

Without a Home

The Castellum Regillia should probably feel more like home to me than it does. I've spent quite a bit of time here in training over the years and in attending courtly functions. My suite of rooms is quite nice by any standard and the staff are efficient and discreet. Still, most of the time I'm here, I feel like I'm visiting relatives instead of living at home.

This morning I'd breakfasted with Aunt Cloe. As wife to Crown Prince Marcus, she was in residence practically year around. She always enjoyed hearing my tales of the outside worlds. I wished I could have gotten her out of the castle, but her husband demanded such extraordinary security for her that it would have been akin to touring with an army. That prospect took all the fun out of a day spent shopping.

However, Aunt Cloe knew what was happening in and around Regillus and especially within the castellum. It turned out that my cousin Samantha had gone through her fifth boyfriend since my last visit. Whatever sort of forest spirit that Uncle Lloyd had bedded to beget Sam, I would have bet she had the attention span of a kitten.

I was further shocked to learn that Aunt Flosia had posed nude for a statue. Evidently that had been some time ago because the statue was currently on display in front of the Regillus Metropolitan Art Museum. I just had to see that with my own eyes. Aunt Flosia had always been bold, but this....

As some thought struck her, Aunt Cloe turned serious. "Your Aunt Talia sent a request to the king for an interview. The arrogant bitch still thinks King Lawrence killed her father. As if the king would kill his own brother!" This news made me uneasy.

"Surely the king didn't grant her request? I'm sure he knows quite well the list of sabotage and murder she's committed in trying to prove that Prince Numitine was murdered by the king." In truth, I knew he was well aware of all of this because I'd delivered a lot of the intel to him myself. However, I couldn't let on that I knew. Politics and acting were a big part of life here. Perhaps that's part of the reason I always feel like a visitor here.

"No, he did not," she stated unequivocally and I sighed in relief. "He did however send a counter-offer to her. He offered to have a regent discuss with her terms for her ceasing her disruptions. I don't think anyone's heard her reply yet."

"That woman is a disaster waiting to happen," I muttered darkly.

"We are quite agreed, my dear," she said, giving me a fond look.

"Clarissa!" Grandad called, stepping off the 'little' throne and walking over to give me a hug that literally lifted me off my feet.

"Hi Grandad," I replied happily, hugging him back and kissing his whiskery cheek. We didn't often get to meet in public. Most of my visits to Regillus were kept secret. Wouldn't do to have people matching up the dates I was in town with the dates certain influential people died. Most of those deaths had appeared quite natural. But not all of them. Best to take no chances.

He took my arm and returned to his seat on the throne. His footman, Arthur, already had a seat waiting for me next to the throne. "Thank you Arthur," I told him with one of my most dazzling

smiles. He blushed and stepped back out of sight.

At the moment court wasn't in session. Despite that, there were numerous people in this good sized room. It was much smaller than the actual throne room as was the king's chair. Hence the term 'little' throne. However, this room saw much more of the truly important business involved in running a kingdom the size of Regillus.

"So," Grandad began, "What brings you back home? What sights have you seen and what have you been up to?"

"I dropped a friend off at the Chateau Arcanorum a few months ago. She's on the four year program. And that got me to thinking that I haven't done much work lately with my own magic. And that led me to think that I hadn't seen my Grandad in far too long. It sounded like a great excuse to come see you. So here I am."

"Sweetheart, you know you don't need an excuse to come visit your dear old grandfather," he replied with a smile.

"I know," I said with a radiant smile of my own. "But I get so busy, if I don't come up with a good excuse for myself, then I tend to get bogged down in the day-to-day stuff. In fact, I'd better go visit Daddy soon. It's been a while since I've seen him, too."

"Well, I certainly understand that all too well," he said with a smirk. "I think giving you a new lesson in Diamond magic would be a wonderful way to spend the afternoon." He turned to Minister Valdenes, "Tell Marcus that the rest of the afternoon is free." Turning to the court, he announced, "You are all dismissed for the day. We'll get to pressing business later. Everyone, enjoy your time off." He then helped me from my seat and escorted me out one of the back doorways.

