

## Family

“She’s certainly a cute one,” Uncle Marcus told me as the two of us sat sharing a bottle of wine out in the gardens. “Are you sleeping with her?”

“What?” I asked unsure of what I’d just heard him ask. My cousin Elmer I could certainly picture asking such a question... if I’d heard correctly. Probably my Uncle Lloyd as well. Then again, Elmer was Marcus’ son. I supposed he had to get it from somewhere.

“Are you lovers?” he asked bluntly. “Do the two of you have sexual intercourse?”

“No! Not that it’s any of your business. What kind of question is that?!”

“One I felt to be both nosy and pertinent. You want to bring her in on intimate secrets of the Order of the Black Diamond. My chief focus as a member of that order is protecting those secrets. So, if I am to share these secrets with anyone, I want to know as much as possible about them.”

“I appreciate your caution but please limit your curiosity to matters truly pertinent to the matter at hand.”

“Very well. Where is she from?” he asked when a young boy bearing a scroll ran into the area, crashing my privacy spell.

“Prince Marcus!” the boy of eight or nine gasped. “This is for you. It’s from Seneschal Cardoso. He says it’s important.”

The crown prince quickly read over the contents of the scroll and stood up. “It would appear we’ll have to continue our discussion later. Right now, duty calls.” Turning back to the loudly breathing boy, he said, “Lead me to the good seneschal. At a more sedate pace if you will.” And with that the two of them walked across the gardens and into the castle. In the distance a person riding up the road towards the castle caught my eye. Smiling, I walked into the castle and began quickly making my way towards the stable entrance.

“Daddy!” I called happily, quickly closing the distance to give him a quick hug. “It’s so good to see you again! It’s been far too long.”

“Indeed sweetheart, it certainly has,” he said, adjusting the saddlebags over his shoulder. “Tell me what you’ve been up to lately.”

“I’m here with Max to introduce her to the king,” I told him as we started walking around towards the grand stairway. “We successfully sponsored a revolution down in Righteous. My doctoral studies are going well. At this pace I’ll get my license to practice medicine in another year and a half. Dyle experienced another fifty percent growth burst which puts it on over one hundred worlds now. I think that’s about it. How about you? What kind of trouble have you been getting into lately?”

“Well, let’s see. Hmm... I had to deal with some pirates who’d set up a little colony not too far from Tas Vibbon. Got into a little tiff with Darkenhold. It was a rather largish castle on the world of Hassporr. It was run by an undead warlord who’s now fully dead. Left me with a rather unpleasant, flesh-eating disease though so I had to come walk the Machine to get rid of it. Did that the other day. Saw Jordana a few days before the whole Darkenhold thing. She said to tell you ‘hello’.”

“As in my cousin Jordana? Aunt Helena’s daughter?” At daddy’s nod, I raised an eyebrow. “Well. It’s certainly been a while since I’ve seen or heard word of her. How’s she doing?”

“She seemed to be doing well enough. Apparently she’s been traveling with a band of musicians.”

“Ah! Perhaps she’s finally found her niche,” I suggested neutrally. I didn’t particularly care for Jordana but didn’t particularly dislike her either. Not much anyway.

“Perhaps,” my father agreed easily. “So, where is Maxine?”

“She’s getting her hair done,” I replied with a smile. “Grandfather decided to hold a grand ball. Tomorrow night in fact.”

“Did he now?” Daddy murmured. “Now isn’t that interesting?”

“How so?”

“Dad never holds social events for the reasons others do. He’ll have at least one alternate motivation for having it. I’ll see you at dinner sweetheart. I’m going to go talk to some people,” he said, giving me a quick peck on the cheek before heading off towards the castle offices.

It had been too long since I’d last spent much time in Regillus. I’d forgotten just how much intrigue went on here. Not smart Clarissa. Not smart at all.

Winter had gone back to Frosthaven last week. Too bad. I’d not only have liked to have introduced her to Max but hearing her thoughts on why the ball was being thrown might have been illuminating. Which brought to mind the question: who was here? I’d been rather preoccupied when Max and I had arrived yesterday and hadn’t bothered to find out which family members were here; otherwise I’d have known Daddy was already in town. Another case of not using my brain.

Hmm. Which meant that Daddy hadn’t already known about the ball. And that suggested that it hadn’t been until today that Grandfather decided to hold it. What had happened to trigger that decision? Very possibly my arrival. But as Daddy had suggested, there were almost certainly other matters to be considered.

Walking with a purpose, I found a chambermaid with whom I got along well. Inquiring into family, I got quite an earful. Daddy was here and had been for three days. He and Marcus had gotten drunk two nights ago and had gone on a late-night singing tour of the third floor apartment corridors. Glad I’d missed that. Drunk, the two of them would have required a wagon to carry a tune. A large wagon. Uncle Linden was here as well, making one of his rare appearances. I didn’t know him well enough to really know what this might portend. Perhaps he was here to find out about Talia’s recent visit. Perhaps not.

