



MORGAN RICE

A SONG
FOR ORPHANS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (BOOK THREE)

A Throne for Sisters

Морган Райс

A Song for Orphans

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2017

Райс М.

A Song for Orphans / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2017 — (A Throne for Sisters)

ISBN 978-1-64-029185-0

In A SONG FOR ORPHANS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Three), Sophia, 17, journeys in search of her parents. Her quest takes her to foreign and strange lands—and to a shocking secret she could never imagine. Kate, 15, is summoned by the witch, as her time has come to repay the favor. But Kate is changing, coming of age, become ever more powerful—and what will become of Kate if she makes a deal with darkness? Sebastian, a romantic, follows his heart, throwing it all away to reject his family and find Sophia. But Lady D’Angelica is still bent on killing her—and may have other plans. A SONG FOR ORPHANS (A Throne for Sisters—Book Three) is the third book in a dazzling new fantasy series rife with love, heartbreak, tragedy, action, adventure, magic, swords, sorcery, dragons, fate and heart-pounding suspense. A page turner, it is filled with characters that will make you fall in love, and a world you will never forget.

ISBN 978-1-64-029185-0

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Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	12
CHAPTER THREE	15
CHAPTER FOUR	19
CHAPTER FIVE	22
CHAPTER SIX	26
CHAPTER SEVEN	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Morgan Rice

A SONG FOR ORPHANS

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—*Books and Movie Reviews*

Roberto Mattos

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CHAPTER ONE

Kate stood in front of Siobhan, feeling as nervous as she did before any fight. She should have felt safe; she was standing on the grounds of Thomas's forge, and this woman was supposed to be her teacher.

And yet she felt as though the world was about to disappear from under her.

"Did you hear me?" Siobhan asked. "It is time for you to repay the favor you owe me, apprentice."

The favor that Kate had bargained back at the fountain in exchange for Siobhan's training. The favor that she had been dreading ever since then, because she knew that whatever Siobhan asked, it would be terrible. The woman of the forest was strange and capricious, powerful and dangerous in equal measure. Any task she set would be difficult, and probably unpleasant.

Kate had agreed, though she didn't have a choice.

"What favor?" Kate asked at last. She looked around for Thomas or Will, but it wasn't because she thought the smith or his son could save her from this. Instead, she wanted to make sure that neither of them would find themselves caught up in whatever Siobhan was doing.

The smithy wasn't there, and neither was Will. Instead, she and Siobhan now stood by the fountain of Siobhan's home, the waters running pure for once rather than the stone of it being dry and filled with leaves. Kate knew it had to be an illusion, but when Siobhan stepped up into it, it seemed solid enough. It even dampened the hem of her dress.

"Why so frightened, Kate?" she asked. "I'm only asking you for a favor. Are you afraid that I'll send you to Morgassa to hunt for a roc's egg on the salt plains, or to fight some would-be summoner's creatures in the Far Colonies? I'd have thought you'd enjoy that kind of thing."

"Which is why you won't do it," Kate guessed.

Siobhan quirked a smile at that. "You think I'm cruel, don't you? That I act for no reason? The wind can be cruel if you are standing in it with no coat, and you could no more fathom its reasons than... well, anything I say you cannot do you will take as a challenge, so let's not."

"You're not the wind," Kate pointed out. "The wind can't think, can't feel, can't know wrong from right."

"Oh, is *that* it?" Siobhan said. She sat on the edge of her fountain now. Still, Kate had the impression that if she tried to do the same, she would fall through it and tumble to the grass around Thomas's forge. "You think I'm *evil*?"

Kate didn't want to agree with it, but she couldn't think of a way to disagree without lying. Siobhan might not be able to reach the corners of Kate's mind, any more than Kate's powers could touch Siobhan, but she suspected that the other woman would know if she lied now. She kept silent instead.

"The nuns of your Masked Goddess would have called it evil when you slaughtered them," Siobhan pointed out. "The men of the New Army you butchered would have called you an evil thing, and worse. I'm sure there are a thousand men on Ashton's streets right now who would call you evil, just for being able to read the minds of others."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're good, then?" Kate countered.

Siobhan shrugged at that. "I'm *trying* to tell you the favor you must do. The necessary thing. Because that is what life is, Kate. A succession of necessary things. Do you know the curse of power?"

This sounded a lot like one of Siobhan's lessons. The best Kate could say for it was that at least she wasn't being stabbed in this one.

"No," Kate said. "I don't know the curse of power."

"It's simple," Siobhan said. "If you have power, then everything you do will affect the world. If you have power and you can see what is coming, then even choosing not to act remains a choice. You are responsible for the world just by being in it, and I have been in it a very long time."

"How long?" Kate asked.

Siobhan shook her head. "That is the kind of question whose answer has a price, and you still haven't paid the price for your training, apprentice."

"This favor of yours," Kate said. She was still dreading it, and nothing Siobhan had said made it easier.

"It's a simple enough thing," Siobhan said. "There is someone who must die."

She made it sound as bland as if she were ordering Kate to sweep a floor or fetch water for a bath. She swept a hand around, and the water of the fountain shimmered, showing a young woman walking through a garden. She wore rich fabrics, but none of the insignia of a noble house. A merchant's wife or daughter, then? Someone who had made money another way? She was pleasant looking enough, with a smile at some unheard joke that seemed to take joy in the world.

"Who is this?" Kate asked.

"Her name is Gertrude Illiard," Siobhan said. "She lives in Ashton, in the family compound of her father, the merchant Savis Illiard."

Kate waited for more than that, but there was nothing. Siobhan gave no explanation, no hint as to why this young woman had to die.

"Has she committed some crime?" Kate asked. "Done some terrible thing?"

Siobhan raised an eyebrow. "Do you need to know such a thing to be able to kill? I do not believe that you do."

Kate could feel her anger rising at that. How dare Siobhan ask her to do a thing like this? How *dare* she demand that Kate cover her hands in blood without the slightest reason or explanation?

"I'm not just some killer to send where you want," Kate said.

"Really?" Siobhan stood, pushing off from the lip of the fountain in a movement that was strangely childlike, as if stepping off of a swing, or leaping from the edge of a cart like an urchin who had stolen a ride through the city. "You have killed plenty of times before."

"That's different," Kate insisted.

"Every moment of life is a thing of unique beauty," Siobhan agreed. "But then, every moment is a dull thing, the same as all the others too. You have killed plenty of people, Kate. How is this one so different?"

"They deserved it," Kate said.

"Oh, they deserved it," Siobhan said, and Kate could hear the mockery in her voice even if the shields the other woman always kept in place meant that Kate couldn't see any of the thoughts behind all this. "The nuns deserved it for all they did to you, and the slaver for what he did to your sister?"

"Yes," Kate said. She was certain of that, at least.

"And the boy you killed on the road for daring to come after you?" Siobhan continued. Kate found herself wondering exactly how much the other woman knew. "And the soldiers on the beach for... how did you justify that one, Kate? Was it because they were invading your home, or was it just that your orders had taken you there, and once the fight starts, there isn't time to ask why?"

Kate took a step back from Siobhan, mostly because if Kate hit her, she suspected that there would be consequences that would be too much to deal with.

"Even now," Siobhan said, "I suspect I could put a dozen men or women in front of you through whom you would put a blade willingly. I could find you foe after foe, and you would cut them down. Yet this is different?"

"She's innocent," Kate said.

"As far as you know," Siobhan replied. "Or perhaps I simply haven't told you all the countless deaths she is responsible for. All the misery." Kate blinked, and she was standing on the other side

of the fountain. “Or perhaps I simply haven’t told you all the good she has done, all the lives she has saved.”

“You aren’t going to tell me which it is, are you?” Kate asked.

“I have given you a task,” Siobhan said. “I expect you to perform it. Your questions and qualms do not come into it. This is about the loyalty an apprentice owes her teacher.”

So she wanted to know if Kate would kill just because she had commanded it.

