

Jab and Twist

Sera tightened the strings of her cloak and threw the hood over her head. The maid's quarters were empty, save Louisa, the youngest maid on the palace staff. She had fallen asleep on the breakfast table, possibly in a defiant attempt to prove that she was old enough to stay up late and work at the ball. Louisa's head was buried in the crook of her arm, her face hidden under a curtain of sandy blonde hair.

Sera tip-toed past Louisa and glided down the spiral staircase that led from the maid's quarters into the palace gardens. She took a cautious step over a puddle of mud and picked her way through the rows of carrots and beans. Vines snaked their way up the palace wall. She ran her fingers along the smooth stones, willing their coolness to spread through the rest of her body.

The heady scent of roses filled the air. They burst from all corners of the garden in alluring reds and demure pinks, innocent whites and vivacious yellows. She plucked a red rose from a plant and stuck it behind her ear. The flower slipped against her sweaty skin and lodged itself at an awkward angle, as if it was making a desperate bid for freedom. She sighed and readjusted it, forced herself to refocus. Sera moved from the roses to the daisies to the sunflowers, which stood at the end of the gardens like faceless sentinels. She gave the flowers an affectionate caress and stepped onto the grass of the palace lawn.

It was a hot, stagnant summer night dotted with fireflies and mosquitoes. Sera reached to touch a firefly with the tip of her index finger, but it jumped out of her reach. She crinkled her nose. She could chase bugs another time – she had more important things to do tonight. The stables loomed before her. Her heart quickened. She closed the distance between herself and the stables in three long strides and threw her weight against the heavy wood door.

The door opened with a creak, and she breathed a little sigh of relief. Lorias, the stable master, rarely locked the stable doors, but she worried that he might have taken special precautions due to the ball. Then again, she had overheard Louisa and her older sister exchanging scandalized stories about Lorias's "shameless" bouts of drinking. Perhaps he had taken advantage of the evening frivolities to indulge himself in one of his favorite vices.

Sera stepped into the stable and peered through the darkness for Riley's familiar profile. His note was tucked into her bodice, dissolving into a mass of ink and parchment and sweat. The stable was too hot. She fanned her face and tried to calm her racing heart.

A floorboard creaked in the corner of the stable. "Riley?" she whispered. "Is that you?"

Shadows shifted in the gloom. A shape began to take form: tall, lean, short-cropped black hair and dark, glittering eyes. Sera gasped. The man was Riley's height and build, but Riley was as fair and pale as the first snow. Something must have happened to him.

"What are you doing here?" Sera asked. "Where's Riley?"

"Oh, don't worry about him," said the man with a scornful laugh. "I don't think he will be coming any time soon."

"Why? Who are you? I demand that you answer me!"

"I could ask you the same question, Princess," said the man. He still lingered in the shadows, but she had the impression that he was amused.

"What are you talking about? I'm not a princess. I'm just a palace maid, and I came down here to -"

"Maids don't 'demand' answers. Maids don't wear satin slippers. And maids would never wear cloaks in this heat. Princesses trying to conceal their ball gowns, on the other hand..."

“Shhh!” Sera said. She shot a nervous glance over her shoulder, as if the utterance of the word ‘princess’ would alert the palace guards to her absence. “Fine, you caught me. Congratulations. At least I don’t need to wear this dreadful thing anymore.”

She shed her cloak and let it fall to the floor of the stable. The rose dangled from her hair by a single thorn. Sera removed it and gripped it with both hands, as if it could protect her from the mystery man. She felt exposed in her glittering ball gown with its layers of ruffles and bows. The man’s eyes roved her body, from her muddy dancing slippers to her fluffy gold dress to her sweaty brown hair. She noticed that his gaze lingered on her hips and breasts, then pretended not to notice.

“You were going to run away wearing *that*?”

“I didn’t have time to change my clothes,” Sera snapped. She had had the foresight not to bring her tiara, at least. “Besides, you caught me. You can take me back to the castle now. I’ll apologize to Father tomorrow.”

