Negotiations and Love Songs

by Lisafer

Notes

Negotiations and Love Songs
Arrival of the Delegation

Negotiations and Love Songs

"Negotiations and love songs
Are often mistaken for one and the same."

- Paul Simon, "Train in the Distance"

Chapter One: Arrival of the Delegation

"The Tortallans will arrive today," Lady Eiralys informed the five children of Drell Valley. "They are to spend most of their day with your father and his guests in the great room and the dining hall, as well as the western gardens. I would like you to steer clear of those areas."

Vivenne nodded; she had little interest in peace treaties or foreigners wandering over their estate. However, she was wise for her sixteen years. She knew that ending the war soon – and with something more permanent than King Ain's cease fire – was more important than the relative comfort of her daily life. The castle would be full of knights and diplomats – the delegation was rumored to have as many as twenty men. She would make a point to be out riding most days, if she could get away with it.

"You older girls will of course need to be present for some activities," her mother continued. "Dinners will be formal, and I expect your best behavior and attire. Evenings are expected to be relatively free from politics – I'm arranging entertainment for most of the nights. I would love to have you three perform music tonight."

Vivenne bit back a scowl. She wasn't fond of performing in front of people. She was the least musically accomplished of all of her siblings. Solanne and Margarethe were nearly masters of their instruments, while Vivenne still struggled. Even her younger siblings were better, though they had been studying for fewer years.

"Do you really think Vivi's playing will impress the Tortallans?" her only brother, Elin, asked with a mockingly pained expression. "I could play instead."

Vivenne smiled at him gratefully. Elin was three years younger than her, but he was protective of his shyest sister. "Yes, he could take my place," she agreed. "He's much better on the harpsichord than I would ever be in accompanying anyone."

"Nonsense," Lady Eiralys answered. "You insisted on an appearance at court last summer – that means you must be willing to perform the duties that come with being a grown woman." She turned to her youngest daughter and son. "And you two will remain seen but not heard. Elin, your father wants you to attend the various peace negotiations, but you are will be there to observe. But both of you will be attending the formal dinners, and perhaps even some of the after-dinner entertainment. I expect you to behave yourselves, and stay out of the way of our guests."

Elin and Idranna nodded solemnly. Idranna was only eleven years old, and a very dutiful girl. They all knew that the instructions were aimed at their brother.

Lady Eiralys swept out of the room, along with their father's other wives. She was the head of the family, although only Solanne and Vivenne were actually hers; the two were full sisters, sharing the dark hair and deep blue eyes of their mother. Elin was the son of Lady Colinne, and
Margarethe and Idranna were the daughters of Lady Fanette, easily distinguished as such by their platinum blonde hair. The Tortallans would never understand such a system, Vivenne knew. They were monogamous, as were most of the northern nations in the Eastern Lands. However, Tusaine had kept the honored traditions of the old empire, and were proud of their ways.

The love between the siblings had never been questioned by the loyalties of full-blood or half-blood relationships. Solanne and Margarethe were inseparable at nineteen and eighteen years of age, respectively, though they were an odd couple, since Solanne tended to be quite serious while Margarethe loved frivolity. Vivenne was closest to Elin, of all her relatives. Idranna was everyone's pet.

"We have to host men who butchered our friends' families and ruined our nation's pride." Solanne scowled, picking up her romance novel and settling in one of the over-stuffed chairs. "This should be fun."

"That's not fair," Vivenne insisted. "Everyone knows Uncle Hilam started the war, and Tortall cannot be blamed for defending itself."

"You, darling sister, could be considered a traitor to the crown." Margarethe's voice was playful, but they all knew it wasn't an exaggeration.

"I don't like Tortall," Vivenne answered. "I just think it was a mistake to go looking for war when Tortall has been nibbling at the edges of every other country next to it. They weren't looking at us until we poked at them a bit."

Idranna shrugged. "I think it will be fun to have so many visitors. I don't care where they're from or even if they're eating Tusaine babies. This summer has been boring, and I'd like something exciting."

Elin, who had been leaning against one of the casement windows, snorted. "Here's your excitement. I see fifteen men on horses in the courtyard right now."

All the girls, save Solanne, ran to the windows.

"That one is absolutely dashing," Margarethe said, pointing to a young man with dark hair.

"I'm guessing that's the prince of Tortall – or someone high ranking," Vivenne said. He had a kingly quality about him, and her father's gestures indicated exaggerated politeness. His horse was decorated in the Conté colors, no less.

"He's still dashing," her sister insisted.

"And what would Gavrel think of you saying such?" Solanne demanded. Gavrel of Delman's Mount was Margarethe's intended – they had announced their betrothal the Midwinter prior to the war.

"He would not mind – I'm permitted to notice how attractive another man is. He knows my love is unwavering," Margarethe stuck her tongue out at Solanne.

The girls continued to banter, but Vivenne's mind – and eyes – were focused elsewhere. A tall, lithe knight had dismounted from the most beautiful stallion she had ever seen. He was chestnut bay with a white star between his eyes. The knight removed his helm and tucked it under one arm while feeding the stallion an apple with his free hand. He was handsome, too, she thought. And even from one story above, she could see that he loved his mount. That made him even more appealing to her.
Since her mother had insisted on giving the men their space, Vivenne took the back stairs down to the kitchens and then skipped out to the stables later that afternoon. If the peace negotiations went on in the salon or even the library, she would be unnoticed.

The stables weren't empty. A young man – the handsome knight she had noticed earlier – was there with another knight. The second man was older, and carried himself with marked dignity, even with his slight limp. They were looking at all of the horses in the stables, admiring them.

"Father has the best stables in all of Tusaine," she stated in Common as she approached. She immediately chastised herself. The last thing she should do is brag about the wonders of Tusaine. Humility was always best when dealing with foreigners.

The men turned to her, clearly caught by surprise. She curtseyed and met the older one's eyes. "I am Vivenne of Drell Valley, daughter of Count Leandre. Welcome to our home – and please let me know if there is anything I can do for you or your mounts."

The older gentleman chuckled as he bowed. "I'm Duke Gareth of Naxen, and I am pleased to meet you, Lady Vivenne. It's astonishing to see so few stable hands to care for this many horses."

She curtseyed again – deeper, this time, allowing for his rank – and smiled up at him. "My father tends to his animals personally, when he can, and is usually assisted by the Lady Colinne. Or me," she added, blushing.

"And does he breed these beasts?" the younger knight asked. He had chiseled features that made his face seem stern, but his lazy smile relaxed it all into an expression of kindness. His light brown hair was trimmed short, unlike most of the Tortallan knights she had seen before, and was thinning on top. "Sir Wyldon," he said, remembering his manners, and he bowed. "Of Cavall."

She curtseyed again. "Father does tend to the breeding. It's been a family interest for centuries, and my brother and I hope to carry on the tradition."

"I must say that these are among the finest horses I've ever seen," Duke Gareth replied. "After seeing your father's mount, Wyldon insisted on coming to the stable to look at any others you housed."

"We do love our animals here at Drell Valley," she answered, beaming proudly. "We also have kennels and aviaries. I was led to believe that many Tortallan knights practice falconry, and we have some nests you might be interested in."

Sir Wyldon's eyes had brightened at the motion of kennels. "Dogs?" he asked. "I would love to see them at some point during our stay."

"Perhaps you will be able to slip away some morning," Duke Gareth suggested to him, his voice low, "depending on how the negotiations move forward."

"I would be honored to show you, if you do end up with free time," Vivenne offered. She found herself rather irrationally wanting to spend more time with this knight from Cavall.

"Thank you, kind lady," said Duke Gareth. "If you'll excuse us, though, I'm afraid we're needed in the gardens. We are to take our midday meal there."

"Certainly, your Grace. If you follow the stone path that winds back toward the keep and then turn right at the sundial, you will shortly find yourself in the western garden. I hope you enjoy your stay." She curtseyed low again, and peeked from under her eyelashes to see them both
bowing respectfully.

Sir Wyldon did not turn(106,995),(163,999) back to look at her when he left, but he did look at one of the mares.

She had only an hour to prepare for supper, and she smelled of horse dung.

"Your father will murder you if you're late," Lady Colinne growled, pushing Vivenne toward the bath. "I know you love the horses, but you really need to be more responsible and learn to keep track of the time when you're out there."

"I'm sorry. " Vivenne stepped into the warm water. "I was lost in thought, and the next thing I heard the bells were chiming that it was seven o'clock."

"I'm glad something brought you to your senses," Lady Colinne said with a sigh. "I'll be in my rooms, if you need me. Don't dawdle."

She washed as quickly as she could while the maids bustled about, preparing her clothing. She and her elder sisters were to dine wearing the Drell Valley colors – crimson and white. Vivenne was glad; she knew her hair – so dark it was almost black – would be striking against her dress.

When she finished her swift bath she began to put on her clothes; Margarethe entered the changing and bathing room, already dressed. "Would you like help with your coif?" she asked, "or are you going to be willful like Solanne and look as plain as possible?"

Vivenne grinned at her older sister. "Help, please. I was thinking a braided crown with white camellias pinned on."

"That sounds lovely," Margarethe answered, placing a stool in front of her and finding a comb.

As soon as she was in her chemise, corset and farthingale, she sat down and let her sister begin working on her hair. There were maids who could help, she knew, but their time was better spent assisting her mother and the other wives. While her father would look grand having beautiful daughters, three beautiful wives would make a stronger impression. And Margarethe was wonderful with hair. "Promise me you won't marry Gavrel, my darling Margarry, and will follow me to my husband's home to play maid to me," she said in a sing-song voice.

Margarethe laughed. "What? Me give up on marriage prospects with the man I love in order to play spinster-aunt to your children while I play with your hair? You must be confusing me with Solanne!"

They giggled, adding the finishing touches (face paint for Margarethe's pale skin, camellias pinned to Vivenne's gown) to their toilettes.

By the time they reached the top of the staircase, the contingent of knights were milling about below.

"Your mother will be furious," Lady Fanette hissed into Vivenne's ear. "You were supposed to be playing while the men came to dinner."

She turned to her own daughter and berated her accordingly, but Vivenne couldn't stand to listen. Lady Fanette was fussy and always had been. Besides – the men had gathered below, discussing aspects of the day's conference, and they were a sight to feast her eyes upon, with their colorful tunics. Prince Jonathan, she noted, was always within an arm's length of her father. He was a striking young man, and she was close enough to see how dazzlingly blue and lively his eyes...
He glanced up and smiled at her, his teeth straight and perfect. "Will you join us, my lady?" he asked, his voice commanding even as he made the request.

She blushed and walked down as gracefully as she could manage in her shoes – she wore heels that were over an inch high – and felt the eyes of all the men on her. One man, she noted, had been kneeling on the floor – scratching the ear of her favorite greyhound – but stood at the sight of her. Wyldon of Cavall.

She reached the bottom step and Prince Jonathan took her hand in his, kissing it. "I'm so pleased that you're joining us tonight. I'm Jonathan of Conté."

"And I am Vivenne," she said, her voice so low that she was almost sure he would ask her to repeat it. She curtseyed deeply.

"May I escort you to dinner?" Prince Jonathan asked.

"O-of course," she said, letting him lead her into the dining hall. She glanced over her shoulder to see Margarethe smiling encouragingly, and – behind her – Sir Wyldon watching, his mouth twisted into a sardonic grin.

Dinner was excruciatingly long. She was seated between Prince Jonathan and a surly dark man with curly hair and black eyes – So-and-So from Goldenlake. (The man mumbled, Vivenne told herself. I can hardly be blamed for not remembering his name.) Her mother had monopolized the prince, and the Goldenlake knight would barely speak to the people he knew, let alone the people he didn't know, so she spent most of the meal in silence, listening to other conversations.

After dinner she was whisked into the salon with her elder sisters, where they were to play music for the men. Solanne was kind enough to pick pieces with easy harp parts.

Luckily for Vivenne, most of the men spent their time talking – over-politely, she noticed – and paid little attention to the music. Duke Gareth seemed to listen, as he smiled and even applauded one particularly lovely song.

Wyldon of Cavall listened, too. Or at least he watched. Several times during their hour of music, she had glanced up to find his eyes on her, his expression completely unreadable. She flushed and tried to find her place in the music each time, hoping her mother would not notice such mistakes.

"You play quite well," the prince said, coming to her side when she finally was permitted to put the blasted instrument aside.

"Thank you, your highness," she replied politely. She didn't understand what she had done to deserve his interest; she wasn't completely sure she wanted it.

"I've always loved the harp," he continued, handing her a glass of wine. "My aunt – Duke Gareth's wife – plays, though she usually performs only the solo works."

"She must be a much better musician," Vivenne said. "If you'll excuse me, I really must get fresh air. Performing in a crowded room is never easy on me." She gave the wine glass back to him and left as quickly as she could, heading through the dining hall and out onto the terrace.

She didn't mind the attention of the men of the delegation – she had been to parties and balls in the past, and knew what it was to be flirted with. But the prince's intense gaze and habit of leaning in too close was overwhelming. She needed time to herself – time to remove her Goddess-cursed slippers.
She sat on the stone steps and pulled off the offending shoes, sighing with relief at the feel of her feet flat against the cold stairs.

"It's entirely too warm in there," said a low voice from out of nowhere. "You look flushed."

"Oh, Merciful Mother!" she yelped, jumping to her feet. She spun around toward the voice, clutching her slippers to her chest.

Sir Wyldon stepped from the shadows, laughing quietly.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," she said, feeling her cheeks burn for the hundredth time that evening. "I shouldn't be alone with you – and certainly not . . ." she trailed off, waving her shoes helplessly.

"No one will worry if you're out here with me," he said, leaning against the ornate stone wall. "I'm infamous for not taking advantage of ladies at parties."

She laughed at his frankness. "And I'm infamous for always doing the last thing that should make any man interested in making advances."

He studied her momentarily, his brown eyes suddenly solemn. "I don't know – the prince seemed rather interested in you."

"No, I think he's just the type who likes to win people over," she replied. "I wouldn't be surprised to see him attach himself to my sister Margarethe tomorrow evening."

"Which is she?" Wyldon asked.

