

Coin of the Realm

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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Her father didn't listen. He never did. The King. The Ruling Monarch. The Man Who Thought He Knew More About Everything Than Anyone Else.

Rosalind sighed and held her arms up as the seamstress adjusted the wedding dress. Thousands of seed pearls adorned the garment, making it very heavy. She was being sewn into it, and she had no idea how she would get out of it. This was form-fitting taken to an extreme.

Her dressing room was cold. The seamstress had insisted, saying the dress was warm enough—which it probably was, but that didn't stop Rosalind's hands from getting cold. She patted her black hair, piled on top of her head, held into place with two long, pointed ebony sticks—pearls dripping off the ends like a waterfall—an elaborate and somewhat ugly gift from Leif, her new husband-to-be.

She shuddered just thinking of him. He was a Crystofilian—tall, blond, with a tendency toward beef-iness. Crystofil was one of the smaller, wealthier countries on Orsem's southern flank. Her father had been eyeing it for years. He thought the arranged marriage would gain him Crystofil's wealth, but it was becoming clearer that he was wrong.

If she and Leif had a son—and the idea of begetting one with him just turned her stomach—then that child would rule Crystofil, inheriting its wealth and its titles. Otherwise, she was merely a royal bride, with no power and no clout.

She had no idea why her father was proceeding with the ceremony. Especially with the assassins about.

Everyone knew of the problem. Orsem's greatest assassin failed his last mission. He had been a brooding, silent man who did most of his work abroad. At home, he was the public executioner, a man whose appearance at a person's door signaled the end of everything.

No hangings for him. A simple slip of the knife was more than enough. Wealthy beyond measure, it was said there was no job he could not complete.

Until the last one. An assassin's error always ended in the assassin's death.

And all the assassins in the kingdom were vying to take his place. Whoever assassinated the most important victim—and increased the King's holdings in doing so—would receive the King's favor.

Rosalind had begged her father to call off the wedding. Her argument was simple: all of the most important people in the kingdom would be there. Her father was risking their lives—and hers—by going through with this charade while the assassins were in such turmoil.

But he had dismissed her, as he always had. Daughters, he used to say, were like coin to be traded. A man's only value lay in his son.

Well, her father had six coins to be married off to the nearest countries. Six failed attempts before her mother finally yielded up the precious son who, at the age of eight, was only beginning to understand the things that were expected of him.

The seamstress bit off the final thread. "Finished, Highness," she said. "You look beautiful."

Rosalind looked into the mirror. The dress shone in the candlelight. It fit her perfectly, showing her small athletic form. She rarely wore such clothing—hating the constrictions it put on her. The dress made her look like someone else. Like a woman whose future lay in a country she didn't understand.

The vows took scarcely any time at all. During them, Rosalind knelt at the cleric's feet, her back twitching. She could feel the eyes of nearly five hundred spectators on her.

This room, the palace's audience hall, was warm—too warm, thanks to the closely packed congregation. As was custom, there were no chairs here, only people, standing closely together to watch the union of two nations. On one side stood Leif's friend, family, courtiers, and nobles. On the other were the important members of her father's kingdom.

Her parents sat on thrones behind the altar. Leif's parents were given seats on the other side, lower, and farther forward, but still away from the throng. Throughout the ceremony, Rosalind could see her father's round, disinterested face, half hidden by the fur of his robes.

His analogy had been right: her passage from his life meant as much as the passage of a coin through his fingers.

When she had entered the hall, Rosalind had scanned for assassins, but she wasn't really sure who or what she was looking for. She thought she saw a few people blending into the shadows, but that simply could have been a trick of the light.

She wondered what her father would do if someone stabbed her in the back during the ceremony. Would he elevate that person to his right hand as custom demanded? Or would he destroy that person for touching a member of the royal family, also as custom demanded?

She wondered if anyone was foolish enough to make her their challenge, and knew someone probably was.

