

CHAPTER 1

Once upon a time, there was a boy who loved a girl, and her laughter was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering. -
Nicole Krauss (The History of Love)



"My lord, we've arrived."

Lord Hamilton Nightray looked up from the book that he was reading, even as the carriage came to a stop. His lips quirked slightly when he caught sight of his sleeping five-year-old daughter, curled up comfortably on the opposite seat under his black cloak, with just her dark hair peeking out from under the cloak, with the rays of the sun that were streaming in from the carriage's windows, catching the purple highlights visible in her hair.

The carriage door opened to reveal one of House Nightray's stewards, dressed in the House's colours of black and silver, with the House's emblem of a silver wolf head gleaming on his shoulder. The steward bowed politely. "Should I...?" He gestured towards the heiress, and Hamilton shook his head.

"I'll do it," he said, gently rousing the little girl. "Sweetheart? Wake up. We're here."

Yuliana Nightray opened her eyes immediately with the slightest touch. She relaxed when she recognised her father, holding out her arms to him. He lifted her easily, draping his cloak over his shoulders as he did so, stepping out of the carriage. Hamilton nodded to the steward, who saluted and got back onto the driver's seat, shaking the reins of the horse to move the carriage elsewhere.

"Are we here?" Yuliana murmured sleepily, rubbing at her silver eyes.

"We are." Hamilton placed the little girl down onto the ground beside him. One of the House's maids had dressed their heiress the best to their ability the moment that Hamilton had received the missive early that morning, even before the sun had broken out over the horizon.

Her boots were a size too large, probably borrowed from one of the clan's older children. She is dressed in a simple dark blue shirt with black pants, with her dark hair tied back into twin braids, bound with dark silk.

"You remember what I told you?" Hamilton asked, kneeling to meet his daughter's eyes, brushing off some invisible lint on her shoulders.

"We're going to meet the King. Be polite and speak only when spoken to," Yulia recited. "I remember, Father."

Hamilton nodded before rising to his full height, holding his daughter by the hand. "All right. Come on."



The double doors opened with a gigantic creak, the carved surfaces etched with the twin-headed golden lion crest of the Kingdom of Alathia, with the burnished gold catching the light of the high chandeliers above.

"Presenting, Lord Hamilton Nightray and his heiress, Lady Yuliana Nightray," The court crier called out.

Yuliana stared with wide eyes, taking in everything at once. She'd never left Evershade before, the ancient, mist-draped stronghold of House Nightray. And even then, life is quiet there, even for the lord and his family. Almost humble.

Sunlight streamed in from the stained-glass windows, spilling fractured colours onto the polished marble floor that gleamed so brightly that one can almost see their reflections within. A long red carpet stretched ahead like a path in the middle of the audience chamber, leading to a raised dais at the far end of the hall. Upon it stood two magnificent golden thrones, gleaming beneath the light.

Yulia tightened her grip on her father's fingers as they approached the thrones. Still, her back remained straight, with her head held high, recalling all her father's lessons and instructions when he'd told her that they would be meeting the royal family of Alathia today.

When Lord Hamilton came to a halt before the thrones, Yuliana stepped forward and bowed—not like a child, but like a soldier, recalling all her etiquette lessons. Her back bent low, and her arms tucked precisely at her sides, just like she was taught, with every motion measured and precise.

Back bent low, and arms tucked neatly when you're meeting a royal, Gareth's words echoed in her mind. When meeting someone from a noble house, you incline your head slightly, my lady. The Ten Great Houses are the pillars of Alathia, and House Nightray is amongst them. There is no one ranked higher than us, except for the royal family.

King Edric von Aubere watched from atop the raised dais, seated upon the golden throne like a fox wrapped in velvet. His robes were the crimson red of the Alathian royal family. And a golden crown rested atop his black hair, already streaked with white. His smile was too thin, too smooth, and a much too pleased expression curved slowly across his face.

"So this is your daughter, Hamilton?" King Edric mused, his voice smooth with fondness that somehow felt too practised.

Yulia chanced a peek, taking in the king with all his glamour and finery—the kind of man who smiled too easily, but whose gaze never warmed. Beside him sat a regal-looking woman with silver hair. *Queen Lysandra*, Yulia recalled her from her lessons. Calm and clever, she is said to be, with a will like that of steel to match the king's fire. She wore crimson, too, regal and beautiful in her dress, her dark blue eyes resting on Yulia, with a flicker of something in her eyes before it disappeared as soon as it appeared.

"Yes. This is Yuliana," Hamilton responded, his grip tightening protectively over his daughter's.

"I haven't seen her since she was a baby," King Edric said, chuckling softly. "Hello there."

Yulia dipped another small bow. "H-Hello, Your Majesty," she said, her voice quiet. Her voice is steady, betraying none of her unease.

This king... He seems rather scary... His smiles are fake.

The king smiled at Yulia, but those smiles never reached his eyes. "Shy, are you?"

Yulia took half a step back, her small form pressing partially behind her father's cloak. Queen Lysandra hadn't spoken a word since Hamilton and Yulia had entered the audience chamber. She merely watched the pair, the only change in her expression being that of her eyes.

The eyes are the windows to a person's soul, my lady, Yulia recalled one of the House members telling her once. *You can always tell who is lying if you know how to read the eyes.*

Then, the king's expression shifted. His smile faded, and his expression became colder. Yulia tightened her tiny fingers into her father's cloak.

"Well..." King Edric said, looking at Queen Lysandra before turning his gaze back to Hamilton. "I apologise for summoning you here so suddenly, Hamilton. It's a rather spur-of-the-moment thing." He chuckled at some joke. "But my queen thought that it would be a good idea for your daughter to be introduced to my son. The Crown Prince should know his future guardian."

Yulia's eyes were wide when she comprehended the words from the king.

The Crown Prince...

Everyone in the kingdom knew that the queen had given birth to the heir of the throne. But the prince's identity and his name had been kept secret under Alathian law. The heir to the throne was never publicly named until they turned nine to prevent assassination attempts, as Gareth had explained.

The Crown Prince should be around her age, from what was said.

"The Crown Prince...?" Yulia whispered into the folds of her father's cloak, but the king heard her and regarded her with sharp eyes before relaxing just a moment later.

"Yes. He should be about your age. Probably just a few months older." King Edric said. He then snapped his fingers, gesturing towards a member of the Crownsguard who stood nearby—the personal protection detail of Alathia's royal family. The man was wearing the black and gold uniform of the Crownsguard—trimmed, crisp, and dangerous-looking. He stepped forward with a bow.

"Show them to the prince's wing."

"At once, Your Majesty." The Crownsguard bowed once more before straightening. "This way, my lord, my lady." He gestured towards the grand doors of the audience chamber.

Hamilton then bowed low once more to the royal couple, as did Yulia, imitating his actions. Then, together, hand in hand, both of them followed the Crownsguard, departing the audience chamber in silence, with the massive doors shutting behind them.



The Imperial Palace was as grand as Yulia had imagined it to be, ever since she was first informed of her duty as the guardian to the heir of the throne, back when she was old enough to understand. Everything that she'd trained for and learned had all led her here.

Generations of royals had walked these halls, alongside the soldiers, advisors, and nobles who had served them. Despite her age, Yulia can almost feel the weight of history and judgment pressing down on her.

But at the same time, the air felt cold. Almost tense.

Not the kind of cold that came from wind or even when winter came, but it was like there was something in the air. Something still and tight.

The Crownsguard led them forward in silence.

Oil paintings in heavy golden frames lined the walls as they walked. The paintings of past kings and queens with their jewelled crowns and royal robes of crimson, and even stern-faced generals, are immortalised. Some of the paintings looked so old that they seemed like ghosts or shadows trapped behind glass, with their painted eyes following her as they walked.

The carpets that lined the hallways beneath their feet were a deep crimson red, thick enough to silence their footsteps. Wall scones along the walls burned low, causing flickering shadows to appear on the walls and floors as they passed.

Yulia tightened her grip on her father's hand, and he looked down at her questioning, a faint crease in his brows, though he didn't break his stride. "It's so quiet here," she whispered, looking up at her father.

Hamilton nodded. "It always is," he replied.

Men and women in the uniforms of butlers and maids passed by, bowing respectfully to Hamilton as they passed. A few of them offered Yulia gentle smiles as they passed by, though Yulia was puzzled at the look in some of their eyes as they did so.

Those looks seemed almost like...pity.

Yulia frowned, confused, but didn't ask any questions, even as she continued walking beside her father. Two soldiers stood guard outside a room as they passed by. Men not in the distinct black and gold uniforms of the Crownsguard, but in a different uniform.

Probably a different branch, Yulia thought.

The soldiers' gazes snapped towards Hamilton, and then down to the little girl at his side. Yulia caught their hushed murmurs as they passed.

"That's the Nightray heiress," One murmured under his breath.

"Poor girl," The other soldier muttered. "She'll be stuck with *him*."

"The older one?"

"They say he hears things. Even knows things that no one should know."

The voices dropped into a murmur before fading as they passed.

Yulia caught the clench in the Crownsguard's jaw as they did, and she frowned. She looked up at her father. "Are they talking about the Crown Prince?" she asked.

