

Schwan

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Littlebranch Papers

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Prologue

Things were different then. Was it only "*Once Upon a Time*," as they say? The reader will have to be the judge of that.

Well...

This is the tale of King Fredrik of Midmont, and his Queen;
A Fantasy, it will be admitted.

In the days when...

How he and she...

And so the tale begins...

In a beautiful alpine valley lay the Kingdom of Midmont. *One night.....*

1 A Death in the Family

The moon cast angular shadows from the houses into the narrow street. A lone figure made it's way from shadow to shadow. He was cloaked against the chill in the air. Although summer was near, the alpine nights were still cold. His hood was pulled close; he did not wish to be recognized by the watch.

It was after midnight and the windows above the streets were dark. The townsfolk were sleeping after the festivities of the day before. It had been the Queen's Birthday. Queen Adelehide was popular with the people of Midmont, and all had turned out to feast in her honor.

The figure followed the narrow street, to an even narrower ally, where another waited with a cart.

"Tell the Duke," he whispered softly; "*The deed is done.*"

With this, he hurried back into the darkness.

The other mounted the cart and turned toward the city gate.

The gate was not closed, as was usual in times of peace. The two men at arms at the gate stopped the

cart out of curiosity; for it was unusual for anyone to be leaving the city at this hour.

But the cart contained only some goods for market, and they were satisfied with the driver's explanation of "wanting an early start for a lengthily journey," and the cart disappeared into the night.

By morning the rumors had reached the town. The King lay gravely ill. Messengers were sent to the Crown Prince Fredrik, who was with the Rangers, at the southern border. He was to return to court at once.

As the day wore on, there was no improvement. By midnight, the bell of the Castle Chapel began to toll sadly.

In the King's chamber all was silent except for the sobs of the Queen. She had thrown herself on the bed beside her dead husband. Princess Lillian stood alone at the window, looking out over the lake glistening below in the the moonlight. It surrounded the castle and town on three sides.

The King's Physician stepped from the room, leaving the bereaved wife and daughter alone. He was joined by the Chaplain, who had administered Last Rites to the dying King.

"I don't understand it," the doctor said to his friend. "This was so sudden. His Majesty's health has

been excellent." After a long pause he continued,
"There was nothing I could do."



At the sound of approaching hoofbeats, the watchmen at the gate stood in the opening, holding their spears at the ready. Two riders rode up on the tough mountain ponies favored by the Rangers who patrolled the frontiers. They could hear the bells of the chapel tolling slowly.

The watchmen challenged the riders.

The foremost rider threw back his hood, and the watchmen recognized Fredrik, the Crown Prince. The watchmen snapped to attention, and presented arms.

"What news, Goodmen?"

"None good, your Highness; the King is dead.

Then the Watchman snapped to attention again, saying, "Long live the King!"

"Greet the Captain of the Guard for me," said the Prince returning their salute.

And then the two men rode on, slowly now, toward the castle gate.

Prince Fredrik entered the King's Chamber, nodded to his sister and then touched his mother, the Queen. She sat up and clutched his hands.

"Why?" was all she said.

He had no answer. As she turned back to her husband, Fredrik went to Lillian at the window and they embraced.

"You've been gone too long," she said. It was almost an accusation. Then her gaze turned to Rolf, standing at a respectful distance near the door.

"You too," she said.

Fredrik excused himself.

"I must speak with the physician."

He stepped out into the antechamber, where the Doctor was waiting.

"I don't understand it," the doctor told him. "One moment he was fine. The next, he was fighting for his life."

"No one else has been ill?"

"No one, Your Highness."



It was some time later. Prince Fredrik sat alone in the darkened chapel. He had known this day would come. But he had never expected it so soon. In an instant the responsibility for the kingdom had fallen on him.

He was young. He had been enjoying his freedom. These last two years had been spent with the Rangers patrolling the borders, and guarding the mountain passes.

He had been nominally in command; but in reality, he was being trained by the Ranger Captain. And he *had* learned well. But there was still so much more to be learned.

And there had been his time at the great universities; Paris, and Köln. There, he had developed a reputation as a poor student and a womanizer. But that was mostly based on gossip, and the reputation didn't bother him. Beneath it all was a serious side, that few, but his closest friends saw. Friends like Rolf.

They had grown up together, along with his sister, Lillian. Rolf's father had served for years as Captain of the Castle Guard. Rolf had been his companion in all his foreign adventures. And Rolf was the moderating influence that had kept him out of a lot of trouble. Now Fredrik hoped that *this* would not change anything.

But still, he knew it would change *everything*.

He heard someone enter the Chapel.

"Are you ready?"

He recognized the voice of Friar John, a monk from the nearby abby.

"Of course not."

"Good. At least you realize it."

Friar John had in recent years become close to the Prince as his spiritual adviser. It was another side of Fredrik that was hidden from most.

"They told me you would be here, *Your Majesty*."

"Cut that out, John. I'm still only me. The *same* me."

"You wish that were so... You *want* it to be so. But you know it can't be. This is your place now, and you alone must fill it."

"I can't do this!"

"The Lord has put you here, and he has prepared you. Do you think that *He* didn't see this coming?"

"The official coronation is in two days. But as of this moment, you *are* King... You might wish to pray."

With this, Friar John left Fredrik alone in the Chapel.



With Fredrik gone, Rolf walked slowly to the Princess. She took his hands in her own.

"I've missed you."

Rolf said nothing. She could see he was struggling with his emotions. He turned his head to look out the window.

"The lake is beautiful this morning," he said. He had wanted to add, "*And so are you,*" but didn't dare. Finally he asked the question that tore at his heart.

"Had your father found you a husband yet?"

Something went out of her at his words.

As much as she loved her father, the late King had believed in politicly advantageous marriages. And although he and her mother had truly loved each other, still, the Queen was the daughter of the Duke of Solland, Midmont's neighbor beyond the southern pass.

In the passed year the King had been in contact with other ruling families; both in regards for herself, and her brother. But Fredrik was King now. He would be free to choose his own bride. But her fate was in his hands now. She longed to ask Rolf what he knew. He seemed too distant. Was he hiding something?



The day before his coronation, Fredrik began meeting with the King's Ministers, trying to acquaint himself with the affairs of state. For now, he would make no changes. There was little point in changing what appeared to be working.

He also needed to chose his advisers. He was beginning to realize that not everyone could be trusted.

And the circumstances of his father's death still bothered him.

He would keep Rolf near. He was one man he knew he could trust. And Friar John could be relied on as well. As for the others... time would tell.

Word came of condolences from the Duke of Morlana, ruler of the country to the North of Midmont. Fredrik was surprised at how quickly word of the king's death had traveled.

From the Foreign Minister, he found that the King had been in contact with the Duke, and there had been discussions regarding marriage between either Fredrik or the Princess, and one of the Duke's children. For his part, Fredrik was not of the opinion that his duty to Midmont went quite that far.

From the Steward of the Treasury, he learned that although the treasury was not extensive, it should be adequate for the present.

And there were more reports. Reports on the state of the roads; the condition of the town walls; the militia; and so on. The list seemed endless.

Fredrik was surprised to find that there was even a network of spies, although he didn't care much for Slythain, the man in charge of it.

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The official celebrations surrounding the coronation were subdued. The King had been popular, and Fredrik, while well liked, had a questionable reputation. And the people, although loyal, were not sure what to expect now, with him, on the Throne.

2 An Unpleasant Visit

The official time of mourning for the King was passed. One of the first things needing to be addressed was a request from the Duke of Morlana, for his son and heir, Rathard, to pay his respects to the new King.

In times past, Morlana had been the enemy of Midmont; and even now, there was a certain amount of rivalry. Morlana had been the only force ever to lay siege to the castle at Waterton. The siege had lasted for several months, but ultimately failed. The castle on the lake had been resupplied by boat, at night.

And although the invaders had ravaged the countryside, they had never entered the city. When they finally withdrew, the archers of Midmont, harassed them along the mountain pass, all the way to the border. More men were lost in the retreat than during the entire siege. The end was a stinging defeat for Morlana.

The Rangers of Midmont had been formed in response to this. It was felt that the invasion could have been easily repulsed at the pass in the narrow gorge, if there had been an adequate warning.

But all this was history now. Trade had been increasing between the countries. The main road from Waterton led to the Morlanian border, and from there to the river port of St. Petersbridge. There, the road

crossed the river on the old Roman bridge, at the town beneath the Duke's Castle.

The only other road out of Midmont led though a difficult pass, south into Solland, the Queen's homeland. It was little more than a trail, suitable only for pack animals. It was impassible in the winter.

And while Midmont was largely self sufficient, some contact with the outside world was necessary.

In short, good relations with Morlana were important. This had no doubt, been Fredrik's Father's object in considering a marriage between the two neighbors.

Fredrik, himself, loathed politics. But now he would be forced to deal with these things. He had met Rathard once. He did not like him, and doubted that much had changed. But in council, it was decided that the invitation should be extended.



Duke Richard, of Morlana, was pleased to hear of his son's invitation to visit to Waterton. The old King had been beyond his influence. That was why he had been removed. If a marriage could be arranged between Rathard, and Princess Lillian, the Duke would have a foothold in the Kingdom. And what if the new King should have an accident in the future? There were

a lot of possibilities here, if Rathard would only play his part.

Princess Lillian was not happy with the news. She feared it was an attempt to arrange a marriage for her. Fredrik, of course, denied it, but even Rolf was uneasy. Fredrik was keeping his own council in this matter.



Rathard, and his attendants were not impressed with their reception at Waterton. The Townsfolk were uninterested for the most part, and simply went about their affairs with an occasional curious glance.

As they were escorted across the drawbridge and into the main courtyard, the Castle Guard was turned out to salute them. But they were not allowed to see any more of the castle's defenses than necessary.

Rathard took this as a slight. And then, the Princess herself, was decidedly cool to him. And while she was a pretty girl, she seemed a bit too rustic to Rathard. He preferred the more *sophisticated* women who frequented his Father's court.

As a result of the affair, it was well established in Waterton, that Lord Rathard was an arrogant pig. His hunting party trampled crops, and his disdain for the villagers was manifest in multiple ways. His men drank too much, and the local women had to stay out of reach to avoid being groped.

Everyone was glad when they left after a fortnight. It had seemed like a month. For Fredrik more than anyone. He publicly thanked the populace for their forbearance.

It had been quite a contrast to their own Royal Family who had never tried to put themselves above the common people. King Fredrik's own grandmother had been a village girl from the western mountains. And he had been close to her throughout his childhood.

And the House of Midmont had always enjoyed mingling with the people, incognito. Many a man, or woman, had been surprised, to suddenly realize, that their drinking companion at an inn, was in fact a Prince... or even the *King* himself.

And so, if the other noble houses might regard Midmont with suspicion, there was no lack of good will among their own people.



It was with little enthusiasm, that Fredrik received the invitation to visit the Duke of Morlana in return, at his castle at St. Petersbridge.

The Duke had not been happy with the results of his son's visit to Midmont and King Fredrik. He realized that the poor reception had been largely due to Rathard's own arrogance. While it was true that

Morlana was more wealthy and powerful than the Kingdom of Midmont, it was still also true that Morlana was only a Grand Duchy.

The Duke was *not* a king. But his *son* could marry into a royal family. Or he *could* have, if he had not been such a fool. But then perhaps the young Fredrik could still be won over.

Now, as they sat at table, he watched Rathard and his two daughters. There was no hope for for Rathard he concluded. But the girls were another story.

Juliet, the eldest at 18, had blossomed into an attractive young lady; the kind that might tempt any man. Her younger sister, Marianne, showed promise as well. It was not unthinkable that Fredrik might be persuaded to marry one or the other.

There was more a stake here than just a title. Midmont controlled the southern pass into Solland. At the present, this was little used, other than for some local trade. The road was only suitable for pack animals in good weather.

But the Duke had with him, a man, recently come from Florence, familiar with the schools of engineering practiced in the south. He had crossed through this pass on his way to the Duke's court. He was of the opinion that the road though the gap could be improved. And improved enough to carry wagons.

If this were done, this pass would be the shortest route from the south to the river traffic at St. Petersbridge. And more trade would mean more tariffs.

It was rumored that King Fredrik was not an intelligent man. In Paris, he had earned the reputation of a carouser. And he was young. If these reports were true, one or the other of the girls, may be able to draw the young King in. And to control Fredrik; would be to control Midmont.

Lady Juliet was aware of her father's gaze, as the servant girl poured her wine. It was not difficult to guess his mind. Ever since her brother had returned from Waterton, the Duke had been dropping hints of his intentions. Now she wondered what the young King was like. Despite what she had heard, surely he could be no worse than her own brother.

And what if he *were*? Most men were pigs at best. But they were also fools. A woman could- if she understood these things- pull the strings from behind the scenes, and have her way in this world.

And she would have her way. And if the Duke didn't like it?... Well, *he* was only a man as well. To her own father, she was only a commodity, to be traded for *his* benefit.

Lady Juliet was suddenly aware that the servant girl was looking at her. Their eyes met for one brief moment before the girl looked quickly away.

She had barely noticed this girl before, working in the kitchen. Now she watched as the girl waited on Marianne, and then her Father.

The servant was about Juliet's own age, perhaps a year younger, if that. And she might have been pretty if she were cleaned up. But that was unlikely. This girl did not normally wait on them. She was *nothing*.

Yet Juliet could not shake the feeling that there was a connection between her thoughts of King Fredrik, and this girl, pouring the wine. But *that* was an absurd thought. She put it out of her mind.



As Elise made her way back down to the kitchen, she was thinking of Lady Juliet. The rumors were, that since Lord Rathard was *not* to wed the Princess of Midmont; *Juliet* would likely marry the King. After all, wasn't it was only natural?

Elise had only wanted a closer look at this woman, who was destined to become the Queen of Midmont. But then, just when she had dared to have that look, Juliet had suddenly turned on her. It was if Lady Juliet had known her thoughts. What had possessed her to do such a thing?

Elise went quickly back to her work. After all, what did *she* have to do with the King and Queen of

Midmont? These things were not her concern. She had acted like a fool. It was always best, for a servant like herself, to remain unnoticed.



But the Duke had made up his mind. Since Fredrik had the reputation of a man who liked "good times", the Duke would invite him to St. Petersbridge, and provide them. Then it would be up to Juliet, as the bait, to pull him in.

3 A Necessary Trip

Fredrik was rowing. He and Lily were alone in the boat on the lake. It was something they had done since childhood. In the distance they could see the castle and the town on the shore. The lake was surrounded by rocky peaks, some still with patches of snow.

Fredrik stopped rowing and let the boat drift in the gentle breeze.

"I would never make you marry a fool like him," Fredrik told his sister.

"I never want to leave this place," she said.

"Then, I suppose you will die an old maid," he teased. "Unless, of course, you were to marry some commoner."

Lillian's face reddened, and Fredrik laughed.

"I've see you together, and I know what you both want."

"I think Rolf is afraid of offending you, Freddy."

"You know, he only need ask. I would like nothing better for you... or him."

Lillian smiled and looked away toward Waterton and the castle set out into the lake. Around the lake, the mountains rose into the sky. This was her world.

Fredrik had seen the outside world, but it held no attraction for her.

"Will you go to the Duke?"

"I'm afraid I must."

"But why?"

He hesitated a long time before answering.

"Morlana is our only link to the outside world. We can't risk offending the Duke."