“You could kill this woman yourself, couldn’t you?” Kate guessed. “I’ve seen what you can do, appearing out of nowhere like this. Killing one person, you have the powers to do it.”

“And who’s to say I’m not doing it?” Siobhan asked. “Perhaps the easiest way for me to do this is to send my apprentice.”

“Or perhaps you just want to see what I’ll do,” Kate guessed. “This is some kind of test.”

“Everything is a test, dear,” Siobhan said. “Haven’t you worked that part out by now? You *will* do this.”

What would happen when she did? Would Siobhan even really allow her to kill some stranger? Perhaps that was the game she was playing. Perhaps she intended to allow Kate to go all the way to the edge of murder and then stop her test. Kate hoped that was true, but even so, she didn’t like being told what to do like this.

That wasn’t a strong enough term for what Kate felt right then. She hated this. She hated Siobhan’s constant games, her constant desire to turn her into some kind of tool to use. Running through the forest hunted by ghosts had been bad enough. This was worse.

“What if I say no?” Kate said.

Siobhan’s expression darkened.

“Do you think you get to?” she asked. “You are my apprentice, sworn to me. I may do as I wish with you.”

Plants sprang up around Kate then, sharp thorns turning them into weapons. They didn’t touch her, but the threat was obvious. It seemed that Siobhan wasn’t done yet. She gestured over the water of the fountain again, and the scene it showed shifted.

“I could take you and give you over to one of the pleasure gardens of Southern Issettia,” Siobhan said. “There is a king there who might be inclined to be cooperative in exchange for the gift.”

Kate had a brief glimpse of silk-clad girls running around ahead of a man twice their age.

“I could take you and put you in the slave lines of the Near Colonies,” Siobhan continued, gesturing so that the scene showed long lines of workers working with picks and shovels in an open mine. “Perhaps I will tell you where to find the finest stones for merchants who do what I wish.”

The scene shifted another time, showing what was obviously a torture chamber. Men and women screamed as masked figures worked with hot irons.

“Or perhaps I will give you to the priests of the Masked Goddess, to earn repentance for your crimes.”

“You wouldn’t,” Kate said.

Siobhan reached out, grabbing her so fast that Kate barely had time to think before the other woman was forcing her head down under the water of the fountain. She cried out, but that just meant that she had no time to take a breath as she plunged into it. The cold of the water surrounded her, and though Kate fought, it felt as though her strength had abandoned her in those moments.

“You don’t know what I would do, and what I wouldn’t,” Siobhan said, her voice seeming to come from a long way away. “You think that I think about the world as you do. You think that I will stop short, or be kind, or ignore your *insults*. I could send you to do any of the things I wanted, and you would still be mine. Mine to do with as I wished.”

Kate saw things in the water then. She saw screaming figures wracked with agony. She saw a space filled with pain and violence, terror and helplessness. She recognized some of them, because

she'd killed them, or their ghosts, at least. She'd seen their images as they'd chased her through the forest. They were warriors who had been sworn to Siobhan.

"They betrayed me," Siobhan said, "and they paid for their betrayal. You *will* keep your word to me, or I will make you into something more useful. Do as I want, or you will join them, and serve me as they do."

She released Kate then, and Kate came up, spluttering as she fought for air. The fountain was gone now, and they were standing in the yard of the smithy once more. Siobhan was a little way from her now, standing as if nothing had happened.

"I want to be your friend, Kate," she said. "You wouldn't want me for an enemy. But I will do what I must."

"What you must?" Kate shot back. "You think that you have to threaten me, or have people killed?"

Siobhan spread her hands. "As I said, it is the curse of the powerful. You have potential to be very useful in what is to come, and I *will* make the most of that."

"I won't do it," Kate said. "I won't kill some girl for no reason."

Kate lashed out then, not physically, but with her powers. She drew her strength together and threw it like a stone at the walls that sat around Siobhan's mind. It bounced off, the power flickering away.

"You don't have the power to fight me," Siobhan said, "and you don't get to make that choice. Let me make this simpler for you."

She gestured, and the fountain appeared again, the waters shifting. This time, when the image settled, she didn't have to ask who she was looking at.

"Sophia?" Kate said. "Leave her alone, Siobhan, I'm warning you –"

Siobhan grabbed her again, forcing her to look at that image with the awful strength she seemed to possess here.

"Someone is going to die," Siobhan said. "You can choose who, simply by choosing whether you kill Gertrude Illiard. You can kill her, or your sister can die. It is your choice."

Kate stared at her. She knew that it wasn't a choice, not really. Not when it came to her sister. "All right," she said. "I'll do it. I'll do what you want."

She turned, heading for Ashton. She didn't go to say goodbye to Will, Thomas, or Winifred, partly because she didn't want to risk bringing Siobhan that close to them, and partly because she was sure that they would somehow see what it was she had to do next, and they would be ashamed of her for it.

Kate was ashamed. She hated the thought of what she was about to do, and the fact that she had so little choice in it. She just had to hope that it was all a test, and that Siobhan would stop her in time.

"I have to do this," she said to herself as she walked. "I have to."

Yes, Siobhan's voice whispered to her, *you do*.

CHAPTER TWO

Sophia walked back toward the camp she'd made with the others, not knowing what to do, what to think, even what to feel. She had to concentrate on every step in the dark, but the truth was that she couldn't concentrate, not after everything she'd just found out. She stumbled over roots, holding onto trees for support as she tried to make sense of the news. She felt leaves tangle in her long red hair, bark brushing stripes of moss against her dress.

Sienne's presence steadied her. The forest cat pushed against her legs, guiding the way back to the spot where the wagon stood, the circle of light from the campfire seeming like the only point of safety in a world that suddenly had no foundations. Cora and Emeline were there, the former indentured servant at the palace and the waif with a talent for touching minds looking at Sophia as if she'd turned into a ghost.

Right then, Sophia wasn't sure she hadn't. She felt insubstantial; unreal, as though the least breath of air might blow her in a dozen different directions, never to fit back together again. Sophia knew the trip back through the trees would have left her looking like a wild thing. She sat against one of the wheels of the wagon, staring blankly ahead while Sienne curled up against her, almost the way a domestic cat would have rather than the large predator she was.

"What is it?" Emeline asked. *Did something happen?* she added mentally.

Cora went to her too, reaching out to touch Sophia's shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

"I..." Sophia laughed, even though laughing was *anything* but the appropriate response to what she was feeling. "I think I'm pregnant."

Somewhere in the middle of saying it, the laughter turned into tears, and once they started, Sophia couldn't stop them. They just poured from her, and even she couldn't tell whether they were tears of happiness or despair, tension at the thought of everything that might be coming for her or something else entirely.

The others moved in to hold her, wrapping their arms around Sophia while the world blurred through the haze of it all.

"It will be all right," Cora said. "We'll make it all work."

Sophia couldn't see how any of it could work right then.

"Sebastian is the father?" Emeline asked.

Sophia nodded. How could she think that there had been anyone else? Then she realized... Emeline was thinking of Rupert, asking if his attempt at rape had gone further than they thought.

"Sebastian..." Sophia managed. "He's the only one I've ever slept with. It's his child."

Their child. Or it would be, in time.

"What are you going to do?" Cora asked.

That was the question to which Sophia didn't have an answer. It was the question that threatened to overwhelm her once again, and that seemed to bring tears just in trying to contemplate it. She couldn't imagine what came next. She couldn't begin to try to figure out how things would work.

Even so, she did her best to think about it. In an ideal world, she and Sebastian would have been married by now, and she would have found out that she was pregnant surrounded by people who would help her, in a warm, safe home where Sophia could bring a child up well.

Instead, she was out in the cold and the wet, learning the news with only Cora and Emeline to tell about it, without even her sister to help her.

Kate? she sent out into the dark. *Can you hear me?*

There was no answer. Perhaps it was the distance that did it, or perhaps Kate was too busy to answer. Perhaps any one of a dozen other things applied, because the truth was that Sophia didn't know enough about the talent she and her sister had to know for sure what could limit it. All she knew was that the darkness swallowed her words as surely as if she had simply yelled them.

