

I peeked into a hall. Portraits of generations past stared back at me. We had something similar back at home. It seemed deserted and rather boring. I was about to leave when...

Damn it.

Picture frames were the worst. They never wanted to stay in the perfect position, and there was a crooked one, highlighted by the light streaking from the door.

I closed the door for a second, thinking that perhaps I could ignore it this once. I lasted two steps from the door then I was dashing back to fix it. I resented my... issue for the first time I could remember. I thought of how Marius had expressed concern, how I may not be able to work as a diplomat.

I pushed one of the corners up until it was even with the opposite corner and gently- so gently- let it go. If I held my breath and released the frame just so, perhaps it would stay. The painting gods were not with me because the frame slid back almost to where it was before. Blowing a stray hair out of my face, I pushed it back until it stuck.

There we go.

I stood back, smiling.

"Do you need something, miss?"

I jumped, turning toward the door. "Oh no. I was just looking..." I frowned at another crooked picture. Did anyone care about their things here? "Um... Just looking at the portraits." I moved toward the painting and started the process all again.

I glanced up when she approached. "Would you like some help with that, my lady?" she asked softly.

I liked the way she talked. It was foreign. I couldn't even name what country it came from.

"Um... Yeah." I nodded. Looking around the room, I grimaced. "Actually... It seems like most of these are crooked. "I'll get this wall if you get that one?"

She raised an eyebrow, but it was still friendly. "Sure."

We worked in silence for a few moments, and I finally asked, "Where are you from? I can't place your accent."

She met my eyes for a second before turning her attention to one of the pictures again. "Just here and there, my lady." She was still smiling. "It's hard to name just one place I'd call home."

I grinned. "So you've been all over then? That's want to do. I want to go everywhere, see everything." I sighed. I was always aware that I sounded so cheesy, so naive. I never really cared.

"There are places in the world a lady shouldn't see." She looked like it slipped her tongue, before looking away. "It's easier to travel when one knows there's a home to return to."

I frowned. "I suppose I understand... Even a castle can seem empty with one person missing, and I'd want to come back to my family but..." I shrugged. "One castle gets boring."

She looked like she wanted to say something, but then changed her mind as she looked at me. "If you say so, my lady.. I find this castle quite interesting, though. All the things happening in it.. like this wedding.." She bit her lip, smiling again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't bore you with my rambling."

"Oh no!" I grinned at her. "The wedding is fascinating. It's the reason I'm here, and really, this castle is fantastic. Somehow I slipped out of everyone's sight and have been spending the day looking around." I studied at a rather dry looking woman stuck forever petting a ratlike dog. "I guess you get a unique view of the castle as a servant." I smirked. "At home I like to think I've made friends with a good lot of them. I get a lot of news." I giggled. "You wouldn't happen to have any tidbits to share, would you?"

She licked her lips with a playful expression. "Perhaps.. Though you seem quite able to find those tidbits yourself, if I may. I'm afraid I might insult you by stating something that you already know about."

I rolled my eyes, liking this maid. "I make do, but it helps to have some ears listening for you." Finishing with the last picture- after the maid, I couldn't help but notice- I smiled at her and refused to look at the wall behind her. I would assume she did everything right and not fix one. I started toward the door. "I don't think I caught your name."

She looked caught by surprise for a second. "Oh.. it's Aqui." She glanced up at my face but then looked down again. "Just Aqui."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that a Scarthian name?" If it was, maybe she knew some of their folklore, and if she knew that... Maybe... Most probably, I would make her a best friend of a sort. Scarthia had always intrigued me.

She smiled again, still looking surprised. "It is.. I didn't expect anyone to know that." She shrugged. "I had ancestors coming from there."

I nodded, grinning. "I've done quite a bit of reading on Scarthia. I love the legends." I laughed to myself. "If a princess could get away with it, I would spend hours reading them. As it is, I get by with what people tell me." I glanced at her curiously. "Did your parents or whoever tell you stories?"

For a second, she seemed almost sad, or like she wanted to change the topic, but then she nodded a bit. "Yes.." She grinned again. "You know, it helps to know how to read Scarthian. Then you can tell your tutors it's a book on whatever subject, and really read what you like."

My eyes widened. "You can read Scarthian?" I was suddenly very impressed. "That's fantastic! A..." I'd never thought of what to call Marius, now that I thought of it... "Friend has taught me some, but I'm not good at all."

