

Nasty as it seems, I thoroughly enjoy watching a noose being slipped around my neck. The rush of excitement that ripples through the air tends to try and pull me towards my doom, and I can't help but laugh when the foolish hangman apprentices take and secure the rope with trembling, pale hands. However, I'm not just laughing at the normal people preparing to let me dangle from a rope and choke, I'm laughing at the king who has ordered my death; once again, he's convicted the wrong young woman, the wrong look-alike. It is in fact a double's neck that the substantial rope rests around, and it is a double's death that always occurs.

*Our gracious, ailing King Daniel has failed us again*, I think with a sly smile as the latest condemned young lady plunges through the trapdoor. *He just killed the wrong pawn in my game*.

"You'd think he'd learn," I mumble as I turn away from the grisly scene, the cheers of the soldiers resounding behind me, "to make sure he strangles the right woman." With that off my chest, I let my cloak swish around me as I clamber onto my horse, freshly stolen from the stables in town, and finger the pouch in my pocket, pleased by the sound the gold coins make when they rub against each other. Each *clink* is an echo of my promise to the dead look-alike. I paid her to do her job, and she did it extraordinarily well. I feel that I deserve a reward for choosing such a talented actress. Lucky me. Lucky, thieving Archer Girl.

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After seeing myself hanged for minor offenses nine times, I have decided that I want to shoot for the big leagues. Normally, I restrict myself to stealing the purses of nobles who are foolish enough to brandish their money in the open market. I silently make my way toward them, deftly slice the strings carrying their wealth, and slip away, leaving only a little twig carved in the shape of an arrow behind (usually following another of my hangings) to keep my reputation for survival alive. My calling card isn't the only thing that has earned me my name, though.

A couple times, I've taken unnecessary risks and been seen out in the open. I wear a long, nondescript cloak on those occasions, and I always have my bow raised to eye level, an arrow directed straight at my victim. Sometimes, this is the only way to get barons or dukes to surrender their bulging purses, but it gets the job done. Then, days later, the cry goes up, the hunters move out, and an unlucky young woman I've gifted with my cloak is hanged in the presence of the withered king of Odari, King Daniel III. Again, my game goes on.

Back to my ambition, my dream. I no longer want to infuriate the lesser nobility of Odari. I want to go all the way to the top of the food chain. I am going to steal from the most royal of royalties. King Daniel is going to have his first run-in with the real Archer Girl. Lucky him.

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Days after the hanging I described so delightfully for you earlier, I put my plan into action, sliding into the shadows of the blacksmith's shack on the edge of the castle.

"Luke! Do you have the disguise?" I hiss from the shadows. A young man with shaggy black hair turns around from pounding away at some blade resting on an anvil, and I shoot him a roguish grin, only to receive a scowl and a bundle of cloth in return.

"I'm only doing this for Serena," he mumbles as he picks his hammer back up again, having set it down to throw me my latest costume. I can't help but frown at this, and I cautiously enter the toasty shack, rolling up my sleeves with the heat. Tapping his shoulder, I ask why he keeps sneaking me into the castle to pilfer from the aristocratic guests of the king if he's doing it for Serena, his little sister, now deceased. I am by no means Serena.

"Misty," he grunts, and I flinch at the use of my real name. Trying it again, he says, "Archer, you were Serena's best friend, and she made me promise to help you if she couldn't. I seem to do the worst things for the best reasons."

"Ain't that the truth," I grumble, knowing better than to press for more information. Then I leave Luke alone to wrestle with his better judgment. That's his special talent.

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My expedition into the castle goes extremely well, and while I don't steal anything from the king yet, I do manage to take something else, as poorly dressed as I am for the occasion. I steal an invitation.

Posing as a maid, I get a feel for the winding corridors that make up the interior of Daniel's cold, stone fortress. During the time I am in his stronghold, I discover the location of his kitchen, his dungeon, his ballroom, his throne room, and most importantly, his personal quarters. If Daniel is as clever as the people claim, he will not store his most prized possessions in the treasury. They will be in his room.

Despite my success in locating this significant piece of information, I feel a little... *unsatisfied* as I make to leave the floor that the king's room sits on. Taking it upon myself to fill the greedy little hole in my mind that craves knowledge, I brashly move towards the quarters of

the crown prince, Aaron, pushing a cart laden with silk sheets for the men Odari bows down to. I have to scope out every inch of the castle at this moment, it seems. My search awards me with the aforementioned invitation that is so unjustly mine.

