

Legacy of the Curse Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: Across Chapters Thirty to Thirty-Six

Kincaid

“Kincaid? Hello in there! Did you hear a word I said?”

Kincaid turned with a grunt. “What do you want, Henrik?”

“I want you to wake up, already. What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” Kincaid said untruthfully, shooting his best friend a look of irritation. “I’m fine.”

Henrik just snorted. “No one forced you to come back early from your summer of freedom. If you want to be cross with someone, be cross with yourself.” He gave Kincaid a curious look. “Why did you come back early? I still can’t figure it out.”

Kincaid sighed. “I’m trying to be more responsible.”

Henrik just raised an incredulous eyebrow, and Kincaid scowled.

“Is that so impossible to believe?”

“Not impossible,” said Henrik cheerfully. “Just unlikely.” His look became stern. “If you decided to come back to be more responsible to your squadron, you should stop acting like a bear woken from hibernation. Everyone’s avoiding you.”

“Except you, apparently,” Kincaid muttered grouchy.

Henrik grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m your best friend. You’ll have to do more than snap like a crab to get me to avoid you.”

Kincaid rolled his eyes. “I haven’t been snapping like a crab.”

“You have,” said Henrik forcefully. He turned away from his friend, looking out from the camp their patrol had made in a little copse of trees.

Kincaid followed his gaze. The sun had passed its zenith, and the countryside was bright and vibrant in the summer sunshine. No match at all for the blackness of his mood. He saw the two scouts returning, but he doubted they would have any useful information to report. It was useless, this whole exercise. He had been in such a rush to do something, anything, when he returned to Bryford the day before, that he had almost begged his father to let his patrol take this mission. But what was the point? It didn’t distract his thoughts. It just inflicted his bad mood on his knights.

He frowned as he thought about his homecoming. His parents had been flatteringly delighted at his unexpectedly early return, but Kincaid had felt no pleasure in their greetings. He had felt guilty—he still felt guilty—at how angry the sight of his brother had made him. He knew none of it was Ormond’s fault, but he had barely been able to look at the older prince. He had half expected Jocelyn to have beaten him there, knowing that Elddreki could take her to the capital in no time at all if she chose to leave the islands. But there was no sign of her, and Kincaid couldn’t bear sitting around watching Ormond and the rest of them prepare for her arrival.

So he had taken this mission, but it was useless. Everything was useless when he had failed in the mission most important to him. He had won Jocelyn’s heart—he knew he had. She couldn’t hide it from him. She had never been good at hiding things from him, although she had tried endearingly hard when they first met. But apparently winning her heart wasn’t enough to actually win her.

He clenched his hand into a fist, trying to turn his thoughts back to the mission at hand. The scouts made their way over to their prince, reporting that they had discovered nothing of interest. As he had expected.

Henrik stayed by Kincaid’s side even after he dismissed the scouts. Kincaid frowned thoughtfully, trying to make himself focus. He was starting to think that the rumor of unscrupulous men traveling down from the North Wilds, hired for some kind of mischief by some unknown employer in Bryford, was just that. A rumor.

“What’s that?”

Henrik's sharp voice startled Kincaid out of his reverie. He looked down. He hadn't even realized that in his abstraction he'd been fingering the bracelet in his pocket. The one he'd had on his person since reclaiming it from the merchant. He smiled briefly to himself as he thought of what a task he'd had to track that merchant down. The man had clearly known that he had cheated the pretty Kyonan girl who was foolish enough to trade such a valuable trinket for some food and a couple of light traveling cloaks. Kincaid suspected that he would have been less cooperative in handing it over on credit if he hadn't been afraid that his prince was going to mete out some kind of punishment for deceiving innocent travelers. Kincaid was just lucky he hadn't sold it on yet.

"It's a bracelet," he said shortly, in answer to Henrik's question.

"Yes, I can see that it's a bracelet," said Henrik in exasperation. "Whose is it?"

Kincaid remained silent, his expression stubborn.

"Kincaid," said Henrik in amazement. "Is that what's wrong with you? A girl?"

Kincaid turned his face away, but he knew that his best friend was having no trouble reading him.

"I can hardly believe it," said Henrik in a dazed voice. "Although it explains why you're so unmanageable all of a sudden, of course." He brought his gaze to Kincaid's face, amusement lighting his features. "Breaking hearts again, Kincaid? The court will be littered with your devastated conquests."

Kincaid made a noise of protest. "What conquests? When have I ever broken a single heart?"

Henrik snorted. "When you fell for this bracelet girl, that's when. Don't try to pretend you don't know how many disappointed hopefuls there'll be back in Bryford if you tie the knot. At least half the noble girls are desperate to marry the handsome Prince Kincaid. The only exceptions are the ones who would rather have the somewhat less dashing Prince Ormond so that they can get the crown."

A pang shot through Kincaid, his friend's words hitting uncomfortably close to home, and his retort came out more aggressive than necessary.

"They'll recover."

Henrik raised an amused eyebrow. "So handsome, but so heartless."

Kincaid rolled his eyes. He felt no sympathy for any girls who might be disappointed if he married outside his father's court. He couldn't help it if the girls in the court swooned over him. It was just because he was a prince, after all. It was all right for Henrik to joke about it, and to

flirt outrageously with any girl inclined to bat her eyelids at him. But even his joking friend couldn't accuse Kincaid of giving any of his admirers the slightest encouragement. A prince had to be careful about such things.

Unless the girl in question was a princess herself, and so close to being promised to his brother that she was practically family. In that case, he had reasoned with himself, no one was going to get hurt, least of all his own heart. He barely restrained a groan. What a fool he had been.

"So who is she?" Henrik pressed, insensitive to Kincaid's foul mood. "She must be quite something if you're hit this hard. I was starting to think there wasn't a girl in all Valoria who could captivate you."

Kincaid sighed, turning toward Henrik. Part of him was desperate to pour the whole story out to his best friend.

"She is quite something. She's the most incredible, unusual, captivating person I've ever met. And she's not Valorian. She's Kyonan."

Henrik raised his eyebrows. "I thought you said you barely made it into Kyona before you turned back. Obviously you were there long enough for something interesting to happen."

"Yes," agreed Kincaid, remembering the mesmerizing way Jocelyn's petite form had swayed to the music when she joined the mountain people's dance, and the unbelievable incident that had followed.

Henrik shook his head slightly. "You and Ormond both going for Kyonan girls," he mused. "There must be something in the water." He chuckled. "Maybe I should pop across the mountains and have a look for a girl of my own."

Kincaid groaned, again ashamed at the flare of anger he felt at Henrik's casual mention of his brother. "Ormond and I are not both going to marry a Kyonan girl. Only one or the other of us."

Henrik stared at him in confusion for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I can't exactly marry her if Ormond does," Kincaid said, the now familiar mix of anger and fear filling him at the thought. "And more to the point," he gritted his teeth, "he can't exactly marry her if I manage to steal her away first." Which he had every intention of doing. As soon as he could figure out how to convince her that she didn't need to sacrifice her heart for the sake of her kingdom or her idiot brother.

He glanced up to see Henrik staring at him open-mouthed.

“The Kyonan princess? The one who’s been delayed from coming to Bryford because—according to the wild rumors flying around—she’s off on some kind of a quest with one of her father’s dragons? *That’s* who you’ve fallen in love with?”

Kincaid nodded, relieved to let it out to someone. “Hopelessly in love,” he acknowledged unashamedly.

