to do."

"Charles, I want you to take Rose with you," I said.

"What?" Rose asked.

"Elizabeth...I still wish you would come with me."

Charles protested. "I can get you out of here."

"I told you that I wouldn't go without my siblings--
and I won't. I want you to take Rose to safety."

"I won't leave you, Betsy," Rose said.

"Yes, you will," I said. "I am in command of this
family and I order you to leave."

Her eyes opened wide. "But the king--" she began.

"I don't care about the king. Go! Charles, didn't
you say you needed to be off soon if you weren't going to
attract attention?"

"Why do you keep calling him Charles?" Rose asked.

"Uuuh," I said, shooting an apology to Charles with my
eyes. "No time for that now, Rose, you need to go--"

"Your majesty, I protest again. You should seek
safety. The king--"

"I know the king is most interested in me!" I
interrupted again, angry. "Do as I say; both of you! If I

chose to stay here, that is none of your business, but if I tell you to take my sister out of here, it is."

"Your highness will remember that by law I am ruler in Triendo at this time," Charles said.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Charles continued. "But I will take your sister with me, when I start out for Revollin."

Relieved, I nodded.

* * *

Charles opened the door and peered out, and then motioned to Rose and me. I crept out, my heart beating faster as I listened to the silence.

We all walked, creeping along the hall, heading deeper into the castle. I started at the slightest noise.

All too soon, we saw a soldier ahead of us.

We shrank into the darkness of a space between torches.

Charles frowned, gazing with an intense look at the soldier. Though my sister dressed as a servant, it would only be a matter of getting close enough to see her face for many of the servants and soldiers to recognize her.

We need another way out.

"Back," He whispered at last.

We rose and began creeping back the way we came.

"Jonathan? Is that you?" The voice made me start and Rose gave a gasp. Charles shoved her in front of him, and then proceeded to do the same to me. The light, though it seemed way too bright, was quite dim, and the soldier far away. He seemed to peering, uncertain of what he saw.

"Go, I'll cover you." I whispered, shoving them both.

"Your highness--" Charles started to protest.

"Now!" I hissed.

"Jonathan? If that's you--where are you going?" The soldier broke into a run. Charles and Rose whisked around a corner. I took a couple of deep breaths.

I can do this.

"I'm not going anywhere!" I said, ambling forward. A desperate urge to look over my shoulder built up inside me, but I choked it down.

"Who are you?"

I shoved the cloth on my head back, revealing my cascade of golden--if a bit tousled--hair. I placed my hands on my hips and stood up tall, giving myself time to think.

"Do you not know my royal person?" I asked in a stern voice.

"Your highness!" He exclaimed, eyes widening. "Where have you been? There's been a terrible uproar, the king is frantic, and the queen sick with worry."

"I think that it is customary to leave those questions to the king or his closest advisors," I answered, in a haughty voice I would have rather not have used.

I gave him a moment to think, and after that moment passed he reached out, unsure, and took my hand.

Inexperienced farm boy, I thought, a plan coming to my mind.

I took a few deep breaths.

All right. Here it goes. I'm going to be you, Jarvis.

"Unhand me!" I said, I wrenched free of his grasp, and began running down the hall--back from the way he came.

"What the--come back here!" He shouted; his boots pounded on the floor.

As the footsteps thudded closer, I darted through an open door, into a dark room or corridor--it smelled musty.

My pursuer stumbled into the room, a smart crack sounded, and I smiled. Then I ran into a wall.

"YOWCH!" I screamed, falling backwards.

"Got you!" He muttered as his hand closed on my arm. He lead me back into the light of the main corridor.

"I'll only come with you if you don't hold me in such a fashion!" I said, in an attempt to regain my dignity, as we entered the main corridor again.

"All right, all right, fine," he said, releasing my arm.

I gave him a right proper glare.

"Your highness," he remembered in haste.

I let him walk in peace for a moment, and then, as soon as a good chance presented itself, I took off down the corridor again.

* * *

After many runs and re-captures by my increasingly more nervous escort, we walked in the parts of the castle where we met more soldiers and servants. Everyone stared at me, wide-eyed. I made no more attempts to run. My captor chose to approach a soldier who slouched against a wall.

"Who do you got, Timothy?" The slouching man asked, peering at the other with his eyes half closed.

"Her highness, Princess Elizabeth Flowain," Timothy said.

The dingy-blue eyes went wide, and he straightened up, bowing to me.

After this etiquette on my behalf, he turned to the before addressed person, and said in a low voice, "Where on earth, Timothy Ar--"

"I-I don't have time for that now," Timothy stuttered, his eyes darting to a "higher up" who walked by. "What do I do now?"

"Take her highness to the throne room, I expect. Did you find Jonathan?"

"No," Timothy said, whitening.

"Well, I suggest you get there as fast as you can."

We headed towards the throne room, but my escort, called Timothy, appeared jumpy at being so closed to a royal person, and being noticed by many higher soldiers.

Before any of the others could react, James came walking towards us with a determined stride.

"Hello," he said, flushing a bit. "What might your name be, young soldier?"

"Timothy Arona, of Thelmor, sir."

"I shall take her highness into my custody. Go back to you post."

"Yes sir," Timothy said, and I could see the relief on his face.

James marched me out of the view of the other soldiers, and drew me into a dark corner.

"Your highness, I thought Charles would--I mean, Jon--" he began, his forehead wrinkling.

"I know what his real name is, James."

"Oh. Well, I thought that Charles would take you away from this cursed place."

"Cursed?" I asked, startled by his use of the word.

"Yes, cursed! How else would the king know to try to stop Charles before he left? How else would they already know of Rose's disappearance? Before we tried to fight him, he seemed slow, easy to trick, and now he seems to follow us everywhere. Where is Charles?"

"He went with Rose, to try and escape."

"Why not you?"

"I'm staying here."

"Has there been a change in Charles's plans? Should I take you somewhere?"

"No, I'm just staying here."

"Why?"

"Because I choose too! You don't all need to know everything!"

"I'm apologize, your highness," James said, "it is hard to follow your friend's directions when your friend is not with you. What am I to do?" He fiddled with his sword hilt and looked at the floor.

"Take me to my room. I am much wearied from the scary turn of events, uh, blah blah, I have to wait until the morrow to speak with the king, because of some reason we must invent, and then we have twelve hours to execute a plan which I know not of."

"This is quite pleasant," James muttered, though I don't think he felt anger towards me.

"Is it indeed?" A harsh voice interrupted our conversation, and we both started.

"What do you want, George?" James asked in a steady voice, but I saw the way his eyes darted for hope of escape. None appeared. No less than six soldiers backed the person named George. And then I saw that two held Rose. Cursed indeed, I thought, feeling the fear come again. I looked to Rose, and she looked at me.

What has happened to Charles?

"To know what you, a trusted knight, are doing with the missing Elizabeth Flowain," George said.

"Questioning her, as the king has asked," James said in a smooth tone, his gaze only resting on Rose for an instant, though the sight must have sickened him.

"Shouldn't you alert the king before carrying out such interrogations? Besides that, you weren't there when the king told us higher ups about that. Where have you been?"

"Caring after my own duties, which I need not relate to you."

"Oh?" George said, a crooked smile played on his face, altered and disfigured by a scar on his cheek.

He half turned his head to the men behind him, and two of them came forward in swift, determined strides.

"You were seen, James, with a servant girl, and now the Princess Roselatina is found in servant's clothes, whilst you are found conferring with the Princess Elizabeth, speaking of, let me think, 'cursed' places?"

James's eyes went wide, and his hand flashed towards the hilt of his sword. Too late. With terrifying speed one of the advancing soldiers plunged forward, capturing James's wrist before the sword came out more than an inch. James writhed under the grip, trying to break loose. The

other soldier grabbed his left arm and shoved him against the wall.

James and the soldier who held his wrist still fought for control of James's hand. With slow brute strength the soldier wrenched the sword from James's hand and shoved that arm also against the wall.

I gasped, moved to help him, and then my hand also received the grip of a strong hand.

"Come, your highness, it is near dinner. Perhaps you would prefer to take it in your room?" The man smirked at me. "We need to deal with this traitor--"

"He is--" I began, but found myself stopped by James's eyes. Wrong thing to say.

"Hmm?" George said, in mock surprise, trying to drag out the rest of my sentence. The man holding my hand in his iron grip grinned to his leader. "Did you not hear what I said against him?"

"Well, y-yes..."

"Am I to understand that he is your friend, and was helping you, this James?"

"No," I said, too late.

"Elizabeth--" James interrupted, and then one of his captors slapped him across the face.

I felt like cringing, but instead I said; "Don't speak to me, traitor!"

"Are you sure that this man isn't your friend. Are you all traitors to the king together?" George's voice grew hard.

"N-no," I gasped, "Do what you like with him. I don't want his hands on me ever again." James's gaze locked into mine. Blood trickled from his mouth.

"Take them to their room, soldier," George said in an airy voice. James turned his gaze to the floor, lowering his head.

I walked with the soldier, in vain watching for a chance of escape. This soldier knew what he was about, and held me tight. I looked to Rose, and the soldier escorting her began to walk in a different direction. Tears started in my eyes. I had run through all those corridors, James risked his life, and Rose still found herself in the seat of danger.

"Now," I heard George's voice behind me. "What to do with you, young traitor. Will you come along quietly? No? All right then."

A thud followed his words.

I spun round, almost bringing the soldier with me.
James crumpled to the ground.

* * *

"No!" I felt like throwing something.

The girl cowered and I lowered my clenched fists to my sides.

"I am not hungry!" I shouted.

"All right, your highness...didn't mean..." her sentences came in fragments as she curtsied, backing to my door. When she reached there, she opened it and fled, and the soldiers closed the door behind her.

I sunk to my bed and put my head in my hands. What were they doing to James?

With sudden clarity that I did not want, I remembered a day several years before, when a plot to overthrow John had been uncovered by a clumsy mistake from one of the planners.

My brothers, sisters, and I did not understand the things that went on at that time; we were still engaged in playing and daydreaming much of the time. That day at supper, a faraway scream was heard, and we all stared at each other and then at King John for an explanation.

He said, "Why do you look at me so? Some horse is causing trouble. Continue eating, dear ones."

"Poor horse," Rose, at ten, was in love with horses at the time.

I knew now that that had not been a horse.

Don't think like that! Surely James can talk his way out of this...

I covered my ears and shut my eyes as if that would help block out the scream in my memory.

It did block out the opening of the door.

"Your highness?" I turned around, and glared at my intruder. Another soldier whom I did not know, who planned to question me, no doubt, entered the room.

I threw a pillow at him. "I don't want to talk to you!" I rolled over to the wall-side of my bed and sank into the crack.

"Your highness, please co-operate."

"I won't unless you--"

I jumped back out of the crack and faced the soldier, who looked quite silly holding a pillow.

"What?" The soldier asked.

"What have you decided to do with that traitor, James?" I asked.

"James who?"

"James Za--" I shut my mouth before the last word could fly out. Surely he didn't use his real last name.

I caught the gleam in the soldier's eye as I rushed on. "I don't know his last name, I only know he took custody of me from the rude soldier named Timothy, and then proved to be no better companion."

"What do you mean by za-I, your highness?" He asked, blue eyes glinting at the prospect of trapping me.

"Nothing!" I said, too fast and loud. "Isn't even a royal person allowed to stumble when she speaks?"

"When the mentioned royal person could be found guilty of treason, we must listen to every sound that comes from her mouth," he said, and then added, "your highness," for the silky touch.

"Treason!" I said, and then attempted to laugh it off.

"Your highness," he continued, paying no heed to me, "what may be your purpose in running away from our king, your loving uncle?"

He isn't my uncle! My thoughts screamed, but I said nothing aloud, and turned my back on the soldier.

"Your highness, your uncle, the king, requires that you answer."

"Than you can tell my uncle, the king, that I refuse to speak until these false charges are removed from my--"

"You could also follow James Zarnor, who admitted to everything in the king's torture chambers, and has been executed."

"What?" I spun around.

"Well, that is good, isn't it, innocent princess?"

"You're lying!" I shouted, it bursting out of me too fast to stop.

His eyebrows went up and his mouth twisted into an expression of 'You think so?' mixed with triumph over my slip.

He turned and exited my room. I stared after him with my mouth open, unbelieving. Then the door closed, and the tears came.

CHAPTER 5

“Tell us,” the man jeered. “Tell us where Jarvis has
gone.”

“I don’t know,”

"Need some persuasion, do you, young traitor?"

"NO! Don't hurt him!"

I awoke with a jerk, and the cold of the night air flooded around me. Shivering, I shrank down again, pulling the bedclothes about me.

The events of the day paraded through my mind, again and again, while I kept my eyes wide; fear of falling back into that dream descending on me.

"What to do with you, young traitor. Will you come along quietly? No? All right then."

Thud.

My face was wet. Betsy, you can't do anything about it. Not now.

My eyes closed, I sat bolt upright; the chill air hit my skin with a blast of 'awake!' Shivering, I hobbled across the floor and sat near the fire.

Why did I stay here? I thought, "I'm not leaving without my siblings." Those were my words and they were brave words. But how could I accomplish getting the others out?

Rose's rescue ended in disaster. James...

The brave man gave his life for her escape. Now only Philip and I were left. And I didn't know where Philip was.

I crept to the door out and began a vain search for a way to see out.

Mumbling and an occasional metallic clank told me that the soldiers still stood out there, but there didn't seem to be any peepholes.

I got to my feet and moved across the room to my window. I expected that going out that way was hopeless, but I needed to try.

For the first difficulty, my window gaped into the cold of the outside from a distance of a foot above my head.

I dragged a chair over, scrambled up, and found myself excited.

Too narrow. Maybe I can work another stone loose. I grasped the edge and pulled; when nothing gave I shoved it.

After a few seconds of hard pushing the stone gave the slightest bit.

Well, maybe it can be done, if I work on it enough.
If they planned to keep me locked up in my own room, I

would have lots of time on my hands. That is, if they didn't get me doing needlework of some kind or another.

Maybe the best bet now is to escape, raise an army...
Wild fantasies shot through my mind. This may still
work...

Too awake now to want to go to sleep, I tiptoed to the door, pressing my face against the rough wood and listening hard.

A loud sigh rewarded my eavesdropping, followed by some grumbling.

"She isn't going to try to escape again," one of the people without said.

"Oh, you think? Them higher ups think she may. They told her about the death of that Zarnor kid. That may make her desperate--scared."

"Have they found the other one--um--Rose-something-fancy?"

"Yeah, someone did. The King also decided not to send that Jonathan on that Revollian expedition after all."

I see, I thought.

A yawn sounded through the wood. "My watch will be over soon, and I'll be right glad of it. Watching a

sixteen-year-old sissy in the middle of the night isn't the most interesting thing to do."

I'm fifteen.

"Nor the most dangerous," his companion reminded him.

"Whatever."

No more talking; a wave of sleepiness come over me.

All right, I'll go to bed. I'll work on everything tomorrow.

* * *

I awoke to the sound of clattering dishes. When I sat up in a groggy state of mind, apologies poured forth from yet another little servant girl.

I expected the same girl that always served me; I hadn't seen her in days. Every time I awoke, a new person waited on me. I asked the new one, when she paused for a breath, if my normal servant happened to be sick.

"Sarah" (as she gave her name) didn't know anything about Mary, so I let her be, assuring her many times that I was fine with being awakened.

No sooner than I finished eating and dressing, my door received another rap upon it. I sent the servant girl to open it, sat myself in a chair, and fought the anger I felt welling up in me.

I gave the soldier who entered my best female glare, but only for a moment. It was the same soldier who told me of James's death. I dropped my gaze.

"Your highness--"

"My highness--" I interrupted with no intention of going on.

A look of irritation crossed the man's face. "Your highness," he began again.

I frowned at him.

"Your highness, you have conducted yourself in a way that--"

"Irritates even the fleas of King John Ecarg."

The man's eyebrows shot high, and then he shifted his weight while I sat back, enjoying it.

"Your highness, there is no reason to speak in such a manner of your uncle."

I rolled my eyes. Jarvis would have done so, I am sure, and I attempted to be as irritating as he could be.

"No reason?" I asked. "Wouldn't you feel at least a bit perturbed at being locked up like this?"

"Perturbed, your highness?" The man said.

"Even so, soldier."

"But--but," the soldier said. "Your highness, you aren't locked in here! Why would your loving uncle do that to his niece?"

