

The Princess

An *A Thieving Curse* Tristan POV (#1)

Tristan staggered back and half fell onto the foot of his bed. He blinked at his father, struggling to comprehend the news. The words made sense, but at the same time, they didn't make *any* sense. "She's here? Now? Alive?"

Father scowled with an exasperated grunt. "Do you have a brain in that head of yours? Yes. Some peasant found her wandering in the mountains. It's suspicious, but we'll talk to him and sort out if he's an honest man. The Eynlaean brat confirmed her identity, though, so it's really Princess Raelyn. The Court should be pleased," he half muttered. "The princess will be more legitimate, but I don't know why the accursed lords are so hung up on this stupid marriage at all."

Tristan barely heard him. Father had never been keen on the royal union or the treaty it sealed, other than an interest in the marriage strengthening their claim to the throne, so he hadn't been happy to switch the bride from the Eynlaean princess to the king's niece. But political maneuverings weren't at the forefront of Tristan's thoughts at that moment.

"He was right," Tristan murmured. "She wasn't dead." Horror crept over him like ice. "I should have looked for her. Prince Gareth has probably told her all about my refusal. What if she hates me?"

His father fixed him with a flat stare. "This is your concern? Not where she's been or what she's been doing for two months? Besides, her feelings are irrelevant. All that matters is that she says her vows, you both do your duty, and she gives you an heir." He uttered his next words under his breath, but Tristan still heard them. "Hopefully by some miracle one more impressive than mine."

Tristan kept his expression impassive and didn't react. He'd had plenty of practice over the years. At least this time his father hadn't worked in a jab about how Tristan's long-dead prince-turned-monster cousin had been a better prince.

"Get dressed and run a comb through that hair of yours before putting on your crown. Then meet me in the Rose audience chamber."

I thought her feelings about me didn't matter, so why does my appearance matter? Tristan kept the thought to himself and bowed. "Yes, Father."

The king turned sharply on his heel and strode out of Tristan's room.

His father might not care about the poor girl's feelings, but she was still a princess, and if there was anything in the world King Henry Carbrey cared about, it was appearances. And power. And appearances' relationship to maintaining power.

As Tristan pulled off the wrinkled shirt he'd been wearing to lounge about in his room and changed into clothing more befitting a royal introduction, a strange feeling buzzed in his chest. Anticipation or nerves, he wasn't sure. All of the questions that had swarmed around him like flies when the Eynlaeans first arrived months ago, only to die unsatisfying deaths as he learned the princess wasn't with them and wasn't coming, revived now.

What did she look like? He knew she had golden blonde hair and blue eyes and was petite and said to be beautiful, but what did she *really* look like? Would he find her attractive? Would...she find *him* attractive? What would she *be* like? Would her experiences lost in the mountains have tempered the wild spirit of which he'd heard rumors? What if they didn't get along?

His father might view Princess Raelyn Argent of Eynlae as nothing more than a tool, but deep in the recesses of his heart, Tristan harbored other ideas. Other hopes—and fears.

A marriage was a lifelong commitment. At least, as long as nothing terrible happened. Tristan shoved thoughts of his mother, dead within weeks of his birth, back into the dark corners of his mind. His father spoke of marriage like a business transaction, but Tristan knew that wasn't the only way, that some couples found companionship and...love.

Just the thought of the word was at once frightening and invigorating. He imagined this arranged marriage rather like a blazing fire on a cold day. It might bring comfort. There had been times in the past he'd let himself daydream of peaceful evenings in his suite with his bride, perhaps cozied up together under a blanket while they watched snow fall out the window, and he told her all the things he never had the courage to say to anyone else and she listened and kissed away his pain.

However, fire could also destroy. Maybe it'd be better to hold his bride at arm's length lest his father prove right that women were weak of mind and body and fickle and untrustworthy. Still, as Tristan placed a gold circlet on his head, he couldn't help but cling to the hope this particular woman might bring some tenderness and joy into his life.

While he walked through the massive palace, he worked on taming his emotions. Burying the nervousness, caging the hope so it wouldn't distract him, and putting on the princely persona his father would expect. Cold, because kings and princes couldn't let emotional appeals from subjects affect their judgment—and princes ruled their emotions, not the other way around. A little distant, because kings and princes were above the rest of the kingdom, and blurring that line would undermine their power and control. And focused, because everything a king or crown prince did could have consequences.

