

# **Captives of the Curse Bonus Chapter 1**

By Deborah Grace White

*Timeline: Across Chapters Eight & Nine*

# Scarlett

Scarlett repressed a sigh as she took in the identity of the young nobleman who had hailed her. He was particularly ridiculous with his attentions, and for some reason she found it harder than usual to tolerate the foolishness of his extravagant compliments. But of course none of this showed on her face. She was far too experienced an actor to betray her impatience.

She extended a hand graciously for him to kiss, her crimson skirts rustling gently as she moved. The undisguised admiration in the young man's eyes was anything but gratifying. For the thousandth time, she wished that she could blend in instead of always standing out. It made it almost impossible to overhear anything useful at events like this, guaranteeing that each would be as tedious as the last.

“Lady Wrendal! You are, as ever, resplendent—no! Transcendent.”

Scarlett refrained from rolling her eyes.

“You put all others to shame. You are like a sumptuous hibiscus...”

Ugh. Why did she wear the crimson dress? She should have known it would make her stand out even more than usual. Scarlett tuned his effusions out, inclining her head in a gesture that perfectly expressed both grace and superiority. The posture was second nature now. It was unnecessary to hear the exact content of his speech in order to know how to respond. It was depressing to think that he, and so many others like him, thought that this type of overblown flattery was what she would actually like.

Her thoughts flew unbidden to the new Kyonan arrival. Jonan. It suddenly took all her considerable self-control to restrain the flush that wanted to rise as she thought of how derisive he would be if he were to witness the ridiculous attentions of this man. The embarrassment was quickly followed by anger. Why should she appear foolish to this Jonan? She didn't seek out extravagant compliments.

But this was absurd. She told herself, for the tenth time that day, that there was no reason whatsoever for her to care what this Jonan person thought of her. She had long ago made her peace with the unappealing part she played. She had turned it into a challenge, telling herself that the more ridiculous she appeared, the more pleased she was, as it meant she was succeeding in her self-appointed task.

So why did her act suddenly chafe her more than it ever had before? She found herself reliving her confrontation with Jonan at Mundsens's rooms the day before. Her face twitched

slightly as she remembered how Jonan had explicitly refused to tell her she was beautiful, but the man still gushing over her didn't notice the change in her expression.

She gritted her teeth behind her carefully constructed facade. She had been infuriated with herself at the discovery that she was irked by Jonan's refusal to admire her. What was wrong with her? She didn't want him to think she was beautiful—she didn't want anyone to think she was beautiful. Was she so good at playing her vapid role that she was becoming that person in reality? Surely not. But there was no denying that she had felt both disappointed and aggrieved when he had pronounced himself unimpressed with her.

A flurry of movement near the door drew her eyes, and she drew in a breath at the sight of the new arrivals. As if summoned by her thoughts, Jonan had arrived. Her face betrayed no interest, and the Balenan nobleman who was still addressing her didn't even notice that she had looked toward the entrance, but on the inside her attention was completely captivated by the sight of the young Kyonan man.

He looked incredibly uncomfortable. Someone had put him in traditional, although simple, Balenan garb, and it didn't suit him at all. He moved awkwardly in the stiff fabric, his limbs jerking unnaturally, and his pale skin flushed from the heat. She felt her chest tighten distressingly—he looked like a sheep among wolves. And that's exactly what he was.

It would be an understatement to say she had been alarmed when she had discovered that her father had invited Jonan to this event. What had he been thinking? If they avoided disaster, it would be miraculous. She had been tempted to try to surreptitiously dissuade her father from the invitation, but had decided that it was wisest not to betray any more interest in Jonan than she already had.

Jonan didn't seem to have seen her yet—not that he would be looking for her of course—but she suddenly realized that she was trying to catch his eye. She could have slapped herself. Why would she want to attract attention? Hadn't she just been bemoaning the fact that she was always conspicuous?

“Such flawless beauty seems hardly fair on us mere mortals—I wonder that it should be allowed by nature.”