Hamilton's jaw clenched, but he remained calm. "Ignore them," he said.

"Is the prince scary?" Yulia asked, her voice no longer whispering.

At that question, Hamilton looked down at his daughter. His normally stern face softened. "Make your own judgment when you meet him, Yulia," he said gently. "People fear what they don't understand. That doesn't mean that they're always right." He smiled teasingly at Yulia. "People tend to be scared of me, too. Am I scary to you?"

Yulia puffed out her cheeks, annoyed that her father wasn't giving her a straight answer, and Hamilton laughed. "I don't think Father's scary," she huffed, "And I'm not scared of the prince either." She added.

In front of them, the Crownsguard let out a soft sound that sounded like a chuckle. Hamilton's silver eyes crinkled with amusement, and his lips quirked. He patted Yulia gently on the head with his large hand. "Good," he said. "That should be the way."

They soon arrived in front of a tall door made of carved oak that was adorned with intricate silver latticework that was shaped into Alathia's royal crest. A pair of guards wearing the Crownsguard uniforms flanked the door on either side, as still as statues. They saluted smartly when Hamilton approached with Yulia, following the Crownsguard that was leading them.

The Crownsguard finally turned to face them, stopping in his tracks. "This is the room of the Crown Prince," he said. "He's expecting you." He then hesitated for a moment, looking at Yulia, who was staring up at him with her huge eyes. "Please don't judge him too harshly, my lady."

Yulia blinked up at him, before looking at her father, who only nodded to the Crownsguard, placing a steadying hand on her small shoulder. "Are you ready to meet the Crown Prince?" he asked.

Yulia nodded, swallowing nervously. *What is the Crown Prince like?* she wondered. *Arrogant? Quiet?* What kind of boy was she meant to protect? To grow up beside? To dedicate her life to?

Hamilton knocked on the door to announce their presence, before he then opened it.



The rays of the afternoon sun were streaming in from the windows of the room, with it reaching from the ceiling to the floor, with the white curtains currently tied back. The room itself is likely larger than any house that belonged to a common peasant in Alathia, and furnished with a dark blue bed on one side of the room, complete with a cupboard, dresser, and even a child's desk and chair. The other side of the room was almost identical in its furnishings, right down to the colouring, save for the fact that there were a few stuffed toys on the bed on the other side of the room.

A table was placed near the hearth, with a chessboard resting on it. There was even a child-sized table and two child-sized chairs placed in the middle of the room, where a silver tray was resting, with several pastries and sweets sitting idly on it, with cooling cups of cocoa.

Lucien von Aubere sat on the floor by the arched window in the room, staring past the glass through the gardens, staring at something only he could see. The windows were open just a crack, letting in a soft breeze that stirred the silver

strands of his hair. Flecks of purple highlights shimmered in the light, and his dark blue eyes, flecked with silver, narrowed in dislike and annoyance as a cacophony of voices echoed in his head.

It's that time of the day again for the servants and maids to start passing by the room.

"Have I already cleaned the tearoom?"

"Today's dessert is chocolate scones. Wonder if Her Majesty would like them?"

"Sheets need washing before sundown."

"How much longer until my shift ends? I shouldn't have gone drinking last night."

Lucien winced, his brows furrowed with both frustration and pain. He pressed his fingers to his temples, whispering to no one, "...Shut up."

It's too loud.

And then, the door to the room opened, with the sound of footsteps being muffled by the carpets. Even still, Lucien didn't turn. He didn't need to.

He already knew they were there before the door even opened. He had *heard* them, even—the tangled web of thoughts and feelings that he had been hearing since he was old enough to understand what those *voices* meant.

"Let's hope Prince Lucien will at least have a friend."

"Let's hope this works out."

Lucien was familiar with Lord Hamilton Nightray, the head of House Nightray, one of the Ten Great Houses in Alathia, and also one of the most influential and powerful, renowned for their roles as royal guardians, assassins, and even intelligence agents.

Lord Hamilton's mind was always calm, and Lucien appreciated the silence and break he got. He was always relieved whenever Lord Hamilton was in his vicinity. To Lucien's surprise, there was a little girl next to him, looking so similar to Lord Hamilton that it must be his daughter.

But her mind is quiet.

Lucien blinked, staring at the tiny girl.

He can't hear *anything* from her.

Lucien reacted instinctively, seeking them out in the foggy place where thoughts and emotions took shape, and stray fears brushed against his awareness.

But there was nothing.

Just silence.

For once in his life, Lucien can't hear anything.

He turned slowly from the window, facing Lord Hamilton and his daughter fully. He already knew they were coming. He had heard the maids and servants talking about it this morning. Even some of the soldiers.

The heiress of House Nightray. His future guardian and companion.

She was small. Supposedly his age, but a few months younger. Her dark hair with purple highlights was tied back in twin braids. The boots on her feet looked a size too big for her tiny frame. Her posture, however, reminded Lucien of the soldiers and the Crownsguard who work in the Imperial Palace.

Her back straight, and her chin lifted, with a spark in those silver eyes that Lucien decided he liked.

He didn't speak for several moments, merely staring at the girl until she frowned, narrowing her eyes at Lucien.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she demanded. Her voice isn't scared or in awe of him, like Lucien had experienced so often. She sounds more...annoyed.

Lucien blinked. *A normal reaction. A normal voice.*

"You're...quiet," he said at last, almost in disbelief.

The girl looked offended. "I *am* talking."

Lucien shook his head slowly. "Not your voice *voice*," he said slowly, still in disbelief. "Your thoughts... I can't hear them. It's...quiet." He was almost in awe. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

He doesn't even know what that felt like until now. Not even Rem's thoughts were quiet, though his were quieter than most.

The girl's tiny brows furrowed with confusion, looking up at her father for an explanation. Lord Hamilton looked pleased, like he had some suspicion of his confirmed. "Prince Lucien has an ability," he explained to his daughter, "He can read minds. Or rather, the thoughts that people held deep in them, but won't speak. For him, most people's thoughts are...loud." He looked at his daughter. "You've always had a natural resistance to arcane influence, and I suspected that our Nightray training had something to do with it."

The girl looked from her father to Lucien, and then back again, like she wasn't sure what to make of it. And then, she frowned at Lucien. "If you don't like what people are thinking, then stop listening," she said bluntly.

Lucien blinked. That...is a new reaction.

The girl crossed her arms. "We can learn. I'll help you shut it off. It's like covering your ears...but for your brain."

Lucien stared. "We can do that?" he asked almost quietly, with some hope in his voice.

The Crownsquad stationed at the door exchanged a glance with Hamilton Nightray. Neither man spoke, content to observe the interactions between the two children. The faint smiles on their faces weren't just hopeful, but also sad.

The girl shrugged. "I can block your ability. It shouldn't be too difficult to figure out how to do it for you," she said bluntly. And then, to the shock of both the Crownsquad and Hamilton, Lucien *smiled*.

It was just the smallest tilt of his lips. But to those who knew the prince, it might as well have been a miracle. The Crown Prince of Alathia, who had not smiled once since he was a baby, was *smiling*. Yuliana Nightray had done in less than an hour what the prince's nanny, and even the queen, had never managed in five long years.

"I'm the Crown Prince, Lucien von Aubere," Lucien said quietly, with a sparkle to his eyes that wasn't there before, making him look more his age. Like a boy of five. A child. "What's your name?"

The girl smiled at him, grabbing his hands, much to Lucien's shock, and he blinked at the little girl. "I'm Yuliana. Yuliana Nightray," she chirped cheerfully. "You can call me Yulia. Let's be friends, Prince Lucien."

Lucien smiled again. "Call me Luca," he said quietly.

The Crownsquad near the door looked visibly misty-eyed. Even Lord Hamilton's shoulders relaxed, his expression softening with rare relief.

Yuliana—Yulia, was about to say something else, but a sound came from the far end of the room, near where the windows are. It was faint, like someone shifting behind the heavy curtains—the ones meant to be drawn during the prince's afternoon naps.

Yulia tensed instantly, standing in front of Lucien—*Luca* protectively. Her tiny hand flew to her side, her fingers brushing the hilt of a dagger that looked far too big for her to wield properly. Yet knowing House Nightray, Luca had no doubts that she would likely wield it without hesitation.

"There's someone here," Yulia insisted.

"Yulia, calm down," Hamilton stepped in. "It's not an enemy or even an assassin." His eyes crinkled as he gave a small smile at his daughter, and Luca blinked. He had never seen Lord Hamilton smile before. "There is another prince."

"Rem, come out," Luca called out. "I know you're here. I can hear you."

Yulia blinked.

And then, another boy shuffled out timidly from behind the curtains at the far end of the room, peeking from behind the dark blue curtains. *He looks exactly like the prince*, Yulia realised. The new boy was identical to Luca—the same tousled silver hair that looked like the queen's, and even the same dark blue eyes with silver flecks. They even have the same slim build.

This new boy's features, however, were a tad softer, and he looked like he smiled more than Luca. And where Luca seems more solemn than a boy his age should be, this new boy seems more...innocent somehow. If he had been born a commoner, Yulia was certain he would have been the kind of boy that parents warned not to accept sweets from strangers.

