

I'm turning the tide of war.

My footfalls are noiseless as I enter the royal suite. Darkness envelops me like a friend. My hand closes around the hilt tucked into my servant's dress as I step over the snoring maidservant at the foot of the royal bed. The queen shifts and I duck behind the bed drapes. With a gasp, she sits up, swinging her legs over the bed, panting. I wince, tucking myself further into the curtains.

The maidservant stirs, rising from her pallet as the queen pushes herself off the bed and crosses the floor to her vanity. She grips the pendant at her neck. Moonlight catches on the jeweled simurgh, the protector of her people laying close to her heart.

"What is it, my queen?" asks her maid.

She leans against her sitting chair. "Something's wrong. The babe."

Babe? No one mentioned she carried an heir. My eyes drift to a pool of blood growing at her feet. It awakens nightmares I tucked away long ago. They claw at my throat, constricting it as realization dawns. The queen's whimper shakes me from their hold. I release the hilt, stepping away from the drapes to pull at the arm of the shock-stricken maidservant.

"Fetch the healer."

She turns a pale face toward mine. I shake her hard. "For simurgh's sake, girl, go!"

I slip into her place as she moves to the door. My hands find the young queen's soft, trembling fingers. She grimaces, gripping me tight.

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“What’s happening? Is it the babe?”

I frown, wrapping my arms around her. “Hold on to me.”

Her hands grip my arm, eyes wide. “Am I dying?”

Yes.

“No,” I assure her, willing my words to be firm and steady.

She leans into my shoulder. “Will I survive?”

Barely.

I cup her face between my hands. “Yes.”

“How do you know?” Her entire body trembles against mine.

I push the hair off her sweat-slicked brow. “Because I did.”

The door behind us opens as the healer rushes to the queen’s side. Time for words is over.

I hold her hand through the worst of the pain, until the babe has passed, while tinctures are offered to help her sleep and all the moans dissipate into silence. Only when she’s sleeping peacefully do I pry my hand from her grip. Her fingers curl into themselves. She shivers, turning her back to me.

The hilt of my dagger digs into my ribs as I stand. I glance over my shoulder. The maidservant has yet to return from gathering balms and teas from the healer. No one questioned my presence during the chaos. This is my chance to finish the task.

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I look back at the queen, her hands again gripping the simurgh around her neck. The goddess of fertility did nothing to help her this time. Perhaps that's why I'm here. To end the darkness that will come in the morning. I withdraw my dagger. Moonlight catches on the ridged blade, formed into the feather of the phoenix that protects our people. Forged for death. It's what I would have wanted months ago.

Voices echo in the hallway and I jerk back. I shake my head, hands trembling as I fumble to conceal the weapon. After tonight, she's not just the enemy's queen. I cannot plunge the blade into a heart with scars identical to mine. I rush to the door.

"You'll come back," her voice whispers as I cross the threshold.

It's not a command but a hope. I swallow hard, letting the words drift between us as I slip into the hallway, seeking the shadowed passages that led me here. When I reach the royal stable, I drop to my knees behind a bale of hay. Hands clutch at my chest as I sob into the sweet-smelling bale before me. For what the queen and I have both lost. For the lives that should be lived. For the darkness that I allowed to claim me if only to mask my pain.

The dagger against my skin begins to warm. I push myself to sitting, remembering my mission, and lift the dagger. I slice the air three times, forming a translucent triangle. It shimmers as the portal opens, allowing my master's phoenix into the realm. It settles on the hay that caught my tears, eyes shimmering.

I send one word back to the Great Lord.

Broken.

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But not by me. By a fate worse than death. A pain I'd not wish on my greatest enemy.
And the deepest pain yet lies ahead. The grief that follows the loss of a babe is heavier than any war. When the king returns, he'll find his heart's desire much changed. It's enough to break a kingdom.

Unless. You go back to her.

The thought brings a gasp from my lips as the portal dances before me, waiting for me to follow the messenger phoenix. What purpose is there in staying? What good could I do her?

You can be the hand you didn't have.

Tears prick my eyes again. I squeeze them shut.

I thought killing the queen was my way out of the Great Lord's harem. Perhaps there's another path.

I glance down at my dagger once more. Then shove it under the bale of hay.

Some common pains are worth laying down my weapon.

I rise with the sun as the portal fades. Look toward the castle. There's more than one way to turn the tide of war. I'll help her rise from the ashes that buried me and perhaps I'll find my own fire again as I rekindle hers.