As she listened with half an ear to her admirer's continuing homage, she caught herself wondering if Jonan would think her appearance was flawless. The thought shocked her, as it suddenly exposed her foolishness for what it was. All at once she realized that she hadn't worn her most striking dress by accident. She hadn't admitted it to herself before now, but she had been *trying* to look magnificent, in the hope of impressing the apparently difficult-to-impress Jonan.

She wanted to scream in frustration. How had she let him get under her skin like this? It could only lead to disaster. She would have to be more guarded than ever around him. The last thing she could afford was for him to learn her secret. It didn't matter if he was brave and selfless. And she knew he was—the sight of him throwing himself between the whip and that poor scared child had seemed emblazoned on her eyelids every time she closed her eyes for the last two days. The trouble was he was also reckless. She had seen it herself, and Baldo's report confirmed it.

She had acted against her better judgment in sending Cody to get him last night. It would have been wiser to observe him for a few more days before revealing anything about the resistance to him. But somehow she couldn't help herself. She wanted him to know that someone was fighting back. And she wanted to give him a more contained purpose before he did something irrevocable in a rash attempt to take down the slave trade singlehanded.

At least she had retained the sense to stay away from the base tree when Cody took Jonan there. He was suspicious enough of her already, she had seen it in his eyes when she had warned him to stay inside last night. It was funny, really. He probably thought she was trying to keep him from finding out Balenol's secrets. He could hardly have guessed that she just wanted to make sure he was still in his room by the time Cody came to get him. But she had seen straight away that it had been a mistake to tell him so directly to stay put. It had made him more determined than ever to defy instructions, and it had given him reason to suspect her of ulterior motives.

Not that he would ever imagine that her ulterior motive was to keep him safe at all costs. Of course not. He thought she was a despicable person, shallow, vain and selfish.

She turned away from him with a sigh. She would behave. She would not try to catch his eye, and she would not approach him tonight. She would observe from a distance to see how he met the challenge she had had Baldo set for him. It seemed unlikely that he would really be capable of playing a role and obtaining information by subterfuge, but she knew better than to judge on appearances. She would give him a chance to prove her wrong.

And she would try not to dwell on how much she admired his fearlessness, his kindness to his vulnerable countrymen, or his readiness to champion a just but apparently hopeless cause. And she would definitely not dwell on his strong, lean form, his bearing still proud despite his recent beating, and his face undeniably handsome in spite of his injuries.

Her gaze flicked back to Jonan involuntarily, and she found herself tensing slightly as she saw her father approach the young Kyonan. Speaking of wolves...She gave an internal, humorless, laugh as she tried to imagine what her father would say if he knew she was mooning over a Kyonan. That thought pulled her up short. Was she mooning? Yes, she admitted, she was. How depressing. Where was Scar, the fearless rebel leader, now?

She took in Jonan's falsely demure posture, and wondered what he was saying to her father. Once again she wished she could slip away quietly from the gaggle of men surrounding her, sidle up behind her father, and...but she would never escape notice. Not in this setting.

After a short time, Jonan walked away from Lord Wrendal. The Overseer looked irritated to Scarlett's experienced eye, and she wondered uneasily just how much Jonan had endangered himself with his words. Yet he had seemed to be showing restraint. He must really want to succeed with Raldo's challenge.

Jonan was immediately approached by a young slave boy, and Scarlett frowned as she watched their quick, furtive conversation. How did Jonan know the boy? And what was the child plotting? He was being bold to approach Jonan in plain sight of his master, whoever that might be.

"You couldn't be so cruel as to deny me, surely, My Lady? You must say yes and make me the happiest man in the room."

Scarlett pulled her attention back to the speaker with a start. She hadn't realized how distracted she had become. Was the tiresome man trying to propose marriage to her again? Why he seemed to think she would give a different answer from the one she'd given the week before, or the week before that, she couldn't imagine. But no, the other men in their little alcove didn't look disgruntled enough for him to be asking her to marry him. She took in his outstretched hand and realized that music had begun to play.