This new boy shifted nervously on his feet, his fingers fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, his expression anxious and even nervous, his eyes flickering towards Luca constantly.

"L-Luca..." The new boy whispered timidly.

"Come here," Luca gestured towards the new boy. The boy didn't need further prompting, immediately scampering over to Luca, and curling by his side, his small hands clutching Luca's sleeve.

"This is Prince Rem," Yulia's father said, his voice gentle. "Prince Lucien's younger twin brother."

Yulia only blinked, like this is the first time that she'd heard of there being *two* princes.

"H-Hello," Rem said, his voice light and shy. He had a light blush on his face when he nodded politely to Yulia, his small hands still clutching onto Luca's arm.

Luca was clearly the protector of the two.

Rem looked at Yulia with huge, scared eyes—acting like Yulia is some monster from a book sent to eat him. But he seemed more relaxed next to Luca's side, acting like a boy who is sure that his big brother would keep him safe.

Hamilton smiled, rising to his full height. "Sweetheart, I need to speak with the king. Play with the princes for a while. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Yulia nodded, turning back to the twins, already forgetting her father's departure as he slipped out and closed the door quietly behind him.

The twin princes warmed up to her sooner than she thought they would.

Both admitted to her in hushed tones that Yulia was the first child they'd ever been allowed to play with. As royalty, they'd never been permitted to leave the Imperial Palace. And even within the palace, there were places forbidden to them, like the east and west wings, where the military and government offices were housed.

With a Crownsquad watching over the three children with quiet amusement, the twins showed Yulia the sprawling Imperial Gardens, where there were huge rose bushes that were the pride and joy of the Imperial Gardener, and where Queen Lysandra loved to spend time in the evenings. Towering green hedges shaped into mythical beasts loomed over winding paths, and two massive hedges at the garden's entrance had been carved into the shapes of two lions—the symbol of Alathia.

The princes even showed her a secret hallway that led to the palace kitchens. The head chef, clearly familiar with the mischief of the twins, only gave them a stern look mixed with exasperation and fondness before offering them candied fruit and warm milk bread.

Rem quickly warmed up to Yulia, with the younger prince being clumsy and sweet, and tended to chatter away like a chatterbox once he got going. He even showed Yulia a beetle that he'd found in the Imperial Gardens, and looked positively heartbroken when Luca gently told him to release it, reminding him that the nanny would likely kill it if it made its way indoors.

Prince Lucien—Luca, on the other hand, however, wasn't much of a talker. When he did, it was in short sentences or answers, mostly observations and questions. But every time he opened his mouth to ask Yulia a question, mostly curious questions about Evershade and the world beyond the Imperial Palace, *Yulia understood him perfectly*, even before he finished his sentence.

Luca is trying to learn more. He wanted to know more about Yulia. About her world. And he seemed genuinely interested and curious instead of simply asking for the sake of asking.

Yulia caught Rem watching their interactions more than once. The smile never faded from his face even once, but his eyes held a look of longing every single time he saw Yulia and Luca interact.

Even at five, Yulia understood what it meant.

Prince Rem is kind. Too kind. A sweet and gentle soul. It is an admirable trait in a person. But in a world like theirs, where crowns and titles came with daggers and shadows hid sharper blades, that same softness and kindness could cost him everything.

Prince Lucien, on the other hand, was Prince Rem's opposite.

Where Rem was kind, Luca was sharp. When Rem hesitated, Luca analysed. When someone smiled at Rem, he thought nothing of it. When someone smiled at Luca, however, he would already be thinking about what this person would want from him.

Prince Lucien, even at five years of age, is pragmatic. He's logical. And Yulia, who is already training for her duties as the Nightray heiress, understood him more than he expected. Luca was born to take a role where kindness and softness could cost him everything, and it might not just be him who suffered for the bad decisions he made, and he understood that.

And yet, despite being the Crown Prince, it was clear that Luca lived in isolation. Aside from Rem, the Crownsguard, and a few staff, most of those in the Imperial Palace seemed to keep their distance from him. Even the king, if Yulia had read him right, seemed uneasy around his son.

If no one else will protect him or stand by his side, I will, Yulia vowed to herself, even as Luca tugged her gently by the wrist to read a picture book together.

Prince Lucien von Aubere would never scare her. He is the boy that she would stand beside, duty or not. And Prince Rem... Rem would be the one she would stand *in front of*, if she had to.



The sun was slowly beginning to set, spilling golden rays across the floors of the twin princes' shared bedroom, casting long shadows across the carpets, and the deep blue curtains that framed the tall windows.

Rem lay on his stomach near the hearth as he giggled and pored over a picture book in front of him. Across the room, his twin sat with Yulia by the arched windows, with Luca watching Yulia carefully balancing a carved wooden soldier atop the sloped roof of a miniature fort.

Luca, even as a toddler, isn't one of many words. He rarely spoke, and when he did, it was often with a haunted quiet that unsettled even grown men and drew fearful glances from the palace staff.

Three nannies have resigned from their positions in less than a week before the Imperial Palace found one willing to stay—a woman who had once served House D'Aragon, one of the Ten Great Houses. At the queen's request, Lady D'Aragon had summoned Eugenia Norman out of retirement and recommended her for the position.

She had served as the wet nurse and nanny for several of House D'Aragon's children, having had experience with children with abilities. Thus, unlike the three who came before her, she wasn't alarmed or afraid of Prince Lucien's gift. The first time Prince Lucien had spoken her private thoughts aloud, she had only raised a brow.

"Prince Lucien," Eugenia had told a four-year-old Lucien sternly, "I know you can't help it, but it is impolite for a gentleman, especially a prince, to speak the thoughts of others aloud. People deserve their privacy, even in their heads."

But now, in the fading afternoon light, Eugenia Norman observed from her seat in the rocking chair. There was a softness to Prince Lucien's face that she had never seen before. He didn't even look at Prince Rem that way. But now, he is looking at the girl whom he had only known for less than a day with such softness in his gaze.

Yuliana Nightray had her cheeks puffed out in concentration, her eyes narrowed and brows furrowed as she carefully placed the last wooden soldier in her hand on the rooftop of her toy fort. Around her on the carpet, the floor looked like a

battlefield—if the battlefield consisted of toys. Fallen knights, tiny horses, and even miniature flags were strewn around the carpet like casualties in her silent war.

Eugenia's lips twitched, though the idea of cleaning it all up later made her sigh inwardly. She'd likely miss at least one toy and step on it in the middle of the night. Her eyes went towards Prince Rem, who is gazing at his twin and Yuliana Nightray wistfully.

The Nightray heiress carefully placed the soldier onto the roof and sat back on her knees. The wooden soldier wobbled on the roof for a moment.

Then it toppled.

Yulia gaped and then burst into helpless giggles.

Luca, seated not far from her, smiled. For the umpteenth time that day. The Crownsguard stationed next to the door smiled, exchanging looks with Eugenia, who looked pleased and relieved.

There was a knock on the princes' door, and the door creaked open.

Lord Hamilton Nightray entered, being flanked by a Crownsguard. His gaze swept the room with his usual cool precision, but the Crownsguard beside him faltered when he laid eyes on Luca.

"He's smiling..." The Crownsguard whispered in a voice low enough for only Lord Hamilton to hear him. But judging by the way Prince Lucien looked at him, the Crownsguard is probably speaking his thoughts out loud. "Prince Lucien... He's smiling... He's never smiled before. Not at anyone. Not even at Prince Rem."

Hamilton followed the gaze of the Crownsguard towards Prince Lucien, who is seated by the windows, looking not at the Imperial Gardens outside, but at his daughter.

His gaze is soft and tender, looking at his giggling daughter, with Prince Lucien looking at Yulia like she hung the stars and moon.

"He's been like that with Lady Yuliana since they started playing," Eugenia said, stepping over to greet the lord. "Good evening, my lord. Are you here to collect her?"

"Yes, my apologies for leaving her in your care all day." Lord Hamilton was apologetic, and Eugenia smiled but shook her head.

"There's no need to apologise. It's been a joy," she admitted, her gaze going towards Prince Lucien. "I've never seen Prince Lucien like this before. For him to meet someone who isn't Prince Rem... Someone who doesn't judge him, and who isn't afraid of him..." Her eyes drifted to Yulia. "And for it to be someone whose mind he can't read... It's a blessing."

Hamilton's face softened. "Sweetheart?" he said gently, and Yulia blinked, turning around and looking at her father. "Come on, let's go home."

Yulia frowned, clearly reluctant to leave with the way she looked at Prince Lucien, who also looked disappointed. Sighing, Yulia rose to her feet, straightening her tunic.

Prince Lucien's expression, too, had shifted. He is no longer smiling. He looked upset, staring at Yulia longingly, before he looked at Hamilton. "Can Yulia come again?" he asked softly.

Eugenia looked surprised, but smiled. "Maybe if we ask the king, he'll allow it, Your Highness," she said gently, but Lucien looked doubtful that the king would allow it.

Hamilton's hand came down to ruffle Yulia's hair when she scampered to his side. "I can ask the king, Prince Lucien," he said gently. "If he agrees, we'll come visit again."

