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# War on Love

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## War On Love

by

Jill Patterson

The large bells echoed off of the stone pavement of the village. That meant the decision had been made. The bells chime once a year for Deliberation Day. The village's worst criminals are put on trial and the Princess decides their fate: life or death. The option that they may live is a rarity, though, because they seldom do. The criminals brought to the platform every year are the village's most repulsive, and it does the town good to see them hung. It keeps the citizens from behaving in such foul ways. And once the offenders are hung to death the bells clang, the people feast, the band plays and everyone is happy. However, today, someone is not...

The princess is not in her usual state. Where there is usually grace and joy, on this day there is a shell of a woman. She keeps her posture as she is seated at the end of the long, wooden table that is lined all the way down the middle of the stone courtyard, but her face does not hold as much dignity as her shoulders. There is no smile to be seen, and there is no light in her eyes. The skies are blue but there is a cloud of gray above her and no one knows why. She looks over at the hanging men from time to time with a shudder. Perhaps the dead bodies are making her sick this year, as she has not yet eaten any meat off her plate.

"I can't help but to ask what's wrong, dearest?" Her father, the King, was more concerned than anyone else.

"I have no appetite, Father. I thank you for asking though."

“I’m surely not asking about your stomach, Eliza. Your head is what seems to be ill.”

She looked up at him with somewhat of a blank stare. She was too wrapped up in her own world to realize others had noticed, and this made her even more troubled. She wiped a tear from under her eye before anyone other than her loyal guard could see. Her father was on one side of her, and Sebastian was on the other. Sebastian was just as aware of her state as her father, but the guard did not bother to ask what was wrong. He already knew, and was perhaps the only person that did.

“An old friend’s been on my mind, Father... That’s all. It’s a shame that it must take away my happiness on Deliberation Day, isn’t it? It’s the best day of the year, after all...”

The last statement was not so convincing.

Eliza looked back over at Sebastian. He was quite content eating his turkey leg. The Princess stared at him for a long time, and was quite thankful for his ability to be so understanding of her condition. He was indeed very happy with the turkey leg he was eating. The town hadn’t seen turkey legs in a few years, since the war broke out. The kingdom was finally restored enough to supply the town with meat again on the first Deliberation Day since the war had broken out. It had been four years since the war, and while they usually only hang one criminal per year at the festival, this year there would be four, to make up for exactly how many years of the celebration that they had lost.

When the sun set and the day’s festivities were over, the villagers went back to their homes and the royal family members retreated back to the Castle. The Princess waited in her room until it was just quiet enough that she could bet everyone else was

asleep. Her wooden door against the stone walls creaked open, and she quietly tiptoed to the entrance hall, where she could then leave through the main entrance to the courtyard.

“Ahhhhhh, Eliza!”

She was startled and jumped back at the sound of Sebastian’s voice.

“You’ve frightened me!”

“Where do you think you’re going at this time of night?”

“I needed some fresh air. I feel like these walls are caving in on me. You know my head isn’t in the right place today.”

“I know exactly where you’re going, Princess. I had a feeling you’d be leaving the castle tonight so I waited here for you.”

There was a long pause, and along with it there was a look of guilt and shame now on the face of the Princess.

“Sebastian... I’m sure you know how guilty I—”

“—Yes, I do.”

“I feel so guilty about everything! I’m a lost soul living in the body of a Princess. I deserve none of it. Can you just let me go out by myself for awhile? Like you did the first time, when I was just a teenage girl? It won’t be long.”

“I almost lost my position as a guard over that night! Why do you think I waited here at the entrance for you tonight? The King will execute me if something happens to you, and I will be hanging alongside the criminals you’re sneaking out of the palace to go see!”

