

The Loyalties of the Courtesan

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/408051) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/408051>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Multi
Fandoms:	Sherlock (TV) , Gondal - Brontë children
Characters:	Sherlock , OFCs
Language:	English
Series:	Part 10 of The Queen of Gondal , Part 11 of Queen of Gondal Universe
Stats:	Published: 2012-05-19 Words: 6,948 Chapters: 1/1

The Loyalties of the Courtesan

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Summary

The most notorious woman in Gaaldine is on a mission. A chance encounter five years earlier left Gertie owing a debt of gratitude which is unexpectedly called in following the Reaching Beck Bridge disaster. With an unidentified traitor sitting in the heart of the Court, the fate of two kingdoms rests in her hands.

Can be read either before or after *The Choices of the King*.

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Notes

Dedicated to clanwilliam, as a birthday gift

Thanks to caulkhead, for betaing

The Loyalties of the Courtesan

She paused by the back door, swathing her face in a fold of her cloak. It would never do to be recognised, not given who she was here to see. The air in the street reeked of horse dung, rotting vegetables and the overflow of middens. She took a last, comforting lungful and crossed the threshold.

She had always hated the hospital. Over the years it had taken so many girls whom no-one had valued, whose names and faces no-one remembered. None except her.

Christa, Janine and Eva; Phyllida, Thelma and Sabine. Little Sabine with her evil laugh and clever, dancing fingers teasing soul-melting music from the strings of her saz.

Sabine. The pain bit as deep as if it had been yesterday, not five years ago.

On the night of Sabine's death the hospital had been dark, murmuring, a place of dread, the more so because she already knew herself to be too late. She had lost the chance of being reconciled with Sabine this side of Judgment Day. All that remained was to save the body she had loved from being dumped in an unmarked, communal grave beyond the city limits.

And, of course, to say goodbye.

Hospital orderlies always had itchy palms. Back then she'd exchanged twenty golden thalers – twice an orderly's annual stipend – for an hour's rent of the morgue key and the promise of invisibility for her and her porters. Those she left at the last turn of the passage, instructing them to join her only when she called. Then she stepped up to the door, turned the precious key into the lock, and pushed the morgue door open.

The place had been a blaze of light; expensive beeswax candles stuck on every flat surface. The man bent over the slab turned at the scraping of the door on the slate-flagged floor, his cloak falling back around him as he rose to his full height, his hands soaked in blood.

She recognised him, of course. He had, on occasion, visited her house – only the public apartments, never upstairs. Always one of a group, usually a pre-wedding fling for one of the great lords of the Court.

"You – you *animal*."

"Please." His voice indicated no surprise, still less resentment. He had recognised her, too. That was only proper. "While I realise there is *considerable* speculation about my preferences in the city, I did hope that *breathing* would be assumed to be a pre-requisite, however exotic my reputation."

"*What are you doing with Sabine?*"

His eye-lids drooped, as if the effort needed to hold them up, let alone explain himself to lesser beings, was something insupportable.

"I required the body of a woman who'd died of complications following an induced miscarriage in the third or fourth month of pregnancy. She qualified."

Fear and fury blended within her; her next words came out as a hiss.

"Holy shitting mother of God, why?"

His tone of bored detachment didn't change. "I needed to prove Lord Amberley's housemaid didn't die for the reason his housekeeper claimed. Problem?"

"Lord Amberley?" She could not keep her distaste out of her voice.

His eyes snapped wide open. "Tell me. Is it true he's been barred from your otherwise extraordinarily open establishment?"

"Open to those who can afford my rates. I call that exclusive, myself." Just the right note of professional detachment.

"Amberley's the heir of Westermarck. Of course he can afford your rates."

"Not for what he requires." Unbidden, her eyes strayed to Sabine on the slab, her body sprawled awry, horribly reminiscent of another girl's. Reminiscent, but for the silence. The other girl had screamed. "Not even the Sultan himself could offer me enough for *that*."

"Ah." A long, drawn out syllable; almost a sigh of fulfilment. "Yes. Oh, *yes*. My thanks. The last piece of the puzzle." He made a vague, salute-like gesture towards Sabine with one blood-stained hand. "She gave me the first parts."

"A puzzle? That's why you treated her like meat on the butcher's slab?"

"She isn't here. I assure you, however eager I am to prove my point, I didn't touch her body until hours after her spirit left it. Given that, why *should* you worry?"

