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Throughout the years, I'd faced death more times than I could count, fought a war, endured the loss of my parents, and survived torture, cruelty, and multiple insults in the form of overcooked meat at the supper table. I thought that I had already faced the worst of anything this world might offer.

Then Lady Batilda Lamont came to the castle. Imogen's mother. She looked very much like Imogen — though Lady Batilda's hair was lighter and worn in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. However, Batilda hadn't even fully left the carriage before I ceased to see any true similarity between mother and daughter.

In the same instant she exited the carriage, it began.

"Imogen, your hair . . . surely someone here can work with that."

"Imogen, I'll need a new gown. Several new gowns."

"Imogen —" Finally, Batilda noticed me standing there, waiting to greet her. Her lips puckered in disapproval, or really, her entire face puckered, which I hadn't thought possible until this very moment. "*You* are Jaron?"

I had frozen as something close to panic sparked within me. I had known every kind of villain before, but this was new to me. I had sworn to Imogen that I would be polite and friendly, and I intended to keep my promise. However, no matter how hard I searched my mind, I couldn't come up with a single word that Imogen would approve of.

*"King Jaron,"* Imogen corrected. *"Mother, he's your king."*

Lord Kerwyn, who had been standing at my side, stepped forward. *"Madam, it is customary to bow before one's king."*

*"This boy is our king?"* She shook her head, her expression souring with every movement. *"And soon he will be my son-in-law. How wonderful."*

Her tone implied that she believed having a thorn in one's foot was also wonderful. I was clearly the thorn.

I still hadn't said a word, but my gut had twisted so tight, I didn't know what I should say. Since the moment I'd learned that Imogen's mother would be coming to our wedding, I had expected this to be a difficult greeting. Batilda had sold Imogen to Bevin Conner as a way of paying for her personal debts. She had sold her own daughter.

*"Try not to think about that when you meet my mother,"* Imogen had told me, but now that I was here, I could think of nothing else.

I eyed the balcony overlooking the main entrance, wondering how fast I could scale the castle wall and use it for an escape. That wouldn't be dignified behavior for a king, but I was still considering it.

Kerwyn cleared his throat. *"Madam, you will bow to your king."*

“Oh, very well.” Batilda gave me a bow, but it meant even less to her than it did to me. When she rose up again and looked behind me, her frown only deepened. “I understand that most castles are quite drafty. Will my room have any problems?”

“Definitely.” Sensing my opportunity, I eyed Kerwyn. “It was rude for us ever to offer our cold, drafty castle to this gentlewoman. Perhaps you will arrange for a room at the inn —”

“I can manage here, I suppose, if you’ll provide me with an extra servant to keep the fireplace stoked. How many servants will attend me?”

I clicked my tongue but didn’t sound nearly as disappointed as I’d intended. “What a pity, we ran out of servants this morning. But at the inn —”

“Someone will be assigned to your room.” Imogen took my arm, giving me a warning glance that I ignored. “Shall we go inside?”

“I thought you’d never offer. It’s blistering hot out here.” We came to the grand entry, a large gathering place for guests who wished to move onward into the great hall or the throne room. Those who lived in the castle could go up the master staircase directly in front of us.

Batilda pointed to a woven tapestry hung at the base of the master staircase. “Is that the one you burned? I heard —”

“Mother, stop,” Imogen said.

I forced a polite smile, though it caused me physical pain to do so. “No, not *that* tapestry.”

“Oh, of course. I would have noticed the burned areas. I also heard — What shall I call you?”

“Mother, you know very well —”

“I’ve also heard, Your Majesty, that your interests have shifted away from fire and are more in the realm of causing explosions. Is it true that six months ago you blew up four ships in a harbor across the sea?”

“Yes, madam, but I should add, they were not my ships.”

They had been the ships of a new enemy I had once thought was extinct: the Prozarians. I had defeated them in battle, and I hoped we had heard the last of them. But during every dark night, I lay awake in my bed, thinking of them, of what was coming. Most nights, I finally drifted off with more new questions than answers. How could I prepare for something I could not anticipate?

Batilda wasn’t finished with me. “And is it true that my daughter was on one of those ships that you exploded?”

“Yes, Mother, but it was my plan —” Imogen began.

She got no further before Batilda squared herself to me and looked straight into my eyes. “King Jaron, will my daughter be safe in a marriage with you?”

The question hit harder than Batilda might have known. Truthfully, Imogen would be safer with nearly anyone else in the kingdom, and every one of us in the room knew it. Even Kerwyn, standing behind Batilda, leaned in to hear my assurance that I could protect her.

But there was no truthful way to answer that question. If thoughts of the Prozarians did not keep me awake at night, this question did.

“Jaron has saved my life on more than one occasion,” Imogen said.

“Your life would not have needed saving except for Jaron.”

Batilda turned back to me. "Is it also true that you were once a thief who went by the name of Sage?"

I hesitated, looking from her to Imogen. This conversation could not possibly be going worse.

"Jaron . . . Oh!" Tobias entered from the great hall and stopped when he saw Imogen's mother. Collecting himself, he said, "Forgive the intrusion, but Harlowe has asked to see you."

Rulon Harlowe was my chief regent, and Roden's father. Harlowe had never aspired to become a chief regent, or really, to be a regent at all, which was the exact reason I wanted him in that position. He and Tobias were also more loyal than nearly all my other regents put together. That wasn't necessarily a reflection of their good characters as much as it was a statement of the spineless, power-hungry nature of most of the other regents.

"Is it urgent?" I asked, nodding slightly as a hint for Tobias to answer.

"The wedding is in three days," Batilda said. "Have either of you given a single thought to which silver pattern you want for the supper?" She turned to stare at Tobias. "What can you possibly want with Jaron that is more important than a silver pattern?"

"I, uh . . ." Tobias looked over at me with the same expression a person might use when the ground beneath them has just collapsed. "No, I suppose it can wait."

"Clearly we have a crisis," I announced, but I didn't get far before a voice behind me stopped me in my tracks.

"King Jaron!" When I turned, the person was already bowing, so at first I wasn't sure who had come to further ruin my afternoon. Tobias gestured at me, signaling that this person,

standing with his body bent low in the doorway of the throne room, was the crisis.

To whoever was still bowing, I said, "Can you not rise again, sir? If you need help, Tobias is a physician, sort of."

Then he rose, and I recognized him immediately. This was someone I had not seen in many years, nor did I have the least desire to see him. If he was anything like his father, then I already understood why Tobias looked so concerned.

"Castor Veldergrath."

Son of Santhias Veldergrath, a mold that had infested Carthya for far too long.

His son would be no different.