“Maybe Sebastian will come for you,” Cora said.

Emeline looked at her with incredulity. “Do you really think that will happen? That a prince will come after some girl he’s gotten pregnant? That he will even care?”

“Sebastian isn’t like most of them in the palace,” Sophia said. “He’s kind. He’s a good man. He – ”

“He made you leave,” Emeline pointed out.

Sophia couldn’t argue with that. Sebastian didn’t really have a choice when he’d found out about the ways she’d lied to him, but he *could* have tried to find a way around the objections his family would have raised, or he could have come after her.

It was good to think that he might be trying to follow her, but how likely was it really? How realistic was it to hope that he might set off across the country after someone who had deceived him about everything, even down to who she was? Did she think that this was some song, where the gallant prince set off over hill and vale in an effort to find his lady love? It wasn’t how things worked. History was full of royal bastards, so what would one more matter?

“You’re right,” she said. “I can’t count on him following. His family wouldn’t allow it, even if he was going to do it. But I have to hope, because without Sebastian... I don’t think I can do this without him.”

“There are people who raise children alone,” Emeline said.

There were, but could Sophia be one of them? She knew that she could never, *ever* give a child away to an orphanage after all that she’d been through in the House of the Unclaimed. Yet how could she hope to raise a child when she couldn’t even find a place for herself to be safe?

Perhaps there were answers ahead for that part of things as well. The grand house wasn’t visible now in the dark, but Sophia knew it was out there, pulling her on with the promise of its secrets. It was the place where her parents had lived, and the place whose corridors still haunted her dreams with half-remembered flames.

She was going there to try to find the truth about who she was and where she fit into the world. Maybe those answers would give her enough stability to be able to raise her child. Maybe they would give her a place where things would be all right. Maybe she could even call for Kate, telling her sister that she’d found a place for all of them.

“You... have options,” Cora said, the hesitation in her voice hinting at what those options might be even before Sophia looked at her thoughts.

“You want me to get rid of my child?” Sophia said. Just the thought of it... she wasn’t sure that she could. How could she?

“I want you to do whatever you think is best,” Cora said. She reached into a pouch on her belt, next to the ones that held makeup. “This is rakkas powder. Any indentured woman soon learns about it, because she can’t say no to her master, and her master’s wife doesn’t want children who aren’t hers.”

There was a layer of pain and bitterness there that a part of Sophia wanted to understand. Instinctively, she reached out for Cora’s thoughts, finding pain, humiliation, a nobleman who had stumbled into the wrong room at a party.

There are some things even we shouldn’t intrude on, Emeline sent across to her. Her expression betrayed no hint of what she felt, but Sophia could feel the disapproval there. *If Cora wants to tell us, she will tell us.*

Sophia knew she was right, but even so, it felt wrong that she couldn’t be there for her friend the way Cora had been there for her with Prince Rupert.

You’re right, she sent back, *I’m sorry.*

Just don’t let Cora know that you were prying. With something like this, you know how personal it can be.

Sophia knew, because when it came to Rupert’s attempt to force her to be his mistress, it was something she didn’t want to talk about, or think about, or have to deal with again in any way.

When it came to the pregnancy, though, it was a different thing. That was about her and Sebastian, and *that* was something big, complicated, and potentially wonderful. It was just that it was also a potential disaster, for her and everyone around her.

“You put it in water,” Cora said, explaining the powder, “then drink it. In the morning, you won’t be pregnant anymore.”

She made it sound so simple as she passed it to Sophia. Even so, Sophia hesitated to take the powder from her. She reached out, and just touching it felt like a betrayal of something between her and Sebastian. She took it from Cora anyway, feeling the weight of the pouch in her hand, staring at it as if that would somehow give her the answers she needed.

“You don’t have to,” Emeline said. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe this prince of yours will come. Or maybe you’ll find another way.”

“Maybe,” Sophia said. She didn’t know what to think right then. The idea that she would have a child with Sebastian might be a wonderful thing under other circumstances, might fill her with the joyous prospect of raising a family, settling down, being safe. Here, though, it felt like a challenge that was at least as great as anything they’d faced on the way north. She wasn’t sure it was a challenge she could meet.

Where could she raise a child? It wasn’t as though she had anywhere to live. She didn’t even have a tent of her own at the moment, just the partial shelter of the wagon to keep off the fine drizzle that fell in the darkness and dampened Sophia’s hair. They’d even stolen the wagon, so they had to feel a little guilty every time they ate or drank because of how they’d acquired it. Could Sophia spend her whole life stealing? Could she do it while she raised her child?

Maybe she would make it to the grand home in the heart of Monthys, and which lay just ahead. What then? It would be ruins, unfit for any human habitation, let alone a safe place in which to bring up a child. Either that, or there would be people already there, and it would take everything Sophia had just to prove who she was to them.

Even after that, then what? Did she think people would just accept a girl with the mask of the goddess tattooed on her calf to show that she was one of the Unclaimed? Did she think people would take her in, give her a space in which to raise her child, or help her in any way? It wasn’t what people did with the likes of her.

Could she bring a child into a world like that? Was it right to bring something so helpless as a child into a world that had such cruelty in it? It wasn’t as though Sophia knew anything about being a mother, or had anything useful to teach her offspring. Everything she’d learned as a child had been about the cruelty that came from disobedience, or the violence that it was only right for something as wicked as an orphan to expect.

“We don’t have to make any decisions now,” Emeline said. “This can wait until tomorrow.”

Cora shook her head. “The longer you wait, the harder it will be. It’s better if – ”

“Stop,” Sophia said, cutting the potential argument short. “No more talking. I know you’re both trying to help, but this isn’t something you can decide for me. It’s not even something I’m sure I can decide, but I’m going to have to, and I have to do it alone.”

This was the kind of thing she wished she could talk about with Kate, but there was still no answer when she called into the night with her thoughts. In any case, the truth was that Kate was probably better at problems that involved enemies to fight, or pursuers to escape. This was the kind of thing she hadn’t had to face, any more than Sophia had.

Sophia went to the far side of the cart, taking Cora’s powder with her. She didn’t tell them what she was going to do next, because right then, she wasn’t even sure that she knew herself. Sienna got up to follow her, but Sophia pushed the forest cat away with a flicker of thought.

She’d never felt as alone as she did in that moment.

CHAPTER THREE

The last time Angelica had gone to the Dowager's rooms, it had been because she had been summoned. She had been worried enough then. Now, marching in of her own accord, she was terrified, and Angelica hated that. She hated the sense of powerlessness that followed her, even though she was one of the greatest nobles of the kingdom. She could do as she wished with servants, with so-called friends, with half the nobles of the kingdom, but the Dowager could still have her killed.

It was worse that Angelica had given her that power. She'd done it the moment she tried to drug Sebastian. This wasn't a kingdom where the monarch could just snap her fingers and order a death, but with her... there wasn't a jury of noble peers who would call what she'd done anything other than treason, if the Dowager chose to bring it to that.

So she forced herself to pause as she reached the doors to the Dowager's rooms, composing herself. The guards there said nothing, merely waited for Angelica to make her case to go inside. If she'd had more time, Angelica would have sent a servant to request this audience. If she'd had more confidence in her power here, she would have rebuked the men for not showing her the proper deference.

"I need to see her majesty," Angelica said.

"We were not informed that our queen would be seeing anyone," one of the guards said. There was no apology for it, none of the courtesy that Angelica was due. Silently, Angelica resolved to see the man pay for that in time. Perhaps if she could find a way to repost him to the war?

"I didn't know it would be necessary until a little while ago," Angelica said. "Ask her if she will see me, please. It's about her son."

The guard nodded at that, and set off inside. The mention of Sebastian was enough to motivate him even if Angelica's position couldn't. Perhaps he just knew what the Dowager had already made clear to Angelica: that when it came to her sons, there was little she wouldn't do.

