

## A Royal Trade

### Part 1

I had to give it to ol' Terion, the man had a comfy throne.

A wooden chair, padded with cushion and fine silk. Large enough that I could lean back, get real comfortable. In the coming days, I'd have to make some difficult decisions regarding this throne.

Would I have a copy made for my own throne room? Or would I tear this one up and have it transported back to my kingdom?

Or perhaps I'd just rule from here instead.

It wasn't just the throne, after all. This entire *palace* was nicer than the one I had back home.

It'd be even better when the screams and shouting stopped.

Women wailing as their men were slaughtered, soldiers shouting orders to one another, the distant clashing of steel on steel. Not all of King Terion's men had downed the poisoned ale. And, of those who had, a few wouldn't have fallen asleep yet. Plus, there'd be some women and servants who'd be foolish enough to bear arms against my soldiers.

I looked down at my lap, the sheathed sword resting on my knees.

Would I get to unsheathe it tonight?

Probably not. My men would be able to handle whatever pathetic resistance Terion's people could mount.

Still, a guy could hope.

After a while, the palace's sounds began dying down. Quite literally. The last of Terion's loyal servants being cut down, the clashes in the corridors and hallways coming to quiet ends. Before long, the only sounds that remained were the sobs and wails of women and children.

The doors to the throne room opened.

For the briefest of moments, I dared to hope that an enemy knight had survived – someone I could have some fun hacking away at. But no, the soldier was wearing red and white. My colours.

I sighed as the man approached, absently stroking my sword's hilt – its pommel and the glowing blue gem there.

"My lord," the man panted, bowing before the throne. "It's done. The palace is yours."

He was carrying something, I saw.

A thick golden circlet with a glowing blue gem embedded in it.

The Sovereign Crown.

Excellent.

I waved the man forward, held my hand out.

The soldier handed me the Relic, head bowed. The moment the still-warm metal was in my grasp, my soldier stepped back.

"King Terion?" I asked, not looking up from the Crown.

"Dead, your majesty."

"And the queen?"

"Escorted to the western wall as you instructed, sir."

"Hm," my eyes narrowed at the Crown. "There's blood on this."

The man flinched.

I looked up at him, waited.

"One of the men," the man gulped, practically trembled in fear. "They tried it on, your majesty. His... His head..."

"Understood," I waved dismissively. "Bring me the princess."

As the soldier rushed out of the room, I brushed the Crown clean with my sleeve –

shaking my head and tutting quietly. Of all the stupid things a man could do, trying to wear this Relic without meeting its criteria was up there. What an unpleasant way to die. Such a waste.

When the last of the fool's blood was cleaned from the circlet, I lifted it up.

My heart sped up as I held the Sovereign Crown above my head. A moment of doubt, silent fears whispering inside my skull. Inhaling a deep breath, I lowered the Crown onto my head.

For a single moment, it seemed slightly too big for my head. A little too loose. Then the Crown's blue gem flared, the gold circlet tightening to fit on my brow perfectly.

I let out my breath, smiled.

Relics were just that; relics from bygone eras. Or, at least, the *good* ones were.

Technically, any magical item made by an Artificer was a 'Relic'. But, the older a Relic was, the more time it'd have to reinforce its Purpose, and thus the more powerful it would become.

Back when I'd been a child, my tutors had used my family's sword – Dragon-Fang – as an example.

A long time ago, an Artificer had created the sword and given it its Purpose – to cut. From that moment on, every time Dragon-Fang had been used to cut something, its purpose had been reinforced and its ability to cut grew. Now, over a thousand years since it'd been made, Dragon-Fang could cut through just about anything. It sliced through plate armour like butter, could carve stone like wet clay.

There was only one problem. Old and powerful Relics had a tendency to develop *quirks*. Conditions.

Dragon-Fang, after spending over a millennium being used in battles and warfare, would only allow itself to be unsheathed if it was going to taste blood. If the person holding it didn't intend to use it to kill, Dragon-Fang would deny them.

Which was more than a little annoying.

The Sovereign Crown had its own, far less annoying, quirk.

It could only be worn by someone of royal blood. A king or their legitimate heir. If anyone else tried putting the Crown on – even a king's bastard or someone just one rung too low on the line of succession – it'd crush their skull like a grape.

A fitting penalty for the unworthy fools who tried to use the world's oldest Relic.

"Traitor!" The princess screamed. "Fiend!"

The soldier beside her raised a gauntleted fist, about to silence the girl. Luckily, the man had the sense to look my way before following through. My glare was enough to stop him in his tracks.

"Coward! Betrayer! Demon!"

"Silence," I commanded in a raised, clear voice.

"Monster!" Princess Ciera continued to scream. "Corrupt swine! Heartless lowlife! Deceiver!"

"Fascinating," I whispered to myself.

So the Crown didn't work on Ciera. I hadn't been sure, but it made sense. She hadn't sworn herself to me, not yet. And she wasn't technically one of my subjects or vassals. She didn't owe me her loyalty, so there was no compulsion for her to follow my commands.

Very interesting indeed.

Guess I'd have to do this the old-fashioned way.

