

Victoria Roberts  
To Break a Kingdom  
1004 Words

Today, the war ends for me. That's what I tell myself, as I enter the royal suite. One last mission and I'll satisfy the debt binding me to the Great Lord.

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 drapes cloaking the bedframe. With a gasp, she sits up, swinging her legs over the mattress. I wince, tucking myself farther into the curtains.

The maidservant stirs, rising from her pallet as the queen stands and crosses the floor to her vanity, panting. She grips the pendant at her neck. Moonlight catches on a jeweled simurgh—the benevolent bird protector of her people—lying close to her heart.

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

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

*Babe?* There was no mention of an heir. My eyes drift to a pool of blood growing at her feet, 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 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?”

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

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

Commented [CC1]: To hopefully keep the reader from having to stop reading to look up what a “simurgh” is.

Commented [VR2R1]: Yes. I wondered about this too. Thank you :)

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~~Yes~~ You'll wish you were.

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

She leans into my shoulder. "Will I survive?"

*As a shadow.*

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 moans into silence. Only when she's sleeping peacefully do I coax my hand from her grip. Her fingers curl into themselves. She shivers, turning her back to me.

I stand, leaning over the Queen, and the hilt of my dagger digs into my ribs. 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 draw my dagger. Moonlight catches on the blade, its ridges shaped like 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?" she whispers as I cross the threshold.

**Commented [VR3]:** What about: "Only your heart": here instead?

**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]:** Pull, coax, etc.

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

**Commented [CC7]:** One of my fellow editors made this change. However, it massively changes what the Queen means. When it was a statement, it implied the Queen knew why she'd really come and hoped she'd be back to end things. As a question, it makes the Queen sound more vulnerable than assertive, and as though she's just asking a servant to keep her company for solace. It's up to you which version you keep, but I found the original more compelling.

**Commented [VR8R7]:** I actually prefer it as a question. My vision here is that the queen is innocent and was just reaching out to the MC specifically because they connected and she wanted someone with that same pain to help her.

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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 stacks of hay, clutching my chest as I sob into the sweet-smelling bale before me. For what the queen and I have both lost. For those who should have had a chance to live. For the darkness I allowed to claim me—if only to mask my pain.

The dagger against my skin begins to warm. Remembering my mission, I sit up 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.

Bowing my head, I speak one word for the phoenix to take 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 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.*

I look up to find the phoenix staring at me. Its mental voice sings an invitation that seeps into my heart.

*You can be the hand you didn't have.*

“I can?” I whisper.

Killing the queen was my way out of the Great Lord's harem. Yet her death would only drag me deeper into my own grief, binding me to the past. My master intended me to rend this kingdom. Dare I create a new life here instead?

**Commented [VR9]:** I don't like the phrase "mental voice" but I do understand its added to clarify these are thoughts from the phoenix. I'm struggling to find another phrase though.

Maybe: it's voice enters my mind, singing an invitation that seeps into my heart.

We're already four words over though, lol, so I'm trying to find a more concise way to word it.

**Commented [CC10]:** Is she having these thoughts herself or is the phoenix or the Great Lord speaking to her? That distinction should be made here.

**Commented [CC11]:** 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 [VR12R11]:** I added some clarification at the beginning of the story. Let me know if this helps or if more clarification is still needed.

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The phoenix dips its head toward mine, emitting a short trill before flying back through the portal. With trembling fingers, I plunge the dagger into the portal's heart, and the energy tears it from my grasp. I stumble back, startled by warmth emanating from the center of my palm. Uncurling my fingers, I find a single phoenix feather where my dagger once lay.

Clutching the feather to my heart, I rise with the sun. Look toward the castle. This is the battleground *I* choose. I'll help the queen emerge from the ashes that buried me and perhaps I'll find my own fire again as I rekindle hers.