

A Matter of Persuasion

Though I was back in Regillus to meet with crown prince Marcus and the king, I had a certain image I'd been fostering for some time now. And in the spirit of staying true to that image, I put off visiting them.

Instead, I went shopping.

Jewelry, clothing, a few household goods, gifts for friends and relatives I had not seen in quite some time. A lot of shopping. Two days and a carriage-full worth of it. After that, I went to a number of social events. A couple of parties, a charity ball, and an opera. All so I could be seen being a socialite. On the last day of this, I toured the city and donated a box of gold to six different charities. Gave me a nice, warm, glowy feeling.

With that out of the way, I finally turned to the Castellum Regillia. The great ancestral home of House Diamond. Riding Juji up Mulvius Mons, I paused before each of the great temples to the Creator, the Sacred Angels, and the Creator's Apprentices, saying a brief prayer at each. Continuing on up the mountain, I was saluted by members of the Legion Prime who guarded the road up to the castellum. Smiling, I rode on to what probably should have felt like home but didn't.

At the stables they took Juji without a word. Entering the castellum through the stable entrance, I made my way up the stairs and around to my little suite of rooms. According to the spell on my door, no one had been through since the last time I'd visited. Stepping inside, I found the room just the way I'd left it. That last freshening spell I'd purchased had been worth every silver. Sitting down in one of my chairs, I wished for a window as I always did here. My suite was in the center of the royal residences. Aunt Flosia had managed to get one of the few balconies in her suite down the hall. The small twinge of jealousy I felt at this was silly enough to make me laugh. I was never here long enough to need a window, much less a balcony. Still, with a wave of my hand and a murmured incantation, I floated my transport mirror in front of me and flipped through, looking at various worlds and world fragments.

A lovely, color-filled sunset. Sunlight striking brilliant sparks from a crystal blue ocean. A volcano spewing lava high into the sky. All pretty but none deeply interesting.

Changing the runes again, the mirror suddenly showed a rather ordinary looking world. The trees had a mottled red and green foliage. The sky would be almost green in the morning and just before sundown while predominately a pale blue during the day. At night almost a dozen moons ensured the area always had a decent amount of light. A pair of rivers wound through the red and green forest with a few tree-covered hills scattered about for variety.

And floating high over this great forest was a smallish castle. Beneath the castle was a very large, single piece of rock. The top of the mountain from which the owner had plucked the castle. Why have a castle if you can't have the basement, the owner had asked me? At the time I hadn't really understood the answer or that the answer was really a clue into how the interesting fellow thought. With a gesture the view zoomed in on the castle. Was anyone home? Did I honestly want to know? It had been a long time since I'd spoken with Silarion. Perhaps too long. Still, I zoomed in further.

There he was, a handsome man sitting at a table eating while reading a book. How like him. Despite myself, I smiled. And found him suddenly looking at me.

"Clarissa?" he asked and with a snap of power I shut down the mirror. I sometimes forgot

just how sensitive Silarion was. There were very few people who could tell when they were being scryed upon. Fewer still who could determine so quickly who was doing the scrying. Feeling silly and a little childish, I cleaned up and dressed early for dinner.

On my way downstairs I learned that tonight a formal dinner was being held. A pair of ambassadors would be joining us at table as well as a visiting prince and an allied general. However, I was much more interested in just which of the family members might be in attendance tonight. Neither of the upstairs maids I'd spoken with had known. Seeing an older man in house livery crossing the room, I walked partway towards him and waved him over.

"How can I be of assistance Duchess Clarissa?" Despite the fact I didn't know this man, I felt no surprise that he knew who I was. The staff here was excellent. Always had been.

"My good fellow, I need to know which of the family will be attending dinner tonight. Could I prevail upon you to go ask the mistress of the kitchens for me?"

"Why certainly, milady. I'll be but a moment." And with that he bowed and walked quickly towards the kitchens.

A few minutes later, he returned. "The king will not be attending tonight. Crown Prince Marcus will sit at table's head tonight. His wife Cloelia will be at his side. Their sons Dayfid and Vance will join them." Why couldn't it have been Elmer instead of Vance? The fellow continued, "Duke Foster will also be attending as will Princess Winter. I believe that's all the royal family who will be attending. A place is being set for you as well. The mistress of the kitchens would greatly appreciate knowing if you will be in attendance or not."

"Please inform her that I will be dining with the family this evening. And tell her to seat me at least three seats away from Vance," I finished with a frown.

