

*A Matter
Of
Tradition*

by

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“A Matter of Tradition”
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First Edition

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For Tamanna –

Thank you for creating and getting me hooked on “Rosamund’s Sister”. Imogen gave me the inspiration for the insolence Bryane so desperately needed.

Chapter One

Everyone says that the good die young. Bryane brushed drops of rain from her cheeks -- tears she had been unable to shed herself. *They never explain what to do when the good live on, weaving their way into our hearts and lives.* Swinging down from her horse, she looked at the people around her. Genuine tears and misery marked their faces, and their voices broke with grief. *It seems that good can leave a mark upon us as easily as evil.*

Her boots sank into the mud as her feet carried her forward unconsciously. The others left an eddy around her, and she bowed her head. *I have returned to a world of strangers.* Her foot slipped as the first stone of the front steps tilted beneath her weight, surprising a smile onto her lips. *Strangers who exist in a world that is too familiar.* The woman in front of her glanced back, noting her smile and gasped, her eyes accusing. Pressing her lips together, Bryane pulled her hood closer around her face. *Far too familiar.*

Inside of the doors, she stopped and moved to one side, letting the flow of travelers continue past her. Everyone glanced in her direction, then quickly turned away, and she dropped her hood. *King Taureas would be disappointed; after all of my practice in invisibility, I have become as glaringly offensive as a monster.* She moved into the shadows, her eyes drawn up to the black silk banner draped over the crest of Valtan. The delicate material couldn't quite shield the brilliant gold of the sinuous dragon coiled about a single rose. Her fingers reached up to trace the same symbol dangling around her neck, this time in soft silver -- a mark of the Third Tier of Nobility of Valtan.

You promised me that my return would be a cause for celebration, Your Majesty. Celebrations do not come draped in mourning. She stepped up to a mirror dominating one wall, staring up at the portrait reflected from across the chamber. The man wore a kindly face framed in a long white beard, and his lips smiled as he looked over her shoulder, his eyes assuring anyone who gazed upon them. She reached up to touch the reflection of his hand, the mirror cold beneath her fingers. "I wish you had waited until I could have thanked you properly," she whispered. "You could have at least told me you would be leaving."

A single tear escaped the corner of her eye as a soft gong echoed through the hallways. *A summoning or a condemnation?* She brushed the tear away and moved to the end of the line of people. Her hands began to shake as she stepped out of the foyer, and she trailed further and further behind. The horrible familiarity of the tapestries around her weighed on her -- a reminder of what waited for her at the end of the corridor. There were whispers filling the corridors already, and she shivered. Only the dim shadows softened the accusing stares that glanced back in her direction.

She looked up at a frayed tassel dangling from a tapestry depicting a prancing unicorn; it was a tassel she had often tried to jump up and touch on her way to Court. She closed her eyes, pressing her lips together. *Does anything change in five years?*



"Five years should not make this kind of difference." Philip leaned against the wall, massaging his temples. "All of these people are strangers."

"Five years of tournaments can mimic five lifetimes for the Court," Nikoli replied. He glanced at the line of people waiting to enter the Throne Room. "Marriages, births, deaths -- all of them add and subtract, and, to be honest, you were never as conversant with the nobility as you should have been."

“You have been speaking to my father.”

“I am your bodyguard and best friend, Your Highness. It only makes sense that he would speak to me about his concern for you.”

Philip rolled his eyes. “Correction: you are the only person I am likely to listen to, and my father is quite aware of that fact.” He sighed. “I suppose there may be some logic to Father’s request, though. If I attempt to at least learn the First and Second Tier, maybe he will lecture me less.”

“The way you speak, one would think it was an impossible task. There are only nine families in the Upper Tiers, and you still have five days before the Coronation.”

Five days before the freedom of being a Prince of the Blood becomes the restriction of being the Crown Prince. Tournaments replaced with endless Court Sessions, hunts replaced with balls and state dinners, and the chance to escape the confines of these blasted traditions for even a moment eliminated. “It may as well be an impossible task. Every time I turn around, another child has been born, another marriage has been performed, and the number of names I have to remember doubles. Considering that more of our Courtiers are being married in from out-Kingdom, not even faces are recognizable.”

“You know the family names, at the least.” Nikoli waved to a pair of elderly gentlemen, each wearing colored sashes over their shoulders. “And I trust you still remember the familial heralds. It may not provide you with the first name, but simple recognition is enough to satisfy most of the Court.”

Philip nodded idly, watching the line of people thin. *Recognition -- the only real necessity of a Courtier’s life. Titles, wealth, land -- none of them mean anything, compared to a small conversation with the Royal Family. If they could, they would all adorn themselves with blazing lights, simply to draw attention to themselves.* His gaze fell on a final mourner, trailing behind the others. She kept her head bowed, and her footsteps grew slower and slower. He frowned, searching for the brooch that should have marked her cloak. Instead, there was only a simple pin, and she had no other insignia. He frowned, nudging Nikoli’s shoulder. “And what of those who wear no herald?”

Nikoli followed Philip’s gesture, his eyes widening, and he gave a low whistle. “That, Your Highness, could quite easily provide a necessary distraction to the boredom you have been claiming.”

“I can have any number of maids, Nikoli,” Philip said scornfully. “I have little need for Courtier’s daughters, particularly those I cannot verify the rank of.”

“You misunderstand -- that is Bryane Merison.” Nikoli paused significantly, sighing when Philip blinked in response. “Bryane is the youngest daughter of Cauld Merison.”

“I attended the wedding of Cauld’s youngest daughter, at my father’s request – Lorelei, I believe her name was.” Philip lifted an eyebrow. “Lorelei, with her husband and child, arrived two days ago.”

“You could try a mule’s patience, Your Highness,” Nikoli murmured, leaning forward to watch the girl as she paused, dropping her hood and looking at the mourning silks. “It happened five years ago, when you left me here to recover from that fall while you went on to the Liefstal Tournament. The Tahon family had managed to acquire a new tract of pastureland, more land than they could manage on their own, and they started circulating a reminder that their son was still unwed.”

Philip snorted derisively. “They would have a better chance auctioning Vlad off to a swineherd than finding a father desperate enough to wed his daughter to that brute.”

Nikoli shook his head. "You know as well as I do the infighting and scheming of the Court. Unless your family belongs to the First Tier, you have minimal influence, at best, and those without influence are unimportant. The Merison family is in the Third Tier."

"Cauld Merison is devoted to his daughters -- everyone knows that. He would move the sun and moon for them, if he could."

"Yes, he would, which meant finding a First Tier husband for his youngest daughter."

Philip grimaced, watching the girl move over to a mirror. "If she were a monster, I might believe it, but that girl looks sweet and quite beautiful." She reached a hand to touch the surface of the mirror, and the careful expression slipped from her face for a moment, revealing pain. *Beautiful, and lost, somehow. She moves as one who has lived here her entire life, yet she appears to recognize nothing.*

Nikoli sighed. "I am afraid, Your Highness, that the gossip you hear from the servants and knights does not mimic the gossip circulating around the Court. While you and I know what sort of creature Vlad is, the Courtiers do not. Cauld believed that Vlad was the considerate, devoted man his family claimed. The fact that a marriage to Vlad would bring an opportunity for partial ownership of fresh pastureland -- land enough for Bryane to have her own household -- made him all the more appealing. Cauld introduced Vlad to Bryane one month before he paid her dowry to the Tahons."

"If she agreed to the wedding, why is she here alone, without the Tahon herald?" Philip asked, frowning. "Further, to my knowledge, Vlad is still unwed. At the least, that is what I heard from the last goose girl he got a hold of."

"It's a shame you were more interested in the life of a knight than that of a Prince, or you would have had a chance to meet Bryane." Nikoli smiled. "Bryane is not like her sisters, or anyone else in the Court; she is the closest to a spirit a mortal can achieve: restless, interested in everything around her, and dangerously independent. Unknown to Cauld, she had petitioned your grandfather for permission to become his Envoy the same day she was introduced to Vlad. The King was prepared to grant her petition, too, had Vlad not proposed to her.

"Vlad had, supposedly, been courting her since her introduction, though I never heard anyone mention seeing them together even once. I, personally, find it impossible to believe that Vlad could have drawn Bryane away from her books and afternoon rides, much less paid her true court. She was taken aback by the proposal -- horrified, actually -- and she refused. That, in itself, would have been travesty enough, but she chose to refuse him at the height of Evening Court, quite vocally."

Well, if one wanted to insure infamy with the Court that would be a good start. Philip winced. "I still fail to see where you are heading with this. If he proposed at Evening Court, and Cauld insisted on moving forward with the marriage, Grandfather could have overturned her refusal, signing the marriage contract in her stead." Nikoli looked surprised, and Philip sighed. "I may pretend to be unaware of the ridiculous traditions of Valtan, but I am a Prince of the Blood -- I have had the traditions impressed upon my brain since birth."

"Your grandfather was not your father where traditions are concerned, and he knew Bryane; more to the point, he knew that she would not have refused for trivial reasons. He rejected Cauld's request to sign the marriage contract. He also refused Vlad's request that he speak with Bryane and change her mind. Cauld was furious, and he told Bryane she had two weeks to change her mind, or he would force the marriage himself. She met with your grandfather many times in those two weeks, and the day before the wedding, she received an invitation from King Taureas, to serve as an Envoy."

“Grandfather found an escape for her, one that would uphold our traditions.”

“To put it simply, yes.” Nikoli waved at the girl as she started down the corridor.

“Bryane gathered her things, leaving the morning of the wedding -- in the presence of her father and Vlad. She has lived in Taureas’s castle these past five years, and Cauld has ceased to acknowledge her existence.” Nikoli shrugged. “As far as the Court of Valtan is concerned, Your Highness, Bryane Merison does not exist.”

“Should make for an interesting spectacle when she walks into the Throne Room,” Philip said. *Not to mention an interesting diversion from Father’s glowering looks and the witless conversations of Courtier’s daughters searching for the title of Princess.*

“‘Interesting’ is not quite the word I might use.” Nikoli frowned, tugging on a lock of his auburn hair. “As you said, Vlad is still unwed, and unless I am mistaken, so is Bryane.” He lifted an eyebrow. “When was the last time you saw Vlad concede defeat to anyone, much less a woman?”

Philip whistled softly, then grinned. “I would say the mood of this mourning period could be in for an abrupt shift. Shall we witness the opening salvos?”



Why is it that the things we wish most to see changed are the things that remain the same? Bryane unfastened her cloak, allowing the shadows to hide her for a few moments. She could hear soft whispers inside the Throne Room; murmurs that would quickly change to an inferno of shock and horror when she stepped through the doors. Old phrases, scandalous gasps, and disapproving stares surfaced from her memory as she traced a fingertip over the latch. *Gossip is the only thing that never ages --it’s as if the first words set down are the only words that can describe the situation properly.* Sighing, she stepped forward, drawing the Majordomo’s attention. His eyes widened, and he dropped the list he had been consulting, his voice choked. The clatter of his staff on the floor drew the attention of every eye in the room, and she felt a nervous smile teasing the corners of her lips at the profusion of goggling eyes and dropped jaws.

Banishing the grin, she lifted her head and looked around the room, feigning an ignorance of the social structure laid out before her. The Tiers of Nobility were starkly defined, for all of the confusion the chaises and lounges created; even in times of collective mourning, proper stations had to be observed, and every family had staked their rightful territory. She let her gaze drift over faces that were both strange and familiar, cringing inwardly as she turned her head toward those that mirrored her own. Where disbelief and confusion marked the majority of the expressions around her, that one small knot radiated nothing short of contempt and disgust. *Apparently, anger is just as easily shared as mourning.*

Adjusting the bag on her shoulder, she moved towards the cluster of glaring Courtiers, conscious of the people on either side of her who drew away, lest she transmit some unknown plague. *If insolence could be transmitted so easily...*, she decided the thought was best left unfinished. As she approached, the group sank down onto their beds and chairs, looking in every other direction. Only one member remained standing -- a small, proud man with thinning grey hair and deep blue eyes. His beard was tattered, and he was making the damage worse by running his fingers through it, his movements increasing in agitation. She stopped in front of him and looked up into eyes that were identical to her own. *Save that I love you, Father, and you despise me.*

Bowing her head respectfully, she let her bag slip to her feet. "Good evening, Father," she said clearly, and her voice actually echoed through the room.

The man met her gaze squarely, and she flinched inwardly at the emotion she could read in his eyes. With an abrupt motion, he dropped his hand to his side and turned away. He made no attempt to keep his words soft as he replied, "You are not a child of mine."

Bryane held still, watching as he walked away, deliberately turning his chair back to her. A calm fell over her as she turned to look at the sisters still facing her, and they stared blankly back. She nodded once slowly before gathering her bag and walking past her family to the shadows at the edge of the room. A single, worn chair waited for her next to a window that was in desperate need of repair. Shifting the chair away from the worst of the dripping rain, she set her bag beneath it and sat down, looking out over the room. Hundreds of eyes stared back at her -- a frozen tableau of horrible surprise -- and then gazes were directed elsewhere. Conversations began where they had left off, and the quiet was replaced with the usual din of Court.

She sighed again and leaned her head back, closing her eyes. *Welcome home, Bryane. Thank you, it feels as if I never left.* She opened her eyes and looked over to her family, fighting a wave of bitterness. There were two small children -- a niece and a nephew -- sitting with her sister Selene that she had never met. Her sister Lorelei's husband was leaning on a crutch, his leg encased in bandages, while Lorelei looked on with concern. Her sister Aislin was very heavy with child, her happiness glowing through her skin. There were stories sitting only a few yards from her, and she knew none of them. Each one represented a hole in her life that she had no ability to fill. *Five years, and not one of them has missed me.*

"I have missed you," a slow voice said beside her, almost in contradiction, and she looked up. A bulky figure stood to the side of her chair, his shadow completely encompassing her. The man's hair was cropped close to his skull, giving his face a menacing appearance that was unnecessary. Two missing teeth gapped his cold smile as he bowed to her, extending his hand toward hers. "It is a joy to see you after so many years."

"Vlad." It was the only word she was able to force past her lips as her entire body stiffened. She drew her hands into her lap, wrapping them in the folds of her cloak and causing him to smile wider for just a moment. She met his gaze, injecting a chill into her voice. "I trust this evening finds you well."

"Quite well, now." He leaned against the wall, toying with the laces at the throat of his shirt. "I must confess myself surprised. I doubted you would come here, particularly as you claimed you would sooner die than lay eyes upon me again."

"King Borean was my sovereign."

"I thought it was King Taureas who served as your sovereign now." There was a dangerous edge to his voice, and she saw something flicker in his eyes.

"I am an Envoy for the Court of Valtan. My loyalty lies with Valtan until my dying breath." She smiled to cover her gritted teeth. "King Taureas accepts me as a part of his Court, but he is not my sovereign."

"I find it strange for one to claim loyalty to a Court that they have shunned so dramatically, in front of the entire Court." He smirked down at her, and she caught his gaze drifting below her face. "It does make one wonder why you would return, particularly as it is clear your family wants nothing to do with you."

She pulled her cloak tighter around her, turning her head away. *It makes one wonder how you are still welcome in Court, considering what you have done, and are likely still doing.*

He knelt beside her chair, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper. "Perhaps you came to rectify a wrong." He reached out, stroking a finger over her clenched hand. His voice dropped lower when she tensed, his breath puffing the hair around her ear. "Perhaps, after five years, you came to your senses."

"I never lost my senses." She got to her feet, glaring down at him. "I have done no wrong against you. I am sorry you are unable to say the same." Turning, she bumped into someone else who caught hold of her arms. For a moment, memories surfaced of another such restraint, and she violently pushed them away. "Do not touch me!"

"My apologies, My Lady. I was simply steadying you." The voice was calm, with a horrible familiarity to it that made her chest ache. She looked up into brown eyes -- brown eyes edged in a rim of gold that she had looked into for years. The face was younger, though, and the smile was unabashedly crooked.

"Your Highness," she whispered, dropping into a curtsy. "I apologize. I thought..." She bit her lower lip, keeping her head bowed. There were no excuses that would save her from some form of punishment, and she was conscious that the majority of the room was watching her closely.

Philip bent forward, lifting her head so that her gaze was lifted to his. His smile softened, and she saw the ghost of his grandfather there. "No great harm done. I do suggest, however, that you pay more attention to your surroundings." He winked at her. "It is a punishable offense to cause harm to a Prince of the Blood."

She felt the corners of her lips curling in response to his smile, and she nodded, rising from the curtsy. "I will be more careful, Your Highness. Thank you." Bowing her head, she let him step between her and Vlad before she continued to the door.

Silence accompanied her flight, all the way outside. She stood under the rain, ignored by the guards flanking the doors. *My family refuses to acknowledge me. Vlad is here. I almost knocked over the Crown Prince.* Nervous laughter bubbled into her chest. *How could I ever have believed the Court would find something else to gossip about?*

The rain soaked through the hood of her cloak, disguising the tears she finally released.

Chapter Two

Philip crossed his arms, looking down at the figure standing on the steps. Though the rain had increased, Bryane hadn't moved once in the past candlemark. He had watched her tilt her head back, eyes closed, several times, so that the rain could wash away what he suspected were tears. *From the pain in her expression, it would require a miracle for there to be no tears. She could be a different girl completely from the woman I saw in the Throne Room.* "You meant something to her, Grandfather, that much is clear. I just wish I knew what."

He had been watching her the entire time that Vlad had been speaking with her, noting the withdrawals from his touch and the fury in her eyes. Something in Nikoli's story of their "courtship" had clearly been lacking, and he was willing to believe it was something strong enough to warrant her violent refusal of the marriage proposal. *So why did she come back here? She was hardly pleased to see Vlad, and she escaped as soon as she could. Her family had no desire to see her, much less speak to her. From what I can see, she has no real reason to be here. Well, perhaps save one.*

He turned and looked at the body laid out in the center of the small room. Candelabras burned around the table, casting a warm glow over the peaceful features of Borean Valtan. He had been dressed in a simple white robe, belted at the waist with a woven belt of gold. His hands

were clasped around the hilt of his sword, and a large pendant bearing the coiled serpent rested on his breast. Death had smoothed the tracks of time from his face, granting him an innocence of youth. Philip could see echoes of his own face. *Echoes even Bryane noticed.*

He sighed, kneeling beside the table. "What did I miss on the Tournament field, Grandfather? Why did one girl from the Third Tier catch your attention?" He smiled ruefully. "And why do I find myself feeling protective of this rebellious monster who throws my Court into an uproar?"

"Meow?" a voice queried, and he glanced under the table. A tiger-striped tom was watching him, its tail weaving sinuous curves against the floor. It had clearly seen poor times, as he could see the outline of its ribs, but its coat was clean, and its eyes were clear -- likely one of the dozens of strays the kitchen staff had adopted to control the mouse population.

"Believe you have all of the answers, do you?" Philip asked, scratching the tom behind the ears. The cat purred, slitting its eyes in pleasure. "I see. Well, for now, those answers will remain yours to keep, because I have yet to learn to speak feline." He sat back on his heels, checking the time candle in the corner. Sighing, he got to his feet. "No time to learn, either. I fear there is a very sodden Courtier outside in need of some shepherding."

"Mrrzzup," the cat replied, apparently in agreement. It followed him down the stairs, tail erect and twitching from side to side, but it stopped when he paused at the doors to pull on his cloak.

"Ah, yes, further proof that cats are wiser than men," Philip said, smiling. He bent to ruffle the cat's ears. "Back to the kitchen with you, Little Tiger. Cook should have some nice tidbits waiting for you."

The guards snapped to attention as he walked out the door, but the figure on the stairs remained frozen. He stepped beside her, an arm's length away and looked at her. Her face was hidden by the hood of her cloak, which was clearly soaked through. *I should have expected a favorite of Grandfather's would have his stubborn streak. Such trivial matters as health are unimportant when there is a point to be made.* "Tell me, has King Taureas perfected a magical spell that repels water from his Court?" he asked, keeping his voice as low as he could and still be heard over the rain.

