

The Ugly
Princess



elizabeth k. burton



*The Ugly
Princess*

A Karlathia Chronicle



Elizabeth K. Burton



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THE UGLY PRINCESS

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Chapter 1

THE TRUTH MIGHT NEVER HAVE COME TO LIGHT HAD THE king not gotten drunk at his wedding banquet and choked to death on a pheasant bone.

The events leading up to and instrumental in the unfortunate moment began three months earlier, just after the summer solstice. The day commenced much like every other, with King Edrick roaring into the private dining hall already well into his first bottle of brandy. He engulfed his usual enormous breakfast, then strode off to his private council chamber to see if there were any pressing matters of state he needed to attend to.

I was in my small office near the kitchens attending to the monthly accounts when one of the downstairs maids dashed in to inform me a courier waited in the main reception hall. As such messengers were only employed for matters of the utmost urgency, I immediately went to greet him.

“I have a message for His Grace,” the man announced before I had barely stepped into the room.

“I will take it,” I said, quickly assessing the layer of dust on his uniform, thick enough to nearly obscure the patch on his shoulder and the shadows of fatigue under his eyes. He

had ridden long and hard, and I saw no reason not to relieve him of his task and send him off for a meal.

“My orders are to give the message to His Grace.”

“Corporal, do you know who I am?” I dislike resorting to a military tone, but I dislike even more standing about arguing with people who should know not to.

“Yes, milord.”

“Then you are aware I am privy to all the king’s business. Now, your message, if you please.”

He wrestled with it for a brief moment but, in the end, he truly did have no choice. Thus, I was the first to learn that the Queen of ABERNAL was dead.

I expect self-introduction is in order before we go any further. My name is Bartrim Ruford, and I am the Seneschal of House Rediman, the twelfth member of my lineage to occupy the post. It, like all those of any importance in the king’s household, is hereditary, guaranteeing the monarch dependable help and a fair number of people steady employment for generations. At least, that is the official explanation for the system. When said monarch is like Edrick, it tends to work somewhat less smoothly than its originators had intended.

His Gracious Majesty Edrick Rediman, the fourth of his name to reign in ABERNAL, was, shall I say, difficult to appreciate but fairly easy to please, provided one had considerable skill at diplomacy and an even greater willingness to compromise one’s ethics. Fortunately, I had been blessed with a more than ample portion of the former and so was able to avoid many instances of the latter.

I had assumed my position some five years prior to the events we will be discussing and had, so far, kept His Majesty’s good will.

For two decades, an outpost stood at the foot of the Stone Mountains. It had one purpose—to apprise the king by the swiftest means available that his detested wife was dead. I now led the dusty courier to the council chamber, where we interrupted a discussion among His Grace and his three

Ministers of Council of the comparative charms of two new ladies just arrived at court. I then hastened to find my wife.

Danella and I knew the king would want to celebrate the news he had just received and hastened to prepare a small feast for His Grace and a few select friends. He had waited twenty years to hear that his estranged wife had finally been killed in some skirmish or other so he could replace her and get a male heir. Well, a legitimate male heir, anyway. He had produced plenty of the other kind, not being any more inclined to celibacy than he was to restraint in dining.

The news that the longed-for day of liberty had, at last, arrived provoked instantaneous results. Envoys departed before the following noon to all the neighboring monarchs with nubile daughters, and a week later Edrick was betrothed to the lovely Yolanthé of Nadwich. Despite our surprise at the alacrity with which the queen-to-be was selected, Danella and I immediately began preparations for the nuptials; and I dispatched invitations to all the relevant lords, ladies and royals. As the weeks prior to the arrival of the lady and her parents passed, the palace actually had a rather more light-hearted, festive air than I could recall having enjoyed for many years.

I, of course, made all the necessary arrangements to welcome the future lady of the house, just as my late father had done for her predecessor. Not surprisingly, the said preparations included gently persuading my sovereign to temper some of his more abrupt mannerisms.

“Are you calling me a boor, Ruford?” he snarled when I suggested having the princess taken immediately to his chambers on arrival so he could “try her out” was somewhat less than romantic.

“Heaven forbid, Your Grace. You are, as everyone knows, the consummate gentleman. However, the lady Yolanthé is fresh from the convent and likely shy for that reason.”

“Then best she get over her girlish megrims now. The sooner she’s in whelp, the better.”

“Well, of course, there is the matter of her father, who is rumored to be an overly pious man much enamored of the concept of premarital chastity.”

The mention of his prospective father-in-law, who in addition to piety had a treasury reputed to be twice the size of Edrick’s he might, if provoked, decide not to share with his new son-in-law, gave my royal master pause.

“So, have her brought after he’s in bed,” Edrick suggested, though his voice had lost some of its earlier assurance.