"The beautiful blonde one – tall and regal. She was playing the cello," Vivenne added, though she wasn't sure why. It's not like people wouldn't remember her. She and Solanne were usually ignored as soon as Margarethe walked into the room.

"Ah yes," he said with a nod. "Very elegant."

"And flirtatious. I think your prince will like to have someone who flatters him, rather than someone who could barely speak to him at all."

Wyldon smiled wryly. "How is it that you can speak to me, but not him?"

She wasn't quite sure how to answer him. "Perhaps because you give me space to breathe, and do not try to charm me." And you don't assume that I will fall in love with you, she added to herself.

He chuckled again, and she rather liked the sound of it. "No, I don't try to charm anyone. That's certainly left to more capable men, like Prince Jonathan."

"Sir Wyldon, I'm sorry, but I really must be going inside. My mother will be sending servants to fetch me soon, I'm sure, and while I trust you, my father and mother might not."

"Lady Vivenne," he said suddenly, taking her arm before she could head inside. "Would you be willing to consider riding with me at some point while I'm here? Your mother or sisters are welcome to join, of course."

She felt numb where his hand held onto her forearm, though his fingers barely gripped. "I-I would love to."

"Thank you," he said softly, releasing her and turning away, walking into the gardens.
"Sir Wyldon!" she called out, curiosity getting the better of her.

He pivoted gracefully. "Yes?"

"May I ask why you grinned when the prince escorted me into the dining hall?"

The corners of his mouth turned upward into that same wry smirk. "Because my prince is someone who always has the best things that can be offered."

She stared at him, bewildered. Was he flirting?

"And you're mistaken," he added, before turning on his heel. "Your sister isn't the beautiful one."

"I think you're insane," Margarethe said that night, curled up at the foot of Vivenne's bed. "He's not nearly as striking as the prince."

"Prince Jonathan is conceited," Vivenne replied flatly. "I think he's a man who likes to collect pretty things. If he ever falls in love, you can rest assured it will be the most beautiful woman in the world and not some pretty enough girl from the Drell Valley."

"I think Vivi has the right of it," Solanne said, kissing her sisters goodnight. "And the sooner these men are gone, the happier we'll be."

"Did you not hear the part where Vivenne agreed to go riding with one of them?" Margarethe called out to her older sister's receding shadow. She turned back to Vivenne and shrugged. "I'll join you; you'll need a chaperone."

Vivenne rolled her eyes. "Yes, my unmarried, un-spinstered sister would be an appropriate chaperone."

Her sister sighed. "Fine then. Take Lady Colinne and let me go along for the amusement."

Lady Colinne was a perfect choice, Vivenne realized. She was horse-minded, and would appreciate Sir Wyldon's love of animals. And she would not frown too much if Vivenne broached topics that young well-bred ladies should avoid.

"Not a bad thought, really," Vivenne acknowledged. "But you'll have to promise not to humiliate me."

"And how would I do that?" Margarethe stood, stretching. "I think you're underestimating yourself by going after such an older, sober man. I think you could have any number of Tusaine men."

"Be gone!" Vivenne cried playfully, pushing her sister out of her bedroom door. "I'm hardly 'going after' anyone."

Closing the door, she leaned against it, recalling the feel of Sir Wyldon's hand on her forearm. He had quite nice hands, she realized. He was serious, as her sister had pointed out, but Margarethe hadn't heard his chuckle. She hadn't seen his wry grin.

And she certainly hadn't seen him petting the hounds.
Chapter Two: Escapism

It was several days before Vivenne had the opportunity to speak to the knight again. Truth be told, she avoided the delegation as much as possible. And only Duke Gareth, it seemed, made a point to speak with her between meetings. He also sat beside her at supper, sharing interesting facts about life in the capital of Tortall, regaling her with the story of his leg injury – broken in three places shortly before the war – and discussing favorite works of literature.

Prince Jonathan, she noted with smug amusement and relief, had latched onto Margarethe on the second evening. She could hardly blame him – her sister was easily the prettiest person she had ever met, and was much livelier and friendlier than either Solanne or Vivenne.

Sir Wyldon did not speak much at the meals. He would usually engage in quiet conversation with whomever was seated next to him, but did not join any discussions across the table. His eyes, in fact, rarely strayed to where she sat. It was beginning to annoy her.

The entire castle was set into a flurry of activity when King Ain joined the peace negotiations on the third day. While he was her mother's half-brother, and it wasn't unheard of to have him visiting, the presence of the Tortallans demanded a much more rigorous affair.

The king was fonder of leisure activities than discussing the peace treaty. He let Count Leandre and Ambassador Mikal of Danne handle most of the talks while he sat in, and insisted on certain comforts – like music every evening, much to Vivenne's chagrin. Before dinner on the fifth night of the peace conference, King Ain insisted on singing a duet with one of his nieces.

"You shouldn't choose Vivenne, for she can't help but sing sharp whenever she takes the high parts," Solanne said, taking a place next to the harpsichord. "What would you like to hear, uncle?"

While they discussed the merits of each song in detail, Vivenne slipped away, realizing that it was unlikely they would need her expertise in a discussion of music. She ducked into an alcove – an out of the way place that could usually be counted upon to be vacant. To her surprise, it wasn't.

"Will we always stumble across one another when we're trying to flee cordialities?" Wyldon asked from his seat next to her father's chess set.

She smiled, taking the seat across from him. "It seems so."

"It could be worse," he said. "Goldenlake – Sir Raoul – has feigned a headache so he could be excused from the evening's festivities."

"Is he shy?" Vivenne asked.

"No." He smirked. "Just willful."
"I wish I could do the same," she confessed, idly moving one of the pawns. "But I rarely suffer headaches. Mother would see through me in a heartbeat."

He countered with a move of a pawn on his side of the board.

"It's not really so horrible," she continued. "I just don't like performing music or being forced to speak at dinner." She pushed another pawn into the center of the board.

"Duke Gareth seems to like you; he's an excellent judge of character."

She colored at the compliment. "He's a very polite man. He seems gentle."

Wyldon laughed outright. "You, Lady Vivenne, have never had the honor of dueling him. He's the best swordsman in all of Tortall."

A cold feeling washed over her – was this how Solanne felt all the time? These men weren't just nobles from a foreign land; they had likely all fought in the war. They had certainly killed men of Tusaine, and probably took pride in that action. "I see."

He took her chin in his large hand, tilting her face upward so she was forced to look into his dark eyes. "You're thinking of the lives lost in war, aren't you?"

She nodded, mortified that she was about to cry.

He pulled his hand away and swallowed. "Although we're trained to fight, it isn't always easy. We think of each campaign as defense – defending ourselves from attackers, or defending our homes – our sisters, our wives – from another nation's future raid against us.

"I know it does not make it easier to face the deaths," he continued, "but our king did not let us wage an aggressive war against your people. We were defending our border."

"The people of Tusaine suffered greatly in this war. I worry that negotiated peace will lead to even more suffering," she said.

Wyldon leaned back in his seat, moving his rook across the chessboard. "King Roald is often called 'The Peacemaker' because he values it so greatly. He knows that making Tusaine suffer would lead only to a generation of souls preparing to war upon Tortall again."

She hoped he knew his king as well as he seemed to.

Two days later, though, the negotiations hit a stalemate. Raised voices could be heard even in the upper levels of the castle, and Vivenne found it almost impossible to concentrate on her reading.

"What do they argue over?" she asked her brother, who had come into the room to escape the shouts below.

"Last I heard it was rights to the river."

She gaped. "They're trying to limit our use of the best path to the Inland Sea?"

He shrugged. "It's within their borders."

She tossed her book aside with frustration. "So what happens now? Does father keep them all as hostages and make demands, or do we continue as planned with music and pleasantries after dinner?"
Elin laughed, flopping onto a thickly upholstered chair. "Business as usual, I would think. But I might suggest that father recommend you to Uncle Ain's council."

She rolled her eyes. "I would not serve the king if my life depended on it. Not if people like Uncle Hilam continue to make policy." She stretched. "I'm going to the paddock. Care to join me?"

He shook his head. "If anyone sees me, they'll wonder why I'm not with all of the men, shouting and being boastful."

"Suit yourself," she said, leaving the room.

It wasn't hard to go unnoticed with all the huffing and shouting. She darted past the open doors of the library and through the kitchen without seeing one unoccupied person. Lady Fanette was berating a serving maid for flirting with the delegation members, so Vivenne was able grab a carrot and easily slip past her out of the keep altogether.

Outside it was hot and muggy – the summer months were humid in the Drell Valley – but Vivenne was grateful for any breeze she could catch. No one was out working in the heat of the day, so she took off at a run toward the stables. When she reached the paddock she was panting from the exertion, but felt more alive than she had in the last months of waiting, worrying and being quiet. War did not suit Vivenne of Drell Valley; she was much more amenable to a laid back life in the country with her horses and no one to tell her how to behave.

It wasn't that she was willful – not by any definition of the word. She wasn't frowned upon or considered "high spirited"; she had been fawned over at court the year before, and her elders assured her she would receive proposals of marriage before Solanne. She was respectful and kind, but books and horses were her preference over fussy nobles who would speak only of marriages and wealth.

After finally catching her breath, she went to find her favorite in the stable, pulling the carrot from her pocket. "Is this what you want, Paladin?" she asked, stroking the dun's nose affectionately. "Or do you want to go for a ride?" She led him out of the stall and saddled him swiftly, her fingers flying over the buckles. Walking him over to the mounting block, she climbed into the side-saddle and took off toward one of the walking trails near the edge of the property.

She rode swiftly – more swiftly than her father or Lady Colinne would probably prefer. By the time the Drelinne River – a small tributary that dumped into the squabbled-over Drell – was in sight, she could see that she was not the only one who had escaped from the house; Sir Wyldon and a Tusaine lord – Baron Chal – were walking their mounts along the river's edge, discussing something in low voices. The baron was a large, jovial man who was always a pleasant and intelligent companion.

She approached noisily, not wanting to overhear sensitive topics, and slowed to a stop.

"Lady Vivenne!" Baron Chal called out cheerfully. "Were you sent to fetch us?"

"No, my lord," she answered in kind. "I was looking for an escape from all of the loud and angry voices in the house, and you know I love nothing more than riding."

He approached to help her dismount (though really, no help was needed), whispering conspiratorially, "we needed an escape, as well."

She led Paladin over to the river's edge and curtseyed. "Sir Wyldon."

He bowed politely, his smile genuine. "Lady Vivenne."
"Are you enjoying your afternoon ride?" she asked.

"Indeed, I am," he answered. "Baron Chal has been kind enough to escort me."

"He says you two are fleeing the peace negotiations, as well."

Wyldon snorted. "Negotiation implies discussion. It's much more pleasant to be out here, enjoying a nice ride in amiable company."

"If you like, I could show you more of the countryside," she offered. "Or we could see the dogs – I know you were interested in the kennels."

Baron Chal looked troubled. "You would require a chaperone for that, Vivenne, and I'm needed back at the conferences. While young Wyldon is not necessary to all of the negotiations, I'm afraid I can't say the same of me."

"We can ride back to the castle together," Vivenne said. "Then perhaps Lady Colinne will join us for a tour of the kennels and aviary." She looked to Sir Wyldon, seeing if he approved of this course of action. He was not even looking at her, though; his eyes were focused on Paladin.

Baron Chal agreed, and they all mounted. The ride back was much slower, though Vivenne was aching to run again. She and the men idly discussed topics appropriate for nobility – relations that might be shared, music that was enjoyed. She found it rather dull, but luckily the Baron was leading the conversation. Sir Wyldon politely answered questions, but offered no topics of his own.

When they neared the end of the walking trail, the baron fell back, and Vivenne found herself riding with Sir Wyldon – out of earshot of the baron. She realized that Baron Chal had done this intentionally, as if she and Wyldon were actually courting.

"I believe the baron thinks I should be reciting poetry to you, or asking if you are engaged to a nobleman of Tusaine," Sir Wyldon said, glancing over his shoulder at Baron Chal.

She smiled at him. "Engagements are out of the question until I'm seventeen. And poetry bores me."

He looked startled. "I thought all young women were fond of poetry. All the ladies I've met at court loved nothing more than poetry recitals." He shuddered visibly.

"Your sentiments appear to match mine, Sir Wyldon," she replied. "I was forced to study the greatest works of Tusaine poetry, as well as some of the ballads in Old Thak – but I never took to it. My sisters excelled in that, and I – as usual – found solace in other comforts."

"Like riding," he said, nodding toward her mount. "I can't say I've ever seen a lady who rode as well as you."

She could feel her face flush with pleasure. "Lady Colinne – my father's third wife – is a much better rider than me."

He rode silently, his firm mouth turned down into a slight frown. "I must admit," he said after several moments, "that I'm unaccustomed to the notion of having multiple spouses."

"Most people outside of Tusaine and Carthak feel the same. It's an old tradition that many have
"Or have chosen to forget." His frown deepened. "Do you look forward to a life where you would share your husband with another woman?"

"That's a very personal question," she answered.

"No, it would be a very personal question if I asked you if you look forward to a life where you share your marital bed with another woman. I would never be so impertinent as to pose that sort of question, my lady."

Vivenne thought, for a moment, that she saw a hint of a smile on his handsome face.

"I have not put much thought into being the sole wife of any man, so I have no expectations with which to compare it," she finally answered. "My father would prefer me to marry a wealthy and powerful man, I am sure, and wealthy, powerful men in Tusaine tend to have more than one wife."

"You could," Wyldon said, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity she had never seen in any man's face, "consider marrying a man who is not from Tusaine."

She felt self-conscious under his gaze, and looked away. "I could consider it, but I doubt Father would."

"That sounds promising to me," Margarethe whispered as they dressed for supper. "He didn't say anything indicating that he would be speaking to Father, did he?"

Vivenne yanked her overgown on, pulling at the sleeves that twisted on her arms. "No. He didn't say anything at all indicating that he wanted to marry me – it was his eyes. I've never been looked at that way by a man."

"I can't imagine someone as dry and serious as him looking at anyone that way!" Margarethe laughed. She kept her voice low, in case their older sister or one of their mothers was in earshot. "You describe his expression as smoldering, and I cannot fathom it!"

"I can only assume then, Margarry," Vivenne whispered, grinning slyly at her sister, "that you have never been gazed at by a serious or intense man. Perhaps no man has been serious about you?"

