

Downfall of the Curse Bonus Chapter 2

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: Between Chapters Twenty-Three & Twenty-Four

Rasad

“My word! That visiting girl is ravishing.”

Rasad didn't turn to see who his companion was referring to. It was no part of his plans to show too much enthusiasm.

Not that he needed to turn, of course. There was only one woman in the visiting delegation who could elicit that reaction. And Rasad would have plenty of opportunity to admire her beauty, given that she had accepted his invitation to accompany him to his home in the north.

He smiled to himself, and not because of the prospect of exposure to her beauty. It was impossible not to admire Luciana's appearance, of course. But such matters were immaterial in the scheme of things. No, he was satisfied because his efforts had obviously paid off. She was responding to his careful handling exactly as he had hoped.

After a prolonged moment, Rasad judged that he could observe the new arrivals without seeming overly curious, and he sent a casual glance toward the doorway. The sight of Luciana,

entering the palace's ballroom with her brother and their guardian, caused him to raise an involuntary eyebrow. For a moment, even he was in danger of showing his admiration too plainly. He had been struck on first seeing her by her stunning beauty, but even that first impression was eclipsed by her appearance tonight.

Contrary to his expectations, Luciana wasn't wearing one of the heavy dresses that seemed to be traditional in the North Lands. She was dressed in a garment of local make, and he hadn't been prepared for just how appealing she would look in the colorful swathes of sheer fabric.

"At least one of them has the sense to abandon those uncomfortable-looking tents they usually wear," the man standing next to him commented, his eyes resting greedily on the young foreign woman.

Rasad didn't respond, his lip curling slightly in disdain. This man was a fool, one of the many who populated the Thoranian court. He saw nothing past Luciana's dazzling appearance. No one but Rasad seemed capable of seeing the depth of her potential.

His satisfaction grew as he returned his gaze to the girl in question. She looked like a Thoranian, and it suited her.

His eyes continued around the room, latching onto Prince Eamon. It was all Rasad could do not to chuckle audibly at the distress so plainly on display in the young fool's eyes. The Kyonan clearly didn't share Rasad's satisfaction at the sight of the beautiful young woman in traditional Thoranian garb.

Speaking of Luciana's potential for usefulness...

The prince's poorly disguised heartache over the lovely Luciana made him even easier to manipulate than she was. And it increased Luciana's potential considerably. To have the crown prince of the prosperous North Lands kingdom on the end of a string was no small prize.

It was all so entertaining, really. Of course, the advisor thought indulgently, they were both so very young. And he wasn't about to complain, not when their total inexperience was so delightfully useful to him.

It suited him that Luciana was so raw, so unshaped. He intended to mold her himself. And she would thank him for it one day, when she discovered just how powerful she could be, if she made full use of her natural talents.

Rasad watched Luciana move across the room, making no attempt to approach her. He had already pushed far enough that day with his invitation. And unless he was mistaken, she was already sufficiently intrigued by his notice.

It was a fine line to walk. If he didn't show enough interest, he might lose her attention to the immature but handsome prince who clearly still held some portion of her vulnerable young heart. But if he seemed too eager, he risked pushing her over the line from being flattered to being overwhelmed.

The challenge was half the fun, of course. Rasad had always been good at identifying what he wanted, and calculating to perfection how to attain it. There was a reason he was the youngest of the king's official advisors, yet held the coveted position of primary advisor.

He saw the Kyonan princess and her Valorian husband enter the room together, looking irritatingly content in one another's company. A flash of annoyance passed over him at the reminder of his deceased ally's biggest failure. Scanlon had been a short-sighted fool. He had made an utter mess of his mission, and any time Rasad saw the newly married couple, it was a frustrating reminder of the alliance between their two kingdoms, and how much harder it made his plans.

He took a deep breath, mastering the emotion. A frustrating reminder, yes, but also a helpful one on this occasion. He glanced around, trying to ascertain the hour. It was probably time to slip out if he wanted to keep his rendezvous.

