



By Beryl Oduor

CHAPTER ONE

The silence in the huge library was eerie. The huge shelves cast shadows within the library and the tables were put a distance apart and were covered with books which the previous readers left there. A young woman was trying to put them back in the shelf but there were many different books from slots that she couldn't see whatever progress she was making. Then a deep voice broke the silence as it reverberated within the walls of the library

`Wendy!

`Yes sir,' the young woman hurried to him. She was startled as she was very new working at the library. She couldn't even remember to address him the right way but then she remembered that she had addressed him the way he wanted to be addressed. She had been slightly briefed on how to address the kings and queen but Gorham, unlike the others, didn't like being called by his title `Your Majesty'. In fact whenever someone addressed him like that in his personal quarters that person would be immediately transferred to the public areas.

Wendy walked over to the table where the middle-aged king had been seated. `Have you seen the Maverick volume seventeen?' he asked looking up at her curiously.

`I put it back on the shelf,' she said worriedly then continued, `I'll just get it.' then she was walking away before he said something else.

There was a young man who had allocated a seat for himself at the end of the room and was watching the exchange. He had been there for almost three hours yet he never opened a single book not even for a glance. He stood up in a split second and was walking toward Gorham. The latter looked up just as he got to his table.

`I've got to head off to Diane's,' he said as he took a book and looked at it thoughtfully. `Tell me Gorham, if you'd have known that you would be spending a half your life in a library, a quarter ruling and the other quarter your own- um- things...' Wendy came back with the book and handed the tome to Gorham. `Would you have agreed to be king?'

Gorham didn't look at him as he said, `I knew what I was getting into.' He smiled then put the book down. `I'd rather not spend that half of it in the battle field.'

The former laughed out loud. Gorham didn't fail to notice that Wendy was staring at the young man standing in front of him. The stare was filled with adoration. Gorham shrugged. That was a normal reaction from women around this man. `Being in the battle field is much more interesting. The danger, the thrill, the kills...' he paused dramatically as he placed the book down on the table. `Anyway, I have to join Diane,' he started walking backwards towards the door.

`Go have fun with Diane,' Gorham called out to him forcing his voice to be light.

`Fun with Diane? No, no, you must have got me wrong. It is not fun when she is around.' He turned and headed to the door.

`I should hope not.' The young man was almost at the door when Gorham remembered.

`Victor,' the man stopped. `Tell her that she has to come in sooner or later this month.'

Victor raised his eyebrow and just to annoy Gorham, he bowed as he said, `As you wish, your Majesty.'

Wendy had noticed Victor's presences long before but she could not approach him to ask who he was or what he wanted because; first, she was too shy to do that and second, she had been told not

to ask questions. Given the circumstances, she was now worried. His eyes had been fixed on her all the time and that fact alone was making her clumsier than she normally was. When she heard the name, there was no other reason that she could think of if not that he suspected her of being a danger to the king.

Victor Raymond was a hero and a legend all rolled into one. He was the youngest member of the royal guard at around twenty eight. He had been recruited by Queen Diane about five years ago. Nobody knew his past or where he was from and he never talked about it. They just accepted that Queen Diane knew and that was enough for them. Unfortunately, Victor was very talented and that caused some people to be curious about him and others worried. He was perfect in swordsmanship, archery, horseback riding and possibly every other thing that he endeavored in. The only person who could still beat him at all in anything was Diane who had personally trained him and therefore knew his weaknesses.

“Rumor has it that Victor has killed more people in and out of the battlefield than is recorded in the books.” She had been told by her room-mate Cynthia.

“He is very dangerous and it is best that you stay out of his way.” Wendy's parents had told her. They knew what she wanted and meeting someone as talented as he would probably make her try to do something stupid like approach him. Of course that was before she realized just how much power he had that he was talking like a friend to the king.

Wendy had looked him over and couldn't fail to notice his handsomeness. His appeal flowed around him and surrounded him drawing all and sundry towards him. His dark eyes seemed as if they could see right through your soul and there she also sensed the alertness for any kind of danger. It made her shudder but not because of fear rather more of excitement. The rest of his feature, though they were hard set, contradicted the soft way that one part of his body merged with the next. He didn't have scars on his face and she didn't think he had them anywhere else on his body. He didn't look much like a guard but that obvious fact was why the two kings preferred to have Victor assigned to them when they went on their various quests. If it happened that their quests took place at the same time then Diane would be forced to decide who would take him.

Victor was known to have a sense of humor that left Gorham frowning at him. He also had an easy laugh and that caused Wendy to wonder how an easy going person like that could be so ruthless in the battlefield. He was a young man and a bachelor with a high status but he had neither a girlfriend nor a betrothed. But there were rumors about that as well.

People around him extruded mixed feelings about him. They liked him one minute and feared or hated him the next. The two kings were not an exception and had their reasons to hate him. Gorham hated him because he thought that Victor was sleeping with Diane. That was the rumor generated as the outcome of Victor remaining a bachelor. It was said that he didn't want the Queen to be jealous and so he remained faithful to her. It didn't help matters that whenever Victor went to see Diane they had to be left alone. Gorham was so jealous of him but he tried his best to hide it.