Bryane looked up at him and then extended her arms out, revealing the soaked sleeves of her dress. "If he has, he's chosen to keep it secret from foreigners." He could hear the attempt at humor in her voice, but her bedraggled appearance spoke otherwise.

"So then I assume you are a new scholar the Librarian employed to serve as a rain gauge while we wait for the glasswright to repair ours?" There was little light on the steps, frustrating his attempts to see if even a grin touched her lips.

"Does the Valtan Court often employ people to the jobs of inanimate objects?" she replied, lifting her head so that he could see her face clearer. Her hair was soaked, and strands were plastered to her forehead and cheeks. He reminded her of a small child that had been playing near the fountains and accidentally tumbled in: woebegone, yet determined to stand her ground and admit she had done nothing wrong. *Those eyes ruin the illusion, though. No child has eyes that have seen that much.*

He stretched his arms over his head, yawning. "Quite often, actually. We find people are more mobile, and they are less likely to suffer a significant breakage." The smallest of smiles flitted across her lips, and he saw her try to repress a shiver. "Save for those people who prove ignorant of all sense and risk their health unnecessarily."

"Do you always insult the sense of your Courtiers?"

“All the time. I find it refreshing that I can insult them, while I can remain free of abuse.”

She looked at him critically, her expression serious. “You look a lot like your grandfather, Your Highness. It’s a pity you seem to have been passed over in inheriting his wit.”

What did she just say? He blinked in surprise, actually feeling his jaw drop for a moment. Her expression was unwavering, but he could see a quiet mirth in her eyes. Scowling, he straightened to his full height, staring down at her. “Do you know what the punishment is for insulting a Prince of the Blood? I could call the guard now and have you placed in the dungeons. They may be less damp than these stairs, but the smell should be similar enough for your comfort.”

A soft, genuine smile crossed her lips. “You could, but I do not believe you will.”

“Confident, are we? Why do you believe I would spare you?”

“You are standing outside, in pouring rain, speaking with an exile of your Court, despite the chime for the evening meal having been rung some time ago. If you were the kind of person to demand restitution for a simple insult, you would hardly be here, showing concern -- mocking as it may be -- for me.” A note of loss crept into her tone. “And you are very much a grandson of King Borean.”

You might have warned me, Nikoli, that she had a golden tongue. He sighed, and smiled, banishing the mask of bravado. “That is a strike I have no parry for, My Lady. I must concede defeat.” He bowed before her.

“I was unaware it was a battle,” she said, and he saw her glancing at the guards nervously. It was unseemly for a Prince to bow to a lower Noble; it was clear she was well-versed in the proper protocol.

“No, I’m afraid the real battle will likely be convincing you to return to the Throne Room.” He extended his arm to her, lifting an eyebrow. “The overall atmosphere may be similar to this storm, but I can promise that it will be drier.”

She shook her head, taking a step back from him and crossing her arms. “I appreciate your concern, Your Highness, but I think I will be better off relying on the courtesy of your stable. It will be dry, as well, and the company will be...”

“Warmer?” She nodded fractionally. “Do you know how King Taureas would react to the knowledge that his Envoy was forced to sleep in the stables?”

“I had no intention of telling him.”

No wonder Grandfather chose her for an Envoy -- she is a master at discretion. He softened his voice. “You would honestly rather stay with the horses than join in the mourning ritual of the Court?”

“Your Highness, the Court would rather I avoided this entire Kingdom.” There was no way for her to disguise the bitterness in her tone. She turned her head away. “In truth, you would be better off to leave me here; it would be a poor choice for you to be seen in my presence.” She curtsied formally, avoiding his gaze. “I wish you a good evening.”

An exasperated noise escaped his throat, and he reached out to grab her arm. She resisted the touch, and he tightened his fingers. “I am the only one that will decide who I will be seen with. In case you have forgotten, I am a Prince of the Blood, and the only authorities I answer to are the King, who is dead upstairs, and the gods. As a Prince, with responsibilities to my Court, I refuse to allow a Courtier to sleep in the hay, much less remain outdoors in this weather.” He sighed again, relaxing his grip. “And as Philip, Borean’s grandson, I will not let you denigrate yourself.”

She stared at him, and he could see the rebellion in her eyes. He suspected that if the guards had not been present, he would have earned himself a slap to the face, at the least. *Somehow, I doubt that she is unable to defend herself. She could probably do me a serious injury, if she wished. Her tongue could certainly flay me.*

Bryane's voice was a whisper, barely audible over the rain. "With all due respect, Your Highness, I would rather not have to sit in the Throne Room and face a family that refuses to acknowledge me. I am already struggling with the loss of your grandfather, and adding the loss of my father and sisters is more than I am capable of. Seemly or not, I would rather participate in this mourning period from the shadows."

Five years, and your wounds are still as fresh as I imagine your father's to be. Her hands were clenched at her sides, and there were tears in her eyes she was holding back -- through sheer force of will, if he had to hazard a guess. *Maybe it wasn't Grandfather you returned to see, after all.* "What if I can provide an alternative, one with more dignity?"

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "I already stumbled into the future Crown Prince; I fear there is very little dignity left in me."

"There is a small room off of the Throne Room, used for more intimate audiences and negotiations. There is little in the way of decoration, but there is a chaise, which should be more comfortable than that soggy chair you found earlier." He smiled, releasing her arm. "It will grant you some privacy, yet still keep you within the Court and the companionship we all need at this time."

"Why?" she asked, frowning. "Why does it matter to you?"

He shrugged. "As I said, I am Borean's grandson. I may not have paid attention to the relationship the two of you shared, but it is quite obvious that you were of some importance. I can at least honor my grandfather by insuring the relative comfort of one girl he cared for." *At the very least, I want to learn why you were important to him.*

She was quiet for several moments, and the rain began to drip from the brim of his hood. "Now I am the one left without words, Your Highness." She curtsied again, bowing her head deeply. "I thank you, and, this once, I bend to your better judgment."

He arched his eyebrows, unable to suppress a grin as she took his arm. "A concession after only a few moments of conversation. My charm must be improving; I usually need to invest at least a candlemark."

"I would say it is less your charm and more the environment. Cold rain and wind can be a powerful influence over a woman's mind."

Insolent bitch. He smiled wider, after first making sure she was no longer looking at him. *No wonder you were so charmed, Grandfather.*



You would be proud of your grandson, Your Majesty, Bryane thought, unlacing her dress. The cloth was sodden, and it began to steam when she placed it over a chair in front of the fireplace. *He has inherited your concern for the Court, though little of your wit and humor.* She pulled a shift from her bag, sliding it over her head and sighing in pleasure as it warmed her chilled flesh. "If you wake in the morning without a cough or fever, you will have to thank the Prince," she said aloud, sitting on the edge of the chaise.

As promised, the room Philip had shown her to was small and barren of ornamentation. There was a table against one wall which could serve just as easily for a game of chess as for

negotiations, and there were only a handful of additional chairs. Philip had brought her a goose down pillow and a soft wool blanket, as well as a plate of food from the evening's supper. The chicken had cooled, but after so long on the road with only hard biscuits, she had been grateful for it. He had also retrieved her bag for her before bidding her a fair night's rest.

I wonder what the Court thinks of all this. She pulled a comb from her bag and began to work the wet tangles from her hair. It snagged once painfully, and she winced. *Or perhaps I don't. The last thing I wish to do is corrupt their opinion of their new Crown Prince.*

That would be a difficult undertaking, indeed, a voice spoke from beneath the chaise, and she started. A small tom cat stepped out and regarded her with warm brown eyes -- eyes traced in a rim of gold. **Philip is quite loved by this Court.** The cat sat before her, its tail curled neatly around its feet. The furry lips never moved, but there was no doubt the words originated from the small beast. The voice pierced straight to her heart, and she dropped the comb.

"King Borean?" she whispered.

I have missed you, Bryane.

Tears filled her throat, and she wavered between a frown and a smile. "How?"

I pretend no more knowledge of the gods' plans than you do, Child. I recall only that I went to sleep an aging man, and I woke in the body of a sprightly cat. It bent its head to clean a front paw, examining the sable toes for a moment. **If this was done for a purpose, I have yet to discover it.**

"I never thought I would hear your voice again."

I feared I would never see you again.

She moved to kneel on the floor, hesitantly reaching out to stroke the soft ears. "You can still hear my thoughts, even in this form?"

The cat made a sneezing noise that could have been laughter. **Cats have more abilities than you or I could ever hope for.**

"I must be dreaming."

I confess I had considered approaching you through that medium. When I saw you standing outside in the rain, though, I thought some physical comfort would be more appreciated. A purr rumbled up through its chest, vibrating the fur against her hand. **What were you doing?**

"Mourning my losses."

You have lost nothing, Child.

"I find it hard to count the things I have not lost." She pulled the cat onto her lap, stroking its fur. The rhythm brought a peace to her mind, and she sighed, closing her eyes. "Am I a fool for believing that five years would be enough for my father to forgive me?"

Your father is the fool, Bryane, much as you refuse to admit that. Cauld's pride has intruded on his judgment a number of times, and one day soon, he will learn to regret it. It slit its eyes in pleasure.

"Why am I here, Your Majesty?"

You have a dangerous sense of loyalty, My Lady. You know there is no need, yet you still feel indebted to me for providing your escape. You believe you still have to thank me, as if I needed more than that my smile of relief I glimpsed so many years ago. The cat snapped its tail against her wrist. **And you are lonely. You have not found a place in Taureas's Court.**

“King Taureas has twelve Envoys who live in the Palace, and I am the only one who does not return home for visits and does not receive even a whisper from my family. He has commented on it himself many times, though he shies from asking me the reason. The whisper around the Court is that I am an orphan without any family.” She shook her head, opening her eyes to stare into the fire. “I would embrace the rumor, if I could just shed my memories of childhood.”

Time can heal all wounds, Bryane.

“Do you still feel pain for the loss of your wife?” she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

The fur fluffed along the cat’s back. **My grandson is right, you are an insolent bitch.**

“I merely challenge the veracity of your statements.” She smiled despite herself. “So you hear his thoughts, do you?”

I do now, for some reason. I was never able to reach them when he was younger, perhaps because he was so focused on his Tournaments. Now, his thoughts speak as loudly as yours.

She stiffened. “Does he hear you? Or me?”

Peace, Little One; his inner ear is quite deaf.

“I wish I could close my ears so easily.” She leaned her head back against the chaise, looking up at the ceiling. “I remember the lessons you taught me, but there are always voices in my mind, here.”

Your memory is your greatest enemy.

“There is truth to that.” She shivered, though she knew it had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. “The first word from Vlad’s mouth reawakened a hell I thought I had buried.”

The cat hissed, flexing its claws. **If I thought I could inflict enough damage, I would shred him with these very talons. That menace has walked these hallways for too long, unpunished.**

“You cannot punish a crime without evidence,” she said bitterly. “And unless you chose to admit that you have the ability to communicate mind to mind, there was no evidence to present. Vlad was very careful to leave no marks.”

Vlad is more careful than his dim mind should allow. There was an odd quality to the words, but the cat then shook itself all over and stepped from her lap. **His time will come, I can promise you that.**

“You have grown bloodthirsty in your new pelage.”

I have always been bloodthirsty when it comes to protecting those placed in my heart. The cat tilted its head to one side as she yawned. **You need to rest. My true body is to be laid to rest in the tomb tomorrow, and you will want to be awake.**

She tried to keep the smile from her lips, but she knew the curve was there. “Tradition forbids women from attending the burial, Your Majesty, you know that.”

The sneezing chuckle came again. **I do. I also know that you are a force unto yourself, and that you have a terrible habit of flouting authority.**

She laughed softly, startling herself with the sound; it was the first sign of mirth she had allowed herself in a long time. She climbed onto the chaise, drawing the blanket over her. The wool had the soft scent of lavender, and it was clear the blanket had seen frequent use. She laid her head against the pillow, watching the cat as it curled up before the fire.

Vertical pupils regarded her curiously. **You are remarkably accepting of this new form of mine, much less my ability to speak beyond death. I had feared you might become frightened, or that I might drive you uncontrollably mad.**

“Ah, but you forget I spent quite a long time in the rain and cold today. I can easily go to sleep now and wake on the morning, convinced that this conversation was merely a fever dream brought on by exposure.”

And what if I should speak to you tomorrow?

She closed her eyes, feeling her entire body relax. “As you said, I am an ‘insolent bitch,’ Your Majesty. I’m sure I can conjure a suitable explanation, given enough time.”

Her last coherent thought was of soft sneezing filling the room with feline laughter.

Chapter Three

Philip stared at the tomb door as the men surrounding him began to slip away. The backs of his eyes ached, and he felt a sharp pain in the base of his throat. *I told you good-bye any number of times in the past seven days, and I still feel pain. Tradition states that mourning shared is mourning halved, yet the Court seems to be free of sadness, while I am weighted down by loss.*

“You were lost before your time, Father.”

Philip glanced over at his father. Thoman Valtan was an older duplicate of his own image, though there was a complete lack of humor in his expression. Every smile Philip had seen his father reveal had been carefully scripted to the situation, and the man had never uttered a single word in jest. Thoman was serious at all times, and a strict adherent to the traditions of Valtan -- more so than his own father had been. “Lost before his time, yet you refuse to open an investigation.”

Thoman never looked away from the tomb. “You would have me cast suspicion on our own Court?”

“I would have you obtain justice for your father, for our monarch,” Philip said tightly. “I would have the Court know the truth, that King Borean was poisoned in his sleep.”

“Would it make them love him any more or any less?” Thoman turned to his son, his lips tight. “Would the manner of his death change how much he meant to this Kingdom?”

“He *is* loved, and his subjects deserve to know the truth.”

Thoman frowned. “Right now, this Court is in an upheaval. Their beloved monarch is dead, and they are waiting patiently for his son to take the reins of control. They have known me for much of their lives, but only as the Crown Prince. They will be holding their breath, waiting to determine if I have the same qualities as my father. They will not want my first act as King to declare that there is a traitor among them.”

Philip clenched his hands at his side. “So Grandfather will rest in this tomb, before his time, while his murderer walks free.”

“No crime goes unpunished, Philip.” Thoman turned away. “Until that time, the peace of this Court will be upheld, by our entire family. Is that clear?”

Philip gritted his teeth. *Your own father and you refuse to act on this. Are you so afraid the Court will abandon our family?*

“You will answer me.”

“Yes, Father. Your point is transparently clear.” He watched Thoman disappear into the trees, the final member of the funeral party to depart. He sighed, running a hand back through

his hair. *What will you do when the murderer chooses to come after you, Father? Or Riana? Me? Will you continue to sit idly by, simply to preserve the maudlin peace of this Kingdom?*

He turned back to the tomb, his gaze tracing the twining serpent carved into the stone. *I wish you were here for me to ask, Grandfather. Would you seek justice or strive to preserve the illusion that all is well?*

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a figure standing to one side, partially obscured behind a tree. Frowning, he stepped closer, trying to decide what about the figure was out of place. The man was small and dressed in a worn smock and trousers. A misshapen felt hat was jammed tightly over his head, though a few hairs straggled down his neck. Philip frowned. *I know I have seen that shade of gold recently.* The man shifted, bowing his head, and he felt a smile cross his face. *Why am I unsurprised?*

Slipping beside the figure, he leaned casually against the tree. “You know, of course, that tradition forbids women to attend the funeral rites of a deceased monarch,” he said. “That particular disobedience is punishable with a night locked in the tower.”

The figure startled, and frightened eyes met his. Bryane bit her lower lip, glancing around for anyone else. “How?” There were equal parts of concern and frustration in her voice.

“Women will never be successful at imitating men, My Lady.” He pulled her hat off, letting her hair tumble down her back. “At least not after they have reached full maturity.”

Her cheeks colored despite her angry expression. “King Borean was a good friend, and I have just as much right to see him laid to rest as anyone else.”

“Tradition states that you should be in the Throne Room, observing silence and contemplation with the other women.”

“The only contemplation those padded paramours are exhibiting is concern over what shade of feathers to adorn their hair with,” she said scornfully. “And I can promise you that silence is not a trait found in the female population of your Court, regardless of what your precious traditions may say.”

He smiled icily and leaned close to her. “My lady mother herself was to lead the rite this morning.”

The color in her cheeks drained away, and he could see her lips moving in silent protest. Visibly shaking, she bowed her head. “I-I apologize for any offense I may have caused, Your Highness, I...”

He laughed, and the sound eased the tension in his body. *And I thought I would spend the entire day locked in a bleak mood.* “Relax, My Lady.”

“I can only claim that I am distraught and hardly thinking straight. I would never intentionally make such a remark about the Queen...”

He rolled his eyes and placed a finger under her chin to lift her head and quiet her protests. “No, Bryane, you do have the right of it, though I was only teasing you. My mother spent much of last night fussing that she had nothing to match her new silk shoes, and I do not doubt that she has continued her primping this morning.” He paused, considering. “And I have yet to hear a moment’s silence in that Throne Room from any of the female contingent...save for that moment when you entered.”

A nervous smile touched her lips. “Then I am happy I frightened your Majordomo so.”

He chuckled. “As am I.” He let his hand drop and extended his arm. She hesitated for a moment, then accepted, and he turned them both toward the castle. “So, in the brief moments that I have known you, I have learned that you are obsessed with the rain, in possession of an acidic tongue, and have a fondness for masculine clothing. A strange Courtier, in deed.”

“King Taureas has often remarked that an injection of the strange helps to balance out the mundane logic of the Court. I merely try to oblige this Court.”

“Am I then to assume that you are a normal lady in Taureas’s presence?”

“I have never been a normal lady, Your Highness.”

An understatement, I think. “Then I should not expect to see you at the Farewell Ball tonight.”

There was a touch of sadness in her smile. “That would be a fair expectation, Your Highness.”

He sighed theatrically. “That is a shame, then. Vlad has often spoken of your beauty, yet I have only been able to see you portray a drowned rat and, now, a man.” Her fingers tightened on his arm at the mention of Vlad’s name, and he looked down to see her entire face turn white. He frowned, stopping. “My Lady, I am sorry -- I did not mean to bring up ill thoughts.”

“I should apologize, for not being able to better school my reactions.” She sighed and closed her eyes, her entire posture speaking of a doe in the forest, trapped in the sight of an arrow. Her voice was soft. “After five years, I should be able to keep myself under control.”

“I could probably argue that logic,” he admitted.

“I would rather you did not.”

“As you wish.” They resumed walking, and he watched her out of the corner of his eye. *There are more layers to you than one finds on an onion. One moment, you are a tactless wench, exercising contempt for all of those around you, and the next you are a child, frightened by monsters hiding in the shadows. Is there actually a lady buried within? A woman capable of soft words?* He blinked in surprise. *Where did that thought come from?*

“I wanted to thank you, for the use of the side room,” she said into the silence. “I was able to sleep well -- the first night in many.”

“Nightmares?”

“Nightmares are fears of the unknown, cloaked in shadows and mystery. I’m afraid the visions I see at night are real.”

He was quiet for a moment, considering the best way to draw her out. *If I ask you directly, you will ignore me or insult me -- neither of which will give me an answer. I need to know what happened, though.* “Our traditions tumble the entire Court into the Throne Room, making everyone uncomfortable. Instead of being able to rest in the comfort of their own manors, they are crowded together on makeshift beds and forced to endure one another’s presence. The Royal Family itself is added to the mixture, creating an endless Audience.” He lifted an eyebrow, glancing at her. “Why does that tradition exist?”

“The loss of a monarch -- especially a beloved monarch -- often brings pain and confusion. Confusion quickly changes to fear, when isolated, and fear can collapse a Court, even a Kingdom. To prevent such fear, the tradition was forged to gather the Court together, so that fears could be spoken of openly and dealt with without rumor.” There was a curious edge to her recitation, as if she did not quite agree with the logic behind the words.

Then again, she has been here less than a day and overheard dozens of rumors and confusions. “Emotion shared is emotion halved.”

Her voice was sardonic. “I know what you are, badly, attempting to ask me, and I will not create dissension in your Court, Your Highness. My demons are my own, and they will remain my own.” She released his arm and bowed formally, in keeping with her costume. “I bid you good day.”