“If you don’t let me go tonight I will find another reason to have you hanged. You’re a wonderful guard, Sebastian. Don’t make me do that... You know I have my

ways of causing many innocent people to die for a wronged cause. Besides, there won't be any bad men out tonight. It's Deliberation Day! Today is the one night of the year they stay inside—for they don't want to witness what will happen to them if they keep it up, hanging there in the middle of the courtyard..."

They were staring at each other for a long time while neither said a word. Sebastian surely knew that the Princess could overthrow his position at any point in time, and therefore he was out of luck. If the Princess didn't get her way tonight he would be hanged, and if the Princess was caught out of the castle at this hour he would be hanged. He thought it best to let her do what she wanted, and at least that way if she returned safely without being seen he would still live to see another day. He nodded his head at her with a sense of defeat, and with that she took off running towards the center of the town where the dead men were swaying lifelessly in the night.

She ran through the stone-paved walls of the city. She ran past the villager's cottages, the bakery, the welder's, and everything else on the way to the wooden platform in the middle of the city. The four men were still hanging tonight, but would be gone with the sunrise of the next day. Where the bodies were taken from there she didn't know. There were a few lanterns lit, and some candlelight that was illuminating out of some distant shop windows, but for the most part it was dark. She walked up closer to the platform so she could get a better look at the criminals.

One in particular—the one to the far right seemed to spark her interest the most. She walked up near his body and sat on the pavement a few feet back to catch her breath. She was seated just far enough away that she could look up at an angle that brought her

eyes directly into his, although they were closed. She closed hers too, for awhile and laid there. She felt weightless—almost like she could be hanging, too, right along with him.

This had been Eliza's first year deciding the fate of the criminals selected to be put on trial on Deliberation Day. She would have done so sooner, if it weren't for the celebrations lost to the war effort. Her mother told her it would be easy. All the criminals were all guilty, and she would always recited the same lines, and was always expected to feel the same way about each of them: guilty. There were no questions about it, and if there were any questions they would not have been sent to the Princess on that day. Deliberation Day was the day the city was invited to watch the deaths of all the citizens worst enemies. It gave the people a sense of security knowing that they were safe at the hands of the Princess, and would be rid of the criminals who would otherwise be living amongst their fellow peoples.

She finally opened her eyes and walked up to the man hanging farthest to the right. She wished he didn't look so pale. She wished he was full of life. She wished he would never have taken part in a criminal act. He wasn't a criminal, after all...

When she took the stage that day to decide the fate of the four men, she had no clue what was in store for her. She was still wearing what she had on twelve hours before, in that same location—her long, formal ruby gown. She loved wearing red because it brought out the brightness of her blue eyes, and the color went well with her blonde hair and skin tone. But when she saw the man farthest to the right presented to her, she wished she hadn't been in such a fancy dress. She wished she wasn't there at all. At the sight of him, she fainted and was taken away by Sebastian and the other royal guards. For the first time in four years, the Queen came back on stage to decide the fate

of the criminals. And that was much needed, indeed, for the Princess would not have been able to get the words out of her mouth if she hadn't been taken away from the scene.

She was crying beneath the feet of the dead man when Sebastian found her.

“Princess! Only a few hours ‘til dawn! Do you realize my life is on the line here? Are you mad?”

He didn't realize she was crying until he had already given her a piece of his anger, and he immediately wished he could take it back. He sat down next to her on the stone ground she lay on and rubbed her back. He felt sorry for her.

“You look like the first time I came and found you when snuck out of the castle... Come on, m'lady. Let's get you back home...”

He extended his hand to her and she let him pull her up off the ground. That ruby dress was finally just as disheveled as she wished it had been when she started the ceremony that day, but it was too late...

She put her arm around Sebastian and they walked back home to the castle. That night she became one with the criminals. She tied the noose in her bedroom and hung herself, where she would finally be able to roam free with the man she loved, and free herself from her own mind and all the terrible things she had done.

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“Do you need a hand crossing the creek, Princess?”

“Do I look like a Princess to you?”