Nathan, the other king, was more concerned about his throne. He believed that Victor was getting very popular with everybody else and his position on the royal army gave him a lot of power. He could organize a coup and the likelihood that he would succeed was high. That was why Nathan had his spies on Victor. He was prepared to report Victor to the council the minute he heard even a whisper that the latter was planning a coup.

The only other reason that Wendy would have about him looking at her would be that she was attractive but she didn't believe that. She had been raised in a farm and the only thing that people

looked at was the field that one had plowed and how the crops were doing. She never had the green thumb and everything that she planted ended up dead, not immediately though. They grew past the seedling stage but died during the transplanting. It was a curious phenomenon which she wasn't prepared to investigate.

She had therefore moved to the city when she was registered an adult. She had applied to join the army but not being from the right bloodline she was not allowed to join and so she reapplied to work in the castle especially Diane's castle but that was not possible either. She was thereof, admitted in Gorham's castle as a book-keeper in the library.

She had found a place to stay with two other room-mates but they were working in Diane's castle. They weren't close to each other yet but after the first day of work she was forced to listen as they marveled at how many guards were in the castle and how grand it was. She had nothing interesting to add or say about where she, on the other hand, worked. She had gone to bed wondering why she had to be born in such an ordinary family that had no connections whatsoever that the best she could do was be a book-keeper. She had stared at herself in the mirror and looking at her hair she wondered about the white strips. She then took a pair of scissors and cut the hair short up to her chin. She had ceased trying to cut off the white strips after realizing, long ago, that she was left with ugly hair afterward.

So on the second day of work she had gone to work with short hair hanging over her eyes since she couldn't hold it back. No one noticed. It hid her face well enough and when Victor was looking at her she could see him without him knowing it, she hoped. At lunch time she met with a few of her workmates but they had nothing to talk about and therefore she was the first one to get back to work in the boring library.

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Diane's castle was filled with guards. It was the safest of the three castles and by far it was the largest since she normally hosted the guests to the state. Nathan's castle was the closest to hers and he used to go and be the host to the guests. He was the one in charge with foreign affairs and administration. Gorham's castle was the most secluded since it was on the other side of the city. He dealt with justice and internal affairs. He co-related mostly with Diane.

She had long ago tried to convince the Council of Elders that it was better if the kings and queen occupied different cities to show that they owned them but the council had not approved and neither did the two kings.

The Council's first excuse was that the funding was not available at the particular moment to built new castles for two of them given that one would have stayed within the city. Their second reason was that such a move would have to take time and planning and may even be effective in two decades. Diane understood that. Relocating a king wasn't nearly as simple as planning the security for a week long quest. It meant that there had to be two dozen security plans in case of an ambush. Selecting a trusted team would mean depleting the rest of the kingdom of good guards and thus risking the security of the people. More so, she understood that once the process had begun there was no turning back whether there were problems or not.

The excuses were reasonable enough to make her stop pursuing it... for the time being. There was no point in them being cooped up in the one city, large as it was. She had worked hard to expand the colony; conquering, maintaining fronts and having to endure a bruised ego when she lost some. The last part wasn't especially easy for her but she had had to learn how to let go and admit defeat, though she never lost sight of the goal even then.

Gorham's reason for not backing her up on the proposal was very straightforward and simple. He needed to keep an eye on her. When he'd said this he hadn't even realized how the statement would be received but that tended to happen when he was talking about Diane. Somehow his statements would betray what he felt for her, whether consciously or not. And she had also understood that reason, though at the time a little anger was brewing as memories sipped back into her head.

Of all the reasons though, Nathan's was the strangest. His being that he would not stand it to have delegates travel back and forth between the two of them and before she could say that they would be the ones traveling, he added that it would be a waste of precious time. When everybody thought that he was done and the meeting was going to continue, he spoke and asked how they would allocate which city to whom and how would that reflect on their shared, equal power to the citizens when one of them got the bigger or the wealthier city. It was a good point, and thus the issue was dropped.

Diane's main responsibility was security both internally and abroad. The army generals were under her but she did little to go against them. It was only the issue of Victor Raymond that made all hell break loose in her department. The generals needed background information on Victor but she hadn't told them; not even his exact age leaving people to guess. She signed him up to the army under her personal training camp and a few years later she promoted him to be one of the royal guards against the protests of the generals. Victor was eventually doing most things for her like assigning guards to the other two royals and rotating patrols around the city. This worried the generals who were siding with Nathan on this. She was giving Victor too much power.

There was not much difference between the royal guard and the Army except that the royal guards were to ensure the security of the people internally and they worked every day of the week while the army protected the citizens from external threats. They were hence called upon once in a while but the job would take weeks, months or even years to complete. Life was hard in both but they served the crowns, especially Diane.

There were some subtle differences such as lifestyle whence one could afford to have a family when they were in the royal guard but life was too uncertain in the army to have that kind of luxury. Their dressings were a different also given that in the army, they had to avoid getting grabbed or trapped so they wore either very short shorts or skirts, or very tight, long trousers when cold for both male and female. They had amours and helmets not forgetting the other weapons. The royal guard dressed more modestly except of course the men were in trousers throughout except in training where the shorter or tighter attire was required.