Grandad and I were always careful to keep our professional and private lives separate. Therefore, there would be absolutely no discussion of killing people or spying on anyone. We did however talk about my travels and such. I confided in him that I wanted to get the little alchemical company away from Daddy but that I wasn't sure how to approach this. He thought about it as we walked down to his magic lab. It filled a large room with tables and all sorts of strange apparatuses. I recognized a few devices but most were so specialized as to remain a mystery. He led me around to a large clear area with a nice throw rug and took a seat on the rug. I promptly sat down across from him.

"What have you come up with so far in the way of possibilities for getting the company away from your father. And of course you're aware that he most likely bought the company for you in the first place?"

"Oh, yes. He knows how interested I am in all things alchemical. I've considered offering to buy it from him but I don't like that." Grandad nodded. "I've also considered offering him a trade for it. Maybe a fleet of ships or something. You know how he likes his ships." Grandad nodded again with a little grin. "I've also considered..."

"Well, go on girl. What did you consider?"

"I've thought about trying to win it in a game of cards," I admitted.

"Perfect!" he laughed, surprising me a bit. "We're both well aware of the rogue your father's become since he gave away Edotoma. Three things your father has a hard time resisting: booze, broads, and gambling."

With a little moue I said, "I know but I'd rather not encourage any of those vices."

"Is he going to do them anyway?" Grandad asked, watching me carefully.

"I suppose," I muttered.

"And which of those would you consider the lesser vice?"

“The gambling,” I sighed.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “For someone without the Diamond family resources, gambling might occupy a higher position on our little table of vices. However, when Andus loses at cards, he can always just walk to another world and find something that will pay off any debts he might accrue. Or go to the bank. Your father’s a very wealthy man.”

“Yeah, I know Grandad. I think I’m going to feel very hypocritical about winning a game of cards from him when I’ve been harping at him about the three Gs for so long now.”

“The three Gs?” he asked.

“You said them earlier,” I explained. “Girls, gin, and gambling.”

“Perhaps you can turn it into a father-daughter bonding experience,” he suggested. Hmm. That had some interesting possibilities.

“Now,” he began with a smile, seeing that he’d done well with his last suggestion, “Let’s get on with your magic lesson for the day.”

Back home in Edotoma, I was making arrangements for the purchase of a fleet of ships. I could actually purchase a wide variety of naval vessels here, as Edotoma saw a lot of worldgate travel along her sea lanes. Since I was their much beloved princess, I could also have these ships equipped, armed, and armored as I saw fit. Technically, my position as princess held no office connected to the running of the government nor with the military. It was purely for show. Unofficially, I had more power than the president. Most of the voters liked the president they’d elected. But they loved me.

Off in the distance, I heard a loud explosion and closed my eyes. I almost certainly knew what that was and who was to blame for that.

Walking outside my mansion, I hailed a cab. In this case it was an old man on a flying carpet. Edotoma was becoming positively cosmopolitan. Reluctantly, he flew me high over the scene of the explosion. A café near the capital. I then had him fly me to the presidential palace. The palace that had been the first and in a way the only home I’d ever known.

Leaving him with a large tip, I walked up the grand stairs. A five hundred foot expanse of solid marble. It was beautiful, made up of the rose and cream swirls that were the trademark of Edotoma’s biggest marble quarry. I’d taken my personal colors from this marble and the jade that had been found to match it. The door guards admitted me immediately.

“Clarissima!” one of the old men who ran the place called with a huge smile. “It’s so wonderful to see you here.”

“Thank you Uncle,” I replied with a genuinely fond smile. “As always, it’s good to be back. Is the president in? If so, I wonder if I might have a quiet word with him.” Of course he wasn’t actually one of my uncles. However, I’d know him since I was a very small girl and I had fond memories of him.

“Yes, he’s in. Very busy though. We just got word of a terrible bombing. Perhaps you heard it?”