Ah, he was asking her to dance. She repressed a sigh. How she wished she could say no. But dancing with all her admiring throng was exactly what she was expected to do at such events. Glancing up, she happened to see Jonan watching her. She retained the control to avoid actually locking eyes with him, but she didn't miss the derision in his expression as he took in the crowd of eager young men around her. The reaction was exactly what she had expected, but she couldn't deny that it nevertheless stung.

Of course, her would-be partner could see none of her emotions on her face. With a gracious, but not terribly encouraging, smile she gave him her hand and allowed him to sweep her into the dance. At least this one danced well. He did tend to make the duration of the song tedious by his continued compliments, but he kept his hands to himself, unlike some of her noble admirers.

She grimaced inwardly as she thought how misapplied the word noble sometimes was. She thought it might be the very worst thing about her dual life, enduring the behaviour of men who swaggered too close to the line of propriety in their pursuit of her. It wasn't that she didn't know how to gently but firmly discourage their attempts to take liberties. But having the ability to

permanently stop their wandering hands and having to restrain herself from exercising it was maddening.

When the dance ended, she was immediately claimed by another suitor, and she took his hand without protest. What difference did it make to her who she danced with? They were all much the same in her estimation. Giles had said he might come tonight—if he did, she would at least get one song's respite from romantic attentions. He would certainly ask her to dance, as much because it was proper and expected that he would do so as because he knew she would give him an earful later if he failed to rescue her from her ever-persistent admirers.

But even so, dancing with Giles was more a welcome relief from dancing with others than a pleasure in itself. There wasn't a single man in the room who she actually wanted to dance with. Except maybe...but no, she shouldn't even think like that. He would certainly have no interest in dancing with her, so it was the height of folly to wonder how it would feel to have him lead her across the floor. He probably wouldn't even know how to dance. To all appearances he was a commoner, not a member of the Kyonan court.

But she wasn't sure she believed that. He was too well-educated, too confident of himself, to be an average peasant. And she was sure he was hiding something in relation to the new Kyonan king. Perhaps he really was a secret emissary of the king. But for once she had to agree with her father—the king would have to be green indeed to send such a young, reckless, anything-but-conciliating man as a diplomat.

Her eyes scanned the space, looking for Jonan in spite of herself, and she spotted him standing partially behind a large arrangement of foliage, a drink held in his hand. What was he up to? He seemed to just be standing there, but if she was any judge of these things—and she was—he was trying a little too hard to look natural.

She continued to dance with a series of enthusiastic young men, checking every now and then to confirm that Jonan remained in the same place. After a while his shoulders lost their tension, and he really did seem to simply be standing idle. Once she thought he was looking at her, but she looked away quickly, trying to avoid eye contact. Soon after he was joined by the same young slave boy whom he had been speaking with earlier. She wondered again who it was, feeling slightly uneasy that Jonan apparently had alliances here in Nohl that she knew nothing about.

"May I claim the next dance?" The familiar voice, laced with humor, cut across her thoughts.

"Giles!" She turned gratefully toward him, ignoring the prior claims of a number of disappointed hopeful suitors. Thankfully Giles's status meant she could get away with what would otherwise be a breach of etiquette.

His smile told her that he could see how pleased she was to be rescued, and the smile she sent back at him was genuine as he pulled her into the correct posture for the dance.

“Have I just come to the aid of a damsel in distress?” Giles teased as they followed the music effortlessly. Giles was an elegant dancer, and Scarlett knew they made an impressive pair. But she didn’t care if people were coupling them in their minds—it was worth it to get a few minutes where she could be natural.

“It took you long enough!” Scarlett quipped, instead of thanking him. “I’d given you up.”

“Well, princes can get away with being late,” Giles said maddeningly.

“How nice to be so exalted,” grumbled Scarlett.

Giles looked measuringly over her shoulder. “Well, the man you were just dancing with will be an earl one day. He looks ready to marry you—you could be a countess, which is pretty exalted.”

“Stop it, Giles,” said Scarlett sharply. She wouldn’t mind if her cousin was still teasing her, but his face had lost the laughing look, and he spoke seriously.

“What?” he asked, surprised. “He’s nice enough. I think he’d make a good husband for you.”