He watched her walk ahead, tucking her hair back under the hat. Her posture was stiff, resentful. *She must have spoken with you, Grandfather*, he thought sadly. *Why will she not speak to me?*



“Your grandson has inherited your ability to read people,” Bryane said, drawing her knees to her chest.

An admirable quality in a Crown Prince, the cat replied, cleaning its whiskers. **One I fear his father failed to learn.**

“He wanted to ask me about Vlad.”

The cat paused, regarding her with wide eyes. **You want to tell him.**

“I want to know why I want to tell him,” she corrected.

I could offer you any number of theories, but none of them would make you happy, My Lady. It finished its ablutions and tucked its front feet beneath its chest. A soft gong sounded from outside in the Throne Room, followed by the soft rush of excited conversation and the thunder of hundreds of moving bodies. **Why are you sitting here, instead of attending the Ball?**

She grinned. “I could offer you any number of answers, but none of them would make you happy.”

The cat spat out a feline curse. **You could try the patience of a stone wall, Bryane.**

“We both know I am an unwelcome addition to this Court. Your people create a perimeter around me when I sit at meals, and they cross to the far side of the corridor when we walk past each other. There is no reason for me to make them uncomfortable by attending a Ball which is meant to be a celebration of your life.”

You think you are undeserving of celebrating my life? You, who comes closest to knowing every aspect of my life?

She arched her eyebrows, pursing her lips. “There is something you are keeping behind your whiskers.”

The cat closed its eyes, bowing its head forward, as if in sleep. **You have been mourning for five years, Bryane. I think you have earned the right to a small celebration -- for yourself, if not for me.**

You know I believe none of this for even a moment. There was no reply, and she sighed mentally. *Being a cat has made you even more inscrutable than you were as a man.* “I traveled light, Your Majesty, and I expected to only stay a few days, at the most, so I’m afraid I brought nothing suitable for a Ball.”

You need only ask. The cat sat up and jumped down from a chair in one fluid motion. It walked over to the wall behind the table and looked up at her expectantly. **The third candle in the sconce -- press the base.**

Frowning, Bryane got to her feet and reached up to the warm silver. At the base was a tiny indentation that sank beneath her probing fingertip. The wall swung open on silent hinges, revealing a narrow corridor. She smiled despite herself. “No wonder you used to appear and disappear from the Throne Room so quickly. I always thought you had learned a magic you refused to share.”

All monarchs have a bit of magic in themselves, Child. An illusion of mystery keeps the Court happy. The cat snapped its tail. **Besides, even beloved Kings find a need to escape from insolent Courtiers now and again.**

“This corridor is quite dark; I would hate to tread on a certain tail,” she remarked dryly. A sneeze was her only reply.

The cat led her down several turns, taking her away from the “public” rooms of the Palace and towards the private quarters of the Royal Family. There was a thin layer of dust on the floors and drifting in the light from the occasional sconce, promising that the passageway was used infrequently. *Thankfully. The last thing I need is to cause further scandal by being discovered here, so close to the private chambers of the new King and Queen.*

Actually, we are closer to Philip’s suite than theirs, the cat said idly.

I will not dignify that remark with a response.

The cat stopped at another section of wall, this one showing heavier signs of disuse.

There is a lever, near the ceiling.

“Were none of the previous Rulers short?” she asked in desperation when it took her two jumps to throw the lever.

The room inside was lit with just a single candle on a table just inside the opened wall. Armoires dominated the far wall, and there were chests and shelves everywhere. There was an air of time about the room, yet none of the shoes or ribbons displayed showed any sign of wear. She opened an armoire to reveal dozens of gowns in varying shades, each matching a pair of slippers on the shelf beside it. “Who do these belong to?”

No one, actually. I had these clothes commissioned when Riana became pregnant with her second child. The cat sat down in the middle of the room. **We all believed she would have a daughter, a feminine balance to Philip. Unfortunately, the second child was lost not long after this work was completed. Riana asked that I hide the clothes away; she wanted no reminders of the girl she would not see.**

Bryane frowned, taking a gown from the closet. “Is it common to order adult gowns for an infant?”

Of course. It can take many weeks for proper attire to be completed by the seamstresses, and one can hardly expect a Princess to wait. A small number of gowns are made for every expected age.

“You think these will fit me?”

Try the armoire to your right.

She closed the first closet and opened the next, reaching in to remove a beautiful gown of black satin. Tiny crystals were sewn into the bodice and gathered skirt, providing the illusion of stars in a night sky, and the sleeves consisted of nothing more than trailing ribbons. *This is the most beautiful dress I have ever seen.* She trailed her fingers through the ribbons. *Beautiful, yet subtle. It has none of the flash or ridiculous ornamentation of some of the other women’s gowns.*

She glanced over her shoulder, smiling wryly. “This is bribery, you know.”

The cat purred. **Go to the Ball, Bryane. If you insist on refusing to go for yourself -- foolish as that notion is -- then go for me.** She swore the cat smiled. **Felines are not permitted at Court functions, after all.**

She sighed. “Why do I think I’m going to regret this?”

The cat simply yawned and tucked itself back into a sleeping position.

I can still turn around and go back to my room, Bryane told herself, her hand shaking where it rested on the handle of the door. No one would even notice if I left now. They have become quite adept at ignoring my presence. She pressed her other hand to her stomach, the satin cool beneath her fingers, and her lips curled into a soft smile. They will not be able to ignore me in this gown, though. It was a thought that warmed a small part of her. I had forgotten how much I despise being ignored. When did that happen?

Pulling the handle, she was greeted with a riot of noise and color. The Ballroom was filled with music from a quintet of musicians on a raised dais in the corner, and the Courtiers were adorned in every color imaginable. The walls had been draped in black silk, and there was a carving of the Valtan herald in ice on a table in the center of the room, but those were the only reminders of loss. Faces that had been drawn and haggard only a candlemark before were now open and cheerful; talk flowed easily in inane chatter. Couples circled the center table in a spirited waltz, and the doors to the balcony stood open so that people could escape the warmth of the room and look over the Royal Gardens.

I was a child the last time I attended a fete such as this, she thought sadly. I've forgotten how much I love the splendor.

She stepped into the room, her hands clasped in front of her. A few faces turned in her direction, and she could see surprise flash across each. As she moved across the room, more eyes turned towards her, and she lifted her chin to disguise her unease. There seemed to be little of the scandal and disgust in their expressions, as there had been before. *But the pleasant surprise and wonder is almost as frightening, if not more so.*

“Bryane?” The voice was hesitant, with a touch of reluctance -- as if the word had been startled from the speaker’s lips. Bryane turned to see her sister, Selene, standing behind her and blinking in disbelief.

“Good evening, Selene,” Bryane said softly, trying without success to smile.

“You...you look beautiful.” Selene was more successful with her smile. “You look like Mother.”

“You will have to tell me if that is a good or bad thing, I’m afraid. My only memories of Mother concerned harried expressions, disheveled hair, and shadows beneath the eyes.”

Selene laughed. “I see that five years serving as an Envoy has done nothing to cure your horrible sense of humor.”

Bryane smiled, swallowing sudden tears. *This is the first time any of you has spoken to me in five years. Why does my tongue have to destroy such a perfect moment?* “Nerves have the power to rob even the most sensible person of decorum.”

Sadness tempered Selene’s expression, and she looked down at the goblet in her hand. “If it helps, you show no outward sign of fright.”

“Thank you, Selene,” Bryane whispered, hoping her sister would understand the true meaning behind the words.

Selene nodded and extended her hand. “Come. I have some terribly delightful children that I would like you to meet.”

Bryane let her sister tug her hand and pull her through the crowds. In the back of her mind, a distant voice spoke with a smugness only a cat could possess. **With such small pebbles are bridges mended.**

Chapter Four

“If those musicians play another pavane, I will order their execution,” Philip muttered behind his wine goblet.

“The pavane is one of the simplest dances for the Court to participate in,” Nikoli replied with a smile.

“You mean, it is the easiest way for multiple women to dance with the Prince, so that no one woman is shown favor.”

Nikoli saluted him with his own goblet. “That, as well.”

Philip sighed. “We used to be able to escape these doldrums, Old Friend.”

“And now your impending crown confines us here through every insufferable moment. Remind me to thank you, at some point.”

“I have had enough insolence today, Nikoli.”

Nikoli chuckled. “You are getting soft, Your Highness. I remember a time when you would accept no glib remarks from your female companionship.”

“There is a difference between ‘companionship’ and genuine conversation.” He nodded politely at a blushing young girl who was staring at him as a starving cat might a dead fish. *There is also a difference between Bryane and every other woman I have ever encountered.*

“She is a dangerous creature for you to associate with,” Nikoli said, his tone serious. “There were others who noticed her absence with the women this morning, and there are a number of the Court who are upset at her persistent absence from meals and this Ball.”

“They expect her to attend when they go out of their way to shun her?”

Nikoli smiled ironically. “It is a tradition.”

“A filthy word, if ever I heard one.”

“Black moods do not go over well at celebrations, Your Highness.” Nikoli paused, and Philip glanced up to see his friend staring at the far end of the room. “I think I’ve had too much wine.”

“Why?”

Nikoli pointed towards the corner of the room where the young children were sitting together. “Is that Bryane?”

“No, Bryane prefers man’s garb.” Philip felt himself smiling, though. Standing beside Selene Merison was a young woman dressed in a simple black gown that put the more ostentatious creations of fabric in the room to shame. Her hair had been woven into a single braid, and the crystals of her dress reflected in her eyes. There was a quiet delight in her expression, for all the reserve her posture showed, and she wore a timid smile. *Yet another layer, Bryane?*

The musicians on the dais took up their instruments again, and Philip recognized the first strains of the piece. Groaning, he grabbed Nikoli’s arm and leaned close to him. “I need an escape.”

Nikoli sighed, and there was reproach in his green eyes. “I enjoy the pavane as much as you do, Your Highness.”

“One dance and you can drag me back, I promise.” Philip grinned at his friend and then ducked into the crowds before a woman could snatch his hand -- or Nikoli could protest. He took up a position just behind Bryane, waiting as she hugged Selene and bid her a good night. There was a genuinely happy smile on her lips as she watched her sister escort her children back to the Throne Room for the night, and it transformed her face completely. *Is that what the youngest daughter of Cauld is meant to look like? How did I never see her before, when her life was unmarred by tragedy?*

He waited until she had turned back to watch the pavane's dancers, then stepped beside her. "Whatever are you doing in that silly dress?" he asked with mock concern, and she turned around, startled. He frowned, looking her over, before raising an eyebrow. "I think I preferred the smock and trousers; this gown makes you appear too much of a lady."

"I could make several comments that would prove I am not, if you would like." Her tone matched his own mockery, and his grin widened.

He took her hand and kissed the back. "All jest aside, you look beautiful tonight, My Lady."

"Thank you." A soft flush colored her cheeks.

He touched her cheek lightly. "It appears to be warm in here, I think. May I escort you to the balcony?"

She appeared to consider the question for a moment, and he could sense the inner battle she was waging. "I suppose it would be a horrible embarrassment for me to refuse, and I've been told that humiliated Princes tend to seek revenge, so I guess I must agree."

He shook his head, extending his arm. "Tell me, is there a time of day when your wit reaches a more modest level?"

"Perhaps when I'm asleep, though I have no way to verify that possibility."

"I could likely find someone willing to test the theory." He was rewarded by a full blush, and he grinned. *Well, whatever else you may be, My Lady, you are still susceptible to male charm. I did have my doubts.*

The balcony was sparsely populated, with most people standing just outside the doors. He led her over to the stone railing, allowing the noise of the Ballroom to settle into a soft echo. A fountain directly below them added a splashing counterpoint to the music inside. "It seems your favored rains have stopped, for at least the moment," he said at last, lifting an eyebrow in inquiry.

"You have a penchant for metaphors." She smiled softly, toying with a jasmine vine growing over the railing. "I have no idea what prompted Selene to speak to me, and I have no desire to challenge it by asking. If you asked if I think this is an omen of things to come, I would still hesitate to agree, but..." She trailed off, then looked up at him. "Hope is a fragile thing, Your Highness, but it does exist."

He touched her hand gently. "Sincerity adds a softness to your beauty, My Lady. You do yourself no favors by hiding it in sarcasm and deflection."

"I am not susceptible to flattery, Your Highness."

"Your blush says otherwise." She turned away, and he smiled. *It takes careful flattery to gain your attention, though. Simple peons to your eyes or skin would be a waste of time; honest observation, though, leaves you defenseless. I wonder if any of King Taureas's Courtiers have noticed.*

"Why are you here?" Her voice was soft. She glanced back at him, curiosity shining in her eyes. "There are dozens of women inside, many of them young and beautiful, and all of them waiting for a chance to dote on you and swoon at your feet."

"Tell me, how receptive would you be to a man who fell to his knees before you and promised to worship your every breath?"

"Am I meant to take him seriously or just enjoy a much needed laugh?"

He chuckled. "Do you think that I am any different, My Lady?"

She tilted her head, regarding him carefully. “Oh, I think you are quite different from me, Your Highness. I wear man’s garb easily, and I doubt that you would be able to move in a gown such as this.”

He sighed, leaning back against the rail. “Is there nothing that can penetrate that sardonic shield of yours?”

“I fear not.”

You could try the patience of the gods, Bryane, he thought fondly, watching the mischievous glint that had appeared in her eyes. “A man would have to be a fool to attempt to lay a hand on your heart, I believe.”

She paused dramatically. “I would have to agree with that statement.”

He smiled, resting a hand on her cheek. “Then I assume you would label me a fool?”

She blinked in surprise, and her words were stammered, lacking her previous control. “I would never call you a fool, Your Highness.”

Before she could finish with a biting remark, he leaned forward and kissed her. She stiffened in surprise, and then she returned the kiss, her lips soft beneath his. He drew her close, and she rested her hands on his chest. He drew back slightly, searching her eyes. “I think, My Lady,” he whispered, his lips brushing hers with each word, “that you would be very correct to label me a fool.” He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply.



“You are a damn bloody fool!” Nikoli grabbed Philip’s arm as the Prince left the Ballroom, drawing him into a small alcove. “Have you lost all sense?”

Philip blinked in surprise. “What are you so panicked about?”

Nikoli glanced out into the hallway and dropped his voice lower. “I saw you.”

“I think your earlier statement was accurate -- you have had too much wine.” Philip patted his friend’s shoulder and moved to leave the alcove.

“She is an exile of this Court!” Nikoli scowled, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

Ah, yes, the more unsavory duty of a bodyguard, to intercept every treacherous ploy of the Prince. “She is not an exile of the Court, Nikoli. An exile of her family, perhaps, but a true member of this Court.”

“She is from the Third Tier.”

If he mentions the word ‘tradition’ I will publicly trounce him in our next sparring match. “Technically, one could argue that she is not of any Tier. Her father has disowned her, as you might recall. An Envoy is equal to, if not superior to the First Tier Nobility.”

“What were you doing?” Nikoli demanded.

“You would do well to ease off the wine, Old Friend, for I believe it was quite obvious as to what I was doing.” *Had we not been on the balcony, mere steps from the Court, I would have been able to do quite more.* The thought warmed him, and a not unpleasant shiver traced his spine.

Nikoli’s jaw clenched. “Why?”

Philip smiled, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall. “That I have no answer for, not one that would please you, at any rate. If it eases your concern, there was no plan to kiss her.” *I will not speak for future plans, however.*

"I warned you once that she was a dangerous companion," Nikoli said, sighing. "I repeat that warning now. You are treading on uncertain ground, and the Coronation is still four days away."

"I think your fears are premature, Nikoli," he replied. "I merely kissed a beautiful woman -- a woman capable of intellect and reason. That is a rare find, My Friend."

"You kissed her twice, in full view of the Court."

Philip chuckled. "Give me some credit -- I was in the shadows, and we were both dressed in dark clothing." He paused, reflecting on the feel of Bryane's soft skin beneath his fingers. "And a pause to allow a lady to regain her breath does not divide a single kiss into two; it is a courtesy granted when you take her by surprise."

Nikoli shook his head, the crease on his forehead deepening. Reluctant acceptance tinged his voice. "When the time comes, do not accuse me of failing to caution you."



Bryane gripped the railing, grateful for the cool stone against her flushed skin. *What was I thinking? He is the new Crown Prince, and I am little more than an abandoned Third Tier Noble. How many violations of the Court did that kiss encompass?*

She traced a finger along her cheek, shivering. "Have I lost my mind?" she whispered.

"You must have," a voice snarled behind her, and she had only a moment's warning before heavy hands gripped her shoulders and spun her around. Vlad glared down at her, his fingers bruising her flesh. He leaned close to her, his breath heavy with wine. "I did not bring you back here for you to make a fool of me."

"You did not bring me back, at all." She glanced around, but the balcony was empty.

He chuckled, and the sound chilled her inside. "Are you so certain of that?"

Fear closed a tight grip around her chest, and she shuddered. *The message that was sent from the Court, that I assumed was sent by Prince Thoman. Was that from Vlad? A ploy to get me to return? The thought engendered a stronger pain. Would my own family refuse to tell me of King Borean's death?*

She tried to pull free, but his hands held her still. "I did not come here for you, Vlad. I came to pay my respects to my monarch."

He kissed her roughly, forcing his tongue between her teeth. "Is this how you pay your respects? By tasting of his grandchild?"

She spit in his face, glaring at him. "You will not insult the Valtan line, Lord Tahon."

His grip tightened, and she whimpered involuntarily. "You will not insult me by dallying with a pompous fool. You were brought here for a reason." He straightened and abruptly released her. "A reason I clearly need to hasten." His smile would not have been out of place on a rabid beast, and his dark chuckle promised a night of unease.

What did he mean? she asked herself, shaking. Gathering her skirts, she hurried back to her room. *Please, Your Majesty, tell me you have an answer to this question.*

Chapter Five

"Bryane?" The name was accompanied by a soft knock on the door, and she looked up, the cat cradled in her lap. The door edged open, and a face framed with dark curls peered around it.

"Good morning, Lorelei," Bryane said, smiling. "Come in."

Lorelei moved slowly, as if frightened of the younger sister sitting pleasantly on the floor. She looked down at the cat, and her timid smile broadened. “You seem to have made a friend.”

“You could say that,” Bryane replied softly, scratching the cat beneath the chin. She gestured Lorelei to a chair. “How are you?”

“Well, I suppose.” Lorelei sat on the very edge of the chair. There were shadows beneath her eyes, and her curls appeared wilted. She smiled sadly. “Wilhem’s leg has been causing him pain, and I am at a loss to help him.”

Bryane blinked. *What magic is at work in this Court? Five years without a single word, and now two of three sisters has approached me?* “What happened to him?”

“He is as any other man, a triumphant fool,” Lorelei said with a laugh. If she noticed her sister’s blush at the final word, she ignored it. “Our new kitten discovered the elm tree at the back of the manor, and it, of course, became stuck. I told him to leave the creature be, that it would learn to come down on its own, but Mari was crying so hard, that he insisted on rescuing the beast.” She shook her head. “He is lucky he did not fall from a higher branch.”

“Oh, Lorelei, I am sorry.” Bryane reached out and squeezed her sister’s hand.

“I think his pride was damaged more than his leg when little Grimalkin jumped down, neat as you please, and began to lick his face.”

Bryane laughed, and her sister’s echoed a moment behind. *I have missed you, Lorelei.*

Would there be harm in confessing your feelings? The cat purred softly.

You know what took place upon the balcony last evening; do you honestly wish me to answer that question? Bryane set the cat aside and took both of her sister’s hands. “Have you spoken with Aislin?”

“She is carrying her first child, Bryane; she has no time to indulge my silly fears.” A glimmer of hesitant tears showed in the corners of her eyes.

“Fear for a loved one is never silly,” Bryane said firmly. “Aislin has had an aptitude for healing since she was born, or so Selene once told me. Pregnant or not, she would be more pained if you chose not to ask for her help.” Lorelei looked doubtful, so Bryane got to her feet, tugging her sister up, as well. “Come on, then.”

“Thank you, Bryane,” Lorelei whispered.

Bryane smiled softly. “I would save my thanks, I think, because I have no intention of letting you forget that your baby sister was braver than you.”