"Has that friend taught you how to speak it as well?" She just looked curious now. "Or understand it?" She bit her lip. "I.. haven't really talked much in it to anyone for quite some years now."

I wrinkled my nose. "I understand it better than I can speak it, and I'm... passable at speaking."

"Then if I kindly ask to hear your name as well, you will know what I said?" She asked in Scarthian, observing me somewhat shyly.

I grinned, estatic. "Yes!" I cried and then switched to Scarthian sheepishly, "My name is Rea. Um..." I tried to summon the words I wanted. "Were you ever in Scarthia?"

That sad expression crossed her face again. "I have.. only shortly, though. There isn't really anyone there anymore."

I nodded. "Yes. That's what I read. Were you young?"

"It was quite recently, actually.. It wasn't what I expected to find there." She sighed slightly. "Do you

think there are other people from Scarthia, still alive, somewhere?"

I frowned. "That would be great, wouldn't it? I couldn't really say though... I [i]want[/i] to say yes. An entire country and all of its people... can't just disappear." I shook my head. "I wish I could give you a different answer."

She looked down, again biting her lip, nodding slightly. "I suppose, yes.." Her voice was quieter now, and for a moment she seemed lost in thoughts. "I'm sorry," she said as she looked up again, smiling a smile made to hide something else. "I'm afraid I got a bit nostalgic there."

I shrugged. "I don't mind. People tell the best stories that way." I frowned. "Not that that's all that matters. I think talking helps. Nostalgia without an audience is

"Perhaps you're right.." She frowned slightly. "You seem to know a lot more things than others your age."

I grinned, pleased with the observation. "I probably do, but we've mostly talked about people, and I know the most about people."

"That's quite a bold statement," she noticed and smiled a little again. "So then, does that mean you can read me like a book?"

I studied her, frowning. "No. I can read quite a few things, but I'm not sure what others mean. I'm good, but I'm not perfect."

Her smile widened, though she observed me carefully, as if she feared what I might see. "Would you tell me what you can read, then?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Well... Throughout a lot of this conversation you've been watching your words carefully. I thought it was because of our differences in status, but you've stopped addressing me by 'my lady' and all that mess, so I think you're guarding against saying too much. Too much of what... I cannot say, but it's certainly intriguing, whatever it may be."

"Perhaps I'm sent by that friend of yours to see how you'd act," she said with a wry smile. "Or perhaps I would find myself in danger if I spoke too much."

"Mmm..." I considered this new development, pushing another door open curiously. "I'm not sure that's Marius' style though I have to say, such a twist would be absolutely novel worthy." I nodded to myself as I wrinkled my nose at the sight of a harp. I was absolutely terrible at music. I glanced at her as I closed the door behind us, motioning to myself. "Do I really look so scary?"

She eyed the harp as well, smiling slightly. "Not until I remember you're a princess, my lady." She curtsied a little, looking like she's having fun. "You [i]look[/i] lovely. But this is a foreign land for me, and castles are terrible places for sharing secrets."

I laughed. "I can't argue with you there. I wouldn't trust anyone here if I had just met them." I shook my head. "Marius told me not to even trust people I've known well for a long time. I'm not very good at that."

"Ah, yes.." she nodded slowly. "Up to a while ago, I would've disagreed, but now.." She shrugged. "I'm not sure if we ever really know anyone we think we know."

I grimaced, not liking where this conversation was going, but curiosity kept me from deftly changing the subject. What kind of maid would have to worry about trust? "I still disagree, not that I tell Marius that. Surely everyone must have one confidante. My every acquaintance isn't watching for a way to bring me down." I sniffed. "I'm not even that important." I tapped a finger against the wall, staring into the

distance. "I'm not naive enough to believe that there is no evil in the world, but neither am I jaded enough to think that everyone wears a mask."

"Perhaps you should consider yourself lucky, then." She sounded serious now, and muttered something in Scarthian which I didn't understand. I told myself to remember to look it up later. "I'm sure you are important, more than you think. Or will be, to someone, soon enough."

She sounded so serious, so horribly sure as if the future of not trusting anyone because I was bitter was set in stone. I rolled my eyes, aiming for cute rather than obnoxious though I was sure if I succeeded. "I am important to people. My mother... My brother on occasion. Politically though..." I fluttered my eyelashes. "I'm merely Princess Rea to be kept under my mother's wing and then passed to my husband's." I frowned at the thought of how soon I would be transferred from my comfortable nest to an unknown one. "I'm a bauble to sing and dance or sit quietly in a corner until told to perform again."