"What about Mother's people, Solland?"

"The road... the pass..."

"But the *Romans* built roads. Aren't they the ones who made the road to Morlana?"

Fredrik was quiet. He thought of all the reasons why it couldn't be done. But what if it *could*?

Lillian turned back to look at him. She held her head high; she was a Princess of Midmont.

"If they did it, why can't *we*?"

It was a challenge.



Fredrik did what he often did when he wanted information. He went to the Abby and Friar John.

"To build a road? You want to build a road?"

"What would it take to make the road to Solland better? To make it good enough for wagons to cross the high pass."

"A lot of work, I think!"

"But it is *possible*?"

"Come, you need to talk to Brother Sebastian."

Sebastian was the monk in charge of building repairs and masonry for the Abby. He was familiar with the southern pass to Solland, having crossed it several times on pilgrimages to the Holy City. He gave it some thought.

"It could be done, your Highness. It would take a few bridges over the streams. But we've plenty of stone. The hardest part would be at the top. We would have to cut into the mountain a bit."

Brother Sebastian looked down at his weathered hands. He had a lifetime of working in stone behind him. The idea was beginning to grow on him. He was starting to like this young King.

"I could do it, if you give me the men; and if the *Abbot* will approve."

Already in his mind, he was working out the plans. It would be his greatest work.

Fredrik sent word to the Queen's brothers in Solland of what he was proposing. They were open to

the idea. So Fredrik directed the work to begin as soon as possible, under Brother Sebastian's supervision.



But the invitation of Duke Richard could no longer be ignored. Fredrik knew that the Duke had hoped to promote a marriage between Rathard and Princess Lillian. That had failed. But the Duke still had two daughters. There was little doubt what he had in mind now.

But Fredrik had no intentions of matrimony as he rode out through the gates of Waterton on a fine summer morning. Princess Lillian would rule in his absence.

The Kings of Midmont had never been much for show. He was only accompanied by two men at arms, and Rolf, carrying the King's Banner. Behind them in a cart rode Friar John, with a wizened old peasant at the reins.

Princess Lillian had met privately with Rolf the night before. She was unhappy with Fredrik's leaving.

"Keep him safe," she told Rolf, as they walked on the battlements in the moonlight. She had heard the rumors about Fredrik, and wasn't sure what to believe.

"Lily, those rumors about Freddy are nonsense. He has good sense. He won't do anything stupid. I've known him all my life." Then he added, "So have you."

"He thinks a lot of you, Rolf."

"I know. But he *is* King now..." And here he paused for a long time. "...And *you* are a Princess."

The way he said it made her sad.



Fredrik's party reached St. Petersbridge as the sun was setting. Friar John and the cart turned toward St Peter's Abby. Fredrik and his men rode on to the castle.

The castle was built on a rocky outcrop that loomed above the town. The road wound up though the town toward the gates. The guards had been notified of their approach, and saluted as the King entered. The way continued to climb toward the inner gatehouse. As they approached it, Rolf could hear the gates closing behind them.

Torches were being lit in the courtyard as they passed though the inner gate. The Duke was there to welcome them. He seemed ill at ease.

"Greetings, your Majesty," he bowed, "I'm afraid we were not expecting you until tomorrow."

Several servants stepped forward, as the Duke continued;

"My servants will take care of your horses, and see that your men are fed and quartered."

Fredrik, and his men dismounted, as the grooms took the horses to the stables.

The Duke led Fredrik up a stairway, through the heavy doors, and into the castle.

"We have other guests here at the moment. The Archbishop has graced us with his presence this past week. Indeed, he means to stay some time," the Duke told him with some irritation.

The Archbishop ruled the Free City of Donstrum and the surrounding territories. He was a powerful man, with ties to the Emperor, and he was close to the Pope himself. The Duke now led Fredrik to the great hall and introduced him to the Archbishop.

The Archbishop was a heavy man with a bulbous nose and cold blue eyes. There was no warmth, the greetings were all formalities.

It was growing late as the Duke led Fredrik to his room.

"You must be hungry after your travel. Make yourself at home, and I'll have a meal brought to you in your chamber."

Then, he bowed, "Until tomorrow, Your Majesty," and took his leave.

4 A Glass of Wine

It was already late on this early summer evening, but the sun was just setting. The Princess Lillian was on her balcony overlooking the lake, enjoying a glass of wine in the cool evening air. There was a knock on her chamber door. It was Ella, her chambermaid, with a stranger in the dress of the Rangers.

"Please, your Highness," Ella curtsied. "This is my brother, Karl, one of the Rangers. May we speak to you, alone?"

Lillian was surprised at this unusual request.

"Any Ranger is welcome here. My brother the King, is a Ranger himself," she said.

Then, she dismissed her Lady in Waiting.

The chambermaid hesitated, and then began.

"We - some of the servants - fear for your life, Your Highness. There is a rumor that the King was poisoned."

Lillian listened in silence. That idea had occurred to her as well.

"This is a serious accusation. And by *who*?"

Now the brother stepped forward bowing respectfully.

"The night the King fell ill, Your Highness, a cart was seen leaving the city. It was unusual, and I followed at a distance, so not to be seen. I followed all the way to the border, to Morlana."

Princess Lillian stared at him. Her worst fears were being confirmed. The man went on.

"At the border, the cart was met by a group of riders. Then the driver mounted, and the party rode swiftly away toward St. Petersbridge, and the Duke of Morlana."

Lillian's blood ran cold. The pieces were falling into place. And now *Fredrik* was in Morlana, and in the power of the Duke.

She opened the door and called to the Man at Arms on duty.

"Summon the Court Physician!"

The Doctor came with haste, fearing the worst after the death of the King. He was relieved to find the Princess in good health. Lillian had the chambermaid and her brother wait outside while she questioned the Doctor.

"The evidence fits, Your Highness."

"Then why have you said nothing?"

Her tone was stern.

"The *Rumors*, Your Highness." He was growing uncomfortable under her gaze.

She waited in silence.

"The Rumor, that the Prince... or Yourself... " now he could not meet her eyes, "...were behind it." He finally got the last of it out with a great effort.

Anger rose up in the Princess.

"And you *believed* this slander?"

The doctor dropped to his knees. This was a side of Lillian he had never seen.

"Please, Your Highness, we don't know what to believe these days. I should have come to you; but..."

"But what?"

"They were watching me."

"*Who?*" she demanded.

"Those men... *Slythain's* men."



The Duke was gone. He had left Fredrik in his room alone. Fredrik laid his sword on the table, and walked to the window. It had grown dark by now, but Fredrik could see a few lights flickering in the town below. And beyond that, in the moonlight, the river and bridge.

Several river boats were tied to the banks below the bridge. It was to the river and the road, that St. Petersbridge owed it's prosperity. And it *was* a prosperous town. And much of that prosperity made it's way into the Duke's hands.

Fredrik's eyes were drawn to the bridge, visible now in the moonlight. It was said to have been built by the Romans hundreds of years ago. It crossed the river in three graceful arches. If the Romans could do that, surely he could build a road.

He thought of his father. If the Late King had intended that he, or Lily marry into the Duke's family, he had never mentioned it to Fredrik. But then he had never mentioned a spy ring either. Fredrik wondered just how many compromises a king had to make. How many would *he* make?

For now he would meet these daughters of the Duke, and perhaps one *would* make a suitable wife. But Fredrik doubted that. He thought that he would prefer a simple village girl, like his Grandfather had.

Already he missed home. He thought of the mountains and the lake. There was something of this castle that felt like a prison to him. He would do his duty here, and leave. And the sooner, the better.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. At his answer, the Porter entered with a frightened young woman, carrying a large tray.

"Your dinner, Your Majesty, complements of the Duke."

With that, the man stepped out, closing the door behind him.



In the kitchen things had just been settling down after serving dinner to the Duke and the Archbishop, his guest. The Castle Guard had been fed. The sculleries were finishing their work and the servants were ready for their own meal, when the Porter came in.

There were some shouts, and some curses, and then the Porter came and pulled Elise by the arm.

"Get ready, and come with me. I have a job for you."

Elise got wearily to her feet. She had been working all day as usual. Now she was tired and hungry.

"And clean yourself up!"

Anna, one of the older women came to her with a wet rag, and began scrubbing her face. Elise had no idea what this was about. One of the other women brought her a clean dress to put on. It was just a bit large, but would have to do. When the Porter returned, he handed her a large tray, filled with cold meats, bread, and wine.

"Follow me. The Duke says it's time you began to earn your keep."

As they climbed the winding stairs, he gave her instructions.

"You are to entertain the Duke's guest."

"Isn't that Marguerite's place?"

"She is with the Archbishop."

Elise tripped on the narrow stairs, but caught her balance.

"Be *careful*, you clumsy girl!"

"But what about Samantha?"

"She's traveling with Rathard."

"Shut up and listen. The Duke wants this guest to be comfortable- *understand?* Do whatever he tells you! If *he's* not happy... *you* won't be either."

Elise thought of the dungeon below. Then, they were at the door.



When the door closed, the woman remained standing, still holding the heavy tray. Fredrik watched her for a bit. Finally, when she still hadn't moved, he told her to set it on the table. She did so, and then stepped back, looking down at the floor.

At first he was amused. Then he became irritated.

"You can go now."

She looked up, more frightened then ever.

"Oh no, Sir!... The Duke... I have to stay... He'll punish me... Please!"

Fredrik's irritation turned to concern. The woman continued...

"I have to wait on you... and..."

She began to place the food on the table, but her hands shook so badly, that he was afraid she'd knock something over. Finally he could stand it no longer.

"Stop it!"

Elise started at his words, knocking over a goblet which was fortunately, empty. As she reached for it she was stopped by his hand on her wrist. Her first reflex was to jerk her arm back, but his grip was too strong. He lifted her hand, and led her away from the table.

"What is wrong with you?"

"N- Nothing, Sir. It's just that... I've never done this before," she stammered.

"Set a table?" asked Fredrik, a little amused.

"No..."

Elise was beginning to calm down a bit. Fredrik waited for her to continue.

... *'Entertain'* the Duke's guest."

He suddenly realized what she meant.

She had said it with a heavy sigh. But saying it seemed to calm her. He still held her wrist. He led her to the table, and sat her down in one of the chairs. Then he poured wine into the goblet and put it in her hand.

"Drink!"

He spoke with authority and she obeyed. As she raised the wine, she met his eyes for the first time.

5 A Plot Unmasked

Princess Lillian was shocked at what she was hearing. It appeared that her father, the King had been murdered by agents of Morlana. And these traitors were here, within the Royal Household.

To make matters worse, her brother, Now *King Fredrik*, was in Morlana, at the Duke's own castle. She had to get word to him. But who could she trust? Then she remembered the chambermaid and her brother, waiting outside.

As the Doctor left, she motioned for them to rejoin her. She took a long look at the Ranger. She liked what she saw.

"What is your name?"

"Karl, your Highness."

"I have a job for you, Karl."



Karl rode through the castle gates and into the twisted streets of Waterton. As he approached the city gate he hoped no one was watching. He stopped at the gate and told the Watchmen that he was returning to his post.

"Unusual time to leave for that," one watchman remarked.

Karl thought quickly.

"I need to be there in the morning. I should have left sooner." He lowered his voice, and added, "But I was delayed by a Lady." That was partly true.

That satisfied the watchmen.

"Get out of here," they told him, smirking.

Karl rode off into the dark. Once he was safely out of sight, he kicked his heels into his mount. Then, took the road for Morlana as fast as he dared in the darkness.



Elise sipped the wine, but when she saw that Fredrik was watching her, she quickly averted her eyes. She stared at the wine in her hands.

"Drink," he said.

And as she raised the glass their eyes met again. This time he looked away. He slid the tray of food in front of her.

"You're hungry." It was not a question.

Elise sat staring at the food. She *was* hungry.

"Eat!" Fredrik commanded, and sat down opposite her. then when she hesitated he added, "There's plenty for both of us."

Fredrik broke off some of the bread and handed it to her, taking the glass away.

"There's only one cup," he said pouring more wine, "So we'll have to share."

He took a drink, and broke off some bread for himself. Elise watched him stealthily though her lowered eyes as he ate.

He was not the Duke's usual guest. It was obvious that he had spent much time outdoors. And although he was not overbearing, there was an air of authority about him; he was used to being obeyed. In her fear, she had missed the Porter's words- "Your Majesty". She only knew that she had never seen him here before.

Fredrik watched Elise eat. He tried not to be obvious about it as he passed her pieces of bread and meat. It was clear to him that she was not used to such treatment. The Duke did not treat his servants very well.

The food and wine had it's effect, and Elise began to relax a little, and even managed a smile. Now Fredrik asked her name.

"Elise, sir."

By now he was convinced that she had no idea who he was. He wanted to keep it that way.

⌘

The Duke was in his own chambers now; the Archbishop being occupied by Marguerite. The presence of the Archbishop had complicated his plans. The Duke had wanted to concentrate on the young King Fredrik. If he could get him to wed one of his daughters, he would be able to influence matters in Midmont more easily.

It was true that he had his agent there. Fredrik's Father had thought Slythain to be working for him. It had been a fatal mistake. But the Duke knew Fredrik's reputation and was sure he would be easier to control.

There was a knock, and the Porter entered.

"Fredrik is settled in?"

"Yes sir. I gave him Elise."

"Elise...?" The Duke questioned.

"From the kitchen."

"You gave the King a scullery maid?"

"He seemed happy enough with her."

"Yes. I suppose any wench will do for Fredrik," the Duke said scornfully.

But he had no qualms about giving him either of his own daughters, if that would further his plans.



But Fredrik did not consider Elise just "any wench". Much had changed since his days at the

university in Paris. Before his return, he had already abandoned most of the behavior that had led to this questionable reputation. And since then, Brother John had continued his education.

And now, becoming King had been the last blow. From now on, he could no longer think only of himself. It seemed that a King was the least free of anyone. But if he were not free himself; he could be free for others-like this Elise.

He enjoyed watching her. The longer he watched, the more he realized that under the hasty cleanup and tangled hair, Elsie was a beautiful woman. He wanted her to see that for herself.

Fredrik had brought a number of items to be used as gifts. Now he took out a carved ivory comb. Elise's hair had been hastily bundled up with several cords, but the rat's nest of tangles remained. He handed her the comb.

"Take this and comb out your hair."

Elise blushed in embarrassment. This was one more reminder to her of what she was not. And, *too personal*, coming from a stranger. But she remembered the Porter's words- and the Duke's dungeon. She pulled out the cords, and began to attack the tangled mess. But it only got worse.

"Here, let me try," Fredrik said and stepped behind her, taking the comb.

He began to patiently work his way through knots. He remembered doing this for his sister, as a child. He stood behind her as he worked. The wine had loosened her tongue, and she began to talk. It had been a long time since she had had anyone to listen.

With Fredrik's encouragement, she talked about life in the Duke's household, of her work in the kitchen, and finally her own life. Her Father had died before she'd known him. She had lived with her mother in the attic of the inn where she worked, until she too, had died.

"I'm not sure how old I was. I don't really remember much; it was so long ago."

She wasn't sure about her own age at the time. But someone had brought her to the castle, and they had put her to work.

"I remember Mama would point out the windows, toward the mountains, and say that some day we would go home..." and here she paused, "...but we never did."

He was finished now. He told her to stand up, and turn around. There was a small mirror on the wall, and he turned her to face it. At first Elise thought she was looking at someone else. Her chestnut colored hair lay over her shoulders and fell nearly to her waist. Fredrik looked on with approval.

