

## 1- An Audience

Seph Jones stared at the stone wall in front of him. He had barely slept. After demanding that he provide a blood sample, the officers had hauled him to the Central Governance Station's holding cells all because of one name:

Joseph Farrow.

That infamous name was on everyone's lips. His colleagues at the Northern Governance station had been dubious that an orphaned noble worked among them, but he didn't remember any richness or finery; he only remembered the orphanage that had turned him out.

He rubbed his tired eyes and sighed. What would happen to him? He had put in the hours and gone above and beyond. All for what? To be stuck here? This was not where he was meant to be. He hoped he'd be able to joke with Carron about the embarrassing mix-up over drinks in a month or so. He wasn't a Farrow...

A sound from beyond the cell's barred entrance roused him, and the door at the end of the corridor opened quietly, the oil lamps on the walls flickering in the sudden draft. The few other cells were empty today, and Seph's ears strained to hear the footsteps that leisurely drew closer. It wasn't meal time. Did he finally have a visitor after three whole days? Seph stood and fixed his rumpled blue uniform as best he could. Perhaps they would help him out of this mess.

The stranger slowed as he reached his cell, and Seph inspected their suit. The tall man blended well with the stone wall behind him. That, coupled with his bland expression, would have made him rather dull, but Seph could tell the make of his garments far exceeded his own. This was a rich, dull stranger.

The man turned his head toward him and Seph gave him a slight bow.

"So this is the son of the infamous noble," the man said quietly. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Joseph Farrow."

He had the wrong cell; this cell held Seph Jones.

"A pleasure to meet you, sir," he replied.

"I had thought that Michael's son was dead, but here he is. You look just like your father."

Seph faltered. This man had known Michael Farrow; the man who had decimated a sizable part of the country, throwing it into turmoil for five long years. He breathed in, resisting the compulsion to reach for his metal identity card; a card that was now confiscated.

"I am sorry. You must be mistaken," Seph replied. "I am Seph Jones, an assistant manager at the Northern Governance Station."

"I am aware," replied the man, his hawkish eyes locking onto him. "I am also aware that you have been charged with identity fraud. A serious offence."

"But I am not impersonating anyone, sir."

What little tepid friendliness the man had evaporated, and he stepped towards the black bars.

"I'd never expected such an unassuming man to be Michael's son," the stranger sighed, looking down at him.

"That's because I am not-"

"The family calling cards do not lie, Mr Farrow... especially one calibrated using both Michael and his father's remains. It was your blood that turned it blue."

Despite the lack of anger, the man's words punctured him like nails. He had even seen the officers bending over the piece of paper as they dragged him away. He could not refute evidence like that.

"What will happen to me?"

The man regarded him, and he could almost feel the slick of a knife being sharpened.

"Do I need to tell you? I'm sure you can use your imagination."

Seph's throat squeezed shut. He'd be murdered. Anyone with sense would declare that he die for the lives lost and the livelihoods ruined in the magical fallout from Lord Farrow's selfish stunt. He could almost imagine the terror of the mob. Like the fear when he'd been caught stealing in the market, but worse... much worse. People would enjoy seeing him hang.

"Yes, you could be put to death..." the man said. "But that would set a bad precedent." The man's lips twitched up into a smile. "Do you really think nobility would remain as powerful if we execute one of our own? With public opinion as low as it is, destroying that untouchability would be a grave error."

The noble regarded him. "It would be a mistake to execute a man with as much potential as you. But I fear your reputation cannot be ignored. What do you think should be done, Mr Farrow?"

Seph had no idea what he meant by potential, but this man must have some sway on his fate if he was asking him such questions. He breathed in, "I am afraid I do not know, sir."

"Yes... that would be wise," replied the man, and Seph blinked at him in confusion. "I am sure I can persuade the director of the Northern Governance Station to conceal your identity. Outside a small circle, no

one knows the face of the infamous Joseph Farrow. Alderbrush is a large city, so I'm sure you will go mostly ignored for the time being."

Seph's heart quickened as the walls closed in. His future was tearing itself away from his grasp.