Henrik threw up his hands in a despairing gesture. “You’ve got half the girls in Bryford falling all over themselves to captivate you, and you have to fall in love with your brother’s betrothed!”

“Keep your voice down!” Kincaid hissed, glancing around before glaring at his friend. “And she’s *not* his betrothed! There’s no formal arrangement. She’s not promised to him, she told me so herself.”

But Henrik just rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. They’re intended for each other. Why else did your parents invite her? Why else did her parents agree to send her?”

“Well, he can’t have her,” said Kincaid, well aware that he sounded like a petulant child. He met his friend’s eye. “Seriously, Henrik. She’s...unusual. She would never do well with Ormond. He wouldn’t understand her. He would crush her with his seriousness, and she would retreat inside herself.” He gave a small groan. Even apart from the agony of not having her himself, he thought it would break his heart to see how withdrawn Jocelyn would surely become with Ormond as her husband.

Ormond as her husband.

He shuddered. He wasn’t going to let that happen, even if he had to throw her over a horse and ride off with her in the night. He almost smiled at the thought. That sounded like fun. Improper of course, but it wouldn’t be the first time. Not that he was going to tell anyone—not even Henrik—that they’d already breached the rules of good behavior more than once, innocent as it had been.

For perhaps the hundredth time he remembered the night they had spent in Dragoncave, and the way his every nerve had tingled at her nearness in the dark. For a moment he lost himself in the memory of how she had drawn close to him, seeking his comfort and protection, lying with her arm against his side. He had been dangerously attracted to her even then. But it was nothing to how he felt now that he really knew her.

“I just can’t get over the irony of it,” Henrik was jabbering on. “You manage through some kind of dark magic to convince your parents to let you run free for a summer to get out of the awful state visit of this Kyonan princess and its endless run of balls and speeches, and then you run straight to the girl herself.”

Kincaid smiled mechanically. “There is a certain irony,” he acknowledged. Not to mention the irony in Henrik’s casual jokes about dark magic, but he decided not to delve into that.

“Hang on,” Henrik said suddenly, as if reading his mind. “If you’ve been traveling around with Ormond’s princess—”

“Her name is Jocelyn,” Kincaid snapped. “And she’s not Ormond’s princess.”

“Whatever,” said Henrik impatiently. “Does this mean you’ve been traveling around with a dragon?”

Kincaid nodded. “Elddreki, his name is.”

Henrik stared wide-eyed. “Kin!”

“What?” Kincaid raised his eyebrows at the note of accusation in his friend’s voice.

“You’ve been traveling around with an actual dragon, and you never told me!”

Kincaid shrugged. “I wasn’t really sure what to say and what not to say. It’s...kind of a complicated mess.”

Henrik still looked indignant, but after a long moment of scrutinizing his friend, his expression softened. “We can talk about the dragon later, then—although don’t think you’re getting out of it. But I can see that right now you can’t see past the girl. Princess Jocelyn,” he amended hastily.

Kincaid sighed. “I never intended this to happen, obviously. It’s the last thing I meant to do when I set off for my little adventure. But I met her in Montego, on her way to Bryford, and she was so incredibly intriguing, I had to know more. Then she met up with Elddreki, and I followed them. And next thing I knew, I was knee-deep in a dragon quest.” He smiled ruefully. “And in over my head as far as Jocelyn was concerned.”

“Do you know when she’s coming to Bryford?” Henrik asked after a moment.

Kincaid shook his head. “I know Elddreki offered to bring her, but I don’t know exactly when she’ll come.” He sighed. “Apparently today is her birthday. My mother mentioned it—they’ve planned some kind of celebration, but it’s a bit of a dampener that the guest of honor isn’t actually in Bryford to attend it.” He frowned. “I thought she would be there by now, actually.”

A small shot of fear spiked through him. Not for the first time, he hoped anxiously that nothing had gone amiss. Perhaps he shouldn’t have left. Perhaps he shouldn’t have assumed that Elddreki would keep her safe. But he had been so consumed by the awful thought of her marrying Ormond in spite of knowing he loved her—and loving him back if he was any judge of the matter—that he had needed some distance.

“She’s going to get dropped off by a dragon?” asked Henrik, amused. “That will be quite an entrance.” When Kincaid didn’t respond, Henrik leaned over and gave his friend’s shoulder a little shake, trying to pull him from his abstraction. “What’s gotten into you, Kin? If you’re so besotted with this girl, then why in the kingdom didn’t you just tell her how you felt before you parted ways?”

“I did,” said Kincaid, his face hard.

Henrik hesitated. “Oh.”

“It’s not what you think,” said Kincaid quickly. “I know she feels the same way. I know it.”

Still Henrik hesitated. “So what’s the problem?” he asked cautiously.

Kincaid sighed. “She thinks it’s her duty to go through with the marriage alliance.” Henrik didn’t respond, and glancing up, Kincaid couldn’t quite read the look on his friend’s face. “What?”

“Well,” said Henrik delicately. “I was just talking before about the reason that some of the girls at court prefer Ormond’s serious stiffness over your dashing good looks...”

“It’s not like that,” Kincaid said quickly. “She’s not like that. She doesn’t care about being queen one day.” He shook his head ruefully. “She’d much rather stay in the background than be in such a prominent position.”

Henrik gave him a look. “It’s hard to imagine you falling for some shy, retiring flower.”

Kincaid smiled to himself. “She’s not like that, either. There’s fire inside her. I can’t explain it all to you, but you just have to trust me. She doesn’t care about Ormond’s crown, at least not for her own sake.”

Henrik looked unconvinced. “If you think she’s in love with you, I don’t really see why else she would be turning you down. It’s all well and good to say that she’s so set on fulfilling the alliance, but surely she can see that she could just as easily do that by marrying you as by marrying Ormond.”

“Well,” Kincaid started sheepishly. “There’s just one problem with that theory.”

Henrik raised a questioning eyebrow, and Kincaid let out a frustrated breath.

“She doesn’t know who I am. She thinks I’m some kind of wandering vagabond, albeit one who’s run off from a wealthy family. She has no idea that I’m a prince, or that Ormond is my brother. Ow!” he protested wrathfully. “Why did you do that?”

Henrik looked anything but repentant, and Kincaid dodged backward before his friend could whack him on the side of the head again.

“*You* know I’m the prince,” he complained. “What makes you think you can get away with whacking me whenever you feel like it?”

Henrik ignored the stricture. “Kincaid, what is the matter with you? Why in the kingdom would you hide your identity?”

“I don’t know.” Kincaid shrugged mutinously. “It was exciting.”

Henrik rolled his eyes. “Oh yes, I can see that you’ve become so very responsible.”

Kincaid sighed. “She’s the one who made me want to be responsible, don’t you get it? She’s the one who made me realize I’ve been running around like a self-absorbed child instead of doing my duty to my family and my kingdom.”

Henrik raised an eyebrow. “She really has had quite an impact on you.”

“Of course she has,” Kincaid said gloomily. “She’s willing to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of duty to her kingdom—which mind you I still think is incredibly stupid—and there I was complaining about having to attend a few cotillions in the cause of forming an alliance with Kyona.”

“But why didn’t you tell her who you were later?” Henrik persisted. “If she turned you down because she thinks she needs to marry a prince out of duty, didn’t you think it might be a relevant detail to mention?”