“You’re as bad as my father,” said Scarlett. “Stop trying to marry me off to someone convenient. You’ll have to find some other way to get out of marrying me yourself.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” said Giles, amused. “I don’t need you to get married in order to get out of your father’s schemes, Scar. You know he has no power over me. I was genuinely thinking about your welfare. You’ll have to marry one of these hopeful young nobles eventually—I’m just helping you identify the nice ones.”

“Well, you can stop,” said Scarlett shortly.

“Okay,” said Giles placidly, “as you like.”

“Sorry, Giles.” She gave his shoulder a squeeze, instantly repentant for her ill-humor. “I don’t know why I’m getting grumpy with you.”

But that wasn’t entirely true. She was aware that her future marriage was a constantly discussed topic in court circles, and it wasn’t the first time Giles had given his unsolicited brotherly opinions. It didn’t usually bother her. She was pretty sure she knew why she was suddenly self-conscious about the subject, but she wasn’t going to admit that to herself, let alone to Giles.

“No need to apologize,” said Giles, his voice light and pleasant. “Being followed around by that lot would make anyone irritable.”

She sighed. “They’re certainly persistent. But to tell you the truth, I’m sick to death of them. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Yes, let’s,” agreed Giles. “What do you make of this Kyonan visitor? There’s a lot of speculation flying around. People are saying that the new king sent him. I heard that he was going to be here tonight...”

He said the last sentence like a question, and Scarlett narrowed her eyes at him shrewdly. “So you didn’t come to rescue me at all,” she accused. “You came to see if you could set eyes on the newest oddity.”

He grinned back, suddenly looking more like the boy she’d grown up with than the poised man he had become. “Can’t I do both?”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t answer. Volunteering no more information than absolutely necessary was a reflex now, and even to Giles she wasn’t going to offer any details about Jonan that had not been specifically requested.

“So is he here?” Giles prompted impatiently.

“Yes,” said Scarlett, trying not to sound evasive. She wasn’t at all sure how she felt about Giles meeting Jonan.

“Have you met him?” Giles prodded.

“Yes,” Scarlett answered cautiously. She saw that his eyebrows were raised expectantly, and she added, “a couple of times.”

“So what’s he like?”

“He’s...” *Brave. Selfless. Contemptuous of authority. Unrefined, but a person of much more substance than any of these silly noblemen. And far too handsome for my peace of mind.* “Unusual,” she finally said aloud. “He’s reckless and not very polite. I don’t know why he’s here, but he doesn’t seem like a diplomat.”

“Hm,” said Giles, thoughtfully. Scarlett waited, but he was silent for a long moment before he spoke again. “I wonder if your father is right that it’s worth keeping him around. He could do us a lot of damage if we’re wrong about why he’s here.”

Scarlett knew she should try not to seem too interested, but she couldn’t quite hold it in. “So quick to see this stranger’s neck under the blade, Giles?” she asked tartly. “What’s his crime? Breathing our air?”

Giles raised his eyebrows. “No need to get heated, Scarlett,” he said. “I know you feel sympathetic to the plight of the Kyonans, but it’s not personal. I don’t have anything against the boy, but you know the situation we’re in. It’s all but war with this slave rebellion.”

Scarlett looked away quickly, not trusting herself to respond. The familiar guilt burned through her body, and it was all she could do to keep her face impassive. Giles was like a brother, and she knew he was fond of her. But what would he think of her if he knew the truth? She thought about the victories she had helped the resistance to achieve. She had done things that had seriously cost Balenol, and not just economically. She had even killed, more than once. She barely repressed a shudder at those memories. She had taken no pleasure in it, and she had done it only when there was no other way to save someone vulnerable. But still, she had blood on her hands.

Giles was right, this was a war, and she was a double agent deep inside the enemy's base. More than ever, she hated the dual life she lived. Her father was one thing, but making Giles trust her when all along she was fighting against him...it made her feel despicable. She struggled against a surge of the habitual despair that kept her awake even on nights when she didn't go to the base tree. She could see no way out of the maze she walked. The best she could hope for was probably to run away into the jungle one day, to live a nomadic life with Baldo's people. The thought held no appeal.