Like speaking too callously to a grieving Eynlaean prince. Father had seemed torn on whether to rage at Tristan for

antagonizing their royal visitors and speaking when he should have held his tongue, to be proud of him for keeping his focus on saving the royal union and the terms of the treaty, or to be a bit pleased that his unintentional goading of Prince Gareth had resulted in allowing Father to arrest the prince, granting him leverage to back King Weston into a corner. But now the consequence might be that Tristan's future wife would have the impression from her brother that Tristan was heartless.

Well, she wouldn't be the only one who thought that. Most of the palace would probably agree. Better to be thought heartless than pitiful.

Except he hoped for something different with Princess Raelyn. She had to be nervous, too, right? If he could show her that he would treat her well, maybe he could win her over. And then if he took off his mask around her...maybe she would kiss him the way she did in his daydreams, and he wouldn't be so lonely anymore.

Or she would reject him.

Tristan stopped at the throne room door and closed his eyes as he reached for the handle. A deep breath. *I'm a crown prince. I demand respect. I show no weakness or fear. I am power.* With that, he opened his eyes and strode into the room.

A dirty peasant stood in the middle of the chamber, facing Father, who sat on the small throne. Both men glanced his way as the door clicked shut behind him.

"Good of you to join us, my son." Father smiled, but irritation flashed in his eyes.

Tristan should have been faster. He hurried over to stand at his father's side, resisting the urge to check that his crown was straight.

"This is Patrick." Father turned his critical gaze back to the peasant.

The man was middle aged, perhaps around King Henry's age, and his weathered face showed tell-tale signs of a man who lived a

lot of his life laboring outdoors. Mud clung to his worn boots and dust coated his rough linen trousers.

“He says he’s a goatherd who was delivering goat cheese in the mountains and Princess Raelyn stumbled onto his campsite.”

Patrick bowed his head deferentially. “Gave me quite a fright, she did, barreling into my camp late at night all dirty and panicked. Said she hadn’t seen anyone in days and was nearly ready to give up hope. Cried all over my shirt.”

A pang went through Tristan’s heart, but he was careful to keep his expression impassive.

“And then what happened?” Father asked.

The goatherd shrugged. “I gave the poor thing food and asked her how she’d gotten lost. She seemed scared and didn’t want to say, until she admitted a dragon had been holding her captive in a cave.”

Tristan couldn’t help the frown that crept onto his face at the unexpected *dragon*, but that was nothing compared to the way his father visibly stiffened in his throne, his jaw slackening for a moment before he caught himself. *Odd.*

“A dragon?” Tristan questioned.

“You’ll have to question the princess on that.” Patrick rubbed his chin. “After I assured her she could trust me, she asked me to bring her here. Now, I would have helped her get home regardless; you see, she reminds me of my niece, and it’s what I’d hope someone would do for my niece if she were lost. But I couldn’t say no to helping a princess, even though it was far out of my way.” His expression fell, taking a mournful quality. “My old horse couldn’t take the trip. She went lame and I’m afraid the princess had to walk a long ways. Had to leave my cart, too, which is a pity to have to replace both horse and cart.”

Tristan and his father shared a quick glance. The man was practically begging for a reward. Typical peasants.

“And you were good to the princess?” Father pressed. “Treated her honorably?”

The man’s jaw hung open, his eyebrows making a leap for his hairline as his face went red. “Of course! You can ask her; I’m sure she’ll tell you. I did everything I could to keep her safe and comfortable and wouldn’t have dreamed of harming her. I just wanted to help a lost girl. And do my duty to the crown, of course.” Patrick gave a deep bow. “Your Majesty.”

“Your Excellency,” Tristan corrected. Father gave him an approving nod.

Patrick jaw tensed, probably out of fear. He swept another clumsy, deeper bow. “Your Excellency. My apologies.”

Father hummed. “I thank you for your service and kindness. I hope this will help ease the loss of your horse and cart.” He reached down on the far side of his throne and lifted a small, bulging sack that clinked faintly. To his credit, Patrick didn’t show any signs of greed.

“It’s my duty and honor, Your Excellency.” Patrick bowed again. But he also didn’t refuse the bounty, hesitantly stepping forward to take the coins. He clutched them as he backed away, bent over in a deep bow.

“You may go.” Father waved his hand dismissively. “I’m sure your sheep need you.”