"It isn't locked? Than why do those soldiers stand--"

"Still," the man interrupted me, "it is anyone's guess what would happen to Princess Marylyn if you left."

My throat went dry; my tongue felt like cloth. All charade of cockiness disappeared.

"Elizabeth, do you want to prevent the death of even more people?"

Did Charles know of this? "Where is she?" I said at last.

"Safe, for the moment."

"You will not hurt her?" I asked.

"As long as you do as we want," he answered, "and that is very simple; we want to know; who is helping you?"

This caught me a little off guard, and my answer came to late. "Helping me?" I said, "Why would anyone help me?"

The man crossed his arms, leaned his weight just small amount forward, and he frowned. A chain hanging around his neck swung towards me; a small pendant dangling from it attracted my gaze. The image frightened me; a horse rearing up, ears flat against its scull, rage in its purple

eyes, and backed by inky black. "Your highness, your sister's well-being hangs in the balance. Who is helping you?"

"J-J-James was," I stuttered, staring at the horse in its mad fury.

"Oh, indeed? We shall have to add that to the charges against him."

"What?" I asked, panic rising within me.

"Oh yes, he is still alive. Not very happy or very comfortable, to be sure, but it will help his death come quicker with your added support that he is involved in treason."

"You lied!" I said, feeling as if I would go to pieces.

"One may lie to find the truth, your highness. I thank you for your cooperation."

He headed for the door, and I charged after him. He stayed me at the threshold of the door and spoke to his soldiers.

"If she crosses this threshold, do not stay her, yet you are to alert me at once. Do you understand, your highness?" He looked me straight in the eyes, and my courage melted under his gaze.

After he turned the corner in the corridor, I closed the door.

* * *

"It's useless. I knew it was useless." I clambered down from the window. "I wouldn't go anyway. I have no way to get Marylyn without first putting her in danger."

I sank down into the chair and stared at the floor.

He's coming back. I know that man will come back. I'll have to tell him everything. I shivered at the thought of his raging horse. The sign of Ja-Runet.

Where is Philip? Wherever you are, please come soon...you're the only one left.

Tears slid through my fingers. Why did everything fall to pieces after Charles left? Had he left? I remembered the soldier's words. Charles hadn't gone to Revollin. But I was sure I would have heard from him by now if he still remained in the castle.

It's my fault Mary is still here. I should have been smart enough to put her on your horse. I should have known that her little horse couldn't keep up...

At least Jarvis and Thomas are safe.

"This will have to do, for now. They can't live for long in the forest."

I shivered as I remembered those words. You don't know if Jarvis and Thomas are safe for sure.

I forced all thoughts from my mind; attempted to think of what I should do now.

A rustling sound awoke me. My window showed blackness. My fire emitted no warmth and very little light.

Where is that servant girl? I thought, shivering. Another soft sound made me clench the sides of my chair.

Who's in my room? Fear gripped at me, threatened to swallow me whole. My body ached from sleeping in the hard chair, but I feared standing up.

At last I inched forward, my ears straining in the silence. I slid forward some more, hoping to sink to the floor without the chair creaking. Hope did me no good. The chair creaked as I left and in the silence that pounded against me it would have been just as obtrusive for it to let out a high pitched squeal.

One soft thump answered my creak; it seemed to me that someone walked towards the noise of my chair.

I moved backwards, not daring to rise. A sharp intake of breath told me of pain or irritation.

Scrambling backwards, I hit a wall.

As swish, and hurried steps came towards me. In desperation I moved to my left, but not before something hit my stomach and wrenching hands grasped my wrists.

I screamed. We fell over, a hand pressed against my mouth. I bit his fingers; slapped him with my loose hand. Then I attempted to rise; to run. My mouth was freed.

"Let go!" I screamed before I fell to the floor; the other person on top of me.

"That's enough!" The hissed words came to my ears, but I still struggled. Then something cold touched my cheek.

"Know what this is?"

I went limp. To my surprise I found tears trickling down my face; silent sobs shook me.

"Get up,"

I stood; moving slowly.

"To your bed,"

The door swung open with a bang, and someone walked forward, stumbling slightly. He held a torch and it lit up his face. He had green eyes and blond hair.

* * *

The man who held the dagger at my throat shoved me onto my bed and leapt forward.

Philip tried to block the blow with the torch he held in hand, but it ended up on the ground, and then he also ended up on the ground with my attacker on top of him. The dagger rose in the air.

"NO!" I screamed, leaping forward. I was too late. The assassin rose, blood dripped from his weapon. Philip lay on the floor, clutching at a broad red stain on his right shoulder. His face was white.

"FREDERIC!" I screamed, hundreds of emotions clashing at once and engulfing me. I leaped on my attacker; we strove for the blood-stained weapon.

I found it in my hand; the other man went still beneath me.

"I'll kill you." Someone I did not know spoke the words, and then, looking into the eyes of a man I did not know; all anger for my brother's death and the unjust attack on Philip washed away.

I felt small and diminished; but I was again human.

"What is your name?" I demanded.

The poor, aging, man looked at me in shock.

"Who are you?"

"K-k-Karl..."

"Karl, help me bind the wound of my friend. When my brother is King, as he ought to be soon, you shall pay dearly if Philip happens to die tonight." My arms trembled.

"Yes, your highness."

"Get up."

At that moment a sound reached my ears. I started, stood up.

"Do you understand--" Karl said in a timid voice.

I turned upon him fiercely. "What is that noise?"

"The king. Someone has told him--"

"Why??" The question boiled up from deep within me.

"Why would you kill me? Why have you turned upon Philip? Why did someone kill my brother Frederic?"

Karl lowered his head. "Money, your highness."

You old, poor fool. The thought snaked through my mind. All you can think about is your own comfort. Aren't there more important things in your life?

No. That is all he has. No family, no children. There is no one to love him or for him to love. My own thought surprised me, but extreme pity for this man came over me.

"Listen," I said, as the sounds of many feet came closer. "I do not know what you can do. But if you, in any way, help return my brother to the throne, I will reward you. Now," I said, an idea striking me, "I have other things to do!"

I took off running.

"Your highness!" The call came from behind me, and I ignored it.

I am going to see John Ecarg.

"For--fight."

Right.

* * *

I rounded a corner going full speed. A blaze of lights met me and I had just wits enough to recognize a medium-sized, middle-aged, man with brown eyes, dark brown hair, and a crown on his head.

I skidded to a halt and fell down.

I stared at the floor, my heart pounding. My resolution drained away. All that I found left was anger and extreme weakness in my body.

Here in front of me stands...

My arms trembled, and I stayed on the ground, even though it wasn't necessary.

He tried to kill my brother. He **did** kill my brother.

Hot tears welled in my eyes, my fists clenched, and I gritted my teeth.

Someone spoke, but not to me. Then the king said, "My dear niece..."

"Look, your highness," a soldier interrupted. "Karl!"

"Karl," the king said; his voice hardening.

"Your highness!" Karl gasped, falling to the ground beside me, and then rising, perhaps at a command of the king's hand, "She has attempted to murder one of the good soldiers defending her, and has at this moment the bloody dagger in her hand!"

It was pulled from my weakened hand. My mind felt numbed.

"Rise, Princess Elizabeth," the king commanded.

Frederic. The single word hammered my mind; bringing again the burst of emotions.

"Bets..."

"Rest, your highness, you must rest."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Of course dear."

I couldn't hold it in any longer. After years of taking it for granted that Frederic's death had been

accident, a mistake of nature; now his killer stood before me.

"You false dog!" I blurted; the first insult that came to mind. I leaped to my feet. Tears streamed down my cheeks, even as the anger boiled from deep within me. "You murdering liar! You--!"

The face of King John showed perfect surprise, wonderful bewilderment.

I continued, even as the soldiers around the king started forward to stay me. "You killed my brother!" I shouted, after a whirlwind of names.

I paused, feeling exhausted, the soldiers grabbed me, and a sharp pain in my right arm confused me.

"Unhand me..." I made an effort to shout, but my strength seemed to drain away.

The king regained his composure. "I'm afraid her highness is sorely in need of help. I didn't kill your brother, Princess, you helped him to escape, for reasons unknown to us."

"You liar!" I shouted again. "You killed my brother, Frederic..." my voice cracked over the last word.

"Oh dear," the king said, a sickening picture of concern and shock. "My dear niece..."

I struggled against the soldiers, and then the figure of the king seemed to spin before me. I fought to refocus and stay on top of myself as he continued to speak.

"Your brother was accidentally slain on a hunting trip, perhaps by one of his own men..."

"You're a liar, John..." my voice faded into a whisper, none of my fighting could stop it. "And...someday, people...will...know..." I slumped forward, and the world spun into peaceful nothingness.

CHAPTER 6

"Your highness, dear?"

I awoke with a shuddering breath. I sat up, but the world spun.

"Ayi," I gasped.

"Ah, she awakens," a familiar voice, filled to bursting with the sound of good health and good eating, came to my ears, and found myself loathing the sound of it.

I jerked up in earnest, and swung my feet off of whatever soft thing I happened to be laying on.

The world again spun, but I forced my eyes to focus, and John Ecarg came into my view, with what I assumed he meant for a loving smile on his face. It looked more like the gracious, but pained, smile you give to the seller of rotten fish.

"Oh," I fumed, "So you want to hear what else I think of you?"

"My dear--" the king said, sounding weary of me.

He flicked his right hand, and a soldier left the small room, soon returning with a brown-haired youth who wore well-fitting clothes, colored brown, grey, and green. He also wore a leather jerkin pulled down over his shirt and tall well-made boots. I gasped in surprise when I looked into his face.

"Jarvis!"

"I'm sorry Betsy, but I just had to know--" he began, but the king interrupted.

"Yes," the king said. "Your brother has given himself up, and perhaps he will be shown mercy."

Jarvis frowned; his grey eyes stared down the King.

"What--?" he began.

"What are you saying?" I said; my heart seemed ready to burst out of me.

"Why, my dear, you are quite slow. Your brother has attempted to murder the king," he said, as if he wasn't the king.

"No," I gasped, and the room appeared to wheel again.

"What?" Jarvis shouted, growing angry. "What in all the--the--waters of the sea are you talking about?"

King John's mouth hung slightly ajar, he stared at my brother.

"Me murder you?" Jarvis continued, getting his 'oh-let-me-explain' look as he advanced on the king. "I fear you have gotten this dreadfully turned around, John Ecarg, usurper to the throne. It was you who tried to kill me."

"Oh, dear me," the king said, leaning back, fear in his eyes. "It appears that Prince Jarvis, as a result of his shock of the accusation--"

"No, I'm perfectly fine," Jarvis said, his voice trembling with anger. "It's you who have some explaining to do."

The king's bodyguards grabbed Jarvis's arms as he moved forward more.

"Let go!" He shouted with great vehemence.

"You let him go, you lying cut-throat!" I said, joining the fray. I jumped up, the world spinning in

protest, "Men, before you stands the man who killed King Mark of Triendo!"

Some laughs erupted from different parts of the room.

"You Flowains all have something in common," John Ecarg said, as a stiff smile covered his face. "You will say anything to protect yourself."

"How do you know that? Any personal relationship with my father?"

"Why, well, of course not, dearest," the King said, appearing even more flustered.

"Oh? Stop calling me dearest. What do you know of my father? Do you know he died under mysterious circumstances?"

"We all know it may have been sadness over the death of--"

"Sure, we have all been told as much. But who holds the strings of what is--and what isn't--told? What about my brother? He was shot on a hunting trip, yes. But isn't it handy that outlaws also killed the Siwel family? And just on the spur of the moment, you decide to visit your wife's home country, when you had been away in Ja-Runet. Your wife had been dead for over five years, you said. But

still you decide to travel to Triendo. Just in time to snatch up the throne."

"She's delirious," King John forced hoarsely.

The soldiers gave me interested and thoughtful looks.

Jarvis stared at me open-mouthed.

"John Ecarg," I said, walking up to him, and the soldiers, hindered with my brother, did not act quickly enough to stop me. I stared straight into the king's troubled brown eyes. "I know."

* * *

What happened next felt like a nightmare. Rough hands jerked me back, and when I looked down, I found a dagger clenched in my hand. With a gasp I dropped it.

"She has tried to murder the king!" A soldier shouted.

"Another charge against her!"

"They shall die together!"

"You liars! She has not." Jarvis said, bursting from a group of soldiers. My arms were drawn behind me right before Jarvis tackled the soldier who attempted to tie them together. We fell to the ground.

We appeared to be in a small sitting-room type area, but there were more than half a dozen soldiers in it.

The king sat, looking quite ridiculous, in a wooden chair, as he watched what went on. The chair's carvings laced up its legs; beautiful, except that they ended at a grimacing face on each armrest. A spasm of disgust sped through me.

Jarvis touched my arm; we struggled to our feet. Jarvis leapt forward, shoving the wooden chair over. It fell with a thud, and the king let out an undignified yell.

"Go!" Jarvis said, as the soldiers rushed to help the king up, and he told them not to. I took a flying leap for the door, and pulled the handle. It wouldn't give. Then, as I tugged in vain, it burst open, and a soldier entered the room, wild-eyed.

Ducking beyond his grasp, I entered the corridor. So far, so--smack!

I fell to the ground, a heavy weight atop me.

"Someone has attempted to murder the king!" I belted out.

"No, sis, they haven't. Come on, get up!"

I jumped to my feet and took off down the corridor. I didn't hear Jarvis behind me. I slowed and looked back. A soldier walked up the corridor towards us, closer to him, looking quite calm.

Jarvis began towards me, trying to appear calm as well.

"What are you doing?" The soldier asked.

"Go, go!" Jarvis shouted.

"Where?!" Frantic, I spun around a corner.

"I don't know, just go!"

Footsteps pounding behind, but it appeared to only be one pair of feet. I risked a glance over my shoulder.

Jarvis began to gain on me, we ran together, and then I fell behind him.

"Excuse me!" Jarvis called, as we burst on a group of servants and soldiers alike.

With their mouths open, they attempted to stop us, but to no avail. Jarvis barreled into the tallest soldier present, and the soldier ended up on the floor. The next thing we dodged was a servant girl holding a golden platter with dainties on it, and then a royal serving boy, his blue uniform covered in mud. I followed in Jarvis's wake, dodging back and forth.

We were free of the group when Jarvis skidded to a halt and spun back around.

"Jarvis?!"

"Keep going!" he shouted

I kept going, but when I didn't hear his footsteps following after me, I slowed again, looked over my shoulder, and then shrank into a dark doorway.

My heart pounded, and my breath came in gasps. Where is he?

The sound of boots hitting the stone floor reached my ears.

I peeked out and saw Jarvis running towards me, a sword strapped and banging at his side. I jumped back into the corridor and attempted to match his stride.

"Where is Thomas?" I gasped.

"Still in the forest--with Lilly."

"Good," A moment of silence ensued. "Where are we going?"

"Marylyn's room."

A thrill went through me. "Do you think we can get to her?"

"We can try," Jarvis said in a voice that scared me, though I didn't know why. I looked at him and saw that he gripped the hilt of the borrowed sword so hard that his knuckles whitened.

In that moment I came to the realization of just how dangerous the whole thing had become.

* * *

On the second to last turn, we ran again into a soldier.

We dodged his grasp and kept on running. He, in turn, ran in the opposite direction. A moment later, the sound of a horn echoing through the great stone halls came to us.

"We don't have much time," Jarvis said.

"Maybe I should try to go for Rose," I said a moment later, veering to my left.

"No!" Jarvis grabbed me. "You don't have anything to fight off--"

"I can't fight, Jarvis--even if I had a sword! I'm a girl. We don't have the time unless we split up!"

"We may not have the time anyway. Betsy--"

"I'll be all right, Jarvis. Just get Marylyn. I'll get Rose," I wrenched myself free of him and began running.

"Betsy!" He called, sounding frantic, but he didn't follow me.

I knew the corridors well, and sped along them, slowing as I neared Rose's room.

Please, let her be here.

"Your highness?"

"What?" I whirled around.

Timothy Arona.

He took my hand, holding it as if it were a flower, but keeping his eyes on my every move.

"Your highness, the king--"

"Dear soldier, the princess--"

Timothy stopped after the interruption, appearing uncertain of his next action.

"Timothy, please," I said, feeling for a last resort. "The king is a liar. You don't have to do what he says."

Timothy ducked his head, and for a moment I thought I had gotten the upper hand; as unexpected as it was.

"Your highness," Timothy repeated. "I must take you to the king. He is looking for you."