When Victor walked into the castle, the guards saluted him. He walked to the upper rooms to Diane's private quarters. He stopped outside the large doors. 'May I see her?' he asked the guard outside the door. She smiled at him; she always smiled at him, then entered and announced his arrival. She came back out and nodded as she stepped aside from the door. 'Your Highness?' he said.

'Victor, I'm glad you came,' she stood up and went to kiss him on the cheeks. 'What do you have to tell me?' she asked expectantly. Victor looked around the room. Everybody else in the room left knowingly.

When they were alone he said, 'She looks a lot like you at that age, I suppose, except her hair which is black with streaks of white.'

'She was born with white hair, it will change back once she has started her training.' she walked away from him and went to sit on a chair. Victor remained standing.

`Why don't you train her yourself?' Victor asked. He was having doubts that he was adept to train her himself.

`It will be so obvious that she is my daughter if she is seen standing next to me and besides, that is why you are here, remember?'

`Yes,' He kept quiet for awhile then said, `Gorham wants to see you.'

`It's about the time I have to sit by the books.' She sighed deeply. `You will accompany me after you finish going through the reports for today.'

`As you wish. When am I supposed to start training her?'

`I'll talk to Gorham about letting her train with you as you ask her if she's interested.'

`What if she's not?' Victor watched Diane's image in the mirror.

`She will be. She's part of me and part of her father, unlike...'

`Your sons?'

`Those are the laziest people on the planet!' she frowned.

`I have to go ahead then.' he walked to her and held her behind the neck then lowered his head to hers as if going to kiss her but just blew on her face. She took a deep breath and inhaled it. By the time she opened her eyes, Victor was gone and her attendants were walking back in. She sat there feeling a bit dazed but then everybody was used to finding her like that whenever Victor left.

What they didn't know was that someone was watching from a peephole that he had created. He wasn't able to listen to what was being said but could see everything especially when Diane sat down. He went excitedly out of the castle and headed to report what he had seen to King Nathan.

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Gorham had relocated to his personal study after being informed that Diane was going to go see him that day. He was preparing to receive her for the monthly review of her policies. Nathan would also be coming but that was way after Diane had arrived. He had opened the books to the specific pages that she had to read and they had to discuss. He had planned that today they were going to go over her obligation to step down from the throne.

The door opened and Diane walked in hanging on to Victor's arm. Gorham frowned but just watched them. They walked until the edge of the table, he let go of her arm and pulled out a chair for her. Then he bowed slightly and started to walk back to the door. By the time he got to the door Diane had already started fidgeting on the chair. She really hated books especially the ones that Gorham made her read and as she watched Wendy bring in an armful of books, she groaned. Diane looked at her as coldly as she could.

Wendy saw the look and hesitated, `Your Majesty.' she said as she tried to curtsy with the heavy books.

`Wendy just put down the books and excuse us,' Gorham said in a gentle voice. She did as she was told and headed for the door where Victor was holding it open for her. Before the door closed behind her she heard Gorham say, `There is no need to look at her like that. She's just doing her job.' Then the door closed.

`I was told she has some potential.'

`Who?' Gorham asked.

`Wendy.'

`Potential in what?'

`To be a royal guard.'

Gorham laughed curtly. `Who told you this?'

`Victor.'

`Are you sure it just isn't because of her beauty?'

`I'm starting to think that,' she said thoughtfully. `Maybe I should forget about accepting her.'

`Are you jealous of her?' Gorham asked studying her keenly.

`Why would I be jealous?' she was genuinely puzzled.

`Wendy is young, beautiful and she can marry Victor if they both wish it.'

She hid the smile that was coming to her face and asked, `You believe the stories that I'm having an affair with Victor?'

`Are you?'

`No,' she looked sad. `I keep him close, maybe too close but I do trust him with my life. You trust me with your life, does that mean that you are in love with me?'

Yes, yes, yes, he wanted to say but only said, `No.'

`Exactly! I know everyone is worried that he might lead a rebellion but that won't happen. It's not in his character.'

`You are putting your neck out for him.'

`Because I know him. He's only here until I die or until I step down. Then he'll go back to where he came from unless...'

`Unless what?'

`Unless he finds a reason or purpose to stay.'

`You think that Wendy may be the reason for him to stay?' he asked narrowing his eyes.

Diane shrugged. `Maybe.'

`You know that Alice is interested in him too.' Diane frowned. `Speaking of Alice, you have to take her under your wing. You've postponed it for too long and it will only be a miracle if you'll have a girl child to take over.

`I hate her name,' Diane said grudgingly.

Gorham laughed softly as his eyes stayed on her. She looked as beautiful as always. `That's not a valid reason.'

`Yes, you are right,' she sighed. `I'll ask her to come over then.'

`You have to teach her what you know.'

`I'll do that.'

`And you won't stand in her way if she's interested in Victor. He'd make her a terrific husband.'

`He's not interested in her.'

`How would you know?'