Lorelei laughed, and Bryane pretended not to see the tear she hastily wiped away.



“Something is wrong. Something feels wrong.” Bryane paused to wait for the cat to catch up with her as it wove in and out of the garden plantings. “I feel like I should be looking over my shoulder.”

I feel it, too. My Court has been behaving strangely today, particularly my son. He has held two private Audiences this morning, neither of which makes any sense. The cat jumped up onto the edge of a fountain, peering down at the fish swimming in lazy circles. During mourning, all Court politics are supposed to cease, yet he spoke with Vlad and then your father.

“Unless that plan of Vlad’s involves me,” she pointed out. “That is the only connection I can find between the two.” *Unhappily, I cannot think of what the reason might be. Banishment from the Court?*

The cat paused, one paw extended to tag a fish. **It is a possibility, I fear. My son is more traditional than I, and your presence here could have upset your father enough to call for a permanent exile.**

“Which would leave me without a name, without a Kingdom, and without any prospects whatsoever.” She smiled sadly. “I can only serve as Envoy while I am a loyal member of the Valtan Court.” *It makes a twisted kind of sense, though. Vlad is obviously furious that his original plans for me failed, so he has decided to seek a different kind of revenge -- one that works within the system. It would leave him free of punishment.*

Which is why I am concerned. Vlad Tahon has never worked within the laws; there is more joy to him in escaping from his crimes unpunished. I do not mean to trivialize a potential exile, but what would Vlad gain from such a move?

Good question, unless he believes I would be desperate enough to throw myself on his mercy. “Do you believe my father is truly that angry?”

The cat flicked an ear back in the direction of the Palace. **Every father is different, Bryane. Some have the consistency of stone, and some bend as easily as a blade of grass. The only common certainty between all of them is that they love their children.** It washed behind one ear. **I am not an authority, but if I had to guess, I believe your father’s anger is directed more at himself, by now. He wanted only the best for you, and not only was he unable to grant it, but he lost you in the process.**

“I wish he had listened to me.” She sighed, sinking down beside the cat and trailing her fingers over the water. “I tried so many times to explain.”

The Merison stubbornness is renowned.

Do not tempt me to tip you into the fountain. “Do you think my father is angry enough that he would agree to my exile?”

“I would say a wronged father would be angry enough to order an exile himself,” Vlad replied, stepping around a topiary. There was an odd cast to his eyes, and she felt her insides turn cold. His smile promised she would regret the impending confrontation.

“Then your father has chosen to be reasonable and exile you for wronging the Tahon name?” she asked tightly. She glanced around quickly, trying to recall the layout of the gardens. There were a number of paths she could use for escape, but there were also many paths that terminated in pockets that were often used for trysts among the Courtiers.

“You will mind your tongue around me, My Lady. I am a member of the First Tier, and I will not hesitate to report your insolent behavior.”

“I would be more than happy to report it myself.” She got to her feet, picking up the cat, which had begun to growl deep in its throat. “If you will excuse me.”

He stepped in front of her, blocking the closest pathway. “I will not. You will listen to what I have to say.”

“There is nothing you have to say that I would find any interest in.” She debated turning her back to him and decided against it, sliding around the edge of the fountain. The cat’s claws gently pricked her arms, its paws kneading her skin.

He snatched at her arm, but she stepped aside in time to avoid him. “You owe me restitution already, My Lady; I would advise against increasing the payment.” He licked his lips, and she felt a wave of nausea sweep over her.

“I owe you a castration, preferably without ether.”

He grinned, and she recognized the expression on his face. She had seen it only once before, and it sent ice through her veins. "I have been speaking at length with your father about our bargain."

"I will tell my father immediately to grant you my dowry; I have no need for it now." She glanced down the path beside her, but the way was blocked with a large rose bush. *Why did your ancestors have to be obsessed with mazes?*

Mazes were in fashion some time...Bryane, look out!

The warning came too late as Vlad shoved her. The backs of her knees collided with a stone bench, and she sat down hard, tumbling the cat from her arms. Before either could react, Vlad had straddled her, his hands pinning her arms behind her back. "I have no use for your pittance dowry, My Lady. It is your maidenhead I have more interest in." He panted slightly, and she blanched. "That is a mark of property that you will never be able to escape."

She felt him pressing against her, and bile rose in her throat. "I would sooner die."

"That could also be arranged," he hissed into her ear before biting down on the lobe.

Bryane had never heard such a demonic sound as the growl that surfaced from the cat, and she watched in shocked horror as it launched itself at Vlad, claws flashing for vulnerable flesh. The attack was enough to startle Vlad so that she could push him from her, her arms reaching out to encircle the cat. Its ears were flat against its head, and teeth that seemed much too long for an ordinary stray flashed in its snarl.

Vlad recovered quickly, wiping a streak of blood from his cheek. "A cat?" He laughed, rolling the sleeves of his tunic. "This is your champion? A common housecat?" He smirked down at her. "This is the best you can manage?"

"Ah, My Lady Merison," a new voice replied. The words were slightly rushed, despite an obvious attempt at nonchalance. They both turned to see Philip approaching, a heavy cloak over one arm. He smiled cheerfully, though his eyes were dark with an emotion she was unable to read. "I have been looking everywhere for you."

"Your Highness?" she asked, stroking the spiked hair of the cat. Its eyes never wavered from Vlad, though the growl softened in volume.

He took her hand, assisting her to her feet. "Forgotten already, have you? Did you not promise to accompany me on my ride this afternoon, to view those ruins I mentioned?"

He witnessed the assault, Child, and he's attempting to rescue you.

"Yes, of course." She forced a smile she hoped looked genuine. "I had forgotten, Your Highness."

"I thought as much when I spoke to your dear sister." He offered her the cloak, then turned a warm smile on Vlad -- a smile that did not reach his eyes. "Thank you, Vlad, for finding this lady for me."

Vlad looked from one to the other, taken aback for the first time in her memory. "You will be spending the afternoon with this lady, Your Highness?"

"I did just say so, I believe."

"Your father is aware of this outing?"

Philip's expression chilled slightly. "You are aware, Lord Tahon, that Bryane Merison is the Envoy for this Court to King Taureas?"

Vlad was quiet for several moments longer than Bryane felt safe. Then he pasted his own false smile and bowed respectfully. "Of course, Your Highness. I bid you both a safe ride." His gaze pierced Bryane's. "I will see you this evening, My Lady."

He slipped down the path to his left, and Bryane collapsed onto the bench. She put her hands over her eyes, her entire body shaking uncontrollably. *Gods help me, I have the unwanted attention of a madman.*

The cat bumped its head under her chin, purring raggedly. **Peace, peace, Little One. You are safe.**

“I thank you, Your Highness,” she said, looking up between her fingers, “but...”

“No,” he said firmly, holding out his hand for hers. “You will be accompanying me for an afternoon ride, and there will be no further protests. That is an order.”

She blinked in surprise and was annoyed to hear a pleased chuckle in the back of her mind. As if to completely settle the matter, the cat jumped down from her lap and dashed into the shelter of a privet hedge.



Philip reined his horse in, glancing around the clearing. The sky was threatening rain, but there were plenty of trees to provide shelter. A small stream ran through the clearing, tumbling over the remains of an old bridge. It was quiet, and the flow of water over the rocks added a tranquility to the scene. He glanced over at Bryane. “I think this place should do nicely.”

She nodded idly, watching him carefully, as she had been doing the entire ride. He could read doubt in her expression, and her entire body was tensed for flight. *Given any provocation, you would gallop from here before I could blink. Not that I am surprised, all things considered.* “These are the ruins you mentioned?”

He looked back at the stream. “Why not?” Some of the doubt in her expression was replaced by suspicion. He swung down from his horse, tying the reins to a nearby branch. “My Lady?” He stepped beside her horse, offering his hand.

“Do I have a choice in this matter?” she asked bitterly.

“Of course. I would recommend dismounting so that you may find a more comfortable seat, but it is up to you if you wish to remain astride.”

She was quiet, looking at his hand as if searching for a hidden viper. “Why do I have a suspicion that I will not like how things proceed in either case?” All the same, she let him lift her down from the saddle. Stepping out of his embrace, she walked over to the stream and sank beside it, settling her skirts around her.

He dropped onto an exposed stone several arm lengths away. “You are very observant, My Lady -- a quality I imagine is necessary for an Envoy.”

“That would be one way of describing it,” she admitted, turning to watch the water spilling over the rocks.

He folded his hands in his lap, serious again. He looked at her sharply, and she met his gaze. “I saw what happened in the gardens, My Lady. Would you care to explain?”

“Why?”

“At the very least, so I have a just reason to banish Vlad from my Court.” He heard the anger in his voice, and he softened his tone. “At the most, because I am concerned for your safety, and I find it is much easier to play the dashing hero when I have all of the necessary information.”

“You cannot banish Vlad any more than your grandfather could, for much the same reasons.” She met his gaze, and he flinched at the pain he could read there. “Though I do appreciate your timely arrival and ability to lie without rehearsal.”

“No games this time, My Lady. What happened between you and Vlad five years ago?” She turned away, unresponsive.

Why do you insist on protecting him? Or is the memory that painful? He sighed and moved to sit beside her, taking her hand. She looked at him in surprise, and he took the advantage to lean forward to kiss her briefly.

“You said no games,” she replied accusatorily.

He grinned. “Then I suggest you start speaking, before I employ further games.”

She colored prettily, though her expression sobered almost immediately. She drew her hand from his, smoothing a fold in her skirt. “I suppose then, that I have no choice.” She sighed. “I was fourteen when my father introduced me to Vlad at supper one evening. I thought it was strange, considering the Tahons are a First Tier family, but I was young -- I assumed my father had an explanation.” She continued to toy with the fabric of her skirt, her eyes looking everywhere but at him.

Fine, if the telling is easier this way, I see no reason to interrupt. He sat back, watching her carefully.

“Vlad was very polite all evening, hovering at my elbow to fetch anything I needed. It charmed my family, but it made me feel uneasy. No boy had ever trailed after me in such a way, much less a man, and it seemed unnatural for him to behave that way. At the end of the evening, he kissed my hand and bid me a pleasant night. That was the last I saw of him for several weeks.

“It was accidental that I ran into him again at the Palace, as I was leaving a meeting with your grandfather. He reintroduced himself, and he invited me to accompany him out to view a new horse he had acquired. It was a harmless offer, so I agreed.” She laughed bitterly. “By then, I had spoken with enough servants to know some of his reputation. The violence was so at odds with the man who had doted on me at dinner, though, that I refused to believe they were true, as told. In any matter, I would be accompanying him to the stables, not a bedchamber; I determined that I would be safe.”

Pity you were too innocent to understand that a man does not require such niceties as a feather mattress. Some of his thoughts from the previous evening surfaced in his mind, and he winced in chagrin.

“There was no horse,” she said lightly. “It was an empty stall, and Vlad pressed me into the corner. He kissed me, hard, and when I tried to scream, he slapped me with the back of his hand. He promised that I needed much more than he was capable of at that moment, and then he smiled and walked away. I was horrified, even more so when he called back that I should be prepared for his next visit, when he would complete the ‘bargain’ he needed to strike.

“I tried to tell Lorelei, Aislin, but they were too busy to listen. Aislin was preparing to move into her new manor, and Lorelei was planning her wedding. I went to my father, but he just laughed and assured me that it was okay for an unwed man and woman to kiss.” She shook her head. “He seemed to ignore my protests that it had been forced.”

“Or assumed you were misreading the situation due to your naiveté.”

She looked up at him, surprised, and then she nodded slightly. “I never considered that possibility.” She sighed, and her expression saddened. “Perhaps I owe my father an apology.”

“That still remains to be seen. Please, continue.”

“I avoided the Court when possible, and I feigned illness to escape invitations to Balls or dinners. My father began to receive complaints, and he lectured me about my duties to our family. When I tried, again, to tell him of the assault, he began accepting invitations in my stead. It is no surprise Vlad’s was the first.

“He claimed he wished to walk with me one afternoon, to show me some new pastureland his family had acquired. I know now that it was the land Father had hoped I would inherit upon wedding Vlad. It explains why my father ordered me to accept, even riding with me out to meet Vlad.” She shuddered. “It is beautiful land, but I will never set foot on it again.”

She drew her knees to her chest, hugging them with her arms. It was first time he had seen her adopt a defensive position, and it chilled his spine. *Is this what the night sees of you? A child huddled in the corner, praying that the monsters will pass you by?* He had an urge to put an arm around her, but he resisted.

“The ‘walk’ was simply that, to begin with, and I wondered at the change in him. He was, again, that charming man, courteously lifting me over fallen logs or handing me across streams. I actually began to suspect the previous encounter may have been brought on by heavy drink -- a momentary aberration. I have no doubt other women have fallen prey to similar thought patterns, and learned to regret them, as have I.”

More than I think even I know.

She bowed her head, closing her eyes, and her voice began to waver. “There were three of them, waiting for us. Not members of the Court, but men who worked on the Tahon land, and every one of them built along the lines of Vlad. They grabbed me, and they held me down, mocking me. I tried to scream, and they forced a cloth into my mouth. One each held an arm and a leg, and the third...the third opened my dress.” She was shaking violently, and he caught sight of a tear on her cheek.

“Stop, Bryane, there is no need to continue,” he said quickly, reaching out to touch her, though he avoided actual physical contact.

“I have to finish,” she whispered, and she looked up at him with haunted eyes. “I have yet to tell anyone of this, save one, and if I stop speaking now, I will never be able to rest tonight. The memory plays through my head, and only at its completion does it leave me in peace.”

He nodded reluctantly. *Save one...is this why you helped her, Grandfather?*

“Vlad’s hands were everywhere. All of them mocked me, hissed stories of what each would want to do to me. I still hear the taunts in the middle of the night. I managed to wrest one leg free, and I kicked Vlad as hard as I could -- a minor triumph.” She closed her eyes again. “When he could stand again, he had a knife in his hand. He...told me that I would receive a mark for every injury I caused him, lest I think of attempting to harm him again.

“For all that he appears to be a brute, he is clever. The cut was made where few would ever look, and it was small. As Vlad told me, it could easily be explained away by childhood accident.” She lifted her hair from her neck, bending her ear forward to reveal a pale scar: a notched V. “While he pressed the knife into my skin, he promised that I would wear many such marks until he could claim full ownership of me.”

“Did he rape you?” Philip asked tightly.

She shook her head. “The final cut was made just as a hound bayed nearby -- the lead of your grandfather’s hunting pack. All of them ran before it reached me, and I was able to gather myself together before your grandfather arrived. If he had been any longer...”

It took her a moment to gather herself before she continued. “Vlad had threatened worse than that humiliation if I told anyone of the encounter, and I had no reason to doubt him. I was terrified of everyone around me. I would bully Lorelei into walking with me so that I could never be found alone. I visited your grandfather whenever I could, and I allowed him to assign me an escort. I was even desperate enough to try to catch the attention of another Noble, in

hopes that an open courtship would divert Vlad's attention elsewhere. I had just begun to speak with Harig Pelner, who was from my own Third Tier, and then Vlad approached me at the height of Evening Court and asked me to be his wife. A formal proposal, timed for the height of the Evening, with an introduction by the Majordomo. He spoke as if we had planned the scene beforehand."

"Which explains the violence with which you refused," Philip remarked.

"I told my father everything that night, but he would hear none of it. He was humiliated by my screams at Court, and he was furious that I was refusing a union he believed I had accepted. I showed him the mark, but he said he was uncertain whether he had seen it before or not. I begged him to reconsider accepting the proposal on my behalf, and he called me an ungrateful child. He pleaded with me, at the last, claiming that he only wanted what was best for me, and I was turning my back on him. My sisters told me to behave, to stop my frightened lies. Everyone knew Vlad was an upstanding gentleman; he was incapable of doing any wrong to a lady.

"Out of desperation, I begged your grandfather to help me escape."

"And you became an Envoy for King Taureas's Court."

"Father was furious. He ordered the wedding prepared for the day that I planned to leave, early morning. He secured a priest, and he told me I would sign the marriage contract. If I refused, I would be stricken from the family registers and cast into exile." She wiped her tears away and smiled sadly. "You know the rest."

"Why were no charges leveled against Vlad?"

"What evidence was there? Spoken words can be made up by a victim, and my own father was uncertain as to whether or not I had earned the scar in childhood. Even the first slap he dealt me left no marks, and the men who held me down managed to leave no bruising. The only women who could confirm my story were servants, and their own reputations were...unreliable. To accuse Vlad without proof would have upset the Court, and the very real possibility was that my family would be destroyed by a trial, if not outright accused of attempting to stage a coup." She pulled her hair back over her shoulder, hiding the scar. "This was my only choice."

And Vlad has bided his time for five years, waiting for a reason for you to return. One more criminal who has been unpunished for his actions. He spoke softly, clasping his hands around one knee. "I know it will not help, but you are not the only one who has been denied justice to preserve the stability of this Court."

She glanced at him, nodding slightly. "Speaking of it has helped. I have spent so much time hiding, forgetting that a wound needs to be exposed to heal. Thank you for bullying me."

"I wish you had told me sooner, when I asked before. At the very least, I could have set you a guard, a personal escort to ensure your safety."

"I have a small escort, Your Highness," she replied, and her lips curved in a fond smile. "Anything more would cause rumors in the Court."

He chuckled. "I would protest, but I witnessed the cat's attack. You have a very loyal friend there."

"You are more accurate than you know."

"I will promise this, My Lady: I will do what I can to watch you myself, and I will do my best to keep Vlad from finding you alone again."

"I think the Court would find that strange."

He lifted an eyebrow. “Do you? I think they would find it stranger if I did not watch a beautiful woman.”

She blushed. “Given your reputation, I’m afraid I have to agree.”

He groaned and pretended to collapse, his hands over his heart. “A mortal wound!” He opened one eye to peer at her. “What, exactly, have you heard regarding my reputation?”

Her smile turned mischievous. “You are a shameless charmer, capable of causing the oldest dame and youngest child to blush. You do not lack for someone to warm your bed, and it is considered amazing that no by-blows have been discovered. You are disgustingly romantic, and you will exploit any setting to your advantage.”

He sat up. “Well, my reputation sounds better than I had imagined it would.”

“You are actually proud of that?” He was uncertain whether the surprise was genuine or feigned.

He grinned. “Why should I be ashamed? You have, essentially, said that I am flattering to all, showing no prejudice.” He got to his feet, offering her his hand. “I am a well-versed lover who must please women, else my bed would be quite cold.” He bent his face close to hers and lowered his voice. “And I am always aware of what things will leave a woman breathless.”

“You should not do this,” she said weakly.

“I know.” He kissed her, weaving his hands through her hair to cradle her face to his.

But I do many things I should not. I have yet to regret a single one. Her lips parted beneath his, and he drew her closer. He let his kiss trail across her cheek, and down the side of her neck, drawing forth a sigh. Her pulse quickened, a match to his own.

“Your Highness...”

He recaptured her mouth, teasing at her tongue with his own. “No protests,” he said against her lips.

She reached up to gently lift his face, her hand warm against his cheek. “Not a protest, merely an observation,” and she turned his face to the left.

“I am pleased to find you well,” Nikoli said stiffly, his arms crossed and his face sour.

Philip sighed, resting his forehead against Bryane’s so their gazes met. “I am afraid, My Lady, that the crown comes with officious bodyguards.” He raised his voice, glaring at Nikoli. “One in particular who has exceedingly poor timing.”

Nikoli bowed formally. “As always, I am at your service, Your Highness.”

Bryane laughed, and Philip sighed again, conceding defeat. *So much for the advantage of an idyllic mood. Perhaps it is time for me to request a practice bout in the Courtyard.*

Chapter Six

I wish you would reconsider this. The cat was curled up in the middle of the chaise, watching her.

“You want me to reconsider escaping from Vlad?” Bryane asked in surprise.

I want you to reconsider leaving without even telling Philip farewell.

“In case you have forgotten, Vlad promised to find me again tonight. I have no plans to be here when he does.” She folded a skirt, tucking it into her bag. *And I’m afraid that if I asked to tell him farewell, I may find myself unable to leave at all,* she admitted to herself.

