

AN OLD FRIEND

"Why are you opening the door?" she said inanely as his grey eyes lit up. Thank goodness it wasn't one of her more antagonistic relatives, but, really, Marius shouldn't be manning the front door either. If Wyn wasn't available, it should've been the footman. They did still have a footman, didn't they? The thought felt oddly alien. Hetta-the-no-name-illusionist didn't have servants.

"Hetta! You came!" Marius pulled the door fully open and caught her up in a tight embrace. "Oh, Hetta." He made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a cry, and Hetta could feel his body trembling. Was the excess of emotion purely on her account? *Oh, Marius, what have they been saying to you?* But the knot in her stomach eased a little nonetheless at the warm welcome.

"It's good to see you too, Marius." She returned the embrace before drawing back to examine him. They shared the same long

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nose and high, flying brows. She'd last seen her oldest brother more than a year ago when he'd come down to Meridon to visit. The silver threading Marius's thick black hair at his temples had grown more pronounced, though Marius was only twenty-seven. Their father had gone grey young too, Hetta remembered being told.

"You look well," she told him fondly, raising a hand to touch the silver. *Though stressed*, she added silently, taking in the circles under his eyes. Was it only Father's death and the funeral arrangements, or was it what came after? Their entire family, like Angus, would be speculating about whether Marius would inherit—hopefully not to his face, but she wouldn't put it past some of them. Even if everyone had somehow managed to be abnormally tactful and refrained from doing so, Marius would still be sensitive to the undercurrents.

Marius looked past her and frowned.

"Whatever is Penharrow doing in our driveway?" he murmured before raising his voice and greeting him. "Lord Penharrow." He nodded politely at Angus.

"Valstar," Angus acknowledged.

It had previously struck Hetta as unfortunate that the two men were civil acquaintances rather than friends, despite their proximity of age, location, and birth. Of course, her younger self had thought it unfortunate mainly because it meant fewer opportunities to see Angus. *Yes, how very unreasonable for two dissimilar personalities not to form a close friendship simply for my convenience,* she thought, hiding a smile.

"Angus was kind enough to drive me from the station," Hetta explained. "I'm afraid I forgot to tell anyone when I was coming. I can't think how I came to be so scatter-brained."

Marius's brows drew together. "That's not like you, Hetta." The delight at her arrival drained from him. "Although I suppose

these are hardly usual circumstances." They shared a look, and Hetta could see the echo of her own recurring thought, the same complicated mix of emotions accompanying it: *Father is dead.*

Marius shook himself. "Anyway, thank you, Penharrow, for rescuing my sister. Would you like to come in?" This last was said with a little pause of reluctance.

Angus smiled sympathetically as he gave his refusal. "No, no. I imagine you've enough chaos in the household at the moment, and I really should be getting back."

Marius and Hetta paused to wave as he drove away and out of sight. Marius took in Hetta's trunk.

"You travel lighter than I thought you would."

She shrugged. "I manage. I left my bricks at home."

Marius heaved her trunk under an arm, and Hetta let him. Her brother didn't provoke the same desire to prove her independence as Angus, perhaps because Marius had always taken her seriously. Besides, her bedroom was up two flights of stairs. *And no doubt brotherly solicitude will wear off sooner rather than later once he gets over the novelty of my presence.*

The open, hard-tiled space of the grand entryway amplified sounds, carrying strains of voices from distant rooms, but they met no one as they made their way up the main staircase. Still, her heart pounded, as if they might turn a corner and run straight into one or other of her relatives. It was strange to think the person she dreaded meeting most was the one person she was *guaranteed* not to run into. But it was somehow impossible to convince herself he wasn't here anymore, not while walking these familiar hallways.

"Who else is here?"

"Everyone," Marius said with a sigh. "That's why I answered the door, actually. Wyn is trying to be in sixteen places at once. The footman was supposed to be manning the door for visitors, but he's in the breakfast room with Phoebe." He adjusted his grip on her trunk. "Something Aunt Sybil said about blue china and

mourning aesthetics. I *may* have suggested he would be better able to aid her than I."

Hetta raised a brow at him, and he gave a sheepish smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. Poor Marius—and poor Phoebe. Their stepmother hated disapproval and tended to throw herself with frantic earnestness into the effort of avoiding it. Hetta had no doubt Phoebe's nerves would be strung tight as she tried to arrange a funeral with "helpful" and conflicting suggestions from the rest of her relatives. It would be a losing battle; there was no way to please every single Valstar simultaneously.

"How is Phoebe holding up?" She'd never been sure how much affection her stepmother held for Father. Hetta and Marius's stepmother had married the late Lord Valstar seven years after the death of his first wife, who hadn't survived birthing Hetta. Phoebe had been very young indeed when Lord Valstar married her, at seventeen—only a handful of years older than Marius, in fact. *And younger than I am now*. Hetta wrinkled her nose. What a distasteful thought.

