

Lady Kestrel

The Hawk

Kieron was bored.

He wandered around the edges of the gathering, a goblet of wine in his hand. The food had been as delicious as always, and now the crowd was milling together to talk afterwards. Kieron was a little confused as to what they were even celebrating in the first place; King Tristan had caught up with him two days ago and told him he was invited to the banquet.

When the king personally invited you to dine, you did not refuse.

It didn't escape Kieron's notice that most of the people at the banquet were men. King Tristan had even managed to persuade Leon Lavallan to attend – or more likely, Leon's parents had told him to attend once they received the invitation.

Kieron didn't mind large gatherings, but there was only so much he could take of them. It was too crowded and loud for him now, so he passed his goblet to a serving-girl and walked towards the nearest window. Fortunately, it was one with a balcony. He stepped outside and closed the window until only a small gap remained.

It was so much better out here in the night air. Kieron closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall, allowing the wind to move over his face.

"It's time to think about marriage."

An image of Lord Makaros' solemn face appeared behind Kieron's eyelids.

"I've avoided discussing this with you for as long as I could but it's time to start thinking about your future. This family needs more heirs, and you need a wife. It's admirable that you took up your mother's charity work, but you have other duties to our people."

"I understand, Father."

"Good." Kieron's father sighed; the moonlight made his greying hair seem almost silver. "I trust you to make your own decision here, Kieron; all I ask is that you choose someone with a good heart – and that you think will be a good match for you. Your mother and I did very well together; I may have never said this aloud, but I loved her."

He didn't have to say the words. Kieron's mother had known, and reciprocated.

Kieron opened his eyes; someone had pushed the window open and was walking onto the balcony. Someone with golden hair and a crimson gown.

"Olivia."

Lady Olivia del Sora spun around at the same time Kieron came into the light. She relaxed as soon as she saw it was him. "Kieron. You're not attending the banquet?"

"I was, but then it grew too crowded for me."

Together, they stood and looked over the balcony. The torchlight made Olivia's hair and eyes glimmer.

"Do you miss your family?" Kieron asked.

"I do, a little, but I try not to think about it. You spend a lot of time at court, don't you?"

"My father is relieved that I can be here in his place. He does not enjoy court very much."

There were times when Kieron did not blame Lord Makaros for that; there were scheming nobles in any court, as Lord Alterne had proven.

"Is he one of King Tristan's swordbrothers?"

Kieron stole a quick glance at her. "No. Captain Ferdian is, though."

He remembered the flash of fire in her eyes when he first encountered her; she'd quickly tried to hide it by lowering her gaze, but he'd been intrigued.

Kieron shouldn't have been surprised when the truth came out about Olivia and Princess Adele. He also hadn't forgotten the tiny smile on Olivia's face when King Tristan told her that her 'princess' act had managed to fool Kieron.

Suddenly, a strange light came into Olivia's eyes. "Kieron."

"Yes?"

"I have a favour to ask."

Kieron turned to look at her properly. "If it's in my power to help, I will."

Olivia gripped the balustrade tightly. "This banquet is being held so I can meet some of the court nobles; when it ends, the king will expect me to choose a husband."

"He wants you to make the decision in one evening?"

Then Olivia looked straight into his face and Kieron knew what favour she was going to ask.

"Will *you* be my husband?"

His first reaction was one of surprise. The second was of relief that she had asked him instead of going straight to the king with her decision.

Kieron had no doubt that Olivia had her reasons for choosing him. He could say no – but he wasn't sure he wanted to refuse, even though they barely knew each other.

All I ask is that you choose someone with a good heart – and that you think will be a good match for you.

Olivia had acted as a decoy for Princess Adeline of her own volition. She was fierce as well; the look on her face when she stood in front of Adeline to protect her had told Kieron that much.

Marriage to her would be interesting. Kieron liked Olivia, yes, but could they do well together? Could he love her as his father loved his mother?

He hoped so.

"I will."