I grinned wickedly, having long outgrown ideas of being my own woman... publically anyways. Privately, I would never jump through hoops at another's whim. I would just play the game. Like everyone else. "But you're quite right. I'm very lucky because that puts me in the marvelous position of watching and being underestimated of course. Me being a little girl who's spent her whole life letting others pamper her."

I laughed to hide a wave of worry because I knew I had told too much to this random maid I had met ten minutes ago. This wasn't just banter anymore, chatting to pass away the boredom with an entertaining companion. I had just given voice to real feelings, and as much as I loved to talk, I didn't much like giving what I actually thought away for nothing. Not to anyone. Not for free.

I shrugged, suddenly cold. I knew she would notice the difference. Oh well. "And I am pampered. Don't get your little servant heart into a little huff. I'm waited on hand and foot, and I love it, never going to apologize for it. Someone started an ugly rumor that being pampered made girls stupid though, and I'm not stupid." I smiled easily again. "Of course, everyone doesn't think that, but enough to make me get a little agitated from time to time." I shook my head, trying to make her think I was laughing at myself for my little rant.

She blinked, looking at me as if she wasn't sure if I was done. "I don't think anyone with a brain can think you're stupid," she said then, looking down again as another maid appeared and quickly walked past us. When she spoke again, she wasn't talking in Scarthian anymore. "I'm sorry, my lady. I don't think you deserve being underestimated, but it's not on me to say. I crossed the line already."

"I don't care about lines. It's okay." I picked at my sleeve. "I was a few years younger the last time I threw that fit." I pulled a face. "You probably think I'm a brat. Me complaining about being seen as stupid while you sweep and clean and..." I peered at what looked to be a suspiciously grey crack in the bookshelf to one side of the wall. "Dust."

"I haven't been a maid for a long time," she confessed. "Only since I got to this kingdom."

I watched her carefully. "What did you beforehand?" I asked pleasantly.

She pretended to think for a while. "I was a princess," she grinned. "But then I had to leave my kingdom and hide, and now I'm just waiting for the perfect moment to act and perfect person to help me get my crown back."

I blinked and laughed hesitantly. [i]Was she serious?[/i] "Sounds exciting," I teased, deciding that it must've been a joke. Surely.

"It definitely is.." She was still smiling. "Looks like I'm in right time, with all the royals around, but I'm

afraid I can't tell who the right person is."

I frowned. [i]She couldn't be...[/i] "You're serious?"

She stepped closer again. "What would you do if I am, my lady?" she whispered in Scarthian.

I studied her eyes. They were serious. Gods, she was serious. "I..." What would- [i]was[/i] I going to do? "Um..." I smiled slowly, suddenly deciding I would match her playful tone, "I would say that maybe I was the right person."

She observed me suspicious for a moment. "And you would help me just like that? What if my crown was one of a country which is an enemy to yours?"

I wondered how much of this was still speculation and how close we were to making a deal. "I suppose..." I leaned closer. "It would all depend on what I'd get in return."

She laughed. "Well, perhaps--" She turned serious, stepping away from me and looking down again, as two men approached from behind a corner.

I took several steps back, sitting at the harp. Plucking a few strings, I turned around to smile at Marius. I stood and gave King Megarus a deep curtsy. "Your Majesty, Lord Marius." I sat back down as Lord Marius bowed and the King did not.

"Do you play?"

"I... um..." I plucked a string. "Dabble." I studied the two men with a coy smile. Marius would have looked distracted if I didn't know him. Megarus... Well, I didn't know him well enough to know what was going on beneath the smile. "But I'm awful," I admitted willingly. "I'm sure you two are happy to see each other again," I decided on what I hoped was an innocent topic.

"Depends if you see us as a king and his advisor, or as a king and his little brother," Marius said and the king smirked.

"Indeed.. both have something to say, but the advisor one knows when to shut up."

I looked from one face to the other, laughing to hide my growing nervousness. That wasn't the answer I had been expecting. "As a younger sibling myself, I can sympathize with poor Lord Marius here. Words can be hard to swallow when you remember being in the nursery with the heir or in your case, I suppose, the King."

"Your [i]poor Lord Marius[/i] could go all day doing nothing, while all the rules and lectures kept me company," Megarus noticed, "and he still wanted to run away most of the time."

Marius raised his arms in surrender, walking closer to me. "I'm afraid you're the only one who understands my troubles, Princess."