Tristan thought he saw the man’s lips move in the shape of *goats* as he bowed again. “Long live the king.” Something odd and almost angry sparked in the peasant’s eyes as he backed toward the door, but it was gone so fast Tristan wasn’t sure he’d even seen it.

For a moment, the room was silent. Tristan waited, knowing better than to speak first.

“Dragon...” Father gazed unseeing into the distance as he stroked his chin, a worried line appearing between his brows. He straightened abruptly. “I don’t like it.”

“I don’t either.” Tristan clasped his hands behind his back. “I know there’s a variety of monsters in the mountains, but usually we only get the rare attack, like the manticore that attacked the Argents’ traveling party. A dragon is a bigger threat, and one that’s taking young women captive is a serious problem.”

“Mm.”

A knock sounded at the door, and Father shook his head. “We’ll speak on this more later. Come in!”

Steward Prescott entered, trailed by Prince Gareth. The Eynlaean prince had cleaned up after his sojourn in the dungeons, his beard shaven and clean clothes tucked into a shining belt and gleaming boots. Gareth bowed, although bitterness showed in the tightening of his mouth as he glanced at Tristan.

“I saw Patrick as he was leaving,” Gareth said when he straightened. “Raelyn spoke highly of him. Thank you for rewarding him, Your Excellency.” Tristan was pleased to hear that Patrick hadn’t been lying about his kindness toward Raelyn.

“It was the least I could do for his service in returning dear Princess Raelyn to us.” Father smiled magnanimously, and Tristan stifled some discomfort at how effortlessly his father could switch from *her feelings don’t matter* to *dear Princess Raelyn*.

“Where is she?” Gareth asked, a bit of anxiety spilling into his words.

Prescott cleared his throat. “Likely still in her suite on the second floor, north hall. Hopefully she will be here soon. I fear it can take ladies longer to get cleaned up, Your Grace.”

Gareth nodded. “And she was in a state.” He glared at Tristan. “The scent of dragon smoke still clung to her. It’s a miracle she’s not dead.”

“So you believe her story?” Father asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Gareth frowned. “My sister has never lied to me. And nothing less than being held against her will could have kept her away.”

“But by a *dragon*?”

Tristan had found it difficult to believe as well, but he hadn’t expected Father to be so incredulous.

Gareth’s jaw tightened as he glared daggers at the king who had kept him locked in his dungeon for weeks. “Raelyn is not taken to flights of fancy, and I heard the fear and sincerity in her voice as she told me a dragon had held her captive. I smelled the smoke in her dress. Are you calling the Princess of Eynlae a liar?”

“Of course not, Prince Gareth. Dragons haven’t been seen in Rethalyon or Eynlae in a couple hundred years. You’ll forgive my surprise.”

Gareth nodded, although he still looked displeased. But at that moment, the door opened.

A young woman walked in, her eyes wide as they darted over the room. Her golden hair was partly pinned back, shorter strands framing a gentle face with soft, pink lips and brilliantly blue eyes. Tristan’s breath caught. The rest of her hair fell in golden waves down her back. Her lavender dress swished around her legs as she walked to her brother’s side and curtsied low. The princess stayed bowed, following proper Rethali protocol for her first time meeting the king, waiting for the king to acknowledge her.

“Rise, Princess Raelyn Argent of Eynlae,” Father said, and she straightened.

Tristan’s mouth felt dry. This was his bride? She was beautiful. He wasn’t sure whether to thank the stars or fear that she was too good for him.

“Tell us your story,” Father said, shifting back in his throne. “I’d like to hear it from you.”

“Of course, Your Excellency,” Raelyn said softly, her eyelashes fluttering as she bowed her head. “I trust you know how I was separated from my family.” She glanced at her brother, and Gareth reached out and gave her hand a quick squeeze, but Tristan saw the haunted look in his eyes. With a deep breath, the princess continued. “After my horse bolted, it took me a while to get her to settle and stop, bringing me far from the pass. We were found by wolves, and my horse threw me.”

Her lower lip trembled as she dropped her gaze to the ground. “That’s when it showed up.” She gulped and whispered, “The dragon.”

Tristan had the urge to go to her and put an arm around her shoulders, let her know she was safe. It was a bewildering, foreign impulse, and one that he knew his father would take as a sign of weakness. He tightened his grip on his clasped hands behind his back and listened attentively as the frightened princess spoke of long weeks in a cave and failed attempts at escape before she finally made her way out of the cave on a day the dragon was mysteriously absent for longer than it had ever been prior. She gushed over the goatherd Patrick’s kindness and ended with her joy at being reunited with her brother.