It was late now. He told her to get into the bed.

Again she reddened, but slowly removed her dress and got into the bed. Elise was innocent, but she knew what would come next. At least it was someone she liked, and not some fat pig, one of the *Duke's* friends. But, Fredrik remained at the table for a long time. And so, Elise fell asleep.

Fredrik was tired himself, and eventually did get into the bed. But he remembered his night in the chapel; and the vows he had made. So he rolled over, and tried to sleep.

Once he awoke during the night. Elise had rolled against him in her sleep. He could feel the curves of her body against him through her chemise.

He lay awake a long time.

6 Swords on the Road

The Queen's Own Guard was a mostly ceremonial company. It was made up of retired Guardsmen and Rangers. But Lillian knew them as a company of grizzled veterans, with a lifetime of loyalty to the crown. With the Queen still in mourning, and secluding herself, command had passed to the Princess.

Slythain's spies had reported Karl's departure from the city to him. Slythain was sure that he was carrying an urgent message to Fredrik. He also knew that the Princess had been consulting the physician, and feared the worst. He was penning a hasty message to the Duke when his door was thrown open. Several members of the Queen's Guard entered.

He tried to throw the message into the small fire on the hearth, but was too late. One of the "old men" delivered a cuff to his head that sent him sprawling. Two more jerked him from his chair to his feet. He abandoned any thought of resistance, as he was dragged before Princess Lillian.

There, he was thrown roughly to the floor at her feet.

"Please, Your Highness," he began, but was cut short by another blow to the head which knocked him to the floor again.

Finally, Lillian spoke.

"Is there anything you wish to tell us?"

"This is all a mistake," Your Highness he began, struggling to his knees.

One of the Guardsmen made to strike him again, but the Princess raised her hand and stopped him. She held the singed, half written message in her other hand.

"Take this traitor to the deepest dungeon," she said, turning away.

"Please, your Highness," he begged. But another blow knocked him to the floor. This time, the Princess did not interfere.



When he saw the Queen's Guardsmen enter Slythain's chamber, Potten feared the worst. If they had discovered Slythain, he would surely be next. He did not expect Slythain to hold out long under torture; he was not the type. He hastily gathered some things into a bag, and slipped out of the castle.

It wasn't difficult. The Gatekeepers were used to seeing him leave at odd hours on Slythain's errands. He hoped to escape before any alarms were raised.

He strode quickly through the deserted streets to one of the less reputable inns. Here he procured a horse.

At the City Gate, he was stopped by the Guardsmen. As they questioned him, a man was heard approaching at a run.

"By order of the Crown; *no one* is to leave the city!" he shouted.

But in that brief moment of confusion, Potten spurred his mount past the watchmen, and fled into the night. They stood watching helplessly.



Karl rode on at a brisk trot in the moonlight, skirting the lake. Soon the valley narrowed and he came to the outlet of the lake. Here, the water flowed over a rocky shoal, and descended into a narrow gorge.

The road followed the river into the gorge. On one side was the river, on the other the the bank rose steeply upward, into the forest. From time to time the road crossed over the stream on stone arches. As he neared the falls the river fell away, and the road clung to one side of the gorge, high above.

Above the Great Falls, the road was cut into the side of the cliff. This was the gateway to Midmont. It could be defended by a handful of men against an army if necessary. But in times of peace, it was only a deserted place along a lonely road.

Karl reined in his horse. He had an uneasy feeling. He watched from the shadows under the trees. And then he saw some movement ahead. A man moved into the moonlight. After a moment, Karl could see a horse standing nearby.

It could be a Ranger patrolling the road, but that was unlikely. The horse was too large, more like the type used in the lowlands of Morlana. And there was also something about the man's dress that was not right. He seemed to be waiting for something- or someone. Karl was sure it was not himself.

But, he had to pass. He threw back his hood, and adjusted his cloak to make sure he had free movement. He loosened his sword in its scabbard and was about to move forward, when he suddenly stopped. He heard hoofbeats behind him. His blood ran cold.

There was no place to hide. He had been ready to challenge one man, but two were too many. He was sure that the rider behind him was in league with the one blocking the road. Yet, he had his duty. There was no more time to think about it. In a desperate move, he spurred his horse forward, and drew his sword.

The man in the road was taken completely by surprise. He had been expecting Slythain's messenger, Potten, not an armed rider bearing down on him. He ran to his horse and mounted clumsily. He barely had his own sword in hand when Karl was upon him.

It was a one sided fight. Karl was well trained, and had the advantage of surprise. In less then a minute, the man was on the ground, and his horse had bolted. But it was long enough for Potten to arrive, his own sword already drawn. Karl had barely enough time to turn to face him.

This fight was different. Potten was a decent swordsman, and he was desperate. There was little room for the horses on the narrow road. They were crowded together with barely room to swing their swords. Karl had been cut twice already and now they were locked together, each straining to throw the other down.

Now Potten leaned back and took a swipe at the leg of Karl's horse. It was only a slight cut, but the horse reared up, kicking out with it's hooves. They struck Potten's mount, and it stepped back to keep it's footing. One hoof stepped into air, and the other slipped back amid a shower of loose stones. In what seemed like slow motion, horse and rider slid over the edge, and with a shriek, disappeared into the darkness below.

Karl spoke soothingly to his horse to calm it down. He looked down at the dead man, laying in the road. Now there was no sound other than the roar of the falls below.

He dismounted and examined his horse's wound. Once he was satisfied it was not serious, he searched the dead man. He found nothing, but was satisfied that he was Morlanian.

Karl pushed him over the cliff to join his fellow.

It was early morning, still before dawn, when Karl rode up to the Abby at St. Petersbridge. He pounded on the door until it was opened by a sleepy eyed monk.

"I must see Brother John, of Saint Mary's Abby at Waterton."

"Can't it wait?" grumbled the monk, as he fumbled with the lock.



Elise woke long before dawn. She needed to get back to her work. She got out of the bed carefully, so not to wake Fredrik. She pulled her dress back on over her head, and quietly gathered the things from the table. Before she left, she paused again at the mirror.

But Fredrik was not sleeping. He was watching her from the bed. There was something about her spirit that drew him. He was already making plans, as she closed the door behind her. He was sure *she* was why he was there.

When Elise got to the kitchen, Anna could tell that something had happened. She had been watching Elise for years, and looking out for her after her mother had died. This was the first time she had seen her smile in a long time. The change was apparent to others as well.

"You must have had quite a night," the cook said.

Elise didn't hear a word.

7 News from Home

When Rolf came that morning, Fredrik was waiting for him. He wasted no time.

"I need you to do something for me," he said.

"Thank you, and I hope you also slept well, Your Majesty," Rolf laughed.

Fredrik was embarrassed. He hadn't realized how abrupt he'd been. Then, he laughed at himself.

"And what's so important so early this morning?" Rolf asked with amusement.

"Rolf, there is this *girl*..." he began, but stopped when he saw the look Rolf was giving him.

"No... I *didn't* sleep with her... Well I *did*... But I *didn't*..."

"You sound confused about it, don't you remember?"

"No... I mean *yes*, I remember. She spent the night here with me. I want to know more about her. Her name is Elise, and I believe she works in the castle kitchens."

"I thought you gave that up, after Paris."

"You know I did. *This* is different."

Rolf could see that he was serious.

"You know you are *King Fredrik* now, Your Majesty."

Fredrik walked over to the window, and looked out.

"I know that Rolf." Then after a long pause he added, "You're a lucky man, Rolf. And you don't even realize it."



Rolf puzzled over Fredrik's words as he crossed the courtyard to where the main kitchens were. Fredrik would be occupied most of the day with the Duke and his daughters. The rumor in castle was, that he was to marry one of them. Rolf had had a glimpse of them. Neither was bad looking. In that respect, a man might do worse.

But now his job was to find this "Elise". And Fredrik had made it clear that she was *not* to know who *he* was.

The kitchen area was crowded, smokey, and filled with activity. In addition to the Duke and his guests, the rest of the castle must be fed. Rolf knew he was out of place the moment he entered. When he finally asked about Elise, a man pointed across the room to a young woman chopping cabbages. She had not noticed him.

As he started in her direction, he was blocked by an older woman who glared fiercely up into his face.

"Leave her alone," she hissed. "I suppose now you'll *all* want her!"

Rolf was taken aback at this, and protested -

"No... No... You don't understand."

"I understand all right. Leave her alone. Let her be happy; at least for today."

"But, *King Fredrik*..."

"King Fredrik!" she sneered. "She thinks he's in *love* with her! She doesn't even know who he is!"

Rolf decided to take a chance.

"But, he *is*."

Anna gave him a funny look.

"Who are *you*, and what do *you* know about it?"

"Can we talk?"

Anna glanced over at the head cook. He was busy. She led Rolf to a side door that opened out into a small herb garden.

As Rolf talked with Anna, he could see Elise through the half opened door. She had a slight smile, and a faraway look to her.

"She's not usually like that," Anna told him. "The cook is hard on her." Then she added, "But even he is leaving her alone today."

"King Fredrik sent me to find out who she is, and whatever else I can."

"Why does *he* care? He is to marry Lady Juliet."

"He has never said that."

"How do *you* know what this King says?" she asked scornfully.

"I've known Fredrik since childhood, we're like brothers."

Anna gave him a skeptical look. But he seemed in earnest. And she did remember a story she had heard somewhere, a long time ago, where a Midmontian Queen, had begun life as a village girl.

"Is it true that your Queen was a commoner?"

"That was Fredrik's grandmother."

Anna gave a long sigh. What if it were true?

"Alright. What do you want to know?"



Fredrik spent the morning with the Duke and his two daughters, Juliet the oldest, and her younger sister, Marianne. The two Women were on their best behavior, and the conversation was polite. But Fredrik's mind was somewhere else. Eventually, the Duke excused himself, claiming some business with the Archbishop.

The ladies insisted on taking Fredrik for a tour of the castle. They started at the highest tower, and worked their way down from there. The fortress rose on a rocky spur of the last mountain at the mouth of the valley. The town below was walled, and just outside it's walls, was the river.

St. Petersbridge took it's name from the old Roman bridge which spanned the river here. The smaller river flowing from Midmont, met the larger, navigable river here. Crossing the bridge was the old trading road, which wound it's way south and up into the mountains to Midmont. In the other direction it was the main route into the Archbishop's realm.

Fredrik looked out over the river wharfs, and the fertile fields beyond. Then he turned his gaze to the narrow valley that led to Midmont, and home. He missed it already.

They walked the battlements and saw the armory and family apartments. Fredrik made a point of memorizing the layout of the castle. Eventually they made their way down to the dungeon. It appeared to be

well used. Then came the stables, and finally a quick peek into the kitchens.

And there he saw her. Elise was working hard at some task. Fredrik wanted to linger and watch, but didn't dare. He was relieved that she never looked up. But Anna had seen him. He had no idea who she was, but when he saw her staring at him, he hastily stepped back outside.

But Anna had seen him with Juliet and Marianne. She had no doubt who he was. And she had also seen how his eyes had lingered on Elise. Perhaps Rolf was right. Perhaps there was something there.

As they crossed the courtyard to the castle, Fredrik's thoughts were elsewhere. And this was obvious to the two sisters.

"What can be on his mind?" Juliet said to her sister.

"It must be some weighty affair of state," she replied with a giggle.

This brought Fredrik out of his reverie.

"No... no, I was just thinking of something,"

They were walking on both sides of him now. Each had an arm.

"Something, or... *someone?*" It was Juliet teasing him. Then she said to her sister, "You know how men are."

"Is she pretty?" This time it was Marianne.

Fredrik certainly didn't want to talk about Elise with them. But he was surprised at how close they were to the truth. Then he noticed Rolf standing with Friar John in the courtyard. They motioned for him to join them.

Fredrik excused himself. Ladies Juliet and Marianne made their way into the castle, laughing at his discomfort- Juliet tossing a teasing smile back toward him.



Fredrik led Rolf and the monk to his room in the tower, and closed the door.

"Princess Lillian has sent a messenger to Friar John at the abby," Rolf explained to him.

Then the monk told Fredrik what he had learned from the Ranger.

"Poisoned.." Fredrik said thoughtfully. "And The Duke was behind it?"

"That's what we believe. Lillian was having Slythain arrested when he left."

"I never did trust that bastard."

"There's more," the monk told him. "The Ranger encountered a Morlanian on the road, and also a courier from the Duke's spies in Waterton."

"And?"

"He killed them both."

"Good. I'll want to thank this man personally."

Fredrik thought for a moment.

"Can we assume that the Duke knows nothing of this?"

When Rolf shrugged, Fredrik added, "We may be in danger when he learns of it."

Then he told Rolf;

"Have everyone prepared to leave on a moment's notice."

Rolf nodded and opened the door to leave. But Fredrik stopped the monk.

"Friar John, I have something to talk with you about."

Then Rolf left, closing the door behind him.

8 New Plans

The Duke and Archbishop were alone in the Duke's private rooms.

"And how are things going for you?" the Archbishop asked, helping himself to more wine.

The Duke looked at him without expression. He loathed the corpulent cleric who had imposed on him time and time again. But he owed him. The Archbishop was the one who had arranged for the Duke's wife to enter the convent when she had become inconvenient.

"Well enough, I suppose."

"I understand that young Rathard was not a success at Waterton."

When Duke Richard didn't answer, he went on.

"But you have Fredrik *here* now."

The Archbishop took on a conciliatory tone.

"It would be difficult to resist the charms of such beauties as Juliet and Marianne. The only problem I could foresee is choosing between them."

"In your case that might be true, but this is Fredrik."

"I know what you're trying to do. But if things don't work out, you could try another route."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you haven't thought about it."

The Archbishop stepped closer and lowered his voice.

"If by some chance this young King Fredrik is able to resist the many charms of Lady Juliet or Marianne, perhaps he could be persuaded by other means."

Despite his dislike of the Archbishop, Duke Richard was listening.

"It is surprising to me that this young King was naive enough to put himself within your power."

"You mean to hold him *hostage*?"

"Let's just say that you could provide time for him to, perhaps... grow *fonder* of the girls; and change his mind."

The Duke was quiet. In truth, this *had* occurred to him. But he had dismissed the idea. Now the Archbishop had revived it.

"The wedding would take place here, of course," the Archbishop added. "Sometimes it's best to act boldly."

It was clear to the Duke how this man had reached his position.



When Rolf left Fredrik's room, Anna was watching unseen from a shadowed corner. She waited a bit, and then went to the door, knocking softly. After speaking with Rolf, she had decided to risk approaching Fredrik personally.

The Door was opened by the young King himself. But he was not alone. She could see a monk standing near the window. She had not counted on this. She curtsied deeply.

"Please, Your Majesty, may I speak with you."

Fredrik stepped back, letting her enter. He closed the door behind her. Anna was a bit intimidated being face to face with the King. He was taller than she expected, and wore a serious expression. She glanced over at Friar John and waited for the king to speak first.

As Fredrik looked at her he realized that she was the same woman that he had seen staring at him, in the kitchen earlier. His expression softened.

"What do you wish to tell me?" he asked.

Anna looked questioningly at the monk.

"It's alright. Anything you wish to say to me, can be said before Friar John."

"Please sir," she began, "Elise is like a daughter to me. Please do not toy with her."

