

Silk Sisters
Arabella
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Prologue

King's Road, Grand Duchy of Finland, September 1815

Her mourning veil was black. It was affixed to the front rim of her hat and made of tulle, a netting fabric with tiny holes, dividing the wearer's field of vision into innumerable tiny parts. From her seat in the *barouche* carriage with its retractable hood,

Dowager Arabella Öhrnmarck could clearly make out her late husband's coffin, amidst its funeral cortège, passing slowly on its way to Espoo Church. Positioned atop an open hearse pulled by six horses, the glossy, lacquered, oblong wooden coffin formed the centrepiece of the sombre procession, spreading a heavy sense of calm in its wake. A plaque had been attached to the end of the coffin, engraved with the deceased's name, surrounded by an ornate leaf motif.

A woman's worth was dependant entirely on a man. The key determinant was not who she herself was, but rather, who her father, brother or husband was. This was a fact of which Arabella had become increasingly aware over the last four years. Ever since she had married the affluent, fifty-year-old Mauritz Öhrnmarck when she was twenty-two years old. Arabella's bridegroom had been a wealthy man and a general in the Swedish Army – or, more precisely, a major general – and one of the royal advisors to the country's former monarch, before he had taken the pleasure of retirement to preside over a castle purchased from the Grand Duchy of Finland.

Arabella clutched her dark, lace-edged handkerchief gently as she sat on the carriage seat with a straight back and elegant posture, her face a stony mask. If she had learnt anything from her marriage, it was how a noble woman ought to behave. She was unwavering in her restraint, yet always stylish.

'So young to be a widow,' someone nearby murmured.

'It truly makes your heart ache,' another continued.

'Quite alone in the world,' yet a third added.

They had departed from the deceased's earthly home at Blackthorn Castle to start the several mile long journey a couple of hours earlier. From the castle, which was located between Kaukalaksi and Kirkkonummi, they came to Kuninkaantie – the King's Road – an old postal route running from Bergen in Norway all the way to St Petersburg in Russia. The part cleaving through southern Finland in an east–west direction was known as the Great Coastal Road.

In the carriages making up the slow-moving cortège sat the noble men of the region, invited to attend with black-edged funeral announcements delivered by courier. Important figures from the major cities, Helsinki, the new capital, and Turku, its

predecessor, were also present. The sobs of their wives, sisters and daughters drifted through the air, like a quiet rustling, through the open windows of their carriages. Accompanying the march with muted drums were Swedish cavalry officers in full uniform and sentries on foot, with bayonet-topped rifles resting on their shoulder. General Öhrnmarck's army contacts had sent them with special dispensation as a mark of respect from the neighbouring country. Thanks to favourable winds, they had managed to arrive just in time.

Nowadays, burials were carried out quickly, within around a week, unlike in the past when Finland was ruled by Sweden, when extravagantly expensive funerals could often last several days. However, the nobleman's final journey was still an important event, the arrangements for which reflected not only the esteem in which the deceased was held, but also the power and position of the family.

The cortège passed Espoo's health spa with its yellow pump room and well master's house, the granary built of timber, and the animal shed. People came to enjoy the water, which was high in iron and believed to have healing properties, from as far off as the fortress at Viapori, a good twelve miles away, and even further. People lined the edge of the road to see the procession, respectfully serious expressions on their faces. Besides the people of the village surrounding the church, many of the rest of the two-thousand strong population of the local area appeared to be out. Only the odd, rapidly hushed, utterance could be heard:

'Poor girl! He wasn't the most wonderful of husbands, despite his popularity in those circles.'

'What would the nobility know about reality.'

'No sane person would set foot near Blackthorn Castle.'

'It would be as an absolute last resort if a maid went to work there.'

They arrived at the hill upon which the church was sat. At the bottom of the valley, a river wound past the building. In the grounds of the stables in nearby Upper and Lower Lövkulla stood a number of red cottages, looking desolate in the drizzle. Below, the lake loomed, still, without even as much as a ripple despite the damp weather, the mist silently hugging its surface. The outline of the church, which dated to

the Middle Ages, rose up before the arriving guests, the grey stone and black pitched roof giving an imposing appearance.

The cortège processed into the building and took their places in the pews, before the pastor opened the service. Arabella's gaze wandered to the recently whitewashed walls. They had previously been adorned with old paintings produced by artists with great talent, using images to spread the gospel to the population in times gone by, when the vast majority had been illiterate. Arabella took in the sight of the pulpit, used for important services and bedecked with a canopy, and the deliberately plain interior of the hall church with its nave and two aisles. The pure scents of wax candles and stone floated through the air, and a sliver of silver autumn light seeped in through the windows. Instead of the organ, the cantor played the lighter-sounding fortepiano, one melancholy melody after the other resonated through the church's vaults.

The pastor pronounced the final lines from his book before closing it. The coffin, which had been brought in on a wheeled platform, was carried by the officers guarding it to the burial site, where the funeral service would end. A deep hole had been dug into the ground as the coffin's final resting place. The clergyman came to a halt beside it, and the guests following him stopped. The pastor stepped up to the head of the coffin.

'You are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

He drew a cross with sand on the coffin.

Arabella turned her face away.