If you feel that way, would it not be wise to question why? Or would it not suggest that you should not leave?

She glared at the cat, which merely licked a paw. “Must you read every thought?”

I read only what your broadcast, quite loudly.

“Pestilential feline,” she muttered, sinking into a chair. *I fear to question my reluctance, Your Majesty. I fear to explore the feelings, thoughts I have now. I fear to ask you what your grandson thinks and feels in regard to this matter.*

The cat dipped its head to its chest, a picture of repose. **I would not tell you, even if you did ask. Matters of the heart are meant to be between the owners, not furred guardians.**

“Matters of the heart.” She laughed, though it was far from a pleasant sound. “What about matters of tradition which forbid a liaison between the Prince and any Tier below the First?”

Philip has no more concern for tradition than you, My Lady. I should think you would know that by now.

“I have broken and violated so many traditions, Your Majesty. Do you not agree that I should stop soon, before I provide my own reasons for exile?”

The cat lifted its head, and its gaze was calm. **If no one ever challenges these traditions, they will continue to persist, and other daughters may find themselves joined to monsters because of it.**

What stopped you from ending these traditions when you wore the Crown? The cat offered no reply, and the silence bothered her. “That monster will come looking for me soon, and I cannot rely on your grandson’s timely arrival to save me this time.” She smiled sadly and reached to stroke the cat’s ears. “I have no other choice but to leave tonight and ride as long as I can. I can contemplate the tangle that is my heart when I know I am beyond Vlad’s reach.”

“Or perhaps I can offer you such a place and save you a long ride in the pouring rain,” a soft voice spoke up, and she gasped as a hooded figure stepped out of the shadows.

Well, and I thought the boy paid me no attention when I showed him those passageways. The voice was pleased, and the cat rumbled a purr.

Philip dropped the hood and stepped away from the now open wall. “I promised you that I would watch over you and ensure Vlad would never find you alone, did I not?” She nodded reluctantly. “I remembered his threat from this afternoon, and I have been watching him for most of the evening. The Throne Room has quieted, and he is coming in this direction, so I suggest we leave quickly.”

Gods protect me, protect us all. She snatched up her bag, throwing it over her shoulder and gathered the cat to her chest.

Leave me. I want another chance to mark the bastard. The cat growled dangerously. *I will not leave you here to die at Vlad’s hands. Your death has caused me enough pain; do not ask me to go through it a second time.*

She heard a sigh in the back of her mind, and the growling ceased at once. **As you wish.**

“Hurry, My Lady,” Philip whispered, ushering her through the wall and reaching to swing it back into place. The candles had been extinguished, and she bit her lower lip as the darkness closed around her. He fumbled for her hand and leaned close, his voice little more than an exhaled breath. “Move as quietly as you can. I’m not certain if he knows of these passageways, but Vlad was seen examining the portal in the Ballroom earlier this evening.”

Vlad knows of them, but he cannot navigate them well.

That is not reassuring. She set the cat down and lifted her skirt with her free hand to prevent any chance of stumbling as she hurried alongside Philip. She frowned, grateful for the darkness so that Philip would be unable to read her expression. *You and I may not like it, but that is one more argument for why I should leave, and soon.*

One escape at a time, Child.

The turns felt familiar, despite her inability to see, and she felt her stomach knot. *He promised me a safe place.*

You will be safe in his quarters. Vlad would not dare to enter the Family's wing of the Palace tonight.

Safe is a relative term, Your Majesty. There was no reply.

Philip paused at last, and she heard a lever creak overhead. The wall slid open to reveal a bedchamber that was three times the size of the room she had been given and unmistakably the quarters of a Royal. There was only a single candle sitting on a shelf just inside the wall, and Philip took it down.

She hesitated, searching in vain for a sign of the cat. Fur brushed against her ankles. **Go ahead. I want to destroy the footprints you have left in the dust, in case Vlad does dare these passageways tonight.**

Be safe, please.

I promise -- no heroics tonight.

Philip closed the wall behind her, and she leaned against it, her bag clutched to her chest. The room's furniture consisted of a large bed, a desk that was piled high with books, and a small table bearing a pitcher and washbasin. Heavy drapes had been drawn across the windows, and Philip was securing the lock to the room's door. *How many other women have been in this room?* she wondered idly before deciding she was better off not knowing.

Philip set the candle down beside the washbasin. "You will be safe here, for tonight. The windows and doors are locked, and even Vlad cannot know of this particular passageway. There is no excuse that he could provide for being near the Family wing that would save him from immediate execution."

"The same could be said for me, if I am discovered here."

"No one will be coming down here. The servants have no reason to clean these chambers while we are all sequestered in the Throne Room, and Nikoli is serving as my body for the night."

She smiled despite herself. "How did you convince him to agree to that?"

"There may have been veiled threats of a public humiliation involving an empty-headed little maid who is quite smitten with him. I cannot say for sure, though."

"You are cruel, Your Highness."

He stepped in front of her, placing a hand along her cheek. The candle was behind him, obscuring his expression, but there was an undercurrent to his voice that made her shiver. "Only when necessary."

I have been saved from the bear and thrown to the wolf. "Thank you, for your help."

"I promised."

"A promise is not always meant to be taken seriously."

"Bryane, when a Prince makes a promise, it is always serious." He stepped back, his fingers trailing across her cheek, and he gestured her into the room. "Please, sit."

She swallowed a sigh of resignation and set her bag down, perching on the edge of the bed. He pulled a chair from beneath the desk, sitting across from her and directly in front of the candle, so that his face was cast in shadow. *Meanwhile, he can see everything written on my face.*

"You mentioned a tangled heart, My Lady. Would you care to speak of it?" His voice was gentle, though she could hear his restraint.

"I think it would be best for us both if I did not," she replied quietly.

He considered her reply. "You did speak at length this afternoon. Perhaps it is only fair that I speak now." She raised her eyebrows, and he chuckled. "You are not the only one with questions, Bryane. I may play the arrogant fool, but I am susceptible to the plagues of the heart, the same as any man."

She looked down at her hands, her thoughts twisting around each other. Reason screamed for her to deflect the conversation, to place a barrier between the two. There were too many undercurrents waiting to snatch her below the surface, and to stay would promise a drowning. She lifted her head, trying to see his expression within the shadows. There was only the soft gleam from his eyes, and the soft request that emanated from them. *If I am found here, or if this is discovered, I will be executed. If I turn away now and escape, I will be exiled. What do I stand to lose that I have not already contemplated?* She got up and blew the candle out, returning to her perch on the edge of the bed. "Supposedly, confidences are easier told in the dark."

His voice revealed his smile. The seat creaked softly, indicating that he had shifted forward, and she heard him clasp his hands. "Your previous assessment of yourself was correct: you are not a normal lady. You are terribly insubordinate, to the point of treason, yet you possess the loyalty of an ancient knight. You are capable of blending into the shadows of any situation, yet capable of capturing every detail. You have endured a private hell in this Kingdom, yet you have held out the hope for five years that you would be able to return. There are more layers to you than ought to exist in a single person, yet they are all honest.

"I knew, from the beginning, that you were not a normal woman -- not the sort of woman I was used to dealing with. You are, I might point out, the first woman who has dared to insult me, and I have yet to recover from that blow." He chuckled quietly, and she smiled despite herself. "You wield a dangerous wit, Bryane, that I cannot help but admire...and envy, if I choose to be honest. The mind that lurks behind those enchanting blue eyes mystifies me, intrigues me, encourages me."

Her first attempt at speech failed her, and she pressed her lips together. *This is not what I expected to hear. Gods help me, I am hopelessly trapped.* "I am an exile of my own family, a scandal in your Court, and a woman bearing scars improperly healed. You would be better off to find a Princess or Noble more worthy of your attention." She folded her hands in her lap, and she softened her voice. "And yet it pains me to say those words."

His hands reached out to cover hers. "Do you honestly mean to leave here?"

"I fear I have no other choice, Your Highness."

"Please, Bryane, no titles here, not now."

She wove her fingers between his. "Philip, Vlad has already warned me of a 'reason' for my presence here, a reason he somehow created. While I appreciate your promises, the only place that I will be safe is back in King Taureas's Court. There, I am beyond even Vlad's reach, and I have protection. It may last for only a few days, until your father revokes my right as Envoy, but it will be enough. There are friends in his Kingdom who will shelter me."

"So you would leave, even if I offered a counter reason for your presence here?" The undercurrent of careful restraint had returned to his voice, and she felt her pulse quicken.

Yes; I have no choice. The words lodged in her throat, though, and she heard herself speak otherwise. "It is the job of an Envoy to listen and observe all sides of an issue."

His hands released hers, sliding to encircle her waist and draw her against him. He pressed his lips to her hairline, and she could feel his entire body trembling. He kissed her cheek, her chin, the side of her neck. "You are cruel, Philip."

His face was close to hers, though she could not see it. "I would argue that you are cruel. You have granted me not a moment's peace since your arrival."

She could hear the unspoken words in his voice, and her body shook. Reason screamed for her attention in the back of her mind, but she shook her head. *I have enough regrets in my life; I will not add another to the list.* She pressed her hand to his cheek and kissed him softly. "Then let us put an end to our cruelty."

His arms tightened around her, and his mouth covered hers. There was a restraint to his movements that belied his obvious need, and she shivered pleasantly. His lips moved down her neck, his teeth grazing her collarbone. She tilted her head back, and he kissed the hollow of her throat. "Am I still a fool, to wish to claim your heart?" he whispered against her flesh.

"No, I am a fool for offering it up."

He gathered her into his arms, and she traced his lower lip with her fingertip. Gently, he laid her on the bed, sinking down beside her. "I would light a candle, to see you beneath me," he admitted, unlacing the bodice of her dress. He chuckled deep in his throat. "But I am afraid that the time required would be time wasted."

His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs tracing her nipples, and she gasped. "You are unfair, Philip," and she arched to meet his touch. "I cannot think straight to reply properly."

He kissed her ear. "You respond quite properly, Bryane." His hands moved lower, and she closed her eyes, a soft moan escaping her lips. He closed his lips around her nipple, and she wove her hands into his hair. Regular tremors ran the length of her body, as his fingers teased her gently, and she bit her lower lip as the intensity built. His lips moved back to hers as the wave within crested, and she cried out against his mouth, gripping his shoulders tightly.

He kissed her forehead and cheeks softly as she came down from the peak, his arms sliding behind her back to support her. She kissed his chin, trailing her fingers along his back to his belt. He leaned back onto one elbow, and she could feel his amusement as she struggled to untie first the belt and then his trousers. When her fingers brushed against him, though, the amusement was banished, and he shuddered. She closed her hand around him, and he groaned.

She sat up, pulling his tunic over his head. He kissed her hairline, cradling her against his bare chest. "And so the torment continues," he whispered, leaning her back against the pillows and pausing to remove his trousers. He embraced her as he slid inside of her, and she bit back a cry of pain. He held still, though she could feel the tension in his body, kissing her face and allowing her body to adjust to the intrusion. "It will pass, I promise."

"I know," she said quietly, feeling the pain begin to dissipate. He moved slowly, and she gripped his shoulders. His thrusts were slow, measured, and she could feel the raised flesh on his arms. Heat began to build through her body again as he moved against her, and she gasped. "Philip, I..."

"I know." She began to move, matching his rhythm, as his arms tightened around her and his tongue met hers. She whimpered against his mouth, feeling the passion crest again, just as he groaned. A final thrust, and she cried out. He collapsed on top of her, his lips pressing lightly to hers. "I fear I have made a fatal error, Bryane," he said between attempts to regain his breath.

"Why?" she asked, tracing a finger over his lips.

He kissed her fingertip. "Because now not only will your mind haunt me, but your body, as well."

"A fatal error, indeed." She kissed him again, and he cradled her tight against him. "One we now both share."



Philip smoothed Bryane's hair back from her face as she dozed, her body warm against his. There were traces of gray light showing beneath the drapes, promising the arrival of the dawn, and he sighed, knowing he would regret the lack of sleep later. *The lack of sleep, but not the reason for it.* They had made love twice more during the night, first wildly, and then slowly, pausing between each to hold one another in silence. *For once, neither of us had any use for words.*

Bryane murmured softly, pressing closer to him, and he kissed her hairline, sliding his arms around her waist. The soft light flattered her, and the traces of fear that he had seen during the waking hours had vanished. She had drifted into a light sleep at one point during the night, and he had taken advantage of the moment to light the candle. He had discovered another small scar on her lower abdomen, the same ugly V that marked the skin behind her ear. A feather touch to the scar had caused her to whimper, a frown creasing her forehead. *She never mentioned what wound she inflicted to warrant this mark.* He had extinguished the candle and pulled her close, stroking her hair until she calmed.

He glared at the thin light now promising to interrupt the quiet peace of the room. She stirred lightly, her body revealing her waking. *I would halt the dawn if I could, Bryane, if only for a few moments more. Anything to hold the fear at bay.*

"You took the fear from me for one night," she whispered sleepily. "That is enough."

He stiffened in surprise, and her eyes opened wide in horror. Propping himself on one elbow, he looked at her carefully. "I did not say anything, Bryane." *I know I did not speak aloud.* She bit her lower lip, and she looked away from him quickly, curling her body into a ball. He placed a hand on her shoulder and she winced. "I did not speak aloud, did I?"

"No." The word was a quiet admission.

"You heard my thoughts."

"Yes."

"Bryane, look at me." She was silent. "Please, Bryane."

She drew further away from him before sitting up, gathering the blankets tight around her and isolating herself from his body. She was still coiled tight, her knees drawn to her chest, and she refused to meet his gaze.

He remained still, watching the early light caress her face. There were haunted shadows beneath her eyes now, and the pre-dawn turned her into a pale ghost. "You can hear my thoughts." She nodded slowly. "Have you heard all of my thoughts?"

"No. I should not have heard them just now." Her voice was heavy with regret, and he reached out to touch her hand, but she flinched away. "I forgot myself, forgot my instruction." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "I promise that I have not heard anything until this moment, and I will not hear it again."

Why not? He waited, but she did not respond. *If you are ignoring me, I will have no choice but to take you again, here and now.* There was no reaction, and he sighed. *I know you well enough by now that that should have at least prompted a blush.* "Why will you not hear me again?"

"I have the skill to choose when I will hear someone. It was the first lesson my teacher gave me, to help me silence all of the voices invading my mind. I am always aware of the shield he taught me to build, but I was...lax. I allowed myself to let go here. I apologize."

“Apologize?” He raised his eyebrows. “What harm has been done?”

“I intruded where I was not wanted.”

He grunted in irritation. *You could try the patience of a stone wall.* He sat up and moved in front of her, taking her hands before she could withdraw. “There is no part of me where you are unwanted, Bryane.” He grinned. “I should hope the previous night would have taught you that.”

Her cheeks colored, but she still refused to look at him. “Please, do not tell anyone of this.”

“I never considered it for a moment,” he admitted, blinking in surprise. “I would guess that this ability has persisted since youth, and if you have not slipped before now, you must have it under control. I see no reason why it needs to be brought to the Court’s attention.”

She lifted her head, and her expression was bewildered. “You are accepting this admirably well.”

He leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers. *I rather like this position; you cannot look away from me.* “There is nothing you could tell me, Bryane, that would frighten or disgust me.”

“I would not make such boasts, if I were you. There is quite a lot you do not know of me.” An inner battle reflected in her eyes: a challenge to defy his words and prove him wrong, wrestling with a desire to believe him and accept him, ignoring possible future pain.

“If you doubt me, then prove my ignorance.” Her eyes flashed, and he hid a smile. *You do not like being challenged. I know that much of you.*

“Your grandfather was my teacher.”

His mind refused to work properly for several moments. His vision was unfocused, and his body felt numb with more than just the morning chill against his skin. Slowly, his thoughts moved forward, drawing forth memories where Borean had known more than he should have about his grandson’s plots and mischief; times he had seemed to pull words from his grandson’s dark thoughts. *This is why Bryane meant so much to you, why you were so often seen together.*

“Yes.” She smiled sadly when he returned his gaze to hers, and she shrugged at his unspoken question. “I did not mean to intrude, but your thoughts were quite loud.”

“Grandfather could hear thoughts.”

“Yes. I was able to speak with him, mind to mind, once he taught me to isolate the thoughts I allowed inside my head. He was very strict about when the ability was to be used, though, demanding from the beginning that I promise to never ‘listen’ without permission. It would have revealed both of us, and I do not believe I need to describe what the results would have been.”

Panic, bedlam, possibly war. Factions would rise up, claiming their thoughts had been manipulated. Conspiracy would reach to other Kingdoms, bringing accusations of unfair dealings. Everyone peering over their shoulders, wondering who else may be able to overhear their thoughts. “You broke that promise, though, didn’t you?”

She sighed, closing her eyes. “Yes and no. Yes, I did listen to Vlad’s thoughts. When I told you of spoken words, I lied; they were threats I read in his mind. That was why there was no evidence against him. Not even torture would have been able to gain confessions from the three men who assisted him; I was the only one who heard him. It was done out of defense, though, and desperation. Your grandfather often said extraordinary circumstances could bend a promise; if I was going to be killed, I had the right to know.”

“A blessing and a curse,” he said, leaning back onto his elbows.

“I cannot label something that summoned your grandfather in my time of need a curse.”

He shook his head. “No, I suppose not.” *Though I would not call such an ability a true gift, especially if it must be locked within every waking moment. If there were precedent, a way to control a situation that required thought reading, it would be invaluable. If so few inherit it, though, it would be an oddity -- a dangerous oddity.* “Is there more you would shock me with?”

She was quiet for several moments, and he frowned. At last, she looked up at him and smiled sadly. “Some things are best left quiet, Philip.”

He considered her carefully, trying to read her expression without success. *Nothing ill, I think, so something that she believes would cause me pain.* “Contrary to Court belief, Bryane,” he said carefully, “I am a patient man. I can wait you out.”

“Unfortunately, the dawn does not wait for you or I.” She gestured to the light creeping from beneath the drapes.

He sighed. *One night is not long enough.* He reached for her, cradling her against his chest. “You are, unhappily, correct.”

“All illusions of normalcy must be preserved.” She kissed him softly.

“What, My Lady, do you know of normalcy?”

Chapter Seven

“I owe you an apology, I believe,” Bryane said without looking up from the book in her lap.

“For setting me out here to spend endless hours watching you read? For demanding silence though I have observed acts which constitute treason? For taking me away from my true duties?” Nikoli asked tightly.

She glanced at him and smiled. “Yes.”

His expression thawed a degree. “It is not your apology I require, My Lady.”

“Perhaps not, but I imagine one from the true villain will not be forthcoming, so I apologize in his stead.” The overcast skies had consented to break for the morning, and the sun warmed the stone bench nicely. There were a number of other Courtiers enjoying the garden, though most of them avoided the small clearing where she was sitting. Selene’s children had run up to her and presented her with two braided chains of flowers, though, and she reached to touch the soft blooms beside her. *If I closed my eyes, I could pretend that all was well. Vlad never existed, my father never turned me away, and I never spent five years away from my home.*

She watched Nikoli pace to the end of the pathway, crushing a fallen dahlia beneath his boot. His hands were clenched, and he kept looking back toward the Palace. She could hear the occasional muttered curse, as well, though he had been careful to restrain his language when he paced close to her. *Then I open my eyes and remember that chaos has taken over my life. Vlad not only exists, but he is stalking me, my father will not see me, and I cannot stop thinking of the pain involved if I choose to return to King Taureas and leave Philip here.*

“Why do you not reveal me?” she asked suddenly, to interrupt Nikoli’s pacing more than anything. He looked at her in surprise. “Would it not be easier to tell Prince Thoman of what I’ve done and wash your hands of this annoyance?”

“It would be easier, My Lady, but it would not be fair.” He paused, then sat down on a bench across from her. “I do not agree with Philip’s actions a great majority of the time, and I do not approve of his choice in you. I feel a disaster brewing in this Court, and I believe that you will be the focus of the storm.”