Anna began to cry. Fredrik could see Friar John watching from his place by the window.

"Don't..." Fredrik began.
But there was no stopping her now.

He began again,
"She told me she came here when her mother died,
and..."

But she interrupted him.

"She was *young*. She doesn't remember it all."

"Tell me, please. I do not wish to hurt her."

"When her father died," Anna began, "... (he had come here to take service with the Duke's Men at Arms) ...her mother found work at an inn in the town."

Now Anna met his eyes and continued. The monk stepped closer to listen.

"She and Elise lived there, at the inn."

"Elise told me that. And then, her mother died."

"No, that's not how it happened. One day, Duke Richard saw her mother at the inn. She was a very beautiful woman. He wanted to bring her here- for himself. She wanted no part of it. But the Duke is not to be refused, as I well know."

Here she looked down, and was quiet until Fredrik spoke.

"And?"

"Well... he *compelled* her to come. But it took the light and life out of her. She died soon after."

Then after another long pause, she continued the story.

"Elise was left alone. I cared for her."

"So, what do you want with me?" Fredrik asked.

Anna fell on her knees and took hold of his tunic.

"Please let her be! Don't do this to her. She thinks she loves you. She doesn't even know who you are."

Anna turned toward Friar John.

"Tell him. It's not right to use her like that."

"What is your name?" Fredrik asked pulling her to her feet.

"Anna, Your Majesty," she said still looking down.

Fredrik turned her face up toward his own.

"Anna, I have every intention of making Elise my queen."

"But..."

"In fact, I was just discussing this with Friar John. He, of course, thinks I'm mad" he said with a smile.

"But, you *can't*..."

"Are you telling me what I can't do?" Fredrik asked sternly.

"No... No, Your Majesty," Anna said, looking away again.

"But Anna," he said raising her face to his once more, "I don't want her to know what I am, not yet. I want her to love *me*, not a King."

"But you *are* a King," Friar John reminded him.

Fredrik and Anna had both forgotten he was there for the moment.

"Yes," said Fredrik slowly. "And she must know that too. But not yet."

9 Two Dinner Parties

That evening the Duke provided a banquet for his guests. There were musicians, and the wine flowed freely. Juliet and Marianne were both very attentive to Fredrik, insisting that his cup remain filled. They sat at either side of him, vying for his attention.

All the time the Duke watched closely, looking for some sign that his plans were working. But Fredrik did not seem to be living up to his reputation. The Duke was beginning to think that he might have to take the Archbishop's advice.

He looked at the Archbishop in disgust. He was already drunk, and seemed unable to keep his eyes off of the Duke's daughters. Fredrik, on the other hand, was making an effort to remain sober, despite being constantly pawed by both Juliet and Marianne. In tending Fredrik's cup, they had not been neglecting their own.

Eventually the Archbishop's attentions returned to Marguerite at his side. Marianne, looking a bit green, left the table and disappeared for a time. Fredrik was left with Juliet.

"Tell me about Midmont," she said.

"Midmont?" he asked. His home was very different than this place.

So he began to tell her about the lake, surrounded by mountain peaks. And he described the town of Waterton, with its castle rising from rocky shore of the lake. He got a faraway look as he spoke of the mountain valleys with their tiny villages hanging on the mountainsides.

"I think I should like such a place," She told him. "I am tired of this place."

"I think you would be bored there," Fredrik told her.

"You hurt my feelings," she returned with a pout.

Fredrik looked at her, wondering if he had gone too far with his words. Perhaps he *had* been unfair.

"You make it sound so beautiful, I should like to see it. I could come and visit you there, if you would like."

Juliet had placed her hand on his arm as she spoke. Fredrik tried to picture her at the castle on the lake. But his mind was filled with Elise instead. He realized that Juliet was watching him, waiting for a reply.

"We'll see what happens," he told her.
Juliet smiled. She thought he was thinking of her.

The Duke had been watching. Juliet's smile was encouraging. Maybe things were finally beginning to go his way.



The Porter had walked Elise to Fredrik's room again, and told her to wait there.

"He asked for *you* again. I don't know why," he said dismissively.

Anna had been gathering up the things from the dinner party and bringing them down to the kitchen. When she got there, with the last of them, the Porter called her over to join him where he sat at the table. He had already finished one tankard of ale, and was starting on his second.

"Annie, Annie, come sit with old Joe for a bit," he told her.

Anna looked over to the cook apprehensively. He was already shorthanded with Elise gone. He scowled at her.

"Don't worry about *him*," the Porter said loud enough for the cook to overhear, "If he says anything, I'll have him whipped."

Joseph, the Porter was in charge of all domestic duties in the Duke's castle. Under the Duke, his word was law. As Anna sat opposite him, he called out to the cook.

"You! Bring more ale, and one for the lady!"

The cook brought it, angrily. He stood there glaring at the Porter, who was ignoring him. Finally the Porter looked up.

"Don't you have something to do? I'll call you when I want you."

The cook walked off in a rage. Anna could hear him cursing the sculleries. The Porter looked at her.

"Drink!" he commanded.

Anna obeyed. Joseph drained one cup and picked up the other. He sat, looking into the tankard for a minute or so. Then looked up at her.

"You know, you're still a good looking woman, Annie. I remember when the Duke first brought you here. I had hoped we could..." Then he paused again. **"But the Duke is the jealous sort, you know."**

Anna drank her beer in silence as the Porter rambled on.

"People like him, they do whatever they want. We just do what they tell us... Don't we, Annie.

"Like this King here," he snorted. "He insists that I take that little bitch, Elise, to his room every night. Sure, she's pretty enough, once you get her cleaned up. But he could have Lady Juliet, a noble beauty, or her sister. The Duke would love to arrange it. But he

prefers a tumble with some stinking little kitchen wench. But they say he is like that, don't they."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know? When he was in Paris, all he did was drink, and chase whores."

This did not sound like the man she'd just met.

Anna spent the next hour listening to the Porter's monologue. He became less and less coherent, until he got shakily to his feet. She had to help him to his own room. Once there, he made a clumsy attempt to kiss her. Anna left him asleep on his bed. She did not return to the kitchen. Let the cook think what he wanted.



When Fredrik returned to his room, Elise was waiting, standing by the window.

"The Porter said you wanted to see me, sir."

"Elise, I've been waiting all day to see you again."

It was what she had wanted to hear. But doubts had begun to disturb her. What did he really want?

But she forgot all that now, as they sat together over a late meal. Fredrik did not eat much himself, having been with the Duke earlier. But he made Elise comfortable as she ate, and drank.

After a time, Elise got up her nerve to ask the question that had filled her mind all day. He had never even told her his name.

"Who are you, *really?*"

Fredrik just looked at her and sighed.

"I know you came with that King from Midmont. But who are *you?*"

Fredrik had been dreading this, knowing it would come up at some point.

"I'm just one of the Rangers," he told her. It was a half truth.

She touched his sword, laying on the table beside them; It was obviously a superior weapon.

"You are not just any Ranger," Elise said watching him closely. "Are you a *captain...* are you a *knight?*"

"Something like that," he answered.

She could see he didn't want to say any more about it. But that only made her more curious. Now emboldened, she told him;

"Tell me about *yourself*". "What is your name? You know mine."

"Just call me Freddy."

"Freddy?"

"Yes, that's what my sister calls me."

"What's her name, Freddy?"

"Lily," he answered, hoping she would not make the connection.

She did not. Elise was not familiar with the Royal House of Midmont. Fredrik was relieved as she continued.

"My mother was from Midmont. I think I was born there." Her eyes seemed to be looking at something far away now as she said, "I'd like to see it some day."

"Perhaps you *will*."

"No... I have to stay here. But tell me, what is it like?"

"It is beautiful, you will love it."

Elise thought that an odd choice of words. But she listened with pleasure as Fredrik described his homeland, and unbeknownst to her, his Kingdom.

10 A Promise

The Duke had been watching Fredrik throughout the dinner. If Juliet played her part well, his plans just might succeed. If he could get his daughter into the House of Midmont, he could deal with Fredrik at any time. He had his own man there already. The *old King* had been a fool, and never suspected until it was too late.

Joining the Kingdom of Midmont to his own lands would make him a force to reckon with. Even the Archbishop would have to respect him then.

He was tired of kowtowing to that pig. The Archbishop had the Church behind him, and the Emperor. But Midmont was an Elector as well. Even the Emperor would have to acknowledge him then. He could tell that Bastard Priest to go to hell, where he belonged.

The Duke was enjoying these thoughts when he was interrupted by a knock on his door. It was Damson, his right hand man, and head of his spies.

"My Lord, we have a problem."

"What is it now, Damson?" asked the Duke in irritation.

**"I had a man watching the road from Midmont..."
"So?"**

"We don't know what happened to him. His horse came in without him in the morning. He was a bad one for drink; but never while on duty."

**"He's probably drunk, in bed with some wench. Have him flogged when he shows up."
"But there's more."**

"What?"

"Slythain's man, Potten, was found dead, in the river. It appears he was washed down from Midmont. From the looks of him, he went over the falls."

"Was he carrying any message?" asked the Duke, suddenly interested.

"We found none, My Lord."

"It could be an accident."

"Yes, My Lord..."

"But you don't think so?"

"No, My Lord."

"Go on."

"There was a monk, traveling with Fredrik and his men. He is staying at the monastery now. He received an visiter early that same morning. We believe there was a message from Waterton."

"Then, this man would also have been on the road that night."

"Yes, My Lord."

The Duke thought about it.

"We'll need to *talk* to this man."

"I can't just *take* him from the monastery, My Lord."

"I'll have to talk to the Archbishop," said the Duke in resignation. He hated to have to ask for another favor. The Archbishop always wanted something in return.

"You can go now. Keep me informed if anything else turns up."

"Yes, My Lord."



Slythain had lost all track of time in the dark. He relived his arrest over and over in his mind. First had come some concern, then panic as he was dragged before the Princess. Then, after a beating, he was thrown into this hole.

Next came an eternity of silence and darkness so thick he could feel it. He was chained to a damp wall

by an iron collar around his neck, barely long enough to let him lay down on the moldy straw.

He *did* have plenty of time to think. Duke Richard had promised him a position of authority in the new puppet state of Midmont. But those promises were worthless now. Maybe he could bargain his way out of this. But, if they had realized that he was the one that had poisoned the King... he could expect no mercy.

When he heard a key turn in the lock, he was expecting the worst.

The jailer came in, keys jingling, with two of his men. They locked manacles around Slythain's ankles, and led him out, and up a twisting stairway. He stumbled along in the torchlight, dragging the chains, rattling behind him. No one spoke.

They stopped at a heavy oaken door. Light shown through a small grating. Slythain's heart pounded as he recognized the torture chamber. The old King had had little use for it. It seemed his daughter had other ideas.

In truth, Princess Lillian was a gentle soul. She had hoped that the traitor would break without this. But she was prepared to follow though, if it came to that. She steeled her nerves, and waited.

She was there, watching impassively as they strapped him down with leather straps. He broke into a cold sweat as the men ripped his tunic open. One was

heating irons in a fire. The fire cast weird shadows on the cold stone walls.

Princess Lillian spoke only one word.

"Names."

"Please, Your Highness," he begged; It had no effect on her.

By now the irons were red hot. One of the men drew one out, holding it up where Slythain could see. Slowly he approached. Slythain could feel the heat on his exposed flesh. He involuntarily strained at his restraints.

His mind was racing. What was the use in trying to hold out? He was doomed either way. At best, he could only hope for a quick and relatively painless death. And this wasn't it.

At the first touch of the iron, he shrieked.

"Stop it! Stop it! I'll tell you everything!"

Potten had been right.



At Duke Richard's castle, in Fredrik's room, Elise listened with pleasure as he described the land of Midmont, and the town of Waterton on the lake. It brought back memories of her mother, and the stories she used to hear as a child. From time to time, she would interrupt him.

"I remember my mother telling me about that. She always said we would go back, but then, she died, and I came here."

Then, Elise grew quiet, and withdrawn. Hearing Fredrik brought back more memories. Ones that had lain dormant for years. Fredrik's voice trailed off as he watched her. After a time she spoke again.

"No... That's *not* what happened." Then she slowly continued, her voice filled with sadness. "No... We came here... *Then*, she died."

Fredrik could see tears running down her cheeks. He wanted to dry her tears.

"Elise... Elise... Come back to Midmont with me."

"I can't," she sobbed.

"Marry me... and come home with me, Elise."

"What?"

"I want you to be my wife... "

Now she broke down completely. Fredrik pulled her to him and wrapped her in his arms.

"Please, Elise."

"But I'm only..."

"My Elise..."

"And you are..."

"Just a man that loves you..."

Finally she said the words he longed to hear.

"Yes... I'll Marry you. I'll be your wife."

It was a strange thing. They had only just met, yet it seemed to be destined. She could tell, that he felt it too. Elise was still crying as he held her, but this time it was for joy. There was hope for the future.

After a time, they walked to the window. Fredrik took out a cross on a silver chain and slipped it around her neck. The cross itself was carved of Ivory, with silver trim, embedded with gemstones. It was a beautiful piece of work.

"This is a token of my love for you, and my promise to take you with me."

He took it and put it beneath her chemise between her breasts.

"Keep it hidden for now, until the time is right. Trust me."

They spent the night laying beside each other. Elise talking about her life, and Fredrik speaking of their future. He was careful not to mention the throne.

In the morning he reminded her, not to speak of this to anyone.

"Except, you can tell *Anna*."

Elise wondered how he knew Anna, but she did not question him.

11 A Quick Escape

It was very early. Krawley had not slept well. In fact, not at all. He had tossed and turned all night.

Ever since he had heard of Slythain's arrest, he had expected a knock on the door. *Potten* had disappeared in the middle of the night. At the inn, all he was told was that *Potten* had left town hurriedly.

Krawley finally gave up on trying to sleep. He got up and began pacing the floor in the dark. When his wife could stand it no longer, she got out of bed herself, and lit a candle.

"I knew nothing good would come of this," she began.

"You liked the few extra coins well enough."

"What good are coins, when you've lost your head? Can you spend them *then*?"

Krawley had sat down next to the candle. Now he shifted nervously on his stool. He had heard a rumor that Slythain had been taken for questioning under torture. He didn't expect much of him.

"We need to go and stay with your mother," he told his wife.

"What? That's half way to *Solland*! I don't want to be up there on the side of that mountain!" She went on,

"And the Rangers are *there* too. You should have thought of this! I knew it would be nothing but trouble."

She went on like this until Krawley could stand it no more. He stood up and slapped her hard.

"Shut up! Damn you!"

Frieda retreated into the darkness, sobbing quietly.

They heard the sound of men passing in the street. Krawley peeked out carefully. Several armed men were moving by torchlight, headed for the inn. His heart began pounding, and he felt a coldness in the pit of his stomach. As he got to his feet, there came a pounding at the door.

Their house was located at the edge of the town, along the lakeside. The town side of the wall was low, only chest high. On the other side it dropped away, to the lake below. Krawley pushed open the back window, and dropped to the walkway along the wall. Then there was the sound of the door giving way, and he heard men running toward him in the dark. With nowhere else to go, he climbed onto the wall, and leaped into the lake.

Frieda was left huddled in the corner, clutching her two children.



"What are you *doing*, Fredrik?"

Rolf couldn't believe what was happening. Fredrik, the King of Midmont, had betrothed himself to a scullery maid, that he had only known for two days.

