

# Song of Vines Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

*Timeline: during Chapter Seven*

## Mariella

Mariella watched her brother's retreating form, well pleased with the turn the morning had taken. She would have been content to enjoy the fun of Matthias and Hagen sparring, but a chance for time with just the Frossian singer was even better. She turned slowly back to Hagen, considering him thoughtfully before speaking. His expression was guarded, his emotions hard to read.

Or at least, she had the sense he wanted to be hard to read. She didn't find him especially so.

"Frightened to be alone with me?" she asked, the question not in jest.

Hagen studied her in silence for a long moment. "A little."

Mariella smiled. It wasn't the first time she'd been delighted to receive an honest answer from the young singer where anyone else would have politely lied. "I don't bite, you know. I'm not usually considered formidable in any sense of the word."

Hagen smiled wryly. "I should have been clearer. I'm not precisely frightened of you, Your Highness. More of the potential consequences of being in your company without proper permission or supervision."

Well, that was certainly an honest answer, Mariella reflected. Uncomfortably so, given his fear was so reasonable.

"I don't mean to put you in a tight corner," she said, genuinely penitent. "I am sorry about the day we first met. Did you get in a great deal of trouble with your mentors?"

Hagen gave his head a quick shake, a hint of distress crossing his usually stoic features before they smoothed out. "I beg your pardon, Your Highness, you misunderstand. I'm not concerned about consequences to myself, but to you."

"Ah." Mariella brightened, regarding him with interest. "Are you a dangerous man, Hagen? Do I need to fear for my safety in your company?"

Hagen narrowed his eyes slightly. "Forgive me for speaking bluntly, Your Highness, but now I believe you're willfully misunderstanding me."

She grinned at him, unashamed. "Perhaps I am. But if you'd focus less on all the tedious *Your Highnessing*, and more on explaining yourself, we wouldn't have an issue."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you find it tedious?"

"Always," she said promptly. "But don't change the subject."

Hagen nodded, accepting this rebuke. “I meant that I don’t wish to be the cause of you getting into any trouble with the king and queen, or anyone else. I would be very sorry to create problems for you.”

“Well, you can rest easy on that head,” said Mariella briskly. “Any trouble involved has most definitely been created by myself, not you. And I meant what I said earlier, when Matthias was here. I really would like to learn some tricks from you. If you can teach me how to redirect attention when things are escalating, I imagine it might come in very handy for me.”

He gave her a wry look. “Redirect attention away from misdemeanors such as being here when you’re supposed to be studying?”

Mariella couldn’t help grinning. “That might be one use. But I’m sure I can think of some more legitimate ones if it would make you more comfortable.”

Hagen’s answering smile was reluctant, but worth the wait. It softened his face in a way that graduated his features from attractive to devastatingly handsome. At least in Mariella’s opinion.

“I don’t think much could make me more comfortable to be alone here with you, Your Highness, so let’s not waste our time.”

She gave a delighted laugh. “Well expressed. There’s so much to be said for plain speaking, don’t you think? I wish there was more of it in the court.” She frowned. “But what did I say about the constant *Your Highness* tedium?”

“I don’t know what else to call you,” said Hagen helplessly.

She considered it. “I’ve heard you calling Matthias *Prince Matthias*, which is definitely a step in the right direction.”

“You want me to call you Princess Mariella?” Hagen sounded doubtful. “I’m not sure if I can do that.”

“You can,” she encouraged him. “Unless you want me to start calling you Honored Royal Apprentice Singer Hagen every time we speak.”

He looked genuinely horrified. “You fight dirty, Princess Mariella,” he said.

She smiled smugly, well satisfied with the effects of her attack. “So my brother tells me from time to time. Most people haven’t figured it out yet. But I’m afraid it’s true. I can be very tenacious in the pursuit of what I consider worthwhile. Not a very princess-like trait, I’m afraid.”

Hagen looked thoughtful at that, once again gaining her approval by taking her comment seriously and giving a genuine, contemplated answer.

“I’m not sure I agree with that. Tenacity is surely a good trait in anyone. Especially so in someone with power and position. That is assuming that there’s true value in what you consider worthwhile to pursue, of course.”