It was what gave Angelica hope that this might work, but it was also what made this dangerous. The Dowager might turn and stop Sebastian from leaving, but she might just as easily have Angelica killed for failing to seduce him as well as she'd been told. Keep him happy, the old bat had told her, don't let him think about another woman. It had been obvious enough what she'd meant.

The guard reappeared quickly enough, holding the door open for Angelica to step through. He didn't bow as he should have, or even announce her with her full title.

"Milady d'Angelica," he called out instead.

Then again, what titles did Angelica have that could stand up to a queen's? What power did she possess that didn't pale into insignificance beside that of the woman who stood in the sitting room of her apartments, her face a carefully composed mask.

Angelica curtsied, because she didn't dare do anything else. The Dowager gestured impatiently for her to stand.

"A sudden visit," she said without a smile, "and news about my son. I think we can dispense with that."

And if Angelica hadn't curtsied, no doubt Sebastian's mother would have rebuked her for it.

"You told me to bring you any news about Sebastian, Your Majesty," Angelica said.

The Dowager nodded, moving over to a comfortable-looking chair. She didn't offer Angelica a seat.

"I know what I said. I also know what I said would happen if you didn't."

Angelica could remember the threats too. The Mask of Lead, the traditional punishment for traitors. Just the thought of it made her shudder.

"Well?" the Dowager asked. "Have you managed to make my son the happiest husband-to-be in the circle of the world?"

“He says that he is leaving,” Angelica said. “He was angry at being manipulated, and he declared that he was going after the whore he loved before.”

“And you did nothing to stop him?” the Dowager demanded.

Angelica could hardly believe that. “What would you have had me do? Tackle him at the door? Lock him in his chambers?”

“Do I have to spell it out to you?” the Dowager said. “Sebastian might not be Rupert, but he is still a man.”

“You think I didn’t try that?” Angelica countered. That part stung worse than the rest of it. No one had rejected her before. Whoever she wanted, whether it was out of genuine desire or simply to prove that she could, had come running. Sebastian had been the only one to ever turn her down. “He’s in love.”

The Dowager sat there, and seemed to calm a little. “So you’re telling me that you can’t be the wife I need for my son? That you can’t make him happy? That you’re useless to me?”

Too late, Angelica saw the danger in it.

“I didn’t say that,” she said. “I only came because – ”

“Because you wanted me to solve your problems for you, and because you were afraid of what would happen if you didn’t,” the Dowager said. She stood, her finger jabbing at Angelica’s chest. “Well, I am prepared to give you one piece of advice. If he is following the girl, the most likely place she will go is Monthys, in the north. There, is that sufficient for you, or do I need to draw you a map?”

“How do you know that?” Angelica asked.

“Because I know what this is all about,” the Dowager snapped back. “Let’s make it clear, Milady. I have already done something to control my son. I have sent *you* to distract him. Now, if necessary, I will discard that option, but there would be no marriage then, and I would be... very disappointed in you.”

She didn’t need to spell out the threat. At best, Angelica would find herself sent away from the court. At worst...

“I’ll fix this,” she promised. “I’ll make sure that Sebastian loves me, and only me.”

“You do that,” the Dowager said. “Whatever it takes, you do that.”

Angelica had no time for the usual niceties of noble travel. This was not the moment to meander along in a carriage, hemmed in by a gaggle of hangers-on, and surrounded by enough servants to slow her to a walk. Instead, she had her servants dig out riding clothes, and with her own hands she packed a small bag with things she might need. She even tied her hair back in a much simpler style than her usual elaborate braids, knowing that there would be no time for such things on the road. Besides, there were some things it might be better not to be recognized doing.

She set out into Ashton with a cloak around her to make sure no one saw who she was. She took a half mask as well, and in the city, that was a common enough mark of religious fervor that no one questioned it. She rode to the gates of the palace first, stopping by the guards and spinning a coin between her fingers.

“Prince Sebastian,” she said. “Which way did he go?”

She knew she couldn’t hide her identity from the guards, but probably they wouldn’t ask questions either. They would simply assume that she was following after the man she loved and intended to marry. It was even the truth, in its way.

“That way, Milady,” one of the men said, pointing. “The way the young women went when they ran from the palace a few days ago.”

Angelica should have guessed as much. He pointed, and Angelica went. She followed Sebastian through the city like a hound at the hunt, hoping she could get to him before he went too far. She felt

almost like some spirit bound to the city. In her home, she was powerful. She knew the people here, and whom to talk to. The further she went beyond it, the more she would have to rely on her own wits. She asked the same questions Sebastian must have asked as he went, and received the same answers.

She heard about the flight of Sophia and the serving girl through the city from a series of folk so filthy she wouldn't even have noticed them under other circumstances. They remembered it because it had been the most exciting thing to happen in their dreary lives for weeks. Maybe she and Sebastian would become another piece of gossip for them. Angelica hoped not. From a gossiping fishwife who genuflected to her as she passed, Angelica heard about a chase through the city's streets. From an urchin so grubby that she couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl, she heard about them diving into the barrels of a cart to hide.

"And then the woman with the cart told them to come with her," the filthy creature told her. "They all drove off together."

Angelica tossed it a small coin. "If you're lying to me, I'll see to it that you're thrown from one of the bridges."

Now that she knew about the cart, it was easy to track their progress. They'd headed for the northernmost exit from the city, and that seemed to make it clear where they were heading: Monthys. Angelica sped up, hoping that the Dowager's information was right even as she wondered what the old woman was keeping from her. She didn't like being a pawn in someone else's game. One day, the old hag would pay for it.

For today, she had to get ahead of Sebastian.

Angelica had no thoughts about trying to change his mind, not yet. He would still be burning with the need to find that... that... Angelica couldn't think of words harsh enough for one of the Indentured who pretended to be something she wasn't, who seduced the prince who was meant for Angelica, and who had been nothing but an impediment since she arrived.

She couldn't let Sebastian find her, but he wouldn't simply turn away from the search because she asked. That meant that she needed to act, and act fast, if she was going to make this turn out right.

"Out of the way!" she called, before spurring her horse forward at the kind of speed that promised a crushing fall to anyone stupid enough to stand in its path. She headed out from the city, guessing at the route the wagon must have taken. She cut across the fields, jumping hedges so close that she could feel the brush of the branches against her boots. Anything that would let her get ahead of Sebastian before he went too far.

Eventually, she saw a crossroads ahead, and a man leaning on the signpost there with a flagon of cider in one hand and the air of someone who didn't intend to move.

"You," Angelica said. "Are you here every day? Did you see a cart with three girls pass by here on the way north a few days ago?"

The man hesitated, regarding his drink. "I – "

"It doesn't matter," Angelica said. She hefted a purse, the clink of the Royals inside unmistakable. "You were now. A young man named Sebastian will ask you, and if you want these coins, you will say that you saw them. Three young women, one with red hair, one dressed like a servant from the palace."

"Three young women?" the man said.

"One with red hair," Angelica repeated with what she hoped was a suitable degree of patience. "They asked you the way to Barriston."

It was the wrong way, of course. More than that, it was a journey that would keep Sebastian occupied for a while, and that would cool his foolish desire for Sophia when he failed to find her. It would give him a chance to remember his duty.

"They did all that?" the man asked.

"They did if you want the coin," Angelica snapped back. "Half now, half when it's done. Repeat it to me, so I know you're not too drunk to say it when the time comes."

He managed it, and that was good enough. It had to be. Angelica gave him his coin and rode on, wondering how long it would take him to realize that she wouldn't be coming back with the other half. Hopefully, he wouldn't work it out until well after Sebastian had been by.

For her part, she had to be long gone by that point. She couldn't afford for Sebastian to see her, or he would work out what she'd done. Besides, she needed all the head start that she could get. It was a long way north to Monthys, and Angelica needed to finish everything that she needed to do well before Sebastian realized his mistake and came after her.

