

### Chapter 3

Josse pondered as she drank from the waterfall, splashing her face with the clear water. She had to admit the view from her new home was amazing. Normally, a home with that sort of view would fetch tens of platinum coins, yet here she was, not having paid a single iron.

She would prefer not to die for the privilege, though.

She looked over the edge once more as she considered the dragon. She hadn't seen a single sign of him since he'd flown off, ignoring her offer. The logical part of her brain insisted he was leaving her dangling simply as a means to keep her under control. As long as she had hope, there was less chance she'd act vindictively to spoil his meal.

The emotional part of her brain, meanwhile, was pulling in a hundred directions at once. There was the hope that the dragon would aid her. The fear he wouldn't. The constant low-level vertigo from the fact she was stranded on a small ledge halfway up a vertical cliff, with an occasional cloud drifting past below. The uncertainty was grating on the few nerves she still had left.

She tried to distract herself by thinking about the state of the kingdom. She'd been too trusting, and walked blindly around a castle full of snakes. How many people who worked there had been in on the plot? Who would have worked it out, but not interfered? Who *did* try to interfere, and what had become of them by now?

There was a certain clique of ministers that her father was forever admonishing for small acts of corruption, all trying to turn their positions to personal gain. He tolerated their presence anyway; none were in senior roles, and the positioning was purely political, to curry favour with several influential houses. Would they go so far as to commit regicide to enhance their positions? She wouldn't like to think so, but obviously *someone* had, and they seemed the most likely candidates.

Who else? She had to remind herself they the castle wasn't staffed only by nobles. The word of a mere servant would count for little when it came to levelling accusations at a princess, but they could have been involved in the plot in other ways. Few had the opportunities to assassinate a royal that their servants had: a chef slipping poison into the food, or a maid slipping a dagger into the back of someone she was helping to dress or wash. But her father had always encouraged loyalty amongst the servants, for precisely that reason.

... And that line of pondering ran straight into a brick wall as the image of Lindy—her personal maid—popped up in her head.

"Damn," muttered Josse, knowing full well the girl was utterly devoted to her, and would gladly throw her life away for revenge. The princess agreed with her father that loyalty was a good trait in a servant, especially one who worked so closely with her, but would it just result in her servant and friend getting killed? "Now I feel even worse..."

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Lindy grinned sadistically as she twisted her knife.

Doran didn't even twitch. No sound escaped his lips. He didn't beg for mercy. He *couldn't*. With the paralytic he'd been dosed with, even his heart struggled to beat. His lips were blue from lack of oxygen as his frozen lungs failed to draw in enough fresh air. His face whitened as the blood drained from dozens of

small wounds. His fingers were bent at odd angles, the fingernails missing. A few tear streaks running down his face were the only sign he was aware of his predicament.

With even a portion of the palace guards in on the plot—abandoning their new king when he started ordering money taken out of the treasury to pay off his blackmailing conspirators—what chances did the attendees of the coronation banquet have? Every one of the treasonous ministers was dead, and their puppet king would soon join them.

"I wonder if I'd enjoy this more if you were screaming, or if it would make it harder to treat you like the inhuman *thing* you are?" she pondered out loud as she levered one eye out of its socket with her knife. "Guess I'll never know. But I've been assured that this drug lets you feel *everything*, and that's good enough for me. Make sure you regret your crimes wholeheartedly as you die."

Elsewhere in the banquet hall, other servants did their best to ignore the enraged maid as they dragged out the other corpses for disposal.

"Looks like you won't last much longer," sighed Lindy as the blue of his lips intensified and the light of his eye turned glassy. "Fine. Go to hell and stay there. At least down there you'll be well away from your sister."

She gave one last stab, driving her knife straight through Doran's heart. As ever, he failed to react, but his one remaining eye dulled and the flows of blood slowed. The wounds to his face and upper torso stopped bleeding completely.

"Good riddance," muttered the killer maid, before spitting in the tortured prince's empty eye socket.