“Sadly, yes. And that’s why I’m here,” I told him.

“It is?”

“Yes. I think I can end the bombings.”

“Oh, Princess. That would be... here, let me take you to the president.”

“Thank you Uncle.”

“Princess Clarissa!” the president called. He was all pleased smiles on the outside but I could tell he really hadn’t really wanted to meet with me. “What a pleasure to see you. I swear, you become more beautiful every time I see you.”

“That’s very kind of you to say,” I replied. “Thank you for meeting me on such short notice. Please forgive my abruptness, I’ll get right to the point. I think I can put an end to these terrible bombings.”

He looked at me with sharp, shrewd eyes for a moment before cautiously answering, “You know who’s responsible for them?”

“Yes,” I sighed sadly. “Just the same as you do. My mother’s people.”

He nodded but didn’t otherwise reply.

“This has dragged on long enough. I’m pretty sure I can convince them to end hostilities. Would you be willing to grant amnesty to them in return for a cease-fire?”

“Not for their leaders. For them it would have to be exile or prison. We cannot be soft with terrorists. Even if they have been misled. The rest will have to turn over their arms and munitions.”

“That sounds extremely fair,” I told him, standing and preparing to leave. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Won’t you need protection? Bodyguards and such?”

“No, Mister President,” I replied softly. “They treat my mother like she’s some sort of blind messiah. They won’t hurt her daughter.”

“Is it true?” he asked quietly. “I know the disease took a terrible toll...”

“Yes,” I responded sadly. “She’s blind now. In more ways than one.”

“Then may the angels watch over you,” he told me seriously before bowing.

“May they guide us all,” I replied, bowing in return.

I’d been visiting my mother off and on for years. For some reason I never had trouble finding her despite the fact that bounty hunters from all over had been trying to track her and her band of revolutionaries down for twenty years. Just like that I walked into their camp. What had been a normal, country village just days ago I imagined.

Wearing a white dress with cream and rose highlights and a nice pair of sandals, I definitely stood out from the hard-looking men and women the camp offered. About half of them were dressed in camouflaged fatigues. As I walked through the camp, none of them made a move to stop or challenge me. They all knew exactly who I was too.

The actual villagers were being held in a stockade to the rear of the camp. With a sigh, I walked over to the gate. The guards watched me approach as did the prisoners.

“It’s Princess Clarissa...”

“She’s here to save us...”

“The angels smile upon us...”

“How are you being treated?” I asked a man through the gate as I rested my hand on the shoulder of the guard closest to me. Both the prisoner and the guard looked at me with a level of loyalty that was almost frightening.

“We cannot go to our homes,” the prisoner told me. “We work the fields during the day but

we are fed enough and we are not abused.”

“Thank you,” I told him. “I will try to have you released soon.”

“The angels honor us with their emissary,” he called as I walked towards the largest building in town. I sighed. The closest I thought I came to being an emissary of the angels was my work for the crown. And that would be most like an agent of Azrael, the archangel of death. I sometimes left a lot of dead people in my wake. Ironically enough, it was the archangel Raphael whom I prayed to the most. The archangel of healing. Perhaps it was time I did more for my preferred archangel. And it was with a pleased little surprise that I realized today just might be the day I got started.

At the door to my mother’s current house, the guards stopped me. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to search you,” the guard explained apologetically. “New orders,” his partner replied, a small woman with a katana strapped across her back. They called over replacements and then the two of them led me across to a much smaller house.

Inside, the man turned his back to watch the door while the woman had me take my dress and footwear off. I was more surprised than upset. This sort of thing had never happened before, much less a strip search. The woman carefully checked first my sandals and then my dress. At an embarrassed gesture from her, I went ahead and took off my white lace bra as well. She searched this over as though it might hold a poisoned needle or a garrote. Wrong clothes for that sort of thing. My darksuit would have kept her busy for weeks.

Just then General Akagi strode into the house. He immediately flushed bright red and spun to face the door as the other guard still did. “I said she was to be brought here on the *pretext* of a search. I did *not* say to actually search her.” His tone gentled completely, “My most sincere apologies Princess. If you require further evidence of my sincerity, I will happily provide it.”