Stepping into one of the many studies, I sat down to think about some of the other family members currently in residence. The top of that list featured Aunt Helena and most of her family. Her husband Turnus as well as Jordana and Danni. The lot of them had arrived less than an hour ago. Perhaps they were simply here for the ball. But I doubted it. Aunt Helena prized power. Not so much that it had made her crazy but enough that her personal empire spanned over a dozen worlds and she’d given more to members of her immediate family. Grandfather Lawrence had given her the first world. Marrying Turnus had gotten her the second. The rest she’d acquired through trade, trickery, and careful planning. So far as I knew, she’d spilled not a drop in so doing. She was a formidable woman. Our relationship was cordial and despite knowing a good deal about her, I still didn’t know her very well.

Turnus was a nice enough fellow. He’d been a warrior in his younger days and to this day remained smitten with Helena. Danni I got along with well enough. Partly due to the fact that in our youths neither of us had liked her older sister Jordana. When I’d first come to Regillus, I’d been paired with Jordana as we were close to the same age. At the time I’d admittedly been rather full of myself. I was good with weapons and fighting and knew it. But I’d never fenced. Fencing was not and still is not an Edotoman sport. Jordana had

embarrassed me in front of a number of young nobles. That was just the beginning of us not getting along well at all. And despite myself, I have been known to bear a grudge or two.

And that set me to thinking... was this an grievance worth carrying? Those awkward teenage years had been long ago and that's when most of our... issues... developed or otherwise occurred. Perhaps it was time to set my grudges against Jordana aside. Perhaps.

Regardless, neither of Aunt Helena's younger daughters had shown any inclination to follow in her footsteps. Daddy had said that Jordana had found music. I sincerely doubted that Aunt Helena approved of that. To her music was a peasant art. So far as I knew Danni was still in school. And had been for the last twenty or so years. She traveled from university to university, studying whatever it was that caught her fancy. She had a list of degrees as long as my arm. Last time I'd seen her, she'd been splitting her attention between studying astrology and a prince of the Familia Magica. If they got married or otherwise had children, it would be the first blood tie between the great houses of Diamond and the FM, as we often referred to them for brevity's sake. If.

Uncle Victor would also be here. The legendary general and warrior himself. A fairly recent rumor held that he secretly had a son whom he refused to bring to Regillus. I'd heard this rumor before. Not for the last time I wondered if there was any truth to it. And if so, why?

Uncle Lloyd and his daughter Samantha were due in sometime tomorrow morning. The portion of the Silvani where they lived most of the time was only a few hours ride from here. Lloyd was a big, self-sufficient man. A good man. Samantha was about as wild as you could get. In pretty much any way there was to be wild. I was looking forward to seeing both of them again.

The ball was a grand, formal affair. It capped off a day of touring the castle with Max interspersed with meeting the occasional family member. During one of our breaks, I'd mirrored Flosia. She was doing well and knew about the ball. Unfortunately, she had other business at hand and couldn't make it.

That evening the grand ball commenced. An orchestra played in one end of the huge room while people mingled and snacked around the edges and in the balconies. As Max danced with Daddy beneath the center of the domed chamber, the serving man, who was actually my great grandfather in disguise, walked over and offered me a glass of sparkling wine from the tray he bore.

"I used to enjoy these affairs when I was younger," I told him, taking one of the fluted glasses. "Now, I suppose I've grown cynical. My enjoyment is tempered with knowledge of just how many enemies we have and how strong they are. I'm almost to the point where I'm just waiting for someone to get murdered."

"A most unlikely circumstance, Lady Diamond," he replied quietly. "Too many people... even people in very high places... fear the tenacity and resourcefulness of your family. To my knowledge there has never been a murder committed in this castle that has not been punished accordingly. And in many cases the appropriate punishment was... shall we say... memorable? No, I think you can safely enjoy the ball without fear of murder. Backstabbing... that's another story."

That drew a quiet, surprised laugh. "Lady Diamond. I suppose this is the one place where I cannot escape that name. Clarissa Dyle is a name that does not inspire fear or immediate thoughts of treachery. In many ways I prefer it to my real name."

"There is much more to being a Diamond than reputation. Reputation is simply the wave that comes before the boat. That wave bears no true impression of the boat that follows. You are a ship of your own choosing. Do not let the spray before you determine your course. Continue being who you are. Remember that a name is simply a label. And labels may be removed at one's leisure. Now if you'll excuse me my lady, I must return to my serving tasks." And with that he disappeared into the crowd.

"I hate it when the servants think they're good enough to talk to their betters," one of our royal guests from offworld informed me. She was a princess from one of the richer worlds. More than that, she was a fool.