Margarethe took one of the feather pillows from Vivenne's bed and smacked her with it, laughing. "Mother says there will be dancing tomorrow night, so I'll be sure to trip you and make you the laughingstock of all of Tusaine!"

Vivenne shrieked, darting across the room to hide behind Solanne. "Help," she begged, clutching her sister's shoulders.

Solanne frowned, plucking loose feathers from Vivenne's hair. "Someday, Vivi, you'll be a proper lady and you will stop these antics."

"Oh, as if you haven't had a pillow fight in the last year," Margarethe snorted, swinging the pillow and catching Solanne in the belly.
Due to Lady Fanette's stern lecture on ladylike behavior, the girls were quieter than usual at dinner that evening. But Vivenne was lost in thoughts from the afternoon: recalling not only that intense gaze from Sir Wyldon, but also his words. She could feel his eyes on her as she sipped from her wine glass, though she didn't quite understand how she was suddenly so aware of him.

The rest of their afternoon together had been uneventful. She and Lady Colinne had escorted him through the grounds, along with another two Tortallan knights who were curious about the kennels and aviary. There were no moments for personal conversation, but there were smiles exchanged and polite discourse.

And now she was under his gaze again, and unable to say anything to him. She looked up, meeting his serious brown eyes with a small smile. He raised his glass very slightly, a silent and secret toast to her. She felt ridiculously clammy.

And that was what confused her the most. She had been appreciated at court the winter before – it wasn't as though she was completely unaccustomed to a man's attention. But none of the men who flattered her were like Sir Wyldon. Mainly, she assumed, because Sir Wyldon was not a flatterer. She strongly felt that he was the kind of man who gave compliments sparingly, but genuinely.

The men were quiet as well; talks that afternoon had not improved from their early shouting match, therefore the mood in the dining hall was tense. People spoke quietly to their dinner companions, and spoke of impersonal things like art and dance. Only Prince Jonathan attempted to engage everyone in some form of discourse, but each subject was dropped almost as quickly as he brought them up.

There was no entertainment scheduled for the evening – Lady Eiralys encouraged the men to take air in the gardens, or amuse themselves in the library, or even create their own music if they were so inclined. Vivenne knew that she and her elder sisters were expected to circulate, making sure their guests were content and comfortable.

"I'll be in the music room with Idranna," Margarethe whispered to her sister. "Solanne went to the library, where she can politely ignore our guests while she reads – so you should head out to the gardens. Your knight is going that way, and there are all sorts of dark corners in which you can hide away from my mother; she and Father are going to be in the gardens with Duke Gareth and the prince."

"Are you sure you don't want to be out there, charming the prince?" Vivenne asked dryly.

"Absolutely," she said, tweaking her sister's nose. "Prince Jonathan doesn't make my eyes light up the way yours do when you speak of Sir Wyldon."

Vivenne rolled her eyes. "One interesting conversation and you assume I'm in love, don't you?"
"Just go!" Margarethe pushed Vivenne toward the doors to the terrace.

Outside, there were several small groups of men – as well as Lady Fanette – in the gardens and on the terrace. Servants were carrying trays of wine and juice to the men, so Vivenne took a goblet of juice before she headed down the stone steps of the terrace and into the garden.

"Lady Vivenne!" the prince called out, beckoning her to join his small cluster. She recognized Sir Raoul of Goldenlake and Lord Imrah of Legann, and was introduced to a knight from Fenrigh, Sir Markus. "We were told that there would be several families coming to Drell Valley for a ball."

"Yes, your highness," she answered with a smile. "You enjoy dancing, I assume?"

Lord Imrah laughed. "I've seen few knights who take to the ballroom as well as the prince."

"But we were wondering," Sir Markus said with a grin, "if the steps here in Tusaine are different from what we learned in our deportment lessons."

"We do minuets, quadrilles, courantes, rigaudon, gigues – I believe you dance these as well."

Prince Jonathan smirked. "Have you not learned of the latest dance – the waltz?"

"I'm afraid not, your highness," she said, embarrassed by her ignorance.

"It's quite simple," he said, taking her goblet and handing it to Sir Raoul, who had just nabbed another wineglass from a passing servant. "It's in ¾ meter, with a strong first beat. And it's in a closed position." He took Vivenne's right hand in his left and pulled her tightly against his chest, his left arm wrapped around her and resting on her back.

She flushed in dismay, uncomfortable in his grasp but afraid to push him away from her altogether. Even if he was taking liberties, he was still the prince of a nation who had just defeated her own in war. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be very good at this," she whispered hoarsely.

"Nonsense – you're fine. You'll want to start off with your right foot," he said with a rakish grin, pulling her gently until she stumbled, her right leg leaning against his left.

"Jonathan, do you really think—?" Lord Imrah stammered, unable to condemn his prince.

Sir Raoul glowered. "Let the girl go, Jon," he said, his voice low and dangerous. He, it seemed, was not afraid of being on the prince's bad side.

But it was something else that made Prince Jonathan release Vivenne: a large hand had clapped onto his shoulder, pulling him backward with a quick jerk. "It doesn't look as though she would like to learn this dance just yet, your highness. Perhaps you should wait until we have musicians and willing partners." Although Sir Wyldon's words were polite enough, his dark expression and cold voice were not.

The prince backed up, turning to look at Wyldon. "Cavall, there's no need for concern. Lady Vivenne knows I only jest."

She took her juice from Sir Raoul, who was studying her carefully, as though making sure she were all right. Her hands trembled to the point of spilling "Of course, your highness. But you will have to excuse me – I've spilled my drink and need to rinse myself off."

She met Wyldon's eyes briefly before curtseying to all of the noblemen, then quickly walked
deeper into the gardens, where a fountain trickled fresh water.

That was stupid, she thought as she rinsed her hand and tried to scrub the pear nectar from her gauzy sleeve. There were plenty of ways to get out of a tricky social situation without upsetting anyone, but she had frozen in the moment. She was in no danger, she knew. While she didn’t always think much of Tortallan knights, they had all been perfectly polite since their arrival. What, had she expected him to rape her on the garden terrace steps with her father standing by?

She sat down on the fountain’s edge, closing her eyes and sighing. The sooner these men were gone, the sooner she could return to her normal life. Summers were for riding and visiting her cousins – not spending every waking hour worrying about placating spoiled lordlings.

"I hope you don't mind me following," a cool voice cut through her thoughts, pushing the storm of worries out of her head at once.

Sir Wyldon.

"I thought you might come after me," she said, slowly opening her eyes. I hoped. He was crossing the brick patio to join her, two goblets in hand. She took one from him when he was within reach, and gestured for him to sit next to her.

"I shouldn't ask you to excuse him," Wyldon said after a moment's silence. "He's the king's only son, and he's used to people vying for his attention rather than shrinking away from it. I honestly don't think he knew how uncomfortable you were."

She nodded. "And how did you know to come to my rescue? I didn't even see you on the terrace."

"I saw the whole exchange," he said. "And you seemed panicked. I felt like I had to come to your aid – not only for your sake, but because the last thing we need right now is animosity between factions while we're trying to put a treaty in place."

She nodded. "I've met my share of amorous flatterers. But I'm usually more resolute about keeping their advances at bay."

He took a sip from his own drink. "I'm sorry if I misinterpreted your expression - if you preferred that I hadn't intervened."

"Not at all," Vivenne said, surprising herself by taking his free hand in her own. His hands were rough and calloused and much larger than hers. "I was taken aback and didn't know how to express my displeasure without angering Prince Jonathan or his companions. I know I wasn't at risk, but it was alarming to me just the same."

He looked down at her hand, then squeezed it gently with his own before releasing her. "He's not a bad prince. He's a talented young man, but he's been indulged. He loves his frivolities, and his chances to be a man rather than a king-to-be."

"Similar things were said of my uncle in his youth, I am told. He was the heir, and he always had his way – he was more interested in being an ardent lover than he was in learning to rule the kingdom."

"I had forgotten that you are King Ain's niece," Wyldon said, his expression unreadable.

"I wish I had that luxury," Vivenne said dryly. "It's impossible for me to attend any social function in Tusaine without the subject of who I'm to marry popping up. I'm a desirable connection, between my mother's social standing and my father's wealth. If my uncle would spend half as
much time tending to his kingdom as he does trying to play matchmaker – " she stopped short, wringing her hands.

"Forgive me," she said, standing. "You came here out of concern for my well-being, and I'm talking of things that are unimportant." She walked away, her back turned to him.

"I don't think telling me how you feel is unimportant," he said, encouraging her to continue.

"My uncle put his entire nation's welfare in the hands of his brother – a man who is cruel to his wives and children, a man who arrogantly boasted of his ability to bring Tortall down to its knees. We thought he was imprudent and brash, but we assumed he had knowledge we knew nothing of – an alliance with Galla or Tyra, perhaps. Instead our people were sent to challenge a nation with a larger army and knights who consistently bested ours at every tournament, and we let our arrogance convince us that these facts were untrue. It was foolish, and if the king had paid less mind to frivolities, fewer people would be suffering today." Her voice shook with fury, and angry tears stung her eyes when she looked over her shoulder at Sir Wyldon. "I know it's treasonous to say such things, and I only say it now because I know we are far enough from the terrace garden that no one will chastise me. But I can't help but think that if your people would keep my uncles locked away in a prison cell to rot, my country would be all the better for it."

Wyldon stood and walked over to her, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. "Is it treasonous to have an opinion?" he asked, tenderly wiping the tears from her face. "Mithros put your king on his throne, as he did my own – but he also put you where you are today because you have the power to persuade. You could never be in the wrong for suggesting that there is a better way to act. Nobles have the duty to inform the crown when they think mistakes might be made. It is in good conscience to do so – it's hardly treason."

"Perhaps in Tortall," she replied bitterly.

"Vivenne," he began haltingly, slipping the handkerchief back into his pocket. It was the first time he had addressed her without her title, and she was astonished. Wyldon of Cavall seemed to be a man who took protocol very seriously. "May I kiss you?"

Her breath caught in her throat and she felt a thrill through her body. His gaze lacked the possessive intensity she had once seen, replaced by an expression of tenderness. "Y-yes," she whispered, fear and excitement battling inside of her.

She rested her shaking hands on his wrists as he tilted her face upward in his palms. Her eyelids fluttered shut as he brushed his lips against hers – a whisper of a touch, at first, until she moved one hand to rest on the nape of his neck. Then he deepened this kiss, teasing her with his lips and tongue; she mirrored his actions, learning from him as she went. They parted reluctantly, and she had to fight the urge to pull him back for more.

"We shouldn't stay here," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "If anyone were to see us, your father would never let you out of his sight."

"And if I'm not allowed out of his sight, we might not get other chances like this," she added impishly.
Chapter Four: Coming of Age, part one

The rest of the evening was like a dream to Vivenne; when she went to bed that evening, she could only lie awake, reliving her first kiss and the gentleness in Wyldon's touch. She was not like her older sisters; Solanne could think of Tortallans as only slaughterers, while Margarethe saw any new man as someone to flirt and play with, be him Tortallan or Tusaine. But Vivenne could not think of Wyldon as someone to merely flirt with, nor could she think of him as a murderer, even knowing that he was a knight who fought in the war. He was likely responsible for many Tusaine deaths, in fact.

Still, even that could not change the fact that she liked him, and could not keep his kiss out of her mind as she fell asleep. In the morning she was wakened by Idranna leaping upon her bed. "Happy birthday, Vivi!" the young girl cried, showering kisses upon her face.

Vivenne sat up groggily, hugging Idranna. "Good morning, little one," she said, dropping a kiss on her sister's head. "Could you not let me sleep in just a bit on my birthday? I turn seventeen only once in my life, you know."

Idranna snuggled up against her. "I did let you sleep in. It's almost nine o'clock – Lady Eiralys was going to wake you, but Solanne stopped her. She said you weren't feeling well."

Vivenne laughed. Solanne lying in order to give her an extra hour or two of sleep? It had to be her birthday.

"You must get off of me," she said, with a gentle shove. "I have to wash up and clean my teeth so I am not wretched and filthy when I get the rest of my birthday kisses." She colored slightly at the thought of more kisses and who might be giving them.

When she was finally presentable, she and Idranna trekked down to the kitchens to forage for a late breakfast. Her mother was there, discussing the evening's feast with the cooking staff.

"How are you feeling, my dear?" Lady Eiralys asked, crossing the room to embrace her daughter. "Solanne was worried about you."

"I'm fine now, Mother," Vivenne said. "I just needed rest."

"You look pale," her mother sad, brushing Vivenne's dark hair back from her face. "Happy birthday. This might be your most exciting one, with so many guests here – not to mention the king. More guests will be coming throughout the day." She wrinkled her nose, finally noticing Vivenne's plain frock. "I do hope you plan on changing into an appropriate afternoon dress. Tonight you must wear your gold gown."

"Yes, mother," Vivenne said, escaping her grasp in order to grab a muffin. "I'll go up and change right now," she said, her mouth full.
Lady Eiralys frowned, then turned back to the head cook in order to discuss the appetizers.

"I wish I could stay up dancing tonight," Idranna sighed as they climbed the stairs. "By the time I have my first ball, you'll be married and I'll have no one to help me choose my gown."

"Don't be silly!" Vivenne chided. "Even if I'm married with dozens of children I'll travel back here to help you choose your gown and fix your hair."

"Promise?" Idranna asked, blue eyes excited.

"I promise."

Lady Eiralys had not been exaggerating when she said more guests would come throughout the day. The Tusaine men involved in the delegation had trickled in slowly over the previous days, but today they seemed to flood the castle, along with the ladies from every noble family in the vicinity. Entertainment had respectfully stopped during the months of the war, so this would be the first party – and with the king in attendance, as well as a foreign prince, it would certainly be popular.

Vivenne spent most of the morning and early afternoon with her brother, first playing chess in the salon and later galloping through the forest together, racing at breakneck speed through the riding paths and jumping every creek and ravine.

"Lord Nikol of Maderen is going to attend the ball tonight," Elin said as they brushed down their mounts. "Father stopped complaining about the Tortallans long enough to suggest a marriage alliance with Maderen."