Kincaid sighed, rubbing a weary hand across his face. He hadn’t been sleeping well since he and Jocelyn had parted. Maybe it was the fact that he kept dreaming about their kiss, but he invariably woke feeling unsettled and anxious. For a moment he got distracted, remembering the feel of her in his arms, her lips on his. He smiled to himself. Before he met Jocelyn, he never would have guessed a princess would kiss like that. Surely polite pecks were the accepted embrace of princesses, not that passionate, abandoned intensity with which she had wrapped herself around him. But the thought just made his heart plummet again. Abandoned was the right word. She had abandoned herself in the moment, but recovered her usual restraint—and her usual fear—all too quickly.

“It’s complicated,” he said at last, in a belated and insufficient answer to Henrik’s question. He stared unseeingly into the trees. “Obviously I’ll tell her soon—I’ll hardly be able to get away with hiding who I am once she’s in Bryford—but there’s more at play than you realize. She’s kind of an expert at sacrificing herself.”

He brought his gaze back to his friend, and his voice dropped. “Honestly Henrik, part of me is terrified that even knowing everything, she might still choose him, out of some kind of warped sense of duty.” Henrik’s gaze was sympathetic, and Kincaid suddenly buried his face in

his hands. “And if that happens,” he went on, his voice coming out muffled, “I think I’ll just have to throw myself off the falls.”

“Whoa,” said Henrik, half laughing at his friend’s dramatics, but clearly also taken aback by the unusual intensity from the normally even-tempered prince. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” He gave Kincaid a piercing look. “You really have been hit hard, haven’t you?”

“She’s the only one for me,” said Kincaid simply. “It’s her or no one.”

“Well, then.” Henrik’s tone had turned businesslike. “We’ll just have to figure out how to win her over, won’t we?” He grinned. “And how to snatch her away from Ormond.”

Kincaid couldn’t help grinning as well at the thought of besting his brother, little though the much-maligned Ormond actually deserved his wrath.

“What’s your plan?” Henrik asked. “What have you got?”

“Well…” Kincaid drew the bracelet from his pocket. “I’ve got this.”

Henrik looked at it doubtfully. “You think she’s going to warm to you because you stole her bracelet?”

“I didn’t steal it,” said Kincaid indignantly. “She bartered it for supplies on our travels—behind my back, because she knew I’d never let her do it—and I redeemed it after we parted ways.” He gave his friend a sheepish grin. “I haven’t figured out all the details yet, but I was hoping I could use it somehow to pull off some kind of grand romantic gesture.”

Henrik snorted. “You haven’t spent enough time charming the ladies of the court. I bet you regret it now that you actually want to win one over and you’re realizing what a novice you are.”

Kincaid shook his head absently, his eyes fixed on something invisible. “No,” he said. “Quite the opposite.” A small smile curved his lips. “Trust me, there’s no girl in my father’s court who’s even remotely like Jocelyn.” He gripped the bracelet tightly as he spoke, comforted by its solidity. It gave him the illusion of still being tethered to his Kyonan princess in some way. “Besides, she’ll like the bracelet. She’ll understand what I’m trying to say.”

“If you say so,” said Henrik, still sounding doubtful. He looked at the trinket. “Well, it’s not much, but it’s a start.”

“Your Highness!” The shout called Kincaid’s attention back to his surroundings, and he pushed himself hastily to his feet, pocketing the bracelet before any of his knights could see him mooning like a lovesick maiden.

“What is it?” He strode forward to meet the man who had addressed him, Henrik not far behind.

“There’s a rider approaching,” said the knight, nodding his head toward a lone figure in the distance. “He’s coming straight for us.”

“That’ll be Patrick,” said Kincaid dismissively. “He was detained in Bryford, and I instructed him to meet us when his business was complete.” He squinted at the rider. “He’s found us quickly. But I suppose he is the best tracker in the squadron.” He frowned, lowering his voice as he spoke to his friend. “He’s certainly riding as if he has hellhounds on his tail, isn’t he? But if he’s come straight from Bryford, I can’t imagine he’s found anything we haven’t.”

“Unless these rumored troublemakers have already reached the capital,” said Henrik doubtfully.

They weren’t kept long in suspense. Every passing second brought the rider closer, and it wasn’t long before Kincaid’s guess was proved to be correct. The delayed arrival pulled up short as soon as he reached the trees, dismounting and bowing to his prince.

“Your Highness. My apologies for being delayed.”

Kincaid waved a hand, dismissing the knight from his formal posture. “No matter, Patrick.” He eyed the man’s excited expression, and his horse’s heaving flanks. “Is all well in Bryford?”

“Oh yes,” said Patrick eagerly, dropping instantly into the informality that Kincaid usually encouraged within his own squadron. He grinned. “I know I just apologized for being late, but in all honesty I can’t say I’m entirely sorry. I wouldn’t have missed this morning’s events for the world.”

“What happened?” asked Kincaid with interest.

“There was a dragon in the royal courtyard. I was preparing to leave to come and join you, but I was called instead to form up with the king’s squadron. The beast was enormous!”

“A dragon?” repeated Kincaid sharply. “What did he look like?”

“Uh…” The knight looked surprised. “Like a dragon. Tall, huge talons, big tail, covered in scales.”

“But what color?” Kincaid asked impatiently.

The man frowned as he tried to remember. “It wasn’t all one color. It was green, but also blue, and purple.”

Kincaid exchanged a look with Henrik, and he could see from his friend’s eager face that he had picked up on the fact that Kincaid recognized the description.

“What did the dragon want?” Henrik asked, rescuing Kincaid from asking a question that would reveal too much.

“Nothing, apparently,” said Patrick, sounding faintly disappointed. He looked back at Kincaid. “The king went out to meet the creature, and asked if he came in peace, but the dragon didn’t even want to stay. It just came to deliver the Kyonan princess, who had apparently been on some kind of quest with the beast. I guess everything they say about the Kyonan royals and their dragon bond is true!”

“The...” Kincaid swallowed. He could feel Henrik’s eyes on him, and he was finding it suddenly very difficult to keep his voice steady. “The Kyonan princess has arrived in Bryford?”

“That’s right,” said Patrick absently, clearly much less interested in the human girl than in her dragon companion. He chuckled. “And quite a sight she was, too. If the dragon hadn’t said so himself, I would never have believed she was a princess.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kincaid sharply. “What was wrong with her?”

Patrick looked at him in surprise. “I apologize, Sire, I didn’t mean to imply that anything was wrong with her. I’m sure she will be a very fitting bride for Prince Ormond once she’s...you know...cleaned up a bit.”

Kincaid clenched a fist involuntarily, trying not to fixate on the casual mention of Ormond and Jocelyn. “Cleaned up?” he repeated ominously, and the knight shrugged.

“She was just pretty disheveled. And I’m no expert on these things, but even I could tell she wasn’t dressed like a princess.” He shook his head. “The poor girl felt it, too, I would say. She looked pretty ill-at-ease when your father was giving her the royal welcome.”

Kincaid’s chest tightened at the thought of Jocelyn, alone and anxious, feeling like she was making a poor impression on her royal hosts. He should have been there, with her. He should have put his feelings aside and stayed with her so that she knew she at least had a friend.

“I should be there,” he said, speaking the words aloud before he thought about it.

“You?” asked Patrick, surprised. “I wouldn’t think so. I think the king introduced her to your brother straight off, and the crown prince will escort her at the celebration tonight.” His expression cleared. “Is that what you’re thinking of? The gala? I thought you were expecting that we wouldn’t be back in time for it, and that the king and queen had excused you.”