Marius shrugged. "Much as we all are, really." Something very dark flickered in his gaze. "Though I haven't had any hysterics over the china just yet." He didn't say the words *Everyone thinks cousin Jack is going to be chosen rather than me*, but they clamoured unspoken in the air around them nonetheless.

Hetta wanted to hug him but couldn't since he was carrying her trunk. She settled for a bright smile instead. "Well, let me know if you feel some coming on and I'll help you find the dustpan and brush."

He didn't reply as they turned towards the west wing, the intersection marked by a portrait of their deceased grandfather, Lord Marius Valstar II—her brother's namesake. Present-day Marius avoided the portrait's severe gaze.

An unpleasant thought occurred, and Hetta paused.

"My room?" She'd just assumed it would still be hers, but it

had been years since she'd left, with not much expectation of ever returning. What if Father had decided to expunge any sign of her presence from the house?

"Oh, you're safe," Marius assured her. "Though it was a near thing. We're pretty tightly pressed for bedrooms, what with all our relatives descending upon us."

"I would've thought there were plenty of bedrooms?" Stariel House was enormous.

"Not habitable ones, there aren't." Marius began to tick off names on his fingers and then abandoned the motion since there were far more Valstars than there were digits. "Not counting those of us already in residence, there's all our aunts and uncles, every one of our first cousins, and most of our seconds."

"And Grandmamma?" Hetta would not mind unexpectedly bumping into Grandmamma in the hallway. "Is she still in the Dower House?"

Marius snorted. "No, that's got even less habitable bedrooms than this one. They shut up the Dower House last month. Grandmamma's living here now."

There was no way Hetta could've known that, given the freshness of the news. "Oh." Why had Father shut up the Dower House? Wyn, by far her most reliable correspondent, hadn't mentioned anything in his last letter, but then perhaps he hadn't known at the time. "Is Grandmamma well?"

"She'll outlast us all," Marius reassured her. He picked up on her silent question without prompting; he'd always had a knack for subtext, when he wasn't distracted by his own thoughts. "I think Father was concerned at the ongoing expense of keeping the house open." He examined his own words and frowned, as if it were the first time he'd reflected on the question. "Though I don't know why. I guess it doesn't make sense, running two households rather than just the one."

As Marius said, it *didn't* make sense, but Hetta thought of the grey, peeling fences in the village, and unease stirred. *Most likely Father's steward simply hasn't gotten around to organising the repairs yet*, she told herself. She hoped so, for the new lord's sake. Neither Jack nor Marius deserved to inherit financial woes.

They arrived at her old bedroom, and it took Hetta six years back in time. The walls were still the same pale yellow. The theatre posters and cut-outs she'd pinned up in defiance of respectability remained, the colours faded now with age. A faint smell of cleaning products tickled her nose, and she saw with relief that the linen looked freshly changed. Evidently someone had prepared for her coming despite her lack of communication.

Father didn't change anything at all in my absence. Hetta turned in a slow circle, not sure what to do with that thought. *Maybe he simply closed the door and forgot about me.*

Marius had just deposited her trunk next to the dresser when footsteps sounded in the hallway.

"Marius?" a soft voice inquired, and the door to the bedroom swung open.

There stood the eldest of their half-siblings, and Hetta stared. When had Gregory gotten so *tall*? She performed a rapid mental calculation—he must be seventeen now. Tallness was not so unreasonable, in that context, but she struggled to match her chubby little brother with the gangly youth now rocking uncertainly on the threshold. In general, the Valstars tended towards darker hair, owing to the strong dose of Noorish blood in their lineage, but Gregory had inherited his mother's curling golden locks, pale skin, and delicate features. Only his grey eyes betrayed his Valstar inheritance. As a boy, he'd been rather adorable, like a cherub. No doubt he wouldn't appreciate being referred to as such anymore. *Not that he exactly appreciated it as a boy.*

"Henrietta?" he said unsurely.

"Gregory," she said blankly. "How tall you've grown. I clearly can't keep addressing you as 'little brother' in my correspondence." Gregory now stood half a head taller than Hetta.

"I didn't think you'd come," Gregory blurted out, then flushed. "Oh—sorry, I mean, it's great to see you—" He faltered as he remembered the solemnity of the occasion. "I mean, not great, but—"

"I'm glad to see you again in person too," Hetta interjected kindly. "It's been too long. I hope we'll see more of each other while I'm here."

Gregory recovered his composure enough to ask how long she meant to stay.