"Timothy! He is trying to kill me. He is trying to wipe out my whole family!"

"I can't know anything for sure!" Timothy said, his eyes darting. "Come with me, your highness."

"ROSE!" I shouted.

Soldiers came from around the corner of the corridor, I yanked away from Timothy, and for a moment found myself free.

"Stop!" A commanding voice. I looked to the speaker. He held Marylyn, who stood perfectly still. Again the

silver thing, treacherous and sharp, threatened someone I loved.

"Let her go!" I said through gritted teeth, stepping forward.

Someone grasped my arm. "He said to hold still," a slippery voice said, "and I would suggest that you do so."

I stiffened. The very voice sent terror through me.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, addressing the man who held Marylyn. Tears glistened in her deep blue eyes; she wouldn't take her gaze off of me.

"What is the meaning of this?"

The voice boomed; full of command and the expectancy of being obeyed, it stopped everyone in their tracks. My spirits rose. The soldier holding Marylyn released his grip the slightest bit.

"Sir William," the man of command said, "why do you threaten Princess Marylyn of Triendo, a mere child, with a drawn dagger?"

The soldier blushed and fumbled with it.

"And you," the man, known to them as the knight Jonathan Thoran, turned to me and said, "why do you hold Princess Elizabeth in such a fashion?"

"I have rather a better reason to be holding her, Sir Jonathan. She has attempted to murder the king."

"Stuff and nonsense," Charles said nonchalantly. "Let her go."

The hold loosened on my arm. I moved away in a quick movement, and then looked to my captor, frowning at him. He paid little heed to me, his whole intent bent on Charles. It surprised me to see how, in a way, beautiful the face of the unknown soldier was. Smooth and clean, standing straight and tall; he looked every inch a gentleman. It seemed almost a pity that he should be a common soldier, except when looked into his eyes. Nothing appeared to flicker there; he was bored and lazy. He stood taller than Charles; but his voice sounded to be disfigured.

"I have something to tell you," he hissed, motioning Charles closer. "I'm keeping an eye on you, Sir Jonathan. No one else appears to suspect yet, but I do."

He almost spat out the last word and then whirled around, marching off on his long legs.

I took in a breath of relief the moment he disappeared around another turn in the corridor.

Then I found myself surprised as I looked into Charles's face; his face had paled and his confidence, if not shattered, looked shaken to its roots.

"Soldiers," he said, turning again to the group.
"Disperse. I will--"

"Why should we do so?" The man still holding Marylyn said.

"Betsy?" Marylyn said in a timid voice.

"Be quiet, you."

"Don't speak in such a way to the Princess,"

"Oh, whatever. Why are you ordering us around?"

"Because the king--"

"Why doesn't anyone except you ever hear these orders from the king?"

"Because," Charles said, still keeping up what appeared to me to be a charade of confidence. "Why would he speak to you of the commands given to me?"

Sir William stared at Charles darkly. "I shall take Marylyn to his highness, as I have been ordered. I have no orders concerning the Princess Elizabeth, so it must be assumed that you do."

The other half-dozen soldiers looked from William to Charles, and back again, but William turned around, holding tight to Marylyn, and began to walk off.

"Wait!" I said, starting forward. Charles grabbed my arm. "Let me go!" I commanded.

Charles bent down and whispered to me.

"No. Don't frighten her. It won't help."

I kept still, watching her walk away. Who knew where she would be in an hour. Tears formed in my eyes, but I kept them back, so that her last wave could be answered without frightening her.

"Now," I said, whirling, "What was that all about?"

"I couldn't take her from William. He was given the order to get her; right in my presence too."

"But now what?" I said, my voice rising, "She's gone willingly into his hands!"

"Elizabeth, keep your voice down," Charles said in a sharp voice. "Can't you see I'm doing all I can?"

"I--I..." I said, my cheeks growing warm.

"I've overstepped in my false commands. They're not completely oblivious anymore. They've probably noticed that sometimes the ones I make up don't match with the ones they've heard--I make them pretty close, or act like there

has been a change in plan, but--" he stopped, gazing over my head. "I've done this too long. We must go, once and for all, or--"

"Jarvis!" I exclaimed.

"What?"

"Jarvis came back and he went going to get Mary--"

"He went to do what?" Charles exclaimed, and, waiting for no answer, he turned around and ran.

I leaned against the wall, my legs weak. My breath came fast.

There is something bad near Marylyn's room. I know it. Soldiers. Jarvis has gone straight into their hands.

"Betsy?"

I leaped sideways. "Who are you?" I said.

"Betsy, shush! It's just me."

"Rose?" I lowered my voice to a whisper.

"Yes. You called for me."

"Well, yes, I know, but I didn't really expect--"

"Shh..." I caught Rose's smile in the dim light. "Why did you call for me?"

"How did you get here?"

"My soldier is a gossip person; I've told him I've got a boyfriend," she grinned at me. "Lower down, of course. He was eager to help out."

"Rose!" I exclaimed, bewildered.

"Now, tell me what happened."

"First you tell me how the soldiers found you."

"Someone came to Charles when we were almost ready to leave; mounting our horses. I hid behind a stack of hay, and the soldier told Charles that the King had changed his mind, and he took him away. They soon discovered me. Now, tell me what is going on."

Whispering together, it almost felt like the times before this whole thing began, when we would sneak out of our rooms and meet in some designated place, and scatter for shadows the moment anyone came near.

"Now what?" Rose's voice was serious, thoughtful.

"I suppose, we wait for Charles--I do hope--"

"Shush," Rose cut me off.

Footsteps. As of old, we scattered to the shadows, but this was real danger, not the faint shadow of it.

Two figures came around the bend, and slowed to a walk.

"A decoy," one whispered to the other. I recognized Charles's voice. "They didn't want you to know she had been moved, not that they expected you too, but still. Also, they assumed that if you escaped, you would try to get her out. Which you did. If I had come upon you faster than we could have avoided what just happened," he sighed.

"Charles?" I said.

"Jarvis?" Rose said.

"Yes?" Jarvis answered.

He's all right. Nothing has happened to him. My breathing slowed.

"What happened?" I asked.

"What happened," Charles began, "was Jarvis has been seen by half a dozen soldiers, when they know he wasn't even in the castle very long ago. Because of my high standing, after much argument, they gave him to me. I expect though, that I shall soon topple from that standing. Many of them appear to be growing suspicious. We need to get out of here, before things become any worse."

"And leave Mary behind? I've told you, I won't."

"What good will it do either you or her if you stay?"

"They said they would hurt her if I left."

"And yet here you are,"

I opened my mouth, but the words scared me. "Then I'm going back," I said, turning in the direction of my room.

"You must listen to sense!" Jarvis said, catching my arm.

"Betsy, that won't help," Rose interjected.

Some footsteps sounded in the corridor, and we all scattered to dark places. They died away, leaving their threatening echoes behind them.

"We don't have the time," Charles said, pleading with me.

"I'm not leaving the little girl in the hands of the killer!" I said.

"Betsy--" Jarvis said.

"Elizabeth, they won't dare to kill her at this present time. The kingdom is already uneasy. Some believe rebellion is brewing in Awaho, some think we are being attacked by spies from Ja-Runet. Some are suspicious of the king. I believe there will be even more suspicious by tomorrow."

I looked past Charles, staring at the signal tapestry in the long corridor.

It showed a girl, in a thin, flowing dress holding a basin of water in her hands. Surrounded by flowers, trees,

and green grass, her gaze held a faraway look in it. The basin tipped, and water spilled on the grass.

"Elizabeth? Have you heard what I said?"

"What? Oh, yes, I heard," I said, drawing my gaze from the girl, "But why will they grow more suspicious?"

"Because my birthday is tomorrow," Jarvis said, "Even I can see that. Thanks for remembering."

"Do not chide her," Charles said, "Things have been more confusing here, than in the forest. We must go."

I gave one last look to the tapestry, and then took the arm Charles held out to me.

For a brief time, the tapestry engulfed my thoughts. Why did they keep it so far away from people? Way back here, where no one ever came? That girl, forever holding her basin, as water came from it ever. I felt akin to her; while I did not watch things good and whole slipped from my life, and when I returned, they would be gone.

Only, as a picture on cloth, she would never need to return, and the basin would never be empty, as I feared that mine may.

* * *

"Try to act unworried," Charles whispered.

"Easy for you to say..." I muttered, staring across the courtyard. Even in my borrowed clothes, it didn't seem possible that they wouldn't recognize me.

"They won't expect you to be dressed as a boy."

Oh, they won't eh? Hasn't this been done before?

So much of this depended on what Charles thought that the general soldiers knew, and would be watching for.

My thoughts turned again towards Philip. When I had told Charles, he had turned away, saying, "All I can hope is that they will treat him well." He spoke through a silent sob of grief, the kind that burns inside, the kind you can't let escape, or you will lose all control.

My neck felt cold. I thought about my now shoulder-length hair, and wondered what my mother would have thought of that.

"Jonathan," a soldier said, walking up to Charles's horse. I bit my lip hard. The man rested his hand on the bridal. "Where are you going?"

"To Thelmor. I have business there."

"Why Thelmor?"

"It is my home town, Christopher."

"Do you have relatives there?"

"No," Charles said.

"Then why do you go?"

"I told you, I have business. It is not my need to explain to you what it is. I shall be back."

Charles's horse took a step forward, but the man still clung to the bridal. I recognized him. The easy smile that at most times he wore on his face had gone without leaving a trace.

"Jonathan," the man, Christopher, said, "Where are you going?"

"To Thelmor, as I have told you. I am also escorting that carriage," Charles said, nodding to the one that held Jarvis, Rose, and one of his Charles's friends and his friend's wife; it had already made it outside the castle walls. "Sir Richard Nialliv's wife wishes to be out of this castle, since it has grown...so...dangerous."

"Who's the boy?" Christopher shot a glance over me.

"A servant of hers, I do believe; but really, soldier, I do not know."

"Get on then," Christopher said with a jerk of his head.

"Thank you," Charles said.

"Not you, boy," Christopher said, grabbing the bridal of my horse in turn. "Who's your family?"

"I--I--" I stuttered.

"Well, spit it out," he said, looking at me impatiently.

"I don't know," I said.

"Why, your voice is young."

Sweat collected on my arms, the horse's sides felt hot.

"Let him go, Christopher," Charles said, almost across the drawbridge, looking back. "He's a bit addled in his brains, but his mistress will not be happy to hear that he was left behind."

"Get on then," Christopher said, eyeing me.

"Let me go!" The sounds of a struggle came from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder. Soldiers escorted Mary out of the door, and then up some steps to a different part of the courtyard.

"Behhhhtsy!" Mary called; I didn't know if she had seen me. I stopped.

"Come on, Gregory!" Charles called for me.

"Aren't you going to go, young boy?"

"I--"

"I sure hope your sister reappears soon," a man helping Mary along said, "I hate to think of what I may have to *do* to you."

I started to turn in my saddle. Charles's horse clattered back over the bridge, he came back for me, as I sat stock-still. "Come on, Gregory," he said.

"N-no..." I whispered, but he reached over and down, grabbing the bridal of my horse.

My fingers were intertwined with the brown hairs. I twisted them, turned them over and over.

"No, Charles," I said. "I've got to go back."

Charles yanked the bridal forward, shouted to my horse, and slapped its rump. With a snort it leapt forward.

"What, is her highness leaving??" Christopher's voice came as I went over the drawbridge. "I would come back, if I were you!" He shouted to me.

I reined in, the horse danced, still wanting to go on. Charles clobbered Christopher, who fell to the ground senseless. The carriage disappeared in the distance.

Charles said something to another soldier close by, he nodded. Then Charles came over the drawbridges, as calmly as anyone could wish.

"Come, Gregory," He said; the drawbridge lifted. Anger swelled up in me. It was his fault that I was out here; not with my sister as I should be. But then he looked at me, tears in his eyes. "I am sorry, Elizabeth. But your staying would have done no good."

I paused; looked again over my shoulder. The castle rose, tall and majestic. But as regal as it looked I knew it to be full of lies, deceit, evil, unfairness, and murderers.

I breathed in the fresh wild air of outside. Blinking repeatedly and wondering if I really did the right thing, I clucked to my horse and began again along the winding road.

CHAPTER 7

Charles muttered something, gazing at the forest as it drew nearer.

"Do you think anyone is following us?" I asked, looking over my shoulder for the twentieth time.

"No. And if there is anyone they would have shown themselves by now."

I'm staying with Marylyn and Rose. I'm staying. Staying.

I bit my lip. I had left Marylyn.

You didn't have a choice.

As if I couldn't have gotten the horse turned around and run back.

They wouldn't have let you back in. Charles said you were Sir Richard's wife's servant.

Who is this Sir Richard, anyway?

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes?"

"Come on. They need to get out."

* * *

"Betsy, I officially hate traveling in a carriage," Jarvis declared.

"Good for you," I said, feeling amused.

Rose smiled.

"Shh..." Charles warned.

Jarvis gave a grumbling look, but fell into silence.

Dappled green and yellow light filtered through the trees overhead. Birds twittered and sang; green showed every where. Spring appeared to have begun in earnest. But, with Triendo, one could never be sure.

The carriage door opened, and out stepped a man, taking my thoughts away from the scenery

"You!" I gasped.

"What?" Charles said with a frown.

"It's--him!"

"Why are you suddenly on my side?" Jarvis challenged.

Richard Nialliv grew red in the face.

"What do you the mean by these outbreaks?" Charles asked.

"He's the one who chased us! Forced us to leave! Ultimately, led to Marylyn's capture!" I said, growing more and more excited.

"I had no part in that!" The man named Richard said, still red, and now his fists clenched.

"Yes, you did!" Jarvis and I both said.

"Stop!" Charles said. "We're all friends here."

"I'm sorry for this great misunderstanding, Charles," Richard said.

"I am wondering how it came to be," Charles said, looking hard at him.

"Me too," Jarvis muttered.

"I came upon them unexpectedly, and--" Richard continued.

"Richard, we can discuss this later. Go on with what I've told you to do."

Richard bowed to Charles, and then re-entered the carriage.

"Come," Charles said, mounting his horse. "We'll discuss this some other time. Just trust me; Richard has

been my close friend for many years. I can trust him. And you can too. Let us go."

* * *

"Betsy!" Someone shook my shoulder. "Betsy! Come on, Betsy, wake up!"

"Umuf," I grunted, and the shaking stopped.

"Betsy," Jarvis said, sounding like he prepared to begin a lecture. "What if I really needed you to get up now?"

"You would sound more scared," I said, rolling over. I propped myself up on my elbow and looked at Jarvis, Rose, and Charles, seated near a small and cheerful fire.

"Well," Jarvis said with a realistic sigh, "You didn't get up when I tried to get you up, and now Charles has eaten all of the bacon."

The smell of breakfast came to me as a slight breeze shifted its way through the green leaves of the forest.

Rose laughed.

I rolled my eyes. "If anyone has eaten my share of breakfast, it'll be you, Jarvis."

"But come, your highness," Charles's serious face brought me back to the realistic again. "You must eat,

because the food is not gone," a slight smile came onto his face.

I started to take off my blanket, but shivered as the cold hit my skin. I slapped it closed again. Light filtered through the trees, but further off, the trees were wrapped in mist.

Jarvis laughed at me. "Come on, Elizabeth May! Do I need to take those blankets off for myself?"

"No," I said. "Brrrrr..." I muttered, crossing my arms and rubbing.

And yesterday I thought spring had come.

Jarvis got me some food and then said, "What are we going to do, Charles?"

Rose sat watching us, as silent as she always was.

"I'm going to get Rose to the other girls and Thomas today."

"Why?" Rose asked; bolder than I had anticipated her being.

"We don't want you hurt," Jarvis answered; I found myself surprised again.

Charles continued, "I should be able to make it there and back all in one day, and I'll try to think up some way of building an army. We may get the people behind us, I

don't know. Most likely, we'll retreat far to the north-east first, and play hide-and-go-seek with John's men while some of us recruit people we can. Philip will get out of the castle as soon as a good chance presents itself."

"So, what do Betsy and I do?" Jarvis asked.

"Rest, I suppose."

Jarvis gave me one of his looks.

Charles must have seen the look because he added, "Or you can wonder around--if your sister will go with you."

I stifled a laugh, and when Jarvis looked at me, I pretended to choke on my biscuit.

"Yes, yes, you're fooling me," Jarvis said, but he didn't linger on it.