The knight looked a little disgruntled, and Kincaid couldn’t blame him. The thought of riding hard to meet them, only to turn straight back around, would be frustrating. But he didn’t have much sympathy to spare for Patrick. He was too busy feeling sorry for himself at the thought of Ormond escorting Jocelyn at her birthday gala. She would probably wear something pretty and flattering, instead of the rough peasant dress he had bought her. And she would dance beautifully—he knew that from their time in Montego. He barely bit back a growl. It should be him, not his brother, sitting next to her, dancing with her, talking to her. He sighed. But she

probably wouldn't even talk to Ormond. She would probably swallow her words again, retreat into her self-imposed cage.

Kincaid looked up, suddenly realizing that Patrick was still waiting for his response. "Yes, they did excuse me," he said. "But that was when we thought Jo—the princess wouldn't actually be present."

"If we leave now, we'd make it back in time for dinner," said Henrik quietly.

Kincaid frowned. "But it would mean leaving the patrol unfinished. We've only covered half the ground west of the highway."

"True," Henrik acknowledged.

Kincaid shook his head with a sigh. "I asked Father to give this task to my patrol. I can't leave it incomplete."

Henrik lowered his voice further. "We could finish without you, of course. You could go straight back to Bryford, and we could follow once we've completed the patrol."

For a moment Kincaid hesitated, more tempted than he wanted to admit. The knowledge that Jocelyn was there, in his castle, was tantalizing. He teetered, the desire to see her again almost overpowering everything else, but suddenly he remembered her words in that memorable training session, and he shook it off.

As much as he might like the idea of leaping on his horse and riding straight for Bryford, it wasn't exactly in keeping with his claim that he was trying to be more responsible. He wasn't the wandering, carefree vagabond he had pretended to be while they traveled together. He was a prince, with responsibilities, and it was time he started acting like it.

"No, we'll proceed as planned, of course." He looked up at the sun. "But if we pick up the pace, and push back to Bryford instead of making camp tonight, we might catch the end of the gala. They'll be sure to be celebrating late into the night."

He ignored the fact that several of his knights were looking at him like he'd lost his mind. They knew his dislike of such events, and they must be wondering at his sudden desire to make it to the gala he had maneuvered so cleverly to avoid. But he had no intention of explaining it to them. Henrik's impudent grin was quite infuriating enough.

"Pack up camp!" Kincaid ordered the others who were still milling around. His hand had somehow made it back into his pocket, curling around the bracelet. "We move out in five minutes!" Patrick's shoulders drooped visibly at this order, coming immediately after his hard ride from the capital, but Kincaid wasn't to be deterred. Not if Jocelyn—his Jocelyn—was even now being squired around by Ormond.

Squire. That was a good thought. He strode away from Henrik and the others, calling to the youngest of the squires who had accompanied his squadron on their patrol. The boy hurried over eagerly, and Kincaid gave an internal grimace. Hopefully he wouldn't lose all credibility with the youth once he disclosed the nature of his errand.

He led the squire a little distance away through the trees. When he was sure no one else was watching, he drew the bracelet from his pocket.

"Can I trust you with a special mission?" he asked winningly. The squire eyed the trinket with wide eyes, but he nodded without hesitation. "It means riding straight back to Bryford," Kincaid continued. "Can you do that?"

"Yes, Sire," said the squire, his eyes shining.

"Good man," said Kincaid, restraining a smile. He held out the bracelet. "This belongs to the visiting Kyonan princess. But I'm going to be delayed from returning. I want you to take this—keep it somewhere safe!—all the way to Bryford, to the castle. Find a maid, and ask her to put it in the princess's room."

The boy held out his hand, but Kincaid closed his fist around the trinket for a moment. "Don't mention it to anyone else, understand? And make the maid promise to put it straight in the princess's room before you give it to her."

The squire nodded solemnly, and Kincaid relinquished the bracelet. He felt a foolish sense of loss at parting with it, but he shook it off. He was becoming ridiculously sentimental.

The squire mounted his horse without delay and wheeled off with such determination that Kincaid couldn't help but be pulled from his heavy mood. Henrik found him chuckling a moment later, his eyes trained on the disappearing figure.

"Where's he going?" Henrik demanded.

"He's taking a message to Bryford for me," said Kincaid placidly.

"To your parents?" Henrik asked suspiciously. "Telling them that you'll be back late tonight?"

"Sure," said Kincaid cheerfully. "If you like."

"Kincaid," said Henrik accusingly. "What did you do?"

Kincaid grinned. "A grand romantic gesture." He jerked his head toward the rest of the camp. "Come on. Let's get this patrol done."

Despite his determination to be responsible, he was chafed almost past endurance by the time the weary squadron finally rode into the capital. It was nearly midnight, and the night watch

had to raise the gates to admit the prince and his knights. But Kincaid was confident that the celebration would still be in full swing, and he could hardly contain his impatience.

Nevertheless, he didn't begrudge the time it took to go to his rooms and freshen up. This wasn't some carefree ride through the North Wilds. It was a royal gala in Jocelyn's honor, and she would be in full princess mode. Somewhere under the anxiety, Kincaid felt a stirring of excitement at the idea of seeing Jocelyn all dressed up and regal. But his nerves soon took precedence again as he donned his ceremonial tunic. There would be no hiding his identity now. She had probably already learned of the absent Prince Kincaid, and was smart enough to have at least wondered if it was him. Would she be angry?

He found that he didn't much care. He wanted to see her—desperately—regardless of whether or not she was mad at him. And perhaps she wouldn't be angry, he thought optimistically. Perhaps she'd be happy. Perhaps she'd decide that his status as prince was enough, and there was no reason for them not to be together.

He deflated slightly at the thought. As much as he wanted her to change her mind, the idea of her choosing him just because she found out he was a prince wasn't terribly appealing. But he was out of other options. Like his usual impetuous self he had taken off instead of waiting in Bryford for her arrival, and now he'd lost his opportunity to tell her himself.

He hurried toward the ballroom, strapping his sword back on as he went. There was a ceremonial blade that he was supposed to wear when dressed for such occasions, but he preferred his own familiar—and more practical—weapon.

He had almost reached the carved double doors when two figures emerged from them. One of them was walking with lagging steps, shepherded ruthlessly by the other, and he had as little difficulty recognizing her as she evidently had recognizing him.

“Kincaid! You're back! I thought you weren't coming to the gala!”

“Hello Lavinia,” he said, a touch impatiently. “I came back early when I heard that the guest of honor was here after all.”

“You did?” Lavinia sounded both surprised and suspicious, and it seemed she had no intention of letting her brother go past her into the ballroom without interrogation. She raised her voice slightly, to be heard over the music and other sounds of merriment issuing from the doorway. “That doesn't sound like you. Since when are you so concerned about doing your duty by a visiting delegation? Isn't that more Ormond's thing? No one expects you to race back from patrol to be here.”

“I may not be the heir, but I am still a prince of Valoria, Lavinia,” said Kincaid, an unnecessary bite in his voice. “It’s not completely ridiculous for me to be here to meet a visiting princess.”

“What’s your problem?” asked Lavinia, clearly offended by his tone. And he did feel a little bit repentant. It wasn’t her fault her words touched a nerve.

“Did you meet her?” he asked in a less aggressive tone, and she nodded enthusiastically, her annoyance forgotten.

“She’s great. Very pretty. Fair hair, blue eyes, that kind of thing.”

Lavinia tossed her own curls in a self-satisfied way, and Kincaid barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Lavinia clearly knew that her own coloring, so similar to Kincaid’s, lost none of its appeal beside golden hair like Jocelyn’s. He had heard his sister say many times that her two brothers set each other off to perfection. If Jocelyn’s hair had been auburn like Lavvy’s, he strongly suspected his sister would have been less impressed by the visiting princess’s good looks.