"Till the Choosing, of course, brat," Marius said without venom. But he shot Hetta a sharp look nonetheless, and she realised with a start that he would like some reassurance on that point himself. Evidently Hetta had become outrageous enough that even the family member she was closest to wasn't sure whether she would be bound by this last and greatest tradition of their house. For a moment, all she could do was blink at him, unsure if she was annoyed or not by that. It had never crossed her mind that she could simply not come home on such an occasion, but if Marius thought it, then so had everyone else.

A spark of temper flared. "I'll be here for the Choosing, of course." The words came out more defiantly than she'd intended. Why did she care if her family thought her lost to all sense of familial duty?

But Marius didn't pick up on her mood, the mention of the ceremony making him grimace. "Good, good," he said vaguely. He'd gone far away, lost in his own thoughts. It was typical of him—one second intuitive, the next entirely oblivious. She still couldn't tell whether his anxiety about the Choosing Ceremony sprang from a wish to be chosen or a fear of it. Perhaps it was both.

"You're older than cousin Jack," Gregory said, as though the

thought were so sudden and strange that he couldn't keep from speaking it.

"Yes." Hetta smiled at her younger brother. "He is two months my junior, though it isn't polite to remind me of it."

"That means you—" Gregory broke off, darting a look at his brother.

Marius came out of his distraction and said sharply: "Yes, Hetta goes before Jack in the ceremony. Though I hope you haven't forgotten cousin Cecily—she's even older than me." The Choosing Ceremony went according to birth order.

"And Aunt Sybil may yet rule over us all," Hetta said lightly, though that wasn't very likely. There had never been a recorded instance of Stariel choosing within the same generation as the deceased lord if the members of younger generations were of age.

Gregory gave a nervous laugh, and Hetta decided it was time for a change to a less fraught subject.

"But what did you come racing in here for, Gregory? You were looking for Marius?" she prompted.

Gregory's eyes widened. "Oh! Yes. I forgot. Grandmamma said the flowers for the casket must be grown at Stariel, but Aunt Sybil said it's more important that they're lilies, even if we have to order them from Greymark, and Grandmamma said ordering flowers from elsewhere would be bad luck for the lord's funeral, and Aunt Sybil said that was ridiculous superstition, and Grandmamma said there was nothing wrong with a little spirituality and her bones told her that lilies were bound to appear if they were wanted, and Aunt Sybil said even the most superstitious fool couldn't conjure lilies outside a hothouse in October, and so I said I would check the greenhouse, but I don't know a lily from lavender."

Marius's lips twitched at this unbroken recitation, but he shook his head. "It wouldn't matter if you did—Aunt Sybil is right. There's no lilies to be had." He said it with regret. Like Gregory, he would clearly have liked to support their often hare-brained

but infinitely more sympathetic grandmother. The greenhouse was Marius's domain. Strangely, for one so deeply disinterested in farming, he had a great passion for botany.

"Oh. I guess they'll have to sort it out between them then." A heaviness crept over Gregory, as if he had suddenly remembered *why* they needed lilies. "Do you think it matters if the flowers come from Stariel or not?" It clearly mattered to Gregory, but he looked to his older brother for direction, his face still so *young*, despite the changes time had wrought.

"Well," Hetta said, taking a deep breath to hide her nerves. "There *can* be lilies from Stariel, if you want." She waggled her fingers theatrically. "Or at least, flowers from Stariel that will *appear* to be lilies." Her heart stuck in her throat as she waited for their reaction, and she formulated half a dozen defensive responses as to why she wasn't ashamed of her profession in the time it took for comprehension to dawn in her brothers' faces.

Gregory brightened. "Could you really?"

Hetta was suddenly off-balance. How did you cope with enthusiasm when you'd steeled yourself for disapproval? "Er—yes, I think so, if Marius will direct me to some appropriate stems for the base of the spell. They only need last for a few days."

Gregory practically vibrated with excitement, and she caught a glimpse of the cheerful eleven-year-old she'd known. *Oh—of course Father's denouncement of me would only make my profession more appealing to a teenage boy*, she realised with a lurch of perspective.

Marius wasn't a teenage boy, but he was also the family member most familiar with her abilities. His reaction was somewhere between consternation and amusement.

"I don't know, Hetta . . . illusory lilies on Father's casket . . ." He trailed off as she met his eyes.

"Appropriate, though, don't you think?" Gregory missed the sharp subtext, but Marius didn't. His mouth thinned. Their

father had always cared more for the look of the thing than the reality below. "But he would have wanted the flowers to come from Stariel, lilies or not." That, Hetta was sure of; Father had always thought anything inside the estate infinitely superior to the rest of the world's offerings.

That darkness from earlier shadowed Marius's face again, but he covered it with a smile. "Very well, Hetta. Let's smuggle you out to the greenhouse before the others realise you're here, or the game will be up when Greg announces there are lilies aplenty."