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Die zwölfte Zofe

The Twelfth Lady-in-Waiting

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When Princess Lär travels with her twelve ladies-in-waiting to the land of the enemy, she has no idea that she herself is part of a dangerous intrigue. One of her ladies-in-waiting steals her identity – and Lär finds herself reduced to a simple maidservant, far from everything she has ever known.

In the stables she meets the gooseherd Anail, and quickly strangers become confidants. Anail is fascinated by the young woman who seems to be far more than first impressions suggest. But he must not let himself get too close, for Lär is not the only one concealing a secret.

- A princess stripped of her identity, a gooseherd with a secret – and a slow, quiet trust growing between two unlikely strangers.

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Chapter 1

The Contingency Plan

The wind whistled past my ears, pulling loose strands from my elaborate braided hairstyle. A glance at my companions ahead and behind me on horseback told me they were faring no better. Like fine threads of gossamer in late summer, the loose strands danced around our heads. But as long as the bulk held, I would not give the order to fix it. If more came undone, however ... First impressions were everything. The Fliuch had to see immediately that we would not let their wind take control from us.

Talamh, my first lady-in-waiting, urged her horse out of line ahead of me and off the path, to ride beside me. "We should rest, Princess. The next valley already holds Acarsaid. It would be to our advantage to arrive there refreshed."

I checked in with myself, but felt neither thirst nor hunger. Instead, there was a hollowness – caused by the yawning uncertainty stretching out before me. Acarsaid. Capital city for three hundred years, but for four decades now in the hands of the Fliuch. The people of the wind mages. Our enemies.

Our former enemies.

I briefly closed my eyes. I had to rid myself of thoughts like that. The rulers had entered into a pact. I, Princess of the Crèadha, would marry their prince so that the war could end. That was why we were here. The advance party, to get acquainted with the Fliuch during the wedding preparations – to get acquainted with my future husband – as was the tradition of Crèadha nobility. My parents would not follow until the actual wedding in two weeks.

I breathed in deeply, inhaling the scent of moisture and earth. Then I opened my eyes again. Above me, white and grey clouds chased one another; beside me, gusts of wind swept through the heather like waves. Only the occasional tree stood defiant against the relentless wind. Instead, wine-red heather, knee-high grasses, and moss the colour of tarnished gold blanketed the mountains. At some distance, I spotted a break in the pattern. A stream.

It was ideal for a rest, and perhaps the last opportunity for one.

"You're right," I said, raised my arm, and gave the corresponding hand signal while calling out at the same time: "Rest at the stream."

Without a word, the ladies-in-waiting ahead of me raised a fist with their index and middle fingers pressed together and spread apart, tapping them against their foreheads to signal they had understood. A glance back showed me the same.

Talamh stayed at my side for the remaining stretch, then dismounted ahead of me, as did my second lady-in-waiting, Pongail. I needed the help of both of them to dismount, for unlike their wide-legged trousers and tunics, my dress was enormously full. It was a work of art in itself, made up of countless finely sewn flower buds shimmering in deep violet, and in truth entirely unsuitable for travel. But first impressions took absolute priority, and Acarsaid was not far now. Wearing something more practical was simply out of the question. Especially when we had to show the Fliuch which of our peoples possessed the more refined sense of beauty and elegance.

The ground beneath my bare feet was cool and pleasantly steady. A privilege. For only the rulers of the Crèadha – currently Queen Cruthadair and myself as her future successor – had the honour of keeping continuous contact between their feet and the earth.

Pongail took the reins of my horse from me and led it to the stream alongside her own, until they all stood in a row: proud highland horses, black, with long, wavy manes. Talamh's mount fell into place at the front, bending its head like all the others and dipping its velvety nose into the shallow streambed. It drank as the other horses drank. Looked like the other horses. And yet ...

Falaich raised his head to look at me. "Staring is impolite," said the non-horse in his deep, soft voice. In that instructive tone I had always found unsettling about him.