Finally, the time for the burial had arrived. The pastor nodded to signal to the officers. They threaded the straps under the coffin, three men on each side. Somewhat jerkily, the load was lifted into the air and over the rectangular hole. The pallbearers lowered the coffin down, allowing the straps to unwind from the spools, inch by inch, until it came to rest on solid earth, before winding the straps back up again. The officers stepped back, fell silent for a moment with heads bowed, then turned and bowed in Arabella's direction.

'Christ said: I am the resurrection and the life ...'

The clergyman's proclamations reverberated through the silence of the graveyard.

The row of soldiers took a step forward. The commands cut through the air with a ring. Moving as one, the rank stepped back and to the right, raised their rifles, loaded, barrels pointed upwards. Each exact, simultaneous movement carried out with practised discipline.

‘Fire!’ the order sliced through the mist.

The motions were repeat several times.

Arabella flinched at every gun salute, with each shot feeling as if it were piercing her spine. A flock of birds rose from nearby trees, flapping their wings in protest against the disturbance. The echo of the sharp bangs reverberated off the ground and distant rock faces, back towards the church yard. The gun smoke hung in the air.

The coffin was covered with soil and the cortège returned to Blackthorn Castle. Even in normal circumstances, the imposing building stood enveloped by the fog that hung in the air like a white shroud. Coffee, wine and beer flowed. The tables groaned with saffron buns, ten varieties of biscuit, and an assortment of more substantial offerings. An unceasing flow of attendees stopped before Arabella.

‘My deepest condolences.’

‘I’m so very sorry. General Öhrnmarck was an honourable man.’

‘Quite remarkable during the Finnish War.’

Arabella nodded, receiving the handshakes and pats on the shoulder, listening to the murmured words. An icy wind blew within her. She was thankful for the veiled hat of her mourning dress, as the wispy mesh hid the fact the new widow had not shed a single tear.

Chapter 1

Blackthorn Castle, September 1816

An impenetrable silence prevailed in the silk parlour, with only the old-fashioned, multi-armed candelabrum stood on the floor, with five lit wax candles providing any light. The name of the room was a nod to the expensive wine-red fabric wallcovering.

Arabella sat in the solitary chair in the centre of the room, in front of the portrait, a piece painted in gloomy shades. Recollections of recent months rose in her mind like an assortment of hazy images, in which she waited for the legally-determined year of mourning to pass. For women, mourning lasted a year, for men, half a year. During the period of deep mourning a widow was not permitted to wear any other colours than black and white; once she reached the half mourning stage, muted colours such as grey, violet and lavender were permitted. This applied to all outer garments, robes and accessories, from hats all the way down to gloves.

Arabella's ability to function had been numbed since General Öhrnmarck's – men could not be addressed by first name – sudden departure from the stage. She had not wanted to do anything or see anyone. Arabella had fulfilled only some social obligations: sporadic visits to various upper class families in the sparsely populated neighbourhood and hosting even fewer return visits. Whilst the General had kept a tight hold of the reins, Arabella had not been a complete hermit. He had often invited guests to foster a lifestyle befitting his status, and Arabella knew at least a handful of people superficially. The rest of the time Arabella had spent drifting about the vast castle and its grounds by herself, trying to comprehend the situation she had found herself in.

Arabella's thoughts returned to the day of the funeral. Eulogies had been given, the guests had left. At last, a little over a year had passed since then. Arabella raised her gaze to the painting hung on the wall. General Öhrnmarck's angular face gazed at her with unfeeling eyes, just as he had almost every day of their marriage when he had been alive. Four years, almost one thousand five hundred days.

'You hold no power over me any longer,' said Arabella in a low voice.

The portrait stared wordlessly at her, as if mocking her.

Outside, in the dark September night a bolt of lightning from a storm far in the distance sliced silently through the sky, lighting the whole silk parlour in a blueish glow for a moment. The familiar rumble did not arrive. Arabella's hackles raised. She jumped to her feet and positioned herself directly below the painting.

'I will be making my own choices from now.'

Once again, no answer. Of course not; it was just a painting, after all. Suddenly, Arabella was unable to look at it any longer. Using all her strength, she tore it from the wall and hurled the gold-framed oil painting to the ground. It fell with a hollow bang. She slipped out of the castle and ran across the yard to tool shed – one of the numerous outbuildings – to get the supplies she would need. The scent of smoke drifted through the cool air. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a curtain twitch in a window of the servants' quarters. Presumably, they thought she had taken leave of her senses.

Panting, Arabella made her way back to the silk parlour with a selection of tools in her hands. Before long, she had wrenched the painting from its frame and rolled up the canvas, which she then shoved out of sight behind a big cabinet. After all, she did not dare get rid of a highly valuable work by a well-known artist. Perhaps she could sell it one day. However, she had no desire to keep it where she could see it, and it was too heavy to drag up to the attic or down to the cellar as it was by herself. Arabella did not wish to get the servants involved either. She set about chopping the frame to smithereens with a knife, before throwing the resulting pieces into the fireplace. She lit the fire with one of the candles from the candelabrum and soon the wood had been reduced to nothing more than a pile of glowing embers.

Arabella sat back down on the chair. More silent lightning flashed in the autumn night sky. She had to get away from here...

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