“That’s quite alright General,” I said, reclaiming my bra. I could see the woman trying to figure out what the word ‘pretext’ meant and coming up blank. As for the General’s offer, I had no use for his fingers or any other sign of his sincerity. “Actually, it was as much you as my mother I came to see.”

This surprised him so much he half turned towards me. Seeing that I still wasn’t dressed, he blushed again and whipped his gaze back to the door. Not wanting to lose the advantage, I hurriedly slid the dress on and dropped the bra into a concealed pocket in near the hem. It didn’t even show a line on the dress. My tailor was very good at making hidden pockets.

“Thank you for respecting my modesty General,” I said. “Won’t you please join me at the table?”

After a more formal exchange of pleasantries, he asked, “You heard about the latest ‘offensive’?”

“The café?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “Twenty killed, seventy something injured. One of the dead a military man. A corporal in the army. We killed nineteen people and wounded scores more in order to get one lowly corporal. It makes me want to cry.”

“Me as well,” I told him quietly. “The president has offered amnesty for those who turn in their weapons and munitions. Leaders such as yourself will be exiled.”

“I should go to jail for my part in today’s atrocity,” he sighed. “However, I suppose living the rest of my life away from my beloved homeland will suffice until hell claims my soul forever.”

“I cannot speak for the angels,” I told him sincerely. “But their writings are filled with tales of atonement for those who truly repent their deeds.”

“One can but hope,” he said, looking down at his hands. “We will take the Empress into the

Kasagi Hills. Edotoma does not claim that land and she can live free there for the rest of her days. Many of us are sworn to serve her to the end of our days. We will strive to do so and retain as much honor as we are able.”

“If you like, I can take the others back with me. I would be honored to ensure they are treated well and fairly by the government and that their transition to a new life goes smoothly.”

“We are lucky to have a princess such as yourself,” he said bowing.

“I am lucky to have the love and respect of people such as yourselves,” I replied, bowing back.

The walk across the camp seemed longer than it actually had been. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

“Hello Mother,” I called quietly.

“Eh? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Clarissa. Your daughter.”

“Clarissa? Oh, yes, I did indeed have a daughter named Clarissa. She used to visit me. But she died. Died as part of her father’s schemes to steal my throne. I still think of her from time to time. She was a beautiful child with a happy smile and a quick mind.”

“It’s me Mother. Your daughter Clarissa.”

“Oh, her ghost,” she nodded. “I’m not surprised. Foolish of me to think you’d sleep the final sleep comfortably dying as you did. What brings you back from the spirit world, daughter mine?”

“You have to take your people into the Kasagi Hills. The living will be tough there. Most of your people will starve unless you send them away. I... I have sent an earthly minion to guide these people to a new land. A land far away from Andus Diamond.” I felt a tear slide down my cheek.

“Yes....” she murmured thoughtfully. “That might work. The war isn’t going well. We’re losing a lot of good people. Yes, Edotoma doesn’t claim the hill lands. Will your agent have my people build up an army for me. That I might some day have them march in and retake what my thieving husband stole?”

“Yes,” I whispered the lie. “My minion will see to it.”

“Most excellent. We’ll have to leave soon. Andus’ assassins are never far behind us.”

“How... how have you been Mother?” A second tear slid down my cheek.

“Well enough. This is not an easy life but it is a free one. Remember when you tried tricking me into moving back to the city with you? But I saw through your little scheme. Now that you’re dead, I guess you see things clearly.”

“Yes Mother. I see things very clearly now.”

“Clarissa?!” Max asked, apparently stunned.

“Hello Max girl. How’s tricks?”

“I’m great. My studies are going really well. When did you get here?”

“A minute or two ago I’d guess. I’m a little foggy on that.”

“You smell like gin. More like a whole distillery. Wait a minute... did you ride here?”

“Ride? No, I think I teleported but I’m not sure. That’s a little foggy too.”