I had known my mother's creation my entire life. Had watched it drink many times. And yet the way it could behave so deceptively like a real horse one moment, then express itself in the next as though more intelligent and educated than any human – how was one ever supposed to get used to that?

With some effort, I tore my gaze away from him and turned around. But Talamh was already stepping towards me, a cup in hand. Foresighted as ever, she had scooped water from the stream above the horses for me. I took the vessel from her and drank. The liquid flooded my mouth with cold, traced the same chill down my throat, and settled heavy in my stomach. From the corner of my eye, I continued watching Falaich nonetheless.

I had seen so many creations before – had even brought several to life myself. The entire latter years at the Ionnsaich, the academy for our elite, I had done little else but learn how creations were produced. That the art of earth magic lay precisely in crafting them to be especially lifelike,

especially realistic. Anything less than perfect would simply collapse too quickly or cause fatal damage – rather than supporting the tasks for which they were intended.

But Falaich was even a category-three creation. Before my time at the Ionnsaich, I had never understood how delicate his creation had been, or how daring his existence truly was. Because he did not merely emulate a real counterpart – he surpassed it. Because he could copy not only human language, but also our way of thinking.

The last time I had witnessed such a creation being brought to life, it had ended fatally. Even if Falaich had never shown such tendencies in all the years I had known him, I found him unsettling enough that I had ordered my first lady-in-waiting to ride him. I certainly had no wish to.

I handed the cup back to Talamh and received in exchange a filled pastry pressed into my hand from one of the saddlebags.

"How are you feeling, Làr?" she asked, her dark-rimmed eyes assessing. "How do you feel about the meeting ahead?"

I felt one corner of my mouth twitch. "How should I feel? We are riding into the open arms of our former enemies – the murderers of both my grandmothers and so many others. Do they truly mean only to pull us close with that embrace – or to crush us outright?"

Her lips also curved in sardonic amusement. In her grey eyes lay an unspoken, deeper understanding. "We are not entirely unarmed going into that embrace. Let them just try."

That was true. I was no defenceless hostage. Merely a gesture of good faith.

And at least a trace of trust was what our peoples would have to extend to one another, if this marriage was truly to end forty years of bloodshed.

While we ate standing up, we were silent, as was customary – in order to give full attention to the food, made from the gifts of the earth. Yet although my mind told me I was tasting pumpkin pâté inside the pastry, and I knew it was my favourite dish, the flavour did not reach me. It was merely a fact.

I watched the other ladies-in-waiting carefully. A few who were not eating or had already finished were talking quietly – some with words, others with their hands. None of them showed their nerves, and yet I could sense them beneath the surface. It was in the nuances. The slightly too stiff set of

their shoulders. The glances that never rested long in one place but flicked away immediately. The absence of jokes.

As soon as I had licked the last crumbs from my finger, my first lady-in-waiting handed me a damp cloth to clean my hands. "Move out?" she asked.

"Move out!" I called, and made the corresponding sign at the same time.

Pongail brought my horse back from the stream. I would have to cross the water on horseback, even though there were enough dry stones in the stream. But with this dress ...

Pongail positioned herself to assist me with the dress while I mounted. But as I looked around for Talamh, a quickly growing dot in the distance caught my eye. It looked like a deer, yet it was using exactly the path we had taken. Without any cover.

"Wait." I placed a hand on Pongail's arm and turned to face the animal.

It could not be a real deer. A real one would never have kept charging towards us with such deliberate purpose. And yet it was visually indistinguishable from a real animal. Its movements swift and fluid, every bound an elegant interplay of muscles. A typical category-two creation. A messenger.