The man laughed. He finally stepped into the light. With a start, she realized that he was more of a boy than a man, only a few years older than herself. Olive skin, thick, dark eyebrows and a thin line of a mouth, so unlike the fair, fine featured people she was accustomed to seeing in her kingdom.

“Princess Seraphina, if you go back to the castle tonight, you’ll be dead by morning.”

Sera’s blood ran cold. She tightened her grip on the rose, wincing as the thorn pierced the soft skin of her palm. “What do you mean?” she asked. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder at the stable door.

“Right now there is a price on your head. Three of Siare’s neighboring kingdoms are very invested in your death.”

Sera squeezed the rose again. Blood trickled down her hand, onto the inside of her wrist.

The man made a faux-sympathetic face. “Sorry.”

“So are you here to kill me, then?”

His eyes widened. “No, no, no, of course not. I’m here to save you, silly girl. If I wanted to kill you, you’d already be dead.”

Sera wondered if he was trying to sound reassuring. “Oh. Thank you, I suppose.”

The man shrugged as if he handed out such compliments on a regular basis which, for all Sera knew, he did. “Prepare your horse, Princess. We need to leave immediately.”

“But Riley...”

“Riley sent you here to have you killed,” he snapped. “Fortunately for you, I got here first.”

He gestured to the shadowy stall behind him. In the darkness, she could make out a man’s form slumped against the back of the stall. Green juice from the rose stem began mixing with Sera’s blood. The petals were wilting in the stale heat of the stall. She threw the wilting flower to the floor and ground it under her heel.

“You liar!” Sera said, her voice shaking. “Riley would never - ”

“Lure you into an abandoned stable in the middle of the night while the rest of the castle is distracted, telling you to tell no one where you have gone? That isn’t at all suspicious.”

“We were going to run away together...”

“Of course you were,” said the man with a condescending smile. Sera couldn’t tear her eyes away from the dead man. He seemed to be wearing a scarlet doublet, the colors of House Arden. Riley’s house. For a second she thought that the man was Riley, but then she saw that he was wearing a thick yellow sash – the uniform of the Arden Guards.

Sera frowned. Riley might have sent the guard ahead of him to help facilitate their flight. Maybe he arrived early to ensure that the couple would not be discovered. Maybe Riley had been waylaid before he could excuse himself from the ball. He was bullied into a final dance with the odious Countess Twill, or trapped in a stifling conversation with Duke Lorence, or nibbling the crust of a strawberry tart under his father's wary watch.

Slowly, she began to believe the mystery man's argument. Riley *had* told her that she could tell no one, not even her trusted confidante Lady Mora, of their plans. He had carefully slipped notes to her at balls and state dinners, working and wheedling to arrange for a way to meet her in secret.

She accepted his initial advances out of curiosity – the intrigue helped break the monotony of her scrupulously structured life. For the first time there was an aspect of her life which was not monitored, something which was entirely in her control. He would press her gloved hand to his lips with a languorous smile, careful to never cross the acceptable bounds of civility.

That night he had passed her a note at the beginning of the ball, and even dared to caress her cheek as he passed. She opened the note with trembling hands. The words were in his bold, slanting handwriting, confident and commanding. My heart burns with love...escape with me...tell no one... She hastened to hide the note before somebody noticed, then snuck away at the earliest opportunity. For all she knew, she would never have another chance like this.

“Ok, if you're so smart, how did you know that Riley had arranged to meet me here? The only people who knew about our plan were him and me.”

“And him, apparently,” said the man, jerking his head at the dead guard. “I guess your Prince Charming wasn't as committed to your secret as you were.”

“I’m serious!” Sera stomped her foot. “Tell me!”

“Shh,” hissed the man, uneasy for the first time. He eyed the door. “I was at the party. I left when the assassin left, and killed him before you arrived. It didn’t take much brain work.”

“What if he wasn’t an assassin? What if he was innocent?”