It was almost laughable, Giles's casual assumption that she would marry some noble suitor and settle comfortably into court life. She would be lucky to live to her next birthday with the rate at which hostilities were increasing. And she'd rather be killed in a clash with the slavers than the all too likely alternative of being exposed and executed in the castle courtyard. This time she wasn't entirely able to repress the shudder.

"Are you all right?" Giles asked in surprise.

"I'm fine," said Scarlett quickly. "I just don't like this talk of war."

"Forgive me," said Giles at once. "It's not very appropriate conversation for a ball. Of course it would upset you."

Scarlett wanted to roll her eyes. She bit back the impulse to scold him for thinking that she was too delicate to handle the conversation. Of course she couldn't say that—it would contradict the excuse she had just made for her discomfort. Giles began to talk lightly of inconsequential matters, and Scarlett repressed a sigh. It was so difficult to sustain any kind of meaningful relationship when she couldn't be herself. She did her best with Giles, but she could tell he thought she had changed since moving away, and not for the better.

Her eyes fell on the young, subdued-looking Kyonans standing discreetly around the edge of the room, and she hardened herself. The deception was for a purpose, and she wouldn't let the guilt eat at her. To drive it away, she brought to mind some of the things her father had ordered to be done to slaves under his power. Some of the things she had witnessed him do with his own

hands. If Giles had seen what she had, maybe he would understand. Human beings should not be owned like livestock.

She thought suddenly of Jonan, and his words in Mundsens rooms. He had said that Kyonan blood was the foundation of Nohl, and he had been right. She had barely been able to keep her countenance, so desperately had she wanted to throw aside her hateful disguise and tell him she agreed with him, convince him that she wasn't the monster he thought her. Giles would be horrified to learn of her secret life, but what would Jonan think? Surely he would approve.

She told herself sternly that she shouldn't care about his approval. But the reprimand had no credibility, because even as she thought it, she found that she was scanning the room for him.

He was standing right where she had last seen him, and he was still talking to the young slave boy. She frowned as she watched them, and Giles followed her gaze.

"Is that him?" he asked, interested. "The one with the dark hair?"

Scarlett nodded, but before she could say anything, one of her fathers guests approached Jonan and the boy. She tensed, feeling a sudden premonition that the disaster that had been looming since Jonan entered the room was about to unfold. The person who was now speaking to Jonan was possibly the most insufferable man in the entire court, and even from this distance, she recognized the defiance in Jonans face as the man spoke to him.

The other Kyonan, whoever he was, scampered off instantly, but Jonan stood his ground. She couldn't hear the words, but it was clear that he was telling the nobleman exactly what he thought. Scarlett held in a groan. The man stepped toward Jonan, and Scarlett came to a stop on the dance floor, well aware that Giles was watching the encounter with great interest anyway. The raised voice of Jonans aggressor was starting to attract attention, and they weren't the only couple who had stopped dancing to watch.

When the man raised his hand as if to strike Jonan, Scarlett took a half step forward before she could stop herself. The movement had been involuntary, but she regretted it as she sensed Giles's surprise. Clearly he had taken note of her desire to intervene.

And it seemed Jonan didnt need her help, anyway. He intercepted the mans swinging arm with a firm hand, and Scarlett sucked in a breath at the incongruous sight of a Kyonan laying hands on a Balenan, and an upper class Balenan at that. From the outraged mutter that passed around the room she knew she wasn't the only one to feel the full impact of Jonans action. But unlike the other observers, she wasn't offended. Even amidst her frustration that he had once again landed himself in trouble, she couldn't help but respect Jonan as she took in the uncompromising set of his jaw as he faced down the powerful but contemptible man in front of him.

But her admiration quickly turned to astonishment as a young Kyonan whom she had never seen before raced across the room and placed himself in front of Jonan. Scarlett wondered fleetingly just how many slaves Jonan knew, but the look on his face told her that he had no more idea who this boy was than she did. The room rustled uncomfortably at the unexpected turn of events, but no one seemed more shocked than Jonan when several other slaves rushed forward to join the first one.