Well, at least Philip keeps honest company, if not company schooled in tact. She pressed her hand to her lips to hide a sudden smile. *Then again, what do I know of tact?*

Nikoli sighed and pressed his hands together, studying them. "At the same time, I know Philip. I have known him since we were both small children, swinging at each other with tree branches. I have spent miserable, sleet-ridden nights with him, and I have sweated beneath the torturous sun on the Tournament Field with him. I have endured nights on the floor -- or, worse, the stables -- while he dallied with courtesans or servants. I have poured his father's lectures into his ears, and I have listened while he shouted his frustrations."

He looked up at her, and a smile touched his eyes. "In all of that time, I have never known Philip to play the fool. I can do no more, now, than to trust that knowledge, regardless of whatever personal feelings I may have."

"Philip is lucky to have such a friend. I hope he is aware of that," she said lightly.

"I suspect there are moments, when he is deeply asleep, but as I would rather not probe into that topic, I will avoid asking you to confirm that speculation."

"A wise friend, in deed." She returned her attention to her book, though she saw a grin flash across his face for just a moment. *His words should reassure me, so why do I feel more conflict, not less?*

Because you need to leave this Kingdom. She looked up to see the cat dashing across the garden to her. It hissed at Nikoli, who jumped back in surprise, and it leapt into her lap, knocking her book aside.

There is that. How can I leave when my heart is confused as to what I feel? She stroked the cat's fur, looking down into the gold-rimmed eyes.

No, Bryane, you must leave immediately! The cat shook its entire body, as if trying to dislodge something unpleasant. **There is no time to explain. You must gather your things and ride for King Taureas.**

A cold wind blew the length of her spine, and her fingers stilled. *Why?*

"Bryane?" The voice cut through her soul, and time seemed to still. There was an air of disuse to the word, unspoken for an eternity by the throat it echoed from. It took ages for her to lift her gaze to the figure beside Nikoli, and a voice in the back of her mind whispered that she dreamed. Eyes the same shade of dark blue as her own brimmed with tears, and the trace of a smile showed in the heavy beard.

"Father," she whispered.

He opened his arms to her, and her mind closed itself away until only he remained, as she stumbled forward into his embrace.



"You have been causing me some distress these past few days," Thoman admitted without looking up from the document before him.

"Purely unintentional, Father, I assure you." Philip lounged comfortably in the chair opposite his father's desk. The study's windows had been opened to admit the autumn air, and he could hear the sound of laughter and conversation from the gardens below. It added a pleasant note to the drab study, buoying his mood. *As is the fact that Nikoli is with Bryane, with threats of a painful death, should he allow Vlad within sight of her.* He chuckled silently at the memory of his friend's indignant expression when he had given that particular order.

Thoman glanced up, lifting an eyebrow. “Unintentional? You were seen on numerous occasions speaking with Bryane Merison, and Vlad Tahon reported that you spent an afternoon’s ride with her just yesterday. I find it difficult to believe such meetings were unintentional.”

There is some small comfort in knowing that neither he nor I inherited Grandfather’s ability to read thoughts. “No, I suppose those meeting were not unintentional. I planned the ride with the lady the previous evening.”

“As I said, you have been causing me some distress.” Thoman returned to his document, scrawling his signature at the bottom. “Your friend, Nikoli, seemed to share my distress when I spoke of these clandestine meetings with him. He claimed no knowledge of them.”

“Tell me, Father, do you share all details of your life with your comrades?” Philip tried to keep the edge from his voice, but he suspected he failed. His father chose not to comment, though.

“It is beneficial to have one companion you can unburden yourself to, but if Nikoli is not your preferred choice, I can understand.”

Somehow I doubt you would understand my preferred choice. “If there is an accusation to be leveled against me, Father, I suggest you come forth with it.”

There was genuine surprise in Thoman’s expression as he looked up. “Accusation? Of course not, Son. I admit, I was concerned that you may have been dallying with the lady, but then I spoke with Cauld Merison early this morning.”

A chill swept over Philip, and he sat straighter in his seat. “Cauld?”

“Yes. I spoke with him yesterday morning, as well as Vlad Tahon, to attempt to gain some perspective of a nasty little matter from five years ago. I fear I paid little attention to it at the time, considering it coincided with the loss of your sister, and I wanted to be sure I had both sides of the story. You are aware of the incident, I assume?”

“Through secondhand accounts, yes.”

Thoman leaned back, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “I must confess, I was contemplating calling for a trial against Bryane, given her shameful actions. Vlad is quite distressed at her behavior, and he remains confused as to the reason for her refusal. Her father is equally traumatized, and he was quite surprised to see her arrive here. It was a blatant display of disregard for propriety, one that has no place in this Court.

“However, having spoken at length with her father regarding a conversation he had with Vlad, I now see her reasons for returning, and I applaud her decision.”

Why do I fear he is not referring to her loyalty to our Family? “Her decision, Father?”

Thoman raised his eyebrows. “Of course. I expected that the two of you would have discussed this at length, given your meetings with her. I must say, I am very proud of your actions, Son.” He smiled, and Philip felt as if he had swallowed a block of ice. “I assume the two of you came to a conclusion on her replacement?”

Philip was incapable of coherent speech. “Replacement?”

“Naturally. King Taureas is an important ally, and we cannot afford to be without an Envoy in his Court.” Thoman leaned forward expectantly. “Who will be replacing Bryane as Envoy now that she has agreed to return to this Court?”



“I have missed you,” Cauld whispered against her hair, and Bryane closed her eyes to hide her tears.

“No more than I have missed you, Father.”

He held her away, looking her over as if for the first time. Pride gleamed in his eyes, and she could actually see him puffing out his chest. “You have grown these past years. I see more of your mother in your face than I ever did, indeed every hoped to see, given your temperamental tongue.” She smiled, and he tapped a finger against her nose. “And such joy in your expression. The South has been good to you.”

“King Taureas is a fair and just man. He treats me as he would his own child. His Court is pleasant, though not entirely the same as our own Valtan. He made me as comfortable as possible, and he respected my wishes when I would feel conflicted over a matter.”

“Then I must convey my thanks to him.” He tucked her hand into his arm, drawing her away from Nikoli.

She glanced back at him and nodded once to reassure him that he could leave. *Vlad would not dare to approach me now.* “I would be happy to deliver the message to him, when I return.”

He laughed indulgently, and she frowned. “Ah, I have missed your humor, Daughter. The manor has been dreadfully dull since your departure. Ah, and empty, too. You know that your sister Lorelei wed Wilhem Sairis?”

“Yes, Father. I have spoken with all of my sisters and met my new nieces, nephew, and brothers-in-law.” She searched for a sign of the cat, but it had disappeared, and her mind was curiously blank. *Your Majesty?* There was no answer.

“Good, good, I am glad to hear it. I had hoped that they would have approached you by now, to make their own amends. Now, with all ruffled feathers smoothed, they will be able to help you.”

“Father, what do I need help with?” she asked carefully.

He paused and looked at her, frowning. “The wedding, of course.” A cry of protest lodged in her throat as he patted her hand and continued, smiling softly. “At the time, I doubted the need for you to flee to Taureas’s Kingdom, but if these five years past have given you the time to consider reason, then I do not begrudge them. I rather wish you had come to your senses sooner, but you have always had an independent mind.” He arched his eyebrows and tapped her hand disapprovingly. “You are very lucky that Vlad has remained not only unwed, but still enchanted with you.”

The cat’s words drifted back to her, the delight at her father’s first kind words relinquishing its hold on her thoughts: *You need to leave this Kingdom.* “Vlad told you I accepted his proposal?” she whispered.

“This morning, immediately after I spoke with Prince Thoman about your position as Envoy. He told me that you approached him yesterday afternoon, apologizing for your previous accusations and behavior.” He leveled a stern glance at her. “You are very lucky Vlad is not the sort of man to harbor a grudge, Bryane.”

Yes, lucky, she thought numbly. She heard nothing more as her father walked her through the gardens.



How much time will I have? Bryane crouched inside of the hidden doorway, watching for any sign of movement in the stalls.

At least until morning, I should think. The cat's tail snapped back and forth, lashing softly against her legs. **A cry could be raised tonight, but with the Feast taking place, it's unlikely. Morning, when Vlad or your father comes searching for you, an alarm will go out.**

I can reach the border by then, at least, though not Taureas's Kingdom. She sighed, clutching her bag tight to her chest. *My only hope is that I can travel faster than any knights that may be sent after me.* She waited for a pair of guards to pass before hurrying across the courtyard to the stable. There was only one lantern swinging just inside of the door, and the horses were all dozing or asleep.

Hurry, My Lady. The stable boys will be driven from the kitchens soon.

She hurried down to her own horse and gently coaxed the mare awake. The cat kept watch at the door while she saddled the palfrey, securing her bag in front of the pommel. It took three tries for her to cinch the girth properly due to her shaking hands. *I have been shaking since this afternoon.* The mare nuzzled her as she buckled the final clasp on the bridle, and she stroked the velvet nose. "There will be a need for haste tonight, my pretty one."

Be safe, Child.

She felt tears fill her throat, but she swallowed them. Kneeling, she gathered the cat to her chest and hugged it gently. *I am sorry, Your Majesty. I wish that I could stay -- for more reasons than the Mourning Rites.* She kissed the silken head. *I wish I could tell him farewell, at the very least.*

My Lady, when he hears of Vlad's plans, he will know and understand. It licked her cheek once, the sandpaper tongue rough and gentle at the same time. **Now hurry.**

She swung the stall door open, pressing her hand over her mouth as a cloaked figure stepped out, leading her horse. "You would do better with a hunter, for speed, but the absence of another from the stables would be noted." Philip drew her own hood around her face. His expression was unreadable, but there was another horse held beside hers, and he was dressed for travel. "I hope this beast of yours is up to the strain we're about to place on her."

Questions flooded her mind, but she held them back. *There is no time.* "She can manage well enough," she whispered.

"Then let us be away." He lifted her into the saddle, and she urged the mare out into the courtyard. *Farewell, Your Majesty. I thank you, for all that you have given me.*

Safe journey, Bryane. Know that I will always watch over you.

She turned the mare towards the southern gate and pressed her into a gallop, Philip's hunter close behind. The lights of the castle fell behind them quickly, and they rode in silence, save for the blowing of their mounts. The night was cold, and her hands became chilled, but she said nothing. *So long as I am within the Kingdom's borders, Vlad can find me. A small pain is a worthwhile price to pay for escape.* She glanced at the shadow beside her that was Philip, wondering what she would say to him when they finally halted, and she strangled a cry of exasperation. *Do I have no pleasant thoughts to consider in this flight?*

Her palfrey began to flag not long after they passed the final hamlet marking the heart of the Kingdom, and allowed the mare to slow. Her voice broke from the cool air, and she had to clear her throat to be heard. "We need to pause and rest, water the horses."

He shook himself, as if he had been deep in thought, and nodded. "There is a fork of the river up ahead, just off the road. The trees will hide us from any passersby."

She reined her horse back, allowing him to take the lead, and he turned his hunter towards the forest. He slowed his own mount, allowing the beast to navigate a shallow ditch,

and she let the mare drop into a walk. They passed through a line of trees, and the sound of rushing water greeted them as the moon made its first appearance in the sky, illuminating the small clearing. Both horses whickered happily, and she slid down her saddle, leading the mare forward to drink. "I fear we may need to travel slower from here out," she said with a sigh. "No horse can maintain a gallop overnight, and this poor creature was not built for extended journeys at this pace."

"Oh, there are horses that can, but they are the exclusive use of couriers." He untied a wine flask from his saddle and passed it to her. His fingers brushed hers, and he frowned. "You are frozen."

"Autumn is a poor choice of season for headlong flights." She chafed her hands together, wishing there was time to warm them over a fire.

He wrapped his cloak around her, drawing her down to sit with his arms around her. "The horses need a chance to regain their breath; the least I can do is keep you warm." He rested his chin on the top of her head, his hands gently massaging life back into her own. "You left without even a note of farewell," he said at last, and there was genuine distress in his voice.

"I had no choice. As soon as my father told me what was planned..."

"Wait, your father spoke to you today?"

"Yes. He found me in the gardens, and he told me that Vlad had announced the 'return of my senses' by agreeing to marry him."

He swore under his breath. "So that is why your father assumed you would stay."

She twisted in his arms to try to see his face, but the shifting light as the moon wove in and out of the clouds left him dappled in shadows. "You did not know Vlad had announced our wedding?"

"No more than you knew that your father informed the Court you would be abandoning your position as Envoy to return here."

No wonder Father was amused when I said I would deliver his message to King Taureas in person. She laughed bitterly. "Vlad has no right to be so clever. He engineered all of this, from the very beginning. He knew I would come, and he planned all along to tell my father I had agreed to stay. Your own father played directly into his hands."

"It provided an explanation for your return that would please and reassure the Court. Everyone was taken aback by your arrival, and there was speculation that the motivation was dark. Now, they are all likely to praise you for returning to seek forgiveness." He drew her closer, and she leaned her head back, resting her cheek on his chest. His heartbeat sounded evenly beneath her ear, in tandem with her own. "Not only forgiveness, but a rejection of the 'lies' and 'base accusations' you leveled against Vlad before. Even if not publicly acknowledged, an agreement to wed is proof enough that you had changed your mind."

"Save that I have made no such agreement." *And instead of facing humiliation again, I have run away -- with no place safe to run to and no certainty as to what I will find with the dawn.*

"Will King Taureas be able to protect you?" he asked, his voice curiously flat.

"For a little while. When my position as Envoy is revoked, though, he will have few options. To continue to harbor me within the Palace could be construed as a hostile act, and the alliance between the two Kingdoms could break. I am not that important to him that he will risk severing ties with an ally."

"And where will you go then?"

“I know there will be some of the Nobles who could shelter me, or at least provision me. I fear I have thought no further than that.” She shook her head, silently cursing the tears that escaped her eyes. “I have always been afraid that Vlad would hunt me down, but I never expected this. If I had had any sense when I received word of your grandfather’s death...”

He kissed her forehead. “Sense has very little to do with life, Bryane. You would do better to level blame where it belongs, rather than accepting it yourself.”

“I have been exiled from my family for five years; I have found little use in cursing time.”

“I meant the bastard who murdered Grandfather.”

Her blood froze in her veins. She sat up slowly, pulling her cloak around her. It took an effort to keep her voice even. “What did you say?”

“Grandfather was murdered,” he said angrily, his hands tightening around her. “A vial of belladonna was found in his bedchamber, beside his water basin. All of his doors and windows had been barred tight, and the guard never shifted from their watch, much less heard any sounds within. Father refused to label the crime a murder, for fear that it would throw the Kingdom into turmoil. We had no evidence, no witnesses -- no one to charge.”

Damn you. You never told me you were murdered. “Are no crimes in this Kingdom punished?” she demanded, shoving him away from her. She got to her feet, pacing angrily. Her entire body was rigid with tension, and she had to work to keep her jaw from locking closed. “If a monarch can be slain in his sleep with no justice, how can a girl believe that a rape will be prosecuted? Everything is done to preserve the peace of this bloody Kingdom, when there is no actual peace here!”

He watched her, and her anger seemed to have a calming affect on his own. “Tradition must be observed in Valtan, Bryane. That means a trial cannot be ordered without conclusive evidence, regardless of who the victim is. If we ordered a trial without even a potential suspect, the Court would collapse into finger-pointing and blind accusations.” He paused for a moment, and then he leaned forward, resting his hands on his crossed knees. “How does King Taureas handle crime?”

“There is a tribunal in place to hear all cases of criminal mischief. The King only hears those cases where the crime has been proven beyond a doubt, and that is so he may set the sentence.”

“Even he does not attempt to rule in a matter that is empty of evidence, then. Do you despise him for his caution?”

She halted her pacing, turning to look at him. *Why can he remain calm, while I am angry? Why is he reasonable when I least wish him to be?* She sighed, pressing her hands over her eyes. *Because he has not spoken to his grandfather. Because he does not know that his grandfather’s spirit walks the halls of the Palace, clothed in fur.* “No,” she whispered. “I admire his discretion. The tribunal is a disaster, most sessions, but no dread sentence is carried out without the King’s approval. The people trust him to make no mistakes, and he obliges them.”

“It is an admirable discretion I have refused to admit, myself.” He got to his feet and took her hands. “I wanted the truth revealed to the Court, but Father prevented it. Grandfather was very loved by this Kingdom, and the horror would only provoke chaos, possibly accusations of an assassin from outside of the Kingdom. No good would come of it. I hate the logic, but I understand it.”

She felt numb, though it was a cold that came from within. “I said those words five years ago, when your grandfather explained why we could not reveal Vlad for the monster he is.”

“I said the words earlier, when Nikoli asked why I was letting you leave,” he said softly.

She blinked in surprise. “How did he...”

“Bryane, whether he approves or not, when Nikoli is given an order, he follows it faithfully. He watched you all afternoon, and he saw when you put your things together and slipped into the passageway shortly before the Feast was announced. He came to me immediately.” He sighed, lifting her hands to press them against his forehead. “He expected me to go after you, bring you back. When I told him I would escort you to the border and then return, he was baffled.”

Her chest ached, and she was unsure which emotion was the culprit: the disappointment that he had already let go, or the admiration that he had understood so completely. The words were out before she could reclaim them, “You would let me go so easily?”

The moon escaped the clouds, and she could see his eyes gazing into hers. The soft glow lent them a subtle shadow that threatened to devour her. His words were thick with emotion. “I would never let you go, Bryane. I would have no choice but to let you leave this Kingdom, but I would not have let you go. I would have found a way to reach you.” He laid his hand along her cheek. “I did not plan for this ending. Had I known what you were when I first saw you, I could have plotted a fairer course.”

“What am I?”

“The other half of myself.”

Her tongue failed her. *How can you say this to me now, when I am candlemarks from leaving you behind?*

Surprise crept into his voice, and he pushed her hood back from her face. “I can say it because I have to.”

Her lips parted, and she felt a smile struggling on her lips. “You heard me.”

He laughed, the sound of a young boy discovering a new toy. “I can hear you.” His voice softened. “I can even hear the words you do not say.”

“This world is cruel.” Tears brimmed that she was unashamed to shed.

“No, it merely has your sense of humor.”

She laughed despite herself, and he kissed her. “I wish I could stop time,” she whispered against his lips.

“A wish I echo, but the gods appear to have gone deaf.” He glanced up at the sky, measuring the position of the stars. “Perhaps that is just as well; they will have no reason to stop me.”

She frowned and reached tentatively for his thoughts, but his mind was shuttered from her. *Unfair that he learned that trick so easily while I struggled to master it.* Her chest grew tight when he knelt before her, her hand still held in his.

“I cannot predict the future, Bryane. I do not know what may lay in wait for us on this road, and I do not know where you will go when I am forced to part with you. I know, only, that you are the final piece to my soul, and I would fight a thousand battles to stand at your side.” He reached into his cloak pocket and removed something that glittered in the moonlight. “I care little about tomorrow, and I care nothing for yesterday. There is only this moment, now, and I have no words to describe my true feelings. I can only say, clumsily, that I will spend the rest of my life building the bond between us, so that not even death may break it.”

She watched him slide the tiny spark onto her finger, feeling as if the body were not her own. The moon peeked from behind a curtain of shadow, revealing the diamond and sapphires of the Valtan ring. It was the ring King Borean had kept in a glass box in his bedchamber, waiting for his grandson to make a choice of wife. *Why me?*

Because you infuriate me. Because you insult me at every turn and check my wit. Mostly because my grandfather loved you and saw in you a person worth loving and protecting. “I can think of no greater reason than that.”

“Your parents will be furious.”

“My parents do not warm my bed.”

“Neither do corpses,” a heavy voice interrupted, and torches pushed through the trees, revealing the Palace Guard. Vlad stood behind the two of them, his smile triumphant. He raised his voice to carry to the waiting guards. “They are here, and both appear unharmed.” His voice promised it would be a temporary state.

Chapter Eight

The debris of the mourning congregation had been pushed aside, leaving the Throne Room empty. The Courtiers lined either side of a narrow path from the doors to the raised dais on which the thrones rested, and their expressions were grim. Philip clenched his teeth in lieu of his hands and strode up to the dais, ignoring all of them. His mother and father were seated formally, and he bowed to them. “Good evening, Father, Mother.”