"I know you think I've lost my mind, Rolf."

"What happened? Did you sleep with her, and now you feel guilty?"

Fredrik looked at him in surprise.

"Is that what you think?" he asked.

"No... No... Forgive me. I just don't understand. You are the King, she's only..."

"Only what? A commoner? Haven't you learned anything about us yet?"

Rolf was surprised at his word "us". Was it intentional? What did he mean by that? But he quickly put it out of his mind. Fredrik was speaking again.

"Rolf, get our horses ready. I need to see Friar John at the Abby."



As Elise came into the kitchen that morning, she was met by the Cook. He was still in a ugly mood from the night before. He stopped her.

"You look happy enough this morning... Have another big night?"

Elise was taken by surprise. She didn't know what to say.

The Cook continued.

"You're in love, aren't you. You think he loves you," he said sarcastically. "You stupid little whore. You'll believe anything." He laughed cruelly. "Now get to work!"

Elise stumbled across the kitchen, and began her chores. Anna has seen it all. After a few minutes, when the Cook wasn't watching, she went to Elise.

Elise's hand was clutching something beneath her dress. Her cheeks were wet.

"What is it, child? Don't listen to him."

Elise slowly withdrew the cross from her bosom, and opened her hand to reveal it. Anna took a deep breath. It was a work of art, and probably worth a fortune.

"He gave me this."

Anna reached over and touched it with her finger.

"Elise, this is..."

"He want's to marry me." Then she looked into Anna's eyes searching. "Can it be true? Is this all real?" Anna held the cross in her hand.

"Well, *this* is certainly real."



The Abbot of St Peter's Abby was not a happy man. He did not like the Archbishop. The Abbot took his own vows seriously, and had nothing but distain for those who did not. They were the ones who gave the Church a bad name. The Abbot did not consider the Archbishop his Superior. His loyalty was to his own Order.

But there were practical considerations as well. Now, the Archbishop was here, demanding he turn over one of his guests for "questioning". He made a sign to one of the Brothers as he stalled the Archbishop with some wine.

"While you are here, your Eminence, you must sample this vintage. We've only recently opened the cask."

He knew the Archbishop had no real appreciation for a fine wine. But then neither would he turn down a drink- or *two*.

His messenger found Friar John with Fredrik and Rolf. Karl was sitting off to the side.

"The Abbot wants you to know that the Archbishop is here. He wants to take your friend-" he nodded toward Karl- " to the castle; and to the *Duke*."

Karl looked up in alarm. The monk lowered his voice.

"There is a back gate though the wall, in the garden. It will not be locked."

Then he was gone.

Karl quickly got to his feet.

"You best get out of here," Fredrik told him. "Go to the Red Onion Inn. Ask for Garth. He's with us."

Karl bowed low.

"Yes Your Majesty."

"And Karl?"

"Thank you for your service to the Crown."

"I only did my duty, Your Majesty."

"Now get on out of here. You will hear from us soon."

Friar John took Karl to the garden. Fredrik and Rolf went to the Abbot, and the Archbishop.

12 Who *Are* You ?

The Archbishop was still with the Abbot when Fredrik and Rolf arrived.

"Care for some wine?" he asked, ignoring the Abbot.

Fredrik first greeted the Abbot, and then replied.
"Not at this hour, thank you."

The Archbishop drained his cup.

"Are you enjoying your stay at St. Petersbridge?" the Archbishop asked.

"Well enough. Although I do hope to return to Waterton soon."

"Yes," said the Archbishop, setting down his cup.
"Lovely place I hear, although I've never been there. A bit rustic, isn't it?"

The Abbot looked on, studying Fredrik. This was his first look at the young King. He did not appear to be what the Abbot had been led to expect. It was obvious that Fredrik did not care for the Archbishop. That alone was a point in his favor. The Abbot knew and respected Friar John. If he was mentoring Fredrik, it could only be for the good.

"Are you perhaps considering *marriage*?" The Archbishop asked.

Rolf, standing near the door shifted uncomfortably. The Abbot noticed it immediately. He had been studying the King's companion as well. Something was going on. He would have some questions for Friar John later.

"I haven't ruled it out," was Fredrik's noncommittal reply.

"Yes, Lady Juliet is quite lovely; and of a very noble family."

That was true. Her mother was cousin to the Emperor Himself. Now, the Archbishop changed the subject.

"It is said that the Late King, your father, gave sanctuary to heretics and Jews."

This was also true. There were a few Waldensian fugitives living in the mountain villages. And a very small Jewish community in Waterton itself. Little was said about it, but Fredrik had never known them to be disloyal to the crown.

"I hope, now that you've come to the throne, you might take a more *orthodox* position," the Archbishop continued.

Now the *Abbot* was uncomfortable. While he was quite orthodox himself, he shared with Friar John, the opinion that any persecution of these groups, did more

harm than good. It had been the subject of many late night discussions between them.

But now *Fredrik* changed the subject again.

"Are you staying long with Duke Richard?"

"A few more days, perhaps," said the Archbishop. He was irritated at being put off by the King.

There was a knock at the door. One of the monks entered. He bowed low to the Archbishop.

"It seems that the man you seek has already left the Abby, Your Eminence."

The Archbishop glared at the Abbot, who for his part, displayed no emotion.

"It seems you will have to seek elsewhere," the Abbot said. "Perhaps you will stay and celebrate a Mass with us?"

The Archbishop stomped out without a reply. He had no time for such things.



A short time later, Fredrik met Karl and the peasant Garth, at the Red Onion. The proprietor of the inn was friendly to Midmont, and the Red Onion was the inn of choice for most travelers from Waterton. He was in fact, the one who had taken in Elise and her mother, years ago.

Fredrik gave them instructions to be ready to move on a moment's notice. He hoped to leave that very night, if all went well.



Duke Richard was angry. He had had to ask the Archbishop for a favor and gotten nothing in return. King Fredrik had left for his own room early, leaving behind a disappointed Juliet. But the Archbishop stayed long at table, as usual.

When the Duke was finally alone, Damson came to him.

"My Lord, I have someone you need to see. He has just come from Waterton."

"Bring him in."

The Duke was expecting news from Slythain, but he was shocked by the appearance of the man Damson brought to him. Krawley's clothes were filthy and torn. He had the look of a hunted animal. He dropped to his knees and waited.

"Well, what is it man?" the Duke demanded.

"Slythain, My Lord, has been arrested."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, My Lord. And he has broken down under torture. I barely escaped myself."

After swimming the lake, Krawley had fled across the mountains on foot, barely evading the Ranger patrols.

The Duke was silent. Finally he addressed Damson.

"And Fredrik... does *he* know this?"

"I know not, My Lord."

The Duke thought for a moment.

"Fredrik must not leave this castle." He walked to the window, and looked out into the gathering darkness. Then he spoke to Damson.

"Get this man out of here."

Anna was carrying a tray of empty plates down to the kitchen, when the Duke's door opened. Damson and the other man pushed past her knocking the tray from her hands. As she began to gather up the pieces, she heard the Duke call after them.

"Remember; Fredrik is *not* to leave this castle!"

He glanced at down at Anna, cleaning up the mess and muttered,

"Clumsy bitch."

She was glad for once to be ignored. As the Duke's guards resumed their place at the door, she made her

way back to the kitchen. Fredrik must be warned. As soon as possible, she slipped out of the kitchen, and carefully so not to be seen, she made her way to Fredrik's room.

She knocked softly. Rolf opened the door, and pulled her quickly inside. After checking for observers, he shut the door.

Anna was surprised to find a number of other people there.

In addition to Rolf and the King, she recognized Friar John. There were two other men there, apparently some of Fredrik's own guardsmen. And then she saw Elise.

Elise was wearing a new dress, provided by Fredrik. The beautiful cross was around her neck. On the table lay a bouquet of wild flowers. She looked frightened.

Fredrik looked at Anna and smiled.

"Good. I was just sending Rolf to find you. We hope to have a more fitting ceremony soon, at Waterton, but this will have to do for now."

Elise hurried to Anna. She looked relieved to see her.

"Anna, I'm afraid. I'm glad you're here now."

Anna hugged the girl, and whispered,

"Don't be afraid. It will be alright."

But then she turned back to the King.

"Your Majesty, please; I overheard it in the hall from the Duke, himself. He means to keep you here as his prisoner."

Elise turned to Fredrik in surprise.

"Your Majesty?"

Fredrik walked to her and took her hand.

"I meant to tell you."

Elise tried to pull her hand away. But he would not let her.

"Who are you, *really?*" she asked.

"I..." he began, but couldn't finish.

Anna reached and placed her own hands on theirs. She looked into Elise's face and told her.

"He is Fredrik, *King of Midmont.*"

13 A Hidden Passage

"He is Fredrik, King of Midmont."

Anna's words stunned Elise. Why hadn't he told her. She was angry at first. But then she began to understand. She could hear him speaking to her.

"...I was afraid if you knew... I didn't want to be King Fredrik to you... only Fredrik... a man - your man."

Elise stopped trying to pull away from him, and looked into his eyes. He was the same man she had spent those nights with. Still the same man who had treated her with respect when no one else would. What did it matter if he was also a King?

Elise went to the table and picked up the flowers.

It was a short ceremony, yet dignified. Friar John heard their vows. Anna placed Elise's hand into Fredrik's. And so, Elise became Queen of Midmont on that cool summer evening.

But now there were new concerns. Fredrik had hoped to slip out of the Dukes castle, and start for home this very night. But Anna's news complicated matters. Perhaps he *had* been foolish to come here at all. But when he looked at Elise he was sure he had done the right thing.

Still, he had no desire to be held hostage. And now with any hope of marriage to Juliet out of the question, he could expect only treachery from the Duke. When Duke Richard found out about Elise he would be furious. If only there were some way to turn the tables on him.

"So, he means to hold me hostage. And he murdered my father."

Anna looked at him in shock. She had not known this.

"But *I* mean to leave this place tonight."

"Tonight?" asked Elise. She ran to Anna. "You must come with me!" She looked to her husband hopefully.

"Certainly, if that's what she wishes."

It did not take long for Anna to make up her mind. There was little to keep her here, and even less with Elise gone.

"I'm ready," was all she said.

"Will you swear allegiance to myself, and the Crown of Midmont?"

"Gladly, your Majesty."

And so Anna became a subject of King Fredrik with all it's rights and privileges... and present dangers.

Now Anna approached King Fredrik with Elise beside her.

"Your Majesty," she began, "What if there was a way to get into the Duke's private apartments, unseen?"

"Is there such a way?"

"There is."

"And how do you know this?" he asked.

"When I was younger..." And here she choked and began to cry.

Fredrik motioned Friar John to join them. When Anna saw the priest, she dropped to her knees clutching his habit.

"What is it, sister?" he asked gently.

"When I was young, I was a pretty thing. One day the Duke saw me in the town, and brought me here to the castle. You can guess the rest."

Here she looked up to the monk's face, searching.

"I didn't want to... I knew it was wrong... But what choice did I have?"

Now she looked at Elise.

"I became with child, by the Duke. That was when he brought your mother here. But I was glad to be done with him, so I thought. But my daughter died at birth. It was my punishment from God. Then, shortly after that, *your* mother died. And so I was once more the Duke's plaything. But I vowed to keep you, Elise, in place of my lost child."

Now she turned back to the Friar.

"Can God ever forgive me? Am I damned forever?"

There was dead silence in the room. Then the Priest pulled her to her feet.

"The Savior has already forgiven you, sister."

Anna gave a sigh from the depths of her soul. She stood still for a long time, a peaceful smile on her face. No one else dared speak.

Now Anna addressed Fredrik once again.

"The Duke does not like for everyone to know his affairs. There is a passage, into his chamber, that few know of. But I was often brought to him by it."

"And could *we* use this passage?" asked the King, suddenly interested.

✠

Duke Richard of Morlana had just poured himself another glass of wine. It was late, but he was too restless to sleep. He wondered if he had acted too hastily. There was no proof that Fredrik knew of Slythain's arrest. But he couldn't take the chance.

For the time being, he would say nothing to the King. As long as Fredrik didn't realize that he was a hostage, there would be no harm. And maybe Juliet would have her way with him yet.

He was completely unprepared when the hidden door suddenly opened, and Fredrik and Rolf rushed into the room. In his surprise he lost his one chance to cry out. Now while Rolf held a dagger to his throat, he faced King Fredrik, himself.

Rolf spoke quietly-

"Give me the word, your Majesty, and I'll cut his throat now."

But Fredrik raised his hand.

"We can leave by the way we entered," Rolf continued in a low voice- "No one will even know we were here."

Now, for the first time, the Duke saw Anna, standing in the passage.

"You!" he spat the word out. *"Traitor!"*

"Take care how you address my subjects, vermin!"

Rolf grasped the Duke tighter. Duke Richard felt a slight trickle of blood down his neck.

"Traitor?" Fredrik continued, ***"This, coming from you?"***

"I would like nothing better than to cut your throat myself, at this very moment. But I also know of your plot against me. And we need you alive... for the moment."

Fredrik gagged the Duke, and bound his hands tightly behind him. Then they barricaded the door. Anna led the way back through the hidden passages. The castle was honeycombed with them, and Anna had explored them thoroughly, over the years. She led the way back to Fredrik's own room.

The Duke was surprised to find it filled with people. There were Fredrik's two Guardsmen, wearing the Duke's own livery, stolen from a store room. There was the monk, Friar John, and another smaller figure, in the habit of the friars.

As Anna slipped into another of the monk's robes, Fredrik addressed the Duke.

"You had hoped for me to take a wife here. I am pleased to tell you, that indeed, I did find one. And for

that, I must thank you. Now, kneel before Queen Elise, of Midmont."

Fredrik motioned to Elise to step forward. She did so timidly. Fredrik's Guardsmen forced the Duke to his knees, as she pulled back her hood.

Duke Richard's face contorted in rage as he realized who she was. This girl who would never have dared to even look at him, was no longer intimidated. Somehow, she even looked *royal* now.

His only consolation was that they were not out of the castle yet. And he had given orders to prevent that.

14 A Prisoner of Prisoners

Duke Richard was now Fredrik's prisoner. But Fredrik was still a hostage in the Duke's castle. Fredrik's first priority was to get his new Queen out, and on the road home to Midmont. He hoped Elise and Anna would be able to slip out of the castle with Friar John, disguised as monks. Neither were tall enough to be mistaken for the King.

"Once you are clear of the castle, meet Garth at the Red Onion, and start on the road to Waterton."

"What about you, your Majesty?"

"We'll have to try something different."

Elise looked alarmed. She took hold of Fredrik, and put her head against his chest.

"I can't go without you," she said.

"You must, for now," he answered. Then, for her ears alone, "Don't worry, we'll join you on the road. Trust me."

"But..."

Was she to lose him on their wedding night?

"Come," said the Friar.



The castle gate was not normally closed at night in times of peace, although it was guarded. As they approached the gate, they overheard the gatekeepers being told not to let King Fredrik leave the castle.

"It will be your heads if he does!"

But the guards were used to seeing the Monks from the abby coming and going. And the two women in disguise were obviously not King Fredrik. They were allowed to leave. Now as they walked out into the town, they could hear the portcullis closing behind them. It was a chilling sound.



Still gagged, the Duke watched as Fredrik and Rolf also pulled some of the Duke's surcoats over their own clothing. Both wore mail beneath. The Duke was stripped of his own robe, and dressed in an old ragged tunic. A bag was tied over his head as Rolf led the way to the dungeon. Fredrik followed behind the other men, hoping not to be recognized.

