

Something stirred her from her dreams. Her eyes blinked open to the dark interior of the carriage. The sun must have already set. They had traveled slower than her knights had assured her. That shouldn't be a problem.

Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she wondered how close they were to the village. Outside she could hear the clip-clop of her knights' horses and several of the knights bantering back and forth. These were normal things to her, and the ride of the carriage was too gentle to have woken her.

Then she heard something, a strange sound in the wind. This must have been what disturbed her dreams. She strained to discern what the sound was.

A series of thuds struck the side of her carriage. Horses cried in pain as the carriage jolted before coming to a halt. The startled voices of her knights mixed with the sudden yells of strangers, the voices soon joined by the din of steel and wood striking in battle.

Rising to her feet, she took the cloak she'd used for a blanket and wrapped it around her. More thuds struck the carriage, one of which split the frame to reveal the tip of a flaming arrow. She reached for the carriage door. It swung back into the night before she could touch it. She recoiled, fearful of who might come in after her.

The doorway revealed one of her knights. She breathed a sigh of relief as he offered her his hand. A moment later she was out of the carriage with the knight leading her through the melee. In the sliver of moonlight she struggled to discern friend from foe.

A dark figure rushed towards them. The knight let go of her hand and crossed swords with the figure. Someone then bumped into her from behind and she was sent sprawling to the ground.

She didn't remain there long, scrambling to rise so as to not be trampled. She looked back towards her knight. An unfamiliar face greeted her, wearing a depraved smile. His rough hand clamped onto her shoulder as she cried out in terror.

There was a flash in the moonlight behind the man as steel cut through the air. A moment later she felt the wet splatter of blood hitting her face. Her eyes closed instinctually as she wiped the blood away, and when she reopened them a knight stood where the man had been, his sword swinging to ward off another attacker.

Someone took her by the arm. She winced and pulled back, then saw that it was another of her knights. He urged her to follow him, and she followed willingly. His sword flashed back and forth as he cut through the last of the attackers standing in their way. Then they headed for the forest. Soon they reached the shadows of the trees.

She looked behind her. The battle was still raging by her flaming carriage, and in the distance she could see the glow of burning buildings. Brigands from the westlands must be pillaging the kingdom again, and her carriage had become a target of opportunity. It had been close, but her knight had managed to lead her out of the fray.

An arrow whipped past her, shattering her thoughts and piercing the back of the knight's leg. The blow sent him crashing to the ground. The knight roared in pain and turned to her. They locked eyes for a moment before he reached down and pulled his dagger from its sheath. Taking it by the blade, he handed it to her and then commanded her to run. His sword in hand, he turned and prepared to delay the brigands.

She hesitated as she watched him go, then she fled into the shadows. Soon the noise of battle faded behind her and the forest closed in around her, silent save for the sound of her footfalls.