Yulia turned back to Lucien. "Today was fun," she chirped, and Lucien smiled again. "You should come to Evershade someday. Rem, too." She added, looking at the younger twin over by the hearth with his picture book. Rem had looked crushed in the beginning, but now looked hopeful.

Hamilton nodded. "There are other children in Evershade, too," he said gently, addressing both princes. "House Nightray's children. And even the village children. They're a little older than you, but I think you'll like them. They often played with Yulia when they had the time."

Lucien said nothing, but he looked hopeful when he looked at Yulia.

And Yulia smiled at him like it was the most natural thing in the world.



The carriage swayed gently beneath the slowly darkening skies, with its wheels rumbling along the road that travellers and merchants take to and from the Imperial City. Lanterns lined the path, casting long shadows along the dirt roads.

The hustle and bustle of the Imperial City was far behind them now, and it would still be a few more hours before they reached Evershade.

Inside the carriage, Yulia was curled up against Hamilton, her head resting in his lap, as he threaded his fingers carefully through his daughter's dark hair, his black cloak draped over her small body like a blanket. Hamilton's lips quirked as he gazed at his child, clearly worn out and exhausted from the day's activities.

She probably hadn't had her usual afternoon nap, either, so little wonder why she's exhausted.

"It's been a long day for you," Hamilton murmured, his fingers gently combing through Yulia's soft hair. He'd undone her braids the moment they had said their farewells to the king and queen, and had climbed into the carriage. "We'll reach home in a few hours. You can sleep until then."

Yulia mumbled something that even Hamilton's keen hearing didn't catch, though he *thought* he might have caught the name of his retainer. The little girl yawned. "...Okay."

Hamilton smiled faintly, gazing down at his only child even as the lights from the passing lamps flickered past the carriage's windows. For several long moments, Hamilton only pressed one hand gently against his daughter's back, with his other hand threading gently through her hair. The rhythmic sway of the carriage, the soft chirr of crickets, and the occasional hoot from a passing owl were the only sounds in the night.

Then, Hamilton cleared his throat. "What do you think of the princes?" he asked at last.

Yulia blinked open sleepy eyes at her father. "Prince Rem is nice," she murmured. "He's shy. Quiet. But he's kind. Sweet."

Hamilton made a small sound of acknowledgement. "And Prince Lucien?" he asked after a brief pause. The Crown Prince was the one he most wanted her thoughts on. Would she be able to stand by Prince Lucien? To be the companion and guardian he needed?

Being the guardian to the heir of the throne isn't an easy affair, as Hamilton knew from personal experience when he was guarding Edric before he became the king.

Thankfully, Prince Lucien does seem to have a better head on his shoulders at the age of five than Edric had at the age of fifteen, so Hamilton isn't concerned that Yulia might need to spend half her life chasing Prince Lucien out of taverns, or making sure that the prince don't get himself kidnapped because he's constantly sneaking away from his guards. It's more likely Yulia will be chasing Prince Lucien out of libraries or the training halls, and making sure he actually sleeps and eats.

Honestly, it's a miracle Edric didn't get himself kidnapped or killed, the number of times he'd given his Crownsguard the slip. The previous king was forever scolding Edric, much to the court's amusement. Hamilton had been the only one whom Edric could never seem to shake off, no matter how hard he tried, much to Edric's annoyance.

For several moments, Yulia didn't answer. And just as Hamilton thought his daughter had fallen asleep, she spoke again. "He's nice, too," Yulia said almost quietly and wistfully. "But... He seems...lonely, too."

Hamilton exhaled slowly, his eyes drifting to the scenery outside the window. The lights were growing sparser the further they travelled from the capital. Soon, it'll be pitch black darkness for several miles until they arrive back at Evershade. Hamilton, however, wasn't concerned about bandits or outlaws. Not only is his carriage driver a trained assassin, like every person that served House Nightray, Hamilton isn't the type of lord who sits in his manor and lets his men protect him.

And that is if any bandit or outlaw is insane enough to attack a carriage bearing House Nightray's emblem.

His daughter was still too young to understand the burdens on Prince Lucien's shoulders, and even the way the Imperial Palace staff looked at the young prince, especially King Edric. But even at her age, she had seen it.

He seems lonely.

Hamilton said nothing for a long while. He merely continued threading his fingers through his daughter's soft hair, his other hand pressed against her back, her small body seeming more fragile than before.

Finally, Hamilton spoke again. "Do you think you can be friends with him?"

Yulia yawned again, almost burying her head beneath her father's cloak. "I guess so," she said sleepily. "It'll be...nice...if they can come to Evershade. They'll love it there, I think... Especially Luca..."

Hamilton chuckled softly as he leaned down, pressing a kiss gently onto his daughter's head. "That's good, then," he said. "Prince Lucien could use a friend. One who won't judge him. One who'll stay by his side. One that would tell him off when he's being foolish."

"Like Father does with King Edric?" Yulia asked sleepily, opening one eye. "Gareth said you do nothing but scold the king since you both were children."

Hamilton muttered something about his retainer being too nosy for his own good, and Yulia gave a sleepy giggle.

If only Edric still listened to Hamilton the way he used to. These days, it seemed like the king paid more heed to his Finance Minister than either Hamilton or the royal advisor.

And it's the Finance Minister who gives Hamilton the creeps. Cyril Varence... Something about that man isn't right. Hamilton couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he hadn't survived this long as a soldier, a spymaster, and even as the head of House Nightray by ignoring his instincts.

He made a mental note to assign a few Stiletos to investigate the man.

Outside, the silver moon had risen, casting soft light across the hills and valleys of the Alathian countryside. The stars shimmered faintly in the dark skies above, glittering like diamonds on black velvet.

As the carriage continued its journey back toward Evershade, Hamilton was lost in thought.

Wondering if maybe, Yulia's friendship might be what saves that lonely boy.

The boy who was also the future of the kingdom.



The soft chirping of crickets and the gentle hum of fireflies were the only sounds that accompanied Queen Lysandra as she sat in the white gazebo of the Imperial Gardens, gazing at the famous rose bushes, as is her usual nightly routine.

Her personal maid was quiet as she poured a fresh cup of jasmine tea for her, the fragrant steam curling into the air. She placed the cup beside a plate of chocolate scones, even as the queen had a book opened in front of her. But she hasn't turned a page in over an hour.

"Your Majesty, if I may?" Her maid's voice was low, but also filled with concern. "Too much sugar isn't good before bed."

Lysandra smiled at her. The maid had come with her from her maiden house, along with her handmaidens, when she'd first married Edric and became the queen. "Don't worry. I'll only have one," she reassured.

The sound of boots on stone echoed faintly along the stone pathways of the Imperial Garden, and both Lysandra and her maid turned only to see one of the Crownsguard approaching. Lysandra recognised him immediately as the Crownsguard assigned to watch over Luca and Rem that day.

"Halt," Lysandra's assigned Crownsguard stopped his colleague. "What business do you have with Her Majesty?"

"It's all right. I'm expecting a report from him," Lysandra reassured. She looked at her maid. "You're dismissed."

The maid bowed to her before leaving the gazebo and the Imperial Gardens. Finally, Lysandra turned to the Crownsguard, who was still standing outside the gazebo respectfully, politely waiting. "Have they already departed?" Lysandra enquired.

The Crownsguard nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. Lord Nightray and Heiress Nightray have left the Imperial City. The Crown Prince and Prince Rem have retired for the night. The nanny is with them now."

Lysandra nodded. "I see." She was silent for several moments, gazing at her teacup and the plate of scones in front of her for several moments before she looked up again. "I want your honest opinion," she said at last, her dark blue eyes sharp. "You've observed my sons with Heiress Nightray today. I want your unfiltered thoughts."

The Crownsguard hesitated, visibly surprised. He looked at his colleague, who was now studying the leaves of a nearby tree with exaggerated interest, clearly pretending not to listen. He recognised the latter as Queen Lysandra's regular guard in the Crownsguard, loyal to both her and the princes, more so than the king.

"Whatever you say here will remain between us," Lysandra promised, her voice steady. "I want the truth."

The Crownsguard hesitated before he exhaled. "Permission to speak freely, Your Majesty?" he enquired, and Lysandra nodded. "I noticed it the moment Heiress Nightray interacted with Prince Lucien. He smiled at her. Genuinely. Something that no one had been able to achieve in five years. Not even Prince Rem. And yet, Heiress Nightray managed it in less than an hour. By the time she had to leave, Prince Lucien was staring at her like she'd hung the moon and stars, and looked as if his world had come to an end when he was told she had to go home."

Lysandra smiled softly, trying to imagine her eldest son smiling and laughing. "Is that so? I wouldn't be surprised if that will be the girl that Luca will marry in the future."

The Crownsguard's eyes widened. And behind the queen, her personal guard made a sound that suspiciously resembled laughter before disguising it as a cough.

Ignoring the reactions of the Crownsguards, Lysandra pressed further. "And what of Rem?"