"Solanne can have him, then," Vivenne sighed. Lord Nikol was a pleasant enough man to spend short periods of time with – he was barely thirty, with handsome features and a sprawling estate. He had one wife, and could easily support another. Vivenne could understand why he would be a desirable mate to someone who did not know him well. He was attractive, wealthy and had been very valiant in the war; but Vivenne had known him since she was a child, and found his arrogance and short temper alarming.

Elin leaned over the door of his mare's stall, cushioning his chin on crossed arms. "I don't think Lord Nikol would be happy with Solanne," he said. "Between you and me, I think Father's going to draw up a marriage contract with him soon. For you."

"For me," she said, her throat suddenly feeling dry. "But I – I shouldn't be married before Solanne."

Elin raised his eyebrows. "Don't you mean to say that you're not attracted to him?"

"Well, there is that," Vivenne replied, shrugging. "But we don't know if Lord Nikol is even interested in marriage right now. Or if he's interested in any of us. I shouldn't panic until I know there is something to worry over."

"Margarethe says you're in love with a knight from Tortall," Elin said, lowering his voice.

"I haven't had a chance to fall in love with any of the Tortallans," she said, avoiding his gaze. "I barely even know them."

"You need to read Solanne's romance novels instead of histories and breeding guides. You would
think of things like love at first sight."

She remembered her first encounter with Sir Wyldon and her irrational desire to see more of him. "Anything is possible, I suppose," she said with a shrug.

In the late afternoon, Vivenne spent her time in the library. She was reading a manual on animal husbandry when Duke Gareth limped in, accompanied by Sir Wyldon.

"Ah, please forgive us, Lady Vivenne," the duke said, bowing politely. "We didn't realize we were interrupting anyone."

"Please stay," she said, smiling. "Unless you're planning on discussing matters unfit for my ears?"

He shook his head. "Nothing of the sort. We just came from some peace discussions, and needed a quiet moment away from the other delegates."

"Peace seems much more difficult than war," Vivenne sighed.

"You're wise for your years," Wyldon said, one corner of his wide mouth turned up in a wry smile.

"I've heard that today is your birthday," Duke Gareth said, taking a seat next to Vivenne. "And that the ball tonight is partially in your honor."

"Yes, it is," she said, blushing. "A seventeenth birthday is something highly celebrated among Tusaine noblewomen. It marks the period where a girl is now available for marriage contracts."

"Marriage contracts," Wyldon repeated, frowning. "Is this something more formal than a verbal agreement?" He leaned back against one of the bookshelves, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Absolutely," Vivenne said, putting her book aside. "In Tusaine, the marriage contract is negotiated by the father of the noblewoman and her potential fiancé. It's a formal written document, to be presented at the marriage ceremony."

"Does a woman not have a say in who she marries?" Wyldon demanded, his eyes blazing.

"Wyldon, calm yourself," Duke Gareth advised. "The lady will think you insufferable. Because it is not your way does not mean it is wrong."

Vivenne stared coolly back into Wyldon's eyes. "Most fathers gives their daughters the right to refuse. And no marriage is made in the eyes of the Goddess –as all Tusaine marriages are performed – if a woman refuses her future husband. The first line of a handfasting is the acknowledgement that a woman joins it of her own free will, after all."

"So tonight's ball is to show you off to potential suitors? To anyone who wants to draw up a contract with your father, even if he already has a wife?"

Vivenne lowered her eyes, uncomfortable with his stony gaze. "I know our customs are strange to an outsider, but they're still our customs. Women of Tusaine are comfortable in our marriage traditions." She stood, curtseying to Duke Gareth. "If you'll excuse me, I need to prepare for tonight."

She left the room without saying another word to Wyldon.
The ballroom hadn't been used for months – since the Midwinter Ball announcing Margarethe's acceptance of Sir Gavrel. It had been aired out over the last few days and dusted and decorated by the servants. It was the most ornate room in the estate, with a wall of mirrors and silver trim on every surface. Instead of oil lamps or candles, the room was lit with mage globes; the crowning glory was an elaborate chandelier with tiny spheres of magical light, illuminating the room with a pure, steady radiance.

Vivenne felt conspicuous in her gold gown – it was fancier than anything she had ever worn in her life, with its silver lace-covered kirtle and gold brocade over-robe, complete with silver threadwork. Even her hair was elaborate, pulled into a very high chignon with thin gold and silver ribbons woven in; several tendrils were loose and curled, framing her face. Topaz ear-bobs dangled from her lobes and a gold and silver carcanet adorned her neck. Sir Wyldon, she noted, could not keep his eyes off of her.

Not that she could keep her eyes off of him. Even as bewildered as she was by his aggressive antagonism earlier in the day, she couldn't help but notice how handsome he looked in his long white tunic and black hose. On his chest he wore a medallion hanging from a blue ribbon – a likely medal from the king of Tortall. He stood off to one side of the ballroom, near the doors to the veranda, drinking wine and conversing with Baron Chal and Count Leandre.

"Ah, there's my darling girl!" her father's voice boomed across the ballroom. He left Wyldon's side and walked toward her. "Happy birthday, my dear. You are just as beautiful as your mother was on the night I met her. Every man will have his eye on you tonight."

She felt her cheeks burn. "Thank you, Father," she said, kissing his cheek.

"We have some very important guests tonight – including Lord Nikol of Maderen. I expect you to speak and dance with as many of them as you can."

"Yes, Father," she replied dutifully. While she was not the hostess of this ball, it was customary for a girl to take the lead at a ball held in honor of her coming of age. It would be her duty to circulate and spend time with every man who was entertaining the notion of having her as his wife. And given the peace conference, she could not overlook the Tortallan delegates, even though many were married and did not practice polygamy.

Count Leandre took her by the hand and led her to the small dais upon which the small orchestra was warming up. He clapped his hands to gain the attention of those mingling in the enormous hall, and greeted the crowd warmly. "We would like to welcome the Tortallan delegates to what is likely their first experience in a Tusaine ballroom. And we thank and welcome Prince Jonathan, the Crown Prince of Tortall, as well as our own King Ain."

Vivenne, along with all the ladies in the ballroom, curtseyed deeply, bowing her head to both Prince Jonathan and King Ain. The noblemen bowed.

"But tonight," her father continued, "we also celebrate the birthday of my third daughter. Vivenne of Drell Valley turns seventeen today, and we welcome her into adulthood." His words had previously been punctuated with polite applause, but now it was more enthusiastic. Local families knew and loved Vivenne, and Tusaine nobles understood the importance of a seventeenth birthday. The Tortallans seemed to like Vivenne's company as well. Count Leander held up his hand, waiting for silence before he continued. "The king has asked for the first dance, and as he is her uncle and my sovereign, I could hardly refuse him."

The music began and Vivenne stepped down to meet her uncle on the dance floor. He was a very
good dancer, and led her very gracefully through the traditional opening rigaudon. There wasn’t a chance to speak – it was a very lively dance from southern Tusaine, and even for those, like Vivenne, who did not have to concentrate on the footwork, it could be difficult to converse due to shortness of breath – and she was a touch relieved to be free of the duty.

The dance was very short, and was met with applause when it ended. Instead of the traditional curtsey and bow, the king kissed her cheek and wished her a happy birthday. She thanked him and was immediately swept into another dance with a Tortallan knight, then three Tusaine nobles, and finally after that she found herself opposite Prince Jonathan.

"Happy birthday," he murmured as they walked side-by-side to the music, hands clasped. "You seem to be in high spirits this evening."

"I love to dance," she answered.

"I owe you an apology, Lady Vivenne, for how I behaved last night. The wine and my own restlessness got the better of me, and I’m truly sorry if I frightened or offended you."

She turned to face him, as the steps demanded. "I appreciate your apology," she said warmly and honestly. "And while I wasn't in the frame of mind for dancing then, tonight I can truthfully say that you're the best dance partner I've had all evening."

"I can say the same."

They continued their minuet with enthusiasm and expertise. Vivenne did love to dance, and it was clear that the prince was equally accomplished. When she curtseyed deeply and he bowed at the end of the dance, he asked if she would be willing to continue.

"I'm very sorry your highness, but I have other guests to consider," she said, smiling inwardly at the recollection of Sir Wyldon's comment about people indulging the prince.

She moved toward the side of the ballroom, where servants were carrying trays of champagne, wine and juice. She took a champagne flute and sat on one of the stiff chairs, watching the other dancers.

Lord Nikol sat down next to her almost immediately. "Mithros, but you're a sight for sore eyes, Lady Vivenne. Every man returning from war should be so lucky."

She blushed and thanked him. He was a large man with dark blond hair and green eyes. If she hadn't known him all her life he might seem imposing. "It seems so long since you last attended a dinner at Drell Valley. Is Lady Yvaine here with you tonight?" she asked, peering around the ballroom for her distinctive red hair.

"Alas, I came straight from the front," he replied smoothly. "I'm afraid there was no opportunity to see my wife prior to my arrival."

"You've been at the front all this time? I thought there was a cease in the fighting."

"Yes, there haven't been any skirmishes, but the army maintains its position on the border, and knights are needed to command and work with the army."

"Your dedication is admirable."

"Thank you," he replied, grinning. His teeth were straight and white, and his smile lit up his handsome face. "I admit that it's strange, having considered Tortall the enemy for so long, to see our women dance happily with them in a Tusaine ballroom."
"They've been nothing but polite," she said defensively, coloring.

"I didn't mean to remark upon your behavior or theirs," he said quickly, touching her hand in a reassuring manner. "It's an adjustment I have to make for the sake of peace. Though some faces," he said, glowering in the direction of Sir Wyldon and Lord Imrah, "will be harder to adjust to."

Her eyes flicked to the two Tortallan men who were chatting on the opposite side of the ballroom. "Do you speak of Lord Imrah of Legann or Sir Wyldon of Cavall?"

He blinked, momentarily confused. "I don't know the name of the man who maimed half of the knights under my command. It's the younger of those two."

"Sir Wyldon," she whispered, her lips numb.

Almost as if he had heard her, his eyes met hers and he tossed her the slightest of smiles.

She stood suddenly, turning to Nikol. "Would you care to dance?"

If he was taken aback by her forwardness, it did not show. "I did so love to dance with you when you were little," he replied, smiling up at her. "But this music calls for a more complicated step than I can gracefully manage. You should enjoy your evening with men who are light on their feet." He stood and bowed to her graciously, excusing himself.

She returned her empty champagne glass to a servant passing by and looked for her sisters. Solanne was dancing with a married baron from northern Tusaine and Margarethe was with her intended. It was their first reunion since the war, and they looked reluctant to part even for one dance. Therefore it was a great surprise when she saw Sir Wyldon dancing with Margarethe for the next dance.

He was light on his feet. He was not a natural dancer, like the prince, but he moved with precision. Margarethe was laughing, and Wyldon was smiling sheepishly. They conversed with ease as they danced, and Vivenne could not help but wonder what they spoke of.

"She likes your knight very much," a low and gravely voice whispered into her ear.

Vivenne spun around to find Gavrel smiling at her. He was an attractive man with reddish-brown hair that he wore in a long horse-tail. He had laughing blue-green eyes and a weak mouth that was masked with a close-cropped beard.

"You frightened me!" Vivenne teased.

"Because you did not expect me, or because you did not expect me to know of your secret?"

"Both," she said. "What do you think of him?" she asked, turning around to face the dancers again.

"I thought he seemed a little stiff at first, until he smiled. Margarethe tells me he likes riding and that you already are in love with his mount."

"His stallion is gorgeous," Vivenne said. "I'm surprised Father hasn't offered to buy him and put him to stud."

"Vivi, you're in a ballroom," Gavrel reminded her. "It's hardly the place to speak of such coarse things as breeding."

Vivenne snorted. "I'm rather sure that you and Margarry have discussed it quite a bit."
He laughed outright. "O-ho! Look who's gotten cheeky in my absence. Will you dance with me, my future little sister?"

She agreed, and they danced a minuet and a courante together, laughing throughout. She loved spending time with Gavrel because she did not have to be polite to him – he saw her as an incorrigible brat, and she rather liked having the freedom to be one. When they finished, she declined the offer to dance with another Tusaine knight, and instead joined Gavrel at her sister's side.

"I have juice for you, Vivi," Margarethe said. "You don't want to drink too much champagne or wine – you'll regret it in the morning."

Vivenne thanked her and took the glass, surprised to see that her sister had also pressed a note into her hand. She looked at her quizzically, but Margarethe simply smiled. "I would sit out on the terrace if I were you," she advised. "It's cooler out there, and you're flushed from dancing."

She took her sister's advice and walked out to the terrace, glass in hand. She was able to find a well-lit but secluded bench where she could sit and read the note.

'Lady Vivenne –

I owe the sincerest apology after my behavior this afternoon; I cannot justify or excuse myself, and I wish to speak with you so I can make it up to you. Please let me know if there is any way you can slip away from the festivities tonight. I remain yours,

- Wyldon of Cavall.'

She quickly drank the rest of her juice and walked back to the ballroom, handing off her goblet to a servant. She joined Margarethe, who was watching their father dance with Lady Colinne. He held her closer than the steps were designed and whispered into her ear.

"Do you think men have a favorite wife?" Margarethe asked. "One they love more than the others?"

"I'm sure they love them all, but in different ways," Vivenne answered, wrapping one arm around her sister's waist. Margarethe leaned her head against hers and they continued to watch.

"You should marry your Tortallan," she said with a small sigh. "Then you will never have to worry about him finding a younger, prettier wife."

Vivenne giggled. "But then I would have to worry about him leaving me to live with a younger, prettier woman."

"That's awful," Margarethe said, laughing. Her voice dropped lower as she asked: "Did you read his message?"

"Of course."

"And will you meet him?"

"Of course."

"It's warm in here. I worry that you might faint from the heat, being laced up as tight as you are."

"I'm not—" Vivenne stopped, seeing her sister's expression.
'The salon. That's where you can meet.' With that, she left Vivenne's side, rejoining her betrothed.

Vivenne saw that Sir Wyldon was the nearest non-dancing man in the room, so she crossed to him at once. "How goes your evening, sir?"

"Much better, now that you've spoken to me."

"I was hearing tales of you earlier," she said. "Lord Nikol – a longtime friend of the family – complains that you have maimed his underlings in combat."