The man chuckled. “Well, he tried to kill me when I walked in, and *I’m* not the one with the price on my head.”

Dead, limp arms at his side, shaggy blonde hair over glassy dead eyes. Sera recognized him now – he had hovered at Riley’s elbow at the ball with the single-minded devotion of a puppy.

“You killed him,” she said.

“Not much to it,” said the man. He patted the hilt of his dagger. “Just jab and twist.”

Sera exhaled, wishing she could sit to rest her aching legs. She sagged as she began to accept the truth of the man’s words bit by bit, piece by piece. “Here, drink this. It will make you feel better.”

He tossed her a sleek metal flask. She caught it in both hands and contemplated it in the darkness. She had heard tales of the evils of spirits from her maids, watched some of the younger lords tip flasks into their evening goblets, but had never dared to actually try them for herself. She raised the flask to her lips and took a tentative sip.

The liquor burned all the way down her throat. She coughed and held the flask at arm’s length, as if it was responsible for the burning. “That’s vile,” she gasped, tears flooding down her face.

“Take another drink,” the man ordered. “It’s better the second time.”

She obliged, and sure enough, her body began to feel warm and loose. The man reclaimed his flask and tucked it into the pocket of his trousers. The man tossed her a pair of men's trousers and a soft tan tunic. "Now hurry and change into this. I will work on the horses."

"I just want to go back to the castle and speak to my father."

"Princess, the castle is swarming with assassins. For all I know, one could be waiting right outside the stable door. I doubt that you would even survive the walk back to the ball."

She gulped. The man hadn't killed her yet, which meant that he was at least somewhat invested in her survival. The liquor was blurring her mind. He was bigger, he was stronger, he was blocking the door. Would he even allow her to leave, or would he kill her as casually as he had killed Riley's guard? She looked for an empty stall so that she could change her clothes.

Much to her displeasure, the only stall without a horse was the stall with the dead man. She struggled out of her dress and tried to avoid looking into his cold, vacant eyes. She pulled the trousers to her waist and tugged the tunic over her head, missing the comforting weight of her ball gown. A pair of thick, sturdy riding boots replaced her ruined slippers; she left them on a pile of hay next to the dead man. She returned to her rescuer feeling awkward and coltish, unsure what to think of the new freedom of her legs.

The man had already saddled two horses, and was leading them to the door of the barn. "Ready?" asked the man.

No, she was not ready, but she did not seem to have much choice in the matter. The man seemed to think that more assassins were coming any minute, and it was obvious that Riley was not coming at all. In a state of suspended numbness, she mounted her horse and followed the man into the night. He brought his horse to a trot and turned onto the path leading into the forest.

Sera followed suit, taking a final glance at the castle lights. She could hear the faintest hum of the lyre and cymbals, and for a moment she imagined that she was still at the ball. Riley might still be there too, unaware that she had survived.

Sera fingered the thin gold chain around her neck. It was Riley's first present to her, delivered to her quarters three months earlier by the guileless Louisa. She cursed the gold, cursed Riley, even cursed poor Louisa for her incompetence. She tore the chain from her neck and tossed it over her shoulder. The gold glinted in the moonlight for a moment, then fell onto the path and quickly disappeared from sight.

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They rode hard for several hours, until their horses were drenched with sweat and foam. The man called for her to stop near a scummy green pond. He dismounted, then moved to her horse to help her to the ground. "Rest for a while," he said.

Sera nodded, her head throbbing. The spirits had long lost their hold over her, leaving her in a state of irritable lethargy. "What's your name, anyway?" Sera asked, venom dripping from her voice. She tore the pearl pins from her elaborate braid, and threw them in the path one by one. Her hair tumbled free and damp down her back.

The man turned to look at her, his flask frozen in mid-air. "Marco," he said simply.

"As in Prince Marco of House Corravaugn?" Sera asked. Corravaugn was one of Siare's four neighboring kingdoms. Sera had heard of Prince Marco – she believed that he was the third in line for the throne – but had never before seen him in person.