"Be silent," I barked, loud enough to cut through the girl's endless, benign, adorable insults. "Or I *will* have you gagged."

Funnily enough, that actually *worked*.

The girl stopped shouting. She continued to glare, stare daggers at me. But the screaming came to an end.

I hadn't expected that to work.

And I'd had the gagging part all planned out too. I was going to have my guard tear a chunk of the princess' nightgown off, shove it in her mouth. I'd give some speech about women and inappropriate words and clothing.

Oh well.

"Your father and brothers are dead," I said, watching Ciera for her reaction. "As are all your loyal knights and guards. The palace is mine. There is no-one left to save you."

Anguish. Beautiful, sorrowful anguish.

The pretty girl's face contorted, all fight draining away to be replaced with unrestrained pain. She shut her eyes tight, let out a sob. But, to her credit, she managed to hold back tears.

Years of etiquette and being schooled in controlling herself and her emotions.

She trembled on the spot. Let out a low, mournful whine.

But she didn't cry.

She'd make for an excellent bride.

I'd first met Princess Ciera a year ago. Shortly after I'd dispatched my father and claimed his throne. I'd been in need of strong allies, and marrying the only daughter of a neighbouring king had seemed like the best way to go about it.

Only Ciera was spoken for. Betrothed to some brat prince from another land. She was off the table.

Which had just about broken my heart when I saw her for the first time. A beautiful blonde princess, chest barely contained in a tight bodice, with wide blue eyes filled with innocence and intelligence. She'd been shy, had barely spoken, but I'd caught her watching me a few times. And each time, she'd glance away blushing.

I'd been enthralled ever since.

And thus my negotiations with King Terion began. Trade rights, exchanges of goods and culture. Defensive pacts and oaths to aid each other in times of crisis. All in the hopes that I'd one-day be able to convince the man to marry his daughter off to me.

But, the more I got to know King Terion, the more I realised it would never happen. The man was as honourable as any king or knight of legend. He'd sworn his daughter to another man, and there was no way he'd betray that promise.

There was no way I'd convince him otherwise.

So I'd had to give up my desire for the beautiful princess.

Only to have a grander opportunity present itself.

A disgruntled servant of King Terion's court, willing to betray their lord in exchange for wealth and titles. They'd kept their identity hidden, but had provided information that only someone close to Terion would've had access to. Maps of the palace, keys to every room, servant schedules, guard placements, sleeping arrangements. Even lists of names; those of the staunchly loyal traditionalists who'd never serve me and would have to be eliminated, and the names of more *open-minded* knights and vassals – ones who'd be far more accepting of the kingdom's change in leadership.

It was that servant who'd been responsible for tonight.

The poisoned ale every man had filled their bellies with? It had been the nameless traitor's idea. The poison was ingenious. A powerful tonic to combat sleepwalking. It had no effect on a person until they went to sleep, at which point it paralysed their bodies. Upon waking up, the paralysis would begin to wear off. But it would take time; precious minutes. Time enough for my men, who'd also consumed the poison but who'd been ordered not to sleep, to slaughter Terion's loyal knights and tie up those who might be willing to follow me instead.

A kingdom, a Relic, and a beautiful princess, all handed to me on a silver platter.

It'd been too easy.

And that wonderful servant, who'd made it all possible?

They'd make themselves known before sunrise, ready to receive their bountiful reward.

At which point I'd have them hanged.

Couldn't well keep a traitor like that around now, could I?

"I am in need of a wife," I said, eyes roaming Princess Ciera's lovely body. That nightgown was deliciously immodest. "And I'm very much a believer in a woman's choice. I will not *force* you into a marriage without your consent. So instead, I'm going to ask. Princess Ciera, will you be my wife?"

"Never!" Ciera swore, straightening her back. "Not if you were the last man in the world."

"Disappointing," I sighed, waving to one of my men. He sprinted off without hesitation. "But understandable."

"You'll pay for this," Ciera growled. The girl was especially pretty when she was angry. Like a little, barking puppy trying to sound vicious. "I promise, you'll-"

"There's a traitor in this palace," I said, interrupting the puppy's snarling. "And no, I'm not talking about me or my men. One of your servants. If not for them, none of this would've been possible."

Confusion flitted across Ciera's face. Disbelief. A firm *refusal* to believe my words.

"It's true," I continued. "You'd be surprised to learn how much I know about this place. You might even be horrified. I'm aware, for example, that you know every servant by name. You're kind to them, help them when you can. By all accounts, you are the sweetest, most caring princess to ever walk these halls."

Suspicion. She was thinking, putting the pieces together. Then it clicked for her, and a horrified expression lit her face.

"I'm persistent. I'm going to ask you to be my wife again," I said. "And again. And again. As many times as it takes for you to say yes."

She shook her head furiously, eyes wide. Fearful.

"And every time you deny me," I smiled, "I'll have another resident of this palace hanged from the western wall. You're on one so far."

The princess dropped to her knees, buried her face in her hands.

"Princess Ciera," I said, loud and clear. "Will you be my wife?"

She didn't answer.