After all, when the ceremony ended, she was *officially* a member of Crystofil's kingdom and could legitimately be called an enemy. Everything depended on interpretation. Her father's interpretation.

Leif took her hand. His was warm and sweaty, his face flushed. He seemed affected by the ceremony until she looked into his eyes. They were cold. He hadn't said anything to her since the engagement. Before that, when his father introduced them, Leif had said simply, "Looks like she'll have to do."

The cleric bade them rise. Then, taking their shoulders, he turned them toward the congregation. Rosalind stiffened beneath his hands. She didn't even hear the introduction—her new name as a married woman. Instead, she surveyed the stone structure, looking in the shadows for the glint of a knife.

So intent was she on the back of the room that she almost missed the movement in front. As she and Leif took their first step forward, a man emerged from the side, blade out.

People screamed, Leif cringed, and Rosalind dropped his hand. In a fluid movement, she removed one of

the bridal sticks from her hair and, point out, used it to stab the assassin as he reached the stair.

He fell backward, looking at her in surprise, his body thudding on the stone floor, knife clattering as it skittered away. The entire congregation stared at him as if they had one brain.

Rosalind put a shaky hand to her falling hair. Leif turned to her, as stunned as everyone else. She smiled at him and said, "Looks like you'll have to do."

He frowned, as if he didn't understand her, while she pulled the remaining stick from her ruined hairstyle, and ran him through.

He looked so ridiculous in his wedding clothes, an ebony hair stick in the center of his chest, pearls waving like flowers in a breeze. His gaze met hers and, for the first time, she thought he saw her.

Then he fell too, forward, sprawling onto the stone, shoving the stick in farther. His parents ran to him. The rest of the congregation was screaming, and hurrying toward the exits. The guards, following their instructions for all emergencies, pulled the doors closed.

Her father stood, slowly, his eyes wide. "What have you done?"

She raised her chin. "I claim the highest prize. I have taken the best victim."

His jaw dropped. He was so close to her that he should have been touching her. But he didn't. Maybe it was the blood on her seed pearls.

Maybe it was the look on her face.

"But our union with Crystofil—you've ruined it!"

There was something else more important than she was. Always something else that took from her accomplishments. She felt an anger rush through her.

"All you ever wanted was their wealth," she snapped. "Well, I got that for you."

"No," he said, his voice weaker than usual. "You didn't."

"By all that's holy, Father, must I do the thinking for you?" She put her hand—her bloody hand—on his fur-covered robe and pulled him close. "You have all their nobles here. And their king and queen. Arrest them. And then invade the country immediately. You'll own all of it by morning."

He didn't move. The screaming was still going on behind them, and there was shoving near the doors.

"If you don't take my advice," she hissed, "you're a greater fool than I ever thought you were."

He shook himself as if waking from a deep sleep. "Why? You could have had everything."

"I would have had nothing. A dull life in a dull country raising children so that they could have wealth you covet. This suits me better."

His eyes widened. "You can't."

"I can. I've been training for this for years." She leaned even closer. "Do you want me to tell you how I killed your last right hand? He was an arrogant fool who underestimated women, just like you. Do you think his mark was smart enough to kill him?"

"No, child, no."

She smiled and touched his face with one stained finger. "I'm not your child any longer. Daughters are coin and you gave me away. I am now taking my position at your side, a position I earned. I'm your new right hand."

"But we've never had a woman—"

She flattened her palm against his cheek, her fingers dangerously close to his eye. "I am following your rules. Won't you do the same?"

He stared at her, his face half hidden by her hand, his expression wary. And suddenly he was no longer the King. The Ruling Monarch. The Man Who Thought He Knew More About Everything Than Anyone Else.

He was a man who heard her speak, and feared for his own life.

He let out a small sigh, and nodded almost imperceptibly. She softened her hold on his skin. Then he turned and snapped his fingers, shouting orders to the guards to arrest the guests from Crystofil.

And Rosalind stood beside him the entire time.