“I am pleased you have made it to us safely,” Father said. With his impassive king tone, he sounded closer to bored than pleased. “I have rewarded Patrick and sent him on his way.”

Raelyn smiled. “Thank you, Your Excellency. He was a most kind man.”

Tristan waited, despite his eagerness to speak to his bride. His father gazed at Raelyn, his expression thoughtful.

“This dragon,” Father said at last. “Did it speak?”

Tristan frowned at his father. Did dragons commonly speak? He didn’t know much about them.

“No. It growled and snarled. If it was speaking, I couldn’t understand.”

Father nodded. “Dragons have been known to cast enchantments. Make people believe impossible lies, or even to do their bidding.”

What? Was that why Father seemed so perturbed by the news? Raelyn didn’t *look* enchanted. Although, Tristan supposed he didn’t have any idea what an enchanted person would look like.

“Hopefully if the dragon couldn’t speak, he couldn’t enchant you,” Father continued. “The fact you’re here likely means you’re fine. Still. Probably best to keep an eye out for any unusual behavior or odd claims. Might be a sign of an enchantment. I have a healer who can help if she says or does anything...outlandish.”

Concern that mirrored Tristan’s own pinched Gareth’s forehead. “Thank you.”

Father stood. “You look tired, Princess Raelyn. I will give you a moment to meet your betrothed, and then you may retire.”

Betrothed. *That’s me.* Tristan’s heart seemed to lodge in his throat. He was vaguely aware of his father saying something more, than a heavy hand gripped his shoulder.

“Whether this dragon has bewitching abilities or not, we need to hunt it down,” Henry murmured close by Tristan’s ear. “Meet me in my chambers.” With that, he strode out of the room, leaving Tristan with Steward Prescott and the Eynlaean siblings.

Prescott bowed to Prince Gareth and motioned toward the door. “Shall I show you back to your quarters, Your Grace?”

“I think I can find it.”

Prescott glanced helplessly at Tristan. “But we could go and allow Crown Prince—”

“I see no reason for Raelyn and the prince to be alone,” Gareth cut in flatly. “And I’m not leaving her after I just got her back.”

Tristan nodded at Prescott. He appreciated the attempt at giving them some privacy, but they'd have the rest of their lives for that. The steward departed, and silence descended on the room. Had this audience chamber always felt so small?

He opened his mouth, but no words came out, so closed it again and bowed. This was ridiculous. He was a future king, not a tongue-tied idiot. He straightened. "I am pleased to finally meet you, Princess Raelyn." He meant it, too, and he hoped she sensed his sincerity.

"I am honored to meet you as well, Your Highness," Raelyn replied with a graceful curtsy. At least Father wouldn't be able to find her manners lacking. Gareth had been right. Raelyn had trained well for her role as princess and eventually queen of Rethalyon.

Tristan smiled. "Please. My lord is fine," he said, offering her the less formal option commonly used by married couples. "Or Prince Tristan, if necessary."

"Of course, my lord."

Her quick adaptation of the more familiar title strengthened his hopes that they could make this marriage work on a personal as well as political level. Tristan looked into her eyes. They reminded him of sapphires.

"You are far lovelier than I imagined." That seemed a poor compliment, but he wasn't used to this. He'd tried to avoid flirting with the young women of the court, knowing he had a bride waiting for him. Abruptly, he realized he should say something about the ordeal she had gone through. "But I am horrified to hear what happened to you." He glanced at Gareth with a twist of shame. "I wish I had listened to your brother."

"Sure." Gareth snorted. "Who's the fool now?"

The words hit like a punch, their sting worse for the truth in them—and for their familiarity. *Fool* was a common criticism from his father. "I was wrong." Tristan cleared his throat. "But the

chances of finding you after a week were—well...” He trailed off, wishing he hadn’t even started that sentence.

“I understand.” Yet the softness of her voice and the way her gaze fell to the carpet spoke of hurt.

“I’m pleased you survived and found your way here, though.” Almost before he realized what he was doing, Tristan reached forward. Gently, he placed his forefinger under her chin and tilted her head up so he could see those blue eyes again. She seemed to hold her breath as he looked over her face. Her lips parted slightly, and Tristan wondered what it would feel like to kiss her. He’d never kissed anyone before. But not yet. Not while she was recovering from everything she’d suffered...and not while her brother stood nearby.

