

The Rest of the Story

“Okay,” Max greeted me, returning to our tent shortly after breakfast. “We’ve put this off long enough. You owe me a much more complete explanation. I quite understand now why you’ve been doing what you do... when you’re not doing the other... stuff you do.” That last sentence alone left me working not to smile. “However, I want to know the rest of what happened that night... when you returned... I mean at the place we were staying... when I had the pistol.” She was obviously trying not to say anything incriminating. Tempting as it might have been to play with her and ask in confusion just what it was she was talking about, I chose not to. Mostly because she was right. I did owe her that. After all, she’d saved my life. In more ways than one.

Standing, I cast my little privacy spell before turning to her. “You’re correct of course. I promised you that I’d explain everything. I suppose I got rather tied up in showing you why I do what I do and with the follow up war. Now’s as good a time as ever to bring you up to speed.

“However,” I continued with a deep breath, “There’s more to the entire situation than I’ve let on.”

“Like what? And that was a nice spell with a good, quick cast. Show me later?”

“Sure sweetie. The ‘more’ is that you know I’m a part-time assassin. People who went to school with me know my face but not who I am. Aside from my employers, you are the only one who knows that. You alone in all the worlds. And there is the possibility that my employers will not appreciate this fact. They may want to return matters to the way they were. If so, that will... complicate matters.”

Max frowned at the tan wall of the tent for a minute, obviously thinking. After a while she asked, “Might they want me dead?”

I nodded, “It’s one possibility.”

She looked like she wanted to say or ask something but didn’t. A moment later she simply asked, “What do we do?”

“Well first, I tell you about my last mission. Sometime soon afterwards, I go have a talk with my employers. Explain the situation to them.”

“Won’t that be dangerous for you?” she asked with a slightly worried look.

“It’s possible but I doubt it. I’m a princess of Edotoma and a duchess of the great House of Diamond. Killing me carries with it far more danger than meets the eye. Layers and layers of trouble and peril most grim.” While she might know I killed people, she could never know that I worked for my uncle, the crown prince of Regillia, and for my grandfather, the king. “I suppose I might be imprisoned... but that would raise questions. No, I may be fooling myself but I believe I’ll be quite safe. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Because if they decide I need to die and you won’t kill me, someone else might?” she asked, looking me in the eyes.

“Yes,” I nodded. “That is exactly what may happen.”

“I’m not afraid,” she told me with a sad smile. “I’ve seen things worse than death now. Much worse. What happens, happens.”

“No,” I countered grimly. “I’m going to get my way on this. Call me ‘spoiled’ if you will, but it is sometimes a princess’ prerogative to have things happen as she wants. This is one of those times.”

“Okay,” she replied with another slightly sad smile. “Now, before you get to explaining, there are a few things you need to know. Sorry, I should have mentioned these first. Anyway, I spoke with general Hafiri a little while ago. His scouts have confirmed that an army out of Virtuous is on its way. They’ll be here within the week if only barely. The initial estimate is fifteen to twenty thousand mixed infantry and cavalry.”

“As expected,” I replied, sitting in the uncomfortable folding chair by the table. “What else?”

“Eve is on her way back from officer training. A runner arrived saying that she’d recruited almost two thousand troops.”

“Are they equipped?” I asked with a frown.

“Surprisingly enough, yes. According to her letter, she and her people overthrew a garrison in Morality. Used the armory to equip her little army.”

“Well, that’s good news. What else?”

“This one,” she sighed, “You’re not going to like.” When I nodded, she continued, “It would appear that Gregor Singel is headed this way. He’s bringing a large army with him. I did some scrying. Looks like he’s got over one hundred thousand heavy infantry and archers.”

“So, the great House of Singel wants to come play do they?” I asked with a scowl. “Perhaps they don’t know that I’m here. We’ll send them a message later. What else?”

“Gretchen Stein of the Canid animal clan is also said to be en route. She’s bringing a force of no less than twenty thousand with her.”

“So one of the animal clans wants to play, too,” I murmured. “It’s been a long time. I suppose they thought this might be a good place and time to test the waters.”

“They’ve attacked your family before?” Max asked.