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I return my maid's disguise to Luke rather late that night, shamelessly explaining what had held me up.

"Apparently, Crown Prince Aaron likes his new maid enough that he's sending her a dress and an invitation to the ball later this week," I confess in a whisper, handing Luke the maid's dress. He grimaces as he takes it, looking over his shoulder to make sure no one sneaks up on us. An arrest would put an end to my quick-fingered reign of terror.

"And which maid is he inviting?" Luke inquires, his blue eyes flashing dangerously as I laugh. He wants the false name I gave the prince.

"I told him Arianna Ellsworth, Ari for short."

"One day..." Luke promises vaguely, trailing off. I thank him for his time and then I leave. No one but Luke knows I was there. Or so I think.

Three days later, on the eve of the ball the prince has so foolishly offered to send me to, I hear whisperings in the village I am currently hiding in. One of the castle's blacksmiths has been arrested for providing a thief entry to King Daniel's fortress, and his execution by beheading is scheduled for two days from the present. There is only one blacksmith I know who could be charged with such a crime.

At first, it's a relief to know that my identity is safe. Luke is a fiercely loyal friend who would never sell me out. However, my relief fades as I realize that there is a very slim chance that Luke can lie his way out of trouble the way I do. With the force of a stone hurled from a slingshot, reality slaps me with this, causing me to spit out my foul-tasting coffee all over the table of the inn where I have set up my personal headquarters.

I discern that I have a chance to save Luke, and I bolt to my rented room, leaving a hasty, probably over-generous tip downstairs. The crown prince of Odari unwittingly committed the same crime Luke has been convicted of the moment he delivered my ball gown himself.

Swiftly bundling the dress in my arms, I shoot back down the stairs, nearly tripping over the silky hem that hangs a little too low. Pausing, I fold the garment so that I do not need to worry about falling on my face, and then I make my way to the shop of another loyal friend.

My hurtling through her front door must have startled Brenda Fisher, but she recovers her composure when I thrust the dress and some gold pieces onto her counter, breathlessly exclaiming, “I need secret pockets sewn in this dress by noon tomorrow!”

“But, Misty,” she protests, not unkindly. “I have other rush orders!”

Rolling my eyes, I add an extra pouch of coins to the pieces already present on my seamstress friend’s counter and then proceed to push it toward her with a few flattering words. Her muddy brown eyes widen with wonder, and she finally accepts my request, promising to be done tonight. I plan to hold her to it.

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Brenda is true to her word, and I pick my gown up without any trouble. That woman seems to know exactly where the pockets need to be, and because she’s a sweetheart, she gives me a glittering silver pin in the shape of an arrow all while running her greedy callused fingers over her reward. Those pieces are buying her silence, and this is my favorite kind of game. It’s treachery at its finest, and I love it the same way I love what I now plan to swipe from Daniel.

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The night of the ball (the eve of Luke’s execution, to boot) is a beautiful one, maybe designed by the god of thieves himself. The moon is blotted out by blurry, rain-heavy clouds, and the air is warm and wet, terrible tracking weather. The storm will break soon.

I ride my own horse, a stolen, dappled gray stallion that carries himself in a regal manner, to the party. My head buzzes with all the things I plan to do and say, but my mouth remains closed for now. I don’t trust myself to speak anything but what I’ve rehearsed, and when I arrive at the familiar, daunting castle of Daniel III, I dismount the horse without a word, flashing the guards my *very* personalized invitation from Prince Aaron. Stumbling over themselves to let me in, the armor-clad pair bang heads ushering me into the castle, bowing repeatedly as if ashamed by the fact that they did not assist the crown prince’s guest. Serves them right.

Leaving the sentries behind, I confidently stride down the halls that will take me to the ballroom, slightly irritated by the way my gods-forsaken nightmare of a gown hampers my movements. All the same, I press on, doing my very best to look at ease as I step into the ballroom, where Aaron is waiting with his other guests. Soft music reaches my ears, and I shoot the crown prince a disarming smile when I catch his eye, praying I still have his favor.

“Arianna, how nice of you to join me tonight. I feared you would not come,” he admits in his very best noble tone. I am disgusted by how fake he is, but I don’t show it as I strike up a conversation with him. Besides, I’m hardly sincere myself.

As the music plays, he guides me into a slow waltz, and our discussion moves from how stunning we look together, how kind Aaron is to invite a lowly maid, and how wonderful his party is. Apparently, we’re celebrating his nineteenth birthday, his coming of age.

Finally, I bring up the topic that might save Luke’s life.

