

The War of the First Day

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Chapter 1

With the baby Prince in my arms I darted past the guards. Since I'd called upon speed I was a blur barely identifiable as human to them. But already I felt the magic weakening me.

I slammed through a door at the end of the hall and up a flight of stairs, then another. In a gray stone passage I paused, let speed slip away, and cocked an ear. Nothing; for the moment I'd eluded the soldiers.

This hall was lined with doorways; I hastily got through the nearest and kicked the door shut behind me.

My hands were shaking. The baby looked a bit surprised by the abrupt changes in speed but wasn't crying. What now? We were in a tidy room with a bed, no doubt guest quarters. I yanked the blanket and sheet from the bed, wrapped the infant in the sheet, and tied the corners together. Carrying the bundle, I went to a window and looked down. Since I'd stolen the Prince from the second-floor nursery, we were now on the fourth floor. Far below two guards stood, but their backs were to us and they seemed unaware of any disturbance in the palace.

The window opened outward and was controlled by a hand crank. I held the baby over the edge, securely nestled (I hoped) in the sheet, and hooked its knotted corners over the crank. Outrageous way to treat an infant but no time for doubts; I had to hide him fast. "Do other girls' mistresses make them do shit like this?" I muttered.

I withdrew and shut the window halfway, as much as it would close with the

cloth blocking the mechanism. A person glancing into the room wouldn't see the Prince. I returned the blanket to the bed.

Next...crap. I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, seeing lurid nebulae, and tried to think of a way out of this. I recalled my mistress's words from that morning: "Capture the child. Kill the King. He dared to invade the witchlands; his death must be public, brutal, and unmistakably done by a woman of witch power. You are a witch aspirant, Lilita; you will need no weapons. Do you understand?"

She'd meant this was a test of my magic. "Yes," I'd answered. "I am ready, mistress, and eager to begin." I did not feel as bold as I acted. I'd killed once before, but that had been to save my own life. The prospect of killing again filled me with horror, but I dared not anger my mistress by disobeying her.

Cries of "Witches!" and "The nursery!" came from lower floors. I'd brought a companion in this raid, and if my blazing around at speed hadn't told them we were witches, her appearance had certainly done it, given her...condition. Too bad our disguises hadn't held up, but the havoc she was causing elsewhere in the castle was a useful diversion.

Since the Taxians were alerted to us I shed the skirt that was part of my disguise as a palace servant and kicked it under the bed. Small loss, since I'd had to tear it so I could run. It left me in a light blouse and a short slip that let my legs move.

I stepped into the hall and looked around so I'd recognize this place when I returned. The palace was an accretion of centuries and its unplanned structure made it easy to get lost. The halls veered in odd directions and the floors abruptly rose or fell a few feet here and there, seemingly at random.

I didn't know where King Brath was. What would I do in the Taxians'

position? With witches after the royal family, I'd get them out of the palace as fast as possible. So if the King hadn't already escaped, he was on the ground level, or would be soon.

I ran back to the stairs and bolted down three flights to the ground floor. Near the base of the stairs was a door flanked by two soldiers; I hurtled toward them.

"Hey!" one yelled, but that was all he could do before I called upon speed. I shot through the doorway and into a narrow windowless corridor. Once speed is fully upon me, I could pick a dust mote from your eye before you could blink, or blow at a candle's flame and be across the room before my breath snuffed it out. My clothes, not affected by speed magic, rubbed annoyingly against my skin as I ran. From my accelerated perspective my footsteps boomed resoundingly on the floorboards. A torch set into the wall loosed a thread of smoke into the air; it seemed frozen, like a strand of wrought iron. Speed magic is taxing, but under the circumstances I had no choice.

I hoped my companion was tending to her task. Her attention often wandered and it wouldn't be surprising if she stopped to admire a painting on a wall.

At the end of the corridor I glanced off a wall, wincing as I bruised my shoulder, and rounded a corner. The corridor widened here and the ceiling arched twenty feet up. Facing me were a dozen soldiers guarding double doors that reached to the ceiling. They were wearing the usual leather armor and a straying part of my mind noted a licorice smell coming from some substance they'd applied to it. Then it hit me: there was no reason to defend a chamber so well unless the King were within!