"You really don't understand, do you? Love, I mean." She closed her eyes. It didn't help. At the back of her head she could hear Sabine's voice; sharp, teasing. *Gertie. Always the theorist. I've had the Crown Prince of Gaaldine's hands all over me. How many girls in this city can boast the same, eh? Admittedly, I'm dead, but then, if I don't mind, who gave you the right to mind for me?*

"I'm reliably informed it's not my area. And certainly not when it comes to women. Sorry." His face set in lines of dismissive contempt.

His indifference was beautifully acted, but she was the best in the business. She felt tension stretched between them like an invisible silk thread. Mentally, she crooked her little finger round the thread and tugged, gently.

"Yes, I know your reputation. Be a miracle if I didn't, given the work you put into maintaining it."

His head jerked up. The candle-light threw the sharp planes of his face, the dark hollows of his throat into sharp contrast. His eyes – God, those eyes. Eyes to strip one naked, not just in body but in soul.

Her skin tingled.

The second most powerful man in Gaaldine was currently favouring her with his undivided attention. Her quip had hit a nerve, better aimed than she'd planned.

Sex and power. For her, they had always been inextricably interlinked. Without the game of seduction, the play of mind against mind, what would set the physical act apart from the gross rutting of farmyard beasts? And power – what could be more seductive than power?

On that thought, she knew she had found the key.

"When did you decide, your grace, you couldn't be arsed dealing with those who would use your bed as a ladder?"

"I'm sorry?"

She continued as if he had not spoken. "Ask me to bet, I'd say you'd had fewer bouts at the horizontal galliard in the last few years than the Archbishop."

"If you refer to his lately anointed Grace, that's probably equally true of you."

The counter-jab came automatically – the riposte of an expert fencer – but his eyes never left her face. She glided forward, reeling in the silk thread as she went. She could see his eyes widen at her approach but he made no attempt to back away.

Her voice dropped to its lowest register; her fingers ghosted over the pale skin of his exposed throat. She felt gooseflesh rise beneath her exploring fingers.

"How old were you the first time?" Her lips brushed his ear.

"That it happened or I realised it?"

Not "When *what* happened?" she noted. His voice had shifted, subtly. A little less smooth, as if he was having trouble breathing. She had him, and he knew it.

"I doubt the two were that far apart. Smart man, you. Everyone says so."

"I wasn't born knowing everything." He stirred, impatiently, beneath her wandering fingers. Warned, she withdrew her hand from the too-intimate realm of his chest, circled his wrist instead: a light, almost sisterly touch. Men wanted what they wanted; she had learned to be expert in divining it. This one – while not as wholly indifferent to women as he pretended or popular rumour suggested – was not a fortress to be taken by frontal assault.

"None of us are," she agreed. "But some of us have knowledge thrust upon us very young. Twelve?"

"Thirteen." After a moment he added, "My grandfather bribed one of the under-grooms to discover whether certain suspicions he had about my preferences were well-founded. I – shall we say, the flow of knowledge went in more than one direction."

Beneath her fingertips she could feel the fluttering of his pulse; more disturbed than his tone betrayed. She hastened to reassure. "Not defeat, then. Knowledge is power."

"Is it?" Such a depth of bitterness in his tone. "That might explain my grandfather's reaction. He never cared for competing powers. He interpreted them as threats."

That, she realised abruptly, was a warning. She kept safe the secrets of half the powerful men in Gaaldine – it was bad business to dream of doing otherwise – but some areas were plain bad luck to meddle in. She let her hand drop.

"I'm sorry for it." She meant it, but hardly thought he would believe her.

"And I, for my part, am sorry for your loss." The trite phrase of commiseration came awkwardly off his tongue. Presumably he had officials to convey condolences, when he needed to. Equally, she presumed he didn't often have to condole on the deaths of destitute tarts who'd chosen some butcher to rid them of an unwanted babe, then fallen into the still more incompetent care of the Poor Persons' Lying In Hospital.

He looked at the girl on the slab, meditatively. "I owe her, I suppose. And you. Between you, you'll help me cut a malignant monster out of a position where, unchecked, he could do great harm. You're a businesswoman. Name your fee."

Twelve hours to show you what you've been missing all these years. The words almost crossed her lips – from his startled, vulnerable, absurdly *young* expression she for a moment thought they had – before sanity intervened. *Get a grip, girl. Whoever's job that is, it isn't yours.*

"No more Sabines." The words escaped her before she knew what she was going to say. "No more women dying needless deaths."