“So you managed to ascertain that she’s pretty,” he said dryly. “Well done.”

“I found out more than that!” she protested. “She’s very nice. And she has a real sense of humor.” Lavinia frowned. “Too much of a sense of humor for Ormond, maybe.” Kincaid felt a rush of affection for his sister, but it was extinguished by her next words, muttered half to herself. “Maybe I can convince her to take him after all, though. I would like her as a sister.” She looked up absently at Kincaid. “You would, too, Kincaid, I think.”

Kincaid scowled, his impatience returning. “Well you may want to stall being tucked into bed, Lavvy, but I didn’t hurry back from patrol to stand here in the corridor talking to you.”

The woman behind Lavinia, who was the princess’s long-suffering companion, cleared her throat meaningfully. “It is indeed well past time you retired, Your Highness.”

Lavinia sent Kincaid a look of such blazing reproach that he felt a bit guilty. But Lavinia shouldn’t really be complaining. She had evidently been allowed to stay at the celebration much later than she usually would.

Still, he sent her a barely-perceptible grimace of apology as her keeper started to shepherd her down the hall again.

“There’s no need to be in a hurry to meet the princess,” said Lavinia waspishly. “You’re too late, anyway.”

Kincaid frowned. “What do you mean?”

But Lavinia's companion had already propelled her halfway down the corridor, and when Lavinia opened her mouth as if to call out an answer, she was sternly admonished by the older woman. She subsided, her expression disgruntled, and flounced around the corner.

Kincaid stared after her for a moment, tempted to pursue her and demand an answer. What did she mean by too late? His stomach lurched sickeningly. Surely—*surely*—no betrothal announcement could have been made already? He had been under the impression that his parents had only hinted at the idea of a marriage alliance in their invitation. The Kyonan monarchs would surely have to agree before anything could be said publicly.

He shook his head. He didn't know what Lavinia had meant, but it couldn't have been that. Because she couldn't possibly know that Kincaid's whole purpose in hurrying back to Bryford was to stop any such announcement taking place, either now or in the future.

Abandoning the attempt to unravel his sister's words, he turned and strode the remaining distance into the ballroom. He had clearly been right that the celebration would still be underway, and as familiar as he was with the castle, it took him a moment to get his bearings. The music seemed to swell around him the instant he stepped through the door, and the sparkling of thousands of candles made the ballroom so much brighter than the stone corridor.

He scanned the room eagerly, uninterested in any of the swirling Valorian figures. Where was Jocelyn? She must be here somewhere. If she arrived only that morning she was probably more than weary enough to retire early to bed, but she wouldn't do so at her own birthday gala. She had far too strong a sense of duty for that.

But the longer he searched the room without seeing her, the more Kincaid's certainty wavered. He began to feel keenly disappointed, and a little anxious. Patrick had definitely said that she had arrived. So where was she? He spotted Ormond, talking to one of Bryford's more pompous noblemen. Kincaid frowned. Jocelyn was nowhere in his brother's vicinity, but he would have expected Ormond to have been fastidious in being attentive to her all evening.

He strode up to his brother, determined to get answers.

"We must be firm in our negotiations, Your Highness," the nobleman was saying. "These Kyonans need to understand that the benefit of an alliance would be all on their side. Such a young royal house would do well to ally itself to—"

"On the contrary, King Calinnae comes from a royal house much older than my father's house," Kincaid cut in with a hint of irritation. "Plus they have the whole dragon thing going for them. I doubt the Kyonans are such fools as to believe that Valoria would have sought an alliance if the benefit would be all on Kyona's side."

Both men turned in surprise at the unexpected interruption, the nobleman looking irritated and disapproving, but Ormond seeming more surprised than anything.

“Kincaid!” he said, and the hint of warmth in his tone brought back Kincaid’s guilt. Ormond didn’t deserve the resentment his brother was secretly harboring. “I didn’t expect you back in time to attend tonight.”

“We completed our patrol early,” said Kincaid shortly. “I came straight to the gala.”

“Have you made your report to Father already, then?” asked Ormond, raising one eyebrow.

“Not yet, but never mind that,” said Kincaid impatiently. “Ormond, where’s Princess Jocelyn? I thought she had arrived today.”

Ormond’s expression became instantly more guarded, and Kincaid didn’t miss the slight purse of his lips. What did that mean? Surely Jocelyn hadn’t told him about her...history...with Kincaid?

“You should make your report to Father before anything else, Kincaid,” said Ormond uncompromisingly. Kincaid started to protest, but Ormond was already taking his leave of the nobleman, and Kincaid figured that it was as good a way of getting rid of the man as any.

“You shouldn’t interrupt him, you know,” said Ormond reprovingly, once the man had left. “Or contradict him like that.”

Kincaid waved an impatient hand. “He was talking like the fool he is, Ormond. You don’t need me to be diplomatic, that’s what you’re here for.”

Ormond rolled his eyes, already turning in the direction of their parents, who were seated in state at one end of the room. Kincaid hurried to keep up, irritated with his brother’s heavy-handed ways.

“I don’t want to talk to Father right now, Ormond. I need to know where the princess is.”

“Why?” asked Ormond blankly. “You didn’t care much about making a good impression at the gala when you begged Father to send you off with your knights on some wild goose chase. Honestly, you’d barely been home two minutes. Do you hate it here so much?”

“That’s because she wasn’t going to be here,” said Kincaid, exasperated. “And of course I don’t hate it. I just don’t like sitting around talking politics all day.”

“Well now that the princess is here, there’ll be even more of that,” said Ormond dryly. “So I’m not sure why you hurried back for it.” He gave Kincaid an appraising look. “I can’t believe you were really that concerned about making a good impression on the Kyonans. So why are you so anxious to meet Princess Jocelyn? If you’ve heard about her arrival, you must have also heard

that the dragon has left by now. And if it's her you're so wildly interested in, then I think rumors have been exaggerated. She's not *that* beautiful."

Kincaid didn't know whether to be angry or amused by this absolute falsehood. His brother must be blind not to see that Jocelyn was the most beautiful girl in the world.

"Ormond, you're an idiot," he said shortly, deciding on anger. "If you were rude to her—"

"Of course I wasn't rude to her!" said Ormond, shocked. "I would never do anything to dishonor our kingdom."

Kincaid rolled his eyes. Even when considering the woman he might spend the rest of his life married to, could Ormond think of nothing but the kingdom? He and Jocelyn had more in common than Kincaid liked to think.

But he had no chance to respond to his brother, because they had reached his parents, both of whom were greeting him with warmth and surprise.

"And did your patrol have success?" King Malcolm asked his younger son.

"No, Father, I'm afraid not," said Kincaid. "If someone in Bryford has hired men from the North Wilds, they've hidden their tracks well. We couldn't find any reports of travelers from the north other than the usual trading groups."

The king nodded, apparently not terribly concerned. "We will keep our eyes and ears open," he said simply. "I am glad you have returned in time to enjoy the festivities."

"Yes, but where is Princess Jocelyn?" Kincaid asked impatiently. Seeing her was the only likelihood of enjoyment he would have from a gala such as this.

The king and queen exchanged an inscrutable look before Queen Marguerite responded. "She retired to bed early. She was no doubt exhausted by her travels. I think we expected too much of her to ask her to attend a gala the evening of her arrival."