"And I become quite annoyed when people mistake a high social status for being better than their

fellow man,” I replied with a smile before turning away from her. For the next several minutes of mingling, I reminded myself that punching her in the nose would not have been lady-like. Satisfying, but not becoming of a lady. And in this world I wanted everyone to think I was a lady.

For the next several minutes I immersed myself in talking to kings and queens, knights and ladies, as well as a number of other interesting people who’d been invited. I had a brief chat with a woman working for the largest newspaper in Regillus, spoke with a hero of the realm (he’d single-handedly prevented a manticores attack on a rural school), a business associate whose company supplied Dyle Alchemical with a lot of its raw components, and not least one of the stars of the local opera scene. Eventually, I found Samantha.

My cousin was surrounded by a number of young men who seemed to hang on her every word. She seemed to be telling a story about hunting some large and dangerous creature as well as flirting with them all. A flick of the hair she wore loose over one shoulder. Batting of eyes here. At one point she ducked down slightly which due to the tightness of her dress showed her backside and cleavage to good effect. She was definitely enjoying herself pretending not to realize what effect she was having on them.

In what they undoubtedly considered a cruel twist of fate, I breezed in and whispered in her ear. “Sorry boys,” she told them. “My cousin Clarissa and I need to talk. I’m sure I’ll catch up with you later.” And with that we hooked arms and strolled off into the crowd.

Looking over her shoulder via a small makeup mirror, she murmured, “Yes, they look properly devastated.” I couldn’t help but laugh and she hugged me impulsively. Sam had always been a creature of impulse.

“It’s good to see you again!” she told me and we began chatting amiably; catching up as we walked around the periphery of the ballroom. Every so often our talk was interrupted by other visitors who wanted a quick word before we moved by but these were not so much interruptions as they were additions of fuel to our conversational fire.

We paused at the royal table to have a quick word with Grandfather. He seemed to be enjoying the ball and we both thanked him for the excuse to get together. He gave us one of his special Grandfather-to-granddaughter smiles as we excused ourselves and returned to the crowd.

From across the room, the tone of the music changed suddenly. It had become much darker. Moody even. This was mostly due to the influence of the grand harp that had joined in. Someone with talent had joined the orchestra. Sam and I exchanged glances and then moved as one to get a better view. Looking past the guests and family on the dance floor, who had slowed a bit in response to the music, we saw that none other than my cousin Jordana stood playing the grand harp.

“She does have talent,” I whispered. Sam nodded but didn’t otherwise reply.

Jordana slowly increased the tempo as she lightened the mood. The dance floor became much more energetic in turn. Eventually, the set ended to loud applause. My cousin looked happy as she stepped away from the grand harp and bowed slightly. Truly happy. Not smugly satisfied or self-righteous but honestly happy. I couldn’t remember ever seeing her so.

“Jordana!” her mother snapped in a voice that cut through the room like a sword. “Get away from those peasants.” And just like that the mood was shattered. “Come here darling.” It was hard to believe Jordana was my age. I exchanged sad looks with Sam as the music started up again and Jordana made her way to Aunt Helena.

The dance floor cleared with no few looks thrown Aunt Helena’s way. And standing in the center of the floor with a small entourage was the princess who’d made a fool of herself earlier. She seemed to be looking for someone. And upon spotting me, she evidently found her.

“There she is!” she declared. Her group focused their attention upon me.

A short, yet well-dressed fellow stepped forward. “Clarissa Diamond, having given grievous insult to the Princess Serafin, you are hereby challenged to a duel in the name of the princess.” Serafin, yes, that was her name. Serafin Osregard.

Samantha and I exchanged raised eyebrows before I turned my attention back to the silly

people with Serafin. Stepping a few paces out onto the dance floor, I nodded to the fellow.

“Since the princess is a fool on so many levels and was rude enough to our host to interrupt the festivities with this silliness, I will accept her challenge. As the challenged, I shall choose here and now as the time and place. And for the weapon, I choose sorcery.” They seemed much taken aback by this. “All based upon the King’s favor upon this... endeavor.”

“The princess is no sorceress,” the man stammered.

“Then she shouldn’t have challenged a sorceress, should she?”

Grandfather walked out to the edge of the dance floor. “Normally, we do not appreciate having our social events interrupted with this sort of nonsense,” he began ominously. “However, we feel that a public lesson in manners might improve the behavior of some of our guests. Both here and abroad. Lyndon, erect a dueling circle in the center of the room. Please make sure the floor is protected, the workmen who made it are long dead so it would be most difficult to replace or repair.”

“Yes, father,” he replied with a bow.

Max was suddenly at my side. “I’ll second you,” she told me with a fire in her eyes.

“Thank you,” I replied with a smile.

“The Princess Serafin has no skill in the dark arts,” the man announced as Serafin and her little covey of compatriots. “She cannot fight this duel.” Dark arts? These people were even sillier than I’d thought. And that was saying something.