"He smiled, too. He was nervous around Heiress Nightray in the beginning, but he soon warmed up to her," The Crownsguard revealed. "He laughed. Not the nervous little laugh that he does with the palace staff or tutors, but a real one. They acted like children for once. Like the five-year-olds they are. Not princes. Not royal heirs. Just...children."

There was silence for several long moments. Lysandra finally nodded. "That's good, then," she whispered.

The Crownsguard standing in front of her shifted on his feet, hesitating, before his shoulders finally eased and he looked up, determination on his face. "If I may, Your Majesty?" he began. "Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but I've been guarding Prince Lucien and even Prince Rem since they both were infants. I understand it's treason for a Crownsguard to question the king. But as a father myself, I can't keep silent anymore. The way His Majesty treats Prince Lucien..." He trailed off slowly.

Lysandra closed the book in front of her with a sigh. "...I'm aware," she said at last. "Edric...doesn't understand Luca. He doesn't want to." She said almost sadly. "We both knew this might happen, even before the twins were born. We both carry bloodlines from the Ten Great Houses. Edric was so proud of Luca when he was born, and the doctor confirmed his gift. But now... He listens too much to Minister Varence."

The Crownsguard frowned, his jaw tight. "With respect, Your Majesty, the Finance Minister has no place involving himself in matters beyond the royal budget," he said hotly.

"I agree," Lysandra sighed. The Crownsguard aren't the only ones concerned with the amount of trust that the king had placed in his Finance Minister. Far more than the king gave to Hamilton Nightray and Esmund Veranthai. His guardian and military advisor, as well as the royal advisor, respectively. "Luca is...special. A natural-born genius. He's too perceptive for his own good. He's intelligent. Too smart. Sees too much. Even hears too much. But the king... He's a man of action. Of

steel and command. And he *fears* Luca.” Lysandra smiled bitterly. “He fears what Luca hears when he looks at him. The thoughts that Edric keeps behind locked teeth, but never buried deeply enough.”

“Then perhaps...” The Crownsguard began, but Lysandra shook her head.

“He won’t change,” Lysandra said quietly. “And I fear for both Luca and Rem. For the one too soft-hearted to survive the game of politics that comes with noble and royal territory... And even for the one that is too sharp not to be hated by it.” She breathed deeply. “The Nightray heiress... She looked Luca in the eye and didn’t flinch. Even asked if she could come again. And even asked if Luca and Rem can visit Evershade someday.”

Lysandra laughed. “Edric looked so shocked when she asked that. A feather could have knocked him over.” The Crownsguard—both of them, grinned. “She called Luca out like an equal. Treated him not as a prince, but as a normal boy. And perhaps that’s what he needs. For someone to look him in the eye and tell him what he’s doing wrong. Someone who sees him. Not the title. Not the gift. But just him.” Lysandra’s expression softened. “Like how Lord Hamilton used to be for Edric.”

The Crownsguard hesitated, then nodded. “Maybe Heiress Nightray can be the ray of light for Prince Lucien. The one the rest of us couldn’t give him,” he admitted softly.

Lysandra nodded, lifting her teacup. “I pray to the Goddess that Luca finds his own path. Not just as a prince of this country. But his own path, as Lucien von Aubere.”



The warm glow of candlelight was the only source of illumination in the twin princes’ shared bedroom. As was her usual nightly routine before turning in, Eugenia Norman checked on the younger prince, ensuring that Prince Rem was asleep, warm, and comfortable beneath his covers. His breathing was slow and even, and he clutched a stuffed bear in his arms.

Despite it being well past his bedtime, however, Prince Lucien was still wide awake. He was already dressed in his pyjamas, but sat perched on the side of his bed on the other side of the room, his small feet swinging above the carpet. He seemed deep in thought, frowning slightly to himself.

Eugenia smiled, sitting by Prince Lucien’s side. “Shouldn’t you turn in for the night soon, Your Highness?” she asked gently, but the Crown Prince only shrugged. “Did you have fun today?” She asked the prince, and Prince Lucien blinked up at her. “I’ve never seen you so at ease with anyone before. Not even Prince Rem.”

Before Prince Lucien could answer, there was a soft knock on the door, and it creaked open. Standing in the doorway was Queen Lysandra, her steps almost silent as she entered the room.

“Y-Your Majesty?” Eugenia blinked in surprise.

“Can you leave us?” Lysandra asked, her voice calm. “You may turn in for the night.”

Eugenia hesitated, looking at Prince Lucien before she nodded, rising to her feet. “Of course.” She curtsied to the queen and exited the room, looking over her shoulder with curiosity as she did so, before closing the door behind her.

Lucien—Luca doesn’t look at his mother. He merely kept swinging his feet in silence, staring down at his feet as if seeing something fascinating. He didn’t look up even when Lysandra crossed the room silently, sitting next to her son.

“Mother,” Luca said quietly.

Lysandra’s heart nearly broke at the uncertainty in his voice. How many times had Luca and Rem truly seen their parents since their birth? They were mostly raised by the wet nurses and nannies. Even their tutors likely saw them more than Lysandra ever did, and she’s their mother.

This is just how things are, a small voice spoke in her head. You know that the moment you accepted the engagement to Edric.

And it was true. Even amongst the nobility, it was rare for a mother to be the one to nurse her own children, especially if she was the lady of the House. Lysandra only knew of a few nobility houses that went against that norm. House Nightray was one of them. But sadly, poor Yuliana Nightray will never get to know her mother, who had passed away when she was just a baby, with the lady of the house giving her life to defend a village under House Nightray’s protection from bandits.

Lord Hamilton never truly recovered from his lady’s demise. Unlike most noble unions, theirs had been a love match. House Nightray had never followed the norm when it came to their heirs and heiresses’ marriages, and had been more relaxed in their customs. Lord Hamilton’s father had allowed him to pick his own wife, and though he had lived long enough to see his son married, he hadn’t lived to witness the birth of his granddaughter.

From what Lysandra had understood, the entire House had literally thrown a party the moment they knew that their lady was with child, and then another one on the day that their heiress was born.

For being a noble House of assassins, they sure don’t act like it when off the clock. If there was another Great House as chaotic behind closed doors, it would be House Hunt.

Luca looked up, startled, when the queen caressed Luca’s silver hair gently. Both twins had inherited her hair and eye colouring, but truthfully, even Lysandra admits to herself that Luca tends to take after her in more than just appearance.

Her child. Her baby. Her eldest. Only five. And yet, he's already carrying such a heavy burden on those small shoulders, and understands the ways of the world more than he already should.

Lysandra remembers the first time that she'd held Luca in her arms. It would have been just after the twins were born, and the midwife proudly announced that Lysandra had two healthy boys.

Even Edric was delighted, and had spent days smiling like a fool, especially when the royal doctor had confirmed that Luca possessed a gift, the first royal in generations to possess one, though Lysandra and Edric both knew that it might be a distinct possibility when they'd first learnt she was pregnant.

Abilities were rare but not unheard of, and they normally manifested amongst the Ten Great Houses. Currently, Lysandra knew of only one other child with a confirmed gift: the D'Aragon heiress, a few years older than Luca, and already engaged to the younger son of House Kael.

But soon, Edric's joy and pride over Luca turned into fear. He started looking at their firstborn like he was a curse, avoiding him like the plague. As if the very gift he once celebrated now threatened to undo everything.

Lysandra wanted to be a mother to her children, but she is also the queen, and couldn't disobey Edric. And thus, she stayed silent and kept her distance. But she had never stopped watching.

She ensured that the Crownsguard assigned to the twins were loyal to their well-being above all else. She arranged for the palace kitchens to prepare the twins' favourite dishes on special days. And here, Lysandra felt a big slap in her face when she had to ask the head chef what Luca and Rem's favourite foods were when she had given that particular instruction.

The head chef said nothing, but the judgmental look he had given Queen Lysandra when he was summoned to her said more than what words could.

Despite everything, however, Lysandra had never stopped loving her sons. If there is a choice to be made between her king and her sons, her sons would be her first choice every single time.

"Luca..." Lysandra sighed. She smoothed out the wrinkles in her gown, trying to act like it was a normal thing for *her* to do. Most mothers would visit their children every single night before they sleep. But for Lysandra, it had been a long time since she had done that.

She hesitated, wondering what to say to her firstborn. What *can* she say, anyway?

How was your day?

Did you have fun?

However that she phrased it, both questions sounded awkward even in her head.

Next to her, Luca gave a slight tilt of his lips like he knew what she was thinking. And then again, he probably did.

Lysandra cleared her throat, trying to break the awkward silence. "Did you enjoy yourself today?" she asked gently. "With the Nightray heiress? I believe her name is Yuliana?" She recalled something of that sort when Lord Hamilton had introduced his daughter to her and Edric earlier that day.

And while Lysandra knew that Lord Hamilton had a daughter, as the royal court always does whenever an heir or heiress is born to one of the Great Houses, she had never met the child until today.

Luca nods slowly, still not looking at Lysandra, but there was a faint smile in his voice. "She prefers *Yulia*," he said simply. He then raised his head, meeting Lysandra's eyes. For the first time in years, Lysandra saw joy in them. "She's...different. Her mind's quiet. When I'm with her, I can *think*. It doesn't hurt. She says she can help teach me to shut it off. To control it. To not...hear." He whispered the last part, his voice filled with hope.