He looked down once again at the girl on the slab, as if for the first time he saw her as a person, not a collection of limbs and organs.

"I'm a prince of the blood, not St Jude." His voice was low, with a thoughtful, assessing edge. "One in a dozen women does not leave the birthing chamber alive, or dies within a month or so thereafter. That's across all kinds and qualities: farm girls, merchants' wives and noblewomen alike."

"I'd take one in a dozen. Hell, I'd take one in six. But here – three-quarters of those who enter this charnel house leave feet first. Can that be right, your grace?"

He paused for a moment, then nodded. "Tell me what the hospital needs. It can't be just money. If it were –"

He glanced down her body in one comprehensive, appraising look. Despite everything, she was hard-pressed to suppress a laugh. Of all the times men – and not a few women – had done that over the years, she could recall none who done so with such a parade of uninterest in the body that inhabited her expensive, subtly sensual clothing.

"I've done well for myself, I agree. More disposable income than many of your courtiers, probably." Certainly. She'd offered a few young blades of the court loans, at suitable interest, over recent years. The money was secure enough. Unlike their tailors, that was a debt they couldn't afford not to repay.

"I suspect there may, in some cases, be an inverse relationship." His expression became vulpine. "Perhaps an oeconomist could formulate a suitable principle of finance to account for it. *Gertrude's Law* would sound well in a learned pamphlet."

She ignored his levity. "As I said, money is not what I seek."

He looked down at the corpse on the slab once more. "Ah. I see. Prestige. You think the physicians here would fight harder to save patients if they felt by doing so they might attract the notice of aristocratic patrons. And you can't use your own lover within the Court to promote the hospital. First, because you fear – correctly – that espousing such a cause would risk bringing your association into plain sight and, secondly and equally correctly, you suspect Lady Anthea – whatever her other qualities – has no real sympathy with the sick."

She gasped. "You know about me and Anthea? Does the King?"

"I'd be astonished if he didn't. Knowing Mycroft."

"And he – does not disapprove?" She heard the absurdity of her words as they tumbled from her lips and scrambled to retrieve them. "Ah. I suppose if he did, he would have stopped it."

"If he did, he would have stopped you." His voice was absent, courteous, uninvolved. Nevertheless, it chilled the blood in her veins. He went on as if he had noticed nothing. "I see a possibility. There's a physician currently at the University in Glasstown. The sort of genius who – when it's whispered abroad they are to perform a dissection – leaves every other physician in the School of Medicine orating to empty benches. With predictable results."

"Jealousy."

"Something, I'm sure, you have seen enough of on your own account."

"Enough for a lifetime." Not entirely true. Assassination attempts – whether of body or character – were how she kept score. When they dried up, she would know it was time to die indeed.

"Quite so." He sounded amused, as if he valued her assurance at exactly what it was worth. "Sarai, too. Three times with poison – idiots, she knows far more about venoms and their antidotes than her enemies ever will – and twice with hired bravos. Those, my agents were forced to step in and deal with."

"Generous to offer your protection." And then, "Sarai?"

"She's by way of being a friend of a friend."

That, of course, had not been the question she had asked. But the answer was interesting. The Crown Prince – was not noted for having friends. Certainly not ones whose protégés he would exert himself to defend in a foreign city. If she could discover who the man was, he would be someone to cultivate.

"How does she come into this mess?" She gestured round the morgue, but encompassed the entire hospital in her intent.

"Sarai thinks she can win her current battle. If she were a man, she would. But no-one can fight both the University and the Church. I'm minded to offer her a strategic line of retreat. Senior physician here would fit the bill nicely."

"None of the physicians now in post will ever deign to work under a woman."

The Crown Prince smiled. "That will avoid a world of difficulties. Now. We linger here too long; your porters will be restless. Allow me to make my departure before you call them. People do talk, but I'd rather channel the direction into slightly more savoury lines than the current set-up is likely to provoke."

And he had vanished and she had taken Sabine to be buried. Two months later, there'd been a minor stir in the city at the news that the new head physician at the Poor Persons' Lying In Hospital would be a woman – an infidel Greek, born in Thessaloniki and fresh from the University in Glasstown.