`She's too easy to read. You look at her face and immediately know what she's thinking.'

`Then you have to teach her to hide her emotions.'

`It will be hard but okay.' She suddenly stood up. `Victor will be training Wendy.'

`I didn't agree to that. Anyway why won't you train her yourself?'

`Because I will be busy with Alice and I want to show you that I'm not jealous. Whatever will happen between the two of them is none of my concern.'

`But you know that for her to be a royal guard you have to approve. There is no point in training her when you aren't going to allow her in.'

`I know.' She smiled at him.

`Mind if I help?' Victor asked after watching her for some time. She shrugged then started piling books on his hands. She carried some in her hands then started walking to the shelf. An older book-keeper was looking at her shaking her head. Wendy didn't know what to do after all Victor had offered himself. `Do you enjoy what you are doing?' he asked breaking the silence.

`Excuse me?' she hadn't heard him with all the thoughts that were in her mind. She arranged the books back on the shelf and started taking the ones that were in his arms.

`Do you enjoy your work?' he asked again.

`It's okay.'

`The truth, Wendy.'

She was startled. Did everyone know her name in this place? She answered him, `No.' they walked back to the table.

`Have you thought of doing something different?'

`Yes, but I can't even if I wanted to.'

`Why not?'

Wendy thought for a moment. `I'm not... I don't have the right bloodline therefore I was not accepted when I applied. '

`You knew that and you applied anyway?'

`Yes.'

`What makes you think that you can do it?' Victor asked sitting down. His eyes were still on her but she was now used to them.

`It's in my blood!' she said simply as she continued stacking the books.

`Really?' he asked slowly reaching for the dagger that hang on a sheath on his right side. `But I thought you said you didn't...' barely pausing he threw the dagger at her aiming it to just miss her head. He got the reaction he wanted. She ducked but he slid his leg to hers and knocked her off balance. She let go of the books in her hand and caught the table to stabilize herself but instinct took over as she pushed the table and moved backwards.

She saw Victor stab the table where she had been but she was going to fall. He whirled around catching her arm but pulled and threw her on the table and the books cascaded down to the floor. She heard a sword being drawn and closed her eyes as she felt the cold sharp edge of metal on her neck. Well, she had been warned. Immediately she heard a voice demand, `Victor, what are you doing?'

She opened her eyes and saw Victor standing over her. He withdrew the sword. Wendy sat up and saw King Nathan walk towards them. She stepped back on the floor. `Nathan, meet my student Wendy,' he said introducing her to the second king.

`Your student? She's a book-keeper!' Nathan objected looking at the uniformed wear of book-keepers. `Does Diane know about this? Does she,' he pointed to Wendy, `even want to be your student?'

`Do you want to be my student?' Victor asked turning to Wendy.

She'd gotten over the shock and her eyes went wide and she smiled, `Yes I'd love to be your student.'

`Then it is done. Diane knows that I have decided to be her mentor and should Wendy choose, as she has done, then she becomes my student.'

`I'm going to talk to her and tell her what I think.' He was walking towards the study.

Victor turned to Wendy who was smiling though her eyes were on the ground. She looked up just as he started saying, `Lesson number one, move fast. Any delay and you are dead. Lesson number

two, always keep your eyes on your enemy. Any distraction may be fatal on your part. Another thing, don't close your eyes even when you face death.' He paused, 'That is it for today. Any questions?'

'Yes, where will I be training?'

'Anywhere, everywhere.'

'Shouldn't I go to Queen Diane's castle?'

'No, you will continue working here.' He saw her face fall. 'You will need unlimited access to these books if you are to be better than me and besides you need pay to sustain your life in the city.'

'Oh! One more thing, did Queen Diane agree to this?' she didn't want to be let down.

'Yes but my advice to you is, stay out of her way. Now that you are learning to fight you are a likely enemy to her. Any other questions?'

'No.'

'No what?'

'No sir.'

Victor walked to the huge doors but before it closed behind him he caught sight of Wendy jumping up and down excitedly. She certainly was like her mother, he thought but younger... He shook his head to get rid of the thoughts.

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'You won't believe what Victor was just doing! I swear Diane; you are losing control of your pet.' Nathan stormed into the study taking Gorham by surprise.

Gorham looked at him worriedly while Diane asked calmly, 'What did he do?'

'He was holding his sword against a book-keeper's throat.'

Gorham turned accusingly at Diane. 'You planned it to come out this way?'

'I had already decided.'

'I don't get it,' Nathan put in.

'She came here and manipulated me into siding with her when she had already made a decision.'

'Was it her decision or Victor's?' Nathan asked sarcastically. Gorham stared at Diane but she didn't answer. 'He's controlling her somehow.'

'What do you mean controlling her?' Gorham asked but they both looked at him.

Nathan realized that he had put himself in a position that he had managed to avoid for a long time. 'I was worried and so I put a spy on her who noticed that Victor did something to her that always left her dazed every time he went to see her.'

'Is this true Diane?'

'Yes but he doesn't do anything to control me.'

'How would you know?' Nathan asked at the same time Gorham asked, 'What exactly was he doing?'