They had no hope of cutting their way out of the castle. They were gambling on a bluff. But first they needed to deposit the Duke, where he could still be used as a bargaining chip, if it came to that.

The lone Jailer at the entrance to the dungeon, as was hoped, did not recognize Rolf. Rolf assumed an attitude of authority.

"Open up for the Duke's special prisoner!"

"But there's been no word..."

"Open up!" Then in a low voice, **"The prisoner is *King Fredrik*, himself!"**

The Duke shifted uneasily. He wanted to get the man's attention, but could still feel the point of a dagger in his back.

"Give me the Keys!" Rolf demanded.

The Jailer, thoroughly intimidated, complied. What did it matter? They were bringing in a *new* prisoner, it was certainly not an escape.

"Wait here!" Rolf told the man.

Rolf left the two guardsmen behind with the Jailer. They did not wish to be followed. Once they were out of sight, Fredrik took the lead. He led the way to the lowest level, glad for the tour Juliet had given him.

Finally, they arrived at a heavy oaken door. It had not been opened for a long time, and Rolf had to struggle with the lock. Fredrik had learned of this chamber from Anna. Over the years, she had learned a lot of the castle's secrets.

At last it opened.

The torchlight revealed a small, lightless chamber with shackles set into the walls. There was a corpse chained to the wall. It was dried and shriveled up. An empty bowl lay just out of reach.

They shackled the Duke next to the corpse.

"I'm afraid we must leave you now. But at least you're not alone. Here's an old friend of yours," Fredrik said as he pulled the sack off of the Duke's head.

Now for the first time, the Duke's face betrayed fear. He recognized this death chamber, the "Cell of the Forgotten". He had abandoned many here to die in lonely misery. His eyes moved involuntarily to a pile of bones tossed into a dark corner. No one left this place alive... *or* dead. Was this to be his tomb as well?

"And now, regrettably, we must take our leave."

They slammed the heavy door, and Rolf turned the rusty lock.

Back with the Jailer, Rolf removed the keys to the Duke's shackles and prison door.

"The Duke wishes to hold these keys himself. No one but the Duke, himself, is to open that door!"

He threw the remaining keys onto the floor, and took the frightened man by his tunic.

"And *no one* is to know of this... on *pain of death*."

And then, Fredrik and his men left the frightened man.

But still, they had to get out of the castle.



As soon as they were out of sight of the gate, Friar John led the women toward the Red Onion. The old innkeeper and his wife were delighted to see Elise. They remembered her mother well, and were amazed at the turn of events. As Garth brought his cart from the stable Friar John explained the situation to the Ranger, Karl.

"His Majesty commands you to guard the Queen, and see her safely to the castle at Waterton."

"It will be an honor."

"Now, I must return to the Abby. Godspeed."

Garth drove the cart though the twisted streets toward the city gate. The two women had discarded their disguises, and were now dressed as simple peasant women. Karl rode behind, his cloak covering his sword.

At the gate, they were questioned, because of the lateness of the hour. But their explanation of needing

to get home, was accepted. After all, they were only harmless peasants, returning to the country. The watchmen did have some question concerning Karl. But they were satisfied with Garth's explanation of his "nephew's" escorting them for protection from robbers.

As they left the city behind, Garth stepped up the pace. He wanted to put as much distance between them and the castle as possible, before daylight.

15 Heartbroken

Lady Juliet could not sleep. She had been looking forward to spending the evening with Fredrik. But he had seemed preoccupied, and excused himself early.

As she lay awake, she thought of her mother. She had been a good woman. But the Duke had sent her away when she had become inconvenient to him. She was sure Fredrik would never have done such a thing. There was a world of difference between the King, and her own family. Perhaps it was her mother, coming out in her, but she was beginning to prefer Fredrik.

Her father, the Duke, was expecting her to find a way to get Fredrik to marry her. He had made it plain for her to do what ever was necessary, even if it meant seducing him. The Duke hoped to control Fredrik though Juliet, as his wife.

But Juliet's thoughts had taken a different turn by now. She still hoped to become his wife, but for her own reasons. She would be glad to leave Morlana behind. And she no longer thought Fredrik to be quite the fool that her father did.

She had heard of the Duke's orders to hold Fredrik hostage in the castle. She wondered if she should warn him. Maybe then he would see how she felt about him.

In her mind she played it out. She would order the gatekeepers to let them pass. They would leave together.

Juliet drew her robe around her. She had made up her mind. She would find Fredrik.



With Duke Richard safely locked in his own dungeon, it was time for Fredrik and his men to look to their own escape. At the stable, they surprised the grooms, and tied them up. Fredrik had his men saddle the horses. On the way to the stables, they had seen that the portcullis had been lowered, blocking the gate. There would be no chance now of them rushing the gate.

There was a chance that they could bluff the guards into letting them pass. But it was unlikely. Fredrik wondered, if they overpowered the guards, how long it would take to raise the heavy portcullis again. And... would they *have* that time?

They quietly led their mounts into the courtyard and waited in the shadows.



When Lady Juliet reached Fredrik's room, there was no answer to her knock. When she tried the door, it

opened easily. There was no one there. There were a few candles still burning.

In the dim light she could see the remains of a hasty meal. It looked as if there had been a small gathering there recently. On the table, beside an empty chalice, lay a bouquet of wild flowers.

Juliet could see only one explanation for these. But that was impossible. How could it be true? And *who?*....

But then of course it *couldn't* be what she thought. If it hadn't been already on her own mind, the thought would have never even occurred to her. Apparently, one of Fredrik's men must have fallen for one of the servants. He would have arranged this for them.

One of the kitchen workers entered the room. He was surprised to see Lady Juliet there. Assuming she knew about Fredrik's hasty wedding, he addressed her.
"They have already left, M'Lady."

Curiosity got the best of her.

"And who was married here tonight?"

The man looked at her in surprise. He had thought she knew all about it.

"Why, the girl... *Elise*... from the kitchen."

Lady Juliet had a vague memory of the girl.

"And who did she marry?"

Now the man looked around uneasily. Juliet was waiting for his answer.

"Why didn't you know, M'Lady? She married the King... King Fredrik."

Juliet gasped. She stumbled to the open window, and the cool air. The pieces began to fit together in her mind. *Elise* was the girl that had been sent each night to Fredrik's room. Now she recalled how he had acted that day at the kitchen. It was *Elise* he had seen there. And by now she knew that Fredrik would not have taken advantage of the girl, despite what was said of him.

As the servant left hastily, she stared out into the darkness. As her heart slowed, she noticed the clothing lying about the room. There were a couple of the castle guardsmen's surcoats, and some other things. It looked as if someone had left in haste. And then, she noticed her father's lounging robe, tossed in the corner. She was sure of it.

Had *he* been here as well? The idea was absurd.

Juliet hurried to her father's chambers. The guardsman at the door assured her that the Duke had never left his room, and did not wish to be disturbed. He was probably in bed by now.

"As I would expect you to be, M' Lady, at this time of night."

"Yes, of course... it *is* late," she said and turned away.

But she was not satisfied. She had still not found Fredrik. With few options left, Juliet descended to the courtyard. Perhaps the wedding party was there.



Rolf and King Fredrik were talking quietly in the shadows as the two others held the horses. They needed a way to get the heavy gate raised. It would take several men to do the job. They were gambling on passing for the Duke's own men.

If that failed, they would have to overpower the gatekeepers, and raise the portcullis themselves. And all before an alarm could be given.

"It's not much of a plan, your Majesty," Rolf said.

"Do you have a better one?" Fredrik answered him a weak smile.

Rolf just shrugged. Then he broke into a smile. He had spent most of his life helping his friend out of trouble. Things hadn't changed.

Rolf took command now, and explained the plan to the two Guardsmen as they mounted. They had been chosen for their loyalty. They would follow the King to the death. Fredrik hung back, hoping not to be recognized.

Then, as they were about to step out into the moonlight, a figure appeared.



As Lady Juliet walked into the main courtyard, she nearly collided with a group of horsemen in the shadows by the stable. She looked up in surprise, straight into the face of Fredrik, himself.

It was obvious that he was planning to leave; and... *without her.*

"Fredrik, the Duke has..."

"I know."

"But you *can't* leave!"

"I can try. And I will."

Juliet took hold of his bridle.

"Take me with you," she pleaded, although she knew it was too late.

"I can't," he said. "Now let me go."

Juliet reluctantly dropped her hand. Her hope faded, and her eyes filled with tears. She stood and watched as the horsemen spurred their mounts toward the gate.

16 A Selfless Act

The Gatekeepers looked up in surprise as four horsemen rushed toward the gate. The leader cried out.

"Open the gates!" as they drew their horses up in the dim light.

"By the Duke's *orders...*" the sergeant began, but was interrupted.

"Did three monks pass though here?"

The men at the gate looked at each other uncomfortably.

"Why, yes sir, not long ago."

"And you *let* them go?"

"Well, yes. It was only some of the Friars from the Abby."

The horses were excited, and the riders had their hands full controlling them. Now Rolf shouted.

"You fools! That was King Fredrik! You let him *escape!*"

The Gatekeepers looked at each other in confusion. It did not seem possible. The sergeant spoke up.

"That is *impossible!*"

But he was worried. *Could* it be true? He did not recognize the riders. But they wore the uniforms of the Duke's own Guardsmen. And they seemed to know what they were talking about. The monks *had* passed though. And *he* had let them.

Now Rolf spoke again.

"Open up! Let us though before he gets away completely!"

The Gatekeepers looked to their sergeant. They were worried as well. This could cost them their heads. He hesitated.

"But, I've no orders!"

Fredrik's men looked to him. His hand moved toward his sword. But before he could draw it, a woman's voice rang out.

"Open the gate, you fools!"

Juliet was walking swiftly toward the gate. All eyes turned to her.

"But, *M' Lady...*"

"Do as I say!" Her tone was commanding. "Let my men though! Do you want Fredrik to *get away?*" As the

sergeant's resolve faded, she added, "Hurry up, you idiots!"

The Gatekeepers ran to the gate and began to raise it. The sound of the rattling chains rang through the night.

Juliet had stepped back as the portcullis was being raised. Now she stood near Fredrik. He looked down at her. She turned her head and looked up at him with an expression of sad resolve. She had made her choice, and expected to pay for it. But for this moment, his nod of thanks and respect, was enough.

As the gate slowly rose, Fredrik's conscience, prodded him. He was in her debt. If the Duke was a treacherous villain, Juliet was not. He spoke one word. "Dungeon."

She gave him a puzzled look. But by now the portcullis was raised enough for the horsemen. Fredrik spurred his mount, and the rest followed him through the gate.

The Gatekeepers were left staring after them, as Juliet turned away. She walked slowly back to the castle wondering what Fredrik could have meant.



Lord Rathard's party was on the road nearing St. Petersbridge and home. He had hoped to be there

before dark, but there had been delays. "Lady Samantha" was in an ill humor. She preferred "Lady"; most called her something else. But *not* to her face. After all, she was Lord Rathard's current favorite.

Now it was late. As they topped a rise, the castle lights could be seen flickering in the distance. Ahead, the road crossed a bog as it approached the city.

"Well, it won't be long now," Rathard said to his companion.

Samantha sulked in silence as the carriage started down the narrow road across the bog. The air was filled with the sound of frogs croaking in the darkness.

Then, there was yet *another* halt. At the sound of curses, Rathard climbed out of the coach to see what was happening. A peasant's cart was blocking the narrow road. He watched as his horsemen forced the cart off of the road and into the deep mud at the side of the road.

Then, they were moving once more. As they passed, they could see the old peasant standing by his horse in the mud. Two women sat dejectedly in the cart, now, already sunk halfway to its axle in the ooze. Another horse stood by, its rider glaring at the passing carriage. Lady Samantha looked on with satisfaction. Other people's misery was one thing that cheered her up.

Just before they reached the city gate they were passed by a party of horsemen leaving the city. Four riders, in the Duke's livery, rode by at a brisk trot. Rathard was surprised when they did not salute. He had a brief look at the leader's face. It looked vaguely familiar. He watched as they rode down toward the bog, and vanished into a gathering mist.

He was offended, but the deference of the gatekeepers mollified him somewhat. He asked about the riders.

"Some of the Duke's guardsmen. They were in a hurry. They never told us their business, and we didn't ask," was the reply.

Rathard was surprised to find the portcullis closed. The gatekeepers seemed nervous as they slowly raised it. They only confused him more as they tried to explain the situation to him. It was something to do with King Fredrik, Juliet, and some monks.

Rathard sent Lady Samantha to her room, and went to find his father, the Duke.



It was not long before Fredrik and his men came upon Garth's cart. It was hopelessly mired in the thick mud beside the road. He, Karl, and the two women had tried without success to free it. The horse strained to pull it free as they all pushed. But it was barely moving.

As Fredrik reined in, the old peasant explained what had happened. With Fredrik, and his men helping, they finally got the cart back onto the road. But the cart horse was worn out from the effort, and they would have to travel more slowly for now.

Fredrik had recognized Lord Rathard. He was sure that they would be pursued. He called Karl to him.

"Ride for Waterton as fast as you can. Tell the Princess to send men to meet us. I fear we will be overtaken on the road before we can reach the castle."

Karl would have protested. He preferred to stay and fight. But he could see the necessity. He saluted.

"Your Majesty!"
And raced off into the night.



When Rathard reached the Duke's rooms, he found the guard on duty at the door. He was informed that the Duke was in his chambers, and did not wish to be disturbed.

But Rathard insisted, and since he *was* the Duke's son, and heir, the guard knocked on the door.

But there was no answer.

Rathard grew impatient, and tried the door. It was not locked, but still refused to be opened; something was holding it. He began pounding on the door. All the commotion attracted the attention of the other guards and servants.

Lady Juliet stood and watched uneasily, expecting the worst. She remembered what she had seen in Fredrik's room.

17 In the Dungeon

When it became obvious that the Duke was not going to open the door, Rathard ordered the guards to break it down. Something was seriously wrong.

The guardsmen began hesitantly. They feared the Duke's wrath. But with Lord Rathard's threats spurring them on they fell on the door with a will.

It took some time to force the heavy doors, but eventually they gave way. The room was empty. Yet, the doors had been barricaded from the *inside*; and, where was the Duke *now*?

By now Damson had arrived. He watched in silence as Rathard stomped around the room, in a rage. Rathard was his father's son, but without any of the Duke's restraint.

Damson cleared the Guardsmen and servants from the room. When he was alone with only Rathard and Lady Juliet, he spoke in a quiet tone.

"My Lord and Lady, as you well know, I have been privy to your fathers closest secrets. Please allow me..."

He stepped to the wall and pushed a certain panel. A door they had never seen, swung open.

"He must have left the room by this passage." He said turning to the others, "But I have no idea why."

Damson was wondering if the Duke had secrets even from *him*. He picked up a candle, and they followed him into the dark passage.

Damson knew the way though the maze of passages. From time to time he would bend low examining footprints in the thick dust.

"They came this way," he said pointing. "There were at least four of them."

Finally, they emerged into the room Fredrik had been staying in. By now Juliet was sure of what had happened. It was no great surprise that someone had known of the passage. And that, *someone*, besides herself, had also helped Fredrik. But what had *become* of her father?