“Yes. Centuries ago. But back then it was all the animal clans. They’re a conglomerate of various types of shapeshifters. Actually, they’re several conglomerates. Each being able through sundry means to change into the animal of the clan they belong to. In those days, their army made it to Regillus before being eradicated. Perhaps they’re thinking of reclaiming some of the worlds they lost back then.”

“Interesting. Well, that’s it for the big news,” she told me. “There’s rumor of an uprising in Immaculate. Monks have been disappearing all across the land. Some fleeing and some meeting their final justice. Numerous reports indicate that the ‘holy’ army is beginning to use harsher and harsher means of dominating the people to maintain order. Lady Jessica may have spent the night with Colonel Haman. Camp morale remains high. We had another hundred walk-ins this morning to join the infantry. And that’s about it.” I took a moment to absorb all this. Jessica and Haman? Well, if it turned out to be true, I certainly hadn’t foreseen that one.

“Alright,” I began when the tent flap opened and my privacy spell crashed back upon me with a little jolt.

“Sorry, milady!” a young guard stated hastily. “General Hafiri needs to speak with you now. He says it’s urgent.” Hafiri was an old military man who’d come out of retirement to fight for freedom. He was a good organizer and a calm man. If he needed me now, it was likely very important.

“Not at all. Lead the way,” I told her.

Reaching the large command tent, I found that the elite guardsmen had mostly wandered into the area. The reason was obvious. There were half a dozen foreign soldiers standing to the side. Standing there with empty eyes, these large men wore razor-spiked, metal armor. Drones of House Singel. Putting on a pleasant smile, I stepped into the large tent, Max close on my heels.

Inside sat General Hafiri with Gregor Singel standing some distance across from him.

“Gregor Singel,” I greeted him. “How have you been? I hope your mother is well.” His father was a most unpleasant fellow, however, his mother had seemed like a nice enough person the one time I’d met her. General Hafiri seemed a little startled and a lot relieved.

“Clarissa Diamond! I’d heard you were here. Didn’t believe it. A Diamond princess running around in the middle of a civil war.” He walked over and took my hand, giving the back of it a most perfunctory kiss before releasing it. Gregor was a smallish man. About an inch shorter than me and weighing only about a hundred and fifty pounds. His real strength lay not in his physical abilities, but rather his psychic abilities. Members of the Singel high family could slowly erode the will of their subjects. After a while, not much remained of the original person. They became near mindless drones. They could also do other things. Many of them as nasty as they were dangerous. “So, you out here playing general?”

“Gregor, I thought you knew me better than that.” In actuality, I thought no such thing. Our one prior meeting had lasted less than four minutes. About half the time I’d spent talking with his mother. Still, I was a Diamond. We all had reputations. Who knew what he’d heard? “I don’t play at anything but games. Everything else I do, I do to the fullest of my abilities.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” he replied with a frown. “However, I need you to leave this world.”

“Why ever would I do that?” I asked, all but batting my eyelashes at him.

“I’ll be blunt. I’m going to take these five worlds over. I never liked the House of the Self-Righteous. Now that they’re fracturing, I plan to put them out of my misery. These are nice enough worlds without all the damned monks. I’m going to make these worlds a colony of House Singel. I’ve seen the army you have outside and my remote viewers have looked over the army approaching from Virtuous as well as the army near Purity. None would present more than the lightest of exercises for my troops.”

“Well, I’ll tell you this, Gregor. I’m not planning on annexing these worlds for House Diamond.” He looked pleased. “That said, I’m not willing to have them conquered by House Singel either.” The pleased look evaporated. “These people are fighting for their freedom from tyranny. I see no reason to allow you to replace a spiritual domination with a mental domination.”

“Allow?!” he snorted. “There’s nothing for you to *allow*. I’m coming here and I will sweep away any and all obstacles in my path. I feel sure your king will not allow you to begin a war with another great house over tactically unimportant, neutral territory. Pack your bags and leave gracefully.”

“Gregor,” I told him with a smile. “My army could kill you, your brothers, and all your cousins. And after that House Singel would still not declare war against Regillus. While Singel is a great house, we both know there are great houses and there are great houses. Your army will never reach this place if you persist in this. As the angels dance and sing, I will send them all to what waits beyond. Do not test my resolve in this.”

