

Princess Amylia's caravan had cleared the fringes of Harrow Forest and moved into the gently-rolling Fillian Hills when the assassins struck.

From the tall grass at the side of the winding cart-track leapt five men, wearing copper armor and brandishing oiled longswords.

The princess's guards, led by Sir Charl Peake, reacted swiftly. The attackers failed to reach the royal wagon before being intercepted by its defenders. Their noisy frontal assault turned out to be a mere distraction, however.

The final two villains, of a more stealthy bent, approached from the rear as the melee raged. One caught an arrow in the gut from the driver, but the second managed to ascend the steps, slip under the canvas flap and enter the carriage itself.

There Amylia stood, protected only by two attendant maids, the half-sisters Lyra Little and Hanna of Harcourt, known as Hanna the Harpist for her skillful playing.

Lyra, who had been in the princess's service since Amylia was a girl of eleven, blocked the intruder's path. The brute cut her down without hesitation, and she collapsed to the floor. Hanna screamed and charged the murderer, as if meaning to claw his eyes out with her bare hands. They grappled for a moment before he struck her with the pommel of his sword and she fell insensate.

Amylia faced the man calmly, though she had gone pale and sweat coated her brow. She clutched her robe about her as the intruder took a step forward and raised his bloody blade.

A moment later he stiffened and fell, the feathers of a crossbow bolt jutting from the back of his skull. Sir Charl ran to the princess as his men checked on Hanna and Lyra.

"Your Highness, my apologies," he said, kneeling. "We have failed you."

Amylia, as usual, said nothing. Behind her eyes, however, her mind raced.

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Days later, safe again inside Willow Castle, Princess Amylia summoned three of her closest advisors to her private chambers.

Lord Arven of Ryst had served her father throughout his long reign, an elder statesman well respected throughout Kannilston and the lands beyond. He possessed both military and business experience, and continued to provide words of wisdom to the throne.

Sir Nathan Marren was General of the armed forces, a brilliant warrior and battle tactician. Blunt and firm, he never shirked from offering his opinion.

Thomas, Earl of Corben, the greatest thinker in the realm, held the position of Headmaster at the University Grand. His skill lay in problem-solving, and his services had been invaluable to the crown on numerous occasions.

The three men knelt briefly then sat at the oak table. Amylia remained standing.

"I have been thinking about the attempt on my life," she said.

The advisors glanced at one another, then returned their eyes to her.

"Sir Charl has been reprimanded," Sir Nathan said. "He promises to—"

Amylia raised a hand, and the general fell silent. "No knight, no bodyguard, can be with me always. The fault is not his."

"Then whose?" Lord Arven asked.

"Mine."

"Your Highness," Thomas said. "I fail to—"

Amylia turned to him. "Tell me, Headmaster, are there not tales of women warriors in the epics of old?"

One of the Earl's eyebrows rose so high it seemed ready to leap off his face. "There are," he admitted.

"I wish to take a more active role in my own protection."

Nathan stood, aghast. "Your Highness, what madness—"

"Good sir knight, you have served me loyally in peace and war. Now I ask you plain: might a woman be taught the passes of the blade? Can one of my nature learn swordplay?" The princess's voice remained calm, but her eyes flashed. "I ask all of you this question. Your answer, sirs—quickly, if you please."

Again the trio exchanged looks.

"Perhaps," Lord Arven said.

"I see no definitive natural prohibition," Thomas allowed.

Amylia turned to Sir Nathan, who looked as though he might bolt from the room at any moment. "Will you train me personally, general?"

Nathan swallowed. He stared at the beautiful, golden-haired maiden before him, who would be Queen Amylia once she reached her twenty-first year—should she survive that long.

"I will attempt it, Your Highness, if you command such a thing," he told her. "But—"

The princess smiled.

"I do so command."