

A Task for the Birds

Herrick

The mountain range in the distance never seemed to get any closer, despite how often Herrick looked out the carriage window. He sighed loudly, drumming bored fingers against his thighs.

"If you ask me one more time how long this journey is supposed to take, I will make you ride outside with Marco." Iona spoke without looking up from her book.

"Maybe I'm just trying to start a conversation."

"Choose a better topic." She turned a page.

Herrick leaned back and crossed his arms, purposefully looking away from the window in the hope that the red, rocky peaks would suddenly come closer if he wasn't paying attention. "How many times are you going to re-read that book?"

Iona finally lifted her eyes. Her brow creased with confusion. "I've never read this one before."

"But you've been reading almost every day."

"Clearly you haven't," she drawled, "or you would have noticed the different titles. I brought several books, Your Highness."

"Oh." He rubbed an awkward hand over the back of his neck. "What's that one about?"

Iona lifted the book so the title on the front cover was clearly visible: *Conquer the World by Sunset: Six Effective Habits to Increase Productivity*.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Sounds thrilling."

"It is," she answered, returning her attention to the page.

Herrick had never before felt jealous of a piece of paper, and he wanted her attention back. "Say I wanted to be more productive. Which of those habits should I use?"

She didn't hesitate. "Time management."

He pressed a hand to his chest. "I manage my time. I just don't rule over it with an iron fist."

Iona closed her book with a sigh and folded her hands in her lap. "You were twenty minutes late for our departure this morning."

"How was I supposed to know you wanted to leave an hour after sunrise?"

She gave him a flat look. "I'm going to pretend you did not just ask me that question after the many, many reminders you have been given to read the itinerary carefully."

"How big of a difference is twenty minutes really going to make? It's not like we're going to be late for a party or something, right?"

"I don't know." Iona lifted a brow. "Are we?"

Herrick sighed. "You know, there are a lot of women who would use this time of uninterrupted access to a prince to flirt with them, rather than argue about reading schedules."

"What an interesting statistic to know." She picked up her book again.

"I'm just saying," he continued, sending a cheeky grin her way and nudging her with his foot to make sure she saw it. "I wouldn't mind if you decided to flirt instead of fight."

She looked at him long enough to blink twice, then resumed reading. "I already scheduled time for flirting on the itinerary, Your Highness."

He straightened. "You did?"

"Yes. For the hour between sunrise and our departure."

"I was sleeping then!"

"Such a shame that you missed out on it."

Herrick could hear the edge of amusement in her words, and the twitching at the corner of her mouth revealed that she was trying to hold back a smile. Warm satisfaction pooled in his chest.

This definitely isn't as hopeless as I feared.

He leaned forward, demanding her attention with his proximity, and smirked. "Do you know what I think?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"I think it just shows how much confidence you have in me. You believe I could woo you in my sleep."

Her cheeks blazed with color. "I never said anything about wooing, Your Highness."

"But I did." He gave her a pointed look while settling back into the seat cushion to give her some space.

"I think the lack of fresh air is starting to get to you. Perhaps you should join Marco outside."

He had to admire the effort she put into remaining calm and unaffected. "I think I like the company better in here."

Iona opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by the sound of something heavy landing on the roof. The carriage slowly rolled to a stop.

Herrick immediately tensed. "What's going on?" He leaned his head out the window, surveying the rocky cliffs that were now directly in front of them, then jumped back with a startled yell as a sharp, pointed black beak and beady eyes dropped down from above. The bird—if he could call it that, with the distinct lack of feathers on its neck—swiveled its head back and forth. It caught his gaze and held for a moment, then gave an ear-piercing screech.

In a feat that seemed to defy the laws of nature, the bird's head remained in place while the rest of its body swung down, revealing leathery wings and talons that looked sharp enough to rip through the hide of the boar they had just left in Kovskia.

"What is that?" Herrick asked in a low voice, keeping his eyes trained on the creature. He could already feel the Fairy magic rushing to his limbs, buzzing with energy that begged to be used.