“You are strong and brave to have survived so long on your own,” he murmured, “and especially to have made your escape and traveled so far.” He dropped his hand from her face. Maybe he didn’t deserve her affection after he had failed her so terribly. “Please accept my apologies for not rescuing you.”

It was a hollow, pointless apology that couldn’t begin to make up for the weeks she had spent as a dragon’s prisoner.

“You wouldn’t have even known where to look,” Raelyn said, and she didn’t sound upset with him.

Still, he had to make this right. For her, for anyone else that dragon might hurt, and to start his marriage well. A beautiful princess deserved a heroic prince, and Tristan thought if he could be her hero, surely she would look at him with more affection than the current uncertainty clouding her features. Besides, Father was correct; they needed to deal with this dragon.

Tristan snatched up her hand. “I’m going to slay the monster that tormented you.” He said it like a vow. “I hate the idea of a dragon who captures innocent maidens and threatens to eat them in my kingdom. My father wants it dead. And as your husband, it is my

duty to avenge you. I swear, I will right the wrong I did you by not searching for you, my lady.”

Raelyn gripped his hand in return, as if clinging to his promise. “But... I survived. I don’t need avenged.”

To Tristan’s surprise, Gareth spoke up before he could reply. “I agree with Prince Tristan. I want to cut this dragon’s heart out.”

“Can you give us a description of the area?” Tristan rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. “I know it may be difficult to talk about, but anything you can remember could help us hunt the beast down and kill it.”

A shiver shook her petite frame. “I... I don’t know.”

“Oh, Princess.” Tristan drew her into an embrace. He hadn’t hugged anyone in...he couldn’t remember the last time it had happened. But he found he liked holding her, liked the warmth of her body against his, the faint beat of her heart that he could feel against his torso. He hoped she found it as soothing as he intended. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. You don’t need to talk about it right now.”

“I only... I don’t know what any of the peaks are called or where anything is on a map.”

Tristan pulled back so he could meet her eyes, but also acutely aware she hadn’t returned his embrace. *Give it time, Tristan.* “It’s all right. I understand.”

“Could you lead us there, Rae?” Gareth asked, stepping in closer. “Are there landmarks you might recognize?”

Tristan considered, unsure if he could ask that of the frightened girl before him. “Would you be comfortable doing that? Maybe if you saw the dragon dead, you would look less afraid.”

Raelyn rubbed her arm and looked down at her feet. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to go,” Tristan assured her. “I’ll put a hunting party together. We’ll scour the mountains from Gonah Way as far as we have to until we find the dragon who took you.”

“And cut out its heart,” Gareth said, his tone menacing. “Something as big as a dragon can’t hide forever.”

Tristan looked to the Eynlaean prince. They hadn’t started off on good terms, with Tristan’s callous belief that Raelyn had to be dead and Gareth’s physically violent reaction. But Gareth was dedicated, and this might be a good opportunity to patch things up—both for the sake of relations between their kingdoms and because he suspected being on Gareth’s good side would benefit his relationship with Raelyn.

“You will accompany me, then, Prince Gareth?” he asked.

“You won’t slay my sister’s monster without me.” The look in Gareth’s eyes dared Tristan to deny him.

Tristan nodded, hoping he wouldn’t come to regret this decision. “Was it high in the mountains?” he asked Raelyn. “Or in a valley?”

“I don’t...I wasn’t...” She shook her head, looking overwhelmed. “It’s all a blur. I think...a valley.”

Gareth put his arm around Raelyn’s shoulders. “You’re in shock. It’s all right.”

A stab of irrational jealousy went through Tristan as Raelyn leaned against her brother, accepting *his* gesture of comfort. Tristan clasped his hands behind him, fighting to keep his expression serious and not let his unwarranted hurt show. He recalled what Father had said about dragons having the ability to ensorcell humans.

“Hopefully the confusion is just nerves, not due to an enchantment,” he mused aloud, watching Raelyn with concern. “If it is, though, I imagine killing the dragon would end it.”

Gareth nodded. “If I were a dragon, I’d make my lair on a tall mountain. We should start with high peaks within a few days’ ride

of the pass. There's a village between..." He squinted at nothing. "I think it was between Mount Liran and Mount Klainar, that had rumors of dragon sightings."