I waited, and waited. And waited some more.

"Think of it as a trade, if you like. Your life for theirs."

More waiting.

Until, after a full minute had passed, I got bored. Began raising my hand to signal one of my men.

"Yes," Princess Ciera whimpered at last, defeated. "I will."

"Excellent!" I clapped my hands happily, stood. "Men, go get the priest. I want us married within the hour!"

A handful of my men rushed off.

I turned to the princess, who was now curled up on the floor, sobbing quietly into her hands.

"Two of my men will escort you back to your chambers," I told her. "Pretty yourself up, put on something nice. It's not every day you get married. Just don't take too long. I tend to start killing servants when I get bored."

The sobbing stopped. Her body stilled. She didn't look up, didn't turn or move. When she spoke next, her voice was cold and lifeless.

"Who?" She whispered. "Who betrayed us?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. Smiled. "But I can't wait to see your face when we find out. I might even let you speak to them."

I opened the door, led my new wife into the bedchamber.

I'd been tempted to do this in the king's chambers, but deflowering Ciera on bedsheets soaked with her father's blood would've been taking things a little too far. I wasn't a *monster*.

So I'd brought the girl to her own bedchamber instead.

She glared at me, walked silently over to the bed.

"No, no, no," I said, shaking my head. "Didn't your mother teach you anything? You don't go right to the main event, my queen. First, you have to tease and play."

Ciera didn't say anything. Didn't even look at me.

"Come here."

She obeyed without hesitation, striding over to stand right in front of me. Refusing to meet my gaze; but that only made her look all the cuter.

"Drop to your knees," I commanded.

She did so instantly, compelled by the Sovereign Crown.

Before, she'd had no allegiance to me. She hadn't sworn any oaths, hadn't owed me her loyalty. So the Crown hadn't affected her. But now? She was my bride. Had sworn to 'honour and obey'. And that promise was all the Relic needed.

So long as I wore the Crown, Queen Ciera would be physically unable to disobey my command.

I unbuckled my belt, tossed it and Dragon-Fang aside.

"Pull my trousers down," I ordered. "Take my cock out. Wrap your lips around it. And start sucking."

The girl glared up at me, obeying without hesitation.

Plump, glistening lips spread around my cockhead as dazzling eyes shot daggers up at me. I smiled down at my beautiful bride, basking in the sensation.

"That's it," I said, tilting my head back, closing my eyes. "Get my cock nice and wet. It'll make what comes after so much easier on you. But don't worry, I'll make sure you enjoy it."

Could the Crown do that? Could I *command* someone to enjoy something they wouldn't otherwise?

I'd find out soon enough, I supposed.

"Husband," a soft, cute voice said. "Wake up."

I felt her dainty hand on my chest, heard the joy in her voice. And, for a long few moments, I was certain I must be dreaming.

When my eyes flicked open, saw Ciera straddling me, I tried to move – raise my hands to fondle those big, beautiful tits. But my body didn't move. Refused to move. I tried to speak, but only a low, murmured groan came out.

I blinked. Saw my wife's smile. And the circlet on her head.

Why was Ciera wearing the Sovereign Crown?

I moved my mouth again, let out another groan.

"Shh," my bride cooed. "Don't try to speak."

My mouth sealed itself shut.

"And don't try moving either," she commanded softly. "The paralytic will only last a few minutes. Maybe less. I noticed you drank a lot less than everyone else."

What was going on? How did Ciera know about the poison?

"Almost sunrise," the girl muttered, looking to a window. She walked over to it, opened the shutters wide. "I was hoping to drag this out, have some fun with it, but no time

for that now.”

My heart thrummed with panic, but I managed to calm myself quickly enough. Ciera was a kind, innocent girl. She was no threat to me.

“Don’t worry,” Ciera said, snatching something up from the ground. “I’ll make it as painless as possible. I owe you that much, after you took care of my father and brothers for me – making me the rightful heir. You even got rid of everyone who’d have a problem with me as their ruler. Not to mention *this*.”

She raised the sheathed Dragon-Fang.

“Two Relics, two kingdoms, the biggest threats to me eliminated, and not a hint of suspicion cast my way. And all I had to trade for all that was my flower. Not bad at all...”

It was a bluff. This girl wasn’t a killer. She didn’t have it in her. I was safe. Just had to wait for the paralytic to wear off.

Ciera grasped Dragon-Fang’s hilt, drew the sword from its scabbard.

Oh. *Shit*.

With a balanced hand, she pressed the sword’s tip to my throat, made a shallow cut. Just deep enough to be lethal.

She sheathed the sword as I bled out.

My vision was blurring when she took the Crown off, set it atop my head. The Relic squeezed my brow snugly.

A few moments of silence as she adjusted herself; messed her hair and planted a horrified expression on her face. Then she screamed. Loud and shrill and terrified.

“Assassin!” Ciera cried. “Help!”

Guards were bursting into the room a second later, rushing to the open window Ciera was pointing at. Too alarmed to notice the complete lack of tears in the girl’s eyes.

I tried to speak. Tried to move.

But nothing happened.

The world faded to eternal black.