Although it was therefore clear that it had to have come from one of us earth mages, Talamh placed herself between me and the approaching creature. She instinctively stretched out her arm as it tried to skid to a halt in front of us. The collision with her arm nearly knocked the false

deer off its feet. Talamh grabbed at it immediately and caught the barely visible, well-camouflaged brown leather band around its neck. Once the animal had regained its footing, she loosened the strap. Beneath it, a small circular marking came into view, though she paid it no further attention. Instead, she examined the inside of the band. Without a doubt it carried a message from my parents to me. I stepped forward and reached out my fingers for it, but she was already reading, without looking up.

Irritation rose in me. That ... was a breach of etiquette. And not a minor one. There was no reason to check the message before I saw it – it posed no danger.

"Give me the band," I said.

She did not answer. Seemed instead to read the words one more time. Then she crushed it in her fist.

I stared at her fingers, the crumpled band within them. She had not truly just ...

"We switch places," Talamh said tonelessly.

"You want to ride at my position in the line? Why –"

"We switch roles," she corrected herself. "I take on yours. As Princess."

I blinked. "Are you certain you haven't misunderstood something? Give me the band."

At least she did not hesitate and handed it to me, crumpled as it was. Without an apology. Probably the clearest proof of how deeply the message had shaken her.

I smoothed out the band and examined the incised message.

Làr, our sources have received essential new information. The contingency plan must be enacted until we have found out what is needed. With love, C.

C. – that was my mother, Queen Cruthadair. But it was about the only thing I understood from that message.

"Contingency plan?" I asked.

"We switch roles," Talamh said again.

"Why do I know nothing about this?"

Talamh's lips drew thin. "Because you were not supposed to know. It is the emergency plan. In case something unforeseen happens and we need to get you out of the line of fire."

"Out of the line of fire?" I repeated sharply.

"An unfortunate choice of words. I don't know whether this new information is truly that drastic. But the fact remains: we have no choice."

I forced myself to think through the situation with a clear head. Talamh was roughly my age at seventeen, and the youngest of the ladies-in-waiting. She and I had a similar build – compact,

muscular frames, average height. My dress would fit her, perhaps pulling slightly across the chest. She also had pale skin, brown hair, and light eyes. By coincidence, even our hair was cut the same – a short fringe across the forehead, the rest long and elaborately braided to give the wind no purchase.

The Fliuch were not known for their artistic skills. So if any of them had ever gone to the trouble of producing a likeness of the princess, the minimal difference in our facial features or the ink-pricked patterns on our arms would likely go unnoticed – unlike, for instance, Pongail or Clach with their earth-dark skin and the white patterns beneath. The Fliuch had certainly never seen me – I had spent the past years too absorbed in my training at the lonnsaich, kept, in a sense, out of sight.

So it could actually work – that she became me and I became her. She was also trained well enough to represent me adequately in terms of conduct. Talamh had, like the other ladies-in-waiting, been specifically chosen for this mission: she had an excellent capacity for learning, had been trained in diplomacy and discretion, and was one of our finest close-combat fighters. She did not belong to the elite – to the few trained in earth magic, as I had been. But earth magic was incredibly time-consuming, and it required specially equipped laboratories to bring earth to life. Anything else would also be far too dangerous. No one would expect such a demonstration from the princess.

Yet the question remained ... Why had my mother not told me about this plan? It was I who had proposed this marriage so that the killing would end. I knew exactly how urgently necessary this union was, and I knew what risk I was taking on. After all, I was the princess – trained in strategy, combat, and magic, prepared for every eventuality.

Except this one, apparently.

Once more I examined the band in my hand. It was not mother's handwriting, but that was to be expected. She had likely dictated the text to someone.

"I need your dress and the diadem," said Talamh. "The others can help me with the hair."

I reached up to touch the delicately carved blossoms of the circlet on my head. I trust Talamh.

Wait. Did I? Was I allowed to?

I had not known Talamh long, but from the very beginning I had felt that there was a special connection between us. That we shared a likeness that could not be put into words. That was why it had been easy for me to accept her as my first lady-in-waiting as soon as my mother had introduced her to me. And yet I now hesitated, letting my hand fall again. How could it be that she knew more

about our undertaking than I did? Or to put it differently – did she truly know more than I did? Or did she merely know a different plan?