“Then I’ll champion for her,” Jordana announced, walking across the floor to join the princess’ party. There followed a number of gasps from around the room. I found the silence from her mother both interesting and instructive.

“Is she any good?” Max asked in a whisper.

“She used to beat Clarissa with great frequency when they were young,” Sam replied in a similar whisper.

“That was a long time ago,” I said, stepping out onto the floor. More loudly, I said to Serafin, “Your champion and you shall share the same fate.” The foolish young woman went from pale to ashen. To Uncle Linden, I said, “I am ready.”

Jordana stepped up, “As the king has said, it is time for a lesson in manners.” She nodded to Linden as well. As we approached one another, the magic containment circle rose around, over, and beneath us. “This is going to be just like old times,” she told me with a sneer.

“No it’s not,” I replied a bit sadly. She still seemed to be stuck in angst of those long ago days. “You played very well. Your mother’s a fool for not seeing or appreciating your genius.” Several expressions flitted across her face as she tried to figure out if I had somehow insulted her or find some clue to indicate that I was being sarcastic. As I had been totally honest, she momentarily settled on irritated as her dominant facial expression.

Grandfather walked up to the edge of the circle holding out a handkerchief. Without a word he looked upon us for a moment. Without a word he dropped it. The instant it touched the floor Jordana released a barrage of spells.

Energy flowed from her like bullets from a machine gun. Pain, bodily injury, and confusion were just a few of the spells she threw. I simply stood there and waited for her to throw something more serious as I casually negated these minor spells. But the stream of school-level spells continued. Had she stopped studying her sorcery when I’d left school? It seemed unlikely but thus far she’d thrown nothing we hadn’t used on each other in our school days.

“You know,” I told her, “I don’t think Grandfather was talking about either of us when he said a lesson in manners was needed.” And with that I transformed her into a wolf. The stream of spells from her came to an abrupt end. With a little twist of energy I locked her into the form. And

that was that. I nodded to Uncle Linden and he dropped the protective circle.

Growling, Jordana charged at me.

“Don’t be silly,” I told her, halting her attack with a powered gesture. With another gesture, I transformed Serafin. “I told you you’d share her fate.” Her people made protesting noises to which I raised an eyebrow. They closed their mouths and withdrew from the dance floor.

Turning to Max, I said, “You stay here and enjoy the rest of the ball. I’m going to take these two out of here. Neither of them seems very comfortable now.” Indeed, Serafin chose that moment to begin whining.

“Clarissa,” Aunt Helena called, striding across to the edge of the dance floor. “I’ll take Jordana now. Rest assured she’ll be punished appropriately.

“Thank you but no,” I replied. “These two are mine to deal with and I will deal with them in a manner I find appropriate.”

Turning to grandfather, I walked close and said, “Your majesty, it has been a lovely ball. I hope this little incident has done nothing to sour your or your guest’s enjoyment of it. However, my responsibilities now require that I must leave.”

“I don’t think any lasting damage was done,” Grandfather said seriously but with a hint of a smile around his eyes. “Do what you need to do granddaughter. But in the end, I expect to have my other granddaughter returned safe and sound.”

“That is my plan, your majesty.”

“Good. Now give your grandfather a kiss and be on your way.” With a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek, I bid him goodbye. During this time Aunt Helena had moved close.

“Clarissa, I really must insist...”

“Ahh, my daughter Helena,” the king stated loudly, interrupting her. “I’ve been meaning to speak with you for a while now about your bigotry and your apparent disdain for the musical arts. Come sit and we’ll talk.” More loudly he called, “Let the music resume!”

“Come with me,” I told the two wolves as music once more filled the room. Both did so with their tails between their legs.

Daddy, Max, and Sam all met me by the exit.

“That was quite a show,” Daddy said with a little smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you. Sad that it was necessary but I think everything will turn out well enough in the end.”

“What are you going to do now?” Sam asked with a nod at the wolves.

“Yes,” Max began, “Where are we going?”

“You’re going to stay here and enjoy the ball,” I told her with a smile. “Continue to mix, mingle, and show the world just what a wonderful person you are. While you’re at it, please try to teach Daddy to dance without stepping all over his partner’s feet.” This brought laughs from all three of them. Daddy was actually an excellent dancer but he wouldn’t mind me lightening the mood at his expense.

“And these two?” Sam asked.

“I’m not sure about Serafin. But I do have something in mind for Jordana.”

“Something unpleasant?” she asked with a wicked grin.

“Perhaps,” I replied with a quick look back at a sullen looking Aunt Helena, who continued to sit next to grandfather. “I’m going to teach her something she should have learned years ago.”

“What’s that?” Sam asked with a puzzled frown.

“I’m going to teach her to live free.”