Eliza was stripped of her royalty, wearing one of the servant's filthy dresses and dipping her naked toes into the creek. She never wore her nice dresses to see Walter. He

was a poor working man, and she was afraid that her nice clothes would bring him insecurities. He was wearing brown pants rolled up to his ankles, and a faded white button-up. It was one of the nicer shirts he owned, and although what used to be white was now off-white, she didn't think she'd ever seen him look so handsome. He offered her his hand to cross the creek on their walk together.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to treat me like a Princess, Walter!”

“I would offer my hand to any lady crossing the creek!”

“Well... I don't feel like being lady-like, either then!”

She hopped into the creek with her bare feet and splashed them both. She giggled like a little girl, then grabbed his hand and pulled him in, too. He fell and soaked his clothes, and she nearly fell over with him in laughter. This time she offered her hand to help him up, and he accepted. He stood up smiled at her. She smiled back then looked down at her appearance.

“Could you imagine, Walter... if my parents were to see me like this?”

He brushed his hand against her face and looked into her eyes.

“They aren't here right now. Besides... you look as beautiful as ever.”

She grabbed his hand that was upon her face and held it in her own. It seemed to fit perfectly. They walked out of the creek and onto the grass to a nearby rock where they could have a seat.

They sat down on the rock, looking down at the creek they just submerged themselves in. Their clothes were soaking wet, and they laid back onto the boulder hoping the sun would dry them enough before they had to walk back to town. They laid

on their backs, looking up at perfectly blue sky, with perfectly round clouds making it the perfect day to be enjoying each other's company.

When they first lied down on the boulder there was silence. She wondered what Walter was thinking during that silence. However, his hand in her own was almost enough to feel like she may have known what he was thinking. Whenever they get too comfortable a tension rises in the air, and she thought the tense thoughts may have been creeping into his head in the silence among them right then. It was indeed creeping into her thoughts, though, which caused her to turn onto her side and face him to speak. He turned, too, and they were facing each other now, and instead of studying the perfect blue of the sky, they studied the perfect color in each other's eyes.

“You know... I like this dress. I think it might be the loveliest I've ever worn.”

She looked down at the mangled wet cloth that was pressed upon her body. It was one of her maid's dresses. She wears it to Church on Sundays. It was fancy for a maid's dress, but nothing like her usual royal attire. It was worn down and faded and such a dull green color. She had to steal dresses from her maids so that she could be more like Walter.

The dresses made her more like him. Eliza felt as if the dresses brought her down to the level of an average person. When she wore them she was just a woman—not a Princess. The stealing also made her more like Walter. He did indeed have a dark side, but with no money and an unreliable family income, he had no other choice. Eliza feared getting caught stealing a dress from one of the maid's, but she could barely imagine getting caught stealing food or clothes. Those were the things Walter had to steal in

town, and she feared for him everyday, because she would not be able to save him from punishment if he ever got caught... She couldn't bear the thought of ever losing him.

“You know... I don't really think I was meant to be a Princess... I mean, I did when I was a child—I loved it. But now... Everything seems so strange. I feel so lost. But you know, in this dress, I feel found. With *you* I feel found. I wish we could play in the creek like children forever.”

“I love you, Eliza.”

She sat up and looked at him. She was startled at the bluntness of his statement, but her heart started beating. It was like all the butterflies in the trees around her had flown into her stomach at once. She *was* a little child with him, and she couldn't help but giggle like one.

“I wish we could run away, Walter. I love you, too! Oh, I don't know what type of life I'll live without you. I'm getting to the age where my parents are trying to set me up with a husband—a Prince! But none are suitable for me. They're not you...”

“I dread the day that we will not speak again.”

With that statement all the butterflies flew back out of her stomach and left it feeling like an empty pit of darkness. She could not imagine a day without him.

“Would you run away with me, Walter?”

He began to laugh, and it was the first time he had since they were standing in the creek.