Mariella nodded. “That is the material question. And as to that, I imagine opinions might differ. I suppose you’re right that I do have position, but it’s very optimistic of you to ascribe power to me. I’m afraid there’s nothing of substance to my role whatsoever.”

Hagen considered her. “Perhaps it’s hard to accurately assess from the inside. In any event, I consider your tenacity something to be admired.”

Mariella felt her heart lighten, and she allowed her expression to soften. “Hagen, that is truly the most meaningful compliment I’ve ever received. And I’ve been the object of some dazzling flattery. Dazzlingly overblown, anyway.”

Hagen tugged at his collar as if it was suddenly tight, but she thought he looked pleased. “Not sure that dazzlingly overblown flattery is much to compete with,” he said gruffly. “But I’m glad you received my comments as intended.”

Mariella raised an eyebrow, unable to resist teasing him. “So you intended to pay me a compliment?” she asked, shifting in a practiced motion so that her skirts swished around her. “Goodness, Hagen, you’re bolder than I realized.”

“I...that is...I only meant that I intended it to convey a positive statement rather than a negative one,” Hagen managed, taken off guard by her flirtation.

Mariella grinned, even as she scolded herself internally. She knew she walked a dangerous line in flirting with Hagen. Dangerous for him as well as herself, as she’d do well to remember. But it was absolutely irresistible. Probably because he didn’t respond at all how any other young man of her acquaintance would respond to being flirted with by the princess.

“Well, I’m glad,” she told him in a business-like tone. “But we’re straying from the point. You’re supposed to be teaching me some skills, remember?”

“Yes,” said Hagen, seeming relieved by the change in topic.

He placed his feet apart and put his hands behind his back, reminding her of the head of her father’s guard giving orders to his subordinates. The image had her holding back a smile again.

“The basics of misdirection have nothing to do with magic, so there’s plenty I can teach you.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mariella murmured in a voice of false docility.

Hagen flashed her a suspicious look before deciding to continue without responding.

“A great deal of it comes down to body language,” he said. “You can use it very effectively.”

“Can I?” Mariella blinked innocently at him. “Hagen, you’re going to make me blush.”

He met her eyes, his own expression unimpressed. “Princess Mariella,” he said sternly. “You said you wanted me to teach you, but your behavior strongly suggests that you don’t really want to learn.”

His blunt rebuke surprised a laugh out of Mariella, who was equally delighted with his use of her requested title as she was with his decision to call out her outrageous behavior so directly.

“You’re absolutely right, and I apologize,” she said. “I’m not usually so shameless. I blame you, Hagen. You don’t realize just how unusual it is for anyone to be as natural around me as you are. I’m afraid it went to my head. But I promise I’ll be good from now on.”

His eyes unmistakably softened as he regarded her. Mariella realized all at once just how strong was his predisposition to regard her with favor. She felt the intoxicating rush of knowing how easy it would be to manipulate his softness toward her, and in the same moment vowed not to abuse it.

Unless it was for a very worthwhile cause, of course.

She listened silently as Hagen explained what movements generally drew people’s eyes and what postures surreptitiously encouraged people to look away. She didn’t even give an outward reaction when he put his hands on her shoulders, shifting her position to demonstrate his point, even though her heart leaped erratically at the casual touch. And it wasn’t just because almost no one else would touch her so unconcernedly. The Frossian was just so close, the bulging muscles of his arms right in front of her gaze as he positioned her, and the strong line of his jaw drawing her eyes as he explained his lesson.

As she meekly allowed him to shift her arms according to his explanation, she reflected that she had a feeling she knew what cause might justify making use of the new power she'd discovered.

Hagen. Hagen was the cause.

She might not have known him long, but she already knew enough about him to recognize that she'd never found anyone like him before. And she had a sneaking suspicion she never would. The fact that he was clearly taken with her, in whatever form that took in his mind, made it feel less of an imposition for her to start making schemes that might bring them together.

She'd told him she was tenacious in pursuing what she considered worthwhile. She could only hope he'd meant it when he said he considered that a trait to be admired.

Because she'd seen enough to know that Hagen was in every way worthwhile. And she had every intention of pursuing him with all the tenacity she had. She would just have to be smart in how she went about it.

A smile curved her lips as she dutifully followed his instructions in positioning her hands in such a way that she could unobtrusively hide an object inside them.

A challenge worthy of her usually wasted potential.