He didn't like Gareth's take-charge attitude, but he couldn't argue with the logic. "We can start with those. I think I can pull together enough men to leave by noon tomorrow."

Raelyn swayed as her face took on a greenish tinge. "I...think I need to retire, my lord."

He should have realized she wouldn't have the energy for this conversation. *Stupid Tristan, stupid.* "I'm sorry, my lady." He offered her his arm. "Prescott mentioned you're in a guest room in the north hall of the second floor. Allow me to escort you."

The heartbeat during which Raelyn hesitated felt like an eternity. Just when Tristan was about to drop his arm and apologize for whatever boundary he had overstepped, Raelyn stepped away from her brother and slipped her hand into the crook of Tristan's elbow. A pleased smile pulled at his mouth as he placed his other hand over her fingers and drew her in closer.

"I'll be right behind you," Gareth said, clear disapproval in his voice.

If Tristan wasn't so used to hiding his emotions, he might have scowled at Gareth. Didn't Gareth understand Tristan was going to *marry* Raelyn? He didn't need to be so flames-cursed protective and disapproving. This marriage would happen whether it pleased Prince Gareth or not.

As Father had told him, it would even happen whether it pleased Tristan or not.

No one spoke as they walked through the sprawling palace's halls. That suited Tristan fine; he wasn't entirely sure what to say to a beautiful young woman who had escaped a dragon he should have rescued her from. Not to mention a young woman he was going to marry soon. Right now, she didn't seem to particularly care for him,

though. She walked stiffly at his side, keeping some space between them.

It's just the dragon, Tristan told himself. Once she'd had time to recover and he'd rectified his error of not searching for her by killing the beast, she'd start to relax. At least, he desperately hoped so.

"Prince Tristan," Raelyn said slowly. "If you leave tomorrow, when will we wed?"

"As soon as I'm back and your enemy vanquished." He gave her hand a reassuring pat. "I failed you when I didn't go looking for you. I won't fail you now."

"The dragon is...terrifying. I fear for your safety."

She...feared for him? Tristan stopped and looked down at her. Maybe it wasn't care for him, more just a memory of how terrified she had been in the dragon's clutches. His resolve to slay the dragon and her fears strengthened. Carefully, he brushed his fingers across her cheek, feeling the warmth of her soft skin.

"You needn't worry. I am skilled with a sword, a deadly opponent. I'll take only the best knights and hunters with me. The dragon will quake with fear, not I."

"But—"

"I will sleep better with the beast dead." In a moment of daring, he leaned down and placed a soft, quick kiss on her forehead. A sealing of his vow that he would avenge her, and a promise of their future. "And I'm certain you will, as well."

Tears glittered in her sapphire eyes; tears Tristan felt helpless to combat. But he could fight the creature that had caused them.

"Oh, my lady." Tristan cupped the side of her face in his hand, unsure if her intake of breath was discomfort or pleasure or related to her fear. "I'll come back. So will Prince Gareth. One princess-stealing dragon in the mountains isn't anything we can't handle. All right?"

“I’ll go with you.” Raelyn pulled Tristan’s hand away from her face and held it, and something steely entered her voice and hardened her face, reminding him of Gareth’s stubbornness. “I refuse to wait here worrying. I’ll try to help you find it. I might recognize something.”

“Are you certain?” Tristan frowned. He didn’t want to put her through any more traumatic experiences.

“Please.” Raelyn turned to Gareth. “I spent over a month wondering if you were dead. I can’t do that again.”

Pain flickered over Gareth’s face. “I know what you mean. I’d feel better knowing exactly where you are, too.”

Tristan gave in, already worrying about his father’s reaction to this. But it was their best chance at quickly finding the dragon. “All right.”

After leaving Raelyn in her room, Tristan hurried to his father’s chambers.

Father was sitting in one of two large armchairs in front of a cold fireplace, glaring at the wood as if he could set it aflame with the intensity of his stare. Tristan slipped into the other chair, even though part of him wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to do.

“How is she?” Father asked.

“Shaken, understandably. Rather frightened—”

“I meant, how is she to you? What do you think of her?”

“Oh.” Tristan shifted his gaze from Father’s piercing regard to the stone mantle above the fireplace. “She’s beautiful. She seems a little unsure of me, but I think her ordeal is a factor. She didn’t seem averse, though, just wary. She let me embrace her and kiss her forehead, though—”

“Her forehead?” Father snorted. “Her lips are only a few inches lower.”

