

Victoria Roberts  
To Break a Kingdom – First Round Edits  
937 Words

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 farther 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, panting. She grips the pendant at her neck. Moonlight catches on the jeweled simurgh—, the benevolent bird protector of her people— laying lying close to her heart.

“What is it, my queen?” asks her maid.

She leans heavily against her sitting the chair. “Something's wrong. The babe.”

*Babe?* No one mentioned that she carried an heir. My eyes drift to a pool of blood growing at her feet. It awakens awakening 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 my blade's 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.

“What's happening? Is it the babe?”

**Commented [CC1]:** Thank you for submitting to Havok! This story was rather moving. Especially for me personally, as I'm named after my older brother, who my mother lost in a miscarriage before having me! You handled the emotions beautifully, and I found the main character's past to act as a sort of “mystery” which we got to learn more about as the story progressed.

**Commented [CC2]:** Perhaps adding something like, “...I tell myself again” will indicate her mixed feelings from the beginning. Otherwise, this setup made me feel like the fate of her people rest in her hands, which made me have mixed feelings at the end about her “betraying” her kingdom.

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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, and various sleeping tinctures lull her 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.

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, its ridges shaped like formed into the feather of the phoenix that protects **our** people. Forged for death. It’s what I would have wanted months ago.

**Commented [CC3]:** This hits me a bit awkwardly. If the MC truly believes she’s dying, how could she also believe she will live (even if just barely). IMO, when we say someone is dying, it’s not simply a decline in medical status, it’s a belief that the situation is terminal. Your choice though.  
After we learn the mc had a miscarriage, I realize this was more metaphorical. Yes - you’ll die inside. But will technically survive. It was confusing here though.

**Commented [CC4]:** I’m not sure if it was intentional, but the formatting through this section (short sentences) give the effect of a block quote or a scene set apart, making it a very poignant exchange. Pretty cool.

**Commented [CC5]:** This feels backward to me. If she’s sitting, it would dig into her, but standing should take the pressure off her (because she would be parallel with the way the blade is positioned, right?)

**Commented [CC6]:** Emphasizing this might draw more attention between the contrasting bird images - simurgh and phoenix.

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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~~ she 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~~ stacks of hay. ~~Hands,~~ clutching 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~~ have had a chance to live. 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, eyes shimmering, on the hay that caught my tears, ~~eyes shimmering~~.

I send one word back to the Great Lord.

**Broken.**

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?

**Commented [CC7]:** So did it go back through the portal already? If not, I suggest you make it more relevant, or a more powerful presence. But it appears and then we don't hear any more about it.

**Commented [CC8]:** This doesn't feel like the right line of questions - she knows exactly what good she could do. Perhaps it'd make more sense for her to be afraid of the results instead. "Can I really leave my people? What about all the mothers who will lose their sons if this war continues?"

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*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.

**Commented [CC9]:** Is she having these thoughts herself or is the phoenix or the Great Lord speaking to her? That distinction should be made here.

**Commented [CC10]:** This confuses me slightly. Is the heroine working under the Great Lord's orders? Or is she trying to kill the queen in order to escape? Expanding on this, and possible even adding more details earlier in the story, would help with the worldbuilding. Or simplifying her motives - is she a patriot or an unwilling assassin?

**Commented [CC11]:** Perhaps she could become self-aware here. "Would killing this woman really help my people? Or am I just lying to myself because I cannot bear to face the truth and my past?"

**Commented [CC12]:** This was underwhelming. Perhaps there's a specific action she can take that's more representative of her choice. Slashing the air with the dagger, causing the portal to collapse with a crack or the phoenix to scream. Or perhaps the phoenix "approves" of the change in her heart somehow - a warm note of song, touching her hand with its beak or wing in blessing before vanishing into the air.

**Commented [CC13]:** Lovely line!

**Commented [CC14]:** This is confusing and somewhat contradictory. Is she staying out of compassion, to escape her king, and because she's decided her path of "darkness" will end? Or is she still clinging to the hope that her country will triumph over this one, and is staying to act as a spy, or a voice in the Queen's ear that will advise in ways that help her home country? Since this is such a short story, I think it'd be best to simplify her motivations. Right now, the mention of the King's harem and the fact that she picked up a blade to drown her own grief implies that she's not actually that patriotic, which helps to validate her willingness to let compassion overrule her need to "aid the war effort." Perhaps you could end with her thinking something like, "Let the kings carry on with their pride and warmongering. Years of acting as a tool in their games had brought me no peace. Let alone my people. But perhaps we could rise from the ashes together..." That would be a much clearer split that the reader would understand, and not leave us with so many questions about the fate of her kingdom and what she's going to do next, but keep the focus on her grief and new hope.