"She just...went to bed?" Kincaid asked, stunned. How weary would Jocelyn have to be to walk out on her own birthday gala? It didn't tally with what he knew of her.

"You might well be surprised," said Ormond dryly, his voice lowered so that only his family could hear him. "It is most peculiar behavior."

"I'm sure she had her reasons," said Kincaid, bristling in defense of the absent princess. "What exactly happened?"

Ormond shrugged. "She was speaking with Lord Randall and me, and she just suddenly declared that she was tired and would retire. I tried to remind her that this celebration is for her own birthday, but she was already practically running for the door."

Kincaid frowned. “How long ago was this?”

“Two, maybe three hours,” said Ormond, still sounding very unimpressed. “The evening had barely begun. She had only just opened the dancing with me.”

Kincaid scowled at the thought of *his* Jocelyn dancing with Ormond. “One dance with you would be enough to send any girl running for the door,” he muttered.

“Kincaid,” said his mother reprovingly. “That is impolite and undeserved.” She glanced around at the many attendees of the gala, hovering just out of earshot. “We will discuss this at another time.” She looked her son over. “I’m glad you’ve returned, Kincaid, and I’m pleased to see that you have enough sense of your duty to join us at the celebration now that you’re back in Bryford. You can meet the princess in the morning. In the meantime, you may as well enjoy yourself.”

She nodded to a clump of girls not far away, whom Kincaid recognized as the daughters of noblemen. They were eyeing the dashing younger prince hopefully. “There are plenty of young ladies who would be glad to dance with you,” his mother prompted.

Kincaid’s eyes started with horror. “But Mother—!”

She silenced him with a look, and he knew there was no use in arguing. But it was nothing short of a nightmare. He had gone to great lengths to avoid being stuck at a gala with a crowd of giggling admirers. He had returned for one reason only—to see Jocelyn. And now not only was she not here, but something was clearly wrong, and he wasn’t even allowed to investigate.

He briefly contemplated disobeying his mother, sneaking from the ballroom, and going in search of Jocelyn. But he knew he couldn’t do it, not if she had retired to bed. It wouldn’t be hard to find out what suite she had been accommodated in, but this was no cave in the North Wilds, or even an Arinton inn. They were in his own castle now, where he was well known, and where there were gossiping servants around every corner. If he was seen at midnight going anywhere near the suite of the visiting Kyonan princess, he would be in serious hot water, and her reputation would be ruined. From what Jocelyn had told him of her father, the consequences of that could be disastrous. It would certainly destroy whatever alliance negotiations had been underway.

So with a bitter sigh, he resigned himself to being fawned over. Dancing with the girls of the court had never been more punishing, knowing how close he had come to dancing with the only girl he had any interest in holding in his arms. He might have actually enjoyed the pastime with Jocelyn as his partner. His mind was so distracted by the question of what had upset Jocelyn enough to send her precipitately from the ballroom that he made a poor companion, and more than one girl left with something of a flounce after dancing with him. Not that he cared.

He could only be relieved that the evening was so far advanced, and it was only an hour or so before he could respectably retire himself. He had been too worried to even enjoy the food, usually the only part of a gala that reliably captured his attention.

He found no comfort in his familiar chambers, pacing the floor for some time before he could settle his mind enough for sleep. The knowledge that Jocelyn was here, in this very castle, and yet out of his reach, was maddening. The awful possibility that she had found out who he was and had been so upset by the revelation that she ran from the room occurred to him more than once. But he couldn't believe that her response would be so extreme. She wasn't one to show her emotions publicly. It must have been something drastic indeed.

As much as his mind was buzzing, he was still extremely weary, and eventually he fell into an uneasy sleep. He woke early, consciousness returning in a rush. Within minutes he was dressed and striding toward the dining hall where his family habitually shared a private breakfast. Visiting royalty would of course be eating with the Valorian royal family. And if Jocelyn had retired to bed so early, she would surely be up by now. He knew her to be an early riser.

He entered the room eagerly, his eyes scanning the table, only to once again slump in disappointment. Only his brother and his father were there, as well as the few servants required to attend the royal family. He dropped into a seat, telling himself not to brood. It was too early in the morning, that was all. The sun had barely risen.

"Kincaid," King Malcolm greeted his younger son. "You're up early."

"Good morning Father, Ormond," said Kincaid, trying to speak lightly. "I wanted to pay my respects to our guest, but once again I've missed the mark. Last night I was too late, this morning I'm too early."

Ormond stared at him. "Why this sudden eagerness to make a good impression, Kincaid? I've never seen a visiting dignitary pull you away from your knights before."

Kincaid was spared the necessity of answering by the arrival of his mother. She swept into the room with something less than her usual poise, and one glance was enough to show all three of her family members that something was wrong. With a gesture, the king dismissed the servants, and in moments the four royals were alone.

"What's the matter, my dear?" King Malcolm asked, his eyes trained on his wife.

"It's Princess Jocelyn," the queen responded, a worried crease between her eyebrows. Kincaid dropped the fork he was holding, a strange rushing sound filling his ears, as though his mind could sense some disaster approaching.

"What about her?" It was Ormond who asked the question, his expression wary.

“She’s...missing.”

“What?!” Kincaid didn’t remember standing up, but he must have, because he was on his feet. “What do you mean, she’s missing?”

His mother’s glance passed to him, her expression faintly surprised at the strength of his reaction. Then she looked back at her husband, calmly continuing her report.

“I’ve just spoken with one of her maids, from the Kyonan delegation. It seems that she did not retire to bed when she left the gala. In fact, her bed has not been slept in, and no one seems to know where she is. Her maids assumed she was at the gala until the early hours, and the rest of the delegation who were at the gala assumed she had retired to bed. No one realized the truth until a couple of hours ago, and then they weren’t sure what to do. I have only just been informed of the situation.”

“You mean she’s been missing for hours and hours, and no one’s done anything?” Kincaid demanded, fear and anger fighting for prime position within him. The idea that he had been dancing with simpering admirers while Jocelyn was missing and suffering who-knew-what was almost more than he could take.

“There’s no call for that tone of accusation, Kincaid,” his father admonished him.

“But who could have taken her?” Kincaid demanded. “Who could have carried her off right out of the castle?”

“Carried her off?” repeated Ormond, raising an eyebrow. “That’s quite an assumption.”

“What do you mean?” Kincaid turned to his brother in astonishment. “What else could have happened? You think she’s been hiding in a storeroom all night?”

Ormond exchanged a look with his father before responding. “Well, it wouldn’t be the first time she’d disappeared in the night without telling her delegation, would it?”

Kincaid frowned. “You think a dragon called her away again?”

Ormond almost snorted. “Of course not. But you weren’t there last night, Kincaid. You didn’t see her behavior. The way she ran out of the room like a dramatic child was nothing short of embarrassing. Not what I expected from a princess.” A rueful look passed over Ormond’s face, and Kincaid could only imagine he was thinking of Lavinia as he amended, “Not one Princess Jocelyn’s age, anyway.”

Kincaid’s hot retort in defense of Jocelyn was cut off, probably for the best, by his mother’s calm voice.

“Don’t judge her too harshly, Ormond. Her visit has been unusual in every particular, it’s true. But I think there was a great deal more to her experiences with the dragon than she told us,

and I wouldn't be surprised if her hasty departure from the celebrations was due in great measure to being still quite overwrought from her experiences, not to mention her injuries."

"Injuries?" Kincaid repeated ominously, but no one was paying him any attention.