"Yes, I know who you speak of," Wyldon said, his eyes hard as he gazed at Nikol, who stood on the opposite side of the room. "He has been glowering at me all evening because he is careless with the men whose safety he was charged with."

"Was he careless, or are you simply better skilled?"

He studied her carefully before answering. "A knight who is not as skilled can still win combat, if he is careful. It is my duty to be so – it is not only my life or my men's lives that I am fighting for. I'm protecting my family, my tenants – their families. When I led soldiers into the river to fight Lord Nikol's men, I knew that some would die. It was my duty to keep them as safe as possible, but still defend the ground we were sent there to hold. That meant taking advantage of weaknesses in Lord Nikol's lines. If I took out a large number of combatants, it's because he was ill-prepared and did not react well to my challenge."

She gazed at him thoughtfully as he spoke. There was much to admire in his outlook on duty. "Are all Tortallans as serious about their duties as you are? It's a very attractive trait in a person."

He colored slightly at the compliment. "While we are complimenting what we find attractive, I would be negligent if I did not tell you that you are absolutely breathtaking this evening. Would you be willing to dance with me?"

She was about to accept, but the music changed. It was a lilting piece she was not sure she was accustomed to dancing to. A small number of ladies were dancing, most of them in the arms of Tortallan men. "I-I'm afraid I don't know this dance."

He smiled down at her. "It's the waltz the prince wanted to teach you. You're an instinctive dancer and it's quite easy – I'm sure you'll be fine."

Leading her to the dance floor, he put one arm around her waist and held the other firmly in his hand. Her heart quickened at the heat of his hand through the delicate silk of her gown. Her mind involuntarily flashed back to the last time he had been so close.

He coached her through the first few measures, and she was relieved to learn that it really was a simple step. He was not technically as good a dancer as the prince, but she felt comfortable in his arms.

"Did you read the message?" he murmured. She at once realized the benefit of the waltz was not the arm held tight around her waist, but the very personal conversation such close positions afforded.

"Yes, indeed" she answered smiling up at him coquettishly. "Your penmanship if quite fine, sir knight."

"Thank you, but I'm more interested in your opinion of its content."
"I found it lacking in emotion."

The corners of his wide mouth turned up into a wry smile. "While not specifically stated, I assure you that it was heartfelt and sincere."

"In that case, I'm quite agreeable to your suggestion."

"Is it possible?" He looked at her with such hope and eagerness that she could no longer tease him with her aloofness.

"Do you know where the second floor salon is?" she asked. "I will be there."

The dance ended and he kissed her hand, his eyes possessive as he gazed into hers.

She barely had time to breathe before she was asked to dance by another man – Lord Nikol of Maderen.

"I thought you did not dance gavottes, my lord!" she cried in surprise.

He caressed her hand with his thumb, smiling warmly at her. "How could I refrain, with you so enthusiastically taking to all the dances?"

She blushed and pulled her hand away faster than the dance dictated.

"May I give you some friendly advice?"

"Of course you may. I appreciate any wisdom you can impart to me."

"The knight from Cavall can barely keep his eyes off of you. He has watched you all evening, and is doing so now," Nikol said, frowning. "It would probably be best to nip that in the bud before he takes any liberties."

Vivenne smiled sweetly at him. "I assure you that no undesired advances have been made, but I thank you for your concern." She was not happy that he had noticed Wyldon's stare, for that implied that he was overly interested in her.

They continued their dance in silence, and when asked for another she politely declined. "I'm afraid I'm entirely too warm," she said, wiping her brow. It was a perfect opportunity, she realized, so she pretended to faint.

He caught her easily, and with her head lolling backward in his arms, she could see through her lashes that Gavrel and Margarethe were running to her aid. Sir Gavrel scooped her up in his arms, and she remained limp in his arms.

"She was saying that she felt warm," Nikol explained. "The next thing I knew she had fainted."

"We should get her someplace cool," Margarethe said. "Gavrel, carry her up to the salon."

Lady Eiralys came to their sides, fussing over Vivenne. "We should take her up to her bedroom and change her out of these clothes," she said when they were out of the ballroom. "No doubt she laced herself up too tight."

"She just needs rest and cool air," Margarethe said. "She'll be devastated if she misses the rest of the ball."

"Fine then," her mother said, and they proceeded to take her to the salon.
Chapter Five: Coming of Age, part two

In the salon, her mother removed her shoes. "Sleep, my dear," she whispered, kissing Vivenne's forehead and leaving the room. Gavrel and Margarethe followed her, and the door to the room was closed behind them.

Vivenne sat up after a few minutes. The room was fairly dark – one candelabra was lit, and the moon outside barely illuminated the rest of the room – but there was enough light to view her reflection in one of the large mirrors. She was disheveled, but hoped he'd find it charming.

She had been waiting twenty minutes when she heard light steps on the stairs, and within moments Sir Wyldon was pushing the door open. He halted, gazing at her. "Either you are a marvelous player or you really were affected by the heat and the dancing."

She laughed. "It certainly does feel cooler up here."

He crossed the room in three long strides and she was in his arms again, kissing him hungrily.

"How did you get away?" she asked against his lips.

He pulled back, caressing her cheek with a calloused hand. "I've never cared much for parties of any sort, and half the knights who came here with me know that I'm beyond smitten with you after our scene with Prince Jonathan last night. It wasn't difficult to make them believe I had no interest in being there once you were gone; it's the truth."

She ran her fingers along the hard line of his jaw. "You said you wanted to speak with me, Wyldon?"

"I wanted to apologize in person for my rudeness this afternoon. I'm – unaccustomed to Tusaine ways, and I couldn't help but think of this ball tonight as being some sort of auction, with your future on the line."

"I'm sorry our customs are so odious to you," she said stiffly, pulling away.

He frowned, taking her hand in his and leading her to the sofa. "I'm trying to explain myself."

"Explanations are excuses," she replied, her voice hard.

"I know I was wrong," he insisted. "But I have to ask – do Tusaine women ever marry for love? Free of a marriage contract?"

She looked at him and saw an earnestness in his face that she'd never seen before. "Love marriages aren't unheard of," she answered slowly, feeling self-conscious. "My sister is madly in love with her betrothed – but it was still negotiated through our father. My father's wives were all marriages of love. He was fortunate to be from a wealthy family of decent standing, so he didn't have to worry about dowries or bloodlines."

"Though he married the sister of the king," Wyldon said dryly.

"Half-sister," Vivenne corrected. "My grandmother was a second wife, and therefore did not have the title of Queen Consort. So while Uncle Ain was a prince, and later made king, my mother was not in the immediate line of succession."
"And what is your standing?" he asked.

"I'm from a good bloodline and an even better fortune," she replied, her voice flat. "Which means that there will be a number of men who could be interested in me – though it's not certain. Solanne is my full sister, and I have not heard of any desirable offers for her hand."

"Could it be said that you are free to marry beneath you, then, since you have a substantial dowry and social standing of your own?"

She laughed. "Yes. That is where love-marriages are most advantageous. Gavrel is of an old family, but has little wealth to speak of. Margarethe pleaded with my father for days before he would consider it."

"And would you plead?"

"Yes," she whispered. "But I'm afraid he will not consider it."

"Here's the thing, Vivenne," he said, his voice soft. "I could easily fall in love with you, and I would hate to leave my heart in Tusaine. If there's no chance of us being together, I would rather walk away now before it grieves me more than I can bear."

This was not the idle flattery of the men at court who had playfully confessed love for her. His expression was open and sincere, and his words shook her.

"I – I want there to be a chance," she said. "I know so little of you, but every time I learn something new I'm shocked that I could like you even more." She ran her fingers from his temple, along his jaw, to the small cleft in his square chin. "And each time I see you, I have to refrain from touching you. The first time you took my arm I was dazed."

It was an invitation for him to kiss her again, and he accepted it enthusiastically. She wrapped her arms around him, loving the feel of his hard body beneath her fingertips as his lips caressed hers. His mouth slid down her neck, kissing her softly as he moved his hands to her hips.

This time she really did feel faint. "Tell me about Cavall," she whispered hoarsely, gently pushing him away.

"Cavall," he repeated, his breath ragged and his eyes tinged with lust.

"Yes," she answered. "I want to know everything I possibly can about you."

In the morning, Vivenne woke with a stiff neck and a very spoilt ball gown. She was lying on the sofa where she had spent half the night speaking with Wyldon. He had stayed with her until the moon no longer shone through the windows and the candles were burnt down to a nubs, then he had excused himself with a goodnight kiss and slipped off to his own rooms. She felt a warmth spread to her toes when she remembered the topics – personal and impersonal – and the caresses they had shared.

She stretched and retrieved her shoes, and marveled how even the sight of her dainty dancing slippers could make her think of him. He had teased her for her miniscule feet, and had even tickled them. Two days before she might not have thought him able to laugh and play the lover, but she had learned so much about him in one evening. They shared stories of their childhood, talked about their dreams and ambitions. "I could easily fall in love with you," he had said to her. The words made her grin like a fool.
When she went up to her bedroom, Margarethe was waiting for her.

"And how was your rendezvous?" her sister asked, voice barely above a whisper.

"Secret," Vivenne answered, sticking her tongue out.

Margarethe closed the bedroom door. "Oh, little sister, you don't get that luxury with me. This whole charade could be in the open, if I choose to say something."

Vivenne sighed and began to tug on the laces at the back of her gown. "It was fine," she said. "Help me out of this gown."

Her sister came to her aide, tutting. "It couldn't have been that fine if you're as tightly laced now as you were before the ball."

"I would never!" Vivenne shrieked, astonished at her sister's casual tone. "Do you mean to tell me that you and Gavrel-"

"Of course we have," she replied with a huff. "We were engaged and he was heading off to war."

"But what if he had been killed, and left you with child?"

"There are charms to avoid that sort of thing, you know. You can take the dress off now."

Vivenne slipped the over-robe off, laying it carefully on her bed. "I knew there were charms, but I didn't realize they were so easy to obtain." Heat rose to her face.

"Would you make love to him, if you had one?" Margarethe asked, her grey eyes searching.

"I – I don't know."

"Then there would be no harm in having one."

"Aren't you supposed to be telling me to wait until I'm engaged, at least? A husband surely will know if he is not the first person I was with."

"Nonsense." Margarethe waived a hand casually. "There's no absolute way of telling if a woman isn't a virgin. Men think they know everything, but they don't."

"I've heard that women bleed the first time," Vivenne said hesitantly.

"Some do. I didn't. I asked a midwife about it, and she says that some women do the work themselves – riding horses astride like you and I used to do probably did the trick."

Vivenne flopped onto the bed, arms stretched out over her head. "I can't believe you're encouraging me to seduce a man!"

Margarethe sat down beside her. "Not so much encourage you as prepare you for the option. Mother discussed all this with me before I had my first court appearance – she said it was better to know what my choices are and be prepared for them, because sometimes in the heat of the moment you don't have time to think about things."

Vivenne couldn't imagine prim and proper Lady Fanette saying any such thing, but something in her sister's face – perhaps the lack of a silly grin – made her believe it.

"Were there heated moments?" Margarethe asked, smiling wickedly.
Vivenne blushed. "We spent our time talking," she insisted.

"So I covered for you and kept your mother from checking in on you so you could talk?"

"There might have been non-verbal conversation," Vivenne admitted shyly.

Margarethe clapped her hands in delight. "Is he a wonderful kisser? He is rather handsome, with those high cheekbones. I thought him far too serious until I danced with him last night."

"He can be solemn at times," Vivenne agreed, "if he feels very important about something. But there's a light-hearted side of him as well – he's quick to laugh, and he can be so tender and sweet."

"And his kisses?"

"Amazing," she said with a giggle. "I know I have barely had the time to get to know him, but I could see myself spending my life with him."

"Are the men back to the peace conferences?" Vivenne asked once she had finished washing up. She coiled her long braid and pinned it at the nape of her neck. Her sisters were in her room, playing cards as they lounged on her bed.

"Some of them are," Solanne answered, discarding half of her hand. "Baron Chal is eager to get the treaty completed – his fear is that the army will be still be on the river when harvest-time approaches."

"We have only a few weeks," Vivenne said, frowning. It would take at least a week for some of the soldiers to reach their homes.

Margarethe looked up at Vivenne, her expression concerned. "Have the Tortallans made too many undesirable demands?"

Solanne sniffed. "Surprisingly no. It seems that the baron was working closely with a few members of the delegation – including the prince – and they were very evenhanded with their expectations. But they want us to decrease the size of the standing army."

"It's reasonable," Vivenne answered. "And I'm sure there would be provisions allowing us to increase the size in dire situations."

"That's what the baron has been stressing. Father says that he was having private meetings with members of the Tortallan delegation that King Ain wasn't aware of, in hopes that friendly conversation and reason would better work in a small groups."

"I think I encountered one of those conversations, actually," Vivenne said, recalling the day she'd come across Baron Chal and Wyldon on the riding path. "I'm glad it seems to be working well."

"The only concern," Solanne continued, "is whether the Tortallan king will accept any kind of treaty we design."

"What do we know of the king?" Margarethe asked with a sigh. "Is he benevolent? Is he vengeful?"

"I was told that he's a peace-loving man," Vivenne replied. "They call him the Peacemaker, in fact."
"One of the knights told you this?" Solanne asked.

"Yes. I was told that King Roald doesn't want to end up with another war, and he knows that having impossible demands will lead only to Tusaine nobles bristling and wanting revenge."

"There is an ounce of logic in that," Margarethe pointed out. "Perhaps, Solanne, you should remember that our nation started this war."

"I'm tired of such boring talks," Vivenne said, stretching. "Would either of you be interested in a ride?"

"I'm meeting Gavrel and mother to discuss wedding plans," Margarethe answered. "And Solanne said she'd help me."

"Perhaps Elin will go with you, if he's not involved in political debates," Solanne suggested.

Vivenne left her sisters in her bedroom and sought out her brother. He wasn't in the library or the kitchens, so the next likely place was the stables. As she approached, the sound of Lord Nikol's voice made her pause before entering.