'It's none of your business,' she retorted standing up abruptly again. The chairs were certainly not made for comfort here, she thought.

Gorham was the one who spoke next since he was more used to Diane's temper. 'If you don't tell us what is going on, we will be forced to go to the council...' he let his words hang. The silence was weighing heavily on them but it was whether Diane would take the threat that made it unbearable. The threat was a real one given Gorham's tone.

She went back to sit down, 'He satisfies my cravings.'

'What do you crave for?' Gorham asked.

`Power.'

`How exactly can Victor help you except...!' his voice trailed then his mouth dropped open.

`Except what?' Nathan asked impatiently. `Is he planning a coup?'

Gorham turned to Nathan, `Do you remember your history?'

`History about what? Victor?'

`Am I the only one here who actually reads?' he asked rhetorically, `I'm talking about the history of the wizards.'

`All I remember is what I was told as bed time stories. I thought they were legends anyway.'

`They are not.' Gorham leaned back on his chair preparing to lecture. Diane was trying not to listen but the former's voice always drew her in. `Do you remember the great war?'

`The infamous one where so many were slaughtered?'

`Yes. The Great War came in two parts. The first part was where colonies were at war. You see everyone wanted to win the war therefore they decided to get help. In those days wizards lived freely among them. So the most powerful people were approached. Initially they said no but after being told of the benefits to themselves, they agreed to help. You see, they are naturally selfish and can't help it. It was that weakness that was exploited and thus many died.'

`Did they join the war?' Nathan asked.

`No, they did better or worse according to your perspective. They trained the soldiers in the art of war and imparted everything they knew to them. He paused then turned to Diane, `Victor always lets you win, doesn't he?' Diane shrugged. `Anyway, after training them, on the last day they breathed to every one of them the rejuvenating breathe. This gave them power, unimaginable power. The powers they had were magnified and the hidden ones brought out.'

He looked coldly at Diane as he said, `Every power has its weaknesses and strengths and as the powers were magnified so were the unforeseen consequences. Violence, lack of self control, uncontrolled tempers, tendencies for self destruction, only to mention a few. In short, many people died until the spell wore off. Then they saw the destruction they had caused. When the councils met they decided on one thing. It always puzzles me how they came to that consensus all of them,' he said thoughtfully. `Anyway, they decided to do away with that which had caused so much destruction. Not the soldiers who did the deeds, not the councils who decided to have the help but the wizards who gave them the uncontrollable power. They were hunted down and killed one by one...'

`I thought they were the most powerful group of the people?' Nathan interrupted.

`They were but they had been weakened when they breathed out the rejuvenating breathe, so now they had only the skills required in combat but unfortunately they had taught their `enemies' all of them too.'

`What does this have to do with what we were talking about?' Nathan asked.

`Victor Raymond is a wizard!'

Nathan went and slumped down a bit exaggerated and there seemed to be real fear in his eyes. Gorham just assumed that the former knew the magnitude that the statement held but Nathan asked instead, `Is he here to kill us in revenge?'

`He isn't here to kill anyone,' Diane objected.

`How would you know? Maybe he is here plotting just that.'

`It isn't in his character...!' Diane started to say.

`What she's trying to say is that,' Gorham interrupted. `It is not in Victor's character as a wizard to want to dominate, they prefer very private lives. They normally have so much power that they don't use.'

`If they don't use their powers shouldn't they be dormant?'

`How old is Victor?' Gorham asked Diane.

`Two hundred and fifty this year.' Nathan's jaw dropped.

Gorham turned to Nathan, `He was born way after the great war meaning his parents probably taught him.'

`Didn't he teach his own kids?'

Diane smiled, `He doesn't have kids. He's too young.'

Nathan was confused. Gorham decided to explain, `Wizards have a different time line to ours. He may be two hundred and fifty but in actual sense he may be just hitting twenty.'

`So he's just becoming an adult!'

`A very wise adult. Another thing about having kids is that it is very complicated. They can only mate with a fellow female wizard to reproduce. After the Great War many of them died and finding a mate became a problem,' he paused. `Do you know why we have her?' he pointed to Diane. `We can rule this colony on our own and the generals can take care of the army.'

`Why is she here then?' Nathan asked curiously.

`Because for some unknown reason her, bloodline has had an incomprehensible connection to wizards. They feel them when they are around. Do you know when the worst part comes? When a wizard gives birth, the females in her line know it,' he paused again. `I'm sure if we go to the royal diaries we'll find the exact date that Victor was born.'

`You are not allowed to go through the diaries,' Diane objected.

Nathan instead asked, `What happens then? When they give birth I mean.'

Diane answered, `We go through their pain. Every single second of it. It was a curse put on my ancestors in order to stop us from hunting them down. We are supposed to experience it the way they do. I've always thought it was a bit empathic'

`What's different from the way they experience it?'

Diane took her time before she answered, `It's bad. In the accounts that I've read, very few us survived. What they didn't count on was that we the descendants would be more driven to stop the same thing from happening to us. I have read the previous queens' diaries and I've felt their pain. They go through all that pain and at the end of it they realize that there is no child they can call their own. If they had the courage to continue hunting the wizards, they had to do that knowing that one of them could be the mother or father of the child. And even though they went on with their lives, they never got over that particular experience.'