"Just Marco," he said with a mysterious smile. "Why so curious?"

"No reason," she said with a careless flick of her hand. "So where are we going? And why is there a price on my head?"

“So many questions,” he said. “Were you so inquisitive with Riley when he was asking you to run away with him?”

“Riley has nothing to do with this,” she said coolly. “Besides, I’ve learned my lesson. So where are we going, and why do so many people want me dead?”

He took a long draw from the flask, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and offered her another drink. She shook her head.

“Did they ever teach you any politics during your years of study, or were you purely confined to singing and modern languages?”

“Oh, they taught me a bit of this and that,” said Sera vaguely. She raked her hands through her greasy hair and shuddered.

“Then you know that House Siare has four neighboring countries: Corravaugn, Dumalac, Torial and, of course, Arden.”

Sera rolled her eyes. “Of *course* I know that.”

“Well, due to a number of delicate and complicated reasons which I could not even begin to explain, Siare’s neighbors have come to the conclusion that House Siare must fall and, as the first in line to the throne, your death would place Siare in a position of political uncertainty. Siare’s neighbors would strike in the midst of the in-fighting for succession, when Siare is at its most vulnerable.”

“What are the ‘delicate and complicated reasons?’” Sera asked.

“I just told you that I - ”

“Simplify it for me,” she said in a sweet little-girl voice.

“Money.”

“Oh.”

“House Siare has a monopoly on trade on the Western Banks. Whoever seizes House Siare’s position would stand to stand to gain an incredible amount of money, and after the House falls, it will be a free-for-all.”

“I see,” Sera said. She examined the contaminated pond and considered splashing the water on her face to rinse away the sweat. No use. She would only succeed in making herself dirtier and smellier than she was before. “So the price on my head is nothing personal?”

He closed the distance between them with a lithe, cat-like grace and wrapped his arms around her. “They are all fools,” he whispered. She could feel his breath on her ear, hot like the summer wind. “Fools to throw away something so precious.”

He held her for a few moments, his chin resting on the top of her head. “I promise that you will be safe in Corravaugn,” he whispered. “My father did everything in his power to dissuade the other houses from trying to kill you. He will offer you sanctuary. We will be there by tomorrow.”

Sera nodded, inhaled his sweaty, soapy, horsey scent. She wondered if people were still at the ball. Were they looking for her? Was her family safe?

Marco kissed the top of her head and released her. He moved to his horse and dug through the saddlebag until he produced a lumpy brown sack. He unwrapped a lump of cheese and a small loaf of brown bread with a little yip of excitement. He broke the bread in half, sliced the cheese with his dagger, and handed them to Sera. “Eat something,” he said. “We still have a long way to go.”

Sera gratefully accepted the food. Hunger gnawed at her stomach. The spun sugar confections and dainty meat pies of the ball seemed like a distant memory. She chewed the bread and forced it down her dry throat. The promise of Marco’s flask tempted her, but she already had

a pulsing headache. Again, she considered throwing herself in the pond and lapping the dirty water, just to wet her cracked lips.

As if reading her thoughts, Marco tossed her a skein of water. She pressed it to her lips and took a long, greedy gulp.

“Ready to ride again?” he asked.

Sera nodded. Her legs were sore from the ride, but she knew that she had little choice in the matter. Marco strapped his dagger to his belt and checked the fastenings on his saddlebag. She caught a glimpse of another sheath on his belt, and wondered how many daggers he carried. How many daggers did a person need, anyway?

“Hey, can I have a dagger?” Sera asked eagerly.

“Why?” Marco asked, bemused.

“There’s a price on my head!” she exclaimed. “Assassins from three kingdoms are tracking me down. At the very least you can give me something to defend myself!”

“Do you even know how to use it?” he asked.

“Oh, there can’t be much to it,” she said with an airy smile. “Jab and twist, like you said. Besides, I’ve always wanted one. Please? I would feel so much safer.”