“I fear it is not a good evening, Son,” Thoman replied, gesturing to the bench on the step below the thrones.

Nor do I. He sat down and turned to watch Bryane being led in. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and she held her head up. At the base of the dais, Vlad and Cauld stepped forward -- the first triumphant, and the second haggard. The guards on either side of her stepped back when she reached the dais, blocking any escape down the human corridor.

She curtsied, dropping her head low. “Good evening, Your Highnesses.”

“Do you know why you have been brought before this Court, My Lady?” Thoman asked.

“I confess that I do not. When I was taken from my journey home, no explanations were provided.” She met his gaze confidently, and several Courtiers gasped in shock. “Is it now uncommon to allow guests to leave the Palace?”

“You will mind your tongue, My Lady,” Thoman said sharply. “The potential for serious charges rests on your behavior in this Court.”

“I have done nothing wrong, Your Majesty.”

“Why were you in the company of the Prince this evening?”

She gestured to Philip. “You must ask your son that question, if you are seeking motivations. He chose to accompany me on my journey home, as far as the border.” She glanced along the front line of Courtiers. “You may question Lord Forsten, if you wish. I was told he had knowledge of these plans.”

Philip suppressed a smile. *I will owe Nikoli my firstborn child when this is ended.* He looked up at his father, arching his eyebrows in silent inquiry, but Thoman ignored him. *Ah, so you have no plans to involve me in this affair.*

“You chose an odd hour to leave, My Lady. Sense would dictate waiting for daylight before beginning such a lengthy journey.” Thoman lifted a scrap of parchment. “I believe it is a three day ride to the Kingdom of Norisand?”

“Travel by night diminishes the number of people on the road, allowing one to reach their destination quicker than anticipated.”

“That does not explain your decision to leave this Court before the conclusion of the Mourning Rites.”

She stared at him, and her expression hardened. “I have no desire to play the fool for this Court, Your Highness. I would request that you ask me the true questions you are interested in.”

Thoman grunted in surprise, but there was a begrudging respect in his expression. “Lady Bryane, did you inform my son that you wished to abdicate your position as Envoy to King Taureas and return here?”

“I did not.”

Philip nodded in agreement, though no one appeared to be watching him, save Vlad. Vlad’s dark eyes never wavered from him, and he shrugged uncomfortably. *How much did he overhear in the clearing?*

“Did you inform your father of a wish to abdicate?”

“I did not.” She hurried on before he could ask her the next question. “Nor did I inform Vlad Tahon of a desire to abdicate.”

“You have no desire to return to this Court, as a functioning member of your family?” Thoman asked, surprised.

She was quiet for several moments, and Philip could feel the conflict raging in her mind. When she spoke again, her voice was soft, and many had to lean forward to hear her. “I have every desire to return to this Court, to my family. Exile is not something one enters lightly, and it is not something one savors. King Taureas, though he is kind, is not King Borean, or Prince Thoman. The Court of Norisand is not the Court of Valtan, and my heart belongs to Valtan.”

Appreciative murmurs broke out among the crowd, and Philip smiled sadly. *Their approval will not last long, I fear.*

“Yet you claim not to have spoken with anyone about returning to this Court.” Thoman glanced down at Cauld and Vlad, his expression severe.

“I do.” Her hands twisted in front of her, and her expression became one of defiance. “Nor do I claim having ever spoken to Lord Tahon regarding the marriage proposal I repudiated five years ago.”

Fresh whispers exploded from the Courtiers, and Thoman had to smack his hand against the arm of his throne to regain their attention. “Insolence will not be tolerated here, My Lady, nor will blatant lies.”

Lies? Philip turned to stare at his father.

Bryane frowned. “I have not uttered a single lie, Your Highness.”

Thoman lifted a sealed scroll, holding it up for everyone to see. “Have you seen this parchment before?”

“I have not.”

“Never before?”

She pressed her lips together, marshaling her control. “I have not seen that document before this moment.”

Thoman broke the seal, unfurling the scroll carefully and turning it toward her. “And I suppose this is not your signature at the bottom of his marriage contract?”

Bryane’s face paled, and Philip clenched his fingers on the edge of his bench. *That bastard!*

Her voice faltered, and she took an involuntary step back. "That is my signature, Your Highness, but I swear to you that I signed no marriage contract. I would sooner die than be wed to Vlad Tahon."

Angry shouts rose from the front of the crowd as the Tahon family surged forward to protest. The guards moved swiftly, pushing them back into order, and Philip turned to Bryane, her gaze desperate. *What do I do?* Her voice echoed slightly in his mind, and he shivered at the direct contact.

Nothing. He firmed his jaw. *This game has gone on long enough.*

Control settled back over the Court, though the Tahons continued to hiss insults at her. Thoman stepped down and presented the contract to her, and she took it with shaking hands. "It is difficult for me to believe you did not sign this, when you admit that this is your signature. Further, it is sealed beneath with the sigil of Norisand, which only you, in this entire Court, possess." He took the contract back from her. "Now, My Lady, do you wish to lie to me again?"

She swallowed and bowed her head, shaking it slowly. "I have no explanations, Your Highness."

"Your theatrics are renowned in this Court, My Lady. We witnessed them five years ago, and we have watched your family suffer for five years while you persisted in your charade. I must claim an ignorance as to why you insist on playing out this drama, when it is obvious that you have no objections to this union." He gestured to Vlad, who wore the false expression of a wounded heart. "This man has claimed your hand in marriage, and he has waited five years for the ceremony to take place. I declare that he has full rights to you, by way of your father's consent, and I state that the wedding will take place in two days time -- the first act of this Court following the Coronation."

"Unfortunately, Father, you are mistaken," Philip said, getting to his feet. Every gaze turned in his direction, and he was gifted with a look of genuine surprise on Vlad's bullish features. "Vlad Tahon may have been given Lord Merison's consent to wed Bryane, but there is already another with claim to her hand."

What are you doing? Your father will never allow this!

He ignored her, reaching to take the contract from his father and tearing it in half. The entire Throne Room fell silent.

"You tread on very dangerous ground, My Son," Thoman said, his voice deadly. He turned to view the Courtiers, searching their bewildered expressions. "Who claims a right to the hand of Bryane Merison?"

Everyone looked at one another, and several people shifted uncomfortably as the silence lengthened. Smiling, Philip stepped forward and took Bryane's hand. "I do, Father, by right of spoken vow and maidenhead." He lifted her hand so that the light would catch the ring.

Bryane's cheeks flushed, and she stared down at her feet. He could feel her accusation of embarrassment, though no words entered his mind. *It is a challenge that Vlad cannot refute, My Love.*

"She is below your rank," Thoman said into the stunned silence.

"The Merison family is below my rank, but Bryane is not. As we have already determined that she made no plans to abdicate her position, she is still an Envoy to King Taureas, which makes her an equal to the First Tier. Our traditions state that a Prince of the Blood may take a wife from no lower than the First Tier." He smoothed his expression to match his father's cold mask. *I do know the traditions, Father. After all, you prodded Nikoli into forcing me to learn them.*

“When was this proposal made?” Thoman asked through gritted teeth.

“This evening, before Lord Tahon interrupted her journey home.”

Thoman turned to Bryane, and a deep fury smoldered in his eyes. She met his gaze, though her hands were trembling. “Is this true, My Lady? Did you accept my son’s proposal of marriage?”

She drew a shaky breath, then placed her other hand over Philip’s. “I did, Your Highness.”

“The proposal is not valid,” Vlad spoke up, pushing forward and retrieving the torn contract. “This contract was signed before this evening.” He glared at Philip. “Dependent on when he laid with my betrothed, it is possible that His Highness owes me restitution.”

Philip watched him with mild eyes, his fingers tightening around Bryane’s hand. *I owe you a march to the executioner’s block for what you did. You are lucky I am unable to bring charges against you.* “I suggest you then wed whoever you found to imitate My Lady’s signature, and I strongly encourage you to return the sigil ring you stole from her.”

Angry voices began to bubble up from the crowd, and Thoman raised his hand for silence. “Enough! This matter has escaped control. I call an end to this Audience. The parties present will retire with me where this issue will be resolved.” He motioned to the guards. “Escort Lady Bryane to my study.”

The guards stepped forward and she reluctantly let go of his hand. She bowed her head, her fingers clasped before her. ***Tell Nikoli that I am sorry -- he was right; I am the center of this storm.***



“I cannot begin to explain my disappointment in you, Philip,” Thoman said, pacing the length of the room. It was the first outward sign of agitation that Philip had seen in his father. It would have shocked him any other day. *But not today, Father. Everything is different today.* “This very afternoon, you sat in my presence and allowed me to believe that your meetings with the lady were political in nature. Now, you have humiliated me in front of the Court.”

“Sit down, Father, before you say something equally ridiculous.” Philip pointed to the chair behind the desk. “There has been no humiliation tonight, as of yet. If you will think rationally, you will find no reason to be angry with me.” He gestured to Bryane, who was seated in the corner, still flanked by her escort. “Bryane was a favorite child of Grandfather, and she has served as an accomplished Envoy for this Court. She returned here -- a place with dark memories for her -- out of loyalty to her sovereign, and she has respected the Court’s ill ease at her presence. The only quality of a Princess that she lacks is a pedigree, and I would even hesitate to say that, considering the pride apparent in the Merison family.”

“If she is the portrait of perfection that you claimed, then why did she sign a marriage contract agreeing to wed Vlad Tahon?” Thoman gestured to the torn parchment holding pride of place on his desk.

“I did not sign that contract,” Bryane said quietly. Everyone turned to look at her, and she regarded them with calm eyes. “I will admit that I knew wedding preparations were being planned; my father spoke of them this afternoon. I was unaware that a contract had been drawn, though, and I would never have agreed to sign it. I left this evening out of fear of the proposed wedding.”

“I will not revisit your claims of abuse and violence, My Lady,” Thoman replied. “There is no evidence you can present to support them.”

“No, there is not.”

“And the claims are of no matter here,” Philip said. “The issue at hand is who has right to ownership of her hand.”

“Please,” a soft voice spoke up, and Cauld got to his feet. The man appeared to have aged years in the past candlemark, and it was the first word he had spoken all evening. He fingered his beard nervously. “My Bryane is not a favored horse, or a treasured vase, or a possession of any kind. The only one in this room who may claim ownership of her is herself.”

“Father,” Bryane whispered, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Philip bowed his head regretfully. *I am sorry, My Love. Your father has the right of it.* “I apologize for my choice of words, Lord Merison. I would claim no ownership of your daughter. I seek merely for the privilege to have her stand at my side as my wife.”

“Consent was given to me to wed the youngest daughter of the Merison line,” Vlad said coldly. “That consent was given five years ago, when Prince Philip was not even present at the Palace. I also received the dowry for Lady Merison.”

“Consent was given by Cauld Merison, not Bryane. While I cannot claim firsthand knowledge, there are witnesses throughout this Court who were present when Bryane rejected Vlad’s proposal of marriage.” Philip gestured to Cauld. “Lord Merison himself was present, I believe. It was her refusal that he took exception to, and the reason that he exiled his own daughter.”

My father is in enough pain, Philip. He lifted his head to her gaze, and she shook her head. ***Something has changed in him. Look at his face. Look into his eyes.***

Cauld sighed heavily, and he folded his hands in his lap. “The Prince is correct: Bryane repudiated Vlad before the Court. Only those not present are ignorant of the scene.”

“Consent was still given, by you,” Thoman replied. “In situations where a child is unwilling or unable to consent to a pre-arranged marriage, the father is entitled to accept the proposal in their stead. The consent predates your own proposal, Philip.”

“I challenge the power of the contract, Father.” Philip got to his feet, stopping himself before he resumed his father’s pacing. “The contract was between Lords Tahon and Merison. Bryane herself accepted my proposal, and she came willingly to my bed. The ring she now wears is proof of the contract between she and I.”

Thoman turned to glare at Bryane. *You will have to do much more than that to rattle her, Father. She is made of sterner stuff than you or I can imagine.* “Is this true, My Lady?”

Her cheeks were flushed, but she managed to meet his gaze. “I have done nothing that I regret, Your Highness. Your son made no threats, attempted no coercion. I made my decisions with a clear mind, and a clear conscience.”

“Bryane is neither unwilling nor unable to consent to my proposal, Father.”

“She made plans to leave this Kingdom tonight, Philip. Those actions do not assure me that she took your proposal seriously.” Thoman’s fingers traced a knot in the wood on his desk, the only sign of his frustration.

“I made plans to leave when I feared that I would be forced into a marriage to Lord Tahon,” she argued. Her voice softened, and she looked down at her hands. “The proposal was made after those plans.”

Thoman leaned back heavily, his chair creaking in protest. “I am at a loss as to how to best resolve this matter.”

You mean you are unwilling to choose sides in this matter and possibly anger the Court. Philip frowned, clenching his hands at his sides. *You are so determined to walk the line of neutrality, that you will not even support your own son.*

I hate the logic, but I understand it.

“I would like to ask a question.” Cauld looked around for permission, and Thoman waved a hand for him to continue. He regained his feet and walked over to Bryane, bending to take her hands in his. “It has been five years since I spoke with you, Daughter. Our last words were said in anger, and they were spoken in haste. Regardless of what the Prince may decide here tonight, I wish this conversation to be different.”

He took a deep breath, and his eyes watched her face carefully. “Two men in this room have claimed your heart belongs to them. Vlad has waited for five years on the hope that you would return and have learned to accept him. Prince Philip has won your approval, as evidenced by the ring you wear. Who truly holds your heart in his hands, Bryane?”

There was no hesitation in her voice. “Philip, Father.”

He patted her hand awkwardly, and a sad smile showed beneath his beard. “I will not go against my daughter’s choice.” He looked up and nodded once to Philip.

“Thank you, Lord Merison.” Philip bowed before him, flustering the older man.

Vlad ground his teeth, and Philip was surprised to find it was an audible sound. “She signed the marriage contract.”

“There is no proof that it was she who set pen to parchment,” Philip retorted.

“Unfortunately, Son, there is no proof that it was not.” Thoman frowned, turning one of the parchment halves around in his hands. “While emotions may be clear to some of the people in this room, they go against our traditions. By all rights, I should declare priority to Vlad.” Vlad smirked, and he cast a quick glance at Bryane which made her flinch. “However, I cannot deny that my own son has a valid claim.”

Philip watched his father turning the parchment over and over. His eyes were focused on the signature on the page, and his jaw was tensed. *Even now, you will not make a decision. Grandfather is turning in his tomb.* He looked over at Bryane, and saw her shake her head helplessly. Quietly, he closed his mind to her, firming his jaw. *If you will not act of your own accord, Father, I will force your hand.* “There is no need for you to make this decision.”

Thoman glanced up, lifting an eyebrow. “I may not yet be King, Philip, but I am the highest ranking member of this Court.”

“You are, and as such it is your duty to uphold the traditions of the Court, is it not?”

Philip moved to stand in front of his father.

“Philip, it is quite late, and I grow weary of rhetoric.”

“When two men have an equal claim to a lady’s hand, the matter is decided with a duel.”

Bryane’s head snapped up, and her eyes widened. He could feel her questions, hammering against the shield over his mind. He ignored her and smiled at his father.

“That tradition was not forged to apply to the Royal Family,” Thoman said harshly.

“No, but it is valid, and the traditions of this Court apply to everyone.”

Thoman’s expression hardened. “You understand what you are proposing?”

Philip stood straight and smiled. “I do not make any proposal without prior thought, Father.”

Thoman was quiet, though he turned his head to stare at Bryane. She looked back calmly, though her hands were gripping the fabric of her skirt hard enough to pale her knuckles. “It seems, My Lady, that you have left me with no choice.” He got to his feet, motioning for the

guard at the door to gesture the scribe in from the hall. “This notice is to be made to the Court immediately. At dawn tomorrow, Prince of the Blood, Philip Valtan will meet Lord Vlad Tahon in a duel to determine the rightful husband to the Lady Bryane Merison. The result of the duel will be final and binding.”

He turned to face Bryane, waving for the scribe to pause. “A duel, My Lady, is to the death. There must be one clear victor. Your wavering heart has placed my son’s life in the hands of the gods, mere days after they took my father.” He raised his voice, nodding to the scribe. “For the crime of treason, Lady Bryane Merison will be taken to the guillotine two months hence and executed.”

“Father, no!”

“This order is made by Crown Prince Thoman Valtan, the evening of the eleventh day of this month.” He gestured to the guards on either side of Bryane. “Take the lady to the tower room, and secure the door.”

Philip threw his mind open, praying for a response from Bryane, but she was silent. Her gaze was on Thoman, who glared back at her. Bowing her head, she curtsied before him and fell in step behind her guards, her hands clasped in front of her. Philip sank into a chair, his hands shaking. *This was not the action I wished you to take, Father. I wanted you to see the ridiculousness of these traditions, not add another.*

Vlad paused beside him and bent to speak in his ear. “You would have been wise to concede defeat, Your Highness. I look forward to two months with your lady.” He chuckled softly. “Though I do not believe you will be able to recognize her when she is finally sent to join you with the gods.”

Chapter Nine

Bryane pulled the blanket from the small bed, wrapping it around her shoulders. The mortar had worn away from the window seams, allowing the night’s chill into the tower room. A thin rim of ice covered the washbasin in the corner, and the walls smelled of frost. *No colder without than within*, she thought idly.

I cannot sooth the chill within, but I can at least warm the chill without. The cat crept from beneath the bed and jumped onto it, its tail held low in dejection. **I heard my son’s orders, and I thought you might prefer companionship tonight.**

“Why did you not tell me you were murdered?” she asked softly.

The cat looked down at the twitching tip of its tail. **Would it have mattered, My Lady? Would it have changed anything that has transpired these past days?**

“I could have spent my time searching for the assassin, instead of allowing myself to fall prey to your grandson.” *Fool, fool, three times a fool. If he hadn’t shut me out, I could have warned him.*

There is no need, Bryane, to seek for the murderer. I know who took my life, and, no, I will not reveal the name to you. The cat looked up at her, its eyes glowing in the dim light of her single candle. **The vengeance for my death is mine alone to claim.**

“And your grandson? Whose right will it be to seek vengeance for his death?”

Abandoned hope so quickly? Philip is an accomplished swordsman, a champion of any number of Tournaments.

“That may be, but Vlad is a brute and a villain, and he outweighs Philip. I have seen what he has done to those he calls ‘friends’ during friendly competition, and they are closer to his build than Philip.”

Treachery does not always trump skill, My Lady.

She sat down on the bed, staring at the wall opposite. “It matters not, what the outcome is. I will either suffer two months of torture at Vlad’s hands, or I will suffer the pain of two months only with Philip.” She drew her knees to her chest, hiding her face in her arms. “I have brought nothing but ill to your family.”

I heard my grandson’s words, Bryane -- those spoken, and those kept silent. He loves you, as deeply as I loved Gorgiana. That is not ‘ill,’ My Lady.

Is there anything you do not have an answer for?

My dear Child, one does not attain the age of seventy-one years without amassing a library of answers.

She laughed softly, stroking its fur. “Then what answer is there to the tragedy looming ahead of me?”

The two of you will be joined again with the gods.

You have not been joined with Gorgiana.

You tread on dangerous ground, Child.

She frowned, stilling her hand. “No, Your Majesty. Tell me, will it be satisfying enough to see Gorgiana after death? Will it content you to have her in death, when you were deprived of her in life?”

The cat snarled a warning. **Do not mock my heart, Bryane.**

“And do not mock mine. An eternity in death is not acceptable. I want to share my life with him, and I do not mean the scant months’ time I have been given.” She leaned her head against the wall. “I do not want the tale to end here.”

There was no reply, and she closed her eyes. *Your tale was ended before its proper conclusion; please do not wish the same for me.*



An angry hiss startled her awake, and she sat up in time to see the door swing open. The body of a guard slumped against the door, his eyes wide and staring, and her blood froze in her veins. Vlad stepped over it, cleaning the blade of his knife on his sleeve. “It is amazing how lax the personal guard of the Royal Family has become of late,” he remarked conversationally, closing the door.