"Anyway," Charles said, "If I don't get back tonight, just make sure you're around this campsite at noon. Don't light the fire anymore. The mist made it possible today."

Charles got up, went into some of the trees, and came out leading his and my horses; the only two we had.

"Are you ready?" Charles asked of Rose. Rose nodded.

"Bye," she said, hugging me. Something stuck in my throat as she said her goodbye, and I hugged her tight. An unwanted thought ran across my mind.

Will I ever see her again?

She walked towards Jarvis; appearing a bit uncertain.
He held out his arms and she hugged him too.

"Goodbye, Jarvis."

"Good--" the word rasped and fell dead.

Charles helped Rose mount, she smiled to both of us
and waved as her horse started off.

Jarvis and I waved back, and stood still until all
traces of her, sound and sight, were gone. Tears created a
burning in my eyes. We looked to each other, and Jarvis
seemed as shaken as I felt.

"Well," he said, appearing at a lost. "It'll just be
us for a day. What do you want to do?"

"Um..." I said.

"How about an introduction to sword fighting?" Jarvis
asked.

"Why?"

"Because we have nothing else to do, and you say you
don't know, and it seems like you ought too."

"Oh, all right."

Jarvis handed me a stick with some sincerity, and I
bit back the sarcastic comment that rose in my mouth.
Today just didn't seem like the day for that.

* * *

"Don't mmove," a voice hissed from the bushes.

Jarvis and I froze.

Great. Charles doesn't come back at night, Jarvis
wants to take a walk and now--

"Who are yhou?" The voice sounded strange, as if the person spoke lower than their usual voice.

The edge and sharpness of the Triendian language seemed to be smoothed out; blurred.

"Who are you?" Jarvis asked, turning his head towards the sound with care.

An arrow exploded from the bushes, and sank into a tree trunk.

"I asked fhirst," the voice continued, but it sounded different.

"I am--uh, Jar--"

I looked at Jarvis in alarm. Did he plan to say his name?

"Jar-rr--" he stuttered, "--son."

"Garson? That doesn't sound Treendine."

I peered towards the bushes. I could not see the person who spoke to us.

"No," Jarvis said, his face reddening, "Jason. I meant Jason."

"No doubt," a figure rose from the tall underbrush.

Dark, large eyes peered out from a tanned face; black hair straggled to shoulders, one bare, one covered in soft deerskin.

I took a second look.

"Why," Jarvis said, "You're a girl!"

"What's it to you if I am a girl?" she asked, a frown across her pretty forehead, but her accent had a soothing sound to it. Then a slight smile crossed her face, "I'm the one with the arrows, am I not?"

She stepped from the tall undergrowth, and stood before us.

The deerskin wrapped around her slender body, creating a straight dress, and she wore soft shoes on her feet. Her copper skin seemed to glow with warmth. Her large, soft black eyes studied us with a calmness that enveloped me for a moment, before Jarvis's voice brought me back to the sharpness of reality.

"So, what is your name?"

"I am Lheil Jharo, and I wonder what two soft and pampered castle people are doing in the forest."

"We don't really have to time to explain--" Jarvis began.

The girl's black eyebrows rose, her bow rising along with them. It seemed odd how beautiful and harmless she looked, while she held a weapon of death.

Jarvis stopped; the eyebrows and bow lowered again. "What is yhour name, lhady? Is this yhour husband?"

"Oh no!" I exclaimed, looking to Jarvis in shock. His ears reddened. "My name is Betsy," I said, "and this is my brother."

The big eyes looked sorrowful.

"I had a brother," she said in a low, wistful voice, "but I don't know where he is."

"You're--you're one of those--Awatos aren't you?" Jarvis said.

Now the girl's dark eyes flashed. "Yes I am, rude boy. I am Lheil Jharo, of the Awahos. I know nhow fhor a fhact that yhou are a Treendine because yhou speak like a fhool."

Jarvis grew red in the face, and opened his mouth to send back an angry answer. The girl raised her bow in a swift moment, pointing it at Jarvis's heart, her eyes hardening.

But then her eyes grew confused, she lowered the bow, and spoke in her soft voice again, "I have nho good reason or right to kill yhou."

"Well good," Jarvis said, and I shot him a glance that I hoped would silence him.

A frown crossed her face again. "Yhour fhace looks fhamiliar to me..." she said, studying Jarvis.

"Yhou're Jarvhis Flowain!"

"Yes, and?" Jarvis said, taunting.

"Uh--Jarvis--" I began.

"Mhy fhather will want to see yhou."

"Uh--what?" Jarvis stuttered.

I felt the same. "You--like him?"

"Thanks a lot, Betsy."

"I mean--what?" I couldn't think of what to say.

"Mhy fhather says that yhour fhather was a good king, Jarvhis."

Unexpected tears came to my eyes.

"Yes..." Jarvis said, in a softer voice than I thought I had ever heard him use before.

"And, we're on yhour side, if yhou will be a king like him."

She seemed to wait for an answer.

"I--I can try."

"That is good enough fhor me. Will yhou come to see mhy fhather?"

"Wait a moment," Jarvis said, "What is your father doing here--in fact, what are you doing here? Your people are supposed to stay in that strip of land--away from--from..." Jarvis grew red in the face.

"As I said, yhou speak like a fhool. But I will not hold it against yhou. Will yhou come?"

"Maybe we should go back and see if Charles--" I whispered.

The girl heard and said, "Nho, yhou mhust come alone."

"And be murdered? No thanks," Jarvis snorted, his face still red.

The girl frowned, "We would not be dishonorable enough to do that. If I planned to kill yhou, I would do so nhow. I mhust request fhirmly that yhou come with me."

She spoke in a calm voice, as if she thought there to be nothing alarming about her last words, as I did.

"We will come with you," Jarvis said, after a moment's hesitation.

"You as well, Behtsy?"

"Yes, I will come," I answered, even though Jarvis spoke for both of us.

The girl stood a moment, seeming to expect something. Then she said, "My nname is Lheil."

"Then, yes, I will come--Lheil." I said, tripping over and mispronouncing the strange name.

Lheil gave me her first smile.

* * *

"So...uh," Jarvis said, after many minutes of silence, "Where are we going?"

"To my fhather," Lheil ducked under a low-hanging branch, and said no more.

"And...Where is he?" Jarvis asked, following her under the branch, leaving me to duck last.

"That way--" Lheil said, pointing ahead; looking perplexed and amused.

We continued forward.

"So--are we going all the way to your--um-- settlement?"

"Do yhou always ask so mmany questions?" Lheil asked, turning around, still looking amused.

"Well--I--um, usually people talk when they're together...I guess, and I was--uh--wondering those things so I asked them."

Lheil half-smiled, shaking her head.

"What?" Jarvis asked, sounding a bit angry now.

"Yhou Treendines mhust know everything, mhust yhou?" She said, "Or, at least try. Yhou can nhever know everything, no mhatteer how hard yhou try."

It took me a moment to grasp what she meant--feeling around her strange accent.

"Sure, but why not try?" Jarvis asked.

"Just so long as yhou know yhou can't know everything."

She turned again, and kept walking. Neither one of us dared ask her another question.

* * *

When we at last reached their camp we saw that it lived in almost absolute silence, even the few children made no noise. They sat, saying nothing, not even playing.

"What's wrong with them?" Jarvis asked me in a whisper.

"Maybe nothing," I answered.

"Nho, there is nnothing wrong with them. We just know to be quiet. Mhany things can be heard when yhou are so."

Jarvis grew red in the face again.

Small structures dotted the small clearing, and it seemed that they sat in a hole of one or two feet deep, because the doors leading in dipped down. I couldn't see what held them up, but each little hut appeared to be made of rushes.

We headed towards the far end of the clearing. Here there rose a tall hut, covered in pelts of deerskin.

It became clear that we planned to go in there. My heart began to beat quicker, fears rushed into my mind.

"Here is where my fhather is."

"So," Jarvis said, unruffled, "How do we know that your father won't kill us?"

Lheil frowned.

"I told yhou we would not harm yhou."

"Yes, but many people can say that without any intention of actually carrying that plan out. And you said you hated the Triendians."

Lheil's face flushed. "I did not say that. And I try not to think it."

"Wha--" Jarvis started.

"Lheil, ehyeso plahnihum kiso?"

A voice came from inside the structure, startling us all. It sounded deep, full, and round.

"Treendines, fhather," Lheil answered, ducking in.

Not knowing what else we could do, we followed.

"Triandians? Why have yhou brought them here?" The voice only sounded surprised, not rebuking.

It took a moment for my eyes to become accustomed to the dimness of the dwelling we entered. Sparse of furniture, it felt larger than it looked from the outside. Most of the belongings; food, fishing tackle, a couple of large bows, quivers of arrows, and a small assortment of chests and boxes lined the furthest wall. Wooden beams were anchored in the dirt floor, and stretched over our heads.

Sitting a low stool near a dead fire, sat a man who at first glance appeared to be quite young.

But as I studied him I discovered the wrinkles on his face and the silver-hued hairs hanging near the front of his face. The rest of his hair was pure black.

"Fhather," Lheil continued, "This is Behtsy and Jarvhis Flowain."

"Indeed," her father said in a thoughtful tone.

His keen eyes searched our faces as he sat in perfect stillness, studying us. The way he sat so erect seemed like an exertion I did not want to make.

"Welcome, Jarvis and Elizabeth," he said at last, his voice quiet, slow, and stern, but not in an unkind way. "I am Johan Jharo, leader of the Awahos. I hear yhou have 'disappeared'."

Goodness, does he get right down to business, I thought.

"Yes sir," Jarvis said.

"But I also have the idea that the king is lying."

Jarvis and I exchanged glances.

"Why would that be, sir?" Jarvis asked.

"For one thing, on the whole, I believe yhour uncle to be a liar. He is certainly a most--"

Jarvis moved to speak, but Johan lifted his hand.

"Let me continue."

"No sir," Jarvis said, and at that I knew that my brother wasn't very much changed by being in the presence someone who appeared to be a wise, stern man.

"I am sorry," Jarvis said. "But I cannot have the man called my uncle. He is not, sir."

Johan looked a bit surprised at having his will crossed, however slightly. He regained his composure, however, and nodded.

"As I said, he is a liar, and a cruel ruler. That is why we are not in the small strip of land he has allotted us. We are the rebellion."

The rebellion? That seemed an odd way to put it, but it made sense.

"And," Johan continued, "we have been looking for yhou."

This surprised me.

"Why?" I asked.

"When someone disappears from a castle, it usually means a murder, or an escape. We hoped for an escape. Tell me: What has really been going on at Nyloran castle?"

Not knowing what else to do, Jarvis launched into his story. I found, to my surprise, that I already trusted this quiet man. My more reasonable side challenged this, but I could argue well. He looked too much like an Awaho to be Triendian, and the Awahos were punished in cruel ways for crossing out of their allotment of land.

How they could have managed to get out at all surprised me much. The camp seemed to be mostly populated

by men, but a few women and children also abided in it. Thinking back, it didn't seem that there were enough for a rebellion, although I knew that their small strip of land was populated almost to a breaking point.

Jarvis finished with our escape from the castle.

Johan nodded. "But yhou have not told all, young prince."

"No, sir."

"You have not told who the king is."

"Charles believes he is from Ja-Runet," I said.

"So; what are you doing?" Jarvis asked.

"I have told yhou. We are the rebellion. The king has trounced on us enough. Two weeks ago, the guard on the land became significantly less. We took that chance to gather together and break over the border. We have left most of our wives and children in the land."

"What did you plan to do?" Jarvis asked.

"We had no clear plan--never a good idea, but we didn't know when the soldiers would return, so we left in haste, no plans made."

"I don't think you have a large enough force...sir," Jarvis said, stuttering a little under the man's gaze.

"Do you think that is all we have?" Johan asked. "We are smarter than you Triandians make out."

Jarvis's face grew red again, but not in anger. King John often emphasized the stupidity of the Awahos, because they followed a god they claimed created all of the earth.

I did not see why this was grounds for the accusation of stupidity. As a general rule, Jarvis and I paid little heed to it.

"I never said that," Jarvis said.

"Do you have plans of your own?" Johan asked, dropping the subject again.

"No," Jarvis said.

"Sir," I said, "why did Lheil insist that we come alone?"

"It is a normal rule," Johan said.

"But why did you want us at all?" Jarvis asked.

Johan just looked at us for a moment. "Because you are the true king, Jarvis."

If Jarvis had been younger, he would have squirmed under the man's intense gaze.

"Are you ready?"

"Am I ready for what?" Jarvis almost snapped.

"For being a king. A leader. It is a hard job to do right. It is a hard position to live in. They watch yhour every move, and they expect yhou to get it all right. Which yhou can't possibly do. They will blame yhou for the things that go wrong, and expect that yhou can fix them. Are yhou ready for that?"

"I--I--" Jarvis stopped, a thoughtful look on his face. "I don't know, sir."

Johan again dropped the conversation. "There is another reason, Jarvis, or, in reality, two. The first is simple, and probably fairly obvious. You know yhou have been wronged. And yhou know now that the king has no right to be where he is. But yhou have no army, and no way of doing anything against him."

"I don't know if I'd say that," Jarvis said.

"Still, you spoke of no army."

"No sir,"

"I have one."

A moment passed. "What do you mean by that?" Jarvis asked.

Johan leaned forward. "I am willing to use my army for a king who will rule justly."

"What is your idea of just?" Jarvis asked.

"Such as yhour father ruled. Such as yhour elder brother ruled."

"But--but, I don't know *how* they ruled," Jarvis said, his voice rising. "I was only eight when Frederic died. Why does everyone assume I know what to do?"

Never before had this side of Jarvis been revealed to me; I saw now the fears and nervousness he covered up with his tardiness and cocky ways. I felt sorry for him.

"You aren't expected to know everything," Johan said to him.

"Yes I am!" Jarvis said, sounding frantic. "Charles talked to me as if I was twenty--I'm only thirteen, and I don't have a clue as to what I should be doing."

Silence settled around us.

"I know what yhou mean, young king."

"No you don't! You know what you are doing!"

"I haven't always."

Jarvis stopped, ducking his head. I felt as if I intruded upon a private moment.

"Yhou will learn, Jarvis Flowain. Yhou will learn." The aging man said.

Jarvis took a shuddering breath, and raised his head. Two tears glistened on his cheeks.

Something passed between the two, and I felt as if I had missed something important, but it did not matter, because it was not meant for me.

I would never have to lead a kingdom.

"There is another reason," Johan said, taking a breath. "I do not know how yhou will take it. I am not a man to waste words, and it sometimes does not work too my advantage."

A faint smile crossed Jarvis's face.

"But, as I see no reason to waste words, I will tell yhou straight out. You know of yhour aunt, Elizabeth Nari,"

"Yes, she's the one who ran away," I said, jumping back into the conversation.

"She could not stand the pressure of being the leader of a nation. As there was no elder brother, the lot fell to her. Supposedly, she married the man who has the throne. Yhou and I know this is not true."

"Is she still alive?" I questioned.

"That is anyone's guess. But I've gotten off of the point, which I rarely do. I am not used to being asked so many questions. Lhissie--as she came to be known--married my brother."

"Your brother?" Jarvis and I gasped together.

"Yes," Johan said, sighing. "She married my brother, Tohmas. They lived with the tribe for awhile, but when John assumed the throne, it became a nerve-wracking experience for us all. Finally, Tohmas, who had turned out paler than me, and could be mistaken for a Triendian, if his brand was not seen--"

"Brand?" Jarvis asked

Anger came into Johan's eyes. "Lheil," he said, calling his silent daughter forward.

Lheil's eyes looked moist as she moved back towards us. "But I hate it fhather."

"You should not hate, Lheil," her father said, "they must know, and they are not the cause of it," her father said, but I could see his own sorrow and anger portrayed through his eyes.

Lheil walked around the fire, reluctant, and held the back of her right hand up to us.

Jarvis and I looked at it.

A scar with the letter 'A' showed on her wrist, old but permanent. I felt sick looking at it.

"This is how they make sure that even the lighter of us are not allowed to escape the land," Johan continued;

Lheil took her hand away. Extreme distaste and disgust showed on Jarvis's face.

"That's--that's so wrong," I said, unable to think of a better word.

Johan turned his keen gaze on me. "We are the conquered. We must be held in a grip of iron."

"No, you mustn't," Jarvis said. "I won't allow it."

Johan smiled.

"I mean it," Jarvis said, and an idea seemed to be shaping itself in his mind. "Johan, if I ever regain my throne, I will give you Triendo's eastern territory, beyond the land of Revollin."