I sidestepped the guards and got to the doors. Opening them slowed me—you can't move an eighty-pound door in an instant, even at speed—and the guards shouted as they saw me. No matter; they wouldn't have time to pose a threat.

I got through the doorway and looked around. I was standing in the central aisle between pews of an enormous stone chapel. Thirty yards away, at the other end, attendants hurried a man toward an exit. He was wearing a powder blue tunic with a crest that rose from the shoulders and half-surrounded his head. That was King Brath, whom I'd caught at sext prayers. Closer to me a group of soldiers blocked the aisle, so I leapt onto the backs of the pews and sprinted forward.

I came upon Brath's party, pushed two attendants out of my way, and was face-to-face with him. He seemed frozen. His eyes were a barrier, unreadable.

Now was the time to strike.

I couldn't do it.

He'd invaded our land, so we had the right to retaliate. But to kill a man—who had never harmed me—in cold blood?

Holding speed was too draining; I let it slip away. The slowed sounds returned to normal pitch, resolving to shouts of confusion and officers' hollered orders. The soldiers rushed forward.

"Witch! Witch! To the King!"

"Another one? Damn, how many are there?"

They converged on us. "I can't do it," I blurted. Perhaps if I abducted Brath my mistress wouldn't punish me too harshly. I shoved him, sending him sprawling into the wall, then leapt to the wall and scurried along it. This let me evade the onrushing defenders, but the climbing magic would only surprise them once. When I overtook the King, I jumped to the floor and caught his sleeve.

"Let go of me!" he thundered and punched my mouth, making my head snap back. As I staggered, hot blood spreading on my tongue, he shouted, "Kill her!"

What? I'd just spared him! His guards were closing again, and a thrown

spear sliced into my calf, dropping me. “Oww, shit!”

I lurched to my feet, for the first time a little scared. There were too many of them, and the injury would limit my movement. Fuck, how could I have been so sloppy?

Still, I had witch strength. Soldiers surrounded me; one thrust a pike at my face and I yanked it from him. Another leapt onto my back and wrapped an arm around my neck. “Got her!” I grabbed the arm with my free hand, wrenched it away, and shouldered him off me. By happy accident he blundered into his closest comrades. “Just kill her, you simpletons!” one shouted.

I swung the pike’s blunt end at the soldiers nearest me, making them jump away, and plowed through the hole in their line. This brought me back to the center aisle near the altar. Favoring my good leg, I stayed in motion, trying to keep them all on one side of me. If they surrounded me again...

Luckily the pews restricted their maneuvering. One man got too close and I used the pike’s end to brain him with a revolting wet thud. As he dropped I swung it the other way and caught the next man on the side of his neck, felling him instantly.

Swearing, the others pulled back and drew their swords. I flipped the pike so I was holding it the right way. “Yes, you morons, a witch really is tougher than a girl of the village.”

But I had no more tricks. I was too spent to use speed, the magic that let me skitter across walls wouldn’t help me here in the middle of the room, and my strength would eventually be overwhelmed by their numbers. Desperately, I looked around for a way out.

One of them said, “Rush her on my sig—”

The King was coming at me with a sword! He swung fast and I reacted

without thinking. I knocked the sword away, grabbed his shirt, and hurled him into the altar face-first. Before he could turn I stabbed him in the back with the pike, pinning him through the heart to the altar.

There was a sudden silence as we all absorbed what I'd just done.

Time to get out, fast, while the soldiers were in shock. As urgent footsteps elsewhere in the castle pounded toward us, I ran to the door the King had been making for. I gritted my teeth and forced myself not to limp; I couldn't let these people see vulnerability in a witch. At the door I turned to the soldiers, who were starting to regroup. My mistress taught me that stagecraft is important in dealing with Taxians. The moment seemed to call for something ominous and witchy-sounding.

"I have sisters," I said. "Beware."

More soldiers burst through the entrance at the chapel's other end. I got through the door, slammed it behind me, and paused in a small room with a desk and a few bookshelves. Light flooded through windows in one wall. Being inconspicuous was now moot, so I exited through a window, took hold of the outer wall, and headed straight up. Since I was using climbing magic, speed was out of the question: using two powers at once was beyond me. I prayed no guards with bows were near.