"That would be task number seven. The Adhavi Sultan mentioned they had a bird problem."

"Are we sure it's a bird?"

"Well, it's certainly not a bunny." Iona shifted, reaching for something at her feet. The movement drew the attention of the bird, which suddenly screeched and dove at the window, beak and talons ready for shredding.

Herrick lunged forward, catching the bird by the neck and flinging it away from the carriage. Thanks to his Fairy-blessed strength, the creature went tumbling head over tail, unable to right itself, until it crashed into the rocky side of the cliff and fell to the ground in a limp heap.

"I don't think I'm going to sleep again." He scrubbed a hand down the side of his face.

"You'll have to worry about sleeping later." Iona pointed to the sky, where at least a dozen black shapes were rapidly approaching. "I think he brought friends."

Herrick groaned. "Of course there's more."

"It was said to be an impossible task," Iona answered helpfully as she scooted across the bench, as if to follow him outside.

"Where are you going?" Herrick hopped to the ground and grabbed his shield from where it leaned against the side of the carriage just inside the door.

"To help Marco with the horses."

"Marco can take care of himself. I don't want you anywhere near another one of those things."

"But—"

He pointed an authoritative finger at her as another bird dropped onto the carriage roof. "Stay."

"Your Highness!"

He closed the door on whatever other protest she was devising, then threw up his shield as a bird dove at his head. Leathery wings beat around his ears, and he blindly reached for the spindly black legs. He gripped them tightly and spun, flinging the bird away with the form of a discus thrower. It collided with another of its companions, wings and legs tangling as they both fell to the ground.

He barely had time to draw his sword before two more swooped down in its place, and for the next several minutes all he could see and hear were ear-splitting screeches and black, murderous eyes, and talons dripping red from the deep scratches on his arms where the bracers left them unprotected.

From the corner of his eye, he was able to see Marco leading the horses away, swinging out with his own sword to bat the nightmarish birds away. The birds soon lost interest, apparently more intent on human prey than livestock, and they circled back to Herrick.

He was moving faster than he ever had before, pushing his muscles to the limit. Bodies of birds littered the ground around him, but still more kept coming. He yelled as a sharp beak found the spot at the top of his shoulder where the leather armor ended, and he dropped his sword as his arm spasmed.

"Herrick!" Iona's voice was close behind him—much closer than she should have been, had she stayed in the carriage like he told her.

"What are you doing? Get back inside!"

He swung his shield like a bat, hitting a bird aside. Unfortunately, the move left his front wide open, and another monster dove in.

Herrick was preparing himself for the inevitable loss of at least one eye when he heard the twang of a bowstring from behind him, and the incoming bird fell at his feet with an arrow through its head.

He whirled around to find Iona, calm and collected as always, already nocking another arrow into a small hunting bow.

"Where did that come from?"

She released the arrow, dropping another bird. "I added it to our supply list in Kovskia."

"And you didn't think to tell me?" Herrick's question came out stilted as he scooped up his sword and divided his attention between the irritating, wonderful woman who kept surprising him and the creature of death attacking from above.

"I tried to, and you slammed the door in my face."

She said something else, but her words were lost in the flurry of activity. A few agonizing moments later, not a single bird remained, and Herrick finally allowed himself a moment to breathe.

He turned to Iona, hands on hips. "I thought you didn't know how to use a weapon."

"I don't know how to use a knife," she answered, opening the carriage door and sliding the bow and arrow under the bench seat. "But my father taught me how to shoot."

"Why didn't you say something?"

She looked up at him and blinked. "Archery is rarely a skill required of secretaries, Your Highness."

"You still could have told me."

"And you could have asked." She patted his arm as she walked past. "I'm going to speak to Marco. You should get yourself cleaned up."

Herrick's draw dropped as he watched her walk away, picking her way over the bodies of the birds as if it were a normal workday. He shook his head in equal disbelief and awe.

I love that woman.