"There will be enough time," Angelica reassured herself as she rode north. "I'll get it done, and be back in Ashton before Sebastian realizes that anything's wrong."

Get it done. Such a delicate way of phrasing it, as if she were still in court, feigning shock while setting out the indiscretions of some minor noble girl for the rumor mill to digest. Why not say what she meant? That, once she found Sophia, there was only one thing that was going to ensure that she would never interfere with her or Sebastian's life again; only one thing that would make it clear that Sebastian was hers, and that would show the Dowager that Angelica was willing to do whatever was required to secure her position. There was only one thing that was going to leave Angelica feeling safe.

Sophia was going to have to die.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sebastian had no doubt as he rode that there would be trouble for what he was doing now. Riding away like this, against his mother's orders, avoiding the marriage she had set for him? For a noble from another family, it would have been enough to warrant disinheritance. For the son of the Dowager, it was tantamount to treason.

"It won't come to that," Sebastian said as his horse thundered onward. "And even if it does, Sophia is worth it."

He knew what he was giving up by doing this. When he found her, when he married her, they wouldn't just be able to walk back into Ashton in triumph, take up residence in the palace, and assume that everyone would be happy. If they were able to return at all, it would be under a cloud of disgrace.

"I don't care," Sebastian told his horse. Worrying about disgrace and honor had been what had gotten him into this mess in the first place. He'd put Sophia aside because of what he'd assumed people would think about her. He hadn't even made them raise their voices in disapproval; he'd just acted, knowing what they would say.

It had been a weak, cowardly thing to do, and now he was going to undo it, if he could.

Sophia was worth a dozen of the nobles he'd spent his time around growing up. A hundred. It didn't matter if she had the Masked Goddess's mark tattooed on her calf to claim her, she was the only woman Sebastian could even begin to dream of marrying.

Certainly not Milady d'Angelica. She was everything that the court represented: vain, shallow, manipulative, focused on her own wealth and success rather than anyone else. It didn't matter that she was beautiful, or from the right family, that she was intelligent or the sealing of an alliance within the country. She wasn't the woman Sebastian wanted.

"I was still harsh with her when I left," Sebastian said. He wondered what anyone watching would think, with him talking to his horse like this. Yet the truth was that he didn't care now *what* people thought, and in a lot of ways, the horse was a better listener than most of the people around him had been at the palace.

He knew how things worked there. Angelica hadn't been trying to trick him; she'd simply been trying to put something she knew he would find unpleasant in the best way possible. Looked at through the eyes of a world where the two of them had no choice about whom they were married to, it could even be seen as a kindness.

It was just that Sebastian didn't want to think that way anymore.

"I don't want to be stuck in a place where my only duty is to keep breathing in case Rupert dies," he told his horse. "I don't want to be somewhere my value is as breeding stock, or as something to be sold on to promote the right connections."

Looked at like that, the horse probably understood his predicament as well as any noble could. Weren't the finest horses sold on for their breeding potential? Didn't those nobles who liked to race the length of country lanes or ride to the hunt keep records of every line, every foal? Wouldn't every one of them kill their own prize stallions before they allowed a single drop of the wrong blood to enter the bloodlines?

"I'll find her, and I'll find a priest to marry us," Sebastian said. "Even if Mother wants to charge us with treason over it, she'll still need to persuade the Assembly of Nobles."

They wouldn't just kill a prince on a whim. Probably, some of them would be sympathetic, given enough time. Failing that, he and Sophia could always elope into the mountain lands of the north, or slip over the Knifewater together unseen, or even just retire to the lands Sebastian was supposed to be a duke of. They would find a way to make it work.

"I just have to find her first," Sebastian said, as his horse took him out of the city, into the open countryside.

He felt confident that he would catch up to her, even with how far ahead she had to be by now. He'd found people who had seen what had happened when she ran from the palace, asking guards for their reports, then listening to stories from the people of the city. Most of them had been cautious about talking to him, but he'd managed to get enough fragments together to at least get a general sense of the direction Sophia had been moving in.

From what he'd heard, she was in a cart, which meant that she would be moving faster than a walking pace, but nowhere near as fast as Sebastian could move on horseback. He would find a way to catch up to her, even if it meant riding without rest until he did it. Perhaps that was part of his penance for pushing her out in the first place.

Sebastian pressed forward until he saw the crossroads, finally slowing his horse to a walk as he tried to work out which way to go.

There was a man asleep against the post of the crossroads, a straw hat pulled down over his eyes. A cider jug beside him suggested the reason he was snoring like a donkey. Sebastian let him sleep for now, looking up at the sign. East would lead to the coast, but Sebastian doubted that Sophia had the means to take a ship, or anywhere to go if she did. South would lead back to Ashton, so that was out.

That left the road leading north, and the one leading west. Without any additional information, Sebastian had no idea about which route to take. He could try looking for cart tracks on one of the dirt sections of the road, he guessed, but that implied that he had the skills to know what he was looking for, or to pick out Sophia's cart from the hundreds of others that might have gone past in the days since then.

That left asking for help, and hoping.

Gently, using the toe of his boot, Sebastian nudged the foot of the sleeping man. He stepped back as the man spluttered and came awake, because he didn't know how someone that drunk might react to the sight of him there.

"Whaddizit?" the man managed. He also managed to pull himself up to his feet, which seemed quite impressive under the circumstances. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Even now, he seemed to have to hold onto the post to steady himself. Sebastian was starting to wonder if this was such a good idea.

"Are you here regularly?" he asked. He both needed the answer to be yes and hoped that it would be no, because what would that say about the man's life.

"Why do you want to know?" the drunk shot back.

Sebastian was starting to realize that he wasn't going to find what he wanted here. Even if this man spent most of his time by the crossroads, Sebastian doubted that he would be sober often enough to notice much.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I was looking for someone who might have come by here, but I doubt you can help me. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

He turned back toward his horse.

"Wait," the man said. "You... you're Sebastian, aren't you?"

Sebastian stopped at the sound of his name, turning back toward the man with a frown.

"How do you know my name?" he asked.

The man staggered a little. "What name?"

"My name," Sebastian said. "You just called me Sebastian."

"Wait, you're Sebastian?"

Sebastian did his best to be patient. This man was obviously looking for him, and Sebastian could only think of a few reasons why that might be the case.

"Yes, I am," he said. "What I want to know is why you're looking for me."

"I was..." The man paused for a moment, his brow crinkling. "I was supposed to give you a message."

“A message?” Sebastian said. It seemed too good to be true, but even so, he dared to hope. “From whom?”

“There was this woman,” the drunk said, and that was enough to fan the embers of hope into a fully fledged fire.

“What woman?” Sebastian said.

The other man wasn’t looking at him now though. If anything, it looked as though he was half drifting back to sleep. Sebastian caught hold of him, half holding him up, half shaking him awake.

“What woman?” he repeated.

“There was something... a red-haired woman, on a cart.”

“That’s her!” Sebastian said, his excitement getting the better of him in that moment. “Was this a few days ago?”

The drunk took his time considering it. “I don’t know. Could be. What day is it?”

Sebastian ignored that. It was enough that he’d found the clue Sophia had left for him. “The woman... that’s Sophia. Where did she go? What was her message?”

He gave the drunk another shake as he started to drift off again, and Sebastian had to admit that it was at least partly from frustration. He needed to know what message Sophia had left with this man.

Why him? Had there been no one else Sophia could leave her message with? Looking at the man he was all but holding up, Sebastian knew the answer to that: she’d been sure that Sebastian would run into him, because she’d guessed that he wouldn’t be going anywhere. He’d been the best way to get a message to Sebastian if he followed.

Which meant that she wanted him to follow. She wanted him to be able to find her. Just the thought of it was enough to lift Sebastian’s heart, because it meant that Sophia might be prepared to forgive all that he’d done to her. She wouldn’t provide him with a way to follow her if she didn’t see a way for them to be together again, would she?