The fierce noon sun dazzled my eyes. I groped my way up the rough stone wall; heated from hours in the sun, it seared my hands. When my eyes adjusted I saw the hanging bundle yards away to my left and I climbed toward it, disregarding the pain in my calf.

Crack!

I glanced up. Arrows were ricocheting from the wall over my head, and looking behind I saw a handful of guards on the ground, staring up. The arrows fell back with leisurely spinning motions, taking an unsettlingly long time to reach the

earth. The men scattered to avoid them and I got moving again, looking back every few seconds.

The soldiers loosed another volley. I let myself slip down the wall a few feet to let the arrows pass over me again, moaning as my hands left streaks of blood on the gritty stone.

Frantically dodging the continuing volleys, I hurried to the baby. "I do enjoy these summer outings," I said, "I should do this more often." When I seized the bundle a tiny fist waved spastically from within, and the volleys of arrows stopped.

My precious hostage kept me safe for the moment, but stories below, more guards boiled from the castle. Some of them ran up to the walkway on the defensive wall that surrounded the castle at a distance of about twenty feet. That wall stood ten yards high and I was clinging to the castle wall a few yards above it.

I continued to my left, hampered because one arm held the infant. Scores of guards below and a growing entourage at the windows within followed. Baffled faces watched me, dogs eyeing food held just out of reach. I knew the practices of the Monarchy of Taxis. If they captured me, they'd torture me to death over many days.

My right leg was starting to hurt more and to weaken; I had to get away soon. If only I could fly, like the other witch in this raid! She was probably already back in the witchlands, the lucky wench. Keeping as far from the windows as possible, I climbed to a point where the gap between the castle and the defensive wall narrowed to about ten feet. Soldiers had anticipated this and stood atop the wall there to prevent my escape.

Nothing for it but boldness. "I have your new King," I shouted. "By all means, try to stop me!" Before they could think, I cast myself off the castle wall and

into their midst. For an instant I was surrounded by startled faces. Then, ignoring the streak of pain in my abused calf, I mustered a little climbing magic and slid down the wall. I hit the earth outside the castle and gasped at the agony flashing up my leg and the stab of pain from my flayed hand. His Majesty, manhandled beyond all reason, finally realized something wasn't right and he began to wail.

The castle sat amidst a span of emerald lawn that stretched a hundred yards in every direction, dotted with beech trees. We were in the middle of the City of Taxis, evinced as a wall of wooden buildings around the lawn's border. I staggered toward the nearest ones.

Behind I heard, "Use your bow, idiot!"

"No, she has the Prince!"

I had a little time before my pursuers got outside the wall the normal way. I called upon speed and ran toward the city, but as I drew near the first houses the edges of my vision went gray and I stumbled.

"Shit!" I cast off speed; I'd almost fainted from the effort of holding it.

I peered over my shoulder. No one was on the lawn yet.

The City of Taxis was a hive of crooked wooden buildings on crooked muddy streets. Its effluvia stank. I was in less danger when I got the first house between myself and the castle, but I didn't slow. I kept to the narrowest, least traveled streets and alleys, where the houses on either side almost met overhead and the walkways were shrouded in shadow. Even so I drew startled stares from other pedestrians as I was wearing little more than a blouse and clutching a screaming baby. But no one in the city knew the royal infant had been abducted, so they had no reason to try to detain me. Nor would they, as long as I kept ahead of the alarm that was doubtless spreading in my wake.

Again I'd been forced to kill; again the reason involved my mistress. Well. I'd spared Brath and he'd tried to kill me anyway.

"Fuck him," I said.

I hastened through the city and soon was safely lost in the woods that abutted it. I hurried back to my mistress's house.

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The witchlands lie north of Taxis and my mistress Apandra resides a mile from the border. Apandra's house served the normal mortals as a fortress long ago. It is set on a hilltop among other hills, terrain typical of the borderland. As I approached the redoubt I looked behind for pursuit. Normally this would be otiose because the normal mortals didn't dare cross the border, but apparently that was no longer the case.

Some insanity had made King Brath of Taxis send his army into the witchlands the previous night. Within hours witches had killed or captured most of the soldiers. Apandra had ordered me to kill their King and capture the Crown Prince, Falkas. Since I knew nothing about caring for a baby, I'd asked Shwackety Shwoo to capture a nurse for him. It would be better to take the Queen, but she had died giving birth to the Prince four months before.