`The day the wizard said the curse her counterpart uttered a different one. Some say it was a prophesy of some sort. His exact words...'

Diane took over. *`A day will come when the flow of the cursed river will be cut short and that is the day two great lines will meet. From then one line will die as another far more powerful than the last will begin!'*

`What does that mean?'

`No one knows!' Gorham said and then saw Diane's eyes shift. `Or at least I thought that no one did. What is it Diane?'

She was quiet for a long time, `My line will end with me...'

` And Alice will take over!' Gorham paused as he realized the implication. ` Diane, it's not your fault that your line will die with you...' but Diane was already at the door and then out. They didn't see the smile on her face.

` She blames herself,' Gorham said simply.

` Do you think that that is the reason why Victor is here? She's still trying.'

Gorham shook his head in sorrow, ` She has to understand that it is too late to do anything.'

` But can he? If he is that powerful can he do anything like that?'

` I don't know much about them except for what is in the history books but if he could she couldn't bear that child. There is a reason why they can only mate with their fellows, the children bore are normally so powerful that they kill the mothers before they are born and if they'd survive... No one knows.'

` What if he's not sleeping with her?'

` Diane hasn't been with her husband for a long time,' Gorham said very sure of what had come out of his mouth.

` But for what other reason would Victor be here? You said yourself that they are very selfish, something in his own interest would have been able to bring him here and keep him here for these five years.'

` Yes.'

` Should we report this to the council?'

` No, whatever the reason that he is here I'm sure it has nothing to do with the administration.'

` You should be careful about him.'

` I am.'

` No you are only worried that he might be sleeping with your precious Diane.'

Gorham narrowed his eyes at him. ` You should watch what you say to me? I can ruin you,' his voice was very low yet intense. Nathan looked down apologetically. The unfortunate thing about Nathan's throne is that it was not his right. The council voted between the candidates submitted by Gorham. All in all, Gorham had the power remove Nathan from his seat.

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Wendy went home excited. She found her roommates sitting in the living room. They were going through some manuals that they had been given. Olivia was going through the etiquette of good servitude and Cynthia reading something to do with the dos and don'ts before guests. They looked up as Wendy entered the house.

` You look happy today,' Cynthia commented.

` Well, you'll never guess what happened to me today,' Wendy said.

` What?' Olivia asked but before Wendy answered there were horse hooves sounding right outside the house. They were quiet waiting to hear if it was theirs or a neighbor's. A knock sounded at their door. Wendy being the closest to the door went to open but the others had also come to see who it was. There was a royal guard standing outside.

` Is this Wendy Summer's home?' he asked.

` Yes,' Cynthia answered from behind her.

` Wendy Summer?' he asked looking directly at Wendy.

` Yes.'

There was relief from the guard's eyes, 'Sign here, please,' he said handing her a board with a piece of paper. Paper was limited and was only used for important things or some very rich people. She signed her name. The guard handed her an envelope and she was about to close the door, 'Wait.' he went back to the horse and brought a sword in a sheath, a bow and several arrows. He handed them to her. 'That all. A pleasure to meet you,' he said then left them.

Wendy carried them into the house and put them on the table as Cynthia asked curiously, 'What's going on? Why did he bring you all these things?'

Wendy did not answer. Instead she pulled apart the seal on the envelope and read through it with both Olivia and Cynthia on her shoulders.

Miss Summer,

You are now the owner of a sword, bow and arrows. They are solely your responsibility now and should you wield them against another person when not in training then you will be judged unable to continue in your path. That is to say that you will never be able to become a royal guard anymore.

About your lesson, tomorrow, two hours in the morning at six, don't carry any of the weapons. It will be a hand to hand combat. I hope you have the appropriate attire.

Victor.

'Victor?' Olivia asked.

'Don't tell me that Victor Raymond wrote this?' Cynthia asked excitedly. She saw the answer on Wendy's face. 'That is just not fair. We should have seen him first given that we work at Diane's castle.'

'The one who they say could smile and you swoon?' Olivia asked finally catching up with them. Wendy nodded.

'Wow! He's training you himself?'

'Yes,' Wendy was now smiling.

'What did you do to him to have him happen to notice you, a needle in a haystack?' Cynthia asked.

'I did nothing. He just approached me and asked if I liked what I was doing? He must have read my file.'

'Yes he must have, I don't see how you get to be so lucky.'

Wendy carried the weapons to her room. She had Olivia telling Cynthia to stop being so jealous. She locked herself in her room and looked at the weapons one by one. She started with the sword and the sheath. She put it around her waist. It was a perfect fit. Then she took the sword out of the sheath. It looked like new but she knew it wasn't. Trainees never had new weapons unless they bought them themselves. She looked at the sword blade it was so smooth she could see her reflection. She examined the handle carefully but did not fail to notice a precious jewel that had been inserted in it. It must have belonged to someone important or who just had a lot of money that they didn't mind having a nice jewel on the sword.