The deer still stood among us, its flanks heaving heavily after its swift run. Its ears twitched, its gaze watchful, but it showed no shyness around us. In the past, it had been found that creations functioned better – in their movement, in their responsiveness, but also in a certain flexibility when confronted with unforeseen obstacles – when one transferred memories from their real-life counterparts to them. However, it was one of the most important lessons we had learned at the lonnsaich which memories to choose and which to leave aside. What was too few, and what was too many. The deer, for example, would have made a poor messenger if it feared humans, or did not know how to leap over a fallen tree.

When the deer had come galloping towards us, Talamh had placed herself between me and it. I had interpreted it as a protective gesture, for of course there was always the risk with creations that one might be imperfectly balanced and cause harm. But what if she had actually meant to intercept it? Was it possible that she had swapped the band by sleight of hand?

Was that why she had crumpled it? A closed fist could conceal a great deal.

"We will not switch," I decided. "Something is wrong here, Talamh. You are withholding critical information – I know it. If I am to be taken out of the line of fire, it would make more sense for me to turn back altogether and for you to ride on without me, rather than continuing with you as Princess. So you had better tell me everything ..." I looked my first lady-in-waiting firmly in the eye. "Or I will have to consider relieving you of this mission."

Something flickered in her expression. For a moment she said nothing, as though both composure and words had deserted her.

Suddenly I wondered whether the connection I had felt to her from the start had merely been part of a plan. Whether she had always presented herself precisely as she believed I would like.

And then, within the blink of an eye, her features became smooth and cool, as though she were drawing on a mask of resolve. Her entire bearing changed. "We switch positions. Now."

Chapter 2

No More Objections

I opened my mouth.

"No more objections!" she cut across me, the tone unmistakably a command.

As though, in reading the message, she had already slipped into her new role and become the Princess.

I wanted to put her in her place. To call on the other ladies-in-waiting to restrain her together. But not a word crossed my lips.

Because she is right, something inside me whispered. You trust her, really.

No, I did not. Not under these circumstances.

Yes, you do. You trust her more than you trust yourself.

I blinked. What were these thoughts? Just because I did not have all the information did not mean I was fundamentally incapable of assessing the situation. My distrust was justified.

Once more I opened my mouth. Closed it again.

What if she truly had good reasons? What if I had not been told about the plan because it would alter my behaviour? Because I would be too afraid of what lay ahead – or too worried about Talamh?

The thoughts rushed through my head as though I were trying to weigh too many options at once and could not grasp a single one.

Meanwhile, the other ladies-in-waiting and Falaich watched Talamh and me closely, but made no move to intervene. Perhaps they felt they had no authority to do so.

My first lady-in-waiting stepped towards me and held out her hand. "Give me the message."

No, was my first instinct.

And yet it was absurd. If she wanted it, she should have it. There was nothing against it. So I handed it to her.

It was only as the band left my fingers that I realised what I was doing. That there was of course something against it. Namely the basic fact that she was not the one who should be giving me orders.

Again. And again I had complied with such an order willingly. Even though that was not at all like me – to obey without hesitation or question. Even towards my mother, the Queen, I often enough struggled to do so. What was happening here?

Disoriented, I watched as Talamh drew a hairpin from her braid and scratched a reply into the leather with its tip. Then she fastened the band around the waiting deer's neck. The animal gave a brief shake of its ears. Then it leapt away, as if it had only been waiting for that moment, and ran back the way it had come.

Talamh turned to face me. "Now give me the diadem."

Absolutely not, I wanted to say. Instead, I felt my hands obey her rather than me.