Most witches who resided near the border were scouring the land for stray soldiers, so Shwackety Shwoo was a companion of necessity, not choice. She was a sweet soul, but for two reasons not the best partner in this kind of venture. Ah, here she was, standing naked outside the entrance to the redoubt, her orange hair flashing in the sun. At her feet lay the dress I'd provided her as a disguise and the inert figure of a young woman.

Shwackety had a score of two-inch-tall people running around all over her. They'd been with her for years, peeking out from under her hair, playing tag across her body, and scampering around looking busy, though they never accomplished anything except minor grooming of their host. They never spoke. They all looked just like her, little naked copies of Shwackety Shwoo, and of course they flagrantly marked her as a witch. They eyed me curiously as I approached.

Earlier, Shwackety, who went naked by preference, had assured me she could make her little people hide in the dress, for a while. As we were trying to talk our way into the palace nursery, one of them had emerged from her hair and walked across her face. "Witches!" a nurse had bellowed and I'd knocked her aside, seized the baby, and bolted.

"Hi Lilta."

"Hi Shwackety. I'm sorry I was delayed. I had to tend to some guards."

"Tend...you fellated them?"

"What?! No! I had to fight past them!"

"Oh."

This was the other reason Shwackety Shwoo was not the ideal companion for a raid. She was not stupid, exactly, but she had the attentiveness of a flatworm. My biggest fear in the raid had been that she'd lose interest in the middle of it and wander off.

"This woman is not lethally injured, I hope?" I asked.

"No. She kept trying to run away, so I punched her in the head to make her stop moving." There was no malice in Shwackety; it probably just hadn't occurred to her that this risked serious harm to the girl.

"I'm going to go now," she said, and took to the air. I watched her fly,

wondering if I'd ever learn that magic.

The unconscious woman was lying on her side; I used a foot to roll her onto her back and recognized one of the young women from the nursery. I shifted the baby to one arm and threw the spare dress over my shoulder, then grabbed the nurse's collar and dragged her toward the redoubt. Using my back to nudge aside the stout oak door, twice as tall as me, I entered the front hall. The Taxians had designed the hall to impress by its sheer size, though the effect was diminished by the lack of furnishings. Apandra was content with the unadorned stone.

The people of the village—those without magic—built the fortress centuries ago, before witches expelled them to the south and established the border. The imposing structure was topped with battlements and ramparts and boasted a couple of towers commanding a wide view. Most witches did not care to dwell so close to the people of the village, so the redoubt had stood empty for many years before Apandra took possession of it. This immense abode would be excessive for most, but my mistress had had a purpose in occupying it.

Me.

Rather, her then-unchosen apprentice. Apandra made the redoubt into a training ground for a witch aspirant. It contains rooms devoted to particular kinds of magic, libraries, an observatory, a room for instruction in hand fighting, an alchemical laboratory, and much more. Years before she took me as her apprentice, my mistress planned for it. She does nothing without a purpose. And of course, an abode must be suitable for the status of its inhabitant; a modest dwelling would not do for so potent a sorceress.

I wasn't her aspirant by choice, but at least the accommodations were spacious.

“Mistress!” I shouted. “Mistress!” No response. I leaned against the door to close it, reflecting that Apandra and I would have to start locking it. We’d never done so because Taxians had almost never dared enter the witchlands until yesterday.

“What the...” the nurse mumbled. Whoops; she was coming around. I’d have to confine her in the subcellar two levels belowground. That level comprised a single hall with a few small rooms on one side. Usually Apandra and I used the rooms for storing food and escaping summer heat. But they locked from the outside and she’d used them as cells before.

I walked through the main hall to the stairs that led to the cellar, and descended with the nurse groaning as I dragged her down the steps. *Ffffffbump! Ffffffbump! Ffffffbump!* Each time her hip bone hit a stair I winced in sympathy. I paused at the bottom. I didn’t have time to let my eyes adjust to the gloom because the nurse was half-awake and trying to get her feet under her. “What the hell?” she repeated, less groggily. I put my shoulder to the stone wall and hurried blindly down the passage until my arm struck a door frame. I kicked the door open, threw the nurse halfway in, and used a foot to shove her the rest of the way.