She swung it several times and liked the way it felt. She put it back then removed the sheath from around her. She then took the bow and arrows she felt the strength of the string of the bow. She liked it. She must have good weapons at least even if they are borrowed. She looked at the letter again. She examined the seal. It was the queen's stamp. She thought, "He must be very close to the

queen to be using her stamp at his pleasure. No wonder the guard looked worried.” She pushed the thought aside and reread the letter. He had beautiful hand writing as if he had practiced it for years and perfected it. It was well spaced and smooth throughout the letter as if the thoughts were flowing easily to him.

She decided to write her parents a letter telling them of the fortunate thing that has happened to her. She also needed more money if it was possible. Having finished she wondered what she would wear for a hand to hand combat. She had her riding trousers but she couldn't walk through town wearing them. She decided to wear them underneath the brown book-keeper's uniform. And where was she supposed to meet him at six in the morning? She went to sleep still puzzling about that.

Very early in the morning she was dressed and had made breakfast for her roommates having woken up first. She would have cleaned up but she heard horse hooves again outside approaching. She went out and looked only to see a rider approaching pulling another horse along. The rider came and stopped right in front of her. There was a half moon but it was bright enough for her to see his general features and finally the voice confirmed it.

‘You know how to ride a horse, don't you?’ Victor asked.

‘Yes, a little bit.’

‘Then what are you waiting for?’ he asked and seemed to be irritated. She debated whether she should just mount the horse or... she turned and went back into the house. ‘I don't have all day Miss Summer,’ he called out after her loudly.

Inside the house Olivia had woken up. She walked into the living room and found Wendy pulling off her book-keeper's uniform. ‘Who's out there?’

‘I don't have time to explain,’ she said as she threw the dress onto a chair. ‘Got to go, bye.’ And she was back out. She went round the horse and mounted without much difficulty. Then Victor handed her the reins. They started to gallop away. Then slowly it became a trot then she was racing after him. She almost fell at some point but managed to hold on. After sometime she realized that they were heading to Diane's castle. The gates opened when they were some distance away and it was only slightly opened so she had to watch closely. Throughout the ride Victor never said a word. He slowed down and suddenly stopped but didn't dismount. The lantern lights outside were lighting their way. He watched as Wendy struggled to bring the horse to a halt. Finally she was successful.

They put the horses in a stable and were walking into the castle but they didn't go up. The guards were saluting Victor at every turn they made and looked curiously at her. Finally they entered a large room which was brightly lit. It seemed that it was a ballroom for holding the formal parties but the floor was covered with a soft material that she could feel under her feet. Suddenly they stopped

Victor turned to her, ‘This is how I am going to teach you. I will teach you the basics, stance, blocking, kicking, hitting and so forth. It will be up to you to harness the other skills. I will not teach you tactics...’

‘Why not?’ she interrupted.

There was a flash of irritation in Victor's eyes. ‘Because if I teach you tactics you will end up fighting the same way every time. Don't interrupt. You will dig through the books in the library and read all about them. I will also get you some books from the queen's library. You will go to the fields and see them if you are able to notice them and I will want to see three styles executed every day flawlessly.’

‘Three styles?’ she asked unbelievably.

`You want me to add more?' he asked sounding very irritated.

`No, three is fine,' she said in a low voice. He started teaching her how to stand, block, how to hold a blow and some other small things.

Then finally he said, `Rule number one?'

`Move fast?' she said not sure of herself.

`Be confident in what you say.' he scolded. `Rule number two?' he asked.

`No distractions,' she said this time confidently.

`Rule number three?' he asked.

`You didn't tell me rule number three.' Then Victor slapped her slightly on the cheek but it was fast.

`Be prepared,' he said then another quick slap on the other cheek. One of the bored guards had come to watch. Another slap but Wendy was too slow trying to block it. Then another and another and it was starting to sting due to the repetition of the slaps and eventually she managed to block one and then after a short time later another and her confidence started building in her. Victor did the unthinkable and tried to kick her but she managed to block it. She had seen the feet rise from the ground.

The rotation when on until he was now throwing her hard blows and kicks a sure thing that if she didn't block them then she was going to hurt. She tried to keep up but she found herself being knocked to the ground several times. Finally half way through the lesson Victor said, `Rule number four, attack first.'

`Why?' she asked. She was on the ground debating on whether to get up and receive another throw on the ground. He moved right next to her legs.

`To gain the advantage. To put your opponent on the defensive. They will be busy trying to keep from being hit that you will be the one making the rules.'

Wendy sighed exhausted. She put her hand to him so that he may help her up. He took her hand and was about to pull her up when she kicked his leg backwards and pull him down instead. He was going to fall right on her but he caught himself. They looked at each other's eyes for a moment. Wendy's heart beat faster. This was not exactly what she had in mind. `How was that?' Wendy asked looking at him. Her voice had come out barely a whisper. She could help but think about how good he looked up close not to mention the smell of his skin.

`Good but I was falling on you. How would that have helped?'

She thought for a few seconds then said, `If I would've moved I'm sure I would've got up before you.'