Face red, he growled, “This army cannot possibly stand against me. Not with you leading it, not with a dozen Clarissa Diamonds.”

“You are of course correct,” I replied, changing my look to suggest I spoke with someone with a slight mental deficiency. “However, I never said I’d stop you with *this* army.” His eyes widened. “Yes. I’m glad to see you understand Gregor. Now take your army and go home. Or go fight House Daemon. I’ve heard the city of Corruption recently lost their army. Play there. And wherever you go, be sure and say hello to your mother for me.”

“How dare you speak to me so?!” He raised his hand to slap me and suddenly found me very

close to him with a knife point pressed against his throat and a similar point pressed against his side. It's entirely possible that second blade drew blood.

"You forget yourself, Gregor," I whispered into his ear. "Useless socialite or not, I am still my father's daughter. I was born with a knife in my hands. And while I appreciate and respect the psychic talents your family has developed, if you try that again.... Well, let's just leave that to your imagination, why don't we? Now, take yourself, your guards, and go. If you doubt my sincerity in regards to not having you here in this place, I will meet you on the field of battle. But I advise you against it. I've scryed your army. You won't fair any better against them than the locals would against yours. Trust me on this. Noble to noble. Now go." And with that I stepped away from him. Max, I noticed, had her casting wand out. An unpleasant green glow literally dripped off it, dissolving into the air before reaching the ground.

Gregor stood there a moment, shifting between stunned and outraged. Spinning on his heel, he walked out. With a little luck he would go home... or at least elsewhere. If he insisted on coming here, I'd have to raise an army and my schedule was already nearly filled for the week.

Back in our tent again, I lay down on my cot. It was more comfortable than the chair and with just me and Max, I didn't need to worry about standing on ceremony. "Now, where was I?"

With a little laugh, she said, "You didn't even manage to get started. Please, start at the beginning." With a muttered spell, she sat down tailor fashion in the air about a foot and a half above the floor. That looked *much* more comfortable than the chairs.

After recasting my privacy spell, I began again.

Taking a deep breath, I began again, "The letter, as you may have guessed, contained my orders. I had to kill Chancellor Chromallin of a high tech world called Dasod. My meeting with the Hierarchy of Crovice was to be my cover. A deception to ensure no one in the worlds had reason to associate me in any way with the Chancellor's death."

Seeing that she was with me so far, I continued, "Once in Dasod, I picked up an information packet about the Chancellor. My letter had stated one reason for him being killed. This packet contained many more which I won't go into." With a quick grimace of distaste, I continued, "The packet also contained information about the Chancellor's more ordinary habits, routines, and his schedule. Additionally, there was information about the security that was in place around him. And that's where I first started. I never completely trust someone else's security arrangements or anyone else's assessments on security. His security turned out to be tight. And that was bad for me as I was there on a distinctly limited time schedule. Just so you know, rushing an assassination is a good way for everything possible to go wrong. Ironically, not at all unlike surgery."

"Taking lives and saving them," Max muttered. "Different sides of the same coin."

"Yes," I admitted sadly. "I suppose now's a good time to mention that I was disguised the entire time I was there. I had black hair and looked much more oriental than I normally do. Anyway, I bought some high tech surveillance gear and double checked the chancellor's security, verified that the itinerary I had for the man seemed to be accurate, and saw him meeting with an enemy agent." In this case that agent had been, Marislaus, my Aunt Talia's secretary and bodyguard. But that wasn't for Max to know yet.

"Wait a minute," Max said, holding up a hand. "Are you saying that you actually recognized an agent of one of your enemies?" Smart girl.

“Yes,” I improvised. “His picture was in the folder. Not a good one though. Very grainy. Still, having seen it, I had no trouble recognizing the man.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry to interrupt.”

“Not at all,” I replied graciously. “Now, when dealing with an extremely high-tech world like Dasod, sometimes special measures have to be taken to ensure that the person remains dead after they’re killed.”

“Same for highly magical worlds,” Max nodded knowingly. “Necromancers and angelic channelers and such.”