A wave of nausea swept over me, pressing in on my chest. Panic, I realised, and immediately tried to breathe against it. To draw air into my lungs more slowly, more deliberately. To press my bare toes into the grass, to ground myself. After all, this was not the first surge of fierce anxiety to come over me. I had grown up with the feeling that everything was a threat, that every step was a tightrope walk from which I could plunge into the depths – and take my entire people with me. Everything had to be balanced. Nothing too little, nothing too much. In politics as in earth magic.

Only a few months ago at the Ionnsaich, I had witnessed the most brutal example of this: my fellow student and friend Làmhán had transferred too many of her own memories to a category-three creation. As a result, the creation had absorbed so much of her personality that it had come to believe itself – though fashioned after a stag – to be the creator, and Làmhán to be its creation. Worse still, the stag had felt threatened by Làmhán, because she in turn insisted she was the original. It had inflicted a fatal wound on her faster than she could issue a command to stop it.

But this, here, was something different. More alien. More unsettling. It was not merely a threat from outside – it was my own body turning against me. My own thoughts knotting around themselves. How was that possible? Who was I, if I could not do as I wished? If I no longer even knew clearly what I wanted and what I did not?

It felt as though I were losing the precious, years-long-practised balance. Slipping from the thin rope into a bottomless fall.

"Now the dress," Talamh's voice cut through my thoughts. She gestured to Pongail. "Help her out of it. I can manage my own clothing."

No. No, she could not be allowed to take more. I had to do something. Something was not right here.

Or was that precisely the part I was imagining? After all, the other ladies-in-waiting seemed to find nothing unusual about the proceedings.

Or only because I was not objecting?

"H-here?" I managed with difficulty.

"Of course here. If we wait until we're in Acarsaid, it will have defeated the purpose."

But ...

I choked on the thought, fighting once more against the sensation of falling. I had to keep my wits about me. Somehow.

While Pongail stepped behind me and with her gentle, precise manner loosened the hidden lacing, I quickly scanned my surroundings. My companions grouped themselves with their horses around us, forming a makeshift screen against both sight and wind. Their gazes swept watchfully across the surrounding hillsides. If anyone were up on the slopes, they would of course be able to look down on us with ease. Perhaps recognise that it was an opportune moment for an attack – two of us half-undressed.

Though wait – was there even an us?

There were two versions of this situation. One in which Talamh was acting according to a plan I knew nothing about, in which she was only trying to protect me. In which all my distrust stemmed from the part of me that had grown up during a war and learned to question everything.

And in the second version, Talamh was pursuing a plan of her own – one that was likely more than a simple role reversal; rather, the beginning of something larger. The interference of an unsuspected third power in this war – this peace. A power that could somehow exert control over a body through words and compel someone to do exactly what it wanted.

Was such a thing possible?

Pongail lifted one layer of fabric over my head, then another.

"Do you know anything about a contingency plan?" I asked her as quietly as I could.

She only shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"That you can't tell me, or that you don't know?"

Pongail hesitated briefly – even her hands paused. Then she continued. "Both."

Because I cannot say, because I do not know.

I was no wiser than before.

The wind moved over my bare skin and the finely pricked patterns upon it. The small daggers bound to my upper and lower arms offered no protection against it, at least. At least they had not taken those from me as well. I suppressed the shiver crawling up my spine. Instead, I clenched my jaw and tensed my muscles, until Pongail handed me Talamh's clothing. It was identical to that of the other ladies-in-waiting: wide, artfully embroidered trousers gathered at the ankle, and a long-sleeved tunic that fell in elegant folds around the torso, concealing the weapons at the arms. Or had done so, at Talamh. On me it hung formlessly, like borrowed skin, for I lacked the fullness of her chest.

On Talamh, meanwhile, the lacing of my dress could be adjusted – or rather, Pongail could attend to it. One of the twin ladies-in-waiting, Creag with her olive skin and blue-black hair, was already rearranging her braids, pinning them up in loops so that the flower diadem rested upon them to full effect.

Talamh glanced at me and gestured to her own head. "You need to let yours down."