“Ow! Hey! What the hell are you doing, you he-bitch!”

Quickly I slammed the door and locked it—Apandra left the keys in the keyholes—and took the key with me. The nurse pounded the door. “Hey! What the...Let me out, you puppy-fucking slut!”

“Are palace servants supposed to use such coarse language?”

“Who the hell are you? Let me out of here!”

I ignored her pounding and swearing and limped up two flights with Prince, no King, Falkas. There’d been no time to prepare a room for him earlier. I got blankets and paused. We had no crib and the baby would roll out of a bed. Well,

we'd have to make a crib from other furniture that we'd move into the cell. But two stories below ground, the cells were always frigid, unsuitable for a baby. We could keep him in an upper room, but I couldn't bring the nurse up there because those rooms didn't lock from the outside.

I'd have to choose a room on an upper floor and devise a way to keep the nurse from escaping. Not now though, as I was spent and my flayed hands were aching. I hoped to return the hostage soon. He hadn't been here ten minutes and making arrangements for him was already a problem. I chose a room with a settee, closed the door, and set the child on the floor with the dress spread over him as a blanket. I threw myself onto the settee and was asleep almost instantly.

I awoke near dusk to see my mistress standing over me. Her green eyes assessed me emotionlessly, as always. Her bearing was plumb-line straight. Richly embroidered silk garments added to the regal impression; the only undisciplined element was her dark red hair, carelessly swept back between her shoulder blades so it would stay out of her way.

"You almost failed in your task, Lilta," she said. The hours I'd slept had been more than enough time for her to find out what had happened in the King's chapel.

"I am sorry, mistress. It was hard. I've never killed before."

"Oh?"

"The other time I...was given no choice. This was different. Please forgive me my weakness."

"I will not. But nor will I punish you. You showed weakness to the people of the village, and while we are at war with them. It is deplorable. I will not dwell on it, but you should. Consider also that when other women of the path learn of

this, it will be an embarrassment to us both.” Ashamed, I could only keep mute. She continued, “My displeasure is moderated because you ultimately succeeded, and the manner in which you killed the King was satisfactorily...dramatic.”

As I became more awake I took notice of my surroundings. The new King of Taxis, on his belly on the floor, chewed on a chair’s foot and burbled. The settee was stained with blood from my calf; I’d been thoughtless. Materials for dressing wounds sat on the settee beside me.

“When I first returned I saw the blood,” Apandra said. “Let me have your leg.” Though Apandra appeared to be about twenty-five years of age, she was much older. Treating wounds was one of many skills she’d acquired over a long life. I moved my leg toward her and ripped away the scab, which had melded with the settee. “Ow, fuck!” I yelped.

“Control your tongue.”

“I’m sorry, mistress.”

After she’d tended to my wound she said, “I found the child’s nurse in the cellar. You did well to think of capturing her.”

“Thank you, mistress. The cell is too cold for the child, I fear.”

“While you are gone I will see to that.”

“Gone?”

“You are to deliver a message to the palace in Taxis.” She handed me a folded piece of paper. I started to unfold it then thought better; she hadn’t given me permission. “You may read, if you wish.”

I read:

Peasant scum—the nobility thus addressed would be more offended at the “peasant” than the “scum”—*your army is annihilated. Your King is slain. The former*

Crown Prince, the new King, is in my hands. You are crushed. All members of the royal family and palace staff shall proceed to the border of the witchlands. We have moved your soldiers' bodies across the border, near the city of Taxis. You shall remove the bodies. You shall accomplish this with your own hands, before the bodies begin to reek. If this is not done—if one delicate lady refuses to submit to this travail—the consequence will be the annihilation of all of you.

It wasn't signed, but that was hardly necessary. Taxians didn't know individual witches' names, indeed most never saw a witch. At the moment they knew all they needed to know: some witch, somewhere over the border, held their King.

“Why ‘peasant scum,’ mistress?” That kind of vulgarism wasn't like her.

“I included that to remind them of their position: they are powerless to do anything but bear the insult meekly.”

“They'll still be furious. Speaking of that, if I go back to the palace today—”

“We have the hostage. They won't dare hurt you.”

“We wouldn't harm the child, mistress!”