“I do hope that the dungeons are empty when it comes time for you to take your father’s place. Anything completed before his passing will stand, but any executions scheduled will rest on your shoulders. What a burden,” I sigh, fluttering my eyelashes at him sympathetically. He shrugs to me in response, but I can tell he is worried by this. He must not have realized how close his father is to death (Daniel is *very* close), and for a few minutes more, we talk about what he may do if his father does pass on soon. However, I soon take my leave, gasping loudly as I realize I have “lost” my arrow brooch. He offers to help me find it, but I shake my head, pleading for him to enjoy his party. My pin will surface soon enough. For now, it rests in one of my secret pockets, waiting for its debut.

Scampering out of the ballroom once I have shaken Aaron’s watchful eyes, I immediately begin climbing the staircase to King Daniel’s floor, hiking my skirts up as high as appropriate. My shoes, which are more like satin slippers, make very little noise as I skid to a halt outside the king’s closed door. He retired early from the festivities, claiming to feel unwell, and then retreated to his chambers. His mistake.

Fumbling around in my pockets, I remove a thin wire and insert it in the lock, twisting it and waiting for the click that will tell me that I’ve succeeded. After a frustrated, dangerous minute in which I can easily imagine royal guards arresting me, it dawns on me that the door is already unlocked, and with a curse under my breath, I enter King Daniel’s bedroom. The wire I removed from my pockets earlier is replaced with the pin. Springing the needle from the catch, I notice it glints merrily in the moonlight drifting in from the balcony.

“So sorry, Daniel,” I whisper as I dart over to the ill man’s bedside. “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am that you never caught the Archer Girl.” Then, as His Majesty’s eyes snap open, dull against his pale, wrinkly face, I plunge the pin into his heart and almost laugh aloud as he begins to feebly spasm the moment I have returned to the door, my fingers on the handle.

Whether I've caused a seizure or a heart attack, I am certain that Daniel does not have very long. I'm glad I chose to steal something intangible. Daniel's wealth is nothing compared to Luke's life. "Happy birthday, Aaron," I add to myself as a last bemused thought.

Shutting the door behind me, I revisit the stairwell that brought me to Daniel's quarters and then arrange myself rather hastily on the balcony outside the ballroom, hearing Aaron's shoes tapping their way towards me. I cannot appear anything but oblivious or I'm ruined.

"Arianna!" he exclaims as he sees me. "I've been looking for you! Did you find your pin?" he then asks, taking me into a gentle hug. I lean into him, back to playing the part of the love-struck, simpleminded maid, and inform him that it is "lost forever!" with a dramatic sob. Aaron tries to comfort me, but I continue to lament the loss of the pin up until three royal guards hurtle around the corner and salute their new king, who is not yet aware of his status. They swiftly inform Aaron of his father's murder and the silver arrow pin that was embedded in the late king. I pale, knowing my deed has been discovered too soon, and Aaron does the same, although he looks more like he'll be sick. The Archer Girl has stolen his father's life from him.

"A-Arianna," he stammers, not putting two and two together, "go to the ballroom and stay with the other guests. The assassin has likely left, but you will be safest there." My response is a frightened, queasy nod, and then I lift my skirts and practically fly down the corridor. However, I do not intend on returning to the ballroom. Now that my crime has been discovered, Aaron will not show mercy to the condemned. He will believe them responsible somehow, and he will behead them all. Unless I improvise, Luke *will* die. I don't relish the idea.

Sure my heart is pounding loud enough to wake the dead (I'd rather Daniel not be resurrected), I head straight for the dungeons, biting my lip as I hear the worst news yet. As I pass by the archway that leads to the ballroom, I hear guests anxiously whispering about the Archer Girl's heinous crime, and specifically the Archer Girl. It seems that Daniel was not dead enough by the time his guards reached him, and he was able to impart the identity of his killer himself. Bad news travels faster than the swiftest horse. I must travel even faster.

Reaching the damp stairwell that leads into the recesses of the castle, the dungeons, I swipe a torch from a bracket on the wall, wincing as the flame comes a little too close for comfort. My gown threatens to spill me down the steps, but somehow I manage to remain on my feet and unseen by anyone as I reach the bottom. Continuing with my legendary persistence keeping me vigilant against ambush by sentries, I rush alongside the wooden doors with tiny

barred windows that are present to let in the dank air. I suspect the air kills more inmates than the real executions.

“Luke?” I ask the dungeons, putting my torch in an empty bracket. Almost instantly, raspy voices reply, some cackling, some leery, all desperate for freedom.