“A possible alternative, Your Grace, but Queen Barba has asked to share her daughter’s chambers to assist with last-minute preparations. And I suspect even were that worthy lady to be a sufficiently sound sleeper to allow your wishes to be fulfilled, King Benifaz will have more than one...observer...in his daughter’s retinue, ready to report in detail if the princess’s virtue were in any way compromised prior to the exchange of vows.”

He sat slumped, one hand gripping his favorite goblet, the other clenched on the arm of the chair. The course of his thoughts as he struggled to reach a plan with a greater chance of success made his face twitch. Finally, to his obvious disgruntlement and my sincere relief, he accepted the inevitable.

“Tis but four days,” he conceded. “Do what you think best.”

So it was that the king met his betrothed with all appropriate courtesy in the Great Hall, the only remaining remnant of the original castle, as per custom. She was a lovely vision, small and slight with deep violet eyes and red-gold hair flowing freely to below her waist. She was exquisite and had a palpable air of sweetness.

She took one look at her betrothed and went white to the lips.

Her royal parents chose not to officially take notice of her reaction, although Queen Barba shot her husband’s back a glance that should have drawn blood. I subsequently noted, however, that she kept her eyes downcast and her face carefully schooled when there was the least chance her spouse

might observe her demeanor. My interpretation of this behavior did not speak well of His Grace of Nadwich, a summation which...but more on that at the appropriate time.

Edrick was five years past his fifth decade, while the lady was two years shy of her second. He was squat and broad and not much inclined to regular bathing; and despite his respect for Benifaz his small, black eyes stripped off Yolanthé's traveling ensemble like razors. Recognizing the need for intervention, I made haste to suggest she might be overtired from her journey and hustled her off to her temporary suite of rooms to recover. Edrick licked his lips as he watched her go, and I'm saddened to admit I was glad the nuptials would take place in only four days. Otherwise, I suspect, he would have reverted to his original plan in spite of Benifaz's money.

"Poor lass," muttered Danella as we retreated to the kitchen to begin preparation for that night's betrothal banquet.

I quite agreed with her, but the deed was done. One could only hope the lady would manage to produce the required heir as soon as possible, after which time she would likely be spared most of her spouse's intimate attentions. Edrick preferred women with fewer inhibitions than a princess trained in a religious community was likely to have.

Still, to give the man credit, he did behave himself reasonably well for the remaining days before the wedding. The ceremony went off without a hitch, and the bridal feast began as the sun retired for the evening. I made certain Yolanthé's wineglass was topped off, but I doubted even that was going to be enough. As course after course arrived and Edrick grew more and more drunk, I caught her staring at him with a look usually reserved for confrontations with savage beasts.

When the final toast to the bride had been made, Queen Barba and a cluster of Abernali ladies escorted her from the festivities upstairs to the king's bedchamber, where she would wait in nervous nakedness in the royal bed to do her duty. Custom demanded Edrick allow at least an hour before joining her, so a variety of entertainers had been hired to help

him while away the time. As a troupe of bawdy clowns sent the assembly into roars of laughter, a course of lemon-ginger partridge was served, a dish that was one of His Grace's favorites. Snatching a drumstick, he bit it in half, chewing bone and all as he hoisted his cup and gulped wine.

I had left the hall to see that the buffet table in the ballroom, where the wedding guests would retire once Edrick had gone, was adequately supplied, so I was not present for the terminal event. However, the man who had served the partridge informed me later that His Grace, in the midst of a bellow of laughter, suddenly fell back into his chair. He sat staring into infinity with his mouth agape as the already high color in his face grew darker still. He seemed to be trying to speak, but the group's attention was on the clowns so all failed to notice his peculiar behavior. He clapped his hand to his throat, a signal he had instituted to alert the wine steward he desired a refill on those occasions when the noise level was too high for conversation. This was promptly provided, but Edrick continued to gesture madly. The rest of the staff, unable to interpret what it was he seemed so desperate to obtain, mingled about in confusion until the king gurgled, turned a singularly unregal shade of purple and fell facedown into his mashed potatoes.

It was at that moment I returned to the banquet hall. One of the clowns had observed the king's curious behavior and stopped to stare. His fellows, their practiced routine thrown awry, stopped as well and turned to see what had interrupted them. Slowly, the room fell utterly silent as I hurried to see what was happening.

Benifaz leaped up and gawked at his son-in-law as if he suspected Edrick were simply evincing yet another disgusting aspect of his character. He confirmed this a moment later in the tone of a man just discovering manure on his best boots.

"Good God! The man's passed out!"

As such an event had occurred numerous times in the past, it was not an unwarranted conclusion. The king's ministers exchanged looks of mingled exasperation and chagrin

from their seats. Until the marriage was consummated their plans to continue in their positions of power were uncertain. Edrick's apparent incapacity to perform that duty—not to mention his having mortally offended the new queen's proud and easily offended sire—was not encouraging.