He made his way across the ballroom, moving with a casual stride. An acquaintance hailed him, and he stopped to greet the man, making no effort to cut the tedious pleasantries short. Rasad never hurried, not for anyone, and certainly not for his own servant. If he was late, the man would wait.

After several minutes, he left the ballroom, strolling calmly down the broad marble corridor. He soon reached the exit he was looking for, and within moments he had descended the shallow steps into the largest of the palace's internal gardens. The sun had set, and the area was lit with bright lanterns.

Rasad didn't break stride, heading straight down a walkway between manicured hedges. This garden was too far from the ballroom to be used as overflow for any overheated guests, so he anticipated no company. Still, it didn't hurt to be careful, and the advisor made a point of ensuring that he wasn't being followed before turning down a smaller row of shrubberies.

The warm orange glow of the lanterns fell away behind him, giving way to the cold white of moonlight. Rasad embraced the solitude as silence enveloped him. He always did his best thinking in the calm cool of darkness. It was a pity he was here to meet someone. Working with others was always tedious.

As if in response to his thoughts, a muffled cough from up ahead announced the presence of the servant he was expecting. Rasad swallowed his irritation at this evidence of the man's lack of skill in being inconspicuous. *I didn't choose him to be inconspicuous*, he reminded himself. *I chose him to attract attention*.

The man wasn't the most devious of Rasad's underlings, but the advisor was confident that he had made the best selection for the task at hand. He was capable, with no inconvenient scruples that might get in the way. And he could be trusted to do anything for gold.

Rasad rounded a corner, taking private satisfaction from the slight jump that told him his servant hadn't heard his approach.

"You were discreet?" he asked by way of greeting, his voice quiet.

The man nodded, his face expressionless.

"Yes. I wasn't followed, and I won't be missed."

"Good," said Rasad briskly. "You remember your instructions?"

"I do," the man said. "Target the princess, and no one else. And make it as public as possible."

"I asked if you remembered your instructions," said Rasad, irritated. "I didn't ask you to repeat them." He drew a breath. "I leave for the Bastion first thing in the morning, so there will be no further opportunity for discussion. If you have any questions, now is the time to ask them."

"I understand," said the servant simply. "I know what I'm supposed to do." His eyes narrowed slightly. "And I know what I've been promised in return."

"You'll get your gold," said Rasad impatiently.

"And you'll use your influence to secure me a position in the royal court," the man reminded him sharply.

"Yes, of course," Rasad agreed. He raised an eyebrow. "Do you doubt my word?"

The man grunted. “If I did, I wouldn’t be taking this job, and the risks involved.”

“The risks will be minimal if you follow my instructions,” Rasad said dismissively.

The man nodded again, a glint in his eyes. “And the rewards might even be twofold, if it’s as powerful as you say. The princess isn’t so bad to look at.”

Rasad didn’t respond, his lips turning down in distaste. He had nothing but contempt for the general tendency of his fellow human beings to blindly pursue the enjoyment of the moment, often at the cost of future benefit. Even though that same tendency was endlessly useful to him.

He glanced around carefully before pulling a small pouch from his pocket. The servant’s eyes gleamed as he looked at it, and Rasad was surprised by his own reluctance to hand it over. He had laid this plan carefully, and he knew that he couldn’t carry it out himself, not on this occasion. But still, it was the first time he had entrusted one of them to anyone else, and it went very much against his inclination to do it.

“I trust you understand how valuable this item is to me,” he said, a warning in his tone. “And how harshly I would punish any attempt to use it contrary to my instructions, or to withhold it from me after your task is complete.”

The man chuckled. “I’m too smart to try to rob you. And I think you know that, or you wouldn’t be trusting me with this task.”

“Trust isn’t a word I tend to use,” said Rasad, his expression showing no sign of softening. “But you’re right that you would be foolish beyond belief to try to double cross me.”

“I know it,” said the man patiently. “I have my eyes on my own goals.”