Tristan shifted uncomfortably. “Like I said, she seemed a little hesitant, and she’s been through a difficult time lately—”

“I’d have kissed her.” Father leaned back in his chair. “Kissing usually makes a girl forget whatever is bothering her.” He shrugged. “At least it seems she’ll do. Healthy and pretty enough and it seems we don’t have to worry about her fighting her duty, and her blood is what matters most. Now. About the dragon.”

“Prince Gareth and I have agreed to head a hunting party together, departing tomorrow morning—”

Father cursed. “You fool! You’re not hunting it down.”

“But...” He shrank down in his chair. “You said—”

“I meant we should discretely send a hunting party, not declare to the entire kingdom we have a dragon problem by sending *you* at the head of a party. And what if the dragon kills you? Or worse, enchants you? The princess said she escaped because the dragon had an unusual absence. This entire thing could be a plot by the dragon to lure you into the mountains. The princess could be its pawn. Even if it’s not a trap, do you really think *you* can kill a dragon? But your stupid self just rushed in!”

Tristan hung his head. “I’m sorry. I thought it was a good idea. The dragon needs to die for the good of the kingdom and to ease Princess Raelyn’s terror and atone for my error in not searching for her. I know you haven’t observed my practices or hunts in a while, but I’m one of the most skilled hunters in the palace and an excellent swordsman.” He hoped Father didn’t catch the faint edge of hurt and longing for approval in his tone. “And I thought working with Prince Gareth would help smooth things over with the prince, which would be good for relationships between our kingdoms. I need to do this. For myself, and for my bride.”

Father snorted. “Ah, this is about being the dashing *hero* is it? Do you think she’ll love you for this?” He sneered, and Tristan’s face burned. “You’d be better served staying here, spending your time seducing her if you have delusions of romance for a royal alliance.”

Tristan cleared his throat. “Actually...she wants to accompany us, so I will be—”

“Do you need more proof it’s a trap, you complete buffoon?”

“If it were a trap she wouldn’t have been so hesitant,” Tristan snapped back. His throat caught with his own boldness, but he pressed on. “She fears the dragon, but she wants to see it dead. Surely she wouldn’t if it had ensorcelled her. She isn’t certain where its lair is, but she thinks she can help us find it if she accompanies us. I think it will be good for our relationship, as a couple and as two kingdoms.” He lifted his chin, trying to appear confident.

Father shook his head. “I don’t approve.”

He breathed in, forcing his voice not to tremble and his expression to remain steely. “I’m not asking for approval, Father. I need to do this.” He braced himself for Father to punish his defiance.

Father’s gaze cut toward him, and then he laughed and slumped back in his chair. “Finally growing a backbone, are you? Fine. But be warned. Dragons are deceptive above all things. They lie and manipulate and enchant and aren’t ever to be trusted. And that goes for your blushing bride, too, since she’s been around one of the fiends for weeks and who knows what it might have done to her. Be on your guard. Be careful of the girl and be more wary of anything even dragon-like.”

Tristan nearly asked what “dragon-like” meant, but he didn’t dare push his father further than he already had. “I’ll be careful. And I’ll bring the best knights and hunters with me to watch my back. Thank you for not stopping me.”

“Hm.” Father’s mouth pinched. “And there was such a promising glimmer of a ruthless king who takes action without caring about approval for a moment. Pity.”

Tristan’s heart dropped down to his stomach, but he kept his stoic mask in place.

Father waved his hand. “Go. Prepare your hunting party. And try to make this trip quick. We don’t want to keep King Weston waiting once he and his queen arrive. This wedding has been delayed too long already, and I dislike dealing with a restless Court. A royal wedding should shut them up for a while.”

“Yes, Father.” Tristan stood and bowed, even though his father wasn’t even looking at him, his eyes distant again as if lost in thought.

Out in the hall, Tristan leaned against the wall, pressing his flushed forehead against the cool stone as he let all his pent-up anxiety over that conversation slowly unwind. This hunting trip would be good. He’d prove to his father he could handle it. Returning with a dragon’s head should impress even the implacable King Henry Carbrey, and surely it would endear him to Raelyn, too.

At long last, he had a chance at not only winning his bride’s affection, but his father’s, too.