“What was the message?” Sebastian repeated.

“She gave me money,” the man said. “Said to say that... damn, I know I remembered it...”

“Think,” Sebastian said. “It’s important.”

“She said to tell you that she’d gone off to Barriston!” the drunk said with a note of triumph. “Said to say that I’d seen it with my own eyes.”

“Barriston?” Sebastian asked, eyeing the sign at the crossroads. “You’re certain?”

The town didn’t seem like a place that Sophia had any reason to go to, but maybe that was the point, given that she had been running. It was a provincial kind of town, without the size or the population of Ashton, but it had some wealth thanks to its glove industry. Perhaps it was as good a place as any for Sophia to go.

The other man nodded, and that was enough for Sebastian. If Sophia had left him a message, then it didn’t matter who she had chosen to deliver it for her. What mattered was that he’d gotten her message, and he knew which way to go to follow her. As thanks, Sebastian tossed the man by the crossroads a coin from his belt pouch, then rushed to mount his horse.

He steered the creature west, heeling it forward as he set off in the direction of Barriston. It would take time to get there, but he would push as hard as he dared on the way. He would catch up to her there, or maybe he would even overtake her on the road. Either way, he would find her, and they would be together.

“I’m coming, Sophia,” he promised, while around him, the landscape of the Ridings sped by. Now that he knew she wanted to be found, he would do anything he had to do to catch up to her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dowager Queen Mary of the House of Flamberg stood in the middle of her gardens, lifting a white rose to her nose and taking in the delicate scent. She had become good at masking her impatience over the years, and where her eldest son was concerned, impatience was an emotion that came to her far too readily.

“What is this rose?” she asked one of the gardeners.

“A variety created by one of our indentured gardeners,” the man said. “She calls it the Bright Star.”

“Congratulate her on it and inform her that from now on it will be known as the Dowager’s Star,” the queen said. It was both a compliment and a reminder to the gardener that those who owned the indentured’s debt could do as they wished with her creations. It was the kind of double-sided move the Dowager enjoyed for its efficiency.

She’d become good at making them too. After the civil wars, it would have been so easy to slide into powerlessness. Instead, she’d found the balancing points between the Assembly of Nobles and the Masked Goddess’s church, the unwashed masses and the merchants. She’d done it with intelligence, ruthlessness, and patience.

Even patience had its limits, though.

“Before you do that,” the Dowager said, “kindly drag my son out of whatever brothel he is ensconced in and remind him that his queen is waiting for him.”

The Dowager stood by a sundial, watching the shift of the shadow as she waited for the wastrel who stood as heir to the kingdom. It had moved a full finger’s breadth by the time she heard Rupert’s footsteps approaching.

“I must be going senile in my old age,” the Dowager said, “because I’m obviously misremembering things. The part where I summoned you to me half an hour ago, for example.”

“Hello to you too, Mother,” Rupert said, not looking contrite in the least.

It would have been better if there were any sense that he had been using his time wisely. Instead, the disheveled state of his clothes said that she’d been right in her earlier guess about where he would be. That, or he’d been hunting. There were so few activities her elder son seemed to actually care about.

“I see that your bruises are finally starting to fade,” the Dowager said. “Or have you finally started to get better at covering them with powder?”

She saw her son flush with anger at that, but she didn’t care. If he’d thought himself able to lash out at her, he would have done it years ago, but Rupert was good at knowing who he could and couldn’t direct his temper at.

“I was caught by surprise,” Rupert said.

“By a serving girl,” the Dowager replied calmly. “From what I hear, while you were in the middle of attempting to force yourself on your brother’s former fiancée.”

Rupert stood there open-mouthed for several seconds. Hadn’t he learned by now that his mother heard what went on in her kingdom, and in her home? Did he think that one remained the ruler of an island as divided as this one without spies? The Dowager sighed. He really did have too much to learn, and showed no signs of being willing to learn those lessons.

“Sebastian had put her aside by then,” he insisted. “She was fair game, and nothing but an indentured whore anyway.”

“All those poets who write about you as a golden prince have really never met you, have they?” the Dowager said, although the truth was that she’d paid more than a few to make sure the poems turned out right. A prince should have the reputation he desired, not the one he’d earned. With the right reputation, Rupert might even have the Assembly of Nobles’ acclamation when the time came

for him to rule. “Did it not occur to you that Sebastian might be angry if he heard what you tried to do?”

Rupert frowned at that, and the Dowager could see that her son didn’t understand it.

“Why would he? He wasn’t going to marry her, and in any case, I’m the eldest, I’ll be his king one day. He wouldn’t dare to do anything.”

“If you think that,” the Dowager said, “you don’t know your brother.”

Rupert laughed at that. “And *you* know him, Mother? Trying to marry him off? No wonder he ran.”

The Dowager bit back her anger.

“Yes, Sebastian ran. I’ll admit that I underestimated the strength of his feelings there, but that can be solved.”

“By dealing with the girl,” Rupert said.

The Dowager nodded. “I assume it’s a task you want for yourself?”

“Absolutely.”

Rupert didn’t even hesitate. The Dowager had never thought that he would. That was good, in its way, because a ruler shouldn’t shrink from doing what was necessary, yet she doubted that Rupert was thinking in those terms. He just wanted revenge for the bruises that marred his otherwise perfect features even now.

“Let us be clear,” the Dowager said. “It is necessary that this girl should die, both to undo the insult to you, and because of the... difficulties she could represent.”

“With a marriage between Sebastian and an unsuitable girl,” Rupert said. “How embarrassing.”

The Dowager plucked one of the flowers nearby. “Embarrassment is like this rose. It looks innocuous enough. It draws the eye. Yet it still has cutting thorns. Our power is an illusion, kept alive because people believe in us. If they embarrass us, that faith could falter.” She closed her hand, ignoring the pain as she crushed it. “These things must be dealt with, whatever the cost.”

It was better to let Rupert think that this was about maintaining the prestige of their family. It was better than acknowledging the real danger the girl represented. When the Dowager had realized who she really was... well, the world had turned into a crystal-sharp thing, clear and full of cutting edges. She could *not* allow that danger to continue.

“I’ll kill her,” Rupert said.

“Quietly,” the Dowager added. “Without fuss. I don’t want you creating more trouble than you solve.”

“I will deal with it,” Rupert insisted.

The Dowager wasn’t sure if he would, but she had other pieces in play when it came to the girl. The trick was to only use the ones who had their own reasons to act. Give commands, and she would simply draw attention to the fact that this girl was someone worth watching.

It had taken all her strength of will not to react the first time she had seen Sophia, at dinner. Not to betray what she felt at the sight of that face, or at the news that Sebastian planned to *marry* her.

That her younger son had left in pursuit of her made things more complicated. Ordinarily, Sebastian was the stable one, the clever one, the dutiful one. In a lot of ways, he would make a better king than his brother, but that wasn’t the way these things worked. No, his role was to live his life quietly, doing as he was commanded, *not* to run off, doing what he wished.

“I have another thing for you to do as well,” the Dowager said. She set off on a slow circuit of the garden, forcing Rupert to follow after her the way a dog followed after its master. In this case, though, Rupert was a hunting dog, and she was about to provide the scent.

“Haven’t you given me enough tasks, Mother?” he demanded. Sebastian wouldn’t have argued. *Hadn’t* argued with anything, except on the one matter where it counted.

“You cause less trouble when you’re busy,” the Dowager said. “In any case, this is the kind of task where your presence might actually be useful. Your brother has acted out of emotion, running off like this. I think it will take a brother’s touch to bring him back.”

Rupert laughed at that. “Judging by the way he set off, it will take a regiment to bring him back.”

“Then *take one*,” the Dowager snapped back. “You have a commission, so use it. Take the men you need. Find your brother and bring him back.”

“In pristine condition, no doubt?” Rupert said.

The Dowager’s eyes narrowed at that. “He is your *brother*, Rupert. You will not hurt him any more than is necessary to bring him home safely.”