“No! We would have no money. No house. Nothing, my dear. I would have you, but I wouldn't want to put your sweet face through such unfavorable conditions as

those of a poor man. You say you don't want the life of a Princess but you deserve it. You are amazing.”

He always knew what to say. Or more like *how* to say it. It wasn't the answer she wanted, because she wanted to take off running right now, but it was enough to comfort her in that moment. The blue sky was getting darker as nighttime approached, and the reality hit her that it would soon be time to be going back to the castle. She heard leaves crack behind them and she perked up.

“What was that?”

She whispered out of fear because it sounded like footsteps...

It happened so quickly. There were guards surrounding them on horses, and some even wearing full armor. And she recognized the guards—they were from her own castle. But there was nothing she could do about it now. She was a helpless Princess in the arms of a poor man.

They demanded that he let step away from her at once and Eliza screamed.

“No! He's not doing anything wrong! It's my fault! All my fault!”

He took him by the arms and drug him away from her, and Eliza began to bawl. Her sobs were the loudest sound in the forest. She knew she would never be allowed to see him again, but even worse, she was afraid that they would hurt him. She sat down helplessly on the grass and watched him get taken away. He used all the force he had in him to turn back and look at her.

“I will see you again, Eliza! Even if it's the death of me!”

He tried to shout more, but they nudged him forward again so that he couldn't say anything more to her.

All the guards left surrounding Walter but one. It was her personal guard, Sebastian. He looked down at her in anger as she continued to sob onto the Earth.

“Get off the ground, m'lady!” He was clearly frustrated. “The King demanded a search for you. I was almost beheaded on the fact that you weren't accounted for! Strict orders will be put in place to keep you in the castle from now on. He's sending for more guards to look after the grounds.”

“Are they going to kill him?”

She barely got the words out, and she feared that he would feel no sympathy for the pain in her heart. But as she looked up at him, she saw him studying her in her filthy appearance, and saw a look of pity come across his face. She feared his facial expression changed because he was going to have to tell her that they were going to kill Walter, and more silent tears ran down her cheeks.

“No, m'lady... They will not. But you know just as well as I that you will never be allowed to see him again. You probably never *will* see him again. Your father will be the one who makes sure of that part.”

When Sebastian reached his hand out to her she barely had the strength to stand. But she got up, and looked down once more at the creek. She felt the coolness of the water upon her dress, and the void of Walter in her heart, her stomach, and her soul... He was gone now, but she could still feel him there. She turned her head away from the creek, afraid that if she looked any longer she would try to submerge herself underwater

forever. Sebastian let her have a moment to collect herself, and when she finally drew near him he rubbed her on the back, in a comforting type of way.

She put her arm around Sebastian and they walked back home to the castle... And that was expected to become a Princess.

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The King was at war with a neighboring kingdom. They had broken their royal treaty to stay off the land of one another, and years of conflict had built up into battle. The town gathered every man old enough to walk, and every boy over the age of twelve to fight its battle. They did not have much time to train, but for the time they did have, they gathered in the town center to talk strategy and prepare the men for what was to come.

The neighboring kingdom was many miles away. It would take three week's time to get there on foot, which would be much too long of a haul to make themselves. The King ordered his men to stay in town one week after the battle was declared, and that way the foreign men would be travelling longer than they once they finally set out after a week. Our men would travel but one week by the time they met up, considering the other side would have travelled two, thus making the King's men stronger than their enemies.

The war effort made Eliza uneasy. As the Princess, she was expected to stay cool and collect during it all, but she could not stomach the idea of hundreds of men dying over a simple territory dispute, that seemed to have no impact on the lives of anyone in the town in the first place. It was all part of her plan, but she felt extreme guilt from it all. She could not bear to watch the training sessions, where old men and their sons appeared

ready for battle. She looked at every man's grin with a frown upon her own face, knowing that each might not return. The headcount of soldiers was 872. The King told Eliza he would guess the death toll of our men to end up around 250.

