

Jewellery's Gambit

by Juliet Robinson

The press of bodies surged and panic rippled through the crowd like a wave washing over rocks. Were there normally this many people in the palace? Glancing around Lisbet found she didn't recognise anyone, where had they come from? Lisbet who had been trying to head in the opposite direction found her way blocked by the mob. They barged, pushed and shoved at her, she was nearly knocked from her feet by a large man who at the last moment grabbed her, saving her from being down and trampled to a pulp.

So she went with the tide, clutching her bag to her chest, ensuring its safety. But as the crowd moved, she started to try and work her way to its edge. Perhaps she could still get away, slip down a side corridor, find another route out of the palace. And there! There it was, a small narrow passage, a servant's pass, normally covered by a hanging, but it had been pulled down in the riots. She was close, so close. A woman pulling a screaming child along with her blundered into Lisbet, blocking the servants passage. Lisbet was jostled, moved away from her escape. She spun, and without thinking she kicked out, her foot, catching the woman on her ankle. Lisbet hooked it, tumbling the woman, her child falling with her, the pair of them wailing as they went down. She had seconds, maybe fractions of a second and Lisbet took it, she leapt landing on the woman's back and threw herself into the side corridor.

She tumbled, gracelessly catching herself in the last moment, and staggered a few steps down the corridor. It was quieter here, though mere feet from her, people continue to run, the thunderous beating of Lisbet's heart filled her ears. She tried not to think of the woman. Of the child. And then, crack. Crack. The rattle of muskets. If the crowd had been screaming before - well, they hadn't been. Lisbet's grip tightened on her bag, the whites of her knuckles flashing in the gloom of the corridor. She had to keep moving, if the soldiers had stopped herding people and had started thinning them out then things were escalating fast.

As she scurried along the narrow passage, like a rat in a wall, she thought to herself that perhaps she had in a way saved that woman and child. They might have survived the crush of hurrying people; they might have been sheltered from the gunfire, yes perhaps she had helped them. This was not a servant's passage Lisbet was familiar with, no doors branched off it and the noise from the main throughfare told her there was no retreat, so on she hurried. Until finally a door barred her way. A small and discreet door, one designed to allow servants to enter a room without being noticed. Perfect.

She pressed her ear to the door - nothing. Did she risk it? She cradled the bag; its contents would change her life. What to do, what to do? Shouts echoing down the corridor made Lisbet's decision for her, others had found the passage. She took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

It swung silently on oiled hinges. A heavy curtain blocked the door from view, Lisbet had entered unseen. For a moment she paused on tiptoes, breath held, ears straining. An empty room? The door behind her clicked shut and she spun, free hand groping for the handle, only to find there was none. Entrance only, no exit.

She peered round the curtain. No, not alone. Not somewhere safe. Not anywhere close to being safe. The throne room, she was in the bloody throne room. Lisbet had fought, clawed, and trampled her way out of the mouth of the beast, only to crawl directly into its belly.

Bodies littered the floor; blood dripped from the once resplendent walls; the murals of past victories and peaceful reigns now smeared with the visceral reality of the present. The gold leaf on the wainscoting caught the light of the chandeliers, reflecting off the pooling crimson on the floor.

Lisbet's jaw dropped. There on the throne, lounging like a lizard basking on a rock was Princess Isles. The Princess was not alone; various courtiers and guards were in attendance. An explosion boomed somewhere in the distant reaches of the palace. The chandeliers rattled and rocked, their light glittered off the crown Lisbet now saw Princess Isles was wearing. The coronation crown, the rubied twin to the one buried in the bag Lisbet carried.

She ducked back behind the curtain, what to do, what to do? Maybe she could just stay here, wait for them to leave? Would they leave? When would they leave? No stupid. The palace was being gutted. Other options, she looked upwards, perhaps she could climb the curtains? Hide in the shadows up there. She could gamble, reveal herself, fall to her knees, and present the bag its looted contents to Isles, pretend she had rescued the jewels from looters?