Rupert looked down. “Of course, Mother. While I’m at all this, would you like me to do a third thing?”

There was something about the way he said it that made the Dowager pause, turning to face her son.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

Rupert smiled and waved a hand. From the far end of the garden, a figure in the robes of a priest started to approach. When he got within a few paces, he swept into a deep bow.

“Mother,” Rupert said, “may I introduce Kirkus, second secretary to the high priestess of the Masked Goddess?”

“Justina sent you?” the Dowager asked, deliberately using the high priestess’s name to remind the man of the company he was now in.

“No, your majesty,” the priest said, “but there is a matter of the utmost importance.”

The Dowager sighed at that. In her experience, matters of the utmost importance to priests mostly involved donations to their temples, the need to punish the sinful who apparently weren’t being sufficiently afflicted by the law, or requests to interfere in the affairs of their brethren across the Knifewater. Justina had learned to keep those matters to herself, but her underlings sometimes buzzed around, irritating her like black-clad wasps.

“He’s worth listening to, Mother,” Rupert said. “He’s been spending his time around the court, trying to gain an audience. You asked where I was before? I was finding Kirkus here, because I guessed that you might want to hear what he had to say.”

That was enough to make the Dowager reconsider the priest. Anything that was enough to make Rupert pull his mind away from the women of the court was worthy of her attention, at least for a short while.

“Very well,” she said. “What do you have to say, second secretary?”

“Your Majesty,” the man said, “there has been a most callous assault on our House of the Unclaimed, and then on the rights of the priesthood.”

“You think I haven’t heard about it?” the Dowager countered. She looked over to Rupert. “This is your news?”

“Your majesty,” the priest insisted, “the girl who killed our nuns suffered no justice. Instead, she found sanctuary in one of the Free Companies. With Lord Cranston’s men.”

The name of the company caught the Dowager’s interest, a little.

“Lord Cranston’s company has been most helpful in the recent past,” the Dowager said. “They assisted in fighting off a force of raiders from our shores.”

“Does that – ”

“Be silent,” the Dowager snapped, cutting the man off in mid-rebuttal. “If Justina really cared about this, she would raise the issue. Rupert, why have you brought this to me?”

Her son smiled like a shark. “Because I have been asking questions, Mother. I have been very thorough.”

Meaning that he tortured someone. Was it really the only way her son knew to do things?

“I believe the girl Kirkus seeks to be the sister of Sophia,” Rupert said. “Some of the survivors from the House of the Unclaimed spoke about two sisters, one of whom was trying to save the other.”

Two sisters. The Dowager swallowed. Yes, that would fit, wouldn’t it? Her information had concentrated on Sophia, but if the other was alive as well, then she could be just as much of a danger. Perhaps more, judging by what she’d managed to do so far.

“Thank you, Kirkus,” she managed. “I will deal with this situation. Please leave me to discuss it with my son.”

She managed to turn it into a dismissal, and the man hurried from her sight. She tried to think this through. It was obvious what needed to happen next. The question was simply how. She thought for a moment... yes, that might work.

“So,” Rupert said, “do you want me to kill this sister of hers as well? I take it we don’t want something like *that* seeking revenge?”

Of course he would think it was about that. He didn’t know the real danger they represented, or the problems that could result if anyone found out the truth.

“What do you propose to do?” the Dowager said. “March in and take on Peter Cranston’s regiment? I’m likely to lose a son if you do that, Rupert.”

“You think I couldn’t beat them?” he shot back.

The Dowager waved that away. “I think there’s an easier way. The New Army is gathering, so we will send Lord Cranston’s regiment against them. If I choose the battle wisely, our enemies will be harmed, while the girl will die, and it will look like no more than another unmarked grave in a war.”

Rupert looked at her then with a kind of admiration. “Why, Mother, I never knew that you could be so cold-blooded.”

No, he didn’t, because he hadn’t seen the things she’d done to keep the scraps of her power she had. He’d fought rebels, but he hadn’t seen the civil wars, or the things that had been necessary in their wake. Rupert probably thought that he was a man without limits, but the Dowager had found out the hard way that she would do *whatever* was necessary to secure the throne for her family.

Still, it wasn’t worth thinking about. This would be over soon. Sebastian would be safely back with his family, Rupert would have avenged his humiliation, and two girls who should have been long dead would go to the grave without a trace.

CHAPTER SIX

“It’s a test,” Kate whispered to herself as she stalked her victim. “It’s a test.”

She kept saying it to herself, perhaps in the hope that repetition would make it true, perhaps because it was the only way to keep herself following after Gertrude Illiard, keeping to the shadows while she sat on the balcony of her home for breakfast, slipping silently through the crowds of the city while the merchant’s daughter walked with friends through the early morning markets.

Savis Illiard kept dogs and guards to protect his property and his daughter both, but the guards had been at their posts too long and relied on the dogs, while the dogs were easy to quiet with a flicker of power.

Kate watched the woman she was supposed to kill, and the truth was that she could have done it a dozen times over by now. She could have run up in the crowd and slid a knife between her ribs. She could have fired a crossbow bolt or even thrown a stone with lethal force. She could even have taken advantage of the environment of the city, startling a horse at the wrong moment or cutting the rope that held a barrel as her target walked beneath.

Kate did none of those things. She watched Gertrude Illiard instead.

It would have been easier if she had been an obviously evil person. If she had struck out at her father’s servants in pique, or treated the people of the city like scum, Kate might have been able to see her as just a step away from the nuns who had tormented her, or the people who had looked down on her on the street. Instead, she was kind, in the small ways that people could be when they didn’t think too much about it. She gave money to a beggar boy as she passed. She asked after the children of a shopkeeper she barely knew.

She seemed like a kind, gentle person, and Kate couldn’t believe that even Siobhan would want someone like that dead.

“It’s a test,” Kate told herself again. “It has to be.”

She tried to tell herself that the kindness had to be a façade masking some deeper, darker side. Perhaps this young woman showed a kind face to the world to hide murders or blackmail, cruelty or deception. Yet while someone else might be able to tell themselves that, Kate could see Gertrude Illiard’s thoughts, and none of them pointed to a predator lurking beneath the surface. She was a normal enough young woman for her place in the world, made wealthy by her father’s business, perhaps a little unconcerned about it, but genuinely innocent in every respect Kate could see.

It was hard not to feel disgusted at what Siobhan had commanded her to do then, and at what Kate had become under her tutelage. How could Siobhan want her dead? How could she demand that Kate do this thing? Was she really asking it just to see if Kate had it in her to kill on command? Kate hated that thought. She couldn’t, she wouldn’t, do such a thing.

But she had no choice, and she hated that even more.

She had to be sure, though, so she slipped back to the merchant’s house ahead of her prey, slipping over the wall in a moment when she could feel that the guards weren’t watching and sprinting to the shadows of the wall. She waited another few heartbeats, making sure that everything was still, then clambered up to the balcony to Gertrude Illiard’s room. There was a latch on the balcony, but that was an easy thing to lift using a slender knife, letting her pad inside.

The room was empty, and Kate couldn’t sense anyone nearby, so she quickly searched it. She didn’t know what she was hoping to find. A vial of poison saved for a rival, perhaps. A diary detailing all the tortures she planned to inflict on someone. There *was* a diary, but even at a glance, Kate could see that it simply detailed the other young woman’s dreams and hopes for the future, her meetings with friends, her brief flash of feelings for a young player she’d met in the market.

The truth was that Kate couldn't find a single reason why Gertrude Illiard deserved to die, and even though she'd killed before, Kate found the thought of murdering someone for no reason abhorrent. It made her sick just to think about doing it.

She felt the flicker of an approaching mind and swiftly hid under the bed, trying to think, trying to decide what she would do. It wasn't that this young woman reminded Kate of herself, because Kate couldn't imagine this merchant's daughter ever truly knowing suffering, or wanting to pick up a blade. She wasn't even like Sophia, because Kate's sister had a deceptive streak when she needed it, and the kind of hard practicality that came from having to live with nothing. This girl would never have spent weeks pretending to be something she wasn't, and would never have seduced a prince.