I, however, had a dreadful feeling that was not inspired by politics or thoughts of my future, and so, apparently did my lifelong friend the Royal Champion. Sir Christopher Evergild had failed to observe Edrick's distress, as he was stationed according to Edrick's orders well behind the throne-like chair the king used when dining formally. Despite his height, his view was thus blocked by the ornate back of the royal seat. At Benifaz's exclamation, however, he leaped forward—too late.

Chris pushed through the gawking servants to lift Edrick from dinner and lean him against the back of the chair. The king's eyes were wide and blank amid the potatoes and gravy and his head lolled in a way no living man's would. I laid my fingers on the place on his throat where his pulse should be. As I had suspected, there was none.

"Gentlemen," I said to King Benifaz and the Ministers of Council as quietly as I could and still be heard, "the king is dead."

Benifaz slumped into his chair, never taking his eyes off the corpse. The gaggle of ministers put their heads together and muttered as I gently cleaned my late sovereign's face with a napkin while Sir Christopher held him steady. They gazed in horror at the corpse of their monarch and former source of steady revenue and then stared with even greater dismay at each other.

The silence that had to this point held sway was shattered as three hundred voices all erupted at once. Many of the gentlemen and not a few of the ladies leaped to their feet in an effort to see. Some who were less mindful of their dignity went so far as to climb onto their chairs.

Finished with my cleaning chore, I motioned for four of the footmen to remove His Grace, surreptitiously slipping

the royal signet from his hand. I then stepped down from the dais to the center the room under the high dome that crowned the hall. From here, I knew, my voice would carry to all.

“Ladies and gentlemen!”

The uproar ebbed as all eyes moved from the exiting cortege to me.

“His Grace King Edrick has suffered an accident—may God grant him eternal peace.”

For a long moment no one moved; and then, one by one, the guests stood and left, some to their chambers, others to their carriages. In a matter of minutes, the only guests remaining in the Great Hall were Benifaz, who was staring into his cup of wine; the ministers, who were staring at each other; and Sir Christopher.

No one had really expected Edrick to survive long enough for any son he might sire to reach majority. The ministers had intended to ensure at least one—and preferably all—of them were named as regents when the hoped-for male heir inherited the throne.

Now, they were appalled. The king was dead, his marriage unconsummated, thus precluding the possibility of there being a posthumous heir. The line of succession, by default, fell to his late majesty's only living child.

“There must be someone else,” muttered First Minister Marlan Overlack to Third Minister Zephus Settleson.

“You know better,” growled Second Minister Ludlow Entreput, tossing back a double measure of brandy. “It was you who advised him to kill all the ones from the wrong side of the blanket off, remember?”

“But, ye gods,” interjected Settleson, slumping back and covering his face with his hand. “*Her!*”

Already the servants were clearing the tables, so of course I must stand on the dais where I could adequately supervise. That my position also offered me the capability of overhearing their discussion was hardly accidental, not that they would have paid me much attention in any case. Many if not

most courtiers overlooked the presence of “the help,” and quite often they included me in that designation.

That cloak of servitor invisibility apparently covered Sir Christopher as well. He had returned to his place behind the king’s chair, from which I knew he could hear every word.

“We know where she is,” Overlack said, his voice cold and ugly. “And there are cousins. Accidents happen.”

Settleson slid his hand down below his eyes, which were suddenly bright with speculation. Entreput smiled, a most unpleasant expression.

“Indeed,” he agreed, pouring another two fingers of brandy but this time sipping it meditatively.

He poured for his fellows, also, and they raised their glasses in a toast. I did not care to consider what they pledged, but I suspected it had nothing to do with anyone’s health—especially *hers*.

Chapter 2

AS HIS MAJESTY HAS NO NEED OF MY SERVICES AT THE MOMENT and the Ministers of Council are occupied in mutual commiseration, this would seem an opportune moment for me to provide some information regarding the history of Abernal and the royal family.

Abernal is a fairly small country situated on the southwest coast of the continent of Karlathia. It is bounded on the east by Nadwich and on the northwest by the Empire of the Decirons. Tucked between them are the various mountain valleys and plateaus claimed by the Moldori, a society of savage horseman about which more later.

Ours is a reasonably wealthy country. There are two fine ports to the south and some productive coal, iron and silver mines to the north. In between lies some of the finest farming country on the continent.

House Rediman assumed the throne of Abernal some five centuries ago. The founder of the house was elected by popular acclaim following his resounding defeat of a score of barbarian tribes, which he then united into a single political entity.

The people of Averal, not approving of allowing too much power in too few hands, also established a system that required their new king obtain permission from several representative bodies before making any sweeping decisions. One was the Guild Consortium, with a membership that represented nearly all the common folk. The other was the Council of Ministers, six representatives of the titled and academic communities.