Her face must have betrayed her thoughts. She became aware of Damson staring at her. By now Rathard had found the Duke's robe.

"That bastard *Fredrik* is behind this!" He looked at Damson. "Where is he?"

"He seems to have disappeared," he answered, looking hard at Juliet.

"Search the castle!" demanded Rathard.
"It is being done, as we speak."

Damson led them back to the main hall where a servant found them. He spoke privately to Damson.

"*Apparently, King Fredrik has escaped in disguise,*" Damson told them. "It seems that a certain Lady ordered the Gatekeepers to let him pass." He turned to Lady Juliet.

Rathard's face passed through surprise to anger. Now he realized why the man on the road had seemed so familiar. It had been *Fredrik*, himself.

"You! Traitorous bitch!" he spat, slapping his sister.

"*My Lord!*" Damson said hastily, "*Control yourself!*"

"Where is Father?" Rathard demanded.

Juliet raised her face defiantly. A bit of blood trickled from her lip. She had expected as much, or worse. But she really had no idea where the Duke was. All she knew was that he had not been with Fredrik.

When she still refused to speak, he slapped her again. Then twisting her arm behind her, he spoke close into her ear.

"Perhaps some time in the dungeon will loosen your tongue... *Sister.*"

Damson looked on impassively.

The Jailer looked up at Lord Rathard's approach. With him were Damson and a woman in shackles. She held her head down. It was turning out to be an unusual night. He bowed low before the duke's son.

"My Lord."

"Lock this traitor up until we decide what to do with her!"

"Yes, My Lord," he answered as he took her arm roughly. Then, he recoiled as he recognized the Lady Juliet. He looked at Lord Rathard questioningly.

"Are you *deaf*? I said put her in the dungeon!"

At this, Juliet lifted her head and repeated the word, "*Dungeon!*" Was this what Fredrik had meant?

"Is Father *here*?"

Now Damson turned and asked;

"Is the Duke *here*?"

"I don't know, but *Fredrik* said..." Juliet began.

Now Damson turned to the frightened Jailer.

"Speak man! Is the Duke *here*?"

"N... no... of course not, Your Lordship... Sir..."

It was obvious that something had happened here.

"What is going on here, dog!" Damson demanded.

"Please Sir!" the man said, dropping to his knees.
"They made me promise not to tell!"

"Speak, if you value your life!"
"It is *Fredrik*, the King. The Duke's men... they brought him here."

"You *saw* him?"
"No, Sir. His face was covered. They told me... never to..."

Rathard and Damson exchanged looks.
"And where is he now?" Damson interrupted.
"In *that* cell, the last one; the one *where...*" and his voice trailed off.

They were silent for a moment. Then Rathard demanded,
"Give me the keys!"

"The *Duke* has the keys!" answered the frightened man, explaining what had occurred earlier.

"We'll have to break down the door."



Duke Richard sat with his back to the wall in the darkness. He could sense the corpse beside him moving. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rising, his ears straining for the slightest sound. But there was

nothing. Now, he felt the presence of the bones in the corner as well.

Five men, and one woman were here. Or had been. They had been left to die; chained to this very wall in turn. But they were still here; and now they waited for *him*. He could feel their presence, watching, waiting in the dark. Waiting for *him*.

How long would they wait? How many days? But what was a day in this place of silent darkness? Had it been a day already? No, that was *impossible*; wasn't it? But already, it seemed like forever.

One by one, they came back to him. Some begging in tears... some stoic. But now they waited in silence; staring at him, though empty eyes. He felt them pulling him through... into the darkness with them.

He did not hear the sound of the ax. He did not see the torchlight. He was already in hell.

When Rathard and Damson found the Duke in the Cell of the Forgotten, he made no response. As the chains were cut from his wrists and ankles, there was no reaction at all.

"This is Fredrik's revenge for his father's death," Rathard said to Damson.

Lady Juliet looked up in surprise. They had forced her to come with them. This was the first she had heard

of this affair. She looked at her father with tears in her eyes. He was an empty shell now. He walked stiffly, never speaking as Damson lead him from the cell.

"You see what you've done?" Rathard said to her viciously. "But *I'll* see Fredrik dead yet."

"Please, Rathard, don't do it. Aren't things bad enough *already*?"

"You really *have* turned, haven't you," Rathard said to her scornfully.



The Jailer opened the door to the cell, and Rathard pushed her in. Juliet tripped over her shackles, sprawling on the floor. Rathard walked in behind her. He stood looking down at her now.

"I never would have thought it. My own *sister*, turning against us."

"Don't go after them, Ratty... *Please!*"
It was his childhood nickname.

"Don't you *ever* call me that again!" he said angrily, kicking her viciously.

The Jailer watched in horror from the doorway, afraid to speak. Was *this* to be his new master?

Rathard turned and gave him a hard look. The Jailer retreated back into the hallway. Rathard turned back to his sister.

"You foolish girl, you've fallen in *love* with our enemy; haven't you. When I return, I'll bring you his *head*. He can share your cell... and *bed* if you wish."

He turned and strode out, motioning to the Jailer to shut the door. Juliet heard it slam, and then the lock turned.

There was an iron grate over the tiny window near at top of her cell that let in a small amount of air and light. The window opened into the main courtyard, but it was far too high for her to see out of.

Soon, Juliet could hear the sounds of horsemen gathering. She heard Lord Rathard join them, and then the horse's hooves, as they rode out into the grayness of the predawn morning.

18 The Royal Suite

Juliet's cell was known as the "Royal Suite" It was on the upper level of the prison, yet still below ground level. It was reserved for prisoners of "distinction". It's luxuries included a small table and stool, and a bed with a straw mattress.

After she had heard Rathard and his horsemen leave, Lady Juliet sat on the edge of the cot, and watched the light growing in the window above. Her ribs ached with every breath from where Rathard had kicked her. Soon she heard another, larger company of horsemen leaving.

There was a noise at the door and the Jailer entered. He set a pitcher of water and some bread on the table. The bread was still warm from the ovens.

"My Lady, I'm sorry to have to keep you here," he said apologetically. "If I can help you... But I think, there is not much I can do."

"You are kind. What news of my Father, the Duke?"

"What I've heard, which isn't much, is that he won't speak to anyone. Lord Rathard has taken his place. But *he* has ridden out in pursuit of King Fredrik."

"What is your name kind sir?"

"I am called Max, My Lady," he answered.

"Max, would it be possible for the Abbot of St Peter's to come and see me?"

"I'll see what I can do, Milady."



It was sometime later when her cell was opened again. The Jailer looked unhappy.

"The Archbishop, My Lady." Then he added in a low voice, "He *insisted*."

He stood aside and the Archbishop strode into the cell. Juliet stood up. She was disappointed. She had hoped to speak to the Abbot, who she had heard had ties to Midmont.

"Lady Juliet," The Archbishop began, "How *unfortunate* to find you in such circumstances."

Juliet did not answer. She detected a certain satisfaction, even gloating in his tone.

The Archbishop walked to the table, lifted the pitcher and sniffed the contents. He set it down, noting the bread crumbs on the table.

"Ah, bread and water. Poor fair for a Duchess," then he added, "or a *Queen*."

When she still didn't answer he began again.

"I know what you and your father were up to. But now I see that you decided to go it alone. You betrayed the Duke, only to be double crossed by Fredrik. And now he's left you *alone*."

Juliet's cheeks colored in anger.

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"*Don't I?*"

The Archbishop walked slowly around the cell. He didn't look at her as he spoke.

"Your brother is taking your father's place, of course. He wanted to lock you down there where we found the Duke. After all, it is only fair, don't you think? But *I* talked him out of it."

Now he looked at her again. She didn't like the look on his face.

"I was able to convince him to send you, to our convent at Donstrum instead. There you will be able to do *penance* for your treacherous deed; and perhaps, save your soul."

The Archbishop smiled.

"I'll *never* go with you!"

"Oh, you *will*," he said. Then as he left he added, "I will see you tomorrow."

The door slammed shut behind him.

19 To the Gate of Midmont

It was just before sunrise when Karl rode into Waterton on his exhausted horse. After a short wait, he was led to the Princess' chambers. Lillian had been hastily roused, but was anxious to hear his news.

Karl explained the situation, and that Fredrik was in route to Waterton and fearing pursuit.

"The King asks that you send a squad to meet him on the road, immediately, Your Highness."

Princess Lillian rang a bell. When a guard appeared she told him to call out a squadron of horsemen immediately, and for them to prepare to leave as soon as she joined them.

"And take this man, feed him, and let him rest."

"*Please*, Your Highness, let me go with you."
The Princess could see his determination.

"Are you *able*?"

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"Very well then."

Within the hour, the Princess joined her troop at the castle gate. Karl, on a fresh horse was at her side.

By now the entire castle was roused, and the town also. The bells rang out and the people poured into the street as The Princess Lillian led her troop from the castle, and through the streets to the city gates.

She wore chain mail beneath her tunic, but no helm, only a circlet of gold. Her hair was loosely bound with ribbons, of the Colors of Midmont. Her banner streaming beside as they moved through the street at a swift trot.

As they approached the gate Lillian raised her sword in salute, and the people cheered. Then, they passed through the gate, broke into a gallop, and were gone.



Garth's horse was doing its best, but the road began to climb as they entered the narrow river valley. The sun was rising now. At every turn Fredrik looked back to see if they were being pursued. He hoped they could reach the Falls and upper valley before their pursuers caught up to them.

They were nearing the Great Falls when they caught their first sign of pursuit. At a turn in the road far below them, at least a dozen riders were approaching at a gallop.

"There are too many to face in the open," Rolf told Fredrik.

"Yes, but we can make a stand where the road narrows above the Falls, at the *Gate!*"

Garth urged his horse to one final effort, and drew up on the narrow road. This was the tightest pass of the road, cut into the rock high above the Great Falls. It was known as the "Gate of Midmont". There was no way around it. It would be the best, the *only* place, to make a stand.

Just beyond was a small glen. The wall of the gorge rose in a series of ledges far above.

"Go on ahead," Fredrik told Garth.

"No!" cried Elise. "We will stay here!"

As Fredrik began to protest, Garth spoke up.

"It's no use, Your Majesty, the horse is too tired. We *all* wish to stand together with you."

The Old Peasant pulled an ancient Broadax from the cart and hefted it with a smile.

"And I'll not leave you again!" Elise said as she drew a long knife from beneath her cloak. Anna held a similar weapon.

"Well," said The King, "It seems there are *seven* of us now. I think that does improve the odds."

They pulled the cart into the glen just beyond. Fredrik took his standard from Rolf, and brought it to the cart. Anna took it and held it up in the morning sunlight.

Garth reached down into the cart one more time and brought out a jug of wine he had brought from St. Petersbridge. He pulled out the stopper and raised it in a final toast.

"I drink to you, Your Majesty," and here he turned to Elise, "And our *Queen*. Then he turned to the others, "And to our *homeland*, Midmont!"

He drank deeply.

All eyes were on the King as he reached for the jug and raised it.

"And I drink to *you*, my noble friends, and to our *homeland!*"

The King took a deep drink, and passed it to Elise, who reddened.

"Drink, child," Anna said softly and Elise raised it to her lips and drank, her heart pounding.

They all drank in turn.

Leaving The cart with Garth and the two women in the rear, Fredrik, Rolf, and the two Guardsmen rode to the narrowest point of the road. Far below could be heard the roar of the Great Falls. It was the same place where Karl had fought the two Morlanians. There was barely room for the horses to stand together. They waited, Rolf, and the Guardsmen making a few weak jokes in an attempt to break the tension.



Rathard lead his men up the steep road. They had entered the valley and crossed into Midmontian territory. The lone watchman at the border, had reported Fredrik's party, not far ahead, and encumbered by the cart. Rathard was pleased. He had no doubt now, that they would be overtaken.

He had them outnumbered. Rathard was confident that Fredrik would soon be his prisoner. He would force him to wed his sister. Not Juliet of course. The Archbishop could have *that* traitor. But Marianne would do nicely. And if the rumors were true about that scullery maid; Fredrik would soon be a widower.

These were his thoughts as they rounded yet another turn, and halted. A hundred yards ahead, King Fredrik, and his men were blocking the road. Behind them the King's standard floated over a peasant's cart, in the gentle breeze.

Fredrik rode forward. Rolf followed a few paces behind. Rathard rode to meet him with two of his retainers. They stopped a few yards apart, facing each other.

Fredrik spoke first.

"Lord Rathard, my friend; What brings you to Midmont, unannounced?"

"Surrender yourself and my servants now, and I'll let these others go."

"There's nobody here with me, but my own subjects."

"I see my scullery maid."

"Mind your tongue. You speak of the Queen of Midmont!"

Fredrik spurred his horse closer to Rathard, who drew back a pace. His two men moved closer, hands on their swords. Rolf tensed up as well.

The two were close together now, and spoke in low voices, while the others strained to hear.

"Then it is *true!* You *are* a fool Fredrik."

"I think not."

"You could have had *Juliet.*"

"I did better with Elise."

Rathard flushed with anger. As angry as he was with his sister, he took *this* as an insult. His hand moved toward his sword. Rolf, who had been watching closely, stepped his horse closer. But Fredrik remained composed.

"Yield now, and I'll spare the others!" Rathard repeated angrily.

"*Yield?* Leave our realm now, while you still *can!*"

Rathard laughed.

"You're a fool, Fredrik. Now you can watch your friends die."

He spit on the ground, spun around and raced back to his men. Fredrik and Rolf trotted back to their own companions. Then, they swung around to face Rathard, and his troop.

20 Defending the Gate

"Take the King alive, and kill the rest!" Rathard shouted.

He had a dozen horsemen with him. They rushed toward Fredrik and his few. But now Fredrik's strategy became apparent. There was only room on the narrow road for two at a time to approach Fredrik.

Fredrik and Rolf met them with drawn swords. The two Guardsmen waited behind as The King and his companion held their places. Rathard and the rest of his men held back in frustration. It was impossible to get into the fight.

Fredrik and Rolf were both well trained and had little difficulty holding their own. When one of their opponents made a mistake, he fell.

When four of the Morlanians were down, Fredrik's Guardsmen took his and Rolf's place, and they had a chance to rest briefly. These men had been handpicked by the King from the elite of the Royal Guard. Rathard's men were no match for them either.

Rathard watched in frustration. It would take all day to wear Fredrik and his men down like this. By this time half of his men were either dead or severely

wounded. And now, Fredrik and Rolf had relieved the Guardsmen again.

Garth, Anna, and Elise watched from atop the cart. When Fredrik and Rolf fell back, Elise ran to them with a flask of water. They drank gratefully.

"We only need to hold until help arrives from my Sister," Fredrik told them.

"I hope that is soon!" answered Rolf, as he rushed forward to take the place of one of the Guardsmen. The man fell back bleeding profusely. He had been badly slashed. Anna and Garth helped him from his horse and tried to stop the flow of blood.

Just then, Elise stood up on the cart, and pointed down the road. It was the second group of Rathard's troops approaching. And they carried lances. At the sight of the reinforcements, the first group of Morlanians fell back to where Rathard was waiting.

Fredrik knew they couldn't hold the road against such a force, armed as they were.

"Bring the cart! Block the road!" Rolf shouted.

Fredrik nodded in approval. He hoped to prevent a charge by the Lancers. If they were forced back into a more open space, they could be surrounded, and the battle would be lost.