Even Johan did not expect this. His eyes grew wide, and Lheil gasped.

"You do not mean that, prince," he said.

"Yes I do," Jarvis said. "It is not in the interest of the king of Triendo to have a group of people under the control of a foreign country, to be herded into a small space like cattle. I will give you your own land."

The two Awahos just stared for a moment at my brother.

"Oh, fhather," Lheil gasped.

Johan sat still, staring at Jarvis, but then I saw tears begin to form in his eyes.

"Yhou," he said, looking straight into Jarvis's eyes, "will do fine, Jarvis Flowain. More than political wit, or a strong body, or a smart mind, a king needs a heart."

The Awaho leader took a deep breath; "I have just seen yhours."

CHAPTER 8

"They got safely over the border, but when six months had gone by, we had lost all contact with them. The watch on the border grew rigorous, and we assumed that they feared to be found out. I grew used to not seeing my brother, but I missed him and my new sister, and their pretty little daughter. Besides that, John began to get us working in our own fields, forcing us to plant huge crops and then hand more than half of it over to him. Winters were hard. Then, he began taking us over the border to work on Triendo's roads and cities. Lheil's mother died

while I was away one spring, leaving Lheil on her own at three."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Johan looked at me, and then continued. "From then on I was a bother to the whole workforce committee. I needed to stay with the little girl and care for her, making me unable to do some of the hard work. Then one day, when Lheil was six, a workforce manager grew angry when I gave my excuse. They took my thirteen-year-old son instead. He never came back."

Silence settled around us again. There didn't seem to be anything to say.

"I had a brother; but I don't know where he is."

I saw Jarvis's face screwed up in concentration, and then his eyes widened. "Sir, what false names would they have assumed?"

Johan looked confused.

"What names would they have told people, since there others would be a give-away."

"Oh," Johan said, "they took on the names; Lizzie Jaray, Thomas Jaray, and Lilly Jaray."

"Lilly!" Jarvis exclaimed.

"Jaray!" I said at the same time, dismayed.

"Sir, we know Lilly--" Jarvis began.

"Oh no!" I said.

"You know my cousin??" Lheil said, her face brightening.

"Yes! She--" Jarvis said.

"Jarvis, this is terrible!" I said.

"What?"

"Stop!" Johan's voice broke up the babble of voices.

"Oh, Johan," I said. "I think John--the king--has--"
I faltered, unable to go on.

"What is it, Betsy?" Jarvis said with concern. The joy had gone out of everyone's faces.

"Charles showed me something," I said, dropping my gaze. "Johan I think--your brother is--dead."

* * *

"Dead? What do you mean?" Jarvis asked, looking horrified.

At that moment a young Awaho, gasping for breath, burst in among us.

"Johan," he said, giving a slight bow. He started like a rabbit as he saw us, and gave an exclamation in his own language.

Johan asked something.

The man answered, among his words I heard "Treendine."

Jarvis and I looked at each other. Johan looked at us.

Johan posed another question, and the man answered again. Lheil looked at us, and I wondered if her eyes went wider, or if she just studied us.

Johan spoke again, it sounded like a command. The other man gave a small bow and left the tent.

"It appears, Jarvis and Elizabeth, that some of my men have stumbled upon yhour guide."

"Guide!" Jarvis said, "Hardly!--Err, I mean...He's much more than that, sir."

"They haven't hurt him, have they, Johan?" I asked, fear building up inside me. Lheil had asked questions first, but we were both children. What would they have done if they'd stumbled upon a grown man when they expected no one?

"No," Johan said. "We never think it is right to first kill someone before finding out their type. Even after that we rarely do. Come, let us go. Korhan will bring him to us."

He rose and went out of the tent. Jarvis, Lheil, and I followed behind.

I squinted as I entered the bright world again. The rays of the sun felt warm, but a chilly breeze swept the camp as we followed Johan.

Charles walked towards us, Korhan beside. Although Korhan held his sword, Charles walked free, and relief crossed his face when he saw us.

But before any word passed between us, he bowed to Johan.

"Hello, Triendian," Johan said in his slow, soft voice. "What might yhour name be?"

"I am Charles Siwel," Charles answered, looking uncomfortable. "What shall I call you?"

"I am Johan,"

"King--?"

"No," Johan said, "I am just called Johan."

"But you are the leader?"

"Yes."

"Of what--may I ask?" Charles said, glancing to us.

"The rebellion."

"So it is true," Charles mused.

"Yes," Johan answered.

"What do you plan to do with me, Kin--Johan?" Charles asked.

"I plan to help yhou--yhou and your king."

Charles frowned, looked at Johan, and then at Jarvis, who reddened. I grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

Korhan uttered an exclamation that sounded much like our, "What?"

Johan spoke to him, but the young man's forehead wrinkled into a deep frown.

"Come," Johan said, motioning to Charles, who came forward under the frowning Korhan's gaze.

"I--I don't understand," Charles said, as we got further away from the other Awaho.

"Neither does he," Johan said, "and, in a way, neither do I. But I am sure it is the right thing."

Charles, Johan, and Jarvis headed back to the main shelter, but as I got close, Lheil tapped my shoulder.

"Behtsy," she said, "Strategy is fhor mhen. Are yhou hungry?"

I nodded. "Th-Thank you," I said. As we walked to a different part of the camp, a small girl stared at me, and then began to shadow us.

"Malhara," Lheil said, turning, and then she spoke some words of command.

The little girl shook her head, and pointed to me.
"Lhari! Lhari!" She said, continuing to point. Then she
added another word. "Lhamra lhari!"

Lheil appeared to agree with her, but it sounded as if
she repeated her same command.

Little faces began appearing out of the low, dark
doorways. They stared at me.

I began to feel warm, from embarrassment or the hot
sun, I could not tell. As Lheil continued to argue with
the girl, I reached up and took off my cap. My hair fell,
touching my shoulders and tickling my neck.

The girl gasped, along with many of those peering
faces, even Lheil stared at me for a moment.

"Merho! Lhari merha ayis! Lharma! Lhamra!" Malhara
said, her voice nearing a shriek of delight.

Lheil face grew red, she muttered something, spoke in
a loud voice to Malhara and the other children who looked
on, and then caught my arm.

"I am sorry," she said, tugging me forward. "It is
nhot often they see a girl fhoreigner. Nhow, I will take
you to eat."

After my meal, we were sent to gather water. As I attempted to pull my laden bucket back out of the stream, the sound of hoof beats came from behind me. I turned, dropping the rope altogether

A horse came swept up, blowing. Two men rode it. I recognized the face of Philip Zarnor, but he was being supported by the other man, who rode behind him.

"Philip!" I said, delighted. I ran forward. "How--"

Philip dismounted.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Philip opened his mouth to speak, but he wavered on his feet and fell into my outstretched arms. Lheil helped me lay him on the ground, and I bent over him, tears stinging the back of my eyes. Philip's white face brought back the unwanted image of my own brother.

"Bets..."

"Philip!" The other man dismounted, tearing me away from the awful memory, and recognized my former acquaintance, Timothy Arona.

"Timothy?" I asked.

"Aye," Timothy said, looking at Philip with concern.

"His wound has hardly closed over...Your highness," he

added as an after thought. Philip took a gasping breath, green eyes staring at nothing.

"Lheil--" I began, but she already ran through the trees.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Timothy, still gazing into Philip's vacant stare.

"He--he brought me--or recruited me. I wanted to help," Timothy said, blushing.

"But why?" I asked.

"Char-uls," Philip rasped.

"Philip, it's me, Elizabeth," I said, but at this his eyes clouded over, he frowned.

Johan, Charles, Jarvis, and Lheil burst on us.

"Philip!" Charles said, running over and falling to the ground. "Philip, what's wrong? Where are you hurt?" Charles asked.

"Nu-o," Philip said, shaking his head. He rose off the ground in his earnestness, grabbing at Charles's hand. "Listen! Charles...they're--they're...coming."

* * *

"Coming?" Jarvis reacted first. "Who? How many?"

"Shush," Charles said, attending to his friend.

Philip slipped backwards, and into unconsciousness. Johan came forward, holding a bag of medicines. Charles touched the forehead of his friend gently before turning on Timothy.

"What do you have to say?" He asked in a stern voice.

Timothy quailed, "Sir Jonathan, I--"

"That's Charles," Jarvis said, also stern.

"Jarvis," I whispered, pleading.

"Charles then," Timothy said, gaining some measure of confidence. "There's a group of soldiers, about a hundred--"

"One hundred??" Jarvis came close to shouting.

"That's all?"

"Well, yes, Jarvis," Charles said, "They don't know you've met up with the Awahos. They may not even know that these Awahos have escaped. One hundred is being sent out to find you, me, Rose and Elizabeth. Normally it would be enough."

"Normally!" Jarvis said, a strange light coming into his eyes.

Charles's eyes shared that light.

What? I couldn't help thinking.

Charles and Jarvis's eyes locked together. Charles nodded.

* * *

"Left! Left, left!" Jarvis said, his voice reaching a fever pitch.

Even in the cool of the evening, sweat dripped in my eyes. Charles tapped my side, smiling.

"You're dead again, Betsy!" Jarvis said, laughing.

"Humph," I grunted.

"It is good you'll not be in the battle," he continued, jumping down from his rock. "I don't know why Charles bothers with attempting to teach a girl the art of swordplay."

"Art!" I said, "So you are Jarvis Flowain; artist. Is that so? And you're the one who--"

Jarvis ignored me.

"The reason I am teaching her is because she may need to defend herself. What if we do not win?" Charles said in his quiet way.

Jarvis seemed not to hear, and began twirling his sword, a thing Charles disapproved of.

"Let me have a turn now," he said.

Charles sighed.

I climbed atop the rock, and sat to watch a much more interesting sword fight than my own. All of the traces of a smile left Jarvis's face as he got ready to fight a knight eight years his senior.

I still knew little of swords, so that flashing and ring of them baffled me. Even in this mock battle, I could scarce see why neither one of them got hit. Jarvis whirled here and there, sometimes spinning around to ward off an invisible enemy when Charles commanded.

When at last the fight ended Jarvis and Charles just stood a moment, looking at each other and breathing in the cool air. Jarvis wiped his face with his hand.

"You have talent," Charles said at last, and Jarvis looked up in surprise. "You do not yet have the practice that backs a good swordsman, but you are talented."

Jarvis's eyes shone. "Th-Thank you," he said.

* * *

"I wish this wasn't necessary," I said, when Charles, Jarvis, and I were walking back to the camp, carrying loads of water.

"What?" Jarvis asked.

"Jumping on them like this, killing these normal soldiers. How I wish John hadn't been so--so--heartless."

"It is hard to have a heart, when you have never been shown love," Charles said.

I looked at him in surprise.

"In my investigation of John on the island of Ja-Runet, I found that he was well known as Jeehown, the son of a drunken father. He often ran away, the people said, and then his father would beat him."

"They did nothing to stop it?" I gasped.

"Ja-Runet is full of heartless people. It was 'none of their business'. He's hurting, Elizabeth. More than you know."

We walked in silence.

We reached the camp, and Jarvis went ahead.

"You have been blessed with a great gift, Elizabeth." Charles said, without looking at me, "The love that binds you to these people, your brothers and sisters, is not something that should be taken lightly. Hold it to you, no matter what goes wrong, and it will hold you up."

* * *

"They are near now Charles," Timothy said, running towards us. "They still hold their steadfast block of a shape, but I think they will spread out soon."

"Good,"

Jarvis gazed intently into nothing, frowning, and remained silent. I wondered what went through his mind. His mood seemed strange to me; unnatural. He had become so different from the boy I thought I knew; more than a signal birthday could account for.

He turned, smiled to me, and said, "I'll see you in a bit, Betsy."

My breath caught in my throat as he and Charles started out, walking through the trees. I turned and fled. Not into the camp, but back; away from where the fighting would go on. I couldn't make myself go further.

He'll get back. He'll be all right. I stopped, and looked over my shoulder. No sound yet.

I have to know. I can't cower away from it. My brother is out there.

I turned, disobeying Charles, and crept forward again. Every movement of mine seemed to result in a crack, swish, or rustle.

The worse thing that can happen is one of the silent shadow-men called Awahos discover I'm here.

For awhile, it didn't occur to me that one of John's men might see me instead. When it did, I sank down, nestling myself in the fragrant undergrowth.

Voices. I strained my ears. One of them sounded like Jarvis. A shout, and then I heard the sounds of sword. I was sick in the bushes.

Someone blundered close beside me.

I looked up; a soldier stared in my eyes. He held a bow in his hand. I never could afterwards remember what went through my head, but the next instant, it seemed, I found myself on my feet, sword in hand. The arrow struck the bushes, I grabbed the bow and pulled, attempting to wrestle it from the man's grasp.

He reached for his arrows, and I leaped against him and we fell over. I grabbed the nest of feathers, yanked the arrows out, and jumped away.

All of my movements felt jerky and as if they did not belong to me. The serene forest, birds twittering, something rustling through the underbrush close by, golden sunlight slanting through the trees offset our desperate fight in a brutal way. I dropped the arrows and stepped on them, their straight shafts snapping underfoot. The man drew his sword and ran forward, before giving a jerk and falling, another arrow snapping under him. I believe he died instantly.

As I attempted to keep my stomach where it belonged, a hand fell on my shoulder. I looked into the brown face of one of the Awaho men.

He frowned at me, and jerked his thumb towards the direction of the camp, where Lheil, the older men, the women, and the young children stayed.

But Jarvis...the words formed on my lips, but I never said them. The man disappeared back into the trees.

I looked at the man on the ground.

He's dead. Just like Frederic. He's gone. This is wrong! Wrong!

He planned to kill you, too...

I found tears on my cheeks. I didn't belong here. Did Jarvis? Could he kill without guilt at all, just like the Awaho?

Jarvis come back, don't go...You're only thirteen!

Why had Charles let him go? This couldn't be where my brother belonged.

My thoughts overwhelming me, I turned and ran back towards the camp. A red bird flashed across my path, I almost trod on a snake.

At last, I blundered into the camp, falling onto the ground, crying, and I didn't know why.

"Behtsy?" Lheil came up to me. "What's wrong? Are they losing?"

I shook my head, unable to stop my tears. I wanted to erase the years. Jarvis was too old now. I wanted him back as a child. I wanted my father and mother.

"Where is my most-favorite-daughter, Elizabeth?"

"I'm your only Elizabeth, Father," I laughed.

"Well, of course," my father answered, "with you, who would need another one?"

"STOP IT!" The scream of my mind came out as a hoarse whisper.

Lheil knelt beside me, saying something, but I could not hear what she said. My own whirling memories blocked out everything. I wanted to block out the memories, pay attention to what Lheil said, live like a normal person. Even as a peasant. Father and mother, siblings. No plots, no evil, no death...

Lheil's arms where around me, she tried to help me rise. Her arms felt warm compared with my own, warm and comforting. At last I let her help me up and lead me to a dark little hut half buried in the earth. I lay down on

the animal skins, still sobbing. Sudden light lit the place I lay in, and then darkness closed around me.

Alone.

* * *

"Behtsy! Behtsy!"

Light flooded the dark hut like a river; straight down the middle, leaving dark on both sides. I shut my eyes.

"Come on, yhour highness!" Lheil's voice contained more happiness than I ever remembered hearing in it before.

"What?" I asked, opening my eyes. "Have they won? Jarvis--?" The name stuck in my throat.

"Yes, yes!" Lheil smiled at me. "They've scattered the group, and Jarvhis is fine. A runner came and said that yhou and I could go. And," she stopped, smiling, "mhy cousin and yhour sibrings have also come."

"Whatever for?" I said, getting up.

"Lhily was curious about what went on," Lheil said with a shrug, although she looked a bit baffled herself. "So, she came. Some of our soldiers stopped her. The others were with her."

"Wait--Lilly...how do you know..."

"Charles explained it all to my father, at the meeting," a few tears rose in Lheil's eyes, but she smiled to me. "It is nice to finally meet my cousin."

"Does she know where her mother is?"

Lheil shook her head, appearing uncertain. "No," she said. "She didn't know she still had one. She thought she was an Awaho orphan they brought to the castle. That means--" Lheil turned her head, remaining silent for a moment. "Thomas was soon found out."

* * *

"Richard, we can work this out!" Charles's raised voice came to my ears.

Richard? I thought. He's returned?

