

## *The Kitchen Maid*

"How is she today?"

There was sympathy in Hanna's voice and I flinched, afraid I would break down and cry if she was too kind to me. Father hated it when I cried and somehow he always seemed to know, no matter how much I washed my face afterwards.

"Worse than yesterday," I shrugged, trying to sound blasé about it. "So the same as always really." It had been an entire year since any of the doctors had had anything hopeful to say about my mother's health but somehow I still woke up every morning hoping to find her a bit better instead of a bit worse than the day before. It hadn't happened yet.

"How did you go with the pastries this morning?" I was blatantly changing the subject, but Hanna took the bait eagerly.

"I did it!"

Her excitement was infectious and exactly what I was looking for. I let the sadness drop away like a dress I could change at will.

"The pastry chef said they were even better than the ones done by the apprentices. He said he's going to talk to the head cook about letting me start as an apprentice!"

"That's amazing!" I gasped, genuinely delighted for her. "Girls *never* get chosen as apprentices," I couldn't help adding.

"I know," she couldn't keep the smile off her face.

I might be a princess but I was as conscious as the kitchen maid in front of me that boys always got chosen first. I tried twice as hard as my brother Konrad but my father preferred him anyway. I could feel the bitterness creeping back in and tried to push it away.

"We should celebrate," I said, determined to keep the sadness away a little longer. "Let's go up to the ballroom and slide in our stockings."

Part of me knew the activity was a little babyish for my thirteen years but I desperately wanted to feel the light-hearted freedom of my childhood. I wanted to experience again the rush I used to feel when my mother snuck me in there and we slid together up and down the long room on the perfectly oiled floorboards. That was before Queen Charlotte fell ill, of course. It was a long time since she'd had the strength to do anything so boisterous.

"Are you sure we wouldn't get into trouble?" Hanna seemed a little uneasy but I brushed her hesitation aside.

"I am the princess, you know. Who's going to tell us off?"

She smiled at that and nodded. I suspected she knew the reason I wanted to let off steam. She was humouring me. I didn't care.

Flying down the room was an even more exhilarating rush than I remembered. I felt all my concerns and fears slipping away with the stream of air past my face. All I wanted was to go faster and faster.

Reaching the end of the room, I narrowly avoided running into the wall by flopping onto the floor. Hanna, who had been right behind me, collided with me and we lay on the floor in a pile, out of breath but laughing anyway.

"I'd forgotten how much fun that is," said Hanna and I grinned and nodded in reply.

"Let's do it again," I said, "faster this time!"

Before Hanna could reply, I leapt to my feet and began my run up. I ran faster than before and when I let myself go and began my slide I could feel I was going too fast for control but I didn't care. What was one more out of control thing in my life? I closed my eyes.

A sudden intuition caused my eyes to pop open but it was far too late to stop myself. I careened into a tall wooden stand holding a large decorative vase. I only had time to throw my hands up to protect my head as the whole thing came crashing down onto the floor, a tangle of wood and limbs and broken pottery.

"Ava!" Hanna sounded terrified so I groaned to let her know I was alive and pushed myself up onto my hands.

"Ow!" I said and started examining myself for cuts. There were none I could see although I would have a few good bruises soon. I turned my eyes onto the wreckage of the stand and vase. I grimaced.

The stand was largely unhurt and I pulled myself to my feet and, with Hanna's help, managed to get it back upright. The vase was another story. It had smashed into several large pieces and a greater number of tiny shards. There would be no recovery for the vase.

Unfortunately, I recognised it. It had been a gift from the Lanoverian delegation who had come last month to discuss a future marriage alliance between my brother and one of their princesses.

"Oh no," I groaned, "Father is going to be so angry! He expects me to be in control and unemotional all the time and somehow I can never manage it. How will I ever be able to explain this? He's going to kill me!"

The words came out in an uncontrollable rush and they frightened me a little. I had never actually voiced my issues with my father to anyone but my mother and I could feel the tears starting again.

Hanna was staring at me with a face that managed to be terrified and sympathetic at the same time.

I panicked.

"Quick, let's get out of here!" I turned for the door, confident that Hanna would follow me.

I was nearly running in my haste to get away from what I'd done so she was still several steps closer to the broken vase when one of the doors opened and two men stepped into the room.

"I'll want all the windows redone before the delegation returns," my father was saying to his seneschal, "we don't want to give the appearance that we need their wealth." The end of his sentence trailed off as he saw the broken vase and then the two of us, still clad in our stockings.

"What is going on?" he barked, his eyes on me.

The panic from before was almost overwhelming now and I knew that he would see it on my face and be even more angry. He had drilled me so many times on keeping my emotions hidden, on maintaining control at all times and he hated it when I failed. For a drawn out moment I could think of nothing to say.

"It.. it was my fault, your majesty." The voice was Hanna's and she sounded terrified. Her eyes were fixed on me and I knew that she could see my panic and was acting like the true friend she was. But I also knew my father, so expert at reading people, would see this too. I trembled and flinched in anticipation of his punishment.

