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THE CROWN

"You think you can do anything you bloody well want!" Sam heard Flex say. So, he and Minerva were fighting again.

"Break it up," Sam warned them when they came out from the kitchen behind the bar. "I'll not have you creating in my pub."

"What business is it of yours?" Flex asked him.

"Granted, I'm not my brother's keeper. But I am the boss around here, so watch it."

"The luck of the draw, that's all. The birthright of the first born. No more clever than being in the right place at the right time." Flex scowled as he spoke. He stood in the kitchen doorway with his right arm barring the way. "In here, Minnie. I want to talk to you," he said.

Sam watched her cower as she slid under Flex's arm.

"Why don't you let her be?" he called out.

He felt he should rush to her defence. This fragile wraith. Such silver-white hair she had, such luminous anaemic skin. He knew he could circle her scarred wrists with thumb and forefinger. The thought of Flex handling something so fragile revolted him. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had to rescue what was precious from his brother's carelessness.

He liked to watch her perform her tasks, delicately, deliberately, calmly. And afterwards to see her at the table farthest from the bar, enfolded in her thoughts, or engrossed in Poe or Tennyson.

He imagined the Raven, summoned by her dreams, guided by her ethereal glow, coming at midnight to tap at her chamber door. She, whose soul's slender silver cord seemed to shiver uncertainly, reached to the core of his fastidious being.

In his own dreams he donned the knightly plumes of bold Sir Lancelot, helmet and feather like one burning flame together, and a pure glinting shield with which to provide the maiden with a different mirror.

“I want you to keep away from him. Do you hear me, Minnie?” In the kitchen Flex was cleaving meat. “I don’t want him touching you. I don’t want him near you.” Flex knew he ought to cajole Minnie, not command. But he must make her see how crucial it was. She nodded and tears began to flow. He wiped blood from his hands. Why did she do that? he asked himself. Her crying was purely an act. Part of the dream she currently inhabited, where the real world had no place.

He’d wanted to comfort her and protect her. Instead he found she protected herself by living entirely inside her dreams. Her apathy made him furious sometimes and then Sam would interfere.

Sam who hardly knew her. Sam who never had been able to resist meddling in his life. Who had set the rules for every childhood game. Who, even now, would only play a game of chess if he could have the black pieces. It was not only his smugness, offering his adversary the advantage, Sam seemed obsessed with possessing the black knights. Usurper of The Crown.

“Come on you two, I haven’t got all day,” Sam called.

Minerva went out to the bar. “Supper is almost ready,” she said to him.

“And how about you, ma petite?” He felt an impulse to grab her around her slender waist but resisted, it would be a crime to bruise her delicate translucence.

She nodded.

“Tonight?” he asked.

“Tonight,” she agreed.

Flex carried a tray of clean ashtrays out from the kitchen, brushing past her on her way back.

“Watch out!” she snapped at him.

“Have you been at her again? So help me, Sam if — ”

“Come, come, little brother, you are not my keeper either, are you? Not even hers, if it comes to that. What you mean is ‘hands off the merchandise’, as the saying goes ... ”

“I’m warning you: don’t take advantage — ”

“Take advantage? That’s a very old-fashioned phrase for you, mon frère ... ”

“You know what I mean. So help me, I’ll kill you if you do.”

“If you had it in you, as the saying goes, which you don’t. I promise you the little lady wouldn’t slit her wrists if I were looking after her.”

“Just stay out of it, do you hear?”

“You can trust me *jeune frère*, my balls are tied.”

“If I find your balls anywhere near my woman, I’ll fucking crush them.” Flex swung the tray over Sam’s head and commenced to throw brown glass ashtrays on to empty tables.

Minerva listened with her usual attentiveness, while keeping well out of the sight of both of them. The intensity of Flex’s moods disturbed her. He demanded too much, and the rewards were not particularly remarkable. Now Sam was here and The Crown was his. Couldn’t he provide just as well? All that self-sufficiency and cynicism he paraded, that worldly French affectation had not fooled her. He had that faraway look she felt she understood. She began to weave the finest of webs.

Sam came into the kitchen, looking for her.

“Don’t take on so, *chérie*,” he said and put his arms gently around her. “Turn off the water works, I’ll take care of you.”