`But you didn't move, did you?' he asked as he stood up. She got up herself knowing that he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. The guard who was watching knew that he had been allowed to see enough already and so he went out of the room.

Wendy was so grateful that the lesson ended exactly after two hours. She was sure she would get bruises the following day but for now she had to get to work in an hour. `Can I borrow the horse?' she asked as she started to head out.

`Sure but you will have to leave him at Gorham's castle for your horseback riding practice.' and he left her alone. She thought that he had probably gone back to bed as she was going to be slaving away in the library. She went to the stables and saddled the horse as she talked to it.

`Oh Horsy,' she smiled as she approached. `You are a very special horse and I'm glad I have the privilege of riding with you.' she mounted. `I want to go home now and very fast but if it is by

your grace please don't let me fall.' Then she kicked it and was riding away. She passed people who were walking to work. They watched her as she passed them in the speed. She got to the house and tied the horse at the window then took a quick bath. She put on the uniform and was out again.

She didn't have time for the normal ladylike thing of riding one sided. Instead she put her legs a stride and was riding as the wind dried her hair. She didn't even know how fast she was going since her thoughts were on three tactics every day. Where was I supposed to find a book that would give her all that? She asked herself. Of course he had said that he would give her some books from the queen's library but she wasn't going to wait around for that. And as she whizzed past the guards at the gate they noticed the uniform and looked at each other questioningly.

She made it on time and of course Gorham was at the library. He asked to see her. 'Yes sir,' she said in his office.

'Wendy, I am a bit worried about you?'

'Why?' she asked. She didn't know why she was there.

'Have you looked at yourself lately? It is the first day of training and you look like you were about to have a black eye.'

'Oh!' she said. The bruises must be showing already. 'He has a strange way of teaching.'

'If he's being too hard on you I could always tell the queen...'

'No, no, no,' she said suddenly and almost slapped herself. 'It won't look good if I am complaining.'

Gorham studied her then said, 'When it will become unbearable you could just come to me and I will make sure that he eases up. By the way why did he choose you?'

'I really don't know,' she answered genuinely. Gorham nodded then waved her away. On his desk was Wendy's file. He was trying to see why Victor might be interested in her but he couldn't find anything unusual about her. Maybe he had to do what Nathan did and put a spy on them who will monitor their training. He was not going to be on the dark anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

For the next two months Diane managed to avoid Victor. She sent him on missions, kept him busy with all sorts of assignments but Victor was not dumb he knew what she was doing and eventually he made his way to her private chambers. Though the guard had been told no visitors she went in anyway and announced him. He was let in.

'What do you think you are doing?' he asked as he was walking in. He didn't care about the others in the room and they didn't know if they were supposed to leave or not.

'Victor,' she called but didn't go to him this time. She just stared at him through the mirror. 'I had a feeling you would know but I guess I was wrong.' Victor didn't answer. He just stared hard at her. She decided to change the subject, 'I want a competition to be arranged.'

`What kind of competition?'

`Fighting of course!'

`For what?'

`For everyone who wishes to compete in.'

`What's the grand prize?'

`I don't know,' she paused as she looked down on the desk she was sitting on. `The winner will get to face Alice in a fight!'

`You are losing your mind you know that,' he said softly.

`I think my mind is clearer today than any other day,' she said not looking at him though there were tears in her eyes. He moved towards her but she raised her hand to him. `Not yet.' she was quiet for a long time then she said, `You have confidence in your student?'

`It is too soon for her to face anyone in a competition.'

`But this thing is happening, as soon as a week from now and if she wants to have me acknowledge her then she has to try. It will be some time before Alice is allowed to make appointments on her own; as long as five years at times.'

`Okay, I will make the announcement and any person who is willing and capable will be required to sign up within three days. The competition will commence in a week.'

`No cheating. I want a clean competition. Everyone who wins at the various stages of the competitions will be assigned to be the personal guards to any of the royals or if there is no other place then they will be given official duties and a medal of honor. You have all that?'

`Yes, your majesty.'

`Then start making the preparations.' Victor started walking to the door when Diane called him back. `I forgot. One more thing, no killing.' And Victor walked out without any other word.

*

The news traveled fast before Victor got organized to make the official announcement and within two hours the news had come to Gorham's castle where it got to Wendy. `You are Victor's student aren't you?' someone asked her.

`Yes,' she answered.

`I hear that you are certainly going to be in the competition.'

`Where did you hear that?' she asked curiously.

`Word travels around. Are you prepared?' she was asked.

`Prepared for what?'

`You are going to face some people who have been training all their lives. You have to be prepared. They will slaughter you.'

And Wendy was left wondering if it was true. She waited and every single minute that passed made her more worried. Victor didn't show up for the lesson. She figured he must be busy with the competition plans. She became so nervous that every time someone called her name she found herself startled.

Gorham noticed and called her back after she had dropped some books that he wanted. She was again startled, `Yes sir,' she went to him.

`What's going on?' he asked. He knew that Wendy probably found it strange that he was always concerned but she never commented on it.

`I heard that there is a competition in the Queen's arena and I am going to be in it.'

`What competition?'

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