"He's a beautiful creature, my lord." Vivenne recognized Elin's voice and peeked through the doorway. She spotted him in one of the stalls, brush in hand as he happily groomed the horse Lord Nikol had ridden to Drell Valley.

"I purchase only the best mounts in the realm," Nikol answered loftily. He opened the door to the stall and stepped inside, bridle in hand. As he reached for the horse's head, the animal shifted suddenly.

"Curse it, you clumsy boy!" Nikol growled savagely. He limped out of the stall in a rush.

Elin darted out, too smart to stay in a stall with an agitated stallion. He looked like he was about to speak when Nikol lashed out again. "He stepped on me! You and your kin claim to be so good with these horses, and yet you cannot prevent an animal from doing harm to its own master?"

"It was foolish for you to come into a crowded stall in the first place!"

Nikol moved suddenly, his hands shoving against Elin's narrow shoulders. Her brother stumbled into the stall door, barely keeping upright.

Vivenne decided to intervene. Afraid to embarrass her brother, he thought it would be best to pretend she hadn't witnessed it. "Good afternoon, my lord, Elin."

Nikol's whole demeanor changed the instant he heard her voice. He turned to her and bowed elegantly. "Lady Vivenne, how nice it is to see you today."

"Haven't you been taking part in the conference?" Vivenne asked.

"No, not at all," he replied with a laugh. "Some men are made for diplomacy and others for war."

Vivenne and Elin exchanged a glance. "I would hope," she replied, "that a well-rounded noble would be able to do both."

Nikol shrugged. "Then consider me woefully under-developed." He hung the bridle with the rest of the tack. "Were you looking for someone out here?"
"I wanted Elin," she replied. "We have a new stallion and I was trying to decide which mares are best suited to him."

Nikol raised his eyebrows. "That's rather indelicate for a female, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," she replied. "But Elin and I assist our father in the breeding of horses."

"To what end?" His expression was perplexed. "Do you hope to continue this after marriage?"

Vivenne shrugged. "Of course. I couldn't be parted from my beloved horses."

"And when do you find time to learn dances and do lady-like embroidery?"

Elin rolled his eyes, unbeknownst to Lord Nikol. Vivenne stifled a giggle.

"I don't like to be idle, my lord."

"You fascinate me," he said, smiling charmingly down at her. "Will you spend time with me after dinner, Lady Vivenne?"

It was a request to court her, she realized. "I-if my mother does not request that I play music tonight, I will gladly sit and talk with you." She made a plan, at that moment, to offer music for the evening.
Chapter Six: Conflicts and Confessions

The following week sped by with barely any contact with Wyldon. Most of the local guests left the castle the day after the ball, though some lingered through the week. The king left—he did not like to spend much time away from his wives. Vivenne's time was spent with the other guests, though she did manage two stolen kisses from her knight (in the library and the music room) as well as a chess match in the alcove while she was trying to avoid Lord Nikol. He had been persistent in his attempt to court her, and her mother seemed to like the notion. Each evening she found herself sitting next to him at dinner, and had to listen to his boorish stories about the war.

It wasn't that she didn't like hearing stories of battle. In fact, she actually found, during her chess game, that she liked to hear tales of knights' endeavors—it was just a matter of which knights. While Wyldon had a knack for making each story fun or thrilling or poignant, Nikol's were full of bravado and arrogance. You would think he won the war, Vivenne had thought on more than one occasion.

When she wasn't avoiding Lord Nikol, or seeking out secret shared glances with Wyldon, she was holed up with Lady Fanette and her sisters, planning a wedding. Gavrel and Margarethe wanted to be married by Midwinter, which meant that there were things to be arranged, beribboned and embroidered.

"It never fails," Lady Colinne said early one afternoon when the girls were eating fruit in the kitchen. She shook her dark head. "Whenever noblemen gather, their boasting eventually takes them outside to fight it out with swords. I'm surprised it took them this long."

"Have they all gone?" Margarethe asked. "I would like to see Gavrel if he's dueling."

Lady Colinne rolled her eyes. "Some day you girls will realize that men with swords are no more dashing than men with words."

"But until then, we watch the swords with rapt attention." Margarethe took Vivenne by the hand and dragged her out of the castle and through the gardens. There was only one place they could think of where the men would have enough space to hold their mock fights.

Two dozen men were in the paddock, leaning casually against the fence as they watched two men with swords. One was Prince Jonathan and the other was a Tortallan with a dark, secretive face—Sir Alexander of Tirragen, according to Margarethe, who had been frequently seated next to him at dinner. While the prince was good, this knight was incredible. The Tusaine knights jeered when the prince lost, but it was playful in nature; they clearly liked the prince. Vivenne was relieved to see this, as she had worried that the duels would be unfriendly in nature.

She and her sister were greeted enthusiastically. They made their way to the middle of the line,
eager to know who was next.

"It hasn't been determined yet," Gavrel said. He lifted Margarethe and sat her on the top rail of the paddock fence. "Do you have any requests, my darling?"

"I wouldn't mind seeing you fence," she said happily. Several men offered, and she chose one of the Tortallans.

While the men were fencing, Wyldon came to Vivenne's side and he explained various techniques to her. "Sir Gavrel is quite adept at feinting," he said, his voice low, "but Flynn of Disart is picking up his style."

"Do you think Gavrel will lose?" she whispered. She liked speaking with low voices, as it gave her an excuse to lean into him.

"Possibly. But he's showing a degree of versatility, so he might keep Flynn on edge long enough to land the blow."

The duel ended relatively quickly, with Gavrel finally getting a clear strike and getting a stab at Flynn's right shoulder.

"Well called," Vivenne said, smiling up at Wyldon. She gestured to the fence where her sister perched. "Help me up?"

He lifted her with ease, settling her on the high fence.

"You, Cavall!" a sharp voice cried. Lord Nikol stepped out of the throng. "You're awfully free with the women of Tusaine."

"I apologize if I have been too forward," Wyldon said politely, bowing to Vivenne.

"I assure you, there's no need," she said. "I did ask you, after all." She flicked her gaze toward Nikol and felt her face growing hot. What if he suspected? Would he take it to her father?

"Vivenne, you are too quick to look for the good in everyone," Nikol chided. "This man has kept one eye on you for the last week – if not since he first arrived here – and I've watched him use every opportunity to let his hands linger on you. While you might not question his intent, I certainly do."

The Tortallan knights bristled at the suggestion and Prince Jonathan stepped forward to speak, but Wyldon put his hand out to stop him.

"It is one thing to insult me, Lord Nikol, but I cannot stand by as you insult a lady's intelligence and judgment in order to excuse your own behavior. Why don't we air out our dislike for one another on the field?" His voice was cold and his gaze was level; his fist gripped the sword hilt at his side.

Lord Nikol sniffed indignantly. "I want nothing more than to express my dislike for you, as you so bluntly put it. As the challenged, I choose lances."

Vivenne saw a flicker of amusement cross Wyldon's face.

"Are you certain?" he asked, one corner of his mouth twitching as if he wanted to smile.

"Of course I'm certain!" Nikol snapped, eyes flashing. "Are you so poor at tilting that you attempt to slink out of it like a coward?"
"You really don't need to do this," Vivenne interjected. She did not understand Wyldon's smile, but she suspected he was a fair jouster. She knew, however, that Lord Nikol was quite good.

Margarethe shushed her. "Vivi, both men feel you have been insulted; let them fight it out."

Vivenne could see the wisdom in her sister's words, but would rather they accepted the insults. She did not want to see Wyldon hurt. The knights of Tortall were rallying around Wyldon, mixing words of encouragement with angry remarks about Nikol. And she decided. If Wyldon's own comrades were not afraid for him, she would trust in his strength.

She uncoiled the plait pinned at her neck and began unbraiding it; she had woven a ribbon into her hair that morning. "Let me at least thank the victor with a gift," she said, feeling bold. She wished she could give it directly to Wyldon, but would rely on his ability to earn it.

"I'll fight all the harder, Vivenne," Nikol said, taking her hand and kissing it.

Wyldon's eyes flashed angrily. "Thank you, my lady," he said stiffly. He bowed shortly, not meeting her gaze.

The men parted, each heading to a different part of the stables. As she watched Wyldon go, she hoped that he would forget her helpless lack of resistance when it came to courtly protocol; she hadn't enjoyed Nikol's gesture in the least.

"Well played, Lady Vivenne," Prince Jonathan interrupted her thoughts, sidling over to where she still perched on the fence. "You handled that in such a manner that both men could keep their dignity in the face of a loss."

"I believe they both have good intentions," she replied. She finished unbraiding her hair and pulled the pale yellow ribbon out. "Does Sir Wyldon have his own shield?" She fretted silently, wondering if she should pillage one of her father's.

"Sir Markus just left for Wyldon's rooms to retrieve his shield and cuirass," he replied. "Do not worry for his safety. I assure you he'll be properly equipped."

The knights made a make-shift rail, tying a line of rope from one end of the paddock to the other. It took several minutes before either Sir Wyldon or Lord Nikol were prepared to mount. Not only was there armor to be donned, but lances had to be tested and chosen.

The men mounted their horses and took their places at either end of the paddock. Vivenne knew that Nikol's warhorse was originally from her father's stable – he was a fast and powerful horse, stronger than Wyldon's bay. And Nikol was a larger man, so he was likely going to have a better pass than Wyldon.

Lances were distributed and the men began their charge across the field. Vivenne's stomach knotted and her heart thundered along with the hoof beats of the charging warhorses. The men lowered their lances and met with a horrific crack: Lord Nikol rocked in his saddle, but Wyldon remained perfectly upright. His lance had shattered.

"What determines a win?" Vivenne asked the prince. She had not been to many tournaments in her life and knew little about tilting other than its potential dangers.

"That pass would earn Wyldon six points in a tournament," Prince Jonathan said, clapping along with the other Tortallans. "It's one point for a strike, five for breaking the lance, and ten for unseating an opponent – all based on the accuracy of the hits."

The men took new lances and turned around to make their second run. Vivenne winced as their
lances crashed against each other's shields, and was disappointed to see that Lord Nikol tossed aside a broken lance as he continued to the other end of the field. Wyldon's lance was intact. He rocked in the saddle, but remained upright. He shook out his lance arm and repositioned his shield.

"Sir Wyldon is quite a bit smaller than Lord Nikol," Vivenne murmured to the prince. "How is he holding his own?"

Another knight answered her, though – Raoul of Goldenlake. "It's more a matter of precision and surprise. Wyldon is stronger than Lord Nikol expects him to be, and he knows exactly where to hit."

Prince Jonathan smiled wryly. "Raoul's compliments should not be taken lightly. He is among the few who is well-matched against Wyldon."

She looked at the dark knight appraisingly. He was roughly the same height as Lord Nikol, but was even broader. If Wyldon could successfully joust against Sir Raoul, he could certainly best Lord Nikol. While the lord's warhorse was more powerful, Vivenne could tell that Wyldon was a better rider. "Sir Wyldon is a very good tilter, then?"

The prince laughed. "One of the best in Tortall. It was generous of him to offer Lord Nikol a chance to choose a different weapon."

Vivenne fought the urge to smile, remembering the twitch of Wyldon's lips when Nikol demanded lances.

On the third pass, Lord Nikol was a hair slower bringing down his lance: he was thrown from the saddle. The Tortallan knights cheered, and even some of the Tusaine knights were applauding. Vivenne knew little of tilting technique, but it was clearly an impressive performance.

"The win goes to Wyldon," the prince told her, clapping.

"As we all knew it likely would," Sir Raoul murmured on her other side.

Lord Nikol stood slowly, removing his helmet and shaking his head. Wyldon slowed to a halt, dismounted and spoke shortly with him, his voice too low to be heard. Vivenne hopped down from her perch and walked toward him as he crossed the field to meet her, reins in hand.

For a moment she said nothing, beaming up at him as the wind whipped her loose hair into her face. "You ride well, Sir Wyldon, and joust even better."

"Thank you, my lady." A smile played at his lips.

"I would like it very much if you kept this as a token of my appreciation and awe." She tied her ribbon around his wrist. Leaning toward him, she stood on her toes so she could kiss his cheek. "I love you," she whispered. She turned away almost immediately, afraid to see his reaction to her confession.

An angry Lord Nikol made his way back to the stables, leading his horse. Vivenne ran to his side and walked with him, trying to match his stride. "I thank you for defending my honor, though I assure you Sir Wyldon has not offended me. Please don't be angry when I myself am not."

He stopped and looked down at her, his expression softening. "Forgive me, my lady," he said, shaking his head. "I assumed you could not handle yourself like a proper Tusaine woman. That man's lust is obvious, and I'll be damned if he has his way with you."

He continued on to the stables, leaving Vivenne standing in the paddock, feeling overwhelmed.
"I told him I love him." Vivenne was in Margarethe's room, preparing for dinner.

"And what did he say?" Margarethe asked, her grey eyes wide with surprise and delight.

"Nothing," Vivenne replied. She pulled on her stockings and slipped into her shoes – the heeled slippers she had worn the evening she had first spoken to Wyldon alone.

"He didn't reply?" she asked incredulously.

Vivenne sighed. "I ran away before he could answer." She sat down on her sister's bed, feeling forlorn. "Will he be turned away by the idea that I couldn't be brave enough to wait for a response?"

"Of course he won't," Solanne said from the doorway.

Vivenne was astonished when her eldest sister came over to sit next to her and placed one arm around her waist.

"You two whisper and think you have secrets, but I know you better than you know yourself, Vivi. I know you've been in love with the Tortallan since at least the night of the ball. I assume you two met up after you fainted in the ballroom?"

Vivenne nodded, dumbfounded.

"Don't worry – mother doesn't have an inkling," Solanne continued. "She doesn't watch you as closely as I do."

"You don't think he's disappointed that I could not face him after my confession?" Vivenne asked meekly.

"He might be disappointed," she acknowledged, "but I think it's more likely due to the fact that you didn't give him a chance to reply in kind."

"And are you disappointed in me?" she asked, looking up at her sister.

Solanne frowned. "Vivi, how could I be disappointed that you fell in love? Do I wish he was a Tusaine knight instead? Of course."

"We thought you would pitch a fit," Margarethe said casually. "You've been so cold regarding the Tortallans."

Solanne shrugged. "A sister's feelings should be more important than politics," she answered. "And he seems like a nice enough man."