Lysandra smiled. "That's wonderful, my love," she said. "She sounds very special." She brushed a strand of silver hair from Luca's forehead. "She'll be a good friend to you. A lifelong companion. A shield and a sword." She murmured. She had hoped Luca might find a friend when she persuaded Edric to arrange the meeting with the Nightray heiress. Thank the Goddess that it worked out. "Someone who will tell you what you need to hear, rather than what you want to hear. Someone who will never guide you wrong. Like Lord Hamilton was to your father."

Luca looked doubtful at that comparison, but he said nothing.

Lysandra grimaced. While Luca and Rem would still be too young to be involved in the affairs of the court, it is not a big secret amongst the Imperial Palace that the once close friendship that King Edric had shared with Lord Hamilton had frayed.

Hamilton Nightray is still a loyal subject of the realm. But he had mostly handed over the protection duties of the king to the Crownsguard, mostly serving Edric in his role as the Imperial Palace's military advisor. And even so, Lysandra had been hearing whispers amongst the soldiers that the king hardly ever takes Hamilton's advice any longer. Not like how he used to. And it wasn't just Hamilton either, but also Lord Esmund, the royal advisor.

"Someday... When you're both a little older, she'll be by your side," Lysandra said. "She'll be someone you can trust more than anyone else." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "Even more than your family."

She brushed off silver curls from Luca's forehead, pressing a light kiss against his forehead—a rare act of affection that startled the small boy for a moment, and causing guilt to wreck through Lysandra's frame once more.

"It's getting late. Lie down now. You'll be too tired for your lessons tomorrow, otherwise," Lysandra said, trying to sound cheerful.

Luca didn't protest, crawling beneath his covers, as Lysandra tucked the blankets around his shoulders, just as she used to when he was a baby, and the world still felt full of light and hope.

"Mother?" Luca murmured. "Why does Father hate me?" Lysandra's breath hitched. And for several moments, she has no idea what to say. "I saw the way Lord Hamilton was with Yulia today. He looks at her. Talks to her. He didn't ignore her. He watched her like she mattered. Why doesn't Father do that with me?" Luca blinked up at Lysandra, confused. "Why does Father hate me?" He asked again. "I don't understand."

Luca's confusion and sadness in his voice almost broke Lysandra's heart. She wanted to lie to him. Tell Luca that it isn't true. That Edric does love him. But she couldn't bring herself to say the words. Even if she does, Luca will know that she's lying. He always knew when someone lied to him, even without his gift.

Lysandra sighed, gently stroking Luca's hair, trying to coax him to sleep. "Oh, baby..." she murmured. She closed her eyes briefly, trying to find the right words to say. "It's not your fault. You did nothing wrong." Luca's eyes are blinking slowly now, slowly being lulled to sleep. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

Lysandra continued sitting by Luca's bedside for several minutes, stroking his hair, waiting until he was fully asleep before she got to her feet, crossing the room and opening the door. She looked over her shoulder at her sons before she left.

Luca and Rem.

Twins born on the same day. But yet, destined for different fates.

Lysandra closed the door quietly behind her, meeting the eyes of the Crownsguard guarding the twins for the night. "Watch over them," she said.

"With my life, Your Majesty," The Crownsguard swore, one fist over his chest.

Lysandra never doubted it.



After leaving the twins' room, Lysandra determinedly made her way towards the one place where she knew King Edric would be at this time of the night. The few Imperial Palace staff still on night shift duty bowed to Lysandra as she passed, but she never broke her stride, her footsteps echoing softly down the palace corridors.

The silence no longer bothered her. In fact, it might be for the best. No one would be around to witness the confrontation that was about to unfold. A confrontation that Lysandra will admit is long overdue.

A Crownsguard was standing beside the door to King Edric's study. He didn't move from his position, but saluted Lysandra smartly, as is protocol. "His Majesty the King ordered that he not be disturbed," The Crownsguard said.

Lysandra only raised a brow. "And I'm his wife and queen," she replied coolly. "I need a word with the king. Come back in thirty minutes." The Crownsguard hesitated. "I'm not going to kill him." Lysandra rolled her eyes. Though there are days when she is solely tempted to. "But unless you can keep your mouth shut about what happens in there, I suggest you leave your post. Or at least try not to listen."

The Crownsguard hesitated before his shoulders slumped. "I can't abandon my post, Your Majesty. Lord Hamilton would have my head. But I won't repeat anything I hear." Lysandra nodded, and the Crownsguard then knocked on the door. "Your Majesty? Her Majesty is here. She requests an audience."

Edric's voice could be heard from behind the door. "Let her in."

Lysandra opened the door and entered, walking in with purpose, the sounds of her heels being muffled by the carpet beneath her feet as she entered the king's study that generations of kings have used.

A crackling fire was going strong in the hearth, with it being the only sound in the room, and its orange light was the only source of light. Heavy crimson drapes were drawn across the tall windows. And above the fireplace hung a large oil painting in a heavy golden frame—an old depiction of the Imperial City. Large bookcases covered one side of the room, stretching from the ceiling to the floor, and were filled with books of all kinds. There were even two plush armchairs in a corner near the window, with a round table between them.

Behind the polished oak desk sat King Edric von Aubere, nursing a glass half-filled with red wine, with a wine bottle resting on the surface of his desk. Though the desk bore the usual stacks of reports and documents, he wasn't reading them.

The king was currently in his red dressing gown, looking more exhausted and humane than Lysandra had ever known. Not since Edric was still Crown Prince, being the reckless, rule-breaking heir that she had once known, always being scolded by the late king.

"Your Majesty," Lysandra strode towards his desk determinedly. "We need to talk."

Edric sighed tiredly, putting down his glass and giving his queen his full attention. "What now?" he asked wearily.

"The way you're treating our son," Lysandra said, narrowing her eyes at Edric. Her statement caught the king's attention, and he looked at her, his brows drawn, and his jaw clenched. "And you will *not* brush me off this time!" Edric's expression began to harden, but Lysandra didn't give him a chance to protest or argue. "Do you know what Luca asked me

tonight? He asked me why his father hates him." Edric's jaw clenched tightly. "How do you expect me to tell him that's not true when you *show him every single day* how much you despise him? When you treat him like he's part of the wall or furniture, or worse, even ignore him like he's a shadow in the hall? When you smile only at Rem, but never once acknowledge Luca?"

The king snarled, half-rising to his feet. "How do you expect me to react when *your* son—"

"Our son," Lysandra said sharply.

"—can read minds?" Edric continued, ignoring the interruption. His hands curled into fists on the surface of his desk. "It's unnatural!"

"You *knew* this could happen," Lysandra said coldly. "Our engagement was arranged *because* we both have bloodlines from the Ten Great Houses, but I wasn't directly tied to them, to prevent upsetting the political balance."

It hadn't hurt that the late king and queen had liked her and had hoped that she could temper the wildfire that was their son. Most of King Edric's policies since he had taken the throne had been drafted by Lysandra's hand.

"We *both* carry bloodlines tied to the Ten Great Houses!" Lysandra pressed. "You *knew* abilities weren't unheard of! Heiress D'Aragon is ten years old, and she can see the future, yet I don't see you calling her 'unnatural'! House Nightray is full of people with skills that can rival those with abilities, yet you've never declared them 'abominations'!"

"That's different!" Edric argued. "He's already five years old, and he's already—"

"*That's* my point *exactly!*" Lysandra almost threw her hands up in the air with frustration. "I haven't forgotten how proud and delighted you were when Luca and Rem were born, and the doctor told us that Luca is born with a gift. The first royal in generations to do so! You were walking about on clouds for *weeks!* What changed, Edric? When Minister Varence started whispering in your ear?" She didn't give Edric a chance to answer. "Whether you want to admit it or not, Luca is your son as much as Rem is! He's five years old! He's *your* child!"

Edric was silent for several moments, staring down at his clenched fists on the surface of the desk. For several moments, Lysandra thought that she'd finally gotten through to him, but then, the king spoke again.

"He's a monster," Edric whispered, falling back into his plush chair. Across him, Lysandra froze. "He speaks thoughts that I never told anyone. Fears and insecurities that I had had my entire life. Things I never told anyone, not even Hamilton. Things buried so deeply that I'd almost forgotten them. And then, he says them back to me like he *knows*. Like he's peeling me apart from the inside." His voice cracked. "Do you think I *want* to fear or hate my child, my queen?"

He looked at Lysandra, and the king looked old. So old.

"I *wanted* to love him. Be proud of him. He's my heir. The Crown Prince. The heir to the throne. The way my father was of me, and his father was of him, and so on. But I look at him, and when I remember that Lucien can hear what I'm thinking..." Edric swallowed. He buried his head in his hands. "I got scared. I can't help how I feel, Lysandra. We have three nannies resigning from their posts in less than a week, even before Lucien and Remington were *three*, and it doesn't help how I feel!" His voice cracks. "It's not normal."