Rasad nodded, satisfied, or as satisfied as he could be at the necessity of giving such a crucial role to someone else. Pushing through his reluctance, he handed the pouch over to the servant.

He felt a disconcerting sensation of power leaving him as the man took it. He was fairly sure it wasn’t just his dislike of passing the talisman over. He had come to suspect before now that his dabbling with the dragon artifacts had given him some level of ability to sense their magic. It was a source of great satisfaction to him, and as much as he wanted the other man to take the value of the item seriously, he was pleased to see no flicker of recognition in the servant’s eyes. He had no desire for the man to share in the knowledge of the full extent of the power he was about to harness.

“That is all,” Rasad said, ready to be done with the transaction. “But remember—do not tell anyone what you carry.” He made sure he had the man’s full attention before continuing. “Not anyone. I don’t care who you think you can trust. Be assured that I don’t trust them.”

“Understood,” said the servant curtly, stowing the pouch in a pocket.

Rasad turned without another word, making his way back out of the garden. If he tarried much longer, his absence at the gala might be noticed. It was better to be unobtrusive, if possible.

The marble corridors were mostly deserted, only a few distracted servants hurrying to and fro in the flurry of extra work inevitably created by a formal event. Rasad paid no attention to them. His mind was on Luciana, planning how best to make use of her time at his home. He would need to tread carefully—she was clearly not totally sure either of him or of herself, and he would spook her if he moved too quickly.

But his other plans were moving forward at a satisfyingly rapid rate. If he wanted her to play her part in manipulating her prince, he couldn’t afford to delay for too long, either in charming her, or in teasing out the bitterness he knew lurked beneath that lovely face.

He smiled to himself. She was so beautifully ready to be guided in the right direction. Her bitterness was as powerful a tool as her beauty, if she only knew how to draw on it. The naive Kyonan prince would never know what hit him.

Rasad's satisfied thoughts were a little dimmed when he re-entered the ballroom. Luciana was dancing with a local nobleman, and was clearly the object of universal admiration—nothing objectionable there. But her guardian, Cody, was much less helpfully occupied.

Rasad concealed a frown as he observed the stoic Kyonan man in conversation with Lady Yasmin. That woman was a thorn in his side. It was her fault he had to depart for his lands so precipitately, taking Luciana with him. He was smart enough not to underestimate the shrewd and determined noblewoman, and as soon as the report reached him that morning that she was sparring with Luciana in the training hall, he knew he had to intervene. Luciana's naivety gave her great potential in his mind, but it also made her susceptible to being influenced by others, and Rasad had no desire to let Lady Yasmin get in the young visitor's ears.

And Cody was even more of a problem. Rasad didn't mind the necessity of including Luciana's young brother in the invitation to his home. Matheus was no threat to him, and might even be useful if things took an unfortunate turn, and he needed a less sophisticated method of convincing Lucy to assist him.

But the requirement to invite the siblings' mentor was unfortunate. Cody shared neither Luciana's insecurity nor her inexperience, and it had very quickly been evident to Rasad that he would not be easy to manipulate. He would probably have to be removed before too long, and how to do that without arousing Luciana's suspicion or anger was a puzzle Rasad had not yet solved.

And as unwelcome as it might be, it was no surprise to see the developing connection between Cody and Lady Yasmin. The intractable, unemotional Kyonan man was just the sort of difficult meddler Lady Yasmin could be expected to warm to, Rasad thought with a touch of resentment. And neither she nor her family would be troubled by Cody's foreign identity or lack of status. They were too open-minded for that.

He knew much less of Cody, of course, to guess what would awake admiration in him. But as much as he might show it in a much milder—and less pathetic—way than all the men currently fawning over Luciana, there was no doubt that Cody admired Lady Yasmin. To someone looking closely—which Rasad always was—all the signs were there.

Rasad sighed. Unhelpful as the man's presence might prove to be, it was probably for the best that Cody was coming to the Bastion with his young charges. The risk of him staying in Thirl might be even higher. A more established understanding between the foreigner and the local noblewoman was the last thing Rasad wanted.