Scarlett froze where she stood, fear for Jonan and the young slaves battling with pride at their courage and abject amazement at the unprecedented gesture of defiance. She could sense the anger beginning to simmer throughout the room, and she felt her heart in her throat as she wondered whether they could all emerge unscathed. Jonan, still looking confused, glanced out from behind his human barricade. He met Scarlett's eyes for a brief moment, and she couldn't quite master herself enough to feign indifference. Not this time.

His eyes slid past her, and following their trajectory she felt a thrill of fear at the sight of her father stalking across the room. Surely he wouldn't act violently against Jonan in the middle of his own packed ballroom.

She tensed in spite of herself as her father approached the group at the center of the conflict, and Jonan turned toward him. She was sure that the reckless young Kyonan would lash out at his host. Her mind raced as she tried to think how she could prevent a catastrophic outcome without stepping outside her court persona.

But it seemed she had underestimated Jonan's restraint. After only a short interchange, he turned and calmly walked away from the two Balenan noblemen. Scarlett let out a long breath she hadn't even realized she was holding in. It seemed the enigmatic Jonan might just live to see one more morning after all.

"Well, he's certainly making his presence felt," said Giles dryly. Evidently he had also recognized that the crisis was over. "What was your father thinking, inviting him here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Scarlett, keeping her face carefully expressionless to hide the emotions swirling around inside her. "I could have told him that it was a terrible idea." She tried to sound disinterested, but she couldn't prevent her gaze from following Jonan across the room. He had paused at one of the heavily-laden tables of food.

"Your Highness!" The simpering voice cut into Scarlett's thoughts. "I didn't see you arrive. How naughty of you to be so late! But not late enough to escape that outrageous display. How shocking to be exposed to such brazen behavior from the slaves. And in the Overseer's own house, too!"

Scarlett didn't even turn as Giles responded appropriately to the insipid young woman whom she knew to be one of her cousin's most determined admirers. Had Scarlett not been so

pre-occupied, she would have been amused by the girl's less than subtle attempt to insult her. If only she knew how little interest Scarlett had in competing for Giles's affection.

But Scarlett couldn't muster the enthusiasm to even smile at the absurdity. She was weary of the games, the intrigues, the subterfuge. How desperately she wished she could be seen and known, as she really was. But it was impossible, even with her closest family. If Giles knew who she had become, he would probably hate her. And even though she had put everything on the line to help the oppressed Kyonans, almost all of the Kyonans in the room hated her already. How could they not, when she was forced to present such a cold and heartless front to them?

She slipped away from Giles and his hanger-on without even taking her leave. She wasn't actually aware of deciding to approach Jonan until her feet had taken her halfway there. She had told herself earlier that she would keep her distance, but his near miss with her father had rattled her. She knew it was foolishness to wish that he didn't hate her. But somehow the contemptuous look on his face when he had watched her earlier in the evening seemed burned into her mind, and before she knew it she was making her way toward him.

He didn't seem to see her approach, apparently engrossed with the pastry in his hand. Unobserved, she rolled her eyes. Did he not realize how close he had been to disaster, or did he not care? It seemed to be a male trait—her three cousins were certainly all capable of losing interest in even life and death matters if food was on offer.

"That was quite a spectacle," she said, catching his attention at last.

Jonan stiffened, clearly resenting the reproach. "It wasn't my doing," he snapped. "I was as surprised as you."

She looked at him for a moment, her face showing nothing of how unexpected his reply was. She had imagined that he would hotly defend his and his young champions' actions, but on the contrary he didn't seem to be too pleased about what had transpired.

"I wouldn't exactly say I was surprised," she said, not entirely truthfully. "You don't seem to be capable of going anywhere without creating a scene."

She was needling him, testing for his reaction as much as maintaining her role. She had learned long ago that getting under people's skin was an effective way of eliciting information. People tended to guard their tongues less when annoyed.

And Jonan was clearly annoyed.