They cry things like, “A girl! Girly, let me out, please,” and “Shut up! She hasn’t got a key!” A few jailbirds even ask if I look any good.

Then, one voice rings out above the others, asking in a hoarse manner, “Archer?” I follow the question to its source, whipping the out wire I used futilely on Daniel’s door and inserting it into the lock keeping me from springing Luke out of his cell. As I work, he comes up to the door and reaches through the bars as far as he can, brushing my hair with his fingertips. Some of my fears are put at ease when I notice he isn’t trembling or showing any sign of weakness besides his new croak of a voice.

“Nope, Ari Ellsworth,” I reply with a dark, self-satisfactory chuckle, pleased with the click of the tumblers releasing my friend from his prison. I stand back up with a stretch, tired of being hunched over the padlock even for that short period of time, and then yank the door open, charging in to grab Luke’s hand and pull him out. He gratefully squeezes my hand, and then we wait to exchange information until the other inmates stop their caterwauling.

“You got away from the prince?” he asks as we go up the stairs, eyes wide and a little bloodshot from trouble sleeping on the wooden bunk each cell is supplied with.

“Actually, the king. Archer Girl struck again. Daniel was defenseless.” I don’t like to admit it, and Luke doesn’t like hearing it. He pales, an amazing feat considering how white he already is from days of imprisonment, and shakes his head in astonishment. He demands that I run my last statement by him again and I obey. I am prevented from going into detail, however, by the arrival of more guards. They remind me of fruit flies at a picnic: They never seem to run out of replacements. *Ever*.

As Luke grinds to a halt, hearing the footsteps of the guards at the same moment I do, I grab one of his arms, throw it around my neck, and cram a stiletto knife in his free hand. Then I scream my heart out, hissing, “I’m a hostage,” to my escapee blacksmith as I take a quick breath. Luke understands immediately, which I believe is a result of the intensity of the state of affairs, and the knife actually presses against my throat hard enough to make me stop screaming. I realize with a snort that I might make him a criminal yet, if we can get out of this mess.

“Halt!” the guards demand, whisking their rapiers out of their sheaths and pointing them directly at us. To add to the drama and general chaos, I bawl for Aaron and then plead with the guards to save me from “this dreadful rascalion.”

“Shut up!” Luke barks, playing the part beautifully. The blade is still frosty against my throat, and he begins dragging me backward. I think he’s pulling us towards the kitchen, and my suspicions are confirmed by the guards demanding that we remain in place and do not interfere with the buffet being prepared down the hall. In response, Luke spits at their feet, marring their shiny, showy boots, and declares that, if either one of them takes a single step in any direction or calls for assistance, I’ll get it. I passionately pray he doesn’t have to prove it.

My prayers are answered. The guards, prime examples of cowards, leave us to our business, and as soon as we are out of sight, Luke lets me go and we race towards the kitchen, our timing exquisite. All of the servants are busy carrying ornate silver platters through an unobtrusive doorway, their spines ramrod straight and the gleaming trays perfectly balanced. They shuffle their way through the door to the ballroom, and I move first. Grabbing Luke’s arm, I haul him towards the empty kitchen, remembering the little back door used for dumping scraps into the woods, and before I know it, we’ve disappeared into the night, perched comfortably on the stolen stallion that brought me to the castle. A light rain falls onto us, cool and refreshing.

“What were you thinking, Archer Girl?” Luke chides me from his seat behind me on the horse. When I don’t answer right away, he growls rather persuasively, “*Misty*, tell me.”

“I was thinking I stole enough from the castle and the king when I remembered my favorite convict,” I tease him in reply. He snorts, mockingly wondering why he wasn’t my primary concern tonight, and I inform him that he is now, in spite of the fact that he owes me.

“Actually, I put my life on the line for you. I think we’re even,” he retorts with a rare laugh in my ear. We argue like this for a little while, listing all the things we’ve done for one another and why each one of us may or may not be the one in debt to the other. However, when Luke starts winning the dispute, I take a chance and repay him in my own way. It seems that he didn’t expect me to kiss him like that. What a fool.

“Now you’re a thief, too. Way to go, you stole my heart,” I whisper, leaning into him.

“Poetic,” he manages after he regains control of his mental faculties, “but you might want to stick to thievery.” I take his advice, but this time, I don’t add a special condition. I just leave it all as is. I think I’ve finally stolen something I’m fully pleased with. *Lucky Archer Girl*.