“The Chateau has defenses up against teleporting an other instantaneous forms of travel,” she informed me.

“Oh? I don’t remember bumping into any on the way here. C’mon, let’s go drink. Wait a minute. Are you old enough to drink yet? Hmm, probably not. That’s okay, I’ll drink enough for both of us.”

“Clarissa,” she said with a dollop of concern tinging her voice. She gently put a hand on my shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I... I went to see my mother.” At which point I collapsed into her and started crying my eyes out.

“What’s going on here?” a woman’s voice demanded a short while later.

“My sponsor came for a visit,” Max replied, sounding uncomfortable as she smoothed my hair.

“I smell booze,” the voice insisted.

“She had a bad day,” Max told her, rocking me back and forth a little.

“How did she get here? I haven’t heard of anyone other than students or staff being here.”

“I... I think she teleported,” Max told her, still sounding surprised.

“Impossible. The chateau’s defenses are always raised against instantaneous transport of any kind.” Max did not reply verbally. I hiccupped and laughed which triggered another wave of crying. Angels above but I was a mess. I heard a nearby mirror chime.

“Yes? The defenses have been... are you sure?” Max continued smoothing my hair. “Yes, well... I believe I have the culprit right here.” A short pause. “No, she doesn’t appear to be an immediate threat. She’s here in Maxine’s room in the south eastern women’s quarters.” Another pause. “Just a moment and I’ll find out.”

“Max,” the woman called. “Who is this woman? You mentioned she was your sponsor.”

“She’s Clarissa of House Diamant,” Max replied.

“House Diamant.... Oh, sweet angels above,” she stepped quickly out into the hall. I suppose she didn’t know I could still hear her. “You caught that? Clarissa Diamond is here crying her eyes out. And I think she’s drunk.” The followed a pause. “Yes, I agree. Let’s keep this very quiet. No need for any toes to be stepped on. Our institution is known for discretion after all.”

“Max dear?” the woman called, sounding like she was not at the door.

“Yes ma’am?”

“Take whatever time you need with your sponsor. Am I correct in recalling that Shelley is your roommate?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’ll see to it that she spends the night in temporary quarters.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I heard the door close and the woman’s retreating footsteps.

“What happened?” Max whispered once I’d quietened down some.

“I saw my mother today,” I sniffed. “Arranged a peace treaty between her rebel forces and the government of Edotoma. The world I was raised on. It’s also the name of the national capital.” Max began dabbing at my eyes with a hanky.

“You arranged a peace treaty? That sounds... wonderful?” Initially enthusiastic, her voice trailed off into confusion.

“My mother’s blind. Physically and otherwise. Insane too.” I began feeling around my pockets for a flask but I only found my bra. “Dammit, I seem to have run dry. I don’t suppose you’d

care to conjure me up something nice and strongly alcoholic? I don't think I can cast right now."

"No, I don't know how to conjure anything that hasn't been pre-tagged yet. And you seem drunk enough as is. I don't think you need anything else to drink."

"Oh, but I do. You see, I'm still conscious."

She led me over the one of the two small beds. "Here, crawl in under the covers."

"I'm not really that sleepy," I groused as I crawled in anyway.

"Why did you come to me?" Max asked as she ran a hand over my cheek and smoothed my hair some more. "Not that I mind... I'm just curious."

"My family wouldn't understand. Or they might understand and pity me which would be worse than not understanding. Or they might... there's a lot of reasons not to tell my family. Too many. Far too many. I don't have a lot of close friends. Not people who would treat me as an equal. Everything that was wrong about my visit with my mother has been burning through my mind and my heart. After the signing ceremony, I flew back to my house and started getting drunk. Then I had the bright idea to come visit you. Especially since I keep missing your mirror calls."

"All those worlds and no home," she whispered.

"Don't pity me," I told her, on the verge of more tears.

"No worry there. I most certainly do not pity you my friend," she declared, looking into my eyes. "I just found my goal for when I graduate. I'm going to help you find a home."