If, perhaps, the other servants were dragging corpses in quite wide arcs to avoid getting close to the pair, who could blame them?

Alas, her celebration was cut short when the doors burst open, a pair of knights rushing in. Everyone froze—the servants realising they'd been caught poisoning an entire banquet, and the knights taking in the blatantly criminal scene before them. Much to the surprise of the servants, though, they didn't react as expected, screaming about treason and waving their swords around. Rather, the one in front slouched, radiating a heavy defeated air from within his polished plate armour.

"Well. We're screwed, then," he sighed, staring straight at Lindy, or perhaps through her to the corpse that was tied to the pillar behind her.

"Huh?" she asked, clutching her knife behind her back and trying to shuffle sideways to block the knight's view of the dead king. Obviously, the act failed to achieve much, not least because of the amount of blood soaked into her uniform, splashed over her face, and pooling around her feet.

"The dragon is in the courtyard," explained the knight. "He demands to see the king *right now*. Or else."

"Oh," she said, before peering over at the chef that had acted as ringleader for their little rebellion. "Long live the king?"

"Bugger off," he replied.

"Either of you two feel like a promotion, then?" she asked, looking back at the knights and trying her best not to look completely psychotic.

"No way. We can't just *pretend*."

"Well, we need *someone*. Who's next in line?"

"You assassinated the king and his entire court without even knowing *that*?"

"Just answer the question!"

A few seconds of silence made it clear they didn't know either.

"I once heard *the king* mention that the high priest of Sulltheria could resurrect the dead?" suggested one of the other servants, who had aided the previous king with his paperwork, and who put a very careful inflection on 'the king'. Not that the clarification was needed: no-one in the room, the knights included, had yet reached the point of thinking of Doran as 'the king'.

"What? Bring him back?!" shouted Lindy. "Don't you *dare*!"

"He'll tell the dragon to eat us all!" shouted someone else, which was a valid concern, but not actually what Lindy cared about.

"His support base is dead. His own guards hate his guts. He has had a *very* personal experience of our displeasure. We don't want the destruction of the capital on our heads, and he won't act out if he knows what's good for him."

"Who cares how many supporters he has left in the castle if he has a *dragon*?!"

"Quiet," said the knight, and the group of revolutionaries sheepishly obeyed. "Go," he added to his companion, and the second knight shot off the way he'd come, to hunt down the rumoured priest.

"Huh! Wait!" shouted Lindy.

"And you," added the knight, staring straight at her. "Get out there and apologise for the delay. See how long you can distract the dragon and keep in mind that all the lives of the capital are in your rather bloodied hands."

"What?! Why me?! And if there was a priest around who could resurrect the dead, what about the *real* king?"

"Lindy?" asked the chef, his voice polite, but his face twisted into a smile that would give children nightmares.

"Y... yes...?"

"You just murdered the king in front of a *lot* of witnesses."

Lindy opened her mouth. Lindy considered the statement. Lindy closed her mouth without voicing her complaint that even if she wasn't there, they would have killed the king anyway. That had been the entire *point*.

"Thank you," added the chef as she silently left the room.

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The dragon was growing impatient. It wasn't like he turned up at the castle and demanded an audience often, so when he did, the least they could do was respond promptly.

Also, the entire place stank of death. A lot of people had died in there recently. *Very* recently. Either the new king had just carried out a cull, or else his position had been even more precarious than the dragon had assumed. Either could easily explain his current absence.

"Umm... Excuse me..." came a very small voice, practically a whisper. The owner obviously held hopes of not being heard. Alas for her, the dragon had very good hearing, so he bent his neck and stared straight at her, giving her his undivided attention.

She flinched backward, which gave the dragon some amusement given the amount of blood she was covered with. Shouldn't a killer be made of harder stuff than that?

He sniffed again.

The amount of *royal* blood she was covered with, he corrected himself. Apparently, it had been the second option, and for some reason the culprit had come to speak to him. And was that a spark of hatred he could smell beneath her nervousness and fear?

