Shift

My father used to tell me Autumn was the truest season of growth, not Spring. He said Autumn is the season when plants let go of all their earthly possessions—let them fall to the ground to make a fresh start and truly appreciate the miracle of Spring. After all, what would Spring be if all the plants still had flowers and leaves upon its arrival? For a time, I wondered if people could be like that. What would it be like to give up your material possessions every year so that, when you earned it back, it meant that much more to you? I know now we cannot be like that. Greed controls us. We always want more. I learned that on a cool day in Autumn.

The shift was loose, but the corset was tightening. Hmph. My breath huffed out in a small puff. The corset constricted for a short while and then loosened just a bit when Mairyn tied off the lace knot at the top.

“How is that, Miss?”

“Just fine thanks.”

The dress was next. The current custom drew a bright stripe from the right shoulder to the left hip. Married women wore the strip off the other shoulder. I would wear it there soon. The beauty strip on this dress was red, opulent, not like me at all. Mairyn gestured for me to raise my arms before sliding the dress over my arms and head. The weight of the thing settled on my shoulders.

“Oh Mairyn, where did you even find this? It’s beautiful. It shouldn’t go to waste on a night like tonight.”
The maid adjusted the shoulders of the dress and smoothed the red strip of fabric. “I’m sure the wedding feast will be just wonderful, Miss Lianna.” she said. Sadness touched her voice. I wanted her to tell me I didn’t have to do this. I wanted to her to tell me there was another way. There wasn’t.

My fists clenched; my breath quickened. I tried to take in slow breaths, but the corset was too tight. It hurt my chest, so I took shallow breaths. Sometimes it’s just easier to not fight. Mairyn opened the door, and sounds from the banquet hall filled the small side chamber I’d dressed in. It was time.

*It was a cool day in Autumn. People lined the cobblestone street as the procession passed. I huddled with my family and watched as a cart pulling a cage filled with twenty-seven men rolled by. The men were bound to the cage grate with iron cuffs and chains. The cart rolled to a stop, and armed guards dressed in the Prince’s livery unlocked the cage and began to take the prisoners out of the cage and guide them toward a raised platform. My mother is crying.*

The banquet hall was bright, but it did not glow. Concentric circles of bronze formed the chandeliers which lit the room. They hung from great iron chains, the links of which were a handspan or more. These chains ran straight though small holes in the ceiling of the hall, where I imagined gears and cogs ground to raise the candles when they were in need of lighting or dousing. There were more than a dozen of these chandeliers in the room. It must have taken hours to light them. It was wasteful; plain candles would have been just fine.

Chandeliers were not all that filled the banquet hall. Long tables filled with people, lords and ladies mostly, crowded the room, but somehow left space for the servants to walk between the aisles. I spotted a few friendly faces nearby, but not enough to make a difference in the way I
felt. My people were seated closest to the door I’d just come out of. The side of the hall closest to me was somber, but opposite, the tables were a little more rowdy. Men drank and argued loudly.

For a long time, I’d been looking at anything but the Prince’s table, but I’d run out of things to look at. I finally glanced over to where he sat on a raised platform with his family and staff. I couldn’t hear him from where I was, but I imagine he was swearing loudly and making bawdy jokes. There were no women at the table. He paused and met my eyes with sheer arrogance and triumph. I dropped my gaze.

There was a gentle tug from Mairyn, and I let myself be led forward across the banquet hall past my people. The men at the tables stood as I passed, completely silent. My caretaker led me to the table on the dais at the front of the hall. We treded red carpet. There was an empty seat on the Prince’s left, and Mairyn bid that I take it. She pulled out the chair for me, and he half-stood as I sat, but not a second before. He smiled.

“So glad you deigned to join me, Dearest.” The sarcasm flowed; I flinched at the word Dearest but otherwise remained silent.

The Prince banged his glass with his fork a few times. The left half of the banquet hall quieted, but the right side clearly hadn’t heard the message. After ringing the glass a few more times to little effect, the he resorted to just yelling loudly for everyone to listen to him. He disgusted me.

“After countless years of civil war and innumerable deaths on both sides of the battlefield, I am pleased to announce that this Kingdom will be whole once more. My troops are victorious. I won. With the leaders of the rebellion executed,” He paused a second. “I went to
Lianna of Arenburgh with an offer of peace—a treaty sealed through marriage. She gratefully accepted.” I shrank at the clarity of the message. *You have failed; this is my conquest.*

“And so, may there be peace among our people. Let my graceful hand guide you to a prosperous future.” I hated him. I considered the somber people on the left half of the banquet hall. We were beaten and broken. They needed something other than this tyrant. There had to be another way. My gaze fell to the table. There was.