Some generations later a descendent of the first Rediman attempted to establish himself as absolute ruler and was promptly shot through the left eye by an arrow while hunting. His son, being of a somewhat wiser order, made official in the form of an irrevocable charter the two bodies that yet represented—supposedly—the will of the people.

It will have been noted that the late Edrick's council contained not six but three ministers. Following his ascension soon after his first marriage, Edrick replaced the first three ministers to retire with Overlack, Entreput and Settleson; and when the remaining three also became vacant he simply left them that way. By careful nurturing of his relationship with the Consortium, he had thus managed to achieve what amounted to absolute rule without anyone's lodging a protest.

Edrick had reigned for nearly three decades; and to give him his due, Averal enjoyed relative peace and prosperity most of that time, as we had for much of the fifteen generations that preceded him. The reason for this was quite simple.

Their bellicose ancestor notwithstanding, the kings of House Rediman preferred alternatives to bloodshed for settling state disputes. This was in large part because law and the custom established by their First Ancestor demanded the monarch lead the armies in the event of any extensive hostilities.

In addition, the Redimans all seemed to understand extended peace meant full coffers. This distaste for placing themselves and their treasury in jeopardy had led to the es-

tablishment some two centuries earlier of the position of Royal Champion, currently held by Sir Christopher. Disputes that could not be settled in the council chamber were referred to combat between the Champion and a representative of the other party.

Fortunately, our neighbor monarchs had been, for the most part, no more inclined toward blood and battle than our own. Oh, they maintained their armies—they were lazy, not stupid—but as long as the diplomacy-by-single-combat system worked they accepted the results with relatively little complaint.

This gentleman's agreement, however, went by the board with the Moldori. They were a serious nuisance, constantly invading this country and that, stealing livestock, abducting women (or men, depending on the majority gender of the particular raiding party), burning villages and whatnot. They swooped down out of their mountains on their speedy horses, took what they wanted, ruined what they didn't and were gone back to safety before the kingdoms they attacked could rally disciplinary action.

Edrick's father, the third Edrick, was determined to obtain relief from these pests. So it was that in his youth the now-deceased fourth Edrick was contracted in marriage with Marvaya, the eldest daughter of the High Chief of the Moldori. The alliance was arranged by the young prince's esteemed sire on the advice of his ministers, two of whom owned lucrative mines very close to the border.

To their later chagrin, however, the Council of Ministers failed to view the lady prior to completing the contract. When she arrived the day before the scheduled nuptials, they and the prospective bridegroom discovered she had a number of ritual scars on her face. She also had a tendency to snarl and draw knives at any perceived insult—and she was easily insulted. She was small and dark and had the wiry strength and agility of an alley cat, which complemented her temperament beautifully.

“Send the bitch back!” the prince roared in the privacy of the royal apartments. “She looks like a field plowed for planting.”

Had the royal treasury been up to the reparations that action would have required, he might have gotten his wish. Observing the groom’s less than enthusiastic reception of his betrothed, the agents of the High Chief were quick to suggest an arrangement might be made to dissolve the match—for a price. The amount required would have fed the entire kingdom for at least a year.

So, Crown Prince Edrick exchanged vows with the dark-eyed lady, who glared at him with something less than ardent appreciation. (No proof has been found to support the rumors of the time that she had, in fact, referred to him as “that fat pig” and threatened to turn him into a soprano if he failed to satisfy her in the marriage bed.) At the wedding banquet, she was seen to match him cup for cup; yet when the ladies came to snatch her away she strode off with nary a stagger.

Always willing to make the best of a bad situation, particularly where women were concerned, the prince retired to the nuptial chamber later that night, having consumed sufficient wine and spirits to make the sight of his bride less burdensome. He emerged the following morning bruised, battered and bloody, swearing never to set foot near the princess again without benefit of full body armor.

Not long after that the old king died, and ten months after the wedding the new queen was delivered of a daughter. Her royal husband took one look at the infant and ordered it and the queen out of his sight.

“You might know a bitch pup would be as ugly as the dam,” he snarled and then ordered his new ministers to find a safe way to get rid of them both.

Before any concrete plans could be developed, however, the queen, having done her duty as she saw it and being apparently lacking in maternal sensitivities, gutted the two

guards assigned to keep her in her quarters and vanished from the palace one night. Several proposals were put forward in regard to dispatching the infant; but more cautious heads pointed out that she was, after all, the only completely Abernali heir to the throne until another arrived to replace her.

The Moldori witch must be divorced to allow Edrick to take a new wife on whom he could beget an heir. Once her replacement was in hand, it could then be arranged for the Ugly Princess to toddle off a high balcony or slip in the bath.

Considering her repulsiveness, they pointed out, it would be an act of mercy.

To the ministers' dismay, however, there were several impediments to their achieving Edrick's goals. For one thing, there were no women of marriageable age in any of the local royal families; and His Grace was quite specific about the need for regal blood in his son's veins. Furthermore, he stressed in a tone to chill the blood, she had better be a beauty.