"Interesting. So, there has been another change in leadership?" sighed the dragon. "Are you the new queen? You don't appear dressed like one, but the blood is a nice touch. Very impactful."

"No, I'm not... There's... no change, as such..." whimpered the girl in the bloody maid's uniform. "Our king is currently a little... *under the weather*... but he'll be with you as soon as possible."

The dragon paused a second to estimate the amount of blood. His senses all agreed on the simple answer.

"I suspect he won't be with anyone ever again. Very well; it's not as if I ever met the fool. Stop messing around and just bring me his successor."

"There... Uh... isn't one. And he really will get better. Hopefully."

The dragon snorted, torn between impatience and amusement. How could the dead 'get better'?

And then he remembered the words of Josse.

"Then the delay is taken by someone fetching the high priest of Sulltheria?" he hazarded, and he saw much in the series of expressions that slid across the face of the young killer in front of him. "Indeed, it seems that they are. It must anger you to have your hard work undone in such a way."

The little human in front of him giggled nervously. "I... have no idea what you're talking about..." she lied, sheepishly glancing around at the few guards and knights that were hanging around the area. It wasn't like *no-one* among the guards were loyal to the new king, but thankfully, most of them didn't seem keen on being in the same castle as a dragon.

The dragon grinned a wide, toothy grin. "Consider yourself lucky that my visit here today was simply because I had business with that priest, and now I find someone has run to fetch him before I even gave voice to my request. Since I'm in such a good mood, I'll forgive your poor attempt at a lie. I'll even guarantee your safety if you answer a simple question: why?"

The maid glanced around uncertainly again, before apparently finding her nerves. Her expression hardened.

"I would never accept that murderer as my king," she spat, no longer stuttering.

"You cannot forgive him for murdering his father?"

"His *sister*! She was so much better than he ever was. A far more worthy queen."

The grin expanded yet further as his suspicions were confirmed. He could see the passionate hate in her eyes all the more clearly now that he had offered a few empty words of reassurance, and her fear had ebbed. It was a look he'd seen often, before the Pact. It was a look shared by many who intruded into his lair. What reason could there be for such hate? He had done something personal to her?

Apparently so.

"You used to serve her?" he asked, and the look of surprise on the maid's face was all the confirmation he needed. "Interesting... But is it not a little unprofessional to become so attached to your master? They can change at any moment, you know."

"She wasn't just my master. She was my *friend*," spat the maid, almost forgetting who she was talking to as her anger grew.

"Oh? And would she consider you her friend, do you think? Or would she be above such things?"

"I... yes. She was always respectful to those of lower status."

Lindy frowned, wondering how the conversation had ended up going in such a direction. "Why do you care? You *ate* her!"

"I do not eat the innocent," lied the dragon, the grin now splitting his muzzle nearly in two. "In fact, we are to be wed. It is why I came here seeking a priest."

The courtyard fell into silence as a tide of shock spread from the dragon, everyone who heard the proclamation freezing up.

"Listen well!" roared the dragon into the silence. "I proclaim this girl your new regent, until your queen returns. And should she meet the same fate as the previous pair of monarchs, I shall be *angry*. Now, regent, may I borrow the priest?"

The silence resumed, no occupant of the courtyard moving a single muscle until the dragon nudged the world's most rapidly promoted maid with a claw.

"Uh... Yes... Yes, of course!" she exclaimed. "Can I come to the..."

"There will not be a public wedding," snapped the dragon, interrupting her. "And it seems my new guest has arrived."

Indeed, knight and priest chose that point to come running through the castle's main gate, ignoring the dragon as they rushed through the courtyard towards the castle and its banquet hall.

At least until the dragon slapped its tail down in front of the door.

"Your new regent has seen fit to loan me your aid," he pointed out. "Let us depart."

The unfortunate priest sighed as the dragon grabbed hold.