"I am on my way to do so now," he informed me walking away, when he and I reached opposite doorways, he stopped and said, "You know your grace, just because you're in a mostly magical world, doesn't mean you can't learn more about technology while you're here." And with that he stepped on through the door and out of sight. After standing there in stunned surprise for a moment, I continued on my way. That had been no ordinary serving man. It was actually my great grandfather Titus. He'd said he'd be here. Obviously he'd kept his word.

Vance had apparently bribed the mistress of the kitchens as it turned out his seat was right beside me. That or the old man had deliberately misheard my seating request. I planned to find out later.

"So how did the negotiations go with the Hierarch of Crovice?" my annoying cousin asked as we ate a delicious salad of crisp, uncooked vegetables in a slightly spicy sauce.

"It was a disaster," I replied, not having to put forth any effort to sound frustrated. "Why did you have to go and get sick?"

He laughed aloud, a sound almost unnoticed in the babble of voices from up and down the large table. Unless tensions were particularly high, even the formal dinners here tended to be filled with conversation. "Just between you and me, father wanted you to work on your diplomacy skills. I wasn't actually sick. Angels spinning, I wasn't even near there." I turned a dark look upon the head of the table, prince Marcus, who completely failed to notice. Vance didn't and wouldn't know the true reason why I'd been called to those negotiations.

"I had other things I was doing," I growled as the kitchen staff took the salad bowls away.

“Things I did not need to leave in order to badly play diplomat.”

“Yeah, that’s father for you. Duty this, and duty that, and duty for everyone!” Despite myself, I laughed. “I think,” he whispered, “That he wants to get you more involved with the official workings of the kingdom.”

“Technically we’re an empire now,” I muttered as a small, honey-glazed fish fillet was placed before me.

“And yet everyone across the worlds refers to us as the *kingdom* of Regillus,” he grinned. “Spreading that is a discreet little part of my job. Helps to make us seem a bit less threatening in the right places. Keeps the common people comfortable trading with us. In more hostile regions, the message changes a bit as you might well imagine.”

“Yes,” I agreed, swallowing a bite of delicious fish. “I suppose I can imagine.”

“How long you gonna be here this time? You never seem to stay here at the castle for more than a few days.”

“A few days,” I replied with a quirked smile.

“So,” he grinned, eating his own fish. “You going to let him?”

“Let who do what?” I asked. The wine was excellent. Complemented both the fish and the glaze.

“Are you going to allow father to drag you into the family business of governing worlds?”

“No, I think not. I have quite enough to do as matters stand. And considering how the Crovice treaty worked out, I rather doubt the crown prince will be wanting me to negotiate on his behalf in the future.”

Vance laughed again. “Considering the current state of the family coffers, I believe we can stand to have a few disastrous trade agreements drawn up while you learn.”

“That’s not going to happen because I’m not going to be doing any more trade negotiations. I’ll leave that up to the experts such as yourself.”

“Maybe you will,” he replied. He looked to his father before returning his gaze to me, “And then again maybe you won’t. It’s all part of the game Clarissa.” In Vance’s eyes, everything was part of the game. The only matters which I knew of that he took seriously were kingdom trade negotiations and trying to get me into his bed. I had no interest in either.

For a long while I managed to talk to Aunt Winter and General Donglass. The general was an interesting man. Aunt Winter had already reached the point where she was barely polite to the others at the table. I was an exception because she liked me. However, people wore on her nerves quickly and it was obvious she yearned to return to the solitude in which she normally immersed herself.

Later in the meal, Vance whispered, “Meet me in the library when the clock strikes ten.”

“I think not,” I breathed just loud enough for him to hear, taking another bite of the excellent prickleberry dessert.

He managed to catch my eye a moment later. “This is serious,” he said in a bare whisper with a quick cutting of his eyes to surreptitiously check where his father’s attention was currently focused.

I had the impression that something was up. “Very well,” I replied under my breath. If this was a trick I’d make him pay for it most dearly.

When the clock struck ten, I found myself the only person in the library. Strolling through

isles and isles of books, I felt myself smile despite the fact that I'd apparently been tricked. I'd always like the library. Had passed many hours here reading on any number of topics. The house library even a rudimentary magic section. However, the better books on magic were in various family member's private collections. A faint noise caused me to move towards the back wall.