Those, as it turned out, were the easy parts. What brought the entire program to a halt was the clause in the marriage agreement requiring a substantial payment before a divorce could be acquired. The amount, not surprisingly, was approximately twice that suggested by the High Chief's agents prior to the marriage. It was clear the man knew his daughter—or Edrick—well.

The sum in question being totally out of reach, and the threat of increased raiding by the Moldori an obvious consequence of any alternative choices, Edrick was forced to accept his fate. Until either he or his absent queen died, he would not be acquiring a new bride.

This did not, of course, improve his attitude toward his tiny heiress. He refused to give her a name and threatened dire bodily harm to anyone who so much as mentioned her in his presence. It was my mother who smuggled a priest into the far corner of the palace where the infant lay to have her christened.

As months passed, rumors grew. It was said the princess was a monster, her limbs twisted and her face deformed. She was allegedly given to fits of screaming rage, to have bitten the nipple from the breast of her wet nurse, to have claws and horns and scales. When such gossip was repeated in my mother's hearing her face would redden with anger, but she never contradicted the stories or defended the infant.

"I know who it is spreads such tales," I heard her tell my father one night. "And who will be blamed but me if anyone says otherwise? I can only tend the wee mite as it is by his sufferance. I'll not risk being shut away from her for having a loose tongue."

Her efforts and her restraint were in vain, however. When the princess was six months old the king decided there was no need to keep her in the palace.

"Stout walls and well-paid servants can be had anywhere," he shouted.

So, the Ugly Princess was sent to live in a dark, damp keep high in the foothills in the farthest corner of the kingdom, attended by a contingent of Trolls. They are a gentle people, but one that most humans find it difficult to look at for any length of time. That, said Edrick, made them the appropriate folk to look after a deformed child.

She remained there for twenty years, more a folk tale than a reality to most of the country, unseen by any but her faithful servants. Given there was at least the possibility of her assuming the throne, she was educated as befit a princess, although all of her tutors were ancients who always seemed to die just as their term of employment was nearing its end.

Now, at the instigation of a dead bird, the Ugly Princess had become an ugly queen.

"There's only one thing to do," decided First Minister Overlack. "We will simply marry her off to Benifaz's nephew. He doesn't care what a woman looks like as long as she's breathing, and she will no doubt be so grateful to have a man she won't be any trouble at all to convince we know best. And he's part Rediman through his grandmother."

“And what assurance do we have His Nibs of Nadwich won’t decide to do without our services?” snarled Third Minister Settleson.

“If you have an alternative suggestion, I’m certain we would all be pleased to entertain it,” replied Overlack in the same tone.

As nothing apparently suggested itself, they were forced to find the plan acceptable and drank a toast to the future.



Sir Christopher Evergild leaned against the high back of Edrick’s chair and listened as the men he had come to call the Three Spiders plotted the future of a woman none of them had ever seen. The servants were still clearing away the wedding feast, and he could see Bartrim standing just within earshot of the conspirators, appearing to be interested in nothing but assuring the clearing away was done properly.

Chris envied Bart that ability to dissemble. He, on the other hand, had a face that gave away everything, which is why he was grateful King Edrick had been so fond of thrones he wanted to eat sitting on one. The huge ornate chair had a back seven feet tall and half that wide, and the dais behind it was wide enough to provide a spot where he could retreat when necessary, which was pretty much any time Edrick ate. Otherwise, House Evergild would have lost their two-century-old position when Chris parted company with his head for sneering at the king’s manners.

“So,” Marlan Overlack said, now the decision to take control of the exiled princess was made, “we will send a delegation at first light to escort the...queen...back to the palace. You, Settleson, will draw up the marriage lines and we will have her sign them as soon as she arrives. The wedding can proceed as soon as Demtri can be fetched.”

“Good God, Overlack,” Zephus Settleson whined over the gurgle of yet more of the royal brandy pouring into his cup. “I’m in no condition to attend to legal matters tonight.”

“Besides,” chimed in Entreput, “the woman’s been locked up for twenty years. One more day isn’t going to make a difference.”

Chris didn’t have to see the Second Minister’s face to know it was twisted into a sneer of contempt. That tended to be his normal expression, and it colored his voice even when he was straight-faced.

“How reassuring to know our heads of state have the situation so firmly in hand.”

Chris started, his hand flying to the dagger that was the only weapon Edrick would allow him to wear at the table. An instant later, he glared at the lanky man standing beside him.

“One of these days, Bart, you’ll sneak up on me like that, and I’ll carve you a new smile under your chin,” he muttered.

“Promises, promises. What would your father say if he knew you could be snuck up on? Anyway, they’ve swooped off to circle the corpse, so you can come out now.”