But that stir had been a feather in the wind compared with the storm which erupted over the capital ten months later, when the infidel woman had been formally appointed the Crown Prince's personal physician.

Prestige, he had promised her. He had not promised her a small, plain, unassuming woman who blazed through inefficiency, incompetence and indifference like a firebrand tossed into a timber-yard. He had not promised her that makeshift lath and plaster outbuildings would be torn down and replaced with airy stone colonnades and cloisters. He had not promised a Demonstration Theatre of Anatomy, right in the heart of the hospital, planned out on models from Leyden and Padua.

Nor had he promised – could not have promised – that on his marriage, three years later, his wife would come as a volunteer assistant to the infidel woman and stay to fight death on behalf of girls from the gutters and back alleys of Gaaldine's capital as if she counted each one lost a personal defeat.

Charis, Crown Princess of Gaaldine, whose world she was here to tear apart.

An orderly – bribed to deny her presence there (some things would never change) – led her through the new corridors with their high ceilings and floor-length windows. They reached a waiting area, lined with benches, where the orderly indicated she should stay. She withdrew

into a shadowed alcove, watching a door. Judging by the screams, it could lead only to the birthing room.

The door opened and a girl came out, wiping her hands on a damp cloth and handing it off behind her with the unconscious ease of someone who had never not had a servant within call. Despite the plain, dark gown, part-covered by a smock of blood-stained holland, and the hair, simply knotted at the nape of her neck, she could be no-one but the Crown Princess.

Gertie watched from the shadows, fascinated. She knew most of the men of the Court by sight, and many intimately. The women – Anthea apart – remained a mystery. The Crown Princess was the subject of such contradictory rumours and speculation that the physical woman was, at first, almost a disappointment.

Almost.

She was no beauty; about that, the rumours were correct. Those who dismissed her as "mannish" were, however, wide of the mark. She moved with a free athleticism, unusual in a gentlewoman, but her stays had been laced to make the most of modest breasts, her eyebrows plucked to delicate lines emphasising warm, wide-set hazel eyes – her best feature – and her hair washed with some admirably subtle preparation to tint its natural sandy hue (rare in Gaaldine and Angria, characteristic of Gondal and points further north) a pleasing light straw gold.

Also, Gertie noted with approval, good bones. Built to last. The girl might not be one of those sprites of fire and starlight whom poets liked, but – if the Blessed Virgin spared them all – she would one day mature into a formidable queen.

If only they could survive the current mess.

On that thought she stepped out of the shadows and sank into a curtsy.

"Your grace," she said.

The Crown Princess stopped. Gertie remained in position, poised with exquisite elegance, head bowed and eyes cast modestly down. The Crown Princess' shoes, she noted irrelevantly, were as practical as the rest of her outfit, if exquisitely made. Her voice, especially considering her youth, was coolly authoritative.

"I regret, but at the hospital the demands of the patients must take precedence over all else. I cannot entertain petitions here. If you apply at the Palace –"

"I am not a petitioner, ma'am."

There was a faint, affronted noise from above her head; one sensibly-shod foot tapped. For the first time, Gertie looked up.

"Forgive my interruption, ma'am, but the news I bring touches very close to your own safety. There is a man you must see, and we should not linger here."

"Please rise."

Standing, she had half a head of height on the Crown Princess. It felt less of an advantage than it normally did. The Crown Princess surveyed her with developing uncertainty.

"Forgive me – I am persuaded we have never met, and yet I believe – that is – " She came to a halt. A faint, attractive flush spread over her cheeks.

It was not difficult to decode. "Perhaps, ma'am, you are persuaded that you know who I am, but the nature of your suspicions – should they prove false – would cause such irremediable insult that you are loath to voice them?"

The Crown Princess looked at her. And then – she had been wrong, Gertie realised, to think the girl's eyes were her best feature. Her wide mouth split in an irrepressible smile which transformed her face.

"That is *indeed* the case. And my suspicions –?"

"Are entirely justified, ma'am." Gertie smiled at her in return. "But now we've dealt with the introductions, I assure you, ma'am, we really must not linger here."

"I cannot leave with you. My guards –"

"Are the last people who must know we have met. Ma'am, I understand entirely your concerns, but I need to take you from here to see someone who has news it is vital for you to hear. If you do not trust me – and that may be wise – at least trust this." She reached inside her bodice, pulled out the letter the exhausted soldier had brought and thrust it at the Crown Princess.