While a servant went around the room, tidying it in preparation for her mistress's return, Kate put her hand to the locket at her neck, thinking of the picture of a woman inside. Maybe that was it. Maybe Gertrude Illiard fit with the picture of well-born innocence Kate had when it came to her parents. What did that mean, though? Did it mean that she couldn't kill her? She touched the ring that sat beside the locket, intended for Sophia. She knew what her sister would say, but this wasn't a choice that Sophia would ever be in a position to have to make.

Then Gertrude came into the room, and Kate knew that she would have to make her choice soon. Siobhan was waiting, and Kate doubted that her teacher's patience would last forever.

"Thank you, Milly," Gertrude said. "Is my father home?"

"He isn't expected back for a couple of hours, miss."

"In that case, I think I will take a nap. I woke too early today."

"Of course, miss. I'll see that you aren't disturbed."

The servant walked off, shutting the door to the room behind her with a click. Kate saw embroidered boots pulled off and set down next to her hiding place, felt the shifting of the bed above her as Gertrude Illiard sat down on it. The timbers creaked as she lay down, and still Kate waited.

She had to do this. She'd seen what would happen to her if she didn't. Siobhan had made it clear: Kate was hers now, to do with as she wished. Kate was as tightly bound to her as she would have been if her debt had been sold to another. More tightly, because now it wasn't just the law of the land giving Siobhan power over Kate, but the magic of her fountain.

If she failed Siobhan in this, at best, she would find herself sent off into some living hell, forced to endure things that would make the House of the Unclaimed look like a palace. At worst... Kate had seen the ghosts of those who had betrayed Siobhan. She had seen what they suffered. Kate wouldn't join them, whatever it took.

She just had to keep reminding herself that this was a test.

She watched Gertrude's thoughts as she fell asleep, noting their changing rhythms as she slid into slumber. There was silence around the room now, as servants kept away to let their mistress get her rest. It was the perfect moment. Kate knew she had to act now, or not at all.

She slid out from under the bed without making a sound, rising back to her feet and looking down at Gertrude Illiard. In sleep, she looked even more innocent, mouth slightly open as she lay with her head on one of a pair of goose down pillows.

It's a test, Kate told herself, only a test. Siobhan will stop this before I kill her.

It was the only thing that made sense. The woman of the fountain had no reason to want this girl dead, and Kate wouldn't believe that even she could be that capricious. Yet how did she pass the test? The only way that she could see was to actually try to murder this girl.

Kate stood there contemplating her options. She didn't have any poisons, and wouldn't know the best way to administer them if she did, so that was out. There was no way to engineer an accident here, the way she might have on the street. She could take out a dagger and cut Gertrude's throat, but would that leave enough of an opportunity for Siobhan to intervene? What if she stabbed or cut so fast that there was no saving the target of this test?

There was one obvious answer, and Kate contemplated it, lifting one of the silken pillows. It had a river scene from some far-off land woven into it, the raised threads rough under her fingers. She held it between her hands, stepping so that she stood over Gertrude Illiard, the pillow poised.

Kate felt the shift in the young woman's thoughts as she heard something, and saw her eyes snap open.

"What... what is this?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," Kate said, and bore down with the pillow.

Gertrude fought, but she wasn't strong enough to dislodge Kate. With the strength the fountain had unlocked, Kate could hold the pillow in place easily. She could feel the young woman struggling to find any space in which to breathe, or scream, or fight, but Kate kept her weight down over the pillow, not allowing the least crack of air to sneak through.

She wanted to reassure Gertrude that it would be all right; tell her that in a minute, Siobhan would stop this. She wanted to tell her that as bad as it felt now, it would all be fine. She couldn't, though. If she said it, there was too much of a risk that Siobhan would know that she wasn't treating this as real, and force her to go through with it. There was too much of a risk that Siobhan would throw her soul into the hellish depths of the fountain.

She had to be strong. She had to keep going.

Kate kept the pillow in place while Gertrude thrashed and clawed at her. She kept it in place even when her struggles started to weaken. When she went still, Kate looked around, half expecting Siobhan to appear from nowhere to congratulate her, revive Gertrude Illiard, and declare this done.

Instead, there was only silence.

Kate pulled the pillow away from the young woman's face, and astonishingly, she still looked peaceful, despite the violence of the seconds before that moment. There was no life there in that expression, none of the animation that there had been while Kate had been following her around the city.

She could feel that there were no thoughts there to sense, but even so, she put her fingers to the pulse at Gertrude Illiard's throat. There was nothing. The young woman was gone, and Kate...

"I killed her," Kate said. She stuffed the pillow back into place beneath the merchant's daughter, beneath her *victim*, and stumbled back from the bed as if she'd been shoved. Her feet caught the boots that Gertrude had kicked off, and Kate fell, scrambling back to her feet in a hurry. "I killed her."

She hadn't believed that it would happen, not really. She hated herself in that moment. She'd killed before, but never like this. Never someone so helpless, so innocent.

"Miss, is everything all right?" the servant's voice called from the other side of the door.

Kate wanted to stand there, to let the ground swallow her up, to let people find her and kill her for what she'd done. She deserved it, and more than that. The full horror of what she'd just done started to dawn on her. She'd stood over an innocent woman and smothered her to death, with nothing quick or clean or gentle about it.

She deserved death for that. She should just stand there and let the merchant's guards give her it. She didn't, though. Woodenly, stumbling, Kate made her way back to the balcony. Around her, she could sense the guards springing into life as they started to understand that something was wrong.

A few more seconds, and there would be no way to escape. The guards would be hunting for intruders, and then Kate would have to fight to get clear. She would have to kill again, too, because if anyone recognized her later, she wouldn't be able to go back to the forge, or to Lord Cranston's company.

That thought was enough to drive her forward, sending her into a leap from the balcony that ended in a roll across the hard ground. Kate was up and running then, sprinting for the outer wall even as she pushed the dogs away from her with a burst of fear. She planted her feet on the wall, running up it and then leaping to catch the top. Kate hauled herself over, the way she might have

pulled herself into a tree back in the forest. She leapt again, landing lightly on the other side and quickly losing herself in the crowds of the city's streets.

As she did it, Kate couldn't work out who she hated more, Siobhan or herself. Maybe she didn't need to choose. Maybe, after what she'd just done, there was enough hatred to be found for both of them. Kate knew one thing – she was going to find Siobhan, and she was going to get answers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sophia was running around the halls of a great house, and there was joy there, not flames. She and Kate were laughing, her sister's smaller hands reaching up for the bronze figurine of a horse, the edge of a tablecloth.

"Be careful, girls," Anora called from behind them, the nanny following along in their wake. "You mustn't disturb your father."

But I want Daddy, Kate sent over to Sophia. *I want to play soldiers.*

We could find Mother, Sophia sent back. *She could tell us a story.*

Sophia loved listening to old stories told in that beautiful, peaceful-sounding voice: *Bren and the Giant, The Seven Sisters of the Island*; it seemed that their mother knew more stories than there were stars in the sky, telling them about all the old creatures of magic that were now so rare they barely touched the world.

They laughed again and ran on, a conversation only they could hear whispering between them. They ran and hid, playing hide and seek while men and women brought in barrels and boxes and chests and sacks. They didn't talk about the possibility of a siege, but Sophia knew anyway. She and Kate always knew.

In spite of Anora's words, she found Kate heading toward her father's study. Sophia followed, and now she could hear her father arguing with a man who looked too much like Sebastian for it to be a coincidence. She frowned, wondering who Sebastian was, and why it should matter.

"I told you, Henry, I have no interest in your throne, whatever your spies say."

"But you still side with the rebels."

"Agreeing that there should be some kind of assembly is not the same thing as fighting against you."

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