

Dark & Cold

- *Ciara Atlong* -

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“For all of your scars, my darling. Especially those.”

Vynier is rich in spices strong enough to spread a scent of wealth across the kingdoms beyond it. Peace thrives among Vynier, Phillimont and Lystotia, the three neighbouring kingdoms of a cozy Europe, but there is darkness festering within the Vynierian palace; Darkness which can only be silenced by a mouth forced shut and the conformation of a traumatised, almost brain-washed mind.

Princess Ericia Charlotte Avington stands at the centre of the confusion, and along with the dark, cold horrors of her everyday life comes new trouble - trouble that's doubled.

Prince Rowan William Wright III of the Kingdom of Lystotia, Princess Ericia's Betrothed, arrives at her palace with the intention wooing his childhood acquaintance before they are to be married. He is the heir to a kingdom abundant in textiles and precious metals and minerals, handsome, charming and talented in every Royal Prince way, but just when the Princess believes she has found the hope of escape through this marriage, another visitor arrives for a long term stay, and not only is he the Prince of Phillimont –the home of the largest army in all the kingdoms- but he knows something that Prince Rowan doesn't; the root of Ericia's darkness.

For the Strong Women

Prologue

IT'S DARK AND COLD and wet— the room is a bone-chilling experience of silence and anger. Outside the thick stone walls of this isolated part of the palace, no one knows what is really happening.

Citizens are baking, singing, tending to animals or dressing for parties, servants and the rest of the working class are getting their hands and feet a little dirty for money to feed themselves and their families, children are out running in the fields, singing folk songs and laughing until they fall off their balance, but as for Princess Ericia... there is no such opportunity as freedom.

Her hands are closed into tight fists —the metal surrounding Ericia's wrists rub and twist and tear her delicate skin until it bleeds. There's fresh blood dripping out from her nostrils, dry blood on her Cupid's bow and upper lip just where the blood stopped running, her breaths are shaky. Ericia could feel her heartbeat moving through her otherwise lifeless body. She would not be standing were it not for the chains keeping her lifted off the ground.

Ericia had grown too numb to all of this –to the feeling and the smell of her own blood, the thousands of slices on her back formed from vicious lashes made with a leather and stone whip. Her skin, torn apart, is now open to the frightfully cold world once again.

Ericia doesn't budge much as another lash strikes just at the bottom of her spine. She feels it –she always feels it, but she clenches her teeth and lets out a silent groan in the form of a reserved sigh instead.

It is always like this. It has always been like this. Princess Ericia Charlotte Avington was always in trouble. Princess Ericia Charlotte Avington was always wrong. Princess Ericia Charlotte Avington was always 'out of control.' Once again, Princess Ericia Charlotte Avington has done something wrong.

“Have you learnt your lesson?” asks King Charles Avington II, her father.

She can't bring herself to look up at him. If she does, the response would be the same –another lash to the back, or perhaps many, depending on whether or not her father is feeling generous.

She nods slowly. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“*Louder,*” commands King Charles, slapping the whip unto the stone flooring. The echo of the whip around the stony walls is always enough to shake something inside of Ericia.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” says the Princess, loudly.

Chapter One: Her Betrothed

THE ENORMOUS THRONE room is silent. Queen Olivia Avington treads carefully along the red aisle that would lead her to her husband, her heels knocking gently against the smooth white tiles. King Charles Avington II is sitting on his throne in a most comfortable position, having not awaited his wife in any way.

Queen Olivia composes herself, standing, sighing most silently, clasping her hands together and resting them just below her tummy in the most proper way. She bows. “Your Majesty.”

After picking under his nails, King Charles finally takes his attention to his wife. He glances around at the room, observing the emptiness; even a room full of court members wouldn’t stop him from doing anything he would usually feel obliged to do. King Charles rolls his eyes and scoffs, thinking of how pathetic the Queen looks bowing to him like that –Pathetic, but his ego is only groomed by the gesture. With a bored sigh, he speaks. “It has taken you *far* too long to get here, Olivia, and now you stand as though I’m to *speak* the breath of life into you.”

The Queen wants to grimace, but she knows that even the slightest move out of character would land her in another pit of pain and shame. “There is news from Lystotia on the subject of our daughter. I... *We* have received a letter from Prince Rowan, himself.”

“Prince Rowan?” asks the King, sitting up attentively. He stares at the queen, intrigued and almost smirking. “Do elaborate.”

Queen Olivia suddenly feels something clogging her throat – something inside her believes she wouldn’t want to say this. She’s afraid of what Charles would think. She’s afraid of what Charles would do. “As you may be aware, Your Majesty, the Prince is of the age at which he is more than merely interested in settling down. His parents, King Stephen and Queen Carol have offered their permission for him to write to us personally, as he has stated in the letter. It appears that soon you will receive a letter from a messenger of theirs, written by them directly, but as for Prince Rowan, he wanted to be the first to share his intentions with us.”

“Marriage,” King Charles says, feeling the word on his tongue. It was a word that stung.