His eyes passed over the pair, scanning the room with a laziness that was entirely for effect. As always, he was taking in every detail. There was a reason no one knew better than he did every facet of what was happening in King Abner's court. His gaze settled on a certain young prince, watching the dancing with an expression that could only be described as brooding.

Rasad smiled. He had to be at the gala, for the sake of appearances. Why not enjoy himself a little?

He wandered over to Prince Eamon, accepting a glass from a serving boy on the way.

“Good evening, Your Highness.”

The prince started slightly at the greeting, not quite able to hide the dislike that flickered through his eyes as he took in the identity of the speaker.

“Good evening, Advisor,” he said, inclining his head stiffly.

“I trust you are enjoying the festivities?”

“King Abner’s hospitality is most generous,” Prince Eamon responded.

Rasad smiled at the diplomatic response, letting his eyes wander casually over the crowd.

“Luciana is looking simply glorious tonight, don’t you think?”

The prince shot him a look so full of suspicion and resentment, that Rasad had to hide a smirk. With Luciana not present to witness it, there was really no purpose to be served by baiting the Kyonan crown prince. But the boy was so delightfully predictable, it was hard to resist.

“She looks well,” Prince Eamon said, more stiffly than ever. “I suppose fashion is subjective...it’s not surprising if she looks a little strange to me when I’m so used to the style of dress favored by all the women in my father’s court.”

“Ah, but your Kyonan dress doesn’t suit our climate,” Rasad said smoothly. “I understand that it doesn’t get nearly so hot in the North Lands as it does here.” He paused. “Perhaps that’s why she looks so much more comfortable in her new attire.”

He took a casual sip from his drink, watching his companion sideways as he let his words sink in. He wasn’t disappointed—the predictable battle between anger and distress was embarrassingly obvious in the young prince’s eyes, much as he was clearly trying to hide it.

Rasad felt a flicker of amusement at how effectively his words had struck a nerve. How foolish this boy was, and how easily thrown. Rasad’s observation hadn’t even been entirely true. Luciana didn’t look altogether comfortable in the sheer Thoranian garment. If he wasn’t mistaken, she had regretted wearing it the moment she’d entered the room. But he doubted the prince would notice that, caught up in his regrets and uncertainties, as he clearly was. It helped that Luciana seemed to have shaken off her initial hesitance by now, at least outwardly.

“I understand she and her brother are joining you in the north,” Prince Eamon said abruptly.

Rasad turned to him, inclining his head in acknowledgment. “Yes, they have accepted my invitation. I feel a little guilty to be pulling them away from the excitement of the capital. I’m sure they’ll be sorely missed.”

His eyes lingered on Luciana, who was no longer dancing, but was surrounded by a group of admiring young men. “Luciana particularly.” He smiled. “But I think they’ll enjoy visiting the north. It’s a beautiful part of the kingdom, you know. You could spend a whole lifetime there without getting sick of its...attractions.”

The prince kept his own eyes on Luciana, containing his emotions with evident effort.

“Such a pity then,” Prince Eamon said, with a bite in his voice, “that they will have only a short time to spare for their visit before we will all be expected back in Nohl.” He turned, meeting Rasad’s eye with a clear warning in his own. “They will certainly be missed, and we’ll all look forward to their *safe* return in the near future.”

With a stiff inclination of the head, the prince turned and strode across the room, probably wanting to put some distance between himself and Rasad before he said something he would regret.

Rasad felt a tiny hint of annoyance at the prince’s barely concealed threat. But he shook it off, choosing instead to laugh at what was nothing more than childish posturing. If he only knew it, Prince Eamon wasn’t the one in a position to make threats. These Kyonans had far too high an opinion of themselves. They had no power to stop the events Rasad had set in motion, and when

their upstart kingdom formed part of King Abner's empire, they would be forced to accept a more accurate view of their own importance.

Rasad indulged in a grim smile. It was a satisfying thought.