I did so mechanically. When Cas, the second twin, held the shoes out to me, however, it cost me real effort to take them. To give up the connection to the earth ... It felt like the most momentous step of all. An uprooting.

And yet I pushed my feet into the shoes. My feet felt smaller inside them, more contained. Pressed into a shape that was not their own.

I waited for the anger I knew must come in a situation like this. But there was nothing ... only confusion.

"How am I to introduce myself at court?" I pressed.

"I will introduce you," Talamh corrected me, though without sharpness. "You will have to practise deferring."

"And what is my name? Yours?"

"Choose one. It doesn't matter."

"Of course. As long as it isn't Làr." The words escaped me with something close to cynicism.

Talamh gave me a strange look. "Exactly."

I wanted to add more – how she could simply take my name, my role, my identity from me like that – but the words again refused to leave my mouth. No more objections.

I fought to keep from sinking once more into a whirlpool of despair. I wanted to tear the diadem from her head. I wanted to call on the other ladies-in-waiting to hold her until she told me the full truth. I wanted to force her to give me back full control over my own body.

But I could do none of it. My foremost task instead was to clear my head. I had to gather information, form a clearer picture. Find out where I stood, and what I was dealing with.

I reached for the first distraction that offered itself, to give my thoughts a focus other than Talamh herself. The name. More deliberately than was perhaps necessary, I turned various names over in my mind. Searching for one that could give a hint about the situation, without being so obvious that Talamh would see through it immediately and forbid it.

"Làrach-Coise?" I suggested at last, feeling somewhat calmer and more composed already. The name was a variation of my actual name – Làr, ground – with an entirely different meaning. Footprint.

A brief, genuinely surprised laugh broke from Talamh. It sounded almost like the Talamh of before, without the mask. And for a fraction of a second, the feeling of connection flickered inside me again. I stamped it out as quickly as Talamh extinguished her amusement. "As I said, it doesn't matter," she said. "If you like it, by all means."

"I do."

"What a pitiable choice," came a deep, soft voice behind me, making me start. Falaich was standing directly at my back. "Is it not proof of one's independence to be able to name oneself? And yet you choose precisely a name like that."

I beg your pardon?

Those large dark eyes, as attentive and calm as any of the other horses'. And yet ... I thought I saw a gleam in his gaze that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. It stirred the absurd urge in me to defend myself, to justify myself. To a creation.

"My mother named you," I said through gritted teeth.

Falaich blew warm air from his nostrils. "Ah, you know so terribly little, Làrach-Coise. Perhaps the name suits you rather well after all."

As though he knew more than I did! The sheer audacity of even implying it – especially after Talamh had also just played her superior knowledge against me ... This was precisely the reason I had never been able to bear him. I turned my back on him deliberately. Unfortunately, the effect was wasted, because Falaich walked straight past me and headed for Talamh.

Once two of the ladies-in-waiting 0150 the slight, pale Ceirmeach alongside Cumadh, whose face was given a perpetually severe look by the scar running from her cheek up into her hairline – had transferred the luggage from his back to my horse, the two twin ladies-in-waiting, Creag and Cas, helped Talamh swing herself up into the saddle in the voluminous dress and spread the violet-blossom fabric smoothly across it. With the delicate wooden diadem on her head, she had become entirely the Princess of the Crèadha.

"Not one of you," commanded my new mistress, casting her gaze around the group, speaking simultaneously with her hands as all our people did, "will breathe a word of this to anyone. That goes without saying."

"Of course," came from all sides; some even reinforced it with a gesture, bringing their fists together vertically.

Talamh looked down at me, directly into my eyes, and waited. I had no choice but to bow my head in assent.

"Move out!" she commanded – and I walked to my now more heavily loaded horse and swung myself up.

[...]

Anne Danck holds a PhD in behavioural biology and finds writing essential for sorting her thoughts. She enjoys turning fairy tales on their head and examining them from unexpected angles.

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