"He is," Vivenne insisted.

"Mother will be disappointed," Solanne began, "but I think Father will not mind so much. Is he wealthy? Is he of good breeding?"

Vivenne flushed. "I don't know enough about Tortallan bloodlines to know if he's of good family. He is the Cavall heir, and I would guess it is a wealthy fief, judging by his clothes and his mount."

"Vivi's got good enough bloodlines that it doesn't matter," Margarethe asserted.
"I agree, but Father might not," Solanne replied. "And Mother wants you to marry Lord Nikol. She hasn't said as much to me, but I've overheard her speaking to Father about it."

"Lord Nikol is boastful and rude," Vivenne said with a scowl. "And he's made it clear that he intends to marry me, yet has not once considered that I might not agree."

"He's the kind of man who looks likes the perfect husband to someone who is not concerned about his lack of compassion or his inability to compromise," Margarethe said, pulling her pale blue overgown on and lacing it up the front. "I've never seen his wife attending a party or ball, so there's really no way of knowing how he treats those in his care."

"I have met her," Solanne said solemnly. "He's a very harsh man. You would be best to keep him at an arm's length, Vivi. Tonight is the meteor shower party, so if I were you, I would take Sir Wyldon aside and talk to him about speaking with father as soon as possible."
Chapter Seven: The Meteor-Shower

Dinner was held later than usual that night, due to the meteor shower. While it was to last for nearly a week, scholars insisted that the first night was the best for stargazing, and the prime viewing would be from midnight until two o’clock in the morning. A later dinner also implied more formal attire; although Vivenne was not dressed as luxuriously as she had been the night of the ball, she was wearing a new dress designed specifically for the first formal event after her seventeenth birthday. The bodice was low-cut, and the shimmering white silk was intended to cling to her figure more than any other dress she had worn in the past. Her sisters had insisted on curling her hair again (“The long curly tendrils are so fetching,” Solanne had said, ”and we want your knight to admit his love for you.”), and she wore it in a very loose upsweep, held in place with silver ribbons. She was instantly rewarded upon walking to the dining table: Sir Wyldon’s eyes lit up and he smiled approvingly at her. Lord Nikol, seated beside her again, appraised her openly.

Throughout dinner Vivenne kept her eyes away from Wyldon’s, still nervous about his reaction to her confession. Instead she spoke with Duke Gareth, situated as ever on her left side, and followed the conversation at her father’s end of the table. The meal was long and – for Vivenne – quite boring, but afterward everyone drifted toward the terrace and gardens. Closer to midnight they would make their way to the slopes of the eastern garden, where the best stargazing was possible.

When she sat on a garden bench, Lord Nikol came to her side yet again, offering her a glass of wine. "I apologize for my temper this afternoon," he said, sitting next to her. "It's something I have struggled with my whole life, I'm afraid."

She took the glass but did not drink. "I, too, have struggled with my anger in the past." She risked a glance at Sir Wyldon, but he was deep in conversation with another Tortallan knight. She did not want to speak to Lord Nikol, and silently prayed that Wyldon would rescue her as he had previously with the prince. "How long will we have you here in Drell Valley, my lord? Have you been asked to take part in the conference yet?"

He gave her his most charming smile. "I'm taking advantage of your father's hospitality, aren't I?"

"That's not at all what I meant to imply," Vivenne lied.

"I have personal business to discuss with your father," he said reluctantly. "The peace conferences take precedence, of course, so I haven't had much of a chance to make my requests." He looked down at her with an eager expression.

She took a large gulp of wine. She could not misunderstand his meaning – this man had every intention of making an offer of marriage. She did not know what kind of response to make; wishing him well in his conversation with her father would just encourage him.

"Do you mind, Lord Nikol, if I steal my sister away?" It was Solanne who was saving her,
Vivenne discovered. Her older sister's apologetic smile seemed sincere. It would be impossible to refuse her. "Our sister is planning her wedding, and every hour brings about a new crisis – we need Vivenne to offer an opinion."

Vivenne smiled meekly and followed her sister to a small pavilion at the far end of the garden. Margarethe was indeed waiting there with Elin, as expected, but there was no opinion needed from Vivenne.

"He was giving you his sleepy-eyed romantic look," Elin said. "I told Solanne to find some excuse to fetch you."

"Thank you," Vivenne replied, sitting down on the decorative bench between her siblings. "I was at a loss for words because he as good as said he intends to speak to Father about marriage. Why couldn't he have set his eye on Solanne?"

"Perhaps because I was clear to him that I would sooner run away to the Goddess's convent in the capital than marry him," she replied, her voice dry.

"Did you really?" Margarethe asked, giggling. "When was this?"

"Two years ago, when you were busy meeting Gavrel at court. Lord Nikol had just inherited his lands and was looking to take a wife. The advantage to being considered cold and practical is that you can be straightforward with a man you don't care for."

"So my downfall will be that I'm polite?" Vivenne asked incredulously.

"Just tell Father you're not interested in Maderan," Elin suggested. "It's certainly better than doing nothing."

"Or have Sir Wyldon speak to him tomorrow evening," Margarethe said, excited. "Cavall isn't as desirable a connection as Maderan, but he would have to consider it if Sir Wyldon speaks up first. Father has to know of his intentions before he can decide either way, after all."

Elin looked at Vivenne, one eyebrow raised. "I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"The fewer people who know, the better."

"He's a better choice than Lord Nikol, in any case," Elin said bitterly.

"He is a cruel man." She squeezed her brother's fingers gently.
For a moment neither spoke, both lost in their own thoughts. "If Margarethe thinks Sir Wyldon should speak to father, that means he's indicated that he wants to marry you," Elin said at last.

"Not in so many words," she replied. "But I believe he does."

"So you would move to Tortall to be with him?"

She nodded. "He wants to breed horses, Elin. I could help him."

"I would miss having your help here," he admitted. "But I guess I couldn't complain if you were married to a man you love and were doing what you've always wanted to do."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I would miss you, too, but I think we should wait and see what happens before we let ourselves grow melancholy."

"True," he admitted. He rose to his feet, pulling Vivenne with him. "Let's walk," he suggested. They paced together through the low-lit gardens. Elin captured several fireflies in his cupped palms before speaking again. "There are more options than you are thinking of. You have to take your life in your own hands, rather than letting other people decide it for you." He looked up at the sky. "Some people wish on stars, you know. I think wishing is futile. You have to make things happen."

She gazed into the stars above, thinking about his words. She had never considered herself the kind of girl who defied traditions. Could she go against the ideas she'd had all her life, and marry the man of her choice?

Vivenne was able to avoid Lord Nikol for the remainder of the evening; she meandered through the gardens, speaking with knights and diplomats. She was disappointed that Wyldon was not among those knights who approached her.

The hanging lanterns were extinguished and the guests were urged to make their way to the eastern gardens, where there were fewer trees to block the view of the sky. Vivenne hung back; she didn't want to spend her time amusing knights and lords when she had such butterflies in her stomach. Why had Wyldon not spoken to her yet?

Her eyes adjusted to the starlight in due time, and she could make out the silhouette of a man who had not followed the rest of the party. She knew it was Wyldon by the way he carried himself.

"Are you sure you won't be missed?" she asked.

"I worry that you will." They moved toward each other in the darkness. When he was close enough, she reached out to him and pulled herself into his embrace.

Rather than kissing her, as they had greeted each other every time they were alone in the past week, he simply held her tight against his chest, saying nothing.

"I was hoping you would want to spend some of this evening with me," Vivenne admitted.

"You wouldn't look at me during dinner."

She blushed, feeling grateful for the low light. "I was afraid."

"Because of what you said today?" he asked, running the back of his hand along her cheek. "You didn't give yourself the chance to see how pleased I truly was."
Relief overwhelmed her. "Merciful Mother, that's good to know," she cried, twining her arms around his neck.

"It is," he murmured before kissing her sweetly. "I love you, Vivenne. I want to marry you."

"I would like that," she whispered, suddenly shy.

He tilted her chin up so their gazes met. "I'm glad," he said thickly. Then he kissed her, and it was like being kissed for the first time.

Some time later he sat on a nearby bench, and she perched upon his knee, smiling down at him. "The first time I saw you – when the delegation arrived – I was intrigued. I thought you handsome and loved how you cared for your stallion. When I spoke with you that evening, I realized that I wanted to know you better. I've never felt this way about anyone, Wyldon." She kissed him, loving the feel of his hands resting on her lower back and thigh, his mouth against her own.

She did not know how long they sat together, kissing and touching one another in such a manner. They whispered promises to one another, and shared delectable secrets of the things they would prefer to be doing with one another, but remained level-headed enough to refrain from acting on most of their desires. She loved the way his voice became hoarse with yearning, the way his mouth felt against the skin at the base of her throat.

Things were becoming heated and Vivenne worried that her virtue wasn't safe in her own hands. She tilted her back, a sound escaping her throat as Wyldon's fingers tugged at her décolletage, attempting to give his lips more access. A shooting star flashed across the sky.

"Oh, look!" she cried, half disappointed when he lifted his head. But reason had to win the night, and the star shower was as likely a distraction as they were going to get. They stopped to look up into the night sky. Although Vivenne had watched meteor showers many times in her life, she still marveled to see the flurry of white streaks upon the star-studded blackness above. She leaned against Wyldon's shoulder, watching more meteors fall.

"My sisters tell me the negotiations are near completion," she said softly.

"Very close," he replied. "We want to send the soldiers home before summer's end."

"And that means you will be gone, as well."

"I won't leave until I can take you home with me," he said, squeezing her hand in his.

The next morning was less pleasant. Immediately after breakfast she was treated to a lecture from her mother about her distant behavior the evening before. And Lady Eiralys had brought up Lord Nikol's name several times within her tirade, no less.

"How long is he to stay here?" Vivenne asked the moment her mother paused long enough for her to get a word in.

"As long as your father wishes him to stay."

"Isn't it difficult, with all the other guests?" Lord Nikol was the only one who had remained who was not a part of the conference.

"Nonsense," her mother snapped. "He's been a friend of your father's for nearly ten years. He's always welcome in our house."
"I don't like him," Vivenne said softly.

Lady Eiralys softened. "You need to get to know him better."

"You've sat me next to him at dinner for the last week!" Vivenne snapped. "You and Father have encouraged me to spend every waking moment entertaining him – never mind the rest of our guests! – so I actually have had the chance to get to know him better!"

"Speaking to someone over dinner is not the same as truly getting to know who he is. I didn't know your father well until we were married."

"So would you have me marry the man so that I might determine then that I don't like him?"

"I would have you remember your place and not speak like this!" her mother cried, exasperated. "Your sisters were never so troublesome."

Vivenne sighed, resigned. "What do you want from me, Mother?"

"I want you to be a good hostess. Converse more with Lord Nikol. He has been your father's friend for years – you will discover desirable qualities in him yet."

Vivenne escaped to the music room for an hour's worth of practice. She half expected Lord Nikol to come in, the way he had been hovering over her for the last week, but the only interruption she had was Idranna, who wanted to play duets. Another forty minutes were passed with music and giggles until they headed off to a fitting for Margarethe's wedding.

But when Vivenne got to the ladies' drawing room, she found her sisters speaking in low voices to each other while Lady Fanette argued with the seamstress.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, wincing at the raised voices.

"They can't agree on fabrics," Margarethe shrugged. "Or anything, really."

"But we were taking the opportunity to discuss your… situation," Solanne whispered. She glanced at Idranna meaningfully. Such things were probably better discussed without their youngest sister present. "Can you help Idranna into her gown?" she asked Margarethe pointedly.

As soon as they were alone Vivenne leaned in close. "What's going on?"

"It's Lord Nikol," her sister said. "I heard him with Mother, and I'm pretty sure they were discussing you. She told him that she would make sure Father had time to meet with him tomorrow, if not sooner."

"Did he say it was about a marriage contract?"

"Not outright," Solanne answered with a frown. "But I'm sure that's what he is going to address."

"What do I do?" She sank to the sofa.

"I don't know, Vivi."
Chapter Eight: Desperate Times

Vivenne spent most of her evening with Lord Nikol, as she had promised her mother. She felt a small sense of security, knowing that if he was with her, he certainly wasn't speaking to her father about a marriage contract.

They sat together at one of the tables in the library: she wrote a letter as they conversed. She kept her face impassive and her paper from his sight as best she could while he droned on about his estate and all the luxuries it afforded.

For the most part it was a quiet evening. Other guests came in and out of the room, searching for particular books or simply a quiet place to hold a conversation. Nikol scowled every time someone entered the room; he was obviously hoping for time alone with Vivenne. She was grateful for each interruption, and for the men who sat reading in one corner for over an hour.

When they were finally alone, he moved his chair closer to hers. She slid her finished letter under another sheet of paper.

"You have seemed so skittish this evening, Vivenne," Nikol said, taking her hand.

"I – I am sorry, I've been rather distracted today."

"Are you wishing you were elsewhere?" His eyes searched hers, and she felt her face flush.

"I shouldn't be alone with you, my lord," she said, her voice low. "Even though you are a family friend, it would be indecent if anyone knew we were not chaperoned."

"Then we'll do our best to make sure no one knows." He swiftly closed the space between them, roughly covering her mouth with his own.

She pushed him away, wanting nothing more than to run from the room. "Please don't."

"You are unaccustomed to stolen kisses in empty rooms, aren't you?" He gave an arrogant smile. "I assure you that there is nothing to worry about. I think you will learn to like it."

"Kisses are for couples who are betrothed," she said, her voice flat.

"And I'm hoping that we could be in the near future," he explained. "If you will have me."

"I-I can't," she replied. "I'm flattered at your attention, but this isn't something I would want."

"I can wait until you do. I would be a very patient man, were I waiting for you." He pulled her close for another kiss, this time much deeper than before. She did not like the way he held her by her wrists, or pulled her closer every time she shied away.
"I must go," she murmured against his mouth, shoving him away and rising to her feet. She grabbed her papers and left the room in a rush, her head down.

In the main hall she was stopped by a commanding voice. "Lady Vivenne, are you all right?"

She looked up to see Prince Jonathan coming toward her, concern etched on his face.