"I thought she seemed very prettily-behaved, if a little withdrawn, when I spoke to her yesterday," his mother continued. She locked eyes with her husband. "It distresses me more than I can say that she's disappeared from our own castle this time, when we're supposed to be looking after her. She seemed so young and vulnerable when I spoke with her, Malcolm." The queen looked anxious. "We really did ask too much of her in expecting her to attend such a function the evening of her arrival."

Kincaid's heart sank. He knew the Jocelyn his mother was describing, and it wasn't the one he had hoped his family would meet.

"Yes, I suspect it was beyond her," said Ormond, his voice unusually cold. "She is a most peculiar princess, and I'm not surprised Kyona's king and queen were so eager to send her here for the summer. They would be doing very well for her if we were to form an alliance."

"Ormond!" said the queen reprovingly. She looked shocked, and if Kincaid's blood wasn't pounding so furiously in his ears, he might have taken more note of how uncharacteristic such a speech was of his brother.

"How dare you say that?" he demanded, leaning forward over the table. He glared at Ormond, his breath suddenly coming hard and fast. "You would be the one doing well for yourself!"

Ormond shrugged, apparently uninterested in entering into his brother's theatrics. "I'm not suggesting we don't want Kyona as an ally. But you'll see what I mean when you meet her. She has barely more conduct than Lavinia. Honestly, after talking over her appalling behavior with Lord Randall, I was half expecting her to run off like this."

Kincaid swelled with fury at Ormond's slights on the Kyonan princess. He knew it was illogical—he should be delighted that his brother was apparently not taken with Jocelyn—but instead he was filled with an unreasoning rage. Never had he wanted so much to punch his brother right in his clean-cut, serious face.

"What did Lord Randall have to say about it?" King Malcolm asked, unknowingly intervening before Kincaid could start a brawl in the breakfast parlor.

Ormond shrugged. "He said that from what he had gathered from his time in Kynton, she's flighty and unmanageable, and regularly runs off like this. The incident in Montego was hardly the first."

Kincaid's mouth dropped open in astonishment, his anger momentarily forgotten. He didn't know what stunned him more—the complete inaccuracy of this description, or the fact that neither Ormond nor their parents seemed to think it inappropriate for a nobleman to make such comments about the visiting princess.

“Is that right?” mused King Malcolm. “I didn't form that impression of her in our short interaction, but Lord Randall would know.”

“Who is Lord Randall?” Kincaid demanded. He may not spend more of his time in the court than he had to, but he still knew every noble, and the name was not familiar to him.

“You remember him, Kincaid,” said Ormond impatiently. “From Balenol. He's been here before.”

“That visiting diplomat?” Kincaid asked, frowning. “He's back again? And criticizing Kyona?”

“Of course he's not criticizing Kyona,” said Ormond quickly. “But he's spent some time in Kynton recently, and he happened to be with me when the princess ran out of the room.”

Kincaid shook his head, trying to focus on the important point. “We can argue about it later. We need to find her.”

“Of course we will find her,” said his father calmly. “But it sounds like she did indeed disappear of her own free will.”

“Based on what?” Kincaid demanded. “The speculation of this Lord Randall person?” He shook his head, frustrated. “Of course she didn't run away by choice! That's nonsense! It sounds to me like this Balenan is just trying to stir up trouble!”

He glanced around to find that all three of his listeners were glaring at him in evident offense. He frowned, trying to picture the man in question. He could barely remember him—why were his family so outraged at the suggestion that his intentions might not be entirely noble?

“That's quite enough, Kincaid,” said his mother repressively. She turned to the king. “She can't have gone far.”

“No, she must be in Bryford still,” King Malcolm agreed. “I'll send out a squadron.”

Kincaid could only stare as his father calmly continued with his breakfast. Surely the disappearance of a visiting princess under their care was a matter of serious concern, even if she had run away on purpose, which Kincaid didn't believe for a second. Even his mother, who had said she was distressed at the thought of Jocelyn being out there alone somewhere, seemed to be absurdly reassured by the information that this Lord Randall had expected her to disappear. She was now sitting down to eat as well.

“Father?” Kincaid prompted, when no one made any move to leave the table. His father looked at him questioningly. “Didn’t you say you would send a squadron to search for her?”

“And so I will,” said King Malcolm. “Immediately following breakfast.” He seemed to take in Kincaid’s frustration, because he raised one eyebrow at his son. “If you’re so concerned, by all means search for her yourself.”

“Which will be so helpful, since you don’t even know what she looks like,” said Ormond sarcastically. “But if you happen to see a short girl with pale hair and blue eyes, do point her back to the castle.”

Kincaid glared at his brother, not sure whether he was more infuriated by the suggestion that he would need help recognizing Jocelyn, or by Ormond’s unimpassioned description of a girl who any fool could see was perfection itself. But he held back the retort on his lips. For some reason he didn’t understand, his family were not motivated to find Jocelyn, and he wasn’t about to waste time arguing with them. Not when she was out there somewhere, almost certainly in trouble.

“I should never have left,” he muttered to himself as he strode from the room, his nervous energy making his steps uneven. “I should have been with her.” Guilt ripped at him as he remembered again the way he had whiled away the evening at the gala the night before, assuming that Jocelyn was in bed. He wished he’d thrown convention to the winds and gone and found her immediately. He had known in his gut that something was wrong.

“This is what I get for thinking about respectability,” he growled to no one in particular. Their night in Dragoncave would have been scandalous to outside eyes, but at least she’d been safe. She’d trusted him to keep her safe, he thought with a pang. And now—

But no. He wouldn’t let himself get caught up in imagining all the dangers she might be facing. He would just have to find her.

But three hours later, he was well and truly frantic. He could find absolutely no indication of where Jocelyn might be. An interview with one of her maids had achieved nothing but to terrify the stupid girl. He hadn’t been game to speak with the other one, as he recognized her from Montego, and was afraid she would realize that he was the wandering Valorian who had disappeared the same night as the princess. But he doubted she would know anything of interest anyway.

He had tried everywhere he could possibly imagine she might be, and talked to anyone who might have any reason to know her whereabouts. But she had vanished without a trace. With Jocelyn’s prolonged absence, his parents were finally taking the matter more seriously, but since all they spoke of doing was sending an express to the Kyonan king and queen, Kincaid was just as irritated with them as ever. He itched to mount his horse and go in search of Jocelyn himself,

but with no idea where to start, he was concerned that he would be more likely to miss the arrival of crucial information than to actually find her.

The morning was well advanced before his restraint was rewarded. He was in the castle's broad entryway, talking to Henrik in an agitated undertone, when his sister sought him out. He had almost forgotten his encounter with Lavinia the night before, but on reflection he was not surprised that she had slept so long after the excitement of the gala. But it seemed she had finally emerged.

"Kincaid!" she said, hurrying up to him. She cast a too-casual glance at his friend, giving him her most demure look as she greeted him. "Good morning, Henrik."

"Good afternoon, more like," Henrik all but snorted. A flicker of irritation crossed Lavinia's face, and Kincaid rolled his eyes. His sister was already showing signs of becoming a terrible flirt, but trying to captivate Henrik? At two years younger than Kincaid, he still had five years on Lavinia. Surely she didn't think he was going to flirt with her.

"Not now, Lavvy," Kincaid said impatiently. "I'm—"

"Looking for Jocelyn," Lavinia finished. "I know."

Kincaid raised an eyebrow. "*Jocelyn*, is it?"

"Of course," sniffed Lavinia. "We're both princesses." Her look turned serious at once. "Is it true she's missing?"