*My mother is crying; my father is among the men being led to the dais. The Prince stands on the dais already, dressed in red and gold—regal attire better suited to a celebration. His legal officer is there, of course, to read the papers. The guards led the first five men up onto the platform and fitted ropes around their necks. My father was second from the right. The legal officer began to read off from a sheet of paper, but I couldn’t really hear him. Then he stopped, stepped back, and the crowd quieted. My father fell.*

We ate our food and, when the time came, I let the Prince take me away. I didn’t kick or scream, no, that would only give him satisfaction. I let him pick me up and carry me from the banquet hall to the raucous laughter of his people and the dead silence of mine. His grip slid too high up my thigh, and I slapped his hand away. He guffawed.

We turned the first corner, and he dropped me. I fell to the floor on my hands and knees. He kept walking, ignoring me.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m not carrying you up these steps. You can walk just fine.”

“Well isn’t this supposed to be romantic or something?”
“We both know how much romance this relationship has. Now get up the stairs.” He
turned and started up the steps. I refused to give him the satisfaction of my anger and instead
shut my mouth and climbed. I would be strong.

My father fell. I held my mother and my two little sisters tight against my chest. My
mother sobbed, and the little ones cried. I hid their eyes; I alone saw my father fall. Nothing
happened like in the story books. No arrow came in to shoot the rope away to bits. No hero
came forward and slashed the line stringing my father up from the gallows. He just fell. And
danced. Out of all five, he was the only one to dance. I don’t know whether the Prince wanted
to further desecrate my father’s body or whether he was trying to show mercy. Either way, the
Prince cut off my father’s head while he was still dancing.

I reached the top of the stairs. Two guards with pikes stood outside the door to the
master chamber. I passed them and entered the room. The room was large, but the bed was
huge. The posts of the bed were almost thick around as I was, and the blanket was the size of a
small roof. The Prince had stopped to say something to the men about a little privacy, and I
stripped to my shift, placing my linens on the bedside table. When the door swung open again
and he reentered the room, I was watching him from the pillows. I licked my lips, and he leered.

“Eager, aren’t you?”

He was rough, but he wasn’t bad. He wasn’t particularly good either, but I suppose
there’s something to be said for trying to put up a fight when you know you’re outmatched.
When it was over, I rolled over to straddle him and sat up a bit. His eyes cracked open, so I
leaned close to snuggle into his chest. The amount of hair there was appalling. He sighed, and
the eyes drifted shut. I reached over to the bedside table and spoke.
“You lost.” His eyes opened, fully aware, and I slammed the steak knife into one as hard as I could.

I expected him to die, not to let out a blood-curdling scream. I yanked the blade out and aimed a thrust at his neck, but his hands knocked me to the side and the tip slid between his shoulder and collarbone. I felt a rush of air as he convulsed, toppling me off him and the bed. There was a whoosh of air; my head smashed into the bedpost on the way down. My vision blurred.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside, and I dove for the deadbolt. It slid into place just as the door shook. The guards couldn’t get in. The King was trying to rise, but he was having a difficult time of it. The knife handle still stuck out of his shoulder. Blood dripped in a steady stream from between his fingers where he was holding his eye socket. I stood, grabbed a candelabrum from the desk and stalked toward him. He saw me with his remaining eye and put up his hands, but I pushed them aside. I let out cry after cry for help to the guards, and smashed the heavy iron into the King’s neck until he stopped moving.

I’d done it. I’d killed the King. Shock overcame me, and I realized I had no idea what to do next. The guards were still pounding on the door. I threw my dress on as quickly as I could right over the shift. It hung a bit and bulged in all the wrong places without the corset, but there was no help for it. I chucked the corset under the bed and slipped on my shoes. “Help—please help me! The King is hurt!”

The door broke under the combined assault from the guards. Four of them stormed into the room. The first thing they saw was me on the ground hiding behind an upturned desk, far
away from the king and a wide open window. I sobbed and pointed at the body on the bed.

“Someone attacked us. I’m okay. Please help him!”

They rushed to the bedside, and I sprinted for the door. I heard their shouts, one turned to grab me, but he missed, and I pulled the door shut behind me. I made for the stairs. Two more guards came from the other end of the hallway, yelling at me to slow down and asking what was wrong. I hurled down the stairs, almost going down, but the railing saved me.

“After her!”

At the base of the stairs I turned right and crashed headlong into a lone guard running to the King’s aid. His pike clattered to the ground, and we followed it in a mass of limbs and armor. I tried to crawl away, but he must have heard his friends’ shouts, because he lunged and caught up my legs again the moment I pulled free. I kicked hard; he reeled back. My second kick didn’t connect with anything—he had grabbed my foot. I lashed out with my free leg and tagged his shoulder. The force popped my shoe off, and I scrambled backward out of reach to flee.

I sprinted down another two long hallways. There were screams from around the entire castle now. A bell rang from somewhere. I turned down another corridor and ducked around two guards. They almost grabbed me. There was a door straight ahead—my way out. It had to be. At the door, I risked a glance back down the hallway. A cluster of men and metal followed tight on my heels. I rushed through the door, slammed it shut behind me, and felt relief. My bare foot felt grass. It has never felt so good to turn away from civilization and sprint headlong into the forest. All they ever got was my slipper.