There, Vance stood just behind the secret door waving me over. With a dark frown, I walked over to the partly open door. "Hurry up and close it behind you," he whispered before stepping away inside the hidden passageway. The first warning sparks of anger rose within me as I followed him, closing the door as he'd requested. Using a magic lamp that only lit the areas he wanted lit (apparently right in front of him at this moment), he led the way through the secret passage to the secret meeting room.

"You remember when I first showed you this room?" he asked, setting the lamp on the table where it now lit the whole room.

"Yes," I replied with a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. "You kissed me rather unexpectedly."

He laughed quietly, "Yeah, and then you dislocated my jaw."

"Yes," I agreed with the same smile.

"Look, I wasn't joking at the table. There's something you need to know but it has to be kept quiet. Absolutely quiet."

"Then this is not the best of places for us to hold this discussion. This room is known to too many who might eavesdrop," I replied, trying to judge whether he was telling the truth or not.

"No. One of the gifts I got from the Machine allows me to always know if someone is listening in or not. No one is now. Which has always made me wonder just what all powers you got from the Machine other than your talent with magic. Sam mentioned that you'd gained the ability to turn into a wolf. That's pretty cool. What else?" And before I had a chance to tell him it was none of his business, he continued, "Speaking of Sammie, something's up with her. She wouldn't admit to anything but something's going on. If you get a chance, see if you can find out. As you well know she has a tendency to get in over her head."

"Did you drag me down here just to ask me to spy on our cousin?" I asked on the verge of being truly angry.

"No," he replied seriously, looking around before giving himself a shake. "Talia's here. In the castle. Right now."

"What?!"

"Yeah, that was my reaction too," he sighed. "She's here for some sort of amnesty negotiations. I thought you should know since she's never liked you. It would be one nasty surprise to walk around a corner and find her there unexpected."

Cursing, I walked over and sat at the table.

"Angels singing bawdy tavern songs but you're even more sexy when you talk dirty," he said with a huge grin. Angels singing bawdy tavern songs? I hadn't heard that one before but the humor wasn't enough to take my mind off Aunt Talia. She still blamed King Lawrence for her father's death. That almost certainly hadn't changed. Vance was correct though. She had never liked me for whatever reason and that most likely had not changed either. No doubt about it, she was up to something. But what?

"Why is she really here?" I asked myself aloud.

Vance answered, "I doubt she's suddenly given up on her theory that Uncle Numitine was murdered by Grandfather. Which left me asking the same question you just posed." After sitting

there a while, I came up with no ideas. It suddenly occurred to me that I was starting to get sleepy. Standing, I walked out the room's other door. Vance followed with the lantern.

"Can you see in the dark or were you just expecting me to follow with the lamp?" he asked.

Rather an answer I put my foot on the first metal rung of the ladder leading up. "I'm going to go talk to Winter for a while and then get some sleep. Maybe tomorrow will bring some more concrete information."

"Maybe. Hopefully," he frowned.

"Thank you Vance. You were right. It was important and I certainly wanted to know." And with that I began climbing the ladder. On the third floor there was a landing. The room outside the landing held a bit of cabinetry that opened up into the ladder well. That's where I'd exit.

"Be careful," my cousin whispered from below. "Oh, and I simply must compliment you on your choice of panties this evening. The slip is nice as well as it does nothing to block the view of the panties," he said, apparently looking up my dress. Gritting my teeth, I thought about dropping him an unpleasant spell for that comment, but didn't because the news he'd brought had been truly important. And despite my annoyance, I wanted him to bring me future news of equal or greater significance. Shaking my head with a small, darkly rueful smile on my lips, I climbed.

By the time I reached the third floor landing, the light below me had gone.

Last night my visit to see Aunt Winter had been short. After speaking only a few minutes, she had to leave on some undisclosed mission. Walking back to my rooms, it occurred to me that the family might be watching Talia. If so, Winter would be a good choice to do so. She was an expert sorceress and like her name suggested she had power over all things cold and snowy. Her mother was queen of Nordland and supposing that near-immortal lady ever passed on, Winter would take the throne. Yes, if ever there was to be a buffer between one's scary Aunt Talia and oneself, Winter would be a good person to have there.

My sleep had been troubled, so this morning began with me not feeling my best. I decided to start with a bath. That almost always either woke me up or put me to sleep. Either would be fine as it was still early.