“Why not?” said Marco. He unstrapped a plain black sheath from his belt and handed it to her, an indulgent teacher to a pet pupil. She weighed it in her palm and looked at it with awe.

“Tie it around your waist,” he commanded. “Then you will have easy access to it if we are ambushed.” She fumbled with the strings of her trousers and tied the dagger in a sloppy bow.

“No, the knot will loosen while we are riding. Tie it like this.” He tied a swift, sure knot with her trouser strings, so that the dagger hung securely at her thigh.

She wrapped her fingers around the dagger and imagined brandishing it against an invisible foe. “Do you feel safer now?” he asked with arched eyebrows. She could tell that he did not think she would be very useful in a fight.

“Absolutely,” she said. She tossed her hair over one shoulder and mounted her horse. It was going to be a long night.

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The grey light of dawn was creeping over the horizon before they stopped to rest again. Sera was panting from the heat and the exertion of riding. Marco helped her from the horse again. Her hands were slick with sweat from grasping the reigns. She wrenched her charm bracelet from her wrist and tossed it aside.

“What are you doing?” Marco asked.

She massaged her wrist and shot him a cool look. “It was chafing my wrist, and I don’t have room to carry it in my bag. Besides, it just reminds me of Riley.”

He had given her a silver heart as his second gift to her with the message, “You are the Queen of my heart.” She spat a wad of phlegm in the direction of the bracelet for good measure.

Marco shrugged, the romantic fancies of women beyond him, and offered her the water skein. “Thank you,” she said.

She stretched her stiff limbs and watched him watch her. “So you never told me why House Corravaugn decided to spare me,” she said. “You stand just as much to gain from my death as the other houses.”

Marco chuckled. “Do you think I should kill you?”

“No,” said Sera, her heart accelerating. Her fists clenched into tight little white-knuckled balls, slippery with sweat.

He tilted his head towards the sky. Little veins of pink and orange shot through the darkness. Soon the sun would rise and the heat would become even more oppressive. Sera imagined the sun's rays beating down on her head, baking her arms, boiling her body.

"There was no reason to kill you," he finally said. "The house war began the moment the other houses decided that House Siare needed to fall. My father, my family wanted to avoid as much bloodshed as possible. Besides, saving you..." He stopped himself. His lips curled in a half-smile. "Saving you was just the right thing to do."

He spread his long legs on the grass and patted the ground next to him. "It's cooler here," he said.

She sat next to him and pressed her cheek against the grass. The blades tickled her cheek. She closed her eyes.

"Tired?" Marco asked. His hand was in her hair, working its way through the knots and tangles.

"A bit," she said. She pushed herself to her feet, tottering as her knees buckled beneath her. "Can we stop to rest for a few hours?"

Marco's obsidian eyes glittered, burning into her. She wished for her ball gown, for the luxury of hiding behind layers and layers of fabric. Sera felt so vulnerable in trousers and a tunic, her every curve visible, as if on display.

"Let's keep riding," he said. He stood and brushed the grass from his trousers. "At this rate, we will have you safe at Corravaugn before twilight."

"The horses need a rest."

"We'll let them walk."

"Of course," she said. She turned away from him, feeling his eyes on her back.

She moved to mount her horse, but he caught her wrist and said, “Here, I’ll help you up.”

“I can do it myself.”

“I insist.”

“Thank you,” she said demurely, unable to hold his gaze. Dawn was breaking. Fresh beads of sweat popped along her hairline.

She looked into the long, empty road behind her, unsure whether their pursuers were gaining on them.

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Sera begged him to stop at mid-morning. Her body was slowly deteriorating from exertion and lack of sleep. She closed her eyes and focused, summoning her strength.

Marco dismounted, lifted Sera from her horse, and set her on the ground, his face inches from her own. His dark eyes were on her again, pinning her in place. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, distracting her from the pain, the fear, everything. He captured a lock of her hair between his fingers and wound it around his thumb.