Kincaid nodded, trying to ignore the sick feeling that rose in his stomach at the words.

"I think I might have been the last one to speak with her," Lavinia said seriously. "I followed her to her room when she left the gala last night."

"You did?" Kincaid grabbed his sister by the shoulder. "What did she say?"

"Lots of things." Lavinia waved a hand. "But she seemed particularly worked up about Lord Randall. She said he was up to no good."

"What did she think he was doing?" Kincaid demanded, apprehension building inside him.

"I don't know, but she said he wasn't what he pretends to be, and that he's out to cause trouble for Kyona. She said something wasn't right about him." Lavinia frowned. "I can't quite believe it myself, but she seemed quite certain. She even asked me to keep an eye on him in the ballroom while she went to the royal courier to send a message to her parents."

"And?" Kincaid prompted, his grip on her shoulder tightening so much that she shoved his hand off.

“I couldn’t find him. He was already gone from the ballroom by the time I returned to the gala, and he didn’t come back. I figured I would tell Jocelyn that when she reappeared, but she never did either.”

“He took her,” said Kincaid, his eyes on Henrik. “He did something to her. It was him, it had to be.” His hand curled into a fist. If the Balenan had hurt Jocelyn, he would tear him limb from limb.

“What?” said Lavinia, startled. “Of course he didn’t. You don’t understand, Kincaid, Lord Randall is a good man. I don’t know why Jocelyn thought—”

“Never mind singing his praises, Lavvy, I’ve already had that from the others,” interrupted Kincaid impatiently. “But if Jocelyn thought he was up to something, she had a reason. And maybe he found out what she knew.” He drummed his fingers against the hilt of his sword, thinking. “I have to find her. *Now.*”

Lavinia was staring at him open-mouthed. “Why do you care so much?” she asked suspiciously. “Why is it so important to you to find her?”

“Never mind that,” said Kincaid impatiently. It wasn’t that he didn’t want Lavinia to know about him and Jocelyn, exactly. But he had a pretty fair idea of what his sister’s reaction would be if he told her how hard he had fallen. And he didn’t have time for Lavinia’s raptures right now. It would have to wait until later.

“Thank you for telling me all this, Lavvy,” he said seriously. He turned away, and at a jerk of his head, Henrik followed. “I owe you one,” Kincaid called back over his shoulder.

“Don’t think I’ll forget it,” Lavinia called after them, but Kincaid’s mind was already elsewhere.

It took very little time to ascertain that Jocelyn had never made it to the royal courier to send a message. And further inquiries confirmed what Kincaid already suspected—that no one had seen Lord Randall since the evening before. With a new direction to his inquiries, he quickly had more success. The Balenan had been seen by the night watchmen, leaving the city by the southward road. The sentries assured Kincaid with unsettling earnestness that the man had been behaving very correctly, nothing suspicious about his late night departure. Kincaid just pursed his lips. There was something very strange going on, but he had no idea what, and it was a secondary concern until Jocelyn was safe again.

It was Henrik who made a more alarming discovery. A group of men had left the city as well, not long after Lord Randall, also heading south. They did not seem to be locals. They had claimed to be merchants, pulling their cart of goods, called away at such an hour by news of a

family catastrophe. But one of the guards on the gate came from the southern region himself, and he had thought their speech unlike that of other southerners.

“Do you think it could have been this Lord Randall who hired the men from the North Wilds?” Kincaid asked Henrik, aghast.

His friend shrugged, his face grim. Kincaid wanted to scream in frustration. All that time he’d been uselessly tracking a rumor, finding nothing helpful, while the men themselves had been in Bryford already, spiriting Jocelyn away in the night. What a useless failure he’d been. If he’d just been present, none of it would have happened. She surely would have come to him with her concerns, and Lord Randall wouldn’t have found it so easy to abduct her with Kincaid by her side.

“Father will have to send a squadron after them now,” said Kincaid. His face hardened at the thought of Jocelyn concealed in the back of a cart, in the power of a group of hired thugs. “Five squadrons, if I have anything to say about it.”

But when he took his discoveries to his parents, it quickly became clear that he didn’t have anything to say about it. Both the sovereigns and their eldest son seemed completely unable to grasp the significance of Lord Randall’s departure. They were almost outraged at the suggestion that there was any connection between Jocelyn’s disappearance and the nobleman’s movements. The king did acknowledge some concern when he admitted that his guards had found no trace of the missing princess, but he wouldn’t hear of sending the royal guards out in pursuit of Lord Randall. He said that such a course would be an insult that the Balenan had done nothing to deserve.

After wasting fifteen minutes arguing hotly with his father, Kincaid realized that no space of time was going to be sufficient to convince the king. Quite apart from whatever strange phenomenon was creating such loyalty in everyone toward the absent Lord Randall, it was clear that Kincaid’s family thought his eagerness to go after the Kyonan princess was just another example of his usual thirst for adventure. He still hadn’t told them about his history with her—he had a feeling it would make his parents even more inclined to see his alarm as a foolish overreaction.

“Enough, Kincaid,” said King Malcolm sternly. “This matter isn’t your concern.”

Kincaid didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Jocelyn’s safety not his concern? It had been the only thing occupying his mind for weeks past.

“Whose concern is it, then?” he shot back. “Ormond’s?” He glared at his brother. “I don’t see him rushing out to find her.”

“The princess is fine,” said Ormond dismissively. “Like I said, she’s prone to this type of behavior. Lord Randall said—”

“I think I’ve heard enough of Lord Randall’s opinions to last me a lifetime,” Kincaid snapped.

“The guards are out looking for her,” Queen Marguerite said repressively. “You have other duties to focus on, Kincaid.”

“That’s right,” said the king. “I don’t want to hear another word out of you about this matter.”

Kincaid didn’t bother to respond. It was clear that there was no use arguing. He bowed stiffly and swept from the room, his steps sure and determined. He might not know much, but he at least had a direction now.

Henrik was waiting just outside the door, but Kincaid didn’t break stride as his friend fell into step beside him.

“Shall I assemble the squadron?” Henrik asked in a grim undertone. He had clearly been listening to the whole conversation.

Kincaid gave a tight nod, his own voice low. “I want everyone to be ready to ride in ten minutes.” Henrik started to turn away, but Kincaid stopped him with an iron grip on his arm. “Ten minutes, Henrik. Then I’m leaving, alone if necessary.” His friend gave a curt nod, then disappeared down a corridor.

Kincaid strode on toward his own chambers. Much as he wasn’t generally one to give thought to his attire, he thought it was worth taking the time to change into his ceremonial garb. The elaborately embroidered tunic in the purple and silver of Valoria’s royal house would identify him to the initiated as both a prince and one of his father’s knights. His pursuit of Lord Randall might not have been approved by the crown, but the Balenan didn’t need to know that. When Kincaid overtook him—as he was determined to do—he would confront him with all the appearance of a prince’s authority. He was more than ready to face whatever consequences might arise later.

True to his word, Kincaid was mounted and ready to ride within ten minutes, but it wasn’t necessary to go alone. Henrik had somehow managed to gather the entire squadron, even the enthusiastic squire who had returned to Bryford early on Kincaid’s special mission. Kincaid felt a surge of gratitude as he looked from one stalwart face to another. If anyone was irritated to be riding out so soon after arriving home, no one showed it. They were clearly ready to follow their leader without question.

Kincaid set his face southward, his fear lifting slightly in the release of having something to do. He urged his horse to a gallop the moment he was clear of the city, his knights thundering behind them.

He would find her. Whatever it took.