“Of course not, Lilta. But the Taxians don't know that.”

“But they might—”

“Go.”

I didn't share her sanguine assessment of the Taxians' self-control, but I feared her more than them. I went to my room and changed out of the remnants of my disguise and into my usual summer garb: a simple shirt and short pants that allowed movement. As I donned the shirt it brushed against my mouth and I winced; Brath's punch had split my upper lip nastily. It was too warm for a cloak, so I just retrieved my knife, which Apandra had made me leave behind for the raid.

The palace was several miles from Apandra's redoubt and it was full dark

when I got there. Torches burned at the entrances and along the walkways, making an island of illumination in the night. From the outside, the castle was plainly an agglomeration of centuries of additions and repairs. Orderly ranks of bricks made an outer wall that was less than fifty years old. It was surmounted by a tower of jagged rock that had stood for a millennium. In an inner wall, rows of windows randomly dropped or rose a few feet, conforming to the improvised floors within. It looked like a model assembled by drunken children.

This time I approached the palace openly, in contrast to the legerdemain Shwackety Shwoo and I had used to get inside earlier. It was better defended now, too late to do them any good. I walked to the main gate, where a score of soldiers were stationed. Their faces, orange in the firelight, stood out sharply against the black sky.

As I neared them one recognized me. “The witch!” he cried, and several whipped out swords and sprinted toward me.

“No, they have King Falkas!” others shouted, and there was a scuffle as they restrained their comrades.

One of them, older than the others, stood forth and spoke calmly. “Why are you here?” This was perhaps the head of the guard unit. He must have been seething with rage at the killing of his King, but he controlled himself well. If he had been a woman he might have made a witch.

“Admit me,” I said. They made no move to open the gate, only glared. “I have a message for the highest-ranking person within,” I added.

The commander reached out a hand. “I’ll pass it along.”

“No, you won’t. And if you don’t admit me in three seconds I will depart, and this message will never be delivered. One...”

“Stop! You may enter. But not alone.” He turned to one of his men and said, “Find out where the Regent is.” The man disappeared through the gate and we waited. I ignored the others, trying to act as if I didn’t notice their hostile stares.

After a few minutes the messenger emerged and spoke to the head of the guard. The head picked out three others and said, “You four will escort this person to the Regent.”

The escort of smouldering soldiers led me into the castle. We wended wordlessly through the stone halls amidst the creaking of their leather armor and the smell of licorice. After a few minutes we came to a small study with maps pinned to the walls and spread on a couple of tables. The study was filled with a dozen men who were leaning over some papers and arguing. “He wouldn’t want us to!” one said as I was led in. Then they saw me and fell silent.

“Who is in command here?” I asked.

“I am,” said a tall white-haired man in scarlet raiment, presumably the Regent ruling in the King’s stead. As I handed him the missive he added, “I was expecting a message from the other one.”

Shwackety Shwoo? Why would he expect a message from her? I shrugged and left.

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I returned to Apandra’s redoubt and found her in one of the libraries. “Now that there is time to ask, mistress, how did the assassination and abduction fall to me?”

“When the invasion became known there was an impromptu conferral among witches who live near the border. We decided to kill King Brath and abduct his son and I volunteered to see to it. I had you do it so I could see how you’d carry out the task.”

Of course she did.

“Why did Brath invade? And will we punish Taxis further?” If so, I hoped I wouldn’t be involved.

“We don’t know why Brath ordered the invasion,” she said. “It is most puzzling. As to Taxis, we are done with bloodshed, if the Taxians refrain from further aggression and if they move the bodies in good time. Also, we have sent messages to their enemies to the south, telling them that the Taxian army is reduced. This will embolden them and force Taxis to divert soldiers southward to defend that border.

“The day after tomorrow is the mid-summer gathering. It will be a good occasion to cipher out the old King’s purposes and to have a war council if it seems necessary.”

I ventured, “Perhaps we should have captured Brath as well as his son; we could have interrogated him.”

“We acted rashly. But we were angry, and we wanted to move quickly. Once the *ad hoc* council of which I was a part decided what to do, I did not care to gainsay them. Anyway, the man’s invasion failed and he is gone; what impelled him to invade is of little importance.”

Hundreds of women would be dead before we realized how wrong she was.