“You should never have come here,” she said to him.

“My father left it me, didn’t he? Legally bequeathed this modest inn via his last Will and Testament, as the saying goes.”

“But Flex had been running this pub for five years.”

“And now The Crown is mine, *n’est-ce pas*? Flex is quite welcome to stay and lend a hand if he feels so inclined. And you, *mon enfant*, are most welcome of all ... “

“Why do you want me?”

“Because you are an utter delight, and my small brother doesn’t deserve you. You should be cosseted, *mon amour*, not bullied.” She smiled brightly. She knew that her smile had an elfin charm.

The moon was full and past its zenith when Minerva arrived back at The Crown with Sam. Once inside the door Sam held both her hands in his, running his thumbs over and over her wrists. He seemed fascinated by the bracelets of knitted flesh. He held up each of her wrists in turn and kissed them. A stylish gesture befitting the Pierre Cardin suit, the spotlessly white pin-tucked shirt and the genuine pearl collar studs. He was running, just a little, too fat and his glittering coal-black curls were thinning, but he had that air of elegance, a certain nobility even, that accompanies great success. She knew, though, how much The Crown meant to him, it made her realise that his image was carefully cultivated, not earned.

“A glass of port, *chérie*?” he asked. She nodded. She knew Flex would be upstairs, brooding. She didn’t want to face him just yet.

“You can stay in my suite if you like.” Sam seemed to have boarded her train of thought. He took her up to his first floor sitting room. He poured port into Waterford glasses. Fine, clear crystal that, if broken, would splinter into silvery slivers that would slice sharper than any scalpel. He handed a glass to Minerva and watched her sip the red liquid.

“Do you play chess?” On a low teak table the intricately carved pieces stood ranked ready for battle.

“I can, but you’re good. I’ve watched you and Flex. Last time you beat him hands down, after he had taken your Queen.”

“She committed suicide,” he said suddenly. Minerva was startled. “My mother. — My father said she was his Queen and named the pub for her.”

“Flex said she’d gone away.”

“Well she did, did she not? One could hardly follow where she went.” Minerva looked at him carefully. For a moment she did not have the right reply. “I left home when it happened. Flex, of course, was too young, he had to stay.”

“Are you sure Flex knows about this? He’s never mentioned it.”

“Oh, he knows all right, though he might still deny it.”

“Why?”

“Because he was there at the time, mon amour. Well, shortly afterward anyway. We all were.”

“No. I mean why did she do it?”

“Why does anyone?” Sam looked closely at Minerva. She blushed. She could feel the dark rose colour begin on her cheekbones and spread like a stain. Steady, she counselled herself, this is not the moment for my confessions.

Sam continued, “I left because of the ghosts. I’ve been back and forth, certainly, staying for short periods off and on. But I never could get on with Flex. In any event, shortly before he died my father wrote to me, chérie, explaining his change of plan for The Crown. He neglected to mention that The Crown held such a jewel.” He stroked her cheek.

“I still don’t understand why he left it to you and not to Flex.”

“I’m the elder, it’s my right. I think he wanted to make up for the past, à la recherche du temps perdu’, perhaps? Guilt had eaten away at him for years. He seemed to want my blessing when he departed this life.”

“But Flex stayed. Surely he deserved something?”

“Ah, that was his mistake. Too close, you see. Closeness attracts blame, separation guilt.” Minerva nodded, swirled the last of her port and drained the glass.

When Minerva slid out of bed and opened the drapes it was already late in the day. Dark blue clouds hung low in the compressed air. She felt as if, overnight, the whole world had drowned, and everything was now deep under water. Time was oozing rather than flowing. Through the narrow full length window she saw the normal stream of passers-by today only trickled.

The first gusts of a stormy south wind stirred the soupy air. Minerva reached for a cotton shirt that hung on the valet chair. When she put it on it reached nearly to her knees. Lethargically she fastened the middle button.

She looked into the cheval mirror and made a face at her reflection; she tilted the glass until she could see the window behind her. Outside lightning flashed, the people in the street quickened their pace.

Large drops of rain fell spattering the window. The sky darkened to Indian ink. And as a mighty clap of thunder shook The Crown, Flex burst into the room.

“So the whore awakes!”