"Stay here," I whispered to Rose, Lheil, Lhily, and Timothy. "I'll find out if this is a good time."

"No we can't," Richard answered, his voice sounding hard and icy.

"You said--" Jarvis began, but Charles must have silenced him.

"So, what do you plan to do? You've sworn to help the king."

"Yes, and guess who that is?"

I came out of the trees and saw them talking a few yards away from where the forest began.

"What do you want?"

I began walking towards them, trying to make sense of their conversation.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Even though I was now quite close, they started at my voice. But Richard reacted fastest. He whirled, sword in hand. All too late I noticed that they all held swords, and that Charles and Jarvis were keeping Richard at bay with them, even though it looked as if they had not been used.

I stood, rooted to the spot, staring at the death held in Richard's hand. He paused a moment, staring into my eyes, and then glittering death plummeted towards me.

* * *

Something hit me, and I fell to the ground. Someone screamed. No pain. A weight fell on top of me. Through the mist of my eyes I saw Richard turn and run, blood-stained sword in hand.

My jerkin became soaked. I smelled blood. Where was the pain?

Someone moaned. The weight lifted off of me. A blackness seemed to be before my eyes.

A scream again.

I sat up, and the world seemed to spin before it jerked to halt, everything coming into sharp focus.

Jarvis half-lay, half-sat, close beside me; his mouth drawn in a straight line. Silent tears made pathways down his cheeks, but when he gave a gasp for breath, a choked sob came out. A broad red stain ran across left side and chest.

His grey eyes locked into mine.

No! my mind screamed at me. Blood covered everything. The front of my jerkin, the grass, Jarvis.

But it was his blood, not mine.

CHAPTER 9

"No!" I screamed, "NO!" I could not wrench my gaze from Jarvis's face. Blood pooled on the green grass.

Water poured from the basin...

Lheil, Timothy, Rose, and Lhily ran onto the scene, all of them with wide eyes and paling faces.

Charles said, "Lheil! Where is your father?"

"He started moving the whole force deeper into the forest yesterday," Lheil said.

"Timothy, quick, you must find them!"

"But Charles, I--"

"Go!"

"Please let him catch the main force..." Charles murmured as he ripped off his shirt sleeves, attempting to slow the flow of blood with the fabric.

Jarvis thrashed and moaned as Charles tried to bind the wound with what little fabric he had.

"You're all right..." Charles said, with more gentleness in his voice than he had ever used before.

He placed his hand on my brother's head, for what purpose, I could not see. Jarvis lay still for a moment.

Lheil stepped forward, removing the long band of soft fabric that kept her dark hair back. Charles used it, but my brother's blood still spilled onto the ground.

Lheil knelt and murmured words in her own language.

The moments crawled by, Charles shredding his shirt.

When one of those dresses would be useful...

"We've got to go," Charles said, breaking the silence, "I don't know what else Richard has planned, but we can't stay here."

He picked up Jarvis, who gave a strangled cry of pain.

"We must get to the forest..."

A whizzing sound interrupted the stillness. An arrow struck the ground close to Charles.

We all ran, without even looking for whoever sent the arrows down among us. A hill with a few trees stood to our left, and the forest spread out before us.

Lhily entered the forest. I stayed close to my brother, and Lheil ran behind us. I entered the eaves of the forest, Charles crashing in close after.

I started to shove my way through some of the tree branches when Lheil screamed.

I whirled around, and saw her fall to the ground.

* * *

"LHEIL!" I screamed, and I charged back out of the trees' shelter.

The hill with the trees seemed to glint in the setting sun. I rushed to Lheil, who struggled upwards with a hoarse cry. An arrow stood out from her left arm.

"Come on," I said, even though she needed no coaxing.

"I'm fhine, Behtsy...go," she gasped.

I paid no heed to her.

After a few more sickening moments, we got under the cover of the trees. A storm of arrows struck the trees. Lheil stumbled and fell.

I pulled her to her feet, and we moved forward, but then Lheil stopped.

"What?" I asked.

She said nothing, but set her teeth and jerked the arrow out of her arm, giving a cry of determination and pain that scared me. During that one moment, a wild fire burned in her eyes.

But the next, my friend Lheil Jharo stood before me again, exhausted and pale, blood pouring down her arm.

"Ohh..." I said, feeling something build up inside me.

Lheil gave me a faint smile.

Jerked out of the trance, I helped her bind the wound.

"I-its nhhot b-a-ad," she said in a shuddering breath.

"Shuu..." I said. "Can you walk?"

She gave me a wry smile. "It is just my arm, Behtsy. I'm fhine."

I ducked my head.

"But thank yhou fhor worrying," Lheil said.

Smiling, I grabbed her right hand, and we began to force the underbrush out of our way, together.

* * *

"Lheil!" Lhily said, rushing forward. "Oh, I was so worried..."

But, unlike Lhily, I found myself brought back to the ground with a painful jerk.

Jarvis lay unconscious, still bleeding. And Charles did not have comforting news.

"I now see the rashness of what I've done," Charles said. "I need you all to go and find Timothy--Lheil, you'll know how to reach your father; the others, go with her for protection."

"No," many voices disagreed.

"I'm staying with Jarvis," I said.

"No your highness, I must protest."

"No, knight, I must protest," I said, determined that I would stay.

"You know the danger, Elizabeth. You *must* go on."

"No."

"You *must* all to leave. You must get to safety, and send some people back who can help. I am not a doctor."

"I will go," Rose said.

"Lheil needs to get to her father anyway," Lhily said.

"I will *not* go," I said.

Charles sighed, but nodded.

* * *

"I'll go get some more water," Charles said, standing.

I sat, watching Jarvis's flushed face. He seemed to be washed out, diminished, crumpled; like an old handkerchief.

A piece of wood snapped in the fire, and one of the main logs crumbled and fell. Jarvis mumbled something and stirred. Despite hours since he had spoken an intelligible word I still strained to hear what he said.

"Well, I hadn't expected this," A voice made me whirl.

Richard stood on the opposite side of the clearing; the firelight reflected on his drawn sword and set fire to his eyes.

"Has the loyal Charles actually left the unprotected princess of Triendo alone with her dying brother?"

"What are you doing here?" My voice came out weak and whispery, not at all helpful.

"Oh, just..." Richard's voice sounded wrong to me, never before had he spoken to me the way he spoke now. Careless and harsh it came to my ears, and sharp pangs of fear began to shoot through my body. Without even thinking, I moved my own body to protect Jarvis's prostrate form.

"To be more specific, your highness, this will not take long. Just move away from your brother--"

"Why?" I stalled for time. "The Awahos will return soon." Where has Charles gone?

"Your highness, I don't have time for this nonsense." Richard's voice grew hard and icy.

He stepped closer. "Any moment, I doubt not, that nuisance, Charles Siwel, will return. I need you to move."

"What are you going to do?" My voice rose to a shriek as I asked the useless question.

"Why must I be so blunt?" Richard said, sounding disgusted. "What you began. What I have been paid to do. What will keep John on the throne. What will never be written in the history books of Triendo. What will make me the most revered, trusted, and wealthy man in King John's court. I am going to kill Jarvis Flowain."

* * *

"No," the word burst out of me, and it came out clear and unwavering, despite my whirling thoughts.

"Your highness," Richard said, feeling now the crunch of time, "I ask that you move."

"And I refuse. You cut-throats will not have my brother as well."

"He is going to die anyway; and who's fault will that be?"

"Why, Richard, why?" Now, although my determination did not fail, I found tears in my eyes, "You promised to *help* my brother."

"That has no hold on me. The king offered a higher price. If luck had been on my side this morning, or even the day I came upon all of you, Jarvis would already be dead. I am surprised the he is not already."

"Just leave him!" The tears in my eyes blurred his shape before me, and gave the sword in his hand extra glint. "Haven't you done enough?"

"No, I haven't," Richard snapped, "Now that I've started, I must be able to tell the king that he is dead."

I gripped the hilt of my sword, grabbing at my fleeting courage at the same time.

Richard let out a grim laugh. "As if you could stand against me," he scoffed, "why sacrifice yourself when he'll die anyway?"

"He may not die," I said; stating, as fact, a dwindling hope.

I hoped to keep him until Charles came back from the stream. But he seemed to sense that.

"You let him leap in front of you, after such a foolish mistake. Why don't I--how do they say it?--put him out of his misery. The misery that *you* caused."

He moved closer, and I drew my sword as fast as I could, jumped to my feet, and held it in front me, forgetting everything Charles had taught me.

"Don't come any closer," I said.

He took another step.

I put the sword straight out, still hoping to buy some time.

He lunged. I managed to block the thrust. He backed, eyeing me with suspicion.

"What of my other brother and sisters? Are you going to kill them too?" My heart raced, my hands shook.

"No, move!"

He moved forward again, and my mind soon whirled again, as I attempted to predict what he planned next.

"Richard! What--?" Charles's voice startled us both, but Richard took less time to recover.

He spun around and slashed at Charles, who must not have seen Richard's sword, because he had not drawn his own.

Charles ducked under the slashing blade, rolled away, and grabbed the hilt of his sword. Richard came on again, and caught Charles's arm with his bright blade. The sword drew back, and Richard seemed to be momentarily stunned, staring at the blood of his former friend on the blade. Charles drew his sword and leapt to his feet.

"Richard, what are you doing? Haven't you done enough for the false king?" Charles's voice sounded soft and calm, but he watched Richard with a wary gaze.

"You--you are always in the way!" Richard said, angry, but his will seemed to be almost shattered. "Jarvis would be long dead if it wasn't for you. A misunderstanding? I planned to kill him in that room, but the others had to be there, and you had to tell him to run."

"You run fast for little shrimps!"

But he said it was my fault! He planned to kill him then?

He turned to me, and then looked at Jarvis with malice in his eyes, "Smart kid, but still a kid. Actually, not so smart, jumping in front of a sword is never smart. He's going to die, Charles," his gaze moved back to Charles, "and then what will you do?"

I began moving forward, to somehow give help to Charles, though I wasn't sure how.

"Continue to give aid to the Flowain family, who has been unjustly dealt a serious of blows. Thomas shall be the next king."

"But that will take five years!" Richard exclaimed.

"We can still get rid of the current usurper, who is a murderer and a liar."

"Oh, I see," Richard said with a disapproving laugh. "You want the throne for yourself."

I took another step forward.

Richard turned around, and in a single stroke smacked the sword out of my hand, causing me to fall backwards, close by the dying fire.

I screamed and scrambled backwards towards Jarvis. Richard came on, his already-blood stained sword in hand.

Charles followed after, but not quick enough. Richard placed his sword at my throat.

The smell of blood, both of my brother and the sword, filled my mind; Richard's image blurred before my eyes and then fled away.

* * *

When I woke, darkness pressed close around me. I began to shiver with cold, and wondered where I was, and for some reason my mind wondered back to the first night, when this had all started.

Did I fall asleep? Where is Jarvis?

I sat up, my mind disturbed by some murky memory that threatened to take over.

I placed my hand down, and found the ground to be soft and springy.

A soft moan came from beside me. In that instant, everything came back.

"Jarvis?" My eyes grew accustomed to the dark; I found I had not been bound, and that I still abided in the forest. Where had Richard gone?

The fire glowed a dark red, a light that did little to penetrate the darkness around.

My brother lay just behind me, though why he still lay there, I could not imagine.

From the dim light, I could just see the outline of his head. I reached my hand out and touched his forehead. To my surprise, I found the former heat of it to be rather less. He felt only a little warmer than usual.

"Jarvis," I just let the name fall from my mouth, rejoicing that the person I associated it with still remained alive.

"Behhh..." an unexpected answer came to me, and I jerked my hand back. "Behtsy..."

"Jarvis?" My heart pounding, I leaned forward, listening with tense eagerness.

"Where--"

"We're in the forest, Jarvis," I said, taking his hand, and found it to be cold.

"Why--?" Jarvis rasped out part of his question, and then struggled to rise. "Ohhh..."

For a moment, nothing was said. Then, Jarvis pulled himself together to speak to me. "Betsy, you need to leave, don't you?"

"No, of course not," I said, puzzled and worried by these words.

"Yes...you do. I can tell."

"Your fever has broken. Surely--surely that means--"

"No, Betsy," Jarvis voice came as gentle but firm reproof. "I don't know what is wrong...but Charles isn't near, and you don't know where the others are, do you?"

"No, not really," I said, and the tears began to run down my cheeks. Why were Charles and Richard gone? Richard would have only gone if he knew that there was something in it for him, a bigger reward than killing the dying Jarvis Flowian.

He's not dying! The fever's broken...hasn't it?
Surely he's on his way to getting well...the Awahos will come...But you don't even know if anyone can help him....

I dropped back beside Jarvis, wondering if he still saw, heard, and thought, or if he floated along in the blitheness of sleep.

"Betsy, where is Charles?" his voice came, clear and innocent.

"I don't know," I choked over the great sense of lost, alone, and helplessness that flooded over me.

"Betsy, you have to go,"

"I don't want too! I can't just leave you here..."

"Yes you can. Betsy, I don't know what it feels like to die, but...but I think that may be what is happening to me."

"No..."

No! Not when it is my fault...

"Behtsee..." Jarvis's voice blurred in pain, and his breath began to come in quick gasps. "I don't know what is going on, and I don't know what is happening. But you have got to go and find the rest of our family, to protect it. I think I am going to die, but I am not afraid. Please, Betsy, go and help the others, while there is still a chance. Don't wait by the bedside of someone with no chance."

"No, Jarvis, no...I'm so sorry..." I stuttered; tears catching in my throat.

During the last day, I had realized just how much I loved him.

"Jarvis, I can't leave you. It's my fault."

"Betsy, it isn't your fault. You *must*."

"It is too my fault!" I said, almost screaming at him. "I acted like an idiot, Jarvis. You know that is so. I should be the one dying."

"No, Betsy..."

"I wish I could reverse this! I should be were you are, feeling what you feel. I'm so sorry, Jarvis!" I could scarce see for tears.

"Betsy, this has nothing to do with what you did. I did what I did because I love you. I want you to go on, protect what is left of our family. Please, Betsy..."

"No! I'll stay with you! I'll die with you."

"Betsy, that may be grand for stories, but then we shall both die, and most likely, so will Rose, Thomas, Marylyn--even the Awaho people. Though it may work in stories, if you do it here, innocent people will die."

"It's not for a story!" I protested, "It's my fault. You're innocent, and hurt by me. Do you expect me to just leave you?"

"No," Jarvis said, seeming for a moment to relent. "I command you to. As king of Triendo, I command you to leave."

"No, Jarvis, no," I said, my stomach turning over.

"Even siblings must obey the king," Jarvis said

"You're not the king..." I whispered.

"Well, I ought to be. I turned thirteen--just the other day...please, Betsy, go." His voice cracked, and I bent down, clutching his hands; tears dropping from my face onto his.

"Go, Betsy," he whispered, kissing me on the cheek.
"If for nothing else, go for Mother, Father, Frederic, and
me. Go."

He pushed my palms, shoving me upwards.

He squeezed my hand, and then released it. I spun
around, and ran crashing into the trees.

* * *

I do not know how long I tore through the darkling
forest, tree leaves slapping my face, blundering into tree
trunks, tripping on the undergrowth. It seemed to take
hours, and it seemed as if I must have run miles.

But I ended up on the ground, and there I lay,
sobbing.

I've got to go back. I thought, attempting to stand.
I can't just **leave** him.

"What was that?" I asked, with a gasp.

"The stone that landed on our door, that's what."
Jarvis said, and I could hear his smirk. "Now, shall we
continue?"

Images of wolves filled my mind. Jarvis lay
defenseless beside a cold fire. Dying.

"I think I am dying, but I am not afraid."

You can't die!" I screamed.

I stumbled forward, my mind half made up to go back. I tripped on a root. Reaching out to save myself, I grabbed a handful of a leafy bush. Small, round things exploded between my fingers. Berries.

Without even thinking, I grabbed fistfuls of them and yanked. I shoved them in my mouth, then spit out pieces of leaves, twigs, and roots.

I can't leave Jarvis alone.

"Go, Betsy. If for nothing else, go for Father, Mother, Frederic, and me."

But you're my brother Jarvis! Do you expect me to just leave? I'll die beside you!

"As king of Triendo, I command you to leave."

"NO! I can't go along without you, Jarvis! I can't do it without you...without Charles...I'm not an heir to the throne, or a knight of Triendo. I don't know what I am doing! Jarvis!"

"Frederic! Elizabeth! Children!"