While soaking, I surveyed the shower conversion kit I'd purchased. The components lay conveniently right next to the tub. A surround so as not to flood the entire suite. I'd splurged and the surround showed an illusionary rain forest grotto with limited motion. Plants waving in the breeze, water from the grotto's waterfall dropping and misting, that sort of thing. It came with an adjustable stand for a showerhead that would attach to one end of the tub. An elemental drain to be mounted however high one wanted the water to get came with the kit (my tub already had one so I might try to find some other use for that.). And of course the elemental feed for the showerhead with hot and cold flow controls. It certainly looked easy enough to install. All I had to do now was find a few minutes in which to do it.

Still soaking in the slowly cooling water, my thoughts returned to Talia. Why had my crazy aunt returned? Maybe she really was interested in amnesty. But I doubted it. Had something happened to cause her to seek sanctuary. Again, doubtful. Talia was probably the most powerful sorceress in all the worlds of the Maze. Could she be here to see or perhaps to try to kill someone? King Lawrence immediately came to mind for that. However, I doubted Talia would try anything here. Grandfather was keeper of the Great Machine. And as such he had instant access to powers

almost unimaginable. No, if Aunt Talia hoped to kill the king, she would try to do it as far from Regillus as possible.

Perhaps she simply wanted to pick up something from her old rooms. Despite the fact she'd been cast out long ago, her old rooms remained as she'd left them. Or... she could be looking for *something*. Like a certain workshop that I'd opened not too terribly long ago. That last held a certain feeling of rightness and I felt sure that was it. And if there was anyone who did not need to be in Titus' workshop, it was crazy Aunt Talia.

The house dungeons were poorly lit as always. There were actually some holding cells located down here but they were some distance away. This portion of the dungeon consisted mostly of old storage rooms and such. And corridors. Probably leagues worth of them. Just how many floors the dungeons went down remained unknown as well. So far as I knew, no map had ever been made of the labyrinthine tunnels and passageways beneath the Castellum Regillia.

Walking along, I came to the door of great grandfather Titus' workshop. And I kept on walking as though I neither knew what it was nor that it was anything other than another store room. The door had been closed. To any not in the know on how to get in, that would make the door more effectively locked than anything I had at my disposal. Did Talia know how to get inside? She'd been one of Titus' apprentices after all. When had the lock on the door been created? Before or after she'd left?

Stepping around the corner I stopped dead in my tracks. Talia stood in the center of the hallway with her arms folded beneath her breasts. She stood looking at me as though she'd caught me in the act of doing something perverted. Acting from a long ago learned instinct for self-preservation, I quickly emptied my face of expression and stilled my thoughts until they became as quiet as a reflecting pool.

"Well, well," she murmured. "What do we have here? It looks like one of my cousin's dolls has come to life and wandered down into the dungeons. What do you down here, little porcelain doll? What brings you to wander these dark, old halls?" Despite the fact that she was a good four inches shorter than me and probably fifteen pounds lighter, she intimidated the hell out of me. Still, I tried not to let her see it. Sharks of all types love blood in the water. And some ogres can smell fear.

"One could ask the same of you Aunt Talia? I'd heard you were here somewhere. Didn't see you at dinner or anywhere else above."

"Do you seriously want me to believe you came down here looking for me?" she demanded angrily.

"I don't particularly want you to believe anything. But if you are questioning my honesty, ask yourself this... do I look surprised to see you?"

She stood there for a moment studying me. I concentrated on breathing slowly and evenly and on not sweating. Eventually, she walked forward and grabbed my hand.

"It is so good to see you again my niece," she lied. "Tell me, what brings you here?" She held my hand not as a warm greeting but to better discern whether I answered with the truth. There was no true warmth to be found within Talia. Her heart had long ago frozen over much harder than any of Winter's icy lakes.

"Shopping," I replied with a smile and a small dose of truth, taking her hand as I started

leading us further down the hall. “There’s simply no place like Regillus in which to find anything one needs.”

Jerking her hand away, she stopped. Taking a couple of steps further, I too halted and looked back at her with a slight confusion on my face.

“Do you think to play me for a fool?” she asked in a near hissing whisper. “I know there’s more to you than just the simpering git you pretend on occasion.”

“There are many things that point you out as just that,” I replied as I once more remembered just how much I disliked this woman even if she did scare me greatly. “Your unreasoning and delusional accusation against my grandfather as well as your relentless and unyielding pursuit of a vengeance based on that hollow accusation are just the top two on that list. However, far be it from me to try to play you for a fool. No matter how much I might personally dislike you, I respect you enough that I would not attempt to do so.”