“Why are you here?” she demanded, placing her back against the wall.

“It occurs to me that, while it is very unlikely that your lovesick Prince will end my life, there is an uncomfortable chance of significant injury. I would hate to have my ability to experience you tainted when we will only have two months together.” He smiled down at her, the savage grin of a predator. “So I believe I will sate my pleasure now and leave your Prince with the final memory of who marked his precious love.”

The cat growled, claws flashing out as it leapt towards him, but he beat it aside. The soft head connected with the wall with a sickening crack, and it lay motionless on the floor. Slow, random thoughts still reached out, whispering of pain and regret in the back of her mind. She got to her feet, her entire body shaking. “You would do better to kill me now.”

“You are no use to me dead, Bryane.” She had never hated the sound of her name before. He moved towards her, the knife held casually in his right hand. “Which is why I plan to use every influence of the Court to secure a stay of execution. You will be pleading for forgiveness

before the King quite soon, and he will have no choice but to pardon you. The Tahon family has a wide circle of followers, after all.”

“I would sooner slit my own throat.”

He paused. “No doubt you would, you treacherous snake. I will have to be sure to secure you properly in the manor so that you cause yourself no harm.” He snatched at her arm but grabbed only her blanket, which she let fall from her shoulders.

“What should it matter if I mark myself or wait for you to do so?” She reached for the knife, and he pushed her aside, the blade slicing her palm. Grimacing at the pain, she held her hand up, the blood nearly black in the ruddy light. “See? I can leave my own scars.”

“If you find pleasure in cutting yourself, I will be happy to oblige, so long as there is no dramatic letting of blood.” His hand caught hold of her braid, wrenching her head around, and she whimpered in pain. He pushed his face close to hers, and she spit at him, startling him so that he released her.

“I know you want me dead.”

“I want nothing of the sort. I have no use for a corpse.” He grinned and caught her ankle with his foot, tumbling her to the floor. One hand pressed down on her chest, and he ignored the scratching of her fingernails. “Now, a woman heavy with a child possessing the ability to read thoughts, that I have a use for.”

Bryane went still, her mind screaming. *No, how did he know?*

He leaned down, slicing the laces of her dress with the knife. “So strange, for an aging monarch to be closeted so frequently with a young girl. There were any number of possible reasons why, each one better for toppling the Valtan line. One need only discover the reason for the meetings to attain power over the Court.” She slammed the heel of her hand into his jaw, and he grunted in pain. Turning his head, he spit blood onto the floor. “You will pay for that, My Lady.”

“I have intentions of much worse,” she hissed.

“Intentions are all well and good, but they are not actions,” he replied simply, straddling her legs. She reached for his face, and he crushed her hands between one of his, stretching them over her head. He leaned close, and she felt bile rise into her throat. “It took me some time to unravel what your ‘teaching’ sessions were for. I fear the passageways of this Palace do not conduct sound very well. Still, I learned what I needed to.” He licked the side of her face, and she gagged. “The ability to speak mind to mind, to read unspoken thoughts in anyone around her; such a girl would be a fine prize for someone with ambitions towards the throne.”

“Shame that I rejected you.” She struggled to bring her knee up, but his weight pressed down on her legs.

He pulled her dress open, and she could feel his excitement at her bare skin. “Yes, that was a shame. It forced me to reconsider my plans, forge new ones. In the end, it was frightfully simple to bring you back to this Court.” He pulled a small blossom from his pocket, holding it in front of her.

Her mind went numb. She had seen the plant on his lands, marveling at the small purple berries. He had laughed indulgently and advised her not to eat them. *Belladonna.*

His voice grated in her ear. “Everyone knew that, of all the Courtiers, Bryane Merison loved the old fool Borean the most.”

“You monster!” She scratched at his hands, her vision blurred by tears.

He sat back, releasing himself from his trousers with his free hand. “Oh, I assure you I am a monster -- a much more satisfying monster than your pathetic Prince.”

She closed her eyes, biting her bottom lip in anticipation of the rape, when there was the sound of a muffled blow, and Vlad collapsed against her with a surprised grunt. She blinked through tears to see Philip standing over them, a naked sword in his hand.

“Get out of my sight,” Philip said, his voice wavering on the thin edge of control.

Vlad looked genuinely confused, for the door was still closed. “You will pay for interrupting.”

“You will pay for your crimes,” Philip corrected. The sword was trained on Vlad’s throat, and it never wavered as he collected himself, sheathing the knife in his boot. “Get out of this tower before I call for the guard and have you placed in chains.”

“I will settle this score at dawn, Your Highness.”

Bryane pulled her dress back around her, crawling over to the cat and cradling it to her chest. *Why didn’t you tell me?*

The door closed, and Philip sheathed the sword, kneeling beside her. “Your small protector has taken a nasty blow.” He gently tested the cat’s skull. “I feel no damage, though. Give it a chance to rest, and it should be fine.”

“No one will be fine,” she said angrily, unable to stop the tears. “Vlad murdered your grandfather.” She pointed to the offending blossom on the floor. “He murdered your grandfather, and he has plans to use me as a brood mare for mind gifted children. No one will be fine!”

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her onto his lap, as if she were a small child. His lips were soft at her temple. “Hush, Bryane. You’re safe.”

The words were repeated over and over until her sobs quieted. Her eyes felt raw as she scrubbed the final tears from her cheeks. “Everything, simply for a way to seize power.”

“In Court, Bryane, that is a daily game played by everyone.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “The flower is not enough, is it?”

“Belladonna is found on any number of lands in the Kingdom.”

So he escapes free from every crime.

He will not escape tomorrow.

She shivered, and he got to his feet, cradling her against his chest. Gently, he removed the remains of her dress and wrapped her in the blanket, stretching out beside her on the mattress. “If I had never revealed my abilities to your grandfather...”

“We will not play at this game tonight, Bryane.”

She pressed her lips together in resignation. *The world has turned sideways on me in one night, then catapulted me back the other direction. Tomorrow, it is poised to repeat the game.*

That may be so, My Love, but the game is not in play now.

She looked up at him, his expression serene in the flickering light of the candle. The peace seeped through her mind, calming her thoughts. She brushed her fingers against his cheek, smiling softly. “There is only this moment.”

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “This moment, this night. I will allow no thoughts beyond.”

She could feel him quickening against her, and her cheeks warmed pleasantly. Her voice shook with the residual fear of the attack, but her words were steady. “If you will not allow my thoughts to rein free, would you play at another game, My Love?”

His response was to slide beneath the blanket, his mouth capturing hers.

Chapter Ten

Philip strapped his sword belt around his waist, checking that the knife in his boot was well concealed. “There will be a fresh team of horses waiting outside of Debonshire,” he said under his breath. “The advanced messenger left this morning, and he should reach the border by evening, so word will be passed on.”

“I do not like this plan,” Nikoli said unhappily, handing his friend his gloves.

“When you find the match to your soul, Nikoli, I will listen to your thoughts on this matter.” Philip took his shield down from the rack, checking the straps for signs of wear. *I will protect her, regardless of what happens on this field today.*

Nikoli searched his face carefully, then sighed. He clasped Philip’s arm, feeling the dagger strapped beneath his sleeve. “I will keep her safe, Your Highness.” His voice was gruff. “See to it that you keep yourself sage.”

“I thank you, Old Friend.” Philip lifted his shield and stepped out into the Courtyard.

A small rectangle had been marked with stones, and the Court was gathered around, waiting expectantly. Vlad already stood at one end, his sword open in his hand. *You destroyed the lives of the Merison family, you took my grandfather from the people who loved him, and you scarred my love nearly beyond repair. Your blood will soak the ground before this day is over.*

He stepped into the rectangle, and Thoman got to his feet, holding up his hands for silence. The man looked older than he had the night before, and there were lines around his eyes from lack of sleep. *You have no one to blame for this beside yourself, Father. Perhaps now you will learn to be more decisive.* “The reasons for this duel were disclosed at the Evening Court. These men will spar until one lies dead or mortally wounded. No assistance or favor is to be shown to either combatant, upon punishment of death.” He turned to look at his son, and Philip nodded once. “Lay on!”



Bryane closed her eyes, her entire body shaking. The cat rested beside her, a comforting warmth at her side, while its purr filled the room. **Reach out, carefully. You do not want to startle his concentration.** The voice wove through her thoughts, boosting her mind outside of the walls of the room. Gently, her thoughts found an answer to their silent call, and she gasped as Philip’s vision filled her mind.

Vlad was charging towards him, his sword raised high like a club. She saw Philip’s sword flash towards the man’s vulnerable middle, when Vlad’s blade clashed against it, throwing sparks. She winced as a shield battered Philip’s, sending tremors through his arm. *Vlad has only to beat him senseless to win.*

Philip knows that, Child. Have faith in a knight to know the ways of battle.

Metal screamed against metal in her mind as Vlad’s blade locked with Philip’s, both struggling to throw the other off-balance. Vlad slammed his shield into the side of Philip’s head, and her own mind shrieked in pain at the blow.

A hand grabbed her arm, and she broke the connection, jolting upright. Her vision refused to come clear, though, as ghosts of the battle continued before her eyes. Nikoli leaned close, placing a hand over her mouth. “We have to hurry, My Lady. Dress quickly.” He handed her a dress and moved away, ducking into the open wall behind the washbasin.

She struggled into the dress, her mind shying away as Vlad’s sword swept in to mark Philip’s arm. *Gods help me, I can feel his pain!*

You must remain calm, Bryane. Your feelings will carry to Philip as easily as his pain carries to you. The cat washed a paw nervously. **The bond is improperly broken, and there is no time to waste in severing it.**

She picked up the cat and stepped into the passageway. The flat of Philip's sword connected with Vlad's arm, and he dropped his own blade with a curse, his hand numb. "Where are we going?"

"As far as we can before an alarm is called." Nikoli closed the wall behind them. "Philip has arranged for us to reach the border, at the very least. If luck is on our side, there will be an advance party from King Taureas to greet you before the guard catches up with us."

She froze, her heart shying as Vlad withdrew a dagger from his belt and lunged at Philip. "You want me to leave?"

"My Lady, these orders were given by Prince Philip." Nikoli paused, and his expression reflected a war of emotions. "He wishes you to be safe, no matter what happens in the duel. I am to convey you to King Taureas and ensure your protection."

"No, I have to stay here." Vlad's knife tore flesh from Philip's thigh. "Please!"

Nikoli grabbed her arm, his face grim. "I have my orders, My Lady."

The passageways were dark, allowing her vision to fill with the battle. She watched in horror as Philip's shield dropped from his hand, blood spilling down his arm where the dagger had marked him. Vlad raised his own shield to batter Philip's head, and a blade cut for Vlad's legs. The strike of steel on skull sent a shock through her entire body, and she collapsed onto the floor, the cat jumping free.

"My Lady?"

"Gods help him," she whispered, feeling Philip's disorientation. Pain tore across her shoulder, and she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. Philip rushed Vlad, catching him off guard and throwing him to the ground, but his sword was jarred from his hand.

"My Lady, are you all right?"

Vlad slashed forward with his knife, throwing Philip back to roll forward and pinning him with an elbow to the chest. The knife dropped lower, and Philip thrust a hand up to catch against Vlad's wrist, squeezing the bones there. The knife fell from Vlad's fingers, and he growled, reaching for Philip's throat.

"The Courtyard," she gasped, pushing herself to her feet. "I have to reach the Courtyard."

"My Lady, please!"

This way, Bryane, this way. The cat was a mobile shadow in the darkness, and she stumbled after him.

Her throat was tight, and she squeezed her eyes shut as the pressure on Philip's neck increased. Hands flailed for the dagger nearby, but Vlad had the longer reach. Philip tried to work his fingers under Vlad's hand, his body twisting to bring the blade in his boot within reach. Nikoli reached for her and she shrugged him off.

Another turn, My Lady. The cat stretched up against a wall. **The lever, over your head.**

She reached up, staring into Vlad's triumphant face as he brought his blade down. Philip kicked against him, trying to shift his weight. She pulled the lever, falling through the open wall onto the dust of the Courtyard. A trio of guards caught sight of her, as she climbed to her feet, shouting for her to hold. She gathered the cat to her chest and ran towards the crowd of people.

The knife pressed through cloth and flesh, seeking bone, and she screamed. Faces turned toward her in surprise, and they moved out of her way.

Philip wrestled the knife from his boot, but Vlad slapped it away, granting a gasp of air to Philip's throat. Vlad lifted a blade stained in blood and thrust it forward.

"You will not take another love away from me!" She shoved a startled woman out of her way, tripping over the stones of the rectangle. Vlad was laughing, getting to his feet, and lifting the blade in triumph. The cat jumped from her arms and dove between Vlad's feet, throwing the man off balance. He howled in surprise, collapsing forward, and the sound of steel meeting flesh silenced the Courtyard.

Tears streamed from her eyes as she got to her feet, looking down at Vlad. He turned towards her, his face surprised. Slowly, he lifted his hand, staring uncomprehendingly at the blood coating his fingers. The blade was buried to the hilt in his chest. He looked at the snarling cat, inches from his face, and his body sagged against the ground.

Hands grabbed her arms, pulling her out of the rectangle and shouting for the people crowding around her to stay back. Her mind showed nothing, save the churning clouds overhead, slowly dimming to darkness. She pressed her hands over her eyes, collapsing to the ground.



Bryane stared at the image of the doll. It gazed with empty eyes at the far wall, its white features frozen into an expression of nothing. It was a beautiful doll, dressed in a gown of white silk, with ribbons twined through its hair, and a simple ribbon tied around its neck. Tiny white slippers adorned its feet, which just brushed the ground. A tiger-striped cat jumped into the doll's lap, and mechanical arms began to stroke its fur.

How long will you hide in here? The voice was soft, a speaker aware that they trespassed. Only the doll's hand moved, sleeking back fur grown coarse with age. **You will take no comfort from knowing that Vlad is dead?** The doll's hand moved, from head to tail and back again. The cat's ears flattened miserably. **I am sorry, Bryane. I am so sorry.**

A door opened somewhere in the room, and a mobile face looked over the doll's head. The face was tired, and it showed signs of weeping. The man gently took the doll's hand, shooing the cat from its lap. "Bryane, it is time." She watched the doll get to its feet, taking the arm of the man beside her. He turned the doll around, and the image vanished.



"Your friend seems concerned for you," Cauld said pleasantly, looking down at the cat keeping pace with them. "I have seen him in your room many times." His smile faltered, and he stumbled for a moment. "I would hope that he has brought you some peace, but that is not a happy tilt of the ears."

"Where am I going, Father?" Bryane asked, appalled and fascinated at the lack of emotion in her voice.

Cauld was quiet. "King Thoman believes that you should speak to a priest, to repent of your sins."

"I have no regrets a priest can absolve, Father."

“Perhaps, then, he will provide you with a word of comfort.” Cauld fell silent, and his steps began to slow. He tottered with an age he did not have, and his gaze was on her face. “Perhaps I should speak to the priest.”

“I forgave you a long time ago, Father,” she said quietly. A muffled sob was her only answer.

They stopped before a closed door, and the guards fell in beside her. Cauld took her hands in his, looking into her eyes, though he flinched from what he saw there. “Bryane, I wish that I had listened to you before. I only wanted what would be best for you.”

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. “I love you, Father.” Then she bent to pick up the cat and pulled open the door.

The room inside was dark, as befitted a confession, and the doors closed behind her with an audible click. She settled into the chair in the center of the room, her hands trembling where they held the cat.

“Bryane Merison. A sentence of death was placed upon you, for the act of treason.” The voice was cold and ugly. A shadowed figure in front of her shifted, and she heard the shuffling of parchment. “It is a tradition, in such cases, to provide the criminal with a chance to seek forgiveness from the gods before a sentence is carried out.”

“I have nothing to say to the gods.”

“You are revoking your right to absolution?”

She was quiet, and she stroked the cat’s head. “To seek absolution would be to admit that I regretted some portion of my life. I have no regrets, save one, and I will not ask for forgiveness for it.”

“What regret is that?”

“That I was unable to stop time for one night, in a forest clearing.”



Bryane waited for the page to announce her presence, her hands clasped in front of her. The cat stood at her side -- a silent guardian. The boy motioned her inside, and she stepped into the King’s study. King Thoman was seated behind his desk, his hands steepled under his chin. He watched as she took the seat in the center of the room.

His face had changed. There was more written in the lines that creased his forehead and surrounded his eyes. He looked old and tired, as her father had. “I am at a loss as to what to do with you, My Lady. The priest tells me that you have refused absolution.”

“I have no regrets, Your Majesty. Let the priests speak with those who are unsatisfied with their lives.”

He nodded slightly. “Your father and sisters are in agony. You refuse to see anyone in your room, save for that mangy stray, and you speak few words -- only when spoken to.” He sighed, leaning back in his chair. “You are a mere spirit of your former self.”

“I am weary of rhetoric, Your Majesty.”

“And I am weary of housing a ghost in my Palace.” He waved someone forward from the back of the room. “Take her away.”

She bowed her head politely, then stood and looked up into a face that shattered the ice encasing her heart. “Philip.” The words were spoken from near-silent lips.

His face was drawn, and there were still bandages marking his forehead and neck, but he smiled, and his eyes were damp. "I'm afraid that I have taken longer to heal than I anticipated. I am sorry to have made you wait, My Love."

She turned back to King Thoman, bewildered. The words she longed for remained elusive, and the man chuckled -- the first sound of mirth she had heard him make. "Perhaps I should take my son away from you more often, if it serves to silence your insolent tongue." His expression softened, and he sighed. "My Lady, I have spoken at length with my son and your father. I find some of what they say difficult to believe, but they have no reason to lie. I wish to speak to you, as soon as your heart has mended and you are once more a thorn in my side.

"For now, you are pardoned of all claims of treason. Dispatches have been sent throughout the Kingdom and to our allies announcing your engagement." He smiled. "King Taureas was the first to send joyful congratulations, though he expressed some disappointment at the loss of his 'favorite Envoy.'" He lifted an eyebrow, and she could see some of the humor that ran rampant through his son. "I suggest that before the pair of you attempt to undo all of the healer's careful work, you consider a fair choice of replacement."

"The choice has already been made, Father," Philip said with a chuckle, and he winced at the pain that lanced through his ribs. "I fear we both owe many favors to a certain body guard, who will be only too pleased to escape from my terrible decisions -- for a short while, at least."

"I will speak to Nikoli at once." He waved them from the room. "Off with you, before I come to my senses and change my mind."

Philip took her hand and led her out of the room, drawing her out into the gardens before pausing to catch his breath. He placed his forehead against hers, reaching up to stroke her cheek with his thumb. "I heard your voice, Bryane. I heard your screams, and then I laid in a bed and heard nothing for days."

"I saw the blade, felt it." She shook her head. "There was nothing to hear."

There was a soft coughing sound at their feet, and they looked down at the cat, wearing a self-satisfied grin. **There are times, my beloved children, when silence is a necessity. Healing is best accomplished in quiet -- be it physical or emotional. The cat closed its eyes, and they both felt a warmth reach out to embrace them. The voice echoed softly between them. You have granted me a peace I feared would not come, and I thank you both. I believe it is time, at last, to seek the oblivion of my beautiful Gorgiana's arms. I love you both, and I will watch over you.** There was a series of sneezing laughter. **Try not to torment the Court too badly.**

They laughed, and Bryane saw her tears mirrored in Philip's eyes. She pressed her hand to his cheek, and he kissed her palm. "I feared I had lost you."

"Did I not promise that I would strengthen our bond, so that not even death could part us?"

She smiled through her tears. "Aye, but when can one be sure a promise is meant?"

He kissed her palm again. "My Love, when a Prince makes a promise, it is always to be taken seriously."

About the Author

Andria lives in Philadelphia where she works full-time, slaving away for the Philadelphia Zoo. She has been writing for as long as she can remember, and her “current” triumph is receiving Honorable Mention in the 2005 L. Ron Hubbard’s Writers of the Future Contest, Third Quarter. When she isn’t struggling frantically to meet her personally-imposed deadlines, she can be found doting on the four-footed muses that populate her home...all of whom are convinced they are more important than her writing.

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