Chris followed him out of the Great Hall and down the passage to the kitchen, where all the food that remained was being packed into hampers. It would be taken to the local abbey to be distributed among the poor, something that wouldn’t have happened were Edrick still breathing. As far as the late king had been concerned, there were no poor in Abernal, just people too lazy to work; and he had seen no reason to encourage them in their sloth.

“Sit down, Christopher, and eat,” Danella Ruford said, setting a plate and a mug of ale on the staff’s dining table as if she had known beforehand he would be arriving. Perhaps she did—he had more than once suspected his best friend’s wife had a touch of the Sight. He’d always persuaded himself otherwise, because he liked her too much to let suspicions come between them.

He wasn’t going to turn down the meal. He hadn’t eaten since midday, and if the germ of a plan forming in his head decided to sprout it could well be longer than that before he ate well again.

“So, now what?” Bart slid into the chair beside him, refilling Chris’s cup and then pouring one for himself.

“I have to get to her before they do.” He said it almost without thinking, only that moment realizing the seed had not only sprouted but grown to maturity as he ate.

“It’s said she’s mad as well as ugly, Chris. What if it’s true?”

“Madwoman or monster, she’s still the queen, and I’m her champion. Once I’ve sworn fealty, the Spiders can’t touch her without risking my stepping on them.” He drained his mug and got up, calling one of the pages over with a quirk of the finger. “Go to the stables and have them saddle me a good horse for a fast ride.”

The lad dashed off, and Chris used the back stairway to climb to his rooms. Stripping off his ceremonial armor, he dressed in leather breeches and a light hauberk then tossed a fur-lined oiled-leather cloak over his shoulders against the chill rain that had started falling just after nightfall. He would have preferred to leave the chain mail behind, but the tradition of his office demanded he wear it when in the monarch’s presence.

His dagger he thrust into the sheath in his boot then buckled on his sword. Finally, he looped the gold chain bearing the badge of the King’s Champion around his neck.

He had been five years old when the princess was born, but he remembered very little of those first months of her life. His father had just started him on his sword training and that had been more important than some baby—and a girl baby, at that.

Nor had he thought much about her after he was old enough to understand her story. Oh, he had heard all the stories about her deformity and her insanity; but that had nothing to do with his purpose in life, which was to guard the king after his father retired.

Suddenly, she was his purpose in life, and the tales of horror that surrounded her kept nibbling at his brain. What

would he do if he arrived at that antiquated stone-heap and found a raving lunatic?

“Don’t make trouble where there’s already enough,” he mumbled as he pulled on his gloves.

There was a knock, and Bart stepped inside carrying a saddlebag.

“Danella says there’s enough there to get you to Norburgh. We’ll have the Lady’s Nest in the Queen’s Tower cleaned and ready by tomorrow sunset at the latest. And you’ll want this.” He held out the royal signet.

“I see at least a day and a half there and likely twice that back, plus whatever time she needs to prepare for the trip,” Chris said, tucking the ring into the pouch on his belt. “And that’s if we ride straight through. I’ll send messengers to give you some warning.”

The two men returned downstairs together then shook hands at the door to the kitchen garden.

“Keep an eye on the Spiders,” Chris said.

“Godspeed, my friend.”

The rain came down steadily, pounding against his head and shoulders as he followed the stone-paved path through the garden and beyond its wall to the courtyard and the stables. The stablemaster was waiting with a restless gray stallion, and he, too, wished Chris “Godspeed.”

He trotted his horse down the long, straight drive toward the main gate, which the night guards began to swing open as soon as they heard his approach. The wind drove the rain into his face, forcing him to pull his hood down so far it was all he could do to see the road. His mount protested, much preferring a warm, dry stall; but Chris patted the stallion’s arched neck and then set him to a hard gallop with a kick of his heels.

Chapter 3

*THE DEEP-LAWNED MANSIONS OF THE NOBILITY THAT SUR-*rounded the palace gave way to the three and four-story buildings of the Registon business district. The chill rain had driven all but the vermin—two- and four-legged—and the constabulary indoors; so the wide, brick-paved avenue that led from Abernal House to the bridge over the Woodrath River was empty enough for his horse's hoofbeats to echo off the buildings. It was still early enough that lights glowed from the windows where people lived above the mercantile establishments.

Riding being something he could manage dead asleep, Chris let his mind wander, once again reviewing Edrick's death, probing to see if there was anything he could have done, should have done, to prevent it. But Bart was right—he had been shackled by Edrick's commands. So, although the sense of duty some people swore was a component of the blood of the Royal Champions gave him a momentary pang of guilt, his logical mind overruled the charge he had failed his responsibility.

That wouldn't apply, though, if he allowed the Spiders to carry out their plans.

He often wished his father hadn't retired well before the usual age when Royal Champions surrendered their sword of office to their successors. Or that he had chosen Mikel for the job, even though Chris's elder brother had no real interest in it. Chris had no qualms about his skill with arms. If he had to fight to defend the new queen the outcome wasn't in question. What he wasn't good at, as he had been reminded again tonight, was dealing with the likes of Overlack and company.