She barked an angry laugh, “You say you respect me in the same breath as you insult me. You are truly your father’s daughter. One of them anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

“Go away little doll,” she commanded in a voice that shimmered the air with power. “I tire of your presence. For the moment. We’ll speak again though. Soon.” And I found myself walking around the corridors and back up the stairs. Only when I was on the next level up did the magic-induced compulsion weaken enough for me to break it. And she hadn’t even been trying hard.

Had she been trying to hurt me with her words because I’d insulted her? Could I actually have brothers or sisters out there? Daddy had certainly never mentioned it... if it was true. Once mother had gone crazy, he’d certainly made himself popular among the women. In Edotoma he’d been discreet. Not so much here in Regillus and not at all in quite a few of the RTC worlds. So there had certainly been plenty of opportunities. But our family wasn’t as prolific as some. Considering how long lived we were, that was probably to prevent us from overpopulating our end of the Maze. Could it be true? And if so, how had Talia found out?

Returning to my rooms, I decided it had most likely been a statement devised to bother me and nothing more. Still, I’d eventually ask Daddy about it. But not tonight. Tonight, I’d cast a minor sleep spell on myself or I’d lay awake revisiting that encounter with Talia to all hours.

“What were you doing in the dungeons last night?” Granpa asked as we rode across a green glade near the summit of the mountain.

“Running into Aunt Talia as it turns out,” I replied with a frown. Reigning in, we walked the horses to the small grove of apple trees at the end of the open grass.

“Yes, I know about that,” he responded irritably. “I want to know what you were doing there in the first place.”

“So did she,” I said with narrowed eyes. “In fact, she was quite insistent when she asked.”

“I know that. And that’s why I want to know as well.”

“Then I will give you the same answer I gave her,” I told him.

“Which is?” he asked as I dismounted. He did so as well but more slowly.

“What a lovely view we have here. You can see all the way down into the great forest from here. There also appears to be a small armada of trade ships coming in by sea. They seem so small from this high up.”

Granpa was quiet a while as he took in the view and probably watched me as well.

At last he said, "You wanted to speak with me about something?"

"And with Prince Marcus as well. However, he had other duties."

"What's the topic, granddaughter mine?" he asked warily. Or perhaps it was wearily.

After casting my privacy spell, I began quietly, "I have a new assistant. A girl I saved some time ago. She's been through the Chateau Arcanorum and is now enrolled with me at a university on Kephlon. Here lately I've been giving her assignments. Working for my company. Meeting people for me. Preparing parties and other social gatherings and such. Now she's helping run a rebellion in Righteous for me. In fact, with me gone, it's more accurate to say she's running the war."

"Yes," he smiled. "I've heard about that."

"I suspected you might have," I replied with a smile of my own which faded. "She saved my life recently. While hunting, I got shot. In the process of keeping me alive, she figured out what I do on occasion."

"I see," he replied, looking out over the green side of the mountain.

"I would like unofficial permission to keep her in the know. She'll never know who I work for. Only that I sometimes work."

"Why do you want her to know this?" he asked, turning his eyes to mine.

"Because she's my friend. She's become the younger sister I never had." Remembering Talia's words, I again wondered about just how true that might be. "And it would be nice to have help from someone I don't have to constantly worry about learning too much."

"I'll consider it. Bring her around, I want to meet her."

"Alright."

"So what led you to war against the Unrighteous?"

"I wanted to show Max why it was sometimes necessary to kill people."

"Ahh. A world... a group of worlds in fact, filled with prime examples. Judging from your request, I take it she now has a much deeper understanding of the reality of evil versus the theories on the darkness within?"

"Indeed, a most clear understanding."

"I always worried that you'd be lonely in your choice of professions, my dear," he said, once again looking out away from the mountain.

"I never was until I met her. And slowly I came to realize that I had pushed most people away from me. I've distanced myself from my family and I have few real friends. And the situation Max now finds herself in is exactly why I pushed most of those friends away. I didn't want them to learn too much."

"And now this one has. Very well, bring her to dinner in a few weeks or so. Talia will be gone by then. Until then, keep yourself away from here. I'll not risk you running into her again. Not if I can help it." He pointed down at the harbor, "That ship is on it's way to Tarino. From there you can hop over to Edotoma and from there anywhere you wish. Anywhere other than here that is." Before I had a chance to ask any questions, I found myself standing next to Juji in the hold of a ship. Shaking my head, I led him into one of the temporary stables and then made my way upstairs to explain to the captain that his ship was going to be one horse and one woman heavier than expected on this passage to Tarino.