Mother stood at the entrance to the garden on the stone steps that led around back into the castle, her black

curly hair flew loose, her blue eyes sparkled and her arms were held out. Father stood by her, standing tall and smiling at us, his arm around mother's shoulders, which were a good deal lower than his own.

I rushed into Mother's arms, and my sisters tumbled about me, Father reached in amongst us and grabbed Thomas, swinging him up in the air. He brought him down again and ruffled Frederic's wayward red hair before shaking his hand in a solemn way, making us all laugh.

I placed my cheek against Mother's stomach, but my arms could not go all the way around and I wondered, as I often did, if the baby would be a boy or girl.

I let go and hugged Father. Frederic grabbed me from behind--continuing the game--and tickled me. I squealed and ran around Father, like a tall fortress between me and my older brother. I thought it wonderful to have him in such a playful mood. At the old and revered age of thirteen he was often too busy with his school and training to romp in the gardens as he used to.

I took a wrong turn and we ended up on the ground, me under, and I soon screamed with laughter.

"Frederic," Mother said, laughing, but firm. "Get off
your sister. It isn't princely to straddle a woman--or
girl--"

"Yes, Mother." Frederic stood up, but he added, "Bets
doesn't mind--do you Bets?" He made a fake grab for me and
I ran. Mother didn't like "Bets". She allowed "Betsy" but
still often protested against "Bets". This time she just
sighed and looked at Father, shaking her head with a laugh.

"Well, what we came to say is--" Father tried; Jarvis
chased Thomas around Mother.

"It's time for supper!" Father got in after several
more screams and laughs.

Father scooped up Jarvis this time, tucking him under
his arm. Jarvis kicked saying, "Let me go! Let me go!"
At last Father put him down, and he turned on us, the
giggling squad, and we subsided.

We walked up the stairs, a happy family, and joy
filled me as I looked at my family; and I knew they were
the best in the world. I knew the good times would last
forever.

Frederic turned and grinned at me, his grey eyes
dancing with merriment; he and I raced up the stairs.

"Frederic!" I called for my elder brother, waking myself up.

Water pattered around me, and I shrunk to the shelter of a tree bole.

I grasped my arms around my knees; fighting off the hot tears that welled in my eyes.

Come back, Frederic. You know I can't catch you.

"Frederic, wait for me!"

Laughter.

His fleeting form was ever ahead of me.

"Wait, Frederic!"

Those dancing grey eyes.

"Betsy..."

"Go, Betsy, if for nothing else, go for Mother, Father, Frederic, and me. Go."

Their deaths were too similar. Treachery. Frederic had been a young king, Jarvis was a king deprived of his throne.

Why do we want a stupid chunk of metal and a carved wooden seat?

I wanted to go back, back to Jarvis, even though it could do no good. But he wanted me to go on. He was the strong one.

Go on...and do what?

"...if for nothing else, go for Father, Mother,
Frederic, and me. Go."

If for nothing else. I should go to my siblings,
comfort them, try to keep them safe and out of harm's way.

I wanted to make that sound good to me, but in my
heart I knew it wouldn't work.

You've got to finish what has been started.

I didn't start it!

But it has been started. And you became involved.
What did you expect, you nagging thought? My brother was
in it. I followed him.

Followed him...would I follow him to death?

I remembered when the soldier chased us to the forest.
He caught up with Marylyn, and snatched her out of the
saddle. I knew right then what to do, because I didn't
have the time to mull it over. Mulling got me into
trouble.

Jarvis wants me to go. Why don't I just go? Because
he is my brother and I love him. I can't leave him. And
it is my fault.

But the king has told me to go.

I took a deep breath. Like it or not, Jarvis was king.

“Even siblings must obey the king.”

Well, of course, this seemed easy enough to understand.

But, it is so hard to do...

“Go, Betsy.”

My mind made itself up, as my heart remained troubled.

I stood, and took some faltering steps forward.

“Go.”

The tears began the journey down my face again, but I moved north and east. I began running. Already I had wasted too much time. I should have gone as soon as my king commanded it.

My King.

Jarvis.

CHAPTER 10

The sound of a horse froze my movements. Dawn neared, and I had seen no sign of the Awahos.

I ducked into the underbrush.

Two horses came into my view, and I squinted at riders.

"Johan!" I said, leaping from my hiding place.

"Elizabeth!" He slowed his horse, and the other rider jumped down. Timothy.

"Where is he?" Timothy asked, "And where is Charles?"

I shook my head, tears spilling down my cheeks, my attempt to speak thwarted by a burst of noise I could scarcely recognize as my own.

"Elizabeth?"

Johan also dismounted, and came to me. "Where are they?"

"Charles..." I gasped through my sobs, "I don't know. Richard came...when I woke, he was gone."

"Princess--" Johan said, taking my shoulders, and looking straight into my eyes, "your brother?"

My brother.

I shook my head, back and forth, back and forth. "He's--dead, Johan."

"Oh, Elizabeth!" Timothy said, burying his face in his hands.

Johan dropped his hands and stood back up, staring past me.

I lost control again. I can only just remember being put on Timothy's horse, and the fierce ride back to the Awaho's camp.

"Lheil," Johan said when we at last reached the camp. Timothy helped me dismount. Only men could be seen, and none of my siblings came to me. "Take Elizabeth to a shelter, and care for her--"

"No! We've got to do something," I protested.

"What do you suggest, Elizabeth?" Johan said, looking at me in surprise.

"Is there any chance we could win at the castle? I believe Richard must have taken Charles there."

Lheil started. She said something in an urgent tone of voice to her father, whose face became grim.

"Lheil says that the scouts reported two men on horses five hours ago. One we knew to be Richard, but we were under no command to kill him. The other we did not recognize. It could have been Charles in disguise."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Charles would not have betrayed us."

"I didn't say that, your highness, I said it could have been him in disguise. If Jarvis's life were threatened, he would most definitely sacrifice himself in

an attempt to save it. I believe he has gone to the king, to hand himself over. That appears to me to be the only thing Richard may accept in lieu of killing your brother outright."

"We've got to help him," I said.

Johan just looked at me. "Your highness, I don't think we have the--"

"It is my order," I said, my voice harsh. "We must attack the castle."

"Your highness," Johan protested.

I stared hard at him, and then turned away.

He grabbed my arm. "Your highness, I--"

"What?"

"You need rest, sleep. You don't understand--"

"We've got to rescue Charles. He's saved my family."

"But, your highness--"

"How do you know it won't work?" I spat out. "We've got to *do* something."

"That's just what I--"

"Do as I say!" I wrenched myself free and again turned my back on his stricken face.

"All right, Elizabeth," he said from behind me. "I will also send some people to find Jarvis--" He began

speaking in his own language, and business soon disturbed the camp

Jarvis's body. I thought. I couldn't even get a clear picture of him, not moving, not laughing, not mocking. Lying still. That was impossible...

I sank to the ground, averted my thoughts. I'm doing the right thing. I'm not rash...

I'm coming, Charles.

* * *

Dawn came on.

The confusion, the shouts, and the sounds continued as dawn crept to smother them all.

With dawn there would come another defeat and the death of many brave men.

Such a desperate charge. You're mad, Elizabeth. You foolish, proud young Flowain...there is no way they will make it into the castle. Everything has gone wrong since the beginning. I should have listened to Johan...I bit my lip.

It'll be my fault. More people dead. It would have been better that Richard's sword cut me down instead of...

Without me, Jarvis would have remained uninjured; Charles wouldn't have gone into the castle, where even now they may be in process of killing him.

What are you going to do before the dawn?

That's something Charles would have said, not me. Why did I think it?

There is nothing to do, I thought.

Really?

Nothing!

There is still time...Time. I couldn't be late--what of the door? The door; we used it to get out of this dreadful castle, the first time.

Dreadful? My home?

Let it go. It isn't your home anymore.

Stop thinking! You don't have the time for it. Go!

I flirted along the fast-diminishing shadows of the trees, heeding the thought that only seemed half mine.

I could see the door, but I remembered the frigid conditions of the weather.

It hasn't iced over yet, but it may be cold enough that I'll end up with pneumonia.

To my complete surprise a sort of giggle burst out of me. I gasped and covered my mouth.

Hungry and exhausted, my reasoning felt all muddled and odd.

Surely I can't make a decision in this state.

What other state can you have?

All right. There are no soldiers watching this place.

No, but they are around. Charles wouldn't want me to do it.

But that would be because he could send someone else to do it, and you can't, because the soldiers are needed where they are. If I make it through...

Yes: if! I won't be much good to Charles if I'm killed by the cold or an arrow.

We are losing anyway. There isn't much more we can lose. And all we've lost has been your fault...

Again, I tried to shake that from my mind. I couldn't brood on it.

Why not? It is all on account of you that they're out here; dying!

Come on, think!!

Perhaps I could go and get Johan and some of the soldiers to go with me--no, I didn't have the time.

The only choice is for me to go in.

I didn't want too. I forced myself to remember one of Jarvis's age-old taunts.

My first memory of that taunt was when I had been afraid of going to the kitchen cellar alone.

"What, are you scared?"

"No. I just don't want to go alone."

"Ha! That is being scared. Look, I'll go."

Even at six he had been brave.

He advanced down the stone steps, holding a torch.

"See! You're just afraid."

"No, I don't want to get my dress messy."

"There is nothing--"

A dark shadow flew past, and Jarvis dropped the light.

"Boo!" The shadow leapt into the light.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!" Jarvis and I screamed together.

The shadow began laughing. It was Frederic.

"ARGH!" Jarvis flew at the older boy, and they tussled for a moment, before Frederic held up the kicking Jarvis.

"Let me go! Let me g--hahahahaha!" He screamed with laughter.

"What, are you scared?" I whispered. But this did nothing but bring tears. How I longed for Jarvis to be there, taunting me for real.

"What, are you scared?"

Yes. But I'm going anyway. It may be the only chance to save Triendo and the lives of Awaho men.

I looked around and when a chance presented itself I ran to the moat; expecting a challenge to be yelled.

I leapt the earth embankment slid into the dark water.

The cold shocked my senses. I gave a gasp of pain and shoved my clinging hair out of my eyes.

I kicked off my shoes, very grateful that one of my former skirts did not weigh me down. The moat seemed to have grown in width.

I struck out, my teeth were already beginning to chatter, but I couldn't turn back; not now.

The fog shrouded the moat, obscuring and sometimes hiding my destination, but I tried to keep going in as straight a line as I could.

Then the fog appeared to be lifting off and drifting away. I kicked harder. How long until the dawn? The fog had been our friend; hiding us from the King's arrows. I should have ordered a retreat before I jumped into this

water. Lheil's father would have never have let me go, though.

The door seemed farther away than ever and my skin seemed to be pricked ever and anon by little needles.

I needed to beat the sun, but I found that I often slowed, weary of going on. There seemed to be some current in the moat.

Come on, Elizabeth. Charles and James are in there.
The Awahos are fighting for you...dying because of
you...

I strived forward again, kicking my legs. My family
needs me. I can't give up...

"Look!" the harsh call made me dip under the water in frantic fear. Nothing happened. After the longest time I could stand, I poked my head above the water, breathing in the air.

My hands and feet felt hot.

Still, no arrow whistled through the darkness--no, not dark. Everything seemed to be grey, and the fog started to lift. Dawn came on, and I couldn't seem to swim fast enough.

"They'll either run or be killed, as soon as the sun comes up."

I realized they were on the castle wall, high above me, discussing the rising sun.

"Those poor fools," someone said with a laugh.

Anger surged through me with such strength I surprised myself. I kicked forward with all the remaining strength in my failing limbs. I grew dizzy and my legs seemed to be made of wood. I pushed even harder.

My fingers touched smooth stone.

I grasped the stone as best I could and looked for the door. It remained a few yards down. This felt like a major setback but I forced myself to think in broader terms.

I just swam the moat. A few more yards aren't going to kill me.

Well actually...they might.

But if you don't, the death of the Awahos will pay for your foolishness.

I begin edging my way to the door, trying to forget my last thought. I shook so much with the cold and fatigue that I could not hold onto the wall.

I began to drift away.

"It's going to be a pretty one."

"It'll be prettier to see the backs of those rebels.
They won't last long in the daylight."

Laughter.

I struck out, getting back to the door, I grasped the
threshold, gasping.

Too late.

A stream of early-morning light shot across the sky.

CHAPTER 11

I sagged, only just holding onto the slippery stone. I wanted to give up. In that moment, all of my failures came into my mind.

The Awahos are going to die.

I always stood by the side, unable to prevent death. In this case I had caused it. Mother, Father, Frederic. Jarvis...

"Go, Betsy."

Jarvis wanted me to go on.

But he didn't know how hard it would get.

How is anyone to know?

My whole body shook with the cold.

I can just let go...slip into the water...

But that would be giving in without a fight. Jarvis
tried to survive.

But he didn't.

I know what it is like to try and fail. Why willingly
put myself in that predicament?

You may not fail.

I wanted to brush this aside.

You may not fail.

The thought hammered in my brain, unwilling to leave.

You may not fail.

Did it mean that I might succeed, or did it mean I was
not allowed to fail?

Oh, rubbish. It doesn't mean anything because it is
my own thought.

You may not fail.

I took a deep breath of the cold air. It stung my
lungs, but also seemed to revive me.

I may not fail.

I will not leave without trying.

I gripped at the stones, pulling myself up and
forward. Only a small ledge of stone lay before the wooden
door.

I found it hard to maneuver my way onto the ledge,
hard to grip the stones.

The blocks of wood I felt in place of my legs grew
more painful in each passing minute. The dawn colored the
sky. The light increased.

The mist and fog left altogether, the air felt sharp
and clear. I dragged myself upwards again, and almost felt
as if I had been lifted. I scrambled onto the ledge and
grabbed the wood of the door.

For a moment I sat gasping, my legs hanging over the
edge, into the water.

I grabbed the handle and pulled myself up. Then I
pulled the handle. It didn't budge.

 No! I wanted to scream and cry...anything. I shook
with cold, my hands threatened to release their hold and
throw me into the churning water.

"I may not fail," I whispered, and I gave all I had to
the opening of that door. At the last of my strength, it
swung open. I flew over the water.

Gasping, I took in why I did not find myself at the
bottom of the moat. My hands grasped the door as if they
were made of ice or steel. The bottom half of my body
dangled in the moat, but I kicked up my legs, drew myself

back onto the ledge, crawled into the darkness, and closed the door with a satisfying slam.

I hobbled through the corridor.

I want anything, anything at all, to warm up.

"Anny-ththing," I muttered to myself, my teeth chattering. As soon as I left these servant's quarters, I was sure to run into soldiers

I snatched up a small, thread-bare rug, pulling it around me.

When we conquer--

If! The Awahos are dying out there, and it is your fault!

I sagged against a wall, tears beginning down my cheeks.

What, you're giving up again?

"Go Betsy,"

I remembered the dim firelight that played on his face.

"If for nothing else, go for Mother, Father, Frederic, and me."

I remembered my resolution, hard as it had been.

He wanted me to go on.

"Who are you?"

A sharp mean voice startled me. I jerked my head up, and then scrambled to my feet.

"Uh--um--sir..."

"Well, speak up, lad. You've the look of a spy about you. What's your business here? You're no servant."

"No sir," I said, steadying my voice. "I am Princess Elizabeth Flowain. I have come to speak with that pretender to the throne, John Ecarg."

* * *

"But she wants to speak with the king."

"Yes, Michael, but we don't just let traitors speak with the king."

I still dripped on the cold floor, but we now stood close to a roaring fire, just outside the king's throne room as my guide and his 'higher-up' spoke.

They aren't going to let me in, now are they? See what good it did, following Jarvis's advice?

Oh, leave me alone.

My determination seemed to be draining away again, and I struggled to regain it. But I'm so tired...

"Sirs?"

I jerked my head around. A servant in plain dress knelt to the ground beside the quarreling soldiers.

Michael remained silent, but the other soldier spoke up.

"Well, what is it?"

Still on the ground, the woman looked up. I found it hard to guess her age.

"Sir, if the king is so certain of his case against the Flowains, why should he be scared of their presence?" A little blond curl had escaped its confinement and lay against her cheek.

"The king is *not* scared of their presence. He is merely busy with other matters. He will speak with her in due time, I doubt not."

"So," the woman said, her deep blue eyes catching mine for a moment, "the king is afraid of speaking with her in public."

"No, of course not," the soldier said a tad too quickly, followed by an uneasy glance shared with Michael.