“You are aware, Your Majesty, that Prince Rowan William Wright III is the Betrothed we have chosen for our Ericia. It was ordained by both our decisions and set in word, made official with the Royal seals of Vynier and Lystotia on the fourth birthday of our daughter.”

“It’s really a shame,” King Charles says, deep in thought, “Ericia and Rowan have barely had enough encounters to call each other ‘friends’.” He laughs, but it’s a humourless, pitiful laugh. “How many times have they met?”

Queen Olivia thinks for a moment, but it's too obvious the answer. "Three times, Your Majesty."

"Th-three?" King Charles bursts out into a barrel of laughs on his throne, the sound of his voice echoing. "What else did the boy say?"

"He has stated that, with our permission, he would like to stay here at our Palace for a while –for the purpose of getting to know the Princess better. He made it very clear that he would like to form a special bond with not only her, but with her family as well. He said that, with the information to be received from his parents, things will be explained to you more in detail, Your Majesty, but he wanted the honour of informing us first."

"Prince Rowan," King Charles says, his tone eccentric, "What a brave, brave boy." He looks at his wife, standing before him, and allows a tense moment of silence to fill the room before he speaks again. "I will await the letter from his parents. Until then, there will be no further discussion on the matter of a marriage involving Ericia. You may leave."

Queen Olivia bows lowly, turning and exiting the room.

King Charles watches as she disappears, the doors to the throne room shutting behind her. In the empty room, all alone with his thoughts, King Charles begins to laugh. He laughs as though this Betrothal was never imaginable in his head. He laughs as though the request of the Prince is funny –and to him, it is.

Ericia tosses and turns in her bed. Cold sweat is trickling down her face and neck, the feeling of stickiness is all over her skin. She twitches. She's asleep, but her body and mind is wide awake.

Ericia recalls the vivid memory of her six year old self, walking quietly through the corridors of the palace to get to her parents' room, her creamy nightgown trailing behind her, her bare feet warming the cold ground. There are bare taps whenever she takes a step and soon enough she is at the bedroom door of the King and the Queen. There are no guards posted out here –no one at this particular moment. Ericia doesn't wonder why. She grabs the handle of the door and pushes it. There is no sound to accompany it, the door opens slightly. Ericia only opens it wide enough to allow one of her eyes to peek through. She spots the large king sized bed on which her parents are lying.

King Charles rests his hand on the Queen's thigh, moving his index finger higher and higher up her leg, pulling against the material of her nightgown. Queen Olivia turns towards him, stopping his hand before it could reach higher grounds. She stares into his eyes –his dark eyes waiting for something more spectacular to occur next.

“No, Charles,” says the Queen. “Please. Not now.”

As if King Charles is a switch and her words are a finger upon it, Charles' expression changes entirely in a matter of seconds. He continues to slide his hand upward, under her nightgown, Queen Olivia being unable to fight him off due to his strength. At first, the queen's undecipherable responses of utterances sound like playful struggle to the on-looking princess peeking in at the action, but eventually Olivia begins to moan and groan –the occasional struggle leaving her tone.

“How... *dare* you... tell me what I can and cannot do?” Charles says to her.

“Charles,” Queen Olivia says, breathless, she almost chokes on the word, “Charles, please, no!”

King Charles covers her mouth with his free hand, pushing his body over hers and proceeding to strip the top of her nightgown off.

Ericia stands, staring through the open crease in silence. Her blue eyes are bright and full of life and innocence, but what she is witnessing is dark and begins to irritate her. Ericia finds herself asking questions.

Why is mommy screaming? Why is daddy fondling that place between her legs? Why is mommy crying? What is that look on daddy's face? Why is he choking her? Why isn't she saying anything now?

It's the echoes; it's the echoes of her mother, desperate to get out of that traumatizing situation. It haunts her, the voice of pain rather than pleasure, crying out for him to stop –stop –please, *please* stop, until she can't bring herself to speak anymore.

The next thing Ericia knows is that she's being pulled from her little peeking spot by a servant named Marie. Marie was a young woman assigned to take care of Ericia as a full time guardian in place of her busy parents.

Marie pulls her away from the door and closes it, leading her through the corridor at a startling pace.

"Marie," Ericia asks, looking up at her, "what are they doing?"

"If I tell you that, my darling girl," Marie says, frowning and almost frightful, "You won't be able to sleep for a long time."

"But I want to be able to sleep," Ericia says to her, "but I'm still curious."

Marie stops her in a quiet spot nearer to her own room. She stoops down and pushes the hair covering Ericia's eyes to the

creasing behind her ears. Marie sighs. “When you are older, little one, perhaps you will understand for yourself. Now, please, let’s get you to bed. You have to promise me you won’t speak a word of what you saw to anyone. Keep it a secret until you figure it out, alright?”

Ericia doesn’t understand, but Marie had suddenly brought her little finger out, and Ericia takes it, swearing never to speak a word of it to anyone until she has figured it all out.