"Do you usually accost your guests when they're trying to eat?" he demanded, sounding like a sulky child rather than the self-possessed young man who had sparred with her the day before. "It's taken quite some doing to get to the food, and I need to keep up my strength. You never know when I might next be attacked."

Scarlett controlled her features with an effort, not even sure herself why the idea of Jonan being attacked was so distressing to her. At least he did seem to have some understanding of the peril he was in, after all. How could he not, after the beating he had received? Even the physician, who clearly had no sympathy to spare for his unwanted Kyonan patient, had admitted that Jonan was lucky to be alive.

“Yes,” she said aloud, “I hear that you’re not quite recovered.” Jonan looked confused, and she pretended disinterest as she shrugged. “I spoke with the physician today.”

“Ah yes,” he said lightly. “A warm and friendly man.”

Scarlett held back a laugh with surprising difficulty, thinking of the stiff set of the physician’s shoulders as he had made his report. He had clearly been trying to convey with his body language the extent to which his dignity had been outraged by being required to wait on a Kyonan. Jonan almost smiled in return, and Scarlett scolded herself internally for betraying her amusement. What was it about this man that made it so hard to play her part? He had been testing her defenses since the moment they met.

“He was less than pleased,” she said, forcing her voice to return to its previous coldness. “He said that your wound had reopened. In fact,” she made her tone as accusatory as possible, “he seemed to think that you had been exerting yourself too much.”

She watched him closely, interested to see his reaction. Of course she knew exactly how much he had been exerting himself, having been the one to send Cody to fetch him and take him to the base tree. But she wanted to see if he could convincingly feign otherwise.

Jonan took a bite of the food in his hand and shrugged, his face the picture of innocence. “He was just trying to blame me in order to hide his inadequate treatment, I daresay. I slept all day yesterday.”

She watched him closely, this time succeeding in hiding her smile. He was doing better than she had expected. He had given nothing away, and in fact what he had said was even strictly true. But apparently he was not as impressed with her as she was with him. Without warning, his expression turned sour.

“What do you care, anyway?” he accused. “Aren’t I destined for execution?”

Scarlett’s eyes narrowed at his unjust words, frustrated that she couldn’t snap back at him that she was the only person expending any energy to prevent his execution. He certainly wasn’t doing anything to help that cause. But his next words distracted her from her irritation.

“Surely it’s not necessary for your victims to be in full health when you go to hang them?”

“Hang them?” she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“You know,” Jonan pulled a hand against his throat in a strange gesture, apparently attempting to clarify. “Hang them from a rope around the neck so the neck breaks, or failing that, they suffocate. Isn’t that how you execute people here?”

Scarlett blinked, thinking how unpleasant that would be to watch. Not that beheading was any better, of course. Did they really not do that in Kyona?

“No, of course not,” she said, keeping her face blank. “We chop their heads off with a blade.”

She could have laughed aloud at the look on Jonan’s face as he put his food down. Apparently his stomach could be distracted by life and death matters after all.

“That’s disgusting,” he said, his voice not entirely steady. “You people are barbaric.”

She didn’t disagree in this instance, but she still found his apparent squeamishness a little bit amusing. “It’s an execution,” she pointed out. “It’s not supposed to be pleasant.”

“Still,” Jonan muttered, his eyes glazing over. “What do you do with the head afterward?”

Again Scarlett found herself holding back a laugh. He never said what she expected, this strange young man. Was she as confusing to him as he was to her? Surely he didn’t think it was normal behavior for a young woman to seek out a man at a ball in order to discuss methods of execution.

“Who’s barbaric now?” she fenced, wondering if he realized how unusual it was for men to talk to her about anything other than her dress, or the way the candlelight rebounded off her hair. Strangely enough, she preferred discussing decapitation.

But she seemed to have lost his attention—another thing that didn’t usually happen when she was speaking to young men. Jonan’s features suddenly tensed as if preparing for an attack, and Scarlett instinctively moved in front of him as she twisted around. It was a foolish move, a Scar move, one Lady Wrendal would never make. But her inexplicable desire to protect Jonan had once again overridden her caution.