"Your charges for identity fraud will be dropped, and this summer, you shall continue working as you have been whilst I think of what to do with you. Be sure to expect another audience with me in the future."

His stomach sank. An audience? Which of the noble houses had the authority to decide his fate? There could be only one. He lowered himself down to one knee. "Your... Majesty?" he asked, looking up at the noble.

"So it seems my secret visit is no longer a secret." Seph fearfully lowered his head. "You need not worry, Mr Farrow. You did not know who you were protesting with."

Seph stared up at the King; a person picked by noble consensus to rule the Noble's Kingdom. If he saw him as Joseph Farrow then he was certain that everyone else would.

"Your Majesty..." It shamed him to hear how his voice trembled. "What should I do?"

The King's steely blue eyes softened slightly. "I cannot say Joseph, but whatever you do with your life, it is what you make of it. Only you can decide that. Till we next meet, Mr Farrow. Farewell."

Seph watched the King turn from his cell and walk back down the corridor, the metal door clanging shut with finality. Was there so little he could hope for? To live in fear under a cursed name? So long to the life he had built up, and to all he had ever wanted.

"That is not my name..." he said, knowing that no one would listen, and warm tears ran down his face as he mourned the name that was taken from him.

## 2- The Royal Assembly

Erika Almer stared gloomily at the rain drops sliding down the window of her travelling carriage and sighed, wishing they would never arrive. She'd rather stay home than watch those pompous nobles talk, even if her standing did obligate her to go. The darkening sky was filled with grey clouds and brown leaves swirled in the wet autumn wind. Perhaps the cold would discourage those nobles from gossiping too much.

The door opened, and her manservant hopped into the coach after checking their progress with the soggy coach driver outside.

"We should arrive in Stornthurrow by night fall, my Lady," announced her butler, returning to his seat opposite.

"Marvellous, Marth," Erika replied, sagging against the window.

Marth looked at her and wiped the drops off his flat cap. "You've never been keen on the royal assembly, have you?" he asked.

"Yes, I am definitely not keen," she said. "Do you know what it's like? Hearing them talk about what the country's budget is being spent on,

but they're really only disagreeing because that so-and-so's son called their daughter ugly."

"They can't be that petty-"

"You'd be surprised!" she said. "Back when some of the sons were still trying to win my favour, the atmosphere was positively awful. I had so many mothers wishing that I die when I kept turning their son's invitations down."

Marth snorted. Nobles kept their magic a secret from each other. But if they had known, they definitely would have been very careful about what they thought and felt around Lady Erika.

"What are you going to do about marriage anyway?" he asked as the coach pulled off.

"I definitely won't be marrying any of them! All they wanted was my surname." She paused watching a tree pass by. "It'd be better if I didn't marry at all, not that I have a choice in the matter..."

"No one's telling you to. Even if you aren't a recognized son, you could still change the rules and become the house head; unless objections from ghosts matter to you."

"I have absolutely no ambition to be elected as the next ruler, and father never recognized me, so that's that!" she replied sourly.

Only the faint sounds of crunching gravel could be heard as they both thought of possible solutions to Erika's marriage problem. Her thoughts intermingled with the stewing misery of the wet coach driver outside, who complained bitterly to himself about his wet neck as the light faded.

The cold drops were still pattering against the windows, as the coach rolled up to the noble residency's lit entrance. The door was opened by

a porter, and Marth guided Erika down the coach steps, armed with an umbrella.

"Thank you for your service, coachman," she called out sweetly over the wind, and she felt the driver's gloom let up slightly as she passed under the building's eaves.

"*Was he that miserable?*" thought Marth pointedly, glancing at her and closing the umbrella.

"*Yes, he was complaining the whole journey,*" she thought back. The raindrops on her midnight blue dress glittered under the oil lamps that lined the spacious entrance hall.

"*Isn't the white trim a bit much?*" asked Marth as the porter led them to the Almer quarters.

"*I find it quite sensible garb for a journey. Why are you not physically talking to me?*"

"*Would the nobles and their humble servants expect to hear Lady Erika discussing fashion sense with her butler?*" he asked. She rolled her eyes as they silently walked through a large visitor's lounge, furnished with slick dark wood. Of course not.