

The 12 Dancing Princesses

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Chapter 1

The Smiling Soldier

It was Quinn's turn to play bait again. It seemed to Quinn that it was *always* her turn to play bait. But none of the other members of Band Gallant were as experienced at it as she was, so for the sake of the team she would dangle herself in harm's way.

Quinn, wearing a merchant's cloak to cover her Farset military uniform, crashed loudly through the underbrush. She brushed fragrant pine needles off her cloak and looked up and down the dirt footpath she was traveling.

"I don't see any sign of wraiths," she said around the smile she used to mask her words.

"Leigh is scouting ahead," Kenneth—Band Gallant's leader—whispered from the shadows of an ancient oak.

"Hang in there, Midnight," Roy, another one of her Band Gallant brethren, whispered. "You could always try giving a good scream."

Quinn caught sight of branch quivering as he changed hiding places, and her smile turned genuine. It warmed her heart to know he lingered close to her. "Why even try? I'll never have the lung capacity you have," she teased her longtime friend.

Guy swung upside down from a branch overhead, his expression serious. "I admire the ice in your temperament. I don't know anyone else who is so emotionless they can lure wraiths in while smiling."

Quinn rolled her eyes. "Thanks."

"You must have a steady heart—or a small one." Guy itched his nose as he remained upside down.

Quinn fought the desire to sigh. She had known Guy long enough not to take his observations personally—the soldier blurted out whatever thought entered his head and meant no malice.

"Back in position," Kenneth barked.

Guy swung twice before he gained enough momentum to curl upwards and disappeared into the forest canopy.

"Where is Leigh? She's taking her merry old time," Roy said in little more than a hushed whisper.

A twig snapped.

"Just a deer," Kenneth said. "But spread out, just in case."

Quinn turned in a slow circle, straining her ears to listen to the sounds of the forest. She could hear branches that groaned in the breeze, the calls of two different birds, and, faintly, she thought she heard the crunch of leaves being crushed by a foot. A few more moments, though, and there was nothing.

A strand of her hair—the same blonde as pale sand—escaped into her face.

"Clear on this side," Roy whispered overhead.

"You were rather fast in your check," Guy said.

"*Guy*," Kenneth growled.

"Sorry, clear."

In spite of the reassurances, Quinn kept her head tilted as she listened—still smiling. *I swear I heard something...*

“Quinn?” Kenneth asked.

More leaves crunched, and Quinn whirled around, raising her short sword in time to parry a green-skinned forest goblin that burst out of a bush and stabbed a spear in her direction.

Quinn swung her sword upwards, making the goblin heft its spear to the sky, and flicked a dagger from her belt to throw at it. Before she could use the dagger, three arrows punched into the monster’s back. It slumped to the ground, slain before it could even croak.

Nodding in satisfaction, Quinn put her dagger and sword back.

Guy popped out of the tree canopy again, this time holding a bow in his hands. “See? Guts of ice. You were attacked—in surprise—by a goblin, and your smile never even slipped.”

“Were you harmed?” Kenneth asked. He stepped out of the gloom of the forest and nudged the goblin with a booted toe before he retrieved his arrow.

“No,” Quinn said.

Roy snorted as he emerged from the prickly embrace of a pine tree. “Of course she’s not! Midnight’s too good to be caught off-guard by a *goblin*.” Roy was the only one out of band to call her Midnight—a play on her birthplace, Midnight Lake, and the irony of the moniker compared to her light hair and eyes.

A frown briefly twitched across Quinn’s lips. “It’s unexpected to run into a goblin, though. We haven’t seen much of their ilk here.”

“Agreed. It seems particularly odd given that there are confirmed wraith sightings in the area.” Kenneth returned Roy’s and Guy’s arrows, then popped a small piece of parchment from a pouch on his belt. “We’ll have to report it.”

“Yeah, well you better report it fast. Two wraiths due north are traveling in this direction,” Leigh—the last member of Band Gallant—drawled as she leaped from a tree branch and landed on the ground next to Quinn with a roll.

Kenneth frowned and returned the parchment to his pouch. “Positions,” he said before he disappeared into the shadows of a tree.

“Course we have to get into position now, after I’ve hauled my carcass down here.” Leigh grumbled under her breath as she slipped a length of rope that ended with a hook from its spot at her hip. She tossed the hooked end of the rope into the tree canopy with perfect aim, securing it between the Y shape formed by two great branches splitting from a tree trunk. “Good luck, Quinn,” she wished before she started crawling up the rope. When she was secure in the tree she gathered the rope up and nocked an arrow in her bow.

“Don’t play hero,” Roy warned Quinn.

Quinn arched a sandy eyebrow. “I know how to play bait, Roy.”

Roy laughed—a sound that made Quinn’s heart jump—and ran a hand through his copper colored hair. “I know you do. Just...be careful.” He winked at her, then disappeared into the woods with the rest of the band.

Fussing with her cloak to keep from blushing, Quinn checked over her equipment and pushed Roy—and his wink—to the back of her mind. *There’s no time for girlish thoughts now. Daydreams cost lives.* Quinn straightened her shoulders, looked up, and smiled as she walked down the forest path.

It only took a minute of walking before she spotted the wraiths. They were terrifying to behold—black cloaked creatures who stretched at least nine feet tall, though the tattered and

frayed ends of their cloaks never touched the ground. There were several ways to slay them, but the surest was fire.

As the wraiths drifted in Quinn's direction, calling to her with dark whispers, Quinn's smile grew. She made a beckoning gesture to them as she pulled a small vial from her military standard pouch and popped the cork off the top.

The wraiths crept forward, engulfing the forest in shadows as they sucked light out of their surroundings.