There was an even longer moment of silence.

"That was a valuable, diplomatic item," his voice was cold and his focus seemed completely fixed on Hanna. "I take it from your clothing that you're a kitchen maid," he continued, "I can't imagine what you thought you were doing in here to start with."

*She's with me!* I wanted to scream the obvious fact but the words stayed locked inside me.

"I'm, I'm sorry, your majesty." Hanna's voice was so quiet we could barely hear the words.

"Your family will have to pay for its replacement," my father said, "and to set an example to the other servants, you will be flogged in the castle courtyard."

Hanna paled and I could feel my own face paling along with hers. The vase was surely worth more than a year's wage for her family and the public humiliation of a royal flogging would destroy any chance of Hanna's being accepted into an apprenticeship.

For a wild moment I considered pointing these things out to my father but the words didn't even make it into my mouth. I knew that he wouldn't care.

"It was me," I could barely choke the words out around my dry tongue. "Hanna was only covering for me; I broke the vase."

"Excuse me?" My father's voice had dropped from cold to freezing and I knew him well enough to read the anger in his calm face.

"It was an accident. Hanna was here at my request and I'm the one who broke the vase."

There was another pregnant pause while my father glanced between me, Hanna and his seneschal, his gaze calculating.

“Regardless of who broke the vase, a kitchen maid should not be in the royal ballroom,” he said at last. “If my daughter broke the vase then she will have to pay for it from her allowance and make a personal apology to the Lanoverian ambassador. But you,” here he glanced at Hanna, “will still be flogged. I cannot have my servants roaming at will through the palace. Everyone has their place and must stick to it.”

I looked down at my feet, utterly and completely appalled. This whole situation was my fault and now my father was ruining Hanna’s life. And I knew he was doing it to teach me a lesson. I could read it in his face. He had known from the beginning who had broken the vase. Had known that Hanna had followed me into the ballroom. But Hanna had confessed and he had accepted it and had chosen a harsh punishment to see if I would break.

And, of course, I had broken. With cold clarity I understood. To my father, the worst crime I had committed was choosing to do something noble. Choosing to take the blame when I could have let the blame fall on someone else. On someone lesser. It would have been the more strategic path.

The realisation struck me like a physical blow. I could feel my mind reeling from it. My mother was constantly telling me that I misunderstood my father. That he really did love me. That he was trying to teach me to be strong for my own benefit. And I was constantly telling her that she was wrong. That she saw her wishes rather than reality.

My father valued strength. It was the thing he truly loved. And my only choice was to beat him and my brother at their own game. If they were strong then I would have to be even stronger. Things like friends and emotions only got myself and other people hurt.

I could feel my emotions struggling but I ruthlessly forced them down. Quickly I erected a wall to lock them away. It surprised me how quickly it was done and just like that they were gone. It was a strange relief to be free of the grief and the fear and the anger. It made me wonder why I hadn’t done it years ago.

For once it was easy to keep my face cold and impassive as I turned towards my father.

“Very well, father. I will make the apology this afternoon.” I made no mention of Hanna and didn’t even glance her way.

The change in my father’s face was very slight and I knew that he was purposely allowing me the glimpse into his emotions. And the emotion he was feeling was pride.

Once it would have made me feel a little sick but now I felt nothing but an answering pride. I had done it. I had finally become the daughter he wanted. I revelled in the freedom of this new coldness.

Without another word I turned and left the room. I could hear Hanna trailing along behind me but I didn’t turn or speak to her. Even when we were safely out in the corridor, I didn’t dare look at her, afraid my new walls would crack. Friends were a luxury I could no longer afford.

Yet Hanna had been my one true friend for as long as I could remember. With her around I would always be in danger of regressing. Already I could feel my emotions pounding against the wall I had made. Pain, fear and shame threatened to break through at the thought of Hanna being punished because of me.

“Floggings happen one hour after sunrise,” I said, my back still to Hanna. “At one hour before sunrise the small gate in the side courtyard will be unguarded.”

I pulled a ring from my finger and held it back towards her. “There will be a group of merchants camped outside the walls. Find the leader and give her this ring. She will recognise it. Tell her I sent you and that I request her to give you safe passage to Northhelm and a favourable word with the head of the royal kitchen there. You said you have an aunt and uncle who work in the Northhelmian palace. Go to them. You’ll be safe there.”

“But...but...” Hanna paused, obviously overwhelmed by the events of the last few minutes and unsure exactly what to say. She finally settled for, “what about my family? Will the king punish them instead?”

“Your family will be fine,” I said, sure of my words. “I doubt my father even remembers your name. That was about me back there, not you, and he is happy enough with the outcome.”

“But Ava...” Hanna’s voice was soft now and I knew her thoughts had turned to me.

“Just go!” I said and marched away, still not having met her eyes. I knew that I would never see her again but I also knew that that was for the best.

I was done with emotions and I was done with friends. I would just keep building the wall higher and wider and stronger until there was no way in or out.

Strength would serve me now.