One-fourth of the men standing in front of her were expected to die. Something about it all wasn't right. She wished she wasn't a princess once more. She never did think she was fit to play the role. However, she also couldn't imagine being the wife of one of the men being sent off with a 25% chance of not returning. The training sessions made her sick, but there was a reason she attended them, rather than staying inside her quarters. She used this time to look for the face of an old friend—Walter.

Surely Walter would be here, she thought. Every man from young to old was ordered to show up, and he fit right in the middle of that age range. That's why this was happening, after all! It was all going according to plan. However, she only had seven days to find him at this training sessions, and by the time day five came along and she had not found him she was overwhelmed with anxiety. On her face, it showed.

“Smile, dearest. These men need to see the warmth of your pretty smile in this time of discomfort.”

The King placed his hand on her shoulder when he said that, and it felt like his hand weighed one thousand pounds pressing down on her. His hand adding to the pressure that was already on her shoulders was almost too much weight to stay standing.

“Father... Are you sure every man is here? Have we been taking roll everyday? I'd like to see a list of the names of all the men present.”

“Ahh, you are scared that we won’t be prepared. You don’t need to worry about that. We have them outnumbered. We will win, I can assure you that, and you will make a lovely Queen someday.”

She had no response to this statement. Her father had no idea at all. This whole battle was declared by her doing, and no one even knew it. Not one person except the man she paid off to go kill a few men in the other district, who she assumed would end up in prison someday, anyways. She had him kill just enough people to cause an outrage, and while the King had no idea who this mystery murderer was, he had no choice but to defend his kingdom when the neighbors declared war. So the men gathered to train, just as Eliza knew they would, and she thought it would be the perfect opportunity to reunite with Walter—the man she had thought about everyday since he had been taken from her.

The only problem was that Walter was no where to be found amongst the crowd of 872 men, and a war would breakout all thanks to her plan, which seemed so flawless at the time being. The only problem now were the faces of every man in front of her, who were all equally likely to die, and none of them being the one she was looking for. She felt an unexplainable load of guilt in her mind, heart and spirit. It was wrong, but it was too late now and in two days over 200 men would be slaughtered, all for a forbidden love she never could have followed through with even if Walter were to appear in the crowd today. She was such an irresponsible Princess.

The seventh and final day of training came along before the men set out, and she had scanned every man’s face in the crowd at least two times each by that point. She knew Walter wasn’t here. Treason! He was committing treason by not being here. Where would he be hiding? It would surely be inappropriate of her to order him to be

found, especially after the incident at the creek... Her plan failed and would cost the kingdom over 200 tragedies, and there was absolutely no way it could be stopped now. The King was preparing to make the final speech right before his men would be sent out.

“Father! Don’t send those men out. They don’t deserve to die!”

He stared at her for a moment.

“They’re fighting for our kingdom. They’re fighting for *you*! Your mother is quite uneasy about the whole thing, too, but you mustn’t fret.”

“Can we declare a truce? Write a new treaty? *Something?!?*”

“What has gotten into you, Eliza? It’s much too late for that now.”

The King looked at her in a very confused way. He stepped forward and delivered his speech to his men, although Eliza didn’t hear a word of it. Too many thoughts were going through her head. She put hundreds of men at risk, all to find one, who didn’t even show. That was the least he could do after all the trouble she went through for him. Tears swelled up in her eyes, but she didn’t let them show. She at least owed the men who were dying for her a strong face before they were sent out.

When they marched through the gates she watched them get smaller into the distance. The tears had finally caught up with her, and she was sobbing by the windowsill as the little dots of men disappeared into the horizon.

Sebastian appeared behind her.

“You silly, silly girl. I saw you search the crowd every single day for the past week. He’s not with those warriors. He was sent to prison a year ago for trying to sneak into the castle—the highest form of crime just beneath murder. I thought you would’ve known that by now...”