The Crown Princess' eyes widened as she recognised the hand. The letter's contents, of course, Gertie had read before setting out.

The safety of the Queen of Gondal is paramount. At the first sign of treachery, do not tarry; ensure you are first to the capital. Once there, make for the house by the Cathedral and tell its lady the time has come for the sealed orders to be opened.

"Sherlock –" The Crown Princess' voice was barely a whisper; her eyes wide and staring. She had gone ashy pale; her expression not that of someone who disbelieved what she had read but, rather, that of one who had seen confirmation of something long dreaded.

Gertie hastened to offer what crumbs of comfort she could.

"We have no reason to doubt your husband lives, ma'am. Though he has – vanished. The man who brought the letter will be able to tell you more; he witnessed everything."

"Describe him." The Crown Princess' flat, imperious tone could not conceal – from someone of Gertie's experience – the terrified girl beneath.

"Ma'am. He is about the middle height, a wiry rather than a muscular build. He has dark hair and swarthy skin. He carries one shoulder a degree awry – the pain of an old wound, I would judge. He has the accent of North-west Gaaldine; Corbisdale territory but I understand him to

have no love for the Duke. Indeed, were you to ask my opinion, I imagine him to have joined the King's service to avoid any risk of being pressed into the Duke's."

"Jonathan," the Crown Princess breathed.

"He gave that name, ma'am, yes."

The girl cracked open the birthing room door a fragment, speaking through the gap. "This morning's patient has developed some disquieting symptoms. I may be some time. Pray take a message to Frances Pickering, and advise her I shall be delayed in joining her supper-party. Ask her to send a servant to attend me there; you need not wait."

She let the door fall shut. "Now. Take me to hear what Jonathan has to say."

He scrambled awkwardly to his feet as they entered Gertie's sitting room, swaying with exhaustion, his hands shaking, his face grey-tinged.

"Sit down at once," the Crown Princess ordered. "What has become of my husband? Where is the Crown Prince?"

He collapsed wanly onto one of the gilt sofas. "Now, don't fret, ma'am. There's no cause. I've never known a man with a better head on his shoulders than his grace's. Nor a better swimmer. And, I swear by all the saints, when I saw him last, he lived yet; aye, and had full use of his wits."

"What. Happened?" It came out almost as a shriek.

The soldier looked cornered. "I pray you, calm yourself, ma'am. He fell – or jumped, more like. From the Reaching Beck Bridge."

She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Where?"

"It's in north-eastern Gaaldine, your grace. We were there to meet the pretender, Hebron – you'll maybe have heard his name?"

The Crown Princess nodded. "Sherlock was so furious after the Council meeting, the one when it first came up. He and John had the most tremendous argument, afterwards, about whether it was politic to challenge the King's decision not to approach him."

"Dear God, never," Gertie murmured.

"So John told him." She looked at the soldier; her lip trembled. "I take it, from your presence here, that Sherlock ignored his *extremely sensible* advice."

He winced. "I never thought the King didn't know what we was about. Christ's foreskin, what a mess." Belatedly, he added, "My pardons, ma'am."

"Oh, Sherlock, what an *idiot*." Almost, she seemed about to break down.

Laying aside any question of protocol, Gertie strode to the sideboard, poured out a glass of brandy, and thrust it into the Crown Princess' hand.

"Drink that, ma'am. It'll do no-one any good if you collapse."

The girl downed the brandy in a few swift gulps. She gestured at the soldier. "This man has had hard usage. Can you, of your courtesy, fetch him food? He can, I am sure, both talk and eat."

Forty years ago, near enough, Gertie had had her first – and last – job as a servitor in her uncle's tavern, in a little port city down on the Angrian border. It hadn't taken her more than a week to determine she'd be better off selling for hard cash what the customers assumed was on offer for free, a relish to tempt a man's thirst, like olives and strips of dried fish. She'd left there on the arm of an Italian merchant skipper and never looked back. She'd never served at table again, either.

Until tonight.

She descended to the pantries, returning with a platter loaded with sliced sausage, venison pasties, potted beef, dried ham, olives, cheese and rolls.

Having passed that to the soldier, she poured wine into three crystal glasses. It was vintage Angrian; for a moment the candlelight on its dark turbid depths evoked dried blood on pale, eloquent hands. Old loves, old memories. Better forgotten.