He knew he should be aware of all the undercurrents running through the palace—through the entire country, actually—but he always seemed to be one step behind. It hadn't really mattered before, because he could rely on Bart. Now, though, his gut instinct told him he would need to be able to anticipate and respond all on his own, and he wasn't sure he was ready.

According to tradition, he should have had years of working with his father, honing his skills both military and diplomatic, before taking office. The customary age for a Champion to pass his sword to his successor was sixty; and some, like his grandfather, kept the job even longer.

Instead, at fifty-five, Davvyd Evergild had suddenly announced that the title of Champion and commander of the king's army was now in the hands of his twenty-year-old younger son and left Registon for Tidecastle, his domain on the southern shore. His only response when Chris or anyone else questioned his abrupt departure was that he felt his son was more than ready to replace him and saw no reason not to enjoy a few additional years of freedom from the demands of the title.

Chris rode through the sodden night until he felt the horse begin to tire. The highway was empty, the houses beside it dark and silent. The villages he passed through might have been deserted, only the occasional tavern shattering the night with raucous voices when the door opened as he thundered by.

In Riverway, the first city north of the capital, he exchanged the exhausted animal for another at the army garrison, informing the commander of the king's death and his own errand. Then he was off again, riding toward the darker shadows to the north and east that were the mountains where the princess dwelled. The rain slacked off from time to time, but it was never far away; and his cloak eventually became soaked through.



Dawn was coming, although the shrouded sun did little to ease the dreariness, when the second horse began to falter. He was in the broad belt of farms that looped across the center of the country and there was no garrison nearby. Fortunately, since nearly every farmer engaged in horse breeding to one extent or another, he found a stable in the next town. Cantering into the yard, he shouted for the hostler as he slid from the saddle and walked his mount to let it cool down.

"Help you?" the man said from the door of the stable.

"I need a sturdy remount with as much speed as can be had."

Even through the dim light of early morning Chris could see the man's eyes light up with greed. He would have already recognized that his customer was in a great rush and so not likely to want to waste time bargaining.

"I've a likely mare that might suit for twelve gold." He turned and called into the barn, and moments later a boy came out to take over the cool-down chore. Chris strode inside and was shown the animal. To give the man credit, he hadn't lied about her quality.

"She'll do," he said. "Get her geared. I'll leave her at the garrison in Norburgh and you can send someone to return my mount and fetch her back anytime after tomorrow."

And then he tossed back his sodden cloak to reveal his chain mail, which left the hostler standing with his mouth gaping, his protest silenced. Only one man in Abernal

dressed like a relic, and when he did his word was law. Fifteen minutes later Chris was back on the highway.

All that day and through the night he rode, pausing only to tend to the necessities of nature and change mounts. He ate as he rode and drank when he stopped, falling into a mindless semi-dream of fatigue. At Norburgh, he again informed the commander of the change in ruler and requested he keep the news to himself until Chris could return with the new queen. He didn't miss the way the colonel's face stiffened in consternation.

The rain continued, with the brief moments of respite usually lasting just long enough for his cloak to begin to dry before he was drenched again. It was midmorning when he at last reached the foot of the high hill where the princess's prison stood. Compared to the many-windowed, elegant structures that had long ago replaced most of its ilk, it crouched like some ancient monument to war with its crenellated parapets and slit-windowed watchtowers. What would it be like, he wondered, to spend your whole life locked within those forbidding walls surrounded by nightmarish creatures whose sole function was to keep you there?

A narrow but well-tended road curved gently to the top of the hill. The rain, which had appeared to be over when he started the easy climb, returned with renewed vigor halfway up. By the time he reached the heavy, iron-banded gate he was exhausted, chilled, wet, hungry and not in the best of moods.

"Hallo, Captain of the Guard!" he shouted as he sat in the downpour, his tired horse blowing from the exertion. "I have important news for Her Highness."

"Then tell it and be off, man," snarled a gravelly voice from a guardhouse set over the portal. A broad-shouldered Troll in studded leather armor as antiquated as his mail leaned out just far enough for the roof overhang to keep him out of the wet.

Chris pushed back his cloak so his badge of office gleamed even in the dim, rain-soaked daylight.

“I am Sir Christopher Evergild, hereditary champion of the Royal House of ABERNAL, Troll, and what I have to say is for Her Highness's ears alone. Now, open the bloody gate!”

The last vestige of his patience was abandoning him, and it made no difference that he knew Trolls were better known for their stubbornness than their spirit of cooperation. It was why Edrick had contracted with them to guard his daughter in the first place, knowing no amount of pleading or bribery would gain anyone access to her.

But he had no way of knowing what was happening in Registon. By now, the Spiders could be on their way here, ready to use the power Edrick had granted them to co-opt their new monarch before she had the opportunity to understand what was happening. The last thing he needed was this idiot of a guard standing in his way.