While Rathard was instructing his men, Rolf was able to position the cart. Garth cut the horse free, and mounted the cart with his ax.

The Cart did break the momentum of the charge. There was simply no room for more than one horseman to pass at a time. The first ones through, were cut down by Rolf, and Garth's broadax. The rest stopped in confusion.

Now Lord Rathard rode forward.

"Dismount! Get that dammed thing out of the way!" he shouted, pointing at the peasant's cart.

The men advanced, using their lances as spears to hold Rolf and Garth at bay. As they were pushed back, more of Rathard's men rushed forward. They pushed the cart to the edge of the road, and over into the gorge. It crashed onto the rocks below.

Fredrik and his men were forced back to the side of the gorge. It was too steep to climb. Garth and the two women scrambled onto a low ledge, holding the King's standard. Fredrik and the others were backed up at the point of the spears below them.

Lord Rathard rode forward with a look of triumph. All that could be heard was the roar of the Great Falls, far below.

"Yield, or die! Fredrik!"

But before The King could answer, they heard the sound of a trumpet, and the thunder of hooves as Princess Lillian led her troop around a bend and into the hollow.

"To the King!" she cried waving the men forward with her sword. She reined in with Karl beside her, holding her standard. Her place was to inspire, not to fight. She stood in the sunlight with her sword raised.

Her troop fell upon the flank of the Rathard's Morlanians, who forgot all about Fredrik now. As they turned to meet this new challenge. Fredrik and Rolf cut their way into them from the rear.

Lord Rathard was momentarily at a loss at this turn of events. But then he saw an opportunity. Calling two men to him, he pointed toward the Lillian.

"Seize the Princess!" he shouted, spurring his horse toward her.

If he could capture Lillian as a hostage, she would be his trump card. Fredrik would *have* to yield.

In the confusion, no one noticed Rathard rushing toward the Princess, except Rolf. He and Fredrik were engaged with two of the Morlanians.

"Lily!" he shouted and rushed toward her.

Fredrik suddenly realizing he now had two opponents, was only vaguely aware of Rolf cutting his way through the fray.

Karl, seeing their approach, stepped between Lillian and Rathard's men. There was no one else nearby. He braced himself to meet them. Just as he met the first rider, Rolf fell on the others from behind. While his men held off the Midmontians, Rathard approached Lillian, who raised her sword to defend herself.

"You are my prisoner, your Highness!" he said with a smile.

"Not yet," she cried, brandishing her sword.

But the Princess was not a warrior, and Rathard knew it. He closed in on her now, being careful not to hurt her. She would be no good to him dead.

Lillian fought him as well as she could, but it was an uneven fight. Rathard pushed her back until she was disarmed and pinned against the cliff. Now he held her at sword point.

She looked him in the face defiantly.

But then suddenly, her eyes looked beyond him. Rathard turned just in time to see Rolf bearing down on him, with a look of rage. In that instant, Lillian slipped from her horse, leaving Rathard's sword pointed at *nothing*. He had no time to react as he turned to meet the enraged Rolf.

Rathard was still fresh- his men had done most of the fighting. But Rolf fought as if possessed, filled with new strength. Rathard was hard pressed, falling back as he desperately parried Rolf's strokes.

Lillian's horse had bolted. She stood watching them, holding her own sword again. Rathard could see that the tide had turned against him now. His thoughts turned toward escape.

Seeing Lillian, he saw his last opportunity for revenge. He whirled away from Rolf and rode straight for Lillian, his sword raised.

Rolf was right behind him. He saw the stroke. And he saw Lillian fall. But in that split second, he had caught up to Rathard.

If Rathard knew that Rolf was behind him, he never turned. He put spur to his mount. But it was too late, and with a mighty slash, Rolf took his head off.

Ignoring Rathard, Rolf leaped from his horse and ran to where the Princess lay. Her tunic soaked now with blood. She looked up at him and smiled weakly.

"Lily," he choked.

"You've won me fairly, Rolf," she said softly; and then, closed her eyes.

21 A New Life

With Lord Rathard dead, his men had no will to continue the fight. The shouts and clash of arms died away. Peace settled over the glen, and all that could be heard was the roar of the Great Falls, far below.

The Morlanians laid down their arms and stood together in a dejected huddle, watched over by several of the Princess's men.

Fredrik rushed over to where his sister lay, Rolf clinging to her with bitter tears. But before he could speak, Anna pushed through to her.

"Get *off* her, you big fool!" she said, pulling on Rolf's arm. "Give her some air!"

It was true, Lillian was still breathing.

Anna pushed Rolf out of the way and tore open the Princess' tunic. While Lillian's sword had not stopped Rathard's blow, it had deflected it. The blow had struck her shoulder, instead of her neck as he had intended.

It had been a powerful blow, but her mail had borne the brunt of it. Still, it was a serious wound, several links of mail having been severed.

"Get this off her!" Anna commanded, tugging at the armor.

When Rolf hesitated, she repeated her command.

"Don't you men know anything? *Elise!* get over here!"

With Rolf's help, they pulled the mail away.

"We must stop the blood!"

Anna was in charge now. With Elise's help, she pressed part of the torn tunic down over the bleeding wound. And then they heard Lillian moan.

Fredrik was satisfied that Lillian was in capable hands. And he was proud to see Elise working with Anna. She would do well as his Queen.

As Rolf stood by helplessly, the King took charge once more. He gathered the wounded, and had their wounds bound up. There were a number of dead also. He was thankful that Lily was not one of them.

Fredrik looked down at the body of Rathard, now lying in a puddle of blood. It had all seemed so pointless.



Lady Juliet sat at her small table, fingering the cross she wore around her neck. She looked up as she heard her cell door being unlocked. She hoped it might be the Abbot of St Peter's, who she had requested. As

the Jailer stepped out of the way, she was surprised to see Damson enter. She did not rise.

"My Lady," he began, "I regret to see you in this situation."

Juliet gave him a cold look but did not reply.

"I assure you, this was not my idea."

When she remained silent, he began to walk slowly back and forth.

"I've served your father, the Duke, loyally these twenty-seven years. I've not always agreed with him, but I've done my duty as best I could." Here he hesitated for a moment. "And I will serve Lord Rathard as well."

Now he stopped, and lowered his voice.

"Milady, may I speak freely?"

Juliet motioned with her hand to continue. He had her interest.

"Your Brother is not the man your father was."

"Was?"

"I'm afraid the Duke has lost his mind. He speaks not a word, but stares off at something no one else can see. He neither eats, nor drinks. It is as if his body is

here, but his soul is gone. I know he is not long for this world.

"Milady, are you familiar with the Cell of the Forgotten?"

Lady Juliet shook her head.

"It is well." He said no more on the subject, and turned to leave. But then he hesitated.

"I would have rather served *you*," he said quietly. Then he was gone, and the door closed once more. Juliet was left to wonder what he had meant by it.



They brought the surviving commander of the Morlanians before King Fredrik. He was wounded, himself, but not seriously. He dropped to his knees, head down.

"And what news of the Duke?" the King asked.

"The Duke?" asked the man in surprise. "They say he is gone mad. Now we follow Lord Rathard... or *did...*"

"And Lady Juliet?"

"Lady Juliet? Lord Rathard had her thrown into the dungeon, *for treason*. She had helped Fred..." he paused, "*Your Majesty*, escape."

Now, Fredrik would have to decide what to do with his prisoners. He had no desire to take them to Waterton where he would only have to feed them. He looked around for Rolf, his usual councilor.

He found him, in a daze, hovering over Anna and Elise as they tended to Lillian. Anna looked annoyed. She had been dropping hints to him, but he seemed deaf to her.

Fredrik took in the situation immediately.

"Rolf!"

Rolf turned to him with a bewildered look.

"Rolf! *I need* you! We need to decide what to do with these prisoners."

By now Fredrik had already decided to send them home with the body of Lord Rathard. But he needed to occupy his friend.

"Thank God," Anna mumbled, as they walked away together. It was obvious to her that Rolf had more than a casual interest in the Princess.

"He's in love with your sister," she told Elise. "But he's afraid to tell her. It's because she's a *Princess*." Here she looked at Elise, "You'd think he knew better by now."

But Elise's mind was on a different track. As she looked down at Lillian, she realized that the Princess,

was now *her* sister, her *family*, now. Her whole world had changed.

She had gone from chopping onions, and scrubbing pots in a smelly kitchen, to a battlefield on the side of a mountain. And this was only the beginning. It was frightening. Would she even be *accepted* in his world?

Anna had stopped the bleeding by now. She called out to Garth.

"Bring that wine over here, while there's still some left!"

He had been careful to salvage the wine before the cart had gone over the cliff. And she had noticed. And she had *also* noticed the few celebratory "toasts" on his part.

He reluctantly handed it over.

Anna now carefully removed the bloodstained cloth and began to wash the wound with the wine. Lillian flinched. Then she sighed and opened her eyes and saw Anna for the first time.

"Thank you, good woman."

Then her eyes moved to Elise, who she studied for a long time. Finally she spoke.

"Elise?"

Elise reddened, embarrassed. The Princess reached out with her good hand and touched Elise's cheek.

"Yes, I can see it too. Welcome, my sister, *Queen of Midmont.*"

22 Aftermath

Fredrik had decided to send the surviving Morlanians home with the body of Lord Rathard. But he also needed to care for his own wounded, including his sister, Princess Lillian.

Rolf suggested they send to Waterton for wagons. Fredrik told him to make the arraignments, glad to see him occupied once more. Within minutes, a rider was on his way back to the castle.



The sun was setting when Lady Juliet heard horses again in the courtyard. There were low voices. She could not make out the words, but it was apparent that things had not gone well. Before long there was a commotion outside her cell. She heard a woman crying. Then the sound of a key turning in the lock.

Marianne rushed in sobbing, and clung to Juliet. She was too upset to speak. In a moment Damson followed her in, with the castle chaplain. The chaplain spoke first.

"My Lady..."

Juliet had expected bad news, and Marianne would not be grieving for Fredrik. She wondered weather it

was her father or her brother this time. Her sister still clung to her in tears.

"...your brother, Lord Rathard, is dead..."

Now Lady Juliet wondered if she should feel more grief than she did.

"...he died in *battle*," as if *that* somehow made it a noble thing.

Juliet could see Damson watching her closely. Then it dawned on her; *she* was now the Grand Duchess of Morlana. And she was free, or as free as any ruler can be. They were all waiting for her to speak.

"Take me to my Father."

"Yes, Milady." It was Damson who spoke. "He is in his chamber," he said following closely behind her.

The Duke did not recognize Juliet. He did not respond at all. There was nothing that could be done for him.



She was taken to her brother's body. She noted with irony how he had died. He had not brought back Fredrik's head. He had lost his own. She questioned Lord Rathard's captain.

"Did *the King* kill your Lord?"

"No Milady, it was his companion."

Juliet felt some relief at this. But shame once she had finally dragged the details out of the man.

"Do we avenge him?" the man asked.

"No," she answered turning away.

It was past midnight when they brought her more news. The Duke had thrown himself from the battlements. Now there was no question of who ruled Morlana.

She thought of Fredrik and wished things had been different. Her first act after burying the Duke and her brother, would be to make peace with Midmont. With cooperation they could both prosper.

And things would change in Morlana.

If the Archbishop was disappointed with the turn of events he didn't show it. But he *did* leave the next day. Marguerite left with him, with the Duchess' blessing. She was glad to be rid of them both.



Juliet's peace overtures to Midmont were favorably received by the King. No one had any desire to continue the war. And over time the relations between the two

lands grew to be quite friendly and co-operative. With the new road through the mountain passes, both prospered.

It was in the Springtime of the following year, that the Grand Duchess of Morlana was finally invited to pay a visit to the Kingdom of Midmont. And there at her formal reception, she met the eyes of the Queen of Midmont again. And she remembered another night, when she had met the eyes of this same woman, in what was now, another world.

But there was little time for reflection on these matters. For it was here, that the Grand Duchess, Juliet met Phillip of Solland, cousin to the King of Midmont.

And while it is true, that these lands were united in future generations, that does not concern us here. For this is the tale of Fredrik of Midmont, and his Queen, Elise.

And what of Queen Elise? She became the most beloved by the people of all the house of Midmont. She was their Queen; and yet one of them.

And lastly, there is the matter of the Princess Lillian, and Rolf, the Ranger...

23 The matter of...

And lastly, there is the matter of the Princess Lillian, and Rolf, the ranger.

After the Battle of the Gate, as it came to be known, Fredrik had kept Rolf occupied in organizing the care of the wounded, and later the release of the Morlanian prisoners.

Then, on their return to Waterton, Fredrik had been concerned with making Elise comfortable and welcome in her new home, in the castle. And there was the care of the wounded Princess as well. Rolf saw little of him.

Elise had to get used to a whole new way of life- to being waited on- rather than serving. Lillian had taken her under her wing and was doing her best to help with the transition. They spent much time together planning for her Official Wedding.

The result was that Rolf found little for himself to do. He seemed to be merely in the way now, and felt out of place at the castle. He went to stay with his Mother in the town.

But he was not happy. He would lay awake at night puzzling over Lily's words to him at the battle- "*You've won me fairly...*" What had she meant by them? He convinced himself that he had only done his duty in

protecting the Princess. Any of the Kings men would have done the same.

Although he knew he would be welcome, he kept his distance from the Royal Family- they needed their time together. Yet he was restless. He just wanted to get away from it all. Rolf decided to ask the King to sent him back to the Rangers, on the southern border.

Fredrik listened to him with concern. He realized that he had been neglecting his friend. And it was not only his own feelings that he was thinking of.

"I'm afraid that is out of the question, Rolf." As Rolf looked at him in surprise, he continued, "I need you here."

"Fredrik, there is *nothing*..." Rolf began, only to be interrupted by the King.

"I have already appointed you as Lieutenant to the Captain of the Castle Guards. You will be his successor when he retires from the post."

(This was not entirely true, but it *had* been Fredrik's intention for some time now)

This was a great honor, but not one that Rolf desired at this point. But he could not refuse the King.

"You will report to him in the morning."

This had been the end of the discussion.



Rolf was well received by the Captain of the Guards. He had succeeded Rolf's father at the post, and was glad to see Rolf following him in this important position.

Oddly, Rolf found that one of his first duties would be to escort Princess Lillian in her boat on the lake. He took the oars as she sat in the stern facing him.

She broke the silence.

"Freddy usually brings me, but he is so busy these days." When Rolf didn't reply, she continued. "I would come myself, but I can't manage the oars yet," she said indicating the sling on her arm.

"I trust Your Highness is healing well."

"My name is *Lily*," she replied angrily. "Why have you stayed away?"

Rolf stopped rowing.

"I just... thought..." he began, but was at a loss for words.

"You think too much!" she said leaning toward him. "Why won't you just be you?"

She put her hand on his knee. Her touch electrified him.

"But *you are...*" he began, but she cut him off.

"Forget *what* we are and be *who* we are! You, and me, two people in a boat, on this lake- this beautiful lake- this beautiful morning."

"Do you think I care about *this?*" she said, pointing at the castle. "Or where I was *born?* I could be happy anywhere *with... if...*"

"But what would Fredrik think if I... if you..."

"Fredrik?" she asked with a laugh. "What did Fredrik *do?* Who was *Elise?* Why won't you *wake up?*"

And then he did; And broke. And at last they embraced with tears of joy.

High above, on the castle wall, Fredrik and Elise watched, and then turned away.

The End