That done, she leaned towards the soldier. "Now, man, tell it from the beginning. I understood the man Hebron to be one of the old King's bastards. But they've never been a problem before. What can have changed?"

It came as a shock when the girl answered instead.

"The Pretender of Gondal."

"Ma'am?"

"There is something between them which goes back a very long way." The Crown Princess sipped her wine, her brows furrowed. "I have never understood what – I don't think even John knows. But it dates to when my husband was a hostage at my father's court, before I was born. Whatever happened between them, I believe it cut both ways. The Heir absented himself from court for some years about that time; he did not return until after Mama's death. I understand he travelled across Europe, pursuing his studies. If Sherlock suspected he was in league with this Hebron man, that would have tempted him to defy the King's command."

The soldier nodded. "I believe that may have been about the size of it, ma'am. That and boredom." He looked at her sidelong, as if wondering if he had overstepped the mark. The Crown Princess sighed.

"Yes. He had been complaining much on that score. I believe it fretted him to have to leave so much to agents. He claimed they would overlook so much that he would have seen, were

he on the spot."

From the soldier's long-suffering air, Gertie rather suspected the Crown Prince had bent his men's ears on that very subject. And they, presumably, had even less ability than his wife to avoid it.

"So how did it begin?"

"His grace fancied seeing the house Hebron grew up in. It's in a little village in the fruit-farming country. Household was broken up about three years ago and no-one's lived there since, so beyond trying to trace some of the domestic staff the King's investigators didn't pay it much heed. But his grace got it in his head that if there was anything to be discovered about Hebron, he'd find it there." The soldier paused, then added, "Well, at least seeing as he couldn't break down the walls of the Abbey of Norburyness and search *there*."

Something about his tone conjured up a vision of hard-bitten troopers desperately juggling deference and horror, trying to convince the Crown Prince that *no, an assault on a nunnery really is completely out of the question, your grace*.

"You went there – to Hebron's childhood home, I mean?"

"Aye, ma'am. Well. In a manner of speaking. We cast round – it took the best part of a day – so we wouldn't have to pass through any village where they might remember us."

He took a deep swallow from his wine.

"Just about twilight, we're going down a lane, maybe quarter of a mile or so from our destination, when suddenly his grace bids us halt. To our left are great iron gates, with a house behind; all shuttered up and quiet as the grave. 'Quick men,' says the Crown Prince, 'over the wall.' And it makes no sense at all – that's the wrong house, for certain; nothing like the description the King's investigators gave – but he uses *that* tone, and before we know it we're on the other side, crouched down, and he's sent off a couple of scouts to check if there's anyone on the premises. And they come back and report there's a caretaker, but he seems to have crawled inside a cider barrel in the back kitchen and it'll take the crack of doom to wake him. So we hie ourselves round to the back kitchen and his grace – cool as you like – relieves the caretaker of his keys. 'Follow me,' he tells me, 'and you lot, make sure he doesn't wake up and raise the alarm if anyone approaches the house.'"

"And what did you find?" The Crown Princess leant forwards.

"It was odd, ma'am." The soldier thought for a moment. "Nothing you could put your finger on – at least, nothing I could, I can't speak for his grace. But something about that place gave me the willies. It felt – it felt wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Yes, ma'am." He hesitated. "Did your nurse ever tell you the tale of the princess who fell in love with the magician?"

"The one who promised to take her to his palace in the forest, beyond the rose-pink mountains? And the palace walls were hung with cloth of gold, and the carpets were of woven starlight. But when she woke in the morning she was alone on the forest floor, and nothing but a heap of withered mushrooms to show where the palace had been."

"Dried yarrow stalks," the soldier muttered.

"I'm sorry?" The Crown Princess' tone was icy.

Gertie coughed. "Doubtless they tell the story differently across the three kingdoms, ma'am. Indeed, when my own mother told it, the mountains were of crystal. But that's of little matter here. It felt unreal?"

The soldier nodded. "Aye. Everything expensive, most of it ugly, none of it looked like it belonged together, all of it practically unused. Until we got to a bedchamber upstairs. That was the only room that felt like a real person had ever lived there."

"Did you find anything there?"

"Aye, ma'am. If I may - ?" He gestured towards his knapsack, left against the wall when he'd arrived. Gertie brought it to him herself; he fumbled inside.