“Matters not if you're the king himself. Orders is the gate stays closed, so closed she stays.”

As if collaborating with the Trolls to ensure his frustration and discomfort, a brisk breeze began, aggravating the clammy chill that was rapidly seeping to his bones and blowing the rain into his face like needles.

“If you blockheads don't open this gate, I'll have your hides for doormats,” he roared in the voice that had given many an opponent on the field of honor second thoughts. “By whose order do you deny entrance to the royal champion?”

“Your pardon, Sir Knight,” replied a decidedly non-Troll voice from within the guardhouse, and in the shadows behind the guard Chris caught a slight movement. “Unaccustomed as we are to visitors, we may have become a trifle...overly suspicious. Pray, enter and be welcome to Raven's Cry.”

If velvet had a sound, it would brush the ears with just that softness and warmth. It wrapped around him and sent a liquid quiver through his chest that slid down through his belly and lodged in his loins in a most embarrassing manner. Astonished, Chris searched to penetrate the darkness; but

between the rain in his eyes and the angle, he was blind. Still, the great iron-barred gates were swinging open with a loud squeal to reinforce the welcoming words. He spurred his horse within and dismounted, handing the reins to the Troll child who ran out to meet him.

He wasn't certain what he had expected to find. This rough castle was nothing but a prison, and his experience with prisons was that they were rarely pleasant. However, the courtyard was as clean and neat as possible, given it was only partly paved with cobblestones; and although he could hear the sounds of livestock coming from what were likely barns to his left, there was no sign of waste anywhere nor was the stench of manure overwhelming. It was a clean place, nearly homey, a place where those who lived in it cared for appearances.

The keep appeared at some point long before to have been truncated, so that only two stories topped by a modern slate roof remained. Three steps led from the ground to a stone porch, half of which was covered by a wide overhang so that those inside might stand in the doorway without regard to the weather. There were casement windows above and below, though no light came from any of them. Someone had gone to great pains to make this as comfortable a dwelling as possible, and Chris didn't believe for a moment it had been Edrick.

Yet who else? Except for the tutors Bart had told him about, the only ones permitted within the walls were the Trolls. If they were responsible, he needed to make some considerable alterations to his ideas about them.

Just then, one of them, wearing armor of leather and plate, a thick scimitar on his belt and an iron mace in his hand, leaped down from the battlements, taking the thirty-foot drop as if he were hopping off a stair. His bowlegs made him seem menacing as he drew closer and Chris let his hand fall to his sword hilt. Then, as the creature came near enough for his face to be clearly visible, the sense of impending threat

vanished. In fact, Chris could have sworn the creature looked ashamed.

"I'm to apologize, milord," the Troll guard mumbled, dropping to one knee without regard for the inch-deep mud. "'Twas wrong to keep ye out when ye come on king's business."

"Better too much devotion to duty than too little," Chris heard himself say, wondering a moment later if he always sounded that pompous. Then wondering why he was wondering. "The lady who just spoke..."

"Sir Christopher?"

It was another Troll, a female this time, come from the keep and standing in the shelter of the portico. Behind her, the door stood open, but there was no light to be seen from within despite the overcast of the day. Chris strode to meet her, careful to look her in the face to avoid insult. It was not a pretty sight. She nodded once, as if approving his courtesy.

Other than having the same number of eyes, nose and mouth, Trolls looked like nothing human. The bones of their faces were irregular, as if they had been broken at birth and had not healed properly. Their noses were flat and broad, the nostrils little more than slits; and their great round orange eyes had slit pupils too much like a snake's for comfort. Prominent brows cast the eyes into shadow, and inch-long fangs overlapped their undershot jaws and thick gray lips. Coarse shaggy black hair covered their heads. Like the guard, the woman—unquestionably the housekeeper, now that he was close enough to see her—was shoeless, her long, clawed feet seeming almost rooted in the stone floor.

"My lady has ordered a bath and a room and a meal for you, milord," the Troll-woman said, her voice surprisingly soft for a creature whose face looked like nothing so much as weathered granite. "If you'll—"

"I must see her at once. I must tell her—"

"This is the lady's house, milord," she said firmly. "She will decide when you must see her. Until then, we beg that you let us make you comfortable."

Chris started to protest. He needed to deliver the signet and warn the princess—the queen—there were others whose intentions were less than honorable on their way to collect her. But there was something in the steady way the Trollwoman looked at him that confirmed doing so would only be a waste of breath. That he was shivering from the cold and had to struggle to keep his teeth from chattering was added incentive. What he had to do would take only a few moments, and a hot bath and a warm fire sounded like paradise at the moment. Settleson's entourage couldn't possibly arrive before tomorrow, even if they rode straight through as he had.

So, allowing himself to be persuaded, he sighed and followed the housekeeper inside.

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