Lysandra swallowed hard. This was the first time she had heard the king admit how he felt, and displaying some form of weakness or vulnerability. For as long as she'd known him, even back when Edric was still the Crown Prince, he was the stereotypical type of man who thinks brute force can solve anything. Hamilton was always exasperated with him. It was a miracle that Edric even managed to graduate from the Officers' Academy, with how poorly he did in Strategy and Tactics.

"Then... If you truly can't bring yourself to treat him as your son..." Lysandra finally found her voice. "*Let* him go." Edric's eyes snapped to hers. "I'll take him to my maiden house. Or send him to House Nightray. I'll go with him if I must. Or send him peacefully to one of our border territories. Even to another country. But don't keep him in the palace just to break him."

The king snarled, rising to his feet once more and slamming both hands onto his desk. His wine glass and the wine bottle wobbled dangerously. "Do you think I'll just *hand over* royal blood to some *random* noble house? Risk another faction raise him as some pawn? Or let some random country or House have a claim on the throne in the future?" Edric snarled.

Lysandra felt anger swell up from within her. "Hamilton Nightray is *no* traitor!" she snapped. "His loyalty is ironbound! He's been your best friend since you both were boys! You *know* that!" Edric was taken aback, startled. Whether it is with Lysandra's words or because she is *shouting* at him for the first time in their years of marriage, Lysandra has no idea. "And yet it seems to me of late that you've been ignoring and even *belittling* Hamilton Nightray's advice to you. And even that of Lord Esmund! Do you think the soldiers wouldn't talk? Or the servants?" She shook her head. "If there is anyone who would never turn on the Crown, it is House Nightray. That entire House exists to protect the royal family! You *know* that."

Edric was silent. "I can't trust anyone. Not anymore," he admitted.

"And yet, you trust your *Finance Minister* more than you trust Lord Hamilton, Lord Esmund, or *me*?" Lysandra asked bitterly. Edric was silent. "I'm your wife. I'm your queen. Put your trust in me. If not as your queen, then as the mother of your children. Trust that I want them safe."

Edric remained silent.

"Even if you can't trust me, you don't trust Luca, you can at least believe and trust that Hamilton and House Nightray would be loyal to the Crown." Lysandra is starting to despair, as none of her words are getting through to Edric at all. But she

had to try! For Luca! "Being a father means more than producing heirs, and feeding them, and providing a shelter for them. It means *being there*. For them. Loving them. Even when they scare you. Even when they drive you up the wall."

There were several moments of long silence.

Edric swallowed. "...Leave me, my queen," he said almost quietly. Slumped in his plush chair, he looked older than he really was, and for a moment, Lysandra felt a stab of pity go through her.

"If you keep pushing Luca away, Edric..." Lysandra warned quietly, "One day, you *will* regret it."

She turned to walk out of the study, her steps steady and measured. Behind her, in the study, Edric stared into his glass of wine like it held the answers to the universe, but he didn't look up at her even as the door closed behind her.

And for several moments, Lysandra wondered if she had ever truly known the man whom she'd married.



House Nightray always knew how to party, Queen Lysandra thought wryly, sipping from a goblet of honeyed wine, her eyes drifting over the chaos that was Yuliana Nightray's fifth birthday celebration.

The grand dining hall of Nightray Manor was full of chaos and life. Long tables were groaning under the weight of lavish platters of food and overflowing goblets. Members of House Nightray, all of them dressed in their civilian attire, laughed and joked with each other. Children darted in between the tables, some of them shrieking with joy as they chased each other.

What seems to be the entire village of Evershade was in attendance as well, gathered not just as citizens but as kin. None of those citizens seemed to be even remotely uncomfortable in the manor of their lord. Some citizens were even happily chatting with him.

House Nightray had always been that way, as far as Lysandra knew. One of the most influential and powerful noble Houses amongst the Ten Great Houses. And yet, they are as easygoing and casual as can be. Their House members are also all fiercely loyal to each other, and not just to the Crown. They are especially loyal to their lord and his family.

Watching them now, Lysandra found it difficult to believe that she was currently standing in a hall full of assassins who could probably kill her before she even realised what was going on. If she hadn't known what House Nightray was capable of, she might even have believed them harmless.

It had come as a surprise to receive a personal invitation for Yuliana Nightray's fifth birthday party, hand-delivered by Lord Hamilton just two weeks earlier, when he had arrived at the Imperial Palace for a meeting with Lord Esmund and Edric. According to the servants, however, it was common for members of Alathia's royal family to attend Nightray gatherings and vice versa.

The members of the royal family grew up alongside the Nightrays for generations and were often invited to each other's milestones and gatherings. Edric himself was a frequent face in Evershade since he was a mere lad. Lysandra had even heard that whenever the late king realised that the Crown Prince was missing, he normally just sent a query to Nightray Manor to check if Edric was there.

"Yulia asked me if Prince Lucien and Prince Rem could come," Hamilton had told Lysandra when he had asked if the two princes could attend his daughter's birthday celebration. "Apart from Yulia, they've never met another child before, and I think it might be good for them to get out of the Imperial Palace for a while. Prince Lucien should meet the people sworn to protect the royal family. And it would do Prince Remington some good to be around other children, too. One of my House will be his future guardian someday."

Whether it was out of some misplaced guilt or something else, Edric had agreed the moment Lysandra had asked him, but only on the condition that she bring at least two members of the Crownsguard with her.

Due to the presence of the Crown Prince at Yuliana Nightray's birthday celebration, House Nightray wasn't able to invite the Valemire and Rovaryn heirs, even though those two Houses have been allies and shield brethren to House Nightray for centuries. The heads of those two Houses, however, had understood when Hamilton Nightray had explained the situation, and arrangements had been made for a separate playdate for all three heirs as a result.

Lysandra smiled faintly when her gaze settled on a small cluster of children near the hearth.

Luca was smiling and laughing like any ordinary boy, even as one of the other Nightray children chased him with a wooden dagger, only for Yulia to jump onto Luca's back mid-run, and both children collapsed in a fit of giggles. Rem, behind Yulia and Luca, giggled uncertainly, but delighted.

For the first time in a long while, Luca was acting like a normal child. Laughing and smiling like any other child his age. And if not for his hair colour and eyes, he could have blended in with the children of House Nightray, having fitted so seamlessly in with them.

Lysandra felt a pang of guilt even as she watched an older Nightray cousin approach Yulia and Luca, a grin on his face. Luca pouted at him, likely having been teased. Rem's eyes were wide with awe, looking at his brother and Yulia, and then at the Nightray cousin.

Yuliana Nightray and House Nightray had done in a few hours what Lysandra had been trying for *years*, and it doesn't hurt any less when Lysandra realised that Evershade and Nightray Manor probably felt more like home to Luca than the Imperial Palace ever had.

"Your Majesty," Lord Hamilton approached with a respectful bow. He was dressed down like the others, in casual attire that made him look neither like a lord nor one of the most dangerous men in the kingdom. He had a smile on his face when he watched his daughter before turning his attention back towards the queen. "Thank you for coming."

Lysandra shook her head. "No. Thank you for inviting me," she said. Her smile was genuine as she watched the children. Luca was giggling now, shrieking with laughter as Yulia tackled him to the floor again. "It'll do Luca some good to get out of the palace. Even just for a few hours."

Hamilton's face didn't change, but his jaw clenched tightly. "...I'll admit," he said quietly. "I didn't expect the king to agree when I first extended the invitation. My relations with Edric have been...strained, for lack of a better word." Lysandra winced. "I was prepared to have to disappoint my daughter, and even the two princes."

"I was surprised, too, when Edric agreed," Lysandra admitted. She sighed. "Sometimes, I wonder if I ever knew him at all. He's changed so much ever since he started listening to Minister Varence. And not for the better." Hamilton's jaw clenched again. "I can't shield Luca anymore. Not from Edric. Not from the things that matter. And if it's already this bad, when he's only five..." She trailed off slowly. "I dread to think what it's going to be like once Luca is older."

And that is only if Luca survives that long. Lysandra won't be surprised if Edric eventually orders for Luca's assassination.

Hamilton said nothing for several moments, watching the children shrieking and playing. "I offered to bring Prince Lucien into House Nightray," he admitted at last, his voice low, much to Lysandra's surprise. "Let him live here. Under our roof. Raise him like one of our own. And that we might be able to teach him how to control his gift. But Edric... He refused. Wouldn't hear of it. He's always been stubborn and hard-headed, even when we were kids. But..."

Lysandra sighed bitterly. "I understand," she said. "He *always* had to be right. Even when it destroys what he loves. Or maybe *because* it does. Half of his arguments with the late king were almost always because Edric refused to see where His Majesty was coming from. The late king believed in peace and diplomacy, but to Edric, that is a sign of weakness." She shook her head. "All the treaties and alliances that we once had with our neighbours... Nuvelle, Solyara, and all the other countries... It's all gone up in smoke now. The late king would be rolling in his grave if he saw what Edric had done."

Hamilton was silent for several seconds. "...Before His Majesty the king had passed away, he made me promise something," he said at last, his voice quiet. Lysandra turned towards Hamilton. "He made me swear to remain by Edric's side. To watch over him. Guide him. Make sure he wouldn't go astray. Make sure that the wrong voices didn't influence him. And every single day, I regret not keeping my promise to the king."