"It was a lady's room, ma'am – you could tell from how it was decorated. And there was a writing desk under the window. An old walnut thing with a mended leg. The moment he saw it the Crown Prince went straight for it and declared there had to be a secret drawer. And he set to looking for it. I feared we'd be there all night."

An opportunity dozens would kill for. Fortunately, the habit of years had given Gertie considerable control over her features.

"And?"

"His grace found it, at last. And – there wasn't anything in it but a lady's sketching portfolio. With these in it."

His scrabbles in his knapsack had proved successful. He pulled out a roll of papers and let them unfold on the low table.

Gertie craned her head. The top sketch – executed in charcoal by a competent, rather too mannered artist – was of a young man, sprawled somewhere outdoors, dark hair flopping across closed eyes. A precise, feminine hand had annotated the sketch, "Jim, sleeping."

The Crown Princess caught her breath. "Yes. That is the Pretender."

"Drawn by someone who knew him very well, evidently." Gertie turned to the soldier. "A lady's room, you say?"

"Yes." The soldier licked his lips. "I doubt there'd have been anything of *that* about it. If his grace hadn't said it was a young woman's room I'd have thought it some old spinster aunt's,

ma'am. Smelt of beeswax polish and dried lavender. Everything in its place. Very proper, if you know what I mean."

The Crown Princess' hand stretched out, and moved the drawing of the Pretender aside. It might have been fancy, but Gertie thought she detected a reluctance on the girl's part to touch the paper.

Underneath was a sketch of a boy, head bent, utterly absorbed in the task of rigging a miniature ship he had balanced on his knee. The same hand had annotated the sketch "David".

The artist had managed to avoid the slight stiffness of the other portrait; her line was more assured, more economical and, in consequence, far more vivid. The likeness leapt off the page.

"Oh," Gertie said, taken aback. She looked up at the soldier. "That is Hebron?"

"Aye. Though he's grown up a bit since that was done." He must have caught the question in their eyes. "I saw him at the bridge, the day before yesterday, ma'am. And – well, your grace will have seen the pictures of King Mycroft I in the Palace galleries and you, ma'am, will recall the living original. Hebron didn't get less like his father as he got older, ma'am."

"You *saw* him?"

"Please, let me tell it in my own way, ma'am. You know what his grace always says about not going running off ahead of the facts."

That seemed to calm her. She nodded.

"Proceed."

"As soon as he finds the drawings, his grace is out of there like greased lightning, ma'am. We've a trooper in the party who comes from some town in those parts who's got a local accent you could cut with a knife. 'Right, man,' his grace says, 'You and me, we're going to the tavern in the village. Anyone asks, we're tramping home from mercenary service in the religious wars. The rest of you, cast back a couple of miles and hole up in the woods, just near the ruined chapel. We'll join you when we're done.' And he hooks the keys back in the caretaker's belt and is over the wall, just like that."

"I've often heard Sherlock say that a tavern is the very place to gain valuable intelligence, without being suspected of anything of the sort." The Crown Princess paused, then added, "Besides, his presence in such places does annoy the King so very, very much."

The soldier grinned. "Aye. I can't see his grace the King bawling out bawdy choruses in a village pot-house."

Gertie sniffed. "More's the pity. He always did have a shade too much invested in his own dignity, even as a young man." At their speculative looks she suppressed a smile on her own

account. Discretion had been her stock in trade for more years than she could count; she was hardly going squander it now. "Still, no matter. I take it the stratagem worked?"

"Must have done, ma'am. Next thing I knew, we were off for the Northern Marches. His grace, of course, being as forthcoming as usual as to what we were up to, which is to say, not in the least." The Angrian red seemed to be doing its work. The Crown Princess, blessedly, seemed to have learned the art of listening, probably from her stints at the hospital, and betrayed no temptation to interrupt.

"I never knew the King didn't know." The soldier shook his head, as if trying to shake water from his ears. "His grace sent a couple of troopers home from Brendelhame – Sarai insisted, they'd been injured in a skirmish with bandits – I assumed he'd sent dispatches with them. His grace vanished for a couple of days – scouting into Corbisdale, I reckon, but don't say I said so. And after that's when he came and told us he'd arranged a meeting with Hebron at the Reaching Beck Bridge; just the two of them, no weapons allowed."

"Madness!"

The soldier looked as if he'd be hard pressed to deny the charge.