“Precisely dear,” I agreed with a smile. “Technology is a bit different but the principle is the same. So, to counter that, I had a particularly virulent poison. It originates with a demonic snake creature called a nosuud. The venom from the creature is then refined and combined with a most unpleasant plant extract. The result is further refined down to a pale green paste that will stick to certain types of metal.”

“It only sticks to certain types of metals? Isn’t that a rather odd property for a poison?”

“Not when you consider that the other metals are dissolved by the poison.”

“Oh.”

“So, this poison was what I planned to use on the Chancellor. It would kill him very quickly and then dissolve his body. After that, I had a spell cast into a wand that would disperse the ties his soul had with the puddle that was his body, thus giving anyone so inclined no means by which to bring him back.” Max’s mouth opened in a ‘wow’ but no sound actually came out. She nodded after a moment and I continued.

“Security was tight as I mentioned. But they had a flaw. With such a high level of technology, they discounted magic. There wasn’t much castable magic there that could be made useful. However, I have certain magics imbedded within me. Put there by the great machine of House Diamond.”

“So that’s how...!” she didn’t finish the statement but it was obvious she now understood quite a number of things from our past.

“Yes,” I nodded. “So, using those powers, I snuck into his home. There, I found him working late. Even bad guys have some good habits. He never even knew I was there. One second he was working and the next he was dead and dissolving. Before he finished dissolving, his secretary walked in from somewhere else in the house. Evidently, she’d intended to seduce him away from his work. At least that was my guess judging from her skimpy attire, anyway.

“Naturally, her screams sounded the alarm. I cast the spell out of the wand and left quickly. My mistake was thinking I was clear of the situation too soon. Four kilometers out, I stopped and was preparing to change clothes. That’s when I was shot. For the record, try not to get yourself shot with an energy rifle. Very painful.” Max blinked at me a couple of times. “From that point, I resumed my stealthy departure, trying to staunch the bleeding as I went. A bit further along I rode the top of one of the mass transit cars out of the world and o through that world into yet another. From there I teleported to an interworld path I knew and crossed over into another world. This one had a good magical base. I snuck into a wealthy house and used their transport mirror to get me to a city where I have a house.

“By that time I was tired and the blood loss was beginning to take its toll. My thinking was becoming clouded but I knew the wound was a problem I couldn’t sleep off. Unable to think of anything better, I used that house’s transport mirror and stepped through into the garage at the house in Kephlon. I believe you know the story from there.”

She sat pondering this for a while. At last she asked, "What about DNA?"

"Hmm?"

"You were bleeding. Your DNA can be traced through your blood. It was on one of the crime shows I watch when we're in Kephlon. Any blood cells you leave behind can link you to the site of the crime."

"Oh, I see what you're getting at now. There are magics that can perform the same feat. Fortunately, that was taken into consideration long ago. My darksuit prevents any trace of me from being left behind. Be it blood, hair, skin cells or whatever. Or rather to be more precise, what is left behind has absolutely no traces of me upon it or within it. The blood I left in our kitchen wouldn't even have been typeable. The suit would have to be virtually destroyed for that most potent enchantment to fail. Much more than the little blast that fried my right kidney."

"How's the new one? Your kidney I mean? Does it feel alright? Like it belongs?"

"I don't even notice it's there," I replied with a smile. "However, I must admit, I'm glad the magical substitute is gone. It was not only uncomfortable, it also felt... weird. A little off. No, I'm quite happy with my cloned kidney."

"Good," she replied with a smile. "Thanks for telling me the whole story. Switching topics, what are we going to do about this Canid woman and her army?"

"You know, I think I'll leave that for you to deal with along with General Hafiri. I've got an appointment I need to keep. It's a very long trip and may take me some time to get there. Keep Eve reigned in. Don't get yourself killed. If you need me, I'll just be a mirror call away."

"Are you going to make a habit of dumping stuff in my lap?" she asked in exasperation.

"Yes sweetie. I most certainly am. Can you handle it?"

"Of course I can handle it!" she declared a tad indignantly. "You just go off and do whatever you've got to do. Just keep in mind, if you don't hurry the good general and I are likely to go ahead and win this war without you."

"I will," I replied an instant before teleporting away. It's a long way back to Regillus and I had an unscheduled appointment with the crown prince and the king.