“Flex, if you have something to discuss, can we discuss it like mature people?”

“Discuss? You want to discuss?”

“It is possible to be civilized, you know.”

“Civilized? You mean in a man of the world way — like Sam?”

“I just want to talk to you calmly ... “

“Right, calmly.” He brought the flat of his hand down hard upon the dresser. He turned swiftly, as if to shock her into admission. “Did he screw you?”

“I know you won’t believe me, but no. What I want is, not so much to have Sam as the freedom to be able to if I choose.”

“Oh, let’s have the cake and eat the old tart too.”

“It’s just — I feel claustrophobic. I’m hemmed in. I want to dance — “

“To dance?”

“To dance, laugh, be ...”

“Let me guess: ‘free’? Oh very 1960s, I must say. O wow.”

“And your sarcasm is another thing.”

“I picked you up off the street, you ungrateful bitch. You’d already pissed off from your last life because you couldn’t hack it. You had nothing.”

“You couldn’t wait to run your hands all over me.”

“Listen you tramp, I could have had any one of a dozen girls.”

“You said you liked my lean boyish hips,” she rotated them slowly, “and my small breasts. Perhaps you really prefer boys?” She knew how much he despised gays.

Flex swung at her. He hit the side of her head and her brain reeled. She felt him push her down and fall on top of her. The room was as dark as midnight, as he drove into her angrily. She felt the penetrating violence. It was as if he was exercising some imagined right, his rite of passage.

She struggled against him. Freed her arm and clawed at his face. Gripped the skin of his neck and dug her nails into the flesh. As the tempest roared in her ears, lightning seemed to enter into the room in a succession of brilliant flashes. Rain buffeted the walls and windows. A screaming southerly buster struggled to tear the roof from the building. Above it all, to her outrage, she heard Flex’s laugh as he rode out his obsession. She felt herself receive the release of his pent-up frustration.

The wind ceased. The thunder rumbled in the distance, as the storm returned to its own elemental jousting.

Flex lifted himself from her. He gave her a look of contempt.

“He’s all yours,” he said, and left the room.

Before the snack bar crowd was due, Minerva was showered and dressed in a snow white frock. She went downstairs. Sam was in the cellar taking delivery of kegs. On her way to the kitchen she saw Flex putting away mops and brooms in the scullery. His thatch of golden curls recently shorn exposed a thick neck streaked with raw scratches. His wide shoulders and muscled back were saturated with sweat. Into this expanse of gleaming flesh Minerva was about to thrust her twin swords.

“Sam tells me your mother committed suicide,” she said, poised. Flex jumped, startled, and his head hit the cupboard lintel. He let out a curse, but did not answer her.

“It was the guilt, he said, made her do it.”

“What guilt?” The first sword was thrust.

“The guilt about betraying your father, of course.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about the fact that you’re a bastard, Flex.”

“Jesus, I wish I knew what you’re going on about.” Minerva stood very still, her grip steady.

“It’s very simple Flex, it’s about your mother being unfaithful and you being the result. And about how, because you are a bastard, you have lost your right to The Crown.” She saw the pain register.

“Sam told you that?”

“Sam had a letter from his father, apparently. A sort of confession, by the way I understand it. To explain the alteration to the Will.” The first sword was sent as deep as she could thrust it, and twisted as hard as she could twist it. With the next she aimed to pierce his heart. “In the letter he told Sam that he had tried to accept you as his own son, but it seems the shame your mother felt made her take her own life and that he couldn’t forgive you for. It’s all there — ask Sam.”

“I’d never give that shithead the satisfaction.” He was leaning against the cupboard door, head down. Her twin swords had drained away his pride, his life force. “I’m out of here, Minnie. I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. I had planned to contest the Will. I was going for all or nothing. No point now, is there?”

She had known exactly how he would react. Had counted on it. She watched him leave. Bags on the wet pavement. A hailed taxi-cab. Goodbye, Flex.

The tangles of love are strange, she thought. Lately she had been dissatisfied with tragedy. With the fate of Lenore and the Lady of Shalott and even Sam’s mother. She felt as if she had lifted the curse that had been upon her.

A wedding would be a fitting ceremony, she thought, to symbolise the new union that would now share The Crown.