The woman just tilted her head, chin part-way down, her eyebrows raised as she gazed up.

"Well--I will speak, with the king," the soldier said in a strained voice, after enduring the glance for a moment.

The decision made, he left Michael, the woman, and me, and stumped off.

I gazed at the woman with wonder.

Who **is** she?

She seemed, somehow, to be familiar. I could not place why.

* * *

"Here is the one who was called her highness Princess Elizabeth Flowain, whose station is now in doubt because of charges of treason and attempted murder, and alliance with former heir to the throne, Jarvis Flowain."

I gritted my teeth.

Dressed in a drab dress, I began walking up the long strip of carpet, staring down at it. I recognized the intertwining strips of gold and red, here and there embellished with silver or blue.

Useless, I thought, feeling bitter towards it all.

"Ah, Elizabeth Flowain--"

I jerked my head up. Richard avoided my gaze, his face tense.

Do you regret that? I thought, black thoughts entering my mind.

"Betsy!" Marylyn called, she rushed forward. Her apparent lady-in-waiting grasped her arm, and pulled her back, slapping her smartly.

"Don't go near her, your highness!"

Mary's eyes filled with tears, but she allowed herself to be drawn back and seated in a rough chair, the servant still holding tight to her arm.

"John Ecarg," I said, fighting to stay on top of my anger, "Who gave you the right to have the heir to the throne of Triendo killed?"

"Me?" John said, looking at me with a sick smile, "I believe that slip-up happened to be your own, Elizabeth."

I flushed, and kept my tears down with great difficulty.

"Why did you send Richard to try and kill me?" I asked hoarsely.

"I did nothing of the sort. You were threatening him, and he needed to defend himself," John said.

"I was not!"

"Oh come," a new voice said. Many heads turned. There again, stood the woman with the deep blue eyes. "This is turning into an argument of a couple of four-year-olds. 'Tis your fault! No, 'tis yours!"

"How dare you speak!" Richard said, starting forward.

John looked flabbergasted.

"Wait!" I said, and to my surprise, Richard stopped.

"How dare I speak?" the woman said, walking forward.

"I have more right to speak than you, Richard Nialliv."

She stopped next to me. Then she grabbed her servant's cap, and shoved it back. Golden hair cascaded down, reaching past her shoulders, past my shortened length of hair.

"I am Elizabeth Nari, daughter of Horace and Laura Nari, sister of Moriah Nari Flowain, aunt of young Jarvis Flowain, and once an heir to the throne."

Murmuring. I stared at her.

"And," she said, smiling sweetly, "I did not marry you, John."

John began laughing, even as his courtiers and soldiers stared and murmured to each other.

"You do not believe this pack of lies, do you, men?" He snorted, but I saw his eyes give a frantic dart to me.

"Don't tell me that every time you see a blond-headed, blue-eyed person, you assume that when they tell you that they are an heir to the throne of Triendo, that they tell you the truth? Think of the nonsense of it! Jarvis

Flowain, who would have been king if he had not tried treason, had brown hair, and Frederic Flowain before him had red hair! Get rid of this servant, and let me never hear you--"

"Excuse me, John Ecarg," Elizabeth Nari said, "but I am here to tell you, show you, that I am Elizabeth Nari."

She reached into a pocket of her dress, and held up a glittering ring, etched with the white dove on red, the sign of the royal house of Triendo.

A gasp could be well heard throughout the throne room, mine included.

"It is a thief!" John bellowed, loosing his cool completely. "She has stolen my wife's ring!"

"If I had stolen it, why didn't you mention it until now?"

John stopped, searching for an answer.

"Speaking of rings," I said, a thought crashing into me like a wave. "You took mine four years ago. 'For safe keeping' you said. Where is it now?"

"You are no longer royalty! You have tried to murder me!" The king shifted in his chair, and the gold of his necklace flashed. Soldiers started forward, towards me and my aunt.

"Wait!" I said, turning all eyes to me. "Your highness, may I ask a favor of you before I am sent to the dungeon."

The king smiled his self-satisfied smile and said, "So, you do doubt what you say is true?"

My aunt looked at me, surprise on her face.

"I do not doubt what I say is true, but you do, or at least pretend too, and you have great--shall we say, sway, and control over what--"

"Well, what of it?" John said in quick, angry voice.

"Will you grant my request?"

The muttering and murmuring still flowed through the throne room. Many soldiers looked at John with interested faces, thoughtful expressions. His eyes darted between me and his men.

"Yes, if it is not something that will bring death to any here."

"Of course not," I said, attempting to put on a sweet smile. "I've just always wanted to see that necklace you wear. May I see it?"

Silence invaded the room.

"Wh-what?" John said, his eyes darting forward and back, across and down.

"I would like to see that necklace thing you wear around your neck, King John."

"That is an outrageous, ridiculous request!" John shouted.

"Your highness--" Richard began, but John saw for himself, and stopped his rampage of words. Soldiers stared at him in wonder. Why did it happen to be such a problem that the young traitor wished to see a necklace? What did the king have to hide?

Richard reached forward, unclasped the necklace from around the king's neck, and started forward.

"Richard! Come back!"

"Your highness," Richard said, through gritted teeth, "you promised her that you would. You do keep you word, do you not?"

John looked stricken. Richard tightened his lips, and gave a look I didn't understand to the king.

"What have you to hide?" he asked. "You are the true king, now."

"Now?" The king said, reddening, as his own face hardened towards Richard.

"You have always been," Richard corrected, "but now you shall remain so, since that young boy decided to use treason."

"But Thomas--" I began, but I bit my tongue.

Richard continued towards me, John's face started to relax, and then he grew tense again. He appeared to be losing the battle to look in control.

My hands began shaking as Richard grew close.

Someone screamed. No pain.

My breath came in quick-uttered gasps.

I stared at the floor. Richard's feet came closer.

Glittering death.

I looked up. Richard stopped a few feet from me, and held out his hand, the necklace dangling from his finger.

I reached out, in seemed to be in slow motion, and curled my fingers around it. Hard, cold, and heavy it felt as Richard dropped the chain. When I looked up, he stared straight into my eyes. I couldn't understand the look there.

John cringed, and looked pained. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a younger soldier staring at him with his eyebrows raised. It seemed to be almost a comical sight,

as he wondered what ailed his king. Richard turned and walked back.

I studied the golden thing for seams. I remembered well how Charles had gotten it open, but I did not know if I could do the same.

I ran my now short and dirty fingernail along a faint line, but I didn't see how I could get it open. At least, not before John demanded it back. All I had asked for was a look. What could be counted for that had already passed.

Elizabeth Nari bumped my arm. I looked at her, and she turned her hand over, revealing a small knife. I took it, and began work at the seam very fast.

"What are you doing??" John bellowed, way too loud.

Richard started forward, looking bewildered.

I gave no answer, and felt the pieces give a little. My arm ached already.

I must get this open. For mother, father, Frederic, and Jarvis. If for nothing else...

My family.

Richard walked towards me; confusion on his face.

"Go, Richard! She is trying to break my--"

Right in the middle of his sentence, the top of the golden necklace sprang back.

"GIVE THAT TO ME!!!" John's voice rose to a scream as he rose from his chair. Richard broke into a run.

Richard grabbed my arm, yanking me forward. His gloved hand grasped for the gold chain. I jerked away and reeled back.

The chain caught on his chain mail. He pulled me in by it the chain, and drew his dagger, placing it against my throat.

I went limp, gasping. Still I held the opened, treacherous thing. Richard shoved me back against his chest, and I looked up into his eyes.

He paused.

Gregor Nialliv. Richard's father. His name is on the list.

"Look," I whispered.

His gaze drifted towards the thing that I held in my trembling hand. He started, and then he frowned, and bent the least bit forward, studying it.

"What are you waiting for, Richard?" John said, the tremble gone out of his voice. He sat in his chair again. I was in his control now, not to be feared.

Richard's grip slackened, the dagger moved. I scrambled away, not even thinking of why he would do such a thing.

Five feet away, I stopped. Richard stared at me. The king's list still remained clutched in my hand.

Soldiers moved forward, a steady flood of them walked towards me from every point in the throne room.

This is it. Richard or no Richard, I'm going to die here.

Not without a fight.

You may not fail.

"Soldiers, look!" I said; my voice seemed to ring through all of that old, tall, majestic, useless, and beautiful throne room.

"Here your so-called 'King' has a list of his victims. He is from Ja-Runet, and has not married Elizabeth Nari-- her own husband was killed by this false king. He attempts to have no--"

Someone grabbed my hands and forced them behind my back. The list flew across the floor; it spun in a graceful pattern across the engraved stones.

Elizabeth Nari, or Lhissie Jharo, also found herself beset with soldiers. The ring had disappeared, to where

she would not say, and they also pulled her hands behind her back.

"NO!" I screamed.

I writhed and ended up on the ground.

The list.

A tittering old soldier reached down and picked up the spinning disc of gold.

"Hand it here," Richard said, holding out his hand, his dark eyes darting.

"Your highness," the man asked, and his voice gave a sudden lurch in my stomach.

Karl.

"What is it, soldier?" The king snapped.

"Hand it to me!" Richard said, his voice rising.

"Are you aware, my dear king, of the words sketched inside this?"

King John again leaped from his seat, shouting, "Richard!"

Richard looked stricken. Again I pulled forward. Someone grabbed my arm. I was enclosed in a sea of soldiers. I reached to one ahead of me; his face turned towards Richard and Karl. I grabbed the hilt of his dagger and wrenched it free.

"Stay back!" I shouted.

For a few seconds shock reigned around me. I leapt into the gap caused. Richard and Karl were in my view again.

"Let me see!" Richard shouted in a desperate voice.

"Read the necklace, Karl!" I shouted, "Read it!"

"I shall be king of Triendo!" Karl declared, echoing the dreadful words I knew to be inscribed on the thing of gold. "Death to those who stand between me and my goal! By my hand they shall fall!"

Someone leaped on him. The list flew to the feet of Richard.

He bent down to pick it up, his hand trembling. Karl gave a cry before the man on top of him knocked him unconscious. The soldier leapt up.

I was grabbed from behind, but I kicked, remaining out of clutching arms.

"It is a list of victims!" I shouted. With horrid clarity, the list paraded through my mind. My voice rose above the babble of confusion. "Mark Flowain! Frederic Flowain! Jonathan Siwel! Mary Kari Siwel! Charles Siwel! Judy Siwel! Henry Litonya! **Gregor Nialliv!**" I gave a gasp, the grip tightened on me. I looked at Richard.

Come on, I pleaded silently.

"Thomas Jaray! And now, he has killed my brother, Jarvis Flowain; his name also appears on that list!"

For a moment, complete silence was all that could be heard.

"It is so," Richard spoke into that silence, his whole figure deflated. His eyes looked vague and far away. "It says thus here, and I myself struck down young Jarvis Flowain."

He dropped the necklace and hid his face. The necklace clattered on the stones, but no one ran to get it.

Dead silence still reigned in the room. John Ecarg of Ja-Runet went very white; he drew his sword. Soldiers looked on; bewilderment in their every look.

He jumped off of the dais and rushed towards me. Richard leaped into action, staying the usurper with his arm.

John, without the slightest hesitation, struck down his former ally. Richard fell to his knees; blood draining from his face and spilling from a fatal wound.

Horror filled me.

John turned again; his only plan to end my life. He did not heed the floor he ran on; he tripped over Karl's prostrate form and fell on his own deadly sword.

He made not a sound.

"Richard," I said, kneeling beside the dying man.

"Eliz--Eliz-a..."

"It's all right, Richard," I said, at last at peace about my brother's death.

"No...I--"

"You were deceived, Richard. Too many were."

"But...Eliza...I'm...sorr..."

"Richard, what you did was wrong. But there is no need now for you to worry about that. My brother is gone. But--" I stopped, surprised at myself. "I've forgiven you, Richard," I said, dropping my voice. "I don't have room for hate. No one does."

Richard's breath came in gasps and he slipped to the floor. A moment later, he breathed no more.

I looked on the dead body of the king, then back away.

I wasn't ready to decide that, not yet. The man had killed my father, brought about the death of two of my brothers.

Charles.

I got to my feet. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something I would say.

"Servant woman, let go of my sister."

Mary came running to me.

"All you here," I said, "you have seen the overthrow of the usurper who has killed King Mark, King Frederic, the Siwel family, Prince Jarvis, and...at the last, his old ally, Richard Nialliv. I now demand that Charles Siwel, known to you as Jonathan Thoran, and James Zarnor are to be brought here. Charles Siwel is to be the next king of Triendo until my brother, Thomas Flowain, comes to the throne. Go, you," I said, pointing to a knight who started to open his mouth, "I believe you know where they are being kept."

Again, he made the movement as if to speak, but changed his mind and took with him two soldiers.

While we waited for their return, soldiers brought in Johan and some Awaho soldiers. Johan they escorted to a seat of honor, his soldiers around him. And then, to my extreme surprise, Rose and Thomas came running to me.

"Betsy!" Thomas called in delight.

Rose came up, placing her hand on my shoulder. She smiled, "Johan sent for us."

"Betsy, where is Jarvis?" Thomas asked, looking around.

This simple question threw me to the ground, shattering my happiness. Thomas had no way of knowing that but a few days ago was the last time he would ever see his older brother.

"Aunt Elizabeth--" I began, turning, fighting the requirement to answer my brother's question, but I soon found distraction enough. Elizabeth Nari no longer stood in the throne room.

Bewildered, I asked the guards about her whereabouts. They didn't know. Well, she never wanted to be queen, so let her go where she liked. Now I couldn't imagine dodging the duty to my kingdom. I had learned. I hoped she would go back for her daughter.

The soldier came back, but only James staggered behind him, his face pale and drawn, his clothes in tatters, the signs of beatings on him. He sank to the ground and I rushed over to him.

"Where is Charles?" I asked.

"He's--They..." James spoke, then stopped, appearing to struggle with something, although I did not know what.

"What is it?" I braced myself for something, anything, I thought, but nothing could have been enough.

"He's dead!" the words seemed to come as an explosion, but in slow motion. "They killed him, Elizabeth! He's..." and then James began to sob.

I sat for a moment; stricken and then, "What?" burst out of me.

"It was cruel, Elizabeth, the way--Oh..." His voice broke.

"James, I..." I tried but trailed off.

What is there to say? His friend is dead. **My** friend is dead.

It hurt to see this man whom I looked up to, and envied, in front of me, his head in his hands, sobbing. I didn't feel the pain of it yet, but I would, soon, a pain that would last my whole life. What I wanted to do then was to comfort James, who had helped me to get me into this room, this castle, to give my family the chair that sat ten feet away, empty.

Is that chair really worth the price? I wondered.
Charles thought so...Charles...

"You have talent. You do not yet have the practice that backs a good swordsman, but you are talented."

Jarvis...Jarvis was talented...

James tried to regain some control. "I don't regret it-coming, helping you, Elizabeth. I just wish..."

"I know; I wish it too." I looked at the usurper.

I stood up, and at that moment Thomas ran over, crying also. "He was so nice...Betsy, so nice..."

I looked at my brother, and then over at my other siblings, two who were missing. They all looked as I felt, shocked and grieved. I felt tears in my eyes. I turned once again to the body of John Ecarg, the cause of all of the death, the pain, and this suffering. My fists clenched.

I'm glad he's dead. I'm--

Then I remembered Charles' story; the poor boy living in a country where he could not have a future, with an abusive father. 'He's hurting Elizabeth. More than you know.'

"It is hard to have a heart, when you have never been shown love.

Love.

"You have been blessed with a great gift, Elizabeth."
Charles said, without looking at me, "The love that binds you to these people, your brothers and sisters, is not

something that should be taken lightly. Hold it to you, no matter what goes wrong, and it will hold you up."

I had no anger towards Jeehown...John Ecarg. I myself had told Richard that I had no room for hate. All I wanted inside me was love.

James stood up, looked on the usurper, and turned away.

As I turned my gaze fell on Rose and Marylyn, standing a little away, and Thomas at my side, all alive and well. The girls came to me, and I thought of Frederic and Jarvis, now gone.

I held out my arms to embrace my siblings, but a commotion at the door distracted me. I looked up. A blond man entered, helping along a tall youth with brown hair. The soldiers and servants knelt. I stood rooted to the spot, looking past my siblings; staring at the youth.

"Hello sis," he said, in a soft, quiet voice. And then, grey eyes sparkling, "Did you miss me?"

THE END