Then, Marie fades from the moment. It’s as if Marie has begun to vanish literally, but she’s fading so slowly that Ericia can see her until she is gone from before her eyes. The next thing Ericia sees is Marie, her head inside of a noose, and her body dropping as the wooden floor under her falls.

Ericia wakes up, cold sweating and breathing heavily. She drags her hand through her moist, blonde hair, her clear blue eyes full of tears as she begins to cry. She hugs her pillow tightly, fighting the urge to scream her lungs out.

It’s all true, it all happened. She had witnessed her mother being abused, and Marie was executed when the King found out that she had known such things.

It was after Marie’s death that Ericia had become a thorn to the king. She would be punished harshly for making even the smallest mistake.

Ericia drags herself more to the corner of the bed where she could rest her back against the wall. Even now, the more recent slices on her back are throbbing because of her anxious body. Every wound hurts.

The Princess stares ahead at the candle standing on her dresser. She stares into the flickering flame. It's almost as if she can hear the sizzling of the iron meeting her skin again as she gets lost in the visual of it. Her pores rise. A chill runs through her entire body and every part of her shakes involuntarily.

Ericia knows that it will take a long time before she can fall asleep again. When she was younger, after she had found out the truth about that first time she had seen her father dig into her mother like she was some sort of ripe fruit, ever since Marie had been executed and the abuse towards her by her father began, Ericia had been having the nightmares. There were only enough panic attacks wild enough to cause the servants to run to her in the middle of the night to calm her down —only enough to be able to count on the fingers of one hand. When word of those panic attacks reached her father, the abuse that followed was often worse than the nightmares and the recollection of the memories themselves.

So Ericia had learnt to suffer in silence. She lies flat on her bed, staring at the ceiling, counting the stones jutting out from the concrete above her individually, allowing herself to breathe in and breathe out slowly with each count and, soon enough, she drifts off.

Princess Ericia Charlotte Avington walks into the throne room in a brilliant blue gown, a small silver crown decorating her flowing, wavy blonde hair. She approaches the King and the Queen, sitting on their thrones, and bows before them.

There are other members of the court in the room, but being specifically called upon by the King, she is the centre of the subject matter, and she is about to find out why.

“I have received an interesting letter from the Royals of Lystotia, Ericia,” King Charles says, in a tone that is obviously only for show and to once again groom his ego. “Prince Rowan, as you know, is your Betrothed. I understand and am aware that you two have not had many interactions, but that is about to change.”

Ericia swallows something that isn’t even in her throat. She almost collapses from nervousness. Her Betrothed. The last time she had interacted with Prince Rowan was when they were fifteen. That was the last time Lystotia had ever hosted such a grand ball, inviting the neighbouring kingdoms and guests from out of the continent as well. Ericia, thinking about Rowan in the way she remembers him, pictures his thick blonde hair which he had insisted then that he refused to have cut. It covered his eyes for most of the night, and when they were dancing at the ball, he had stepped on her toe so many times because he couldn’t see clearly. He wasn’t very tall back then, either, but at least he was trying to be charming and polite towards her. She had kept the impression that he was amiable for all these years in her heart of diminishing hope.

Ericia wonders what he must look like now at the age of twenty—surely he must be twenty by now. She’s forgotten his birthday, but she’s always remembered that he was at least eight months older than her.

“The Prince has written an interesting letter,” King Charles continues, “which was approved and confirmed and put into further detail by his parents and now that we have gathered the full story, we are ready to let you all in on it.” The King pauses, and Ericia’s heartbeat speeds up.

Ericia suddenly hopes that what she is about to hear is not the planning of her wedding. It has always been her dream to fall in love before that—even if it means having to fall in love with that

specific Prince, as long as she could do that, she would be happy with the marriage.

She knows, however, that even with that burning desire to marry out of love, her father would never allow her to have her way. If she so much as decided to absentmindedly poke her food with a finger or sigh too loudly, he would be off with her again – and being off with her is far too ugly of an understatement at which to put it.

“Prince Rowan William Wright III has announced his intention to marry our Princess Ercia Charlotte Avington after he has had the honour of staying here, at Vynier, in this very palace. He intends to bond with not only the Princess, but with the entire family, and form general and personal relationships with as many people as he can. I can assure you all that he is a brilliant, charming, and honourable young man. If the unfortunate occurrence that we had predicted wrongly of his future spirit had happened when they were both four, we would not have decided to make him our precious daughter’s betrothed, wouldn’t you agree?” King Charles says, grinning at the people in the room.

A general wave of laughter crosses the risen thrones at the front of the room and King Charles feels satisfied with the response.

“Prince Rowan is yet to send word of when he intends to arrive. Until then, we will prepare everything so that only the finest of Vynier will be his experience.”

Ercia stands, listening to her father speak of this ‘bond’ that Prince Rowan intends to develop with her. Can she really, truly fall in love with him? Will she? And if she does, will she be able to escape the darkness of her life as she knows it?

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