Quinn dosed her dagger with the smoky smelling liquid in her vial and held her ground as the wraiths closed in on her. One touch from their skeletal hands would yank her breath from her lungs and freeze her heart, instantly killing her. *Steady. If we don't close in around them, they'll flee as soon as we attack.* Wraiths could be *fast* when necessary.

The air turned so cold it stung Quinn's cheeks and frosted her eyelashes, and it seemed like night had fallen in the woods as the wraiths loomed over her. One wraith reached out a skeletal hand to her, and when it was a mere arm's length away, Quinn flung her dagger, hitting it in the chest.

The wraith stared down at the dagger, then *shrieked* when a flaming arrow hit it, landing so close to the dagger that the flickering flames from the arrow sparked and hit the liquid fire Quinn had dosed her dagger with. The magical liquid lit up, creating a fireball that ate away at the wraith's cloak.

Three flaming arrows hit the other wraith. It screamed—a piercing sound that made Quinn cringe—and fled, though the flames caused by the arrow grew.

"Leigh, Guy, pursue it!" Kenneth barked, still hidden in the forest.

"Yessir!"

Quinn skittered backwards as the wraith she had attacked stumbled, still reaching for her. She pulled her short sword from its scabbard and chopped at the wraith's arm, forcing it down. Frost climbed up her blade from coming in contact with the wraith, even as flames crawled across the creature's cloak.

Quinn clenched her teeth when the frost reached the hilt of her sword, making it painfully cold to hold.

"Quinn, get your gloves on!" Kenneth snarled as he rolled out of the shadows and shot another flaming arrow at the wraith. He tried to engage the monster, but it kept its focus on Quinn.

Hoping to lose the creature's attention, Quinn backed off, streaking up the path. The wraith still trailed after her, but she had enough time to tug her tailored gloves free from her belt and slip them on over her hands—which were red from the cold.

"Why won't this one *die*?" Roy loosened another arrow from the shadows.

"Spite?" Kenneth suggested.

Quinn twirled her sword. "Give me an opening."

"You got it!" Roy said with laughter in his voice. He hit the wraith in one shoulder then the other within the blink of an eye, making the creature sag backwards. "All yours, Midnight!"

Quinn lunged forward, stabbing her sword into the wraith's belly, then swung straight up, ripping the cloak in half.

The wraith flung its arms out, but Quinn had already made her retreat. She winced when it released its dying gasps—a deep guttural noise that made the hair on her arms stand on end.

With its last breath it tried to whip around and graze Kenneth, but the band leader was too smart for that, and blocked the wraith's strike with his bow before the wraith collapsed in on itself, leaving the fire to burn up what was left of its cloak.

Quinn remained in a defensive stance for several heartbeats as she watched the cloak burn, waiting to confirm it was truly dead.

When only a burnt husk remained, she straightened and sheathed her sword.

"Brilliant job, Midnight!" Roy jumped down from a tree branch, almost landing on top of Quinn. He tugged playfully on the braid of her hair before flinging an arm over her shoulders.

"I could do it only because you had my back," Quinn laughed.

Roy winked at her again—almost making her knock-kneed. "I doubt that. What next, sir?" Roy asked Kenneth.

Quinn cleared her throat, incredibly aware of Roy's arm around her shoulders. *Stop it*, she sternly told herself. *He doesn't feel that way*. Quinn had spent most of her career as a soldier nursing a ridiculous crush on Roy—ridiculous because she didn't think he was even aware she was female, much less find her attractive.

Still, as stupid as this crush was, she just couldn't seem to shake it. It was enough to drive her mad—and then make her heart thump oddly whenever Roy winked specially at her again.

"Let's track Leigh and Guy," Kenneth said. "Then we can depart for our next target."

"Which is?" Quinn asked.

"A troll sighting at Miller's Meadow."

Quinn tapped the hilt of her short sword in habit. *That's the third troll this month. Thankfully they remain relatively rare compared to wraiths.*

"A troll?" Roy groaned.

"Could be worse," Quinn said.

"I don't see how," Roy said. "They're easier to kill than wraiths, but they make such a mess as they stomp around and uproot anything in their path."

"At least we haven't seen any ogres in Farset," Quinn pointed out.

"Yet," Kenneth said grimly.

Roy shook his head, then peered up at the sky that peeped through the trees—many of which had dumped their leaves in the coolness of the fall air. "Should we search the area first to see if that goblin that tried to run Midnight through is acting alone?"

Kenneth nodded. "When we establish contact with Leigh and Guy we'll retrace our trail and use this footpath to travel to Miller's Meadow."

Quinn nodded and tugged the cloak from her shoulders—feeling more at home with just her uniform on. Farset was unlike the rest of the continent in that its soldiers weren't dressed in chain mail or armor, but dark green trousers and a green tunic topped with a thick leather vest and—in the cold months—a brown-green cloak that cut off at the waist. Unlike other armies, Farset soldiers were trained in stealth, and specialized in taking out an enemy before they were even aware the soldiers were there.

Roy grinned and pinched Quinn's cheek. "Guess who gets to act as bait again?"

Quinn slapped his hands away. "Your turn is coming up soon," she promised.

"Nah-uh," Roy said. "You're always bait because you're the best out of us all in close combat."

"Enough," Kenneth said in a firm voice. "We're moving out." He headed down the trail without looking back.

Roy tugged Quinn's braid then hurried after their leader.

Quinn was right behind him, though her smile slipped long enough to morph into a frown when she passed by the charred remains of the wraith. *Five years ago, a wraith never would have dared to lurk in these woods. Then again, five years ago, the elves were still here.*

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