"There was a fair on – doubtless they thought the presence of crowds would make it safer, ma'am. We were all in disguise, mingling with the locals; I don't doubt Hebron's supporters were, too. I saw his grace speak to the boy, and draw him into the bridge's central recess. Then, as luck would have it, some idiot carter lets the leader of his team spook at a goat and damn near overturns his rig, so all hell breaks loose. We were caught wrong-sided, cut off from the pair of them."

His face was grim. "I heard his grace shout. I was first of our men to the parapet – saw his grace's head break water. He was still holding Hebron. He looked up – ma'am, I'll swear he recognised me. He waved his arm, pointing, like he was saying, *Go, man! Now!* and then the current carried them both round the next bend and out of sight."

"Dear God! And what then?"

"I was riding south to find you, ma'am, before a quarter of a turn had passed. There were others who would organise the search for his grace; my job was to see you safe."

Gertie rose, unlocked the cupboard in the corner and reached inside for the package the Crown Prince had left with her, so long ago.

"I understand his grace has long feared that someone within the very heart of the Court bears a hidden allegiance to the Pretender. Accordingly, some time ago he asked a favour of me. If ever I received word, you were to have this, and no-one, not the King nor his Council nor even your grace's private physician was to know I had given it to you."

The Crown Princess scrutinised the packet, but did not break the seal. "I – see." She looked across at the soldier. "You stand in some jeopardy on my husband's account. If he has in truth failed to inform the King of his actions, my husband's enemies within the court will seek to persuade the King there was some – some disloyalty at the root of that decision."

She carefully avoided the word "treason"; it hung in the air, nonetheless.

"Both on the superscription to this package and in Jonathan's orders he describes me as 'the Queen of Gondal.' My husband is a subtle man."

Her brow furrowed in thought. Then, visibly, came revelation, as clearly as if she had shouted her conclusions aloud. She sat up very straight, as if consciously posing herself for a formal portrait.

A coronation portrait.

"The King of Gaaldine has Our friendship; he may not command Our allegiance."

Her voice had changed, deepened, as if she spoke not just for herself but in right of long line of others, stretching back to the dawn of time.

"The treaty my late father signed on Our marriage pledged Gondal's help to Gaaldine, should it be threatened, and Gaaldine, in turn, pledged its support to the house of Ancona and its lawful heirs. This –"

Her hand indicated the sketch of the Pretender.

"- gives rise to more than suspicion that a rogue member of Our house has broken the peace of Gaaldine and conspires to do worse, if unprevented."

The rogue member in question having been anointed King in the Cathedral of Saints Augusta and Geraldine by the Cardinal-Archbishop of Gondal, before all the assembled nobles of the realm – present company excepted – and sundry foreign ambassadors and delegates of princely houses from the Emperor to the Sultan.

Gertie suppressed an ill-timed grin. For all her dignity, all her conscious cloaking of herself in the authority of a royal line which stretched – according to Royal genealogists, those most accomplished and bare-faced of liars – back to the plains of Troy, the Crown Princess was still a sixteen-year old girl. And Gertie had learned much over the years (*Of course he will marry me; he does it to show how much he cares; my father will come round in the end; it was only a marriage of convenience; he loves me best; he will love me forever*) about the abilities of sixteen-year-old girls to ignore the existence of inconvenient facts in pursuit of a set idea. It was almost a force of nature.

"Your grace?" Gertie enquired demurely.

The Crown Princess broke the seal on the packet, and scrutinised the top sheet briefly.

"I am to ride for Castle Cavron. The King lies away from the Palace tonight; it will take any messenger some hours to reach him with this news. It gives me the start I need. I will need my horse, travelling clothes and a suitable escort."

Gertie nodded. Breaking the beast out of the Palace stables would be a problem, but she knew *exactly* what the Master of the Royal Horse liked. It could be done. As for an escort – it was

hardly as if she lacked experience in unobtrusively moving young women safely from one end of the country to the other.

The Crown Princess turned to the soldier. "After I am on the road, go to John. Tell him I bid him join the hunt for my husband forthwith. That is his Queen's command. Tell him that – and be sure to be overheard."

She turned back to the packet in her hand. "I pray you, may I have paper, ink, quills and more light? There are instructions I must send."

Gertie rose, pulling the soldier to his feet. "At your command, your grace. We'll leave you to make your arrangements."

The door whispered shut behind them.

Queen takes castle. So the game moves into its final stage.

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