

The Four Kingdoms by Judith Millar

Keller cowered in the shadows of the empty courtyard, his eyes darting between the lit windows high above him. He saw no one, no silhouettes gliding across the drapes, but still he waited. If they found him here, he would suffer. His breaths rasped, all but drowning out the crackle and spit of the iron torches hanging from the walls. He chewed on his fingers, the flesh around the nails angry and raw. Counting the thuds inside his chest for a moment, he leapt up and scuttled across the cobbles.

He burst through the wooden door, slamming it shut behind him before resting his back against its boards. The warmth from the kitchens clogged his nose and mouth, making it hard to catch a breath, but instead of waiting any longer he lunged forward, skulking along the corridor, peering through the doorways on either side. Dairy, boot room, scullery, all stood silent, only the cold tiles and a whiff of stale milk there to greet him.

He reached the laundry and shoved the door open with a scrape. His eyes scoured the room, but it lay empty too. No sign of Elagh. He crossed the stone floor, hung linen billowing out of his way, and leaned over the sink, his fists curled tight on the cold porcelain. He hadn't seen her in three days – a long time without a kind word from anyone. Stupid woman. Why was she never there when he needed her? Bowing his head low, he steadied himself. After a moment, he stepped back into the hallway and crept close to the door of the servant's wide dining room, pressing himself in against the wall. The door lay half open, so he watched unseen as they finished their meal together. A waft of roast meat made his insides rumble - much more appetising than what he had filled his belly with.

He had waited long enough.