“Thank you,” Sera breathed. “So chivalrous.”

“I do what I can,” said Marco with a satisfied smirk.

“Don’t we all,” said Sera. In two sharp motions, she drew the dagger from the waist of her trousers and drove it into the narrow space between Marco’s ribs.

He sputtered and fell backwards, looking at her with wide, doe eyes as if seeing her for the first time. She hit the hilt of the dagger with her palm, pushing it deeper into his side. Jab and twist, just as she had said. His fingers grasped for her, but she had already fainted to the side, stepping three steps out of his reach. Little bubbles of blood formed on his lips, exploded,

reformed. She watched with a stony expression until he let out a terrible, gurgling gasp and fell onto the grass.

Sera dried her bloody hands on Marco's shirt, readjusted her hair, and examined her reflection in the stream. The day of hard riding had not been kind to her complexion – her face was streaked with dirt, there were deep purple circles under her eyes, and the beginning of a hideous blemish was had blossomed on her forehead. No matter, she could freshen up when she returned to Castle Siare.

She looked at Marco's lifeless form and shook her head. It was a shame that such a talented member of House Corravaugn died purely because he had underestimated her. For a moment she felt as though his sightless eyes were still burning into her, measuring her, drawing her to him. Her stomach turned as she remembered his hands on her, in her hair. Dead now, dead forever, leaking blood into the dewy grass. Sera mounted her horse and rode until she saw a group of men wearing gold, the color of House Siare.

Her cousin was waiting for her with a cohort of guards and a grave expression. "Seraphina," he said.

She swung to the ground and embraced him. "Frederick." She stood on the tips of her toes to give him a formal kiss on the cheek. "What news?"

"Prince Riley died of poison after you disappeared from the ball," Frederick said. "We think that House Terial or House Dumalac is responsible, but no one has admitted to the murder."

Sera nodded, absorbing the information with little surprise. "Riley asked me to elope with him at the ball. Prince Marco of Corravaugn told me that he was trying to have me killed."

"He probably was," said Frederick, his frown deepening.

“That’s ironic – I was meeting him in the stables to kill him. I can’t believe he was every bit as indifferent to me as I was to him.”

“Sera, you took too much of a risk.”

Sera shrugged. “I figured I would have a chance to dispatch him while he was distracted with the horses – stables are full of potential weapons. And I didn’t think he would send an assassin.”

“Thank the gods that you escaped. Where’s Marco?”

“Dead.” Marco’s pale, gasping features materialized before her eyes. She blinked them away.

“Ah,” said Frederick. “What happened?”

“Marco saved me from Riley’s assassin. He wanted to use me as leverage when we reached Castle Corravaugn. I had other ideas.”

“How did you know?” Frederick asked.

Sera shrugged. “House Corravaugn would never send a member of the Royal Family on a rescue mission unless they stood something to gain, unless my life was worth something to them. I had a feeling that Marco would kill me if I tried to run, so I decided that my best opportunity to escape was to pretend to cooperate until I had the upper hand. You were able to follow my clues?”

A tiny smile shone through Frederick’s icy reserve. He reached into his breast pocket and opened his fist, revealing Sera’s golden chain, her pearl pins, and her charm bracelet. “It was a stroke of genius. But we were worried that we wouldn’t be able to catch you before you reached Castle Corravaugn.”

“So was I. Fortunately it didn’t matter, in the end.”

Frederick nodded, deep in thought. “Let’s return to Castle Siare and bring the news of your safe return to your father. Then we can begin to plan our next course of action. We need to be on our guard – I’m afraid that this is just the beginning.”

The guards formed a protective circle around Sera and Frederick, then spurred their horses to a canter. The landscape blurred as they rode, each step placing more distance between Sera and Marco’s dead, bleeding form. Sera leaned close to her horse. The wind whipped her red cheeks and brought tears to her clear grey eyes. Marco was right. The house war had begun.