"Ah..." My eyes narrowed. I had stumbled into a fix I wasn't sure how to navigate. Their relationship was on worse footing than I had thought. "Of course, Lord Marius. That isn't to say King Megarus' troubles should be scoffed at. I would think it' would be hard to listen to the advice of one's younger sibling." I smiled at Megarus, wondering if there was an excuse I could use to extract myself from this situation.

Megarus looked from me to Marius and back. "You were right, Mary, she [i]is[/i] a very charming young lady. And a good apprentice, as much as I see, though I like that less..One of you is more than enough." He walked past us, putting a hand on his shoulder shortly. "I want to discuss some details later."

Marius nodded, looking slightly worried as his brother turned to leave and the maid followed him. She glanced at me before leaving, seeming reluctant for a moment, then smiled once more and disappeared in one of the hallways.

I got up from the harp then, smirking at Marius as the tension in the room dissipated. "That was certainly interesting."

He laughed a bit. "Well, now that I think about it, I'm glad you weren't there to see us as children. Little brother Mary tended to be quite an idiot, you wouldn't believe I'm that kid."

I tried to imagine Marius as a child, and when that failed I decided not even to try to think of him as an idiotic child. "You're right." I laughed. "I can't believe it. All kids are stupid though."

"Indeed..if only tutors allowed them to be stupid while they can." He turned serious, only to smirk again after a moment. "As for me being an idiot, I'm sure quite a few people would gladly tell you about those days."

I raised an eyebrow. "I must find these people. I do love a good story."

"You should ask Brek, then," he muttered. "If anyone can make me feel like a kid again, it's him." He glanced around. "But don't exactly tell him I said that, or he'll never stop doing it."

"I wouldn't dream of stopping either way." Brek smirked at Marius as he appeared in the doorway, before he turned toward me and bowed. "Princess."

I curtsied. "Lord Elgan. We should have a conversation soon, so I can learn all about Marius as a kid." I grinned.

"There is nothing I would like more."

"Oh, I'm sure there is." Marius was still grinning. "Too bad I'm not ten anymore, or that might happen as well."

I blinked. [i]What in the world could that mean?[/i]

Brek narrowed his eyes. "I was having an off day, and you know it."

"Of course you were," Marius said flatly, looking like he's struggling to keep serious, before turning to me. "We were sparring earlier."

"And that's as far as that story needs to go." Brek said briskly, clearing his throat.

I tried not to look too curious, but it was hard, probably too hard. I wouldn't be surprised if they could tell. "I've heard a lot about you, Lord Elgan. Lord Marius has a lot of good things to say."

"That's good to hear." He nodded, smiling gently. "I've got plenty of good things to say about him as well..." He smirked at Mar. "But the unflattering stories are so much more interesting to tell."

I nodded a bit more enthusiastically than I should have. "Always."

"Now, if we're playing [i]that[/i] game.." Marius bowed at him a bit. "I suppose the host has the right to start."

"I'm not sure how safe this game is to play...but very well."

I was very glad he hadn't decided safety was very concerning.

He glanced at me a moment, hesitating. "Hm...well, has Lord Angroth ever told you about getting himself getting locked in the armory when he was a lad?"

I looked at Marius inquisitively. "No. Never." I smiled.

He ran his hand over his face. "Oh dear.. alright. Fair enough, that [i]did[/i] happen. Only because my tutor at the time failed to mention I wouldn't be able to open the door again if I let them close."

I laughed, perhaps louder than I should have, but I couldn't help it. "Was your tutor with you?"

"Of course he wasn't." He seemed to be starting to regret agreeing to that storytelling. "Supposed to be, perhaps, but I was rarely - if ever - at the same place as my tutor at the times I was expected to be."

Giggling, I asked, enjoying making him spell it out, "You were hiding from your tutor?"

He gave Lord Elgan a [i]just wait[/i] look before answering. "From my tutor, my assistants, my men, my brother.. Armoury seemed like a nice place." He smiled a mischievous smile.

I put a hand over my mouth, grinning. He sounded pretty normal then. "I hid in broom closets," I admitted. I thought a moment before adding with a smirk, "I never got locked in one though."

They both grinned at that, and Marius crossed his arms, looking between us. "Alright..two against one. Touche, Princess. Allow me to add, while at it, it took them quite a while to find me there. Some like to say it took long enough that that's when I developed my style."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm certainly glad I can't say the same. I wouldn't want to be known for my talent with the feather dustster."

Marius laughed. "Well luckily I was supposed to be able to handle those weapons anyway."