Hamilton never mentioned names, but Lysandra knew whom he was referring to. Both of them do.

Finally, Lysandra met Hamilton's gaze. Not as a queen, but as a frightened and desperate mother. "Lord Hamilton, tell me, can I trust you?" she asked.

Hamilton blinked. "My loyalty has always been to the Crown," he said slowly.

Lysandra hesitated. "Even if...that means going against the king?" she asked slowly, and Hamilton stiffened. "You're an intelligent and sharp man, Lord Hamilton. You know what I'm asking. If the day ever comes... When Edric's fear overcomes his common sense... I want you to promise me something."

Hamilton nodded, meeting Lysandra's gaze fearlessly. "Name it," he said.

"I'm not asking this as your queen. But as a mother," Lysandra said. "If anything happens... Whether to me... Or if Edric loses control... And if anything happens... If Luca's in danger... I need to know that someone will protect him. That someone will keep him safe. Even from the king, if necessary."

Lysandra's voice didn't waver. She might be the queen now, but once, she was the daughter of a minor noble house and had even attended the Officers' Academy during her youth. But right now, no diplomacy or strategy could protect her child.

"I'm not asking you to betray Edric," Lysandra said softly. "I would never ask you to do that. I just want to make sure that if anything happens... That my child would be safe."

Hamilton didn't hesitate. He laid a fist to his heart. "I swear it to you, Queen Lysandra," he said formally. "On my honour. And on the honour of House Nightray. I'll protect Prince Lucien. No matter what." His eyes softened. "I might be Edric's protector, but it doesn't mean simply protecting him from assassins and criminals. Being the guardian to the king or the heir of the throne means more than that. Sometimes, it means protecting them from themselves if necessary. I'll make sure Prince Lucien will be safe, no matter what."

Lysandra exhaled, a look of relief crossing her features. "Thank you," she whispered. Her gaze turned back to the children. Yulia had taken Luca by the wrist, and was now tugging him towards the table where the birthday cake was—it's the biggest cake that Lysandra had ever seen in her life, and is probably baked by one of House Nightray's renowned chefs.

It was easy to see how much House Nightray adored their heiress, and it's sweet to see.

"For as long as possible, I want to keep his innocence," Lysandra whispered. "Luca and Yulia both. Because let's face it: if anything happens to Luca, Yulia will suffer, too."

Hamilton said nothing. Because he knows his daughter. And he knew if anything happened to Luca, Yulia would never forgive it.



The rays of the setting sun were already casting long shadows over the Alathian countryside, even as the royal carriage made its slow trek back to the Imperial City, with the two Crownsguard seated up front, steering the horses in silence whilst also keeping an eye out for bandits.

Inside the carriage, Lysandra had Luca's head nestled in her lap, with the Crown Prince currently sleeping, exhausted from the day's activities. The queen smiled to herself, gently brushing back Luca's fringe.

Luca must have the time of his life today, just acting like any normal child, free to be himself without the constant scolding to "act more like a prince". The first time Lysandra had overheard the etiquette tutor say that to her then three-year-old sons, she'd dismissed the man on the spot, despite his pleas.

The next tutor they found was thankfully more experienced with children, and more importantly, Luca seems to like her. That's normally how Lysandra determined if a tutor is worth keeping or not: if Luca trusted them. For all that he was only five years old, Luca was shrewd and a very good judge of character.

Across Lysandra, Rem is seated on the opposite seat. Unlike his brother, he is still wide-eyed and alert, swinging his little feet back and forth. He is smiling as he clutches at the wooden wolf figurine in his hands, carved with the unmistakable style of Nightray craftsmanship.

It had originally been Yulia's. A birthday gift from one of the members of House Nightray.

But Rem had stared at it all day, and the Nightray heiress had then surprisingly given it to him when Lysandra was about to depart from Evershade with the twins. "You look like you need a protector," was what Yulia had said. Even Lysandra had never seen Rem look so surprised.

"Did you have fun?" Lysandra asked Rem gently, even as the young prince clutched at the wolf figurine in his tiny hands like it was a precious treasure.

Rem blinked at Lysandra with the sudden question, but he nodded shyly, the figurine clutched close to his chest. "It was nice. Everyone was loud. But... I liked it." He smiled shyly, before his gaze dropped to his sleeping twin, and his face fell slightly. "I've...never seen Luca laugh this much." He admitted quietly. "He only smiles around Yulia. He doesn't even smile at me the way he does with Yulia."

The words had a greater impact on Lysandra than she expected. Rem's voice wasn't bitter or jealous. It was just plain truth. An observation. The queen looked down at Luca who still continued sleeping. *How much longer could she keep both the boys safe?* How long would it be before Edric made his choice? It's only a matter of time before Edric names his favoured son, Rem, the Crown Prince.

And Lysandra fears what Edric will do to remove Luca from the line of succession.

Lysandra looked at Rem, smiling so innocently, unknowing of the burdens that weighed upon his brother, and even of the knives in the court. "Rem, can I ask you something?" Lysandra asked gently, and Rem blinked at his mother. "Why didn't you ever speak up for your brother?" Rem flinched. "Like last week, when you accidentally destroyed the Imperial rose bush in the garden after kicking your ball into it. You saw your father blame Luca for it. And yet, you stayed silent. You just stood by and let your father blame Luca for it, when it was you."

Rem flinched, his grip tightening over the wolf figurine. He looked ashamed and even guilty. "I was...scared," he whispered. "I made it up to Luca!" He said immediately, like it would make up for the beating that Luca had received at the king's hands. "I gave him my pudding that night, and I cleaned his books, and—"

Lysandra shook her head. "But your brother was still hurt," she reproached gently, and Rem flushed with shame. "And maybe he wouldn't have if you had just told the truth."

Silence fell in the carriage. Only the rhythmic clatter of hooves and even the soft squeak of the carriage wheels accompanied her words.

"Staying silent when you know that something is wrong doesn't make it kind, and it doesn't make things worse. It's letting injustice slide." Lysandra said.

She tried not to sound too harsh, but Rem needs to learn this lesson sooner rather than later, before he loses Luca completely. Luca did not say a word when Edric had punished him for the rose bush incident, but Lysandra had seen the look that Luca had given Rem. Luca knew who was responsible for the rose bush, but he had still stayed silent to protect Rem.

And even after Edric learned the truth from the Imperial Gardener later that night, what did he do? Did he apologise to Luca? Lift the punishment? No, of course not. He still let the punishment stand. If not for the nanny and one of the maids sneaking Luca some food that night, he would likely have gone to bed hungry.

"It makes you complicit," Lysandra told Rem gently. "Someday in the future, as a prince, and as a member of the royal family, you need to speak up when you need to. Especially when people need you. Stand up for the common people. You have to be more than just kind. You have to be just. And not let injustice slide."

Rem swallowed hard, guilt visible in his expression as he looked at his sleeping brother. "Like Luca? And Yulia?" he whispered.

Lysandra smiled and nodded. "Yes. Like them," she said. "But you don't have to be fearless to be brave. Courage comes in all forms. Sometimes, it's just doing the right thing, even when you're scared. That's a kind of courage in itself." She leaned forward, brushing a strand of silver hair from Rem's forehead. "No matter what happens, you're still Luca's brother. That won't change. You won't lose him. But if you keep ignoring what happens to him just to 'not cause trouble', Rem, then you *will*."

Rem said nothing. He merely stared down at the wolf figurine clutched in his tiny hands, thoughtful, Lysandra's words giving him lots to think about, and the queen hoped that it would be enough for Rem to find some courage in himself and not let others lead him by the nose all the time.

Even as a normal prince of this kingdom, being too kind will tear him apart. Already, Rem's hesitation was driving a wedge between him and Luca. Even Yulia had noticed the way Rem stood by, saying nothing, even as Edric blames Luca for everything, even for things obviously *not* Luca's fault.

The Nightray heiress is smart enough *not* to say anything to the king, only tending to Luca's bruises on the days when she was over at the Imperial Palace, and had witnessed more than a few of those 'punishments'. But the looks she'd shot Rem told Lysandra everything that the girl was thinking. And someday, should the king either order Luca's assassination or his exile, as Lysandra knew was only a matter of time, the older the twins grew, Yulia isn't going to take it well.

Either Edric's cruelty or even Rem's indecisiveness, Yuliana Nightray would remember.

She was already getting annoyed with the way Edric seemed to constantly try to push Yulia into Rem's direction, when anyone with eyes can tell that it's Luca whom Yulia seems to share a connection with and even a bond, duty or not. And Rem's indecisiveness was doing him no favours.

And when it all comes to a head someday, as Lysandra knew it would, she wondered what would happen.

Will this be the end of House Nightray's centuries of service and bond to the Crown? Or will this destroy the children's relationship with each other?

Especially the brotherly bond between Luca and Rem?

Lysandra shivered as she thought about the implications.

Whatever would come, Lysandra thought to herself grimly, even as the carriage rattled on through the dirt roads toward the Imperial City, it is going to be up to the Goddess's will now. She only prayed that Edric had enough sense to overcome his fear of his own child.

And yet, somehow, something in Lysandra told her that that would never happen.