The sight of her father stalking toward them brought her back to reality. This was no time to let down her guard. She moved subtly back away from Jonan, hoping her father hadn’t noticed her strange behavior.

But as usual, he was uninterested in what she might be thinking or feeling.

“You, boy,” he snapped at Jonan, not even looking at his daughter. “What do you think you’re doing, insulting my guests? I thought I told you what would happen if you showed me any more insubordination.”

Scarlett repressed a sigh, embarrassed for the thousandth time to be connected with this man. Didn't he realize how foolish his empty blustering made him look? It was clearly an empty threat. If only Jonan could continue to show restraint, his host was not going to make more of a scene than had already been made.

"Really, My Lord, it was all a misunderstanding." Jonan's voice was mild, and Scarlett breathed deeply again. He evidently could continue to show restraint.

"It seems I overestimated you when I thought you could conduct yourself in a manner appropriate to polite society," her father retorted. "You would be best to leave now."

*More like, you would have done best not to have invited him in the first place, fool that you are.*

Jonan, as unpredictable as ever, showed none of the offense that might have been expected. On the contrary, he looked amused.

"I don't think overestimating me is your mistake, My Lord," he said.

She supposed it was too much to think that he would be able to resist baiting the incensed Balenan altogether. But a quick glance around the room was enough to show Scarlett that there was as much need for caution as ever.

The mood was angry, Jonan's earlier display clearly neither forgotten nor forgiven. Many of the guests were watching them, and some of them looked murderous. She saw a dangerous glint in Lord Greentan's eye in particular, and all her anxiety for Jonan returned. Lord Greentan was perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the slave trade, and she couldn't imagine that he would take kindly to Jonan having stirred up the slaves to defiance. She still didn't understand why her father had invited Jonan in the first place, but this little farce had gone on long enough.

"You should certainly leave," she said, keeping her tone aloof, trying to hide how concerned she felt for him. Apparently she succeeded, because he sneered derisively back at her.

"My deepest apologies, My Lady, for soiling your perfectly planned event with my uncomfortable presence."

She held back a glare at his unhelpful rudeness. Keeping him alive was an impossible task—why was he so determined to make himself odious to those who had the power to kill him?

Sure enough, her father had taken instant offense to Jonan's words. "You have already offended my guests—you will not disrespect my daughter in her own house. As she said, you should leave."

Scarlett wanted to snort at the idea that her father cared about her being treated badly. Belittling her was his favorite pastime. But it didn't matter—he was backing her up in her

insistence that Jonan remove himself from this volatile situation, and that was all she cared about.

“I will be only too happy to oblige,” said Jonan, his sarcastic tone at odds with the polite words.

He didn’t even look at her as he swept toward the exit, but he paused in the doorway, glancing back. Scarlett watched him anxiously, hoping he wouldn’t decide to be difficult after all. His eyes hovered on her for such a long moment that she wondered if he could read her concern. But then he turned and was gone.

She looked around the room, noting that Jonan’s departure had done little to diffuse the tension. A cluster of senior nobles had formed on the other side of the room, heads bent together in serious conversation. Her unease grew, and she made a quick decision. Her father’s favorite soldier lackeys must be here somewhere—they were never far away. She would send them after Jonan, to make sure he made it safely home. Her father might be angry when he found out she had issued the order without speaking to him first, but she would have to take the risk.

As she wended her way through the room, looking for the soldiers, she tried to calculate how soon she could get away with retreating from an event that had lost all interest for her. It wasn’t just that she was sick to death of the nonsense—although of course she was—it was that she had somewhere else to be.

She wasn’t exactly sure what had decided the matter for her. Certainly she had intended to wait longer before revealing herself, if she were to reveal herself at all. But the contempt in Jonan’s eyes seemed to swirl around her even now that he was gone, taunting her unbearably. As soon as she was away from all the guests, she would summon Bonnie and send her out with a message for Baldo.

Perhaps it was a mistake—perhaps she would regret it. She didn’t care. She wanted Jonan to know the truth. She was going to show him who she really was.

And she was going to do it that very night.