"I – I'm not feeling well," she explained. "I'm going to head to my rooms for the night – but would you be willing to do me a favor, your highness?"

"Anything," he replied.

Vivenne folded her letter swiftly. "Could you please deliver this to Sir Wyldon? I was in the library when I found some historical information about Tusaine he had been asking me about, so I copied it out for him."

If the prince suspected a lie, he did not show it. He graciously took the paper from her and bowed. "I will deliver it immediately," he said. "Sleep well, my lady – I hope you are feeling better in the morning."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a low curtsey before she headed up the stairs.

She spent the next morning with her sisters, quietly embroidering delicate handkerchiefs that were to be Margarethe's when she started her new home with Gavrel. It was tedious work, but Vivenne needed something to keep her hands and mind occupied. After a quiet lunch in the ladies' drawing room, she stretched and stood. "I need a break," she announced. "If you need me, I'll be in the gardens."

Margarethe looked up at her knowingly, a playful smirk tugging at her mouth. "I'm sure we'll do fine without you. Enjoy your walk," she said.

Vivenne retreated to her room before leaving the castle. She looked over herself in her mirror, pleased with her unadorned afternoon dress. She had specifically chosen to wear her thinnest cotton overgown; it was the color of wheat, and lighter than any other frock she owned. Keeping cool would be important today. She twisted her hair up into a chignon, fastening it with a jeweled pin. Satisfied with her appearance, she ran down the stairs and out to the gardens.

She was glad to find very few people in the gardens, and none of them family members or servants who would report her whereabouts to her mother. She made her way to the pavilion where she had spoken with her siblings the night before, and within minutes Wyldon was in sight, wearing a bewildered expression. "I followed your instructions," he said with a smile, gesturing to the thin cotton shirt and breeches he wore, as opposed to his usual tunics. "I'm hoping you will explain."

"You'll have to trust me. Close your eyes," she said, taking him by the hand. She led him around the pavilion to a small stone and glass building. Upon entering, she was overwhelmed by humidity and heat. She guided him over a gravel path and paused in the middle of a narrow footbridge.

"You may open your eyes now," she whispered.

He did so, and she reveled in the surprise and awe on his face as he took in all the tropical vines and flowers throughout the greenhouse. Trees towered up two stories, their branches thick with coiled moss. Ferns and flowers carpeted the ground, flanking the narrow stream beneath them. "I've never seen anything like this," he murmured, reaching out to touch one of the creepers.
Lady Fanette was raised in the Copper Isles," Vivenne explained. "When Father proposed to her, he promised her a garden - nobles of Tusaine love their gardens, you know. So he found a way to give her the tropical jungles of her youth."

"And what did his other wives say when he built such a tribute to one woman?"

Vivenne laughed. "When he married Lady Colinne, he expanded the stables to more than twice their size. When he proposed to my mother, this castle did not exist – it was merely a hunting lodge. The men of Tusaine do not tend to show affection for one wife over another. There is no jealousy that I know of among my father's wives."

He shook his head, clearly unable to comprehend the notion. But instead of pressing the issue, he changed the subject. "Are all of these plants native to the Copper Isles?"

"I believe so," she answered, leading him further down their path. "Though some may be indigenous to other regions as well."

They walked through the greenhouse in silence, taking in the large ferns and lush trees. Toward the center of the building there was a koi pond surrounded by orchids and palms of varying sizes.

"It's beautiful here," he said, gazing up at the tall trees that grew to the peak of the glass structure.

"I thought you might like it," she said.

"It's almost," he said, stressing the word playfully, "as beautiful as you." He leaned down to kiss her thoroughly, one hand on the small of her back, the other at the nape of her neck, tangling in her hair.

He withdrew his hand only to pull the delicate pin from her hair altogether, and untwisted the coil of hair so it hung down her back. "Mithros, but I love your hair," he murmured in her ear, following up with more kisses.

"You're making me dizzy," she said, her voice low and shaking. She led him to the low retaining wall, urging him to sit down. "I wanted to discuss something with you, but I don't even know where to begin," she fretted, standing before him.

He rested his hands on her waist and looked at her with such calmness that she relaxed. "Whatever it is cannot be so terrible," he said, his brown eyes affectionate.

She took a deep breath. "Lord Nikol intends to ask my father for my hand, and he may do it as soon as today. I would beg you to speak as soon as possible, but I'm afraid it won't do any good. My mother adores Nikol, and will take up his case."

"And what about your opinion? Would it sway your father?" Wyldon asked, his face unreadable.

"My mother's heart is set so much on this match that I fear my father will listen to her pleading over mine."

Wyldon digested her words slowly, dropping his hands to his side and clutching the stones beneath him. "I can speak with him today," he decided. "I wanted to wait until the peace talks were over, but I can ask him as soon as I see him."

"But that could jeopardize the entire conference," Vivenne said. "How long do we have until the treaty is finalized?"
"As little as two days. If we can't reconcile a few key issues, it may be as long as a week."

"We cannot wait so long as that," she said with a sigh.

"I would marry you right now if I could." He gazed up at her with such earnestness that it pained her. His expression shifted, as though he had come to a decision. "Marry me, Vivenne," he urged. "Right now."

"You would risk my father's wrath?" she asked.

"Yes," he said firmly. "Would you be willing to leave this very night if necessary?"

She nodded. "I can't bear the thought of not being married to you," she said, resting her arms upon his shoulders and leaning her forehead against his. "You would have me as your wife?"

"If you will have me," he answered.

She kissed him lightly, then began searching through her pockets. "I don't have any ribbon," she muttered. "Of course this would be the one day I don't braid my hair."

Wyldon stood, holding out the pale yellow ribbon she had bestowed upon him after his successful tilting.

"You've been carrying it in your pocket?" she asked, surprised.

"You gave it to me," he replied, an incredulous look on his face. "Of course I carry it with me."

She took the ribbon and kissed him swiftly. She took his right hand in her left – handfastings were done with primary hands, and Wyldon was right-handed – and laced her fingers through his.

"I bind myself to you of my own free will, to take you as my husband," Vivenne said shakily, beginning the traditional vows for a marriage in the Goddess's temple.

"As I bind myself to you, I promise that I will never intentionally cause you pain," he whispered, caressing her cheek with his free hand. She felt as though her joy might choke her. She'd not yet imagined those words in his voice.

She wrapped the ribbon around their wrists with her right hand. "I will share our burdens, so our spirits may grow in this union."

"And I will take the heat of our anger and use it to temper the strength of our bond." He wrapped the cord around their wrists a second time.

His eyes were hot and intense on hers and she almost lost her voice. "We will never give cause to break the honor we promise each other," she whispered.

"We will dream together to create new realities and new hopes."

Together they wrapped the ribbon one final time.

"We will look for the brightness in life and the positive in each other," Vivenne recited.

"And so the binding is made, for as long as we love each other," Wyldon affirmed. *Let it be forever,* Vivenne wished.

With her help, he tied the ribbon and knotted it. A shimmer of silver gleamed from the pale yellow
thread - the Goddess's blessing, Vivenne suspected. She beamed up at Wyldon and stood on her toes to kiss him.

"So mote it be," they murmured against one another's mouths.

She moved to untie the knotted cord, but he stopped her with his free hand. "In Tortall we have a tradition that should be easy to follow," he said with a wicked grin. "The knot cannot be untied until the union is consummated."

"I would hate to start this marriage on the wrong foot," she acknowledged with a throaty laugh, pulling him close to her.
Chapter Nine: Negotiations and Love Songs

The evening was a cheery one, and Vivenne was grateful. It would be hard to pretend to be somber when her heart was so light. The peace negotiations were going well, it seemed, judging by the relaxed expressions on the delegates' faces. At dinner she was seated next to the prince again, and he told her that they hoped to have the final draft of the treaty written and maybe even signed in the morning. "If all goes according to plan," Duke Gareth added, from her left. "There is still room for disagreement."

"But soon you will be rid of your pesky visitors," the prince said with a smile. "And your life can return to normal."

She grinned back at him, amused at how wrong he was. "You assume that your group is unwelcome, but I assure you it has been delightful."

Throughout the previous week she had spent her dinners refraining from gazing at Wyldon. She watched him only when he spoke, and occasionally snuck glances when she was certain few people would notice. But now she looked at him deliberately, even giving him a secret smile, which he returned.

The afternoon with him had been overwhelming and amazing, and she couldn't help but flush with joy at the memory. It wasn't until after their second bout of lovemaking that they had removed the yellow ribbon, only then noticing the fine silver scars on both of their wrists, marking where they had been joined.

Wyldon had studied them in awe. "Do all married couples have them?" he asked, his voice reverent. "I've never noticed them before."

But Vivenne understood. It was the Merciful Mother's sanction – so they could later prove that their handfasting was legitimate in the Goddess's eyes.

"How should we tell everyone?" he asked when she explained her theory.

"I'll tell my family," she answered. "But please give me some time – if they are unhappy they might send us both away. Let me have the time to ease them into the notion."

And yet, now gazing at him across the table, she wanted nothing more than to shout to everyone that she married Wyldon of Cavall.

"Spirits are so high," Count Leandre said loudly, "that I would like to add to them by announcing that I have accepted Lord Nikol's offer of a marriage contract with my daughter, Vivenne."

There was a gasp – Margarethe's – and a clatter as Vivenne dropped her fork onto her plate. There was an awkward pause as she glanced around at table to see so many eyes on her; guests were
whispering to each other. Lord Nikol beamed from his seat next to her father.

Her eyes flicked to Wyldon; his expression was stony as he watched Lord Nikol.

"I-I'm sorry Father, but I can't," she said, forcing herself to look at the head of the table. Her heart pounded and her palms were suddenly clammy.

The hum of murmurs around the table fell silent. Vivenne could feel eyes on her again.

"I am truly sorry for any offense, Lord Nikol," she said, gazing at him levelly. "My father agreed to your offer before speaking to me. But I cannot enter an engagement."

"Oh, Vivenne," Lady Eiralys whispered, her eyes wide.

Lord Nikol rose to his feet, his expression furious. "What?"

Her father stood as well, laying a calming hand on Nikol's shoulder. His dark eyes were dangerous as he demanded, "Why not?" His voice was low with rage.

Vivenne gulped. She could not recall ever seeing her father quite so angry. Her eyes flicked to her mother, who was pale. She could not bring herself to say the words that would scandalize the family. "I cannot," she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Vivenne," her father glowered. "Explain yourself – why not?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but could find no words.

"Because she is already married," Wyldon said, standing boldly.

"In my study," her father ordered. "Now."

"Where are you going?" Count Leandre asked pointedly when the prince followed Vivenne from the dining room and into the study.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but this is a matter that involves my countryman," Jonathan replied coolly. "I can't let him face the wrath of prominent Tusaine men without someone at his back."

"And Duke Gareth?"

The prince shrugged. "Uncle Gareth is the King's Champion – he is my father's voice and sword arm when he is unable to travel. Should anything become political in this conversation, Duke Gareth has the right to speak on behalf of the king's interests."

"This is madness!" Nikol cried angrily. "This is a personal matter, not an international one! You speak of politics when it's more the question of a girl's disobedience!"

"By marrying a man of Tortall," Duke Gareth pointed out. "Let us see how this plays out before we assume it's a simple family affair."

Vivenne's cheeks burned. She stood between her father and Lord Nikol in front of the large mahogany desk. The Tortallans were sandwiched between them and her father's personal guards, who stood on either side of the door. She found reassurance in Wyldon's steady gaze. He mouthed, "It's all right." She understood him: the Goddess recognized their handfasting, and therefore it was not something her father or Nikol could thwart.
Her father finally addressed her, looking down his beak-like nose. "Have you married this man?" he asked, his voice low and stern. She had never seen him glare so furiously at her; she could not imagine him forgiving this transgression.

"Yes, Father," she answered bravely. She pulled up the silk sleeve of her gown, showing the silver scar to her father and Lord Nikol. "This was burned into my wrist after the handfasting," she explained. "Wyldon has a matching scar."

Nikol towered ominously over her. "Certainly he forced her!"

"Of course not," she replied loftily. "The Goddess would not have left her mark on us if I hadn't entered the marriage freely."

"We can have it annulled," her father said darkly. It was not common for a marriage to be terminated in the Goddess's temple, but it wasn't unprecedented, if the couple had not consummated their union.

"We can't," Vivenne said, hearing Wyldon's voice overlap her words with the same phrase. She glanced at him; he did not blush as she did.

Nikol moved quickly, slapping her across the face. She staggered and fell back against her father, holding a hand to her stinging cheek. Her father's arms moved protectively around her.

Wyldon charged at Nikol, but was not the first to reach him: Prince Jonathan and Duke Gareth flanked the lord, each of his arms held in their grip. The prince pressed a letter opener to the large man's throat. "You dare to strike a woman, let alone a woman with the Great Mother's mark on her flesh?"

"This is how you repay the men who fought to keep your country intact?" Nikol demanded of Vivenne, his voice shaking with rage as he fought against the men's restraint. "This is how you thank the men who shed blood for your honor? You're a traitorous little bitch!"

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't kill you right now, Nikol," Wyldon growled.

"Get off me!" Nikol shouted, trying to break free, but Jonathan's hold tightened.

"If I let go of you," Jonathan said icily, "it will be either to have you taken to a temple court or to hand you over to Sir Wyldon."

"While she has imprudently become your wife, Sir Wyldon, I am still her father and she is mine to defend." Her father motioned for the guards. Vivenne noted, even in her shock, that they had not moved to restrain the Tortallans, but waited with swords out, glaring at Lord Nikol. They stepped forward and began to wrap his hands in a leather thong. "Take him to the nearest temple. The warrior-maidens of the Goddess will deal out his punishment."

No one spoke while Nikol was dragged from the room. Her father hugged her protectively. "I'm sorry I didn't realize his character sooner," he murmured. "I should have asked you how you felt about him before accepting his offer."

He released her, frowning. "But we still have this to address," he said, gesturing helplessly to Wyldon.

"There's little to discuss," Vivenne said boldly, raising her chin defiantly. "You can't end it simply because you don't like it. I'm of the age to marry by Tusaine law and our appeal to the Goddess would be recognized in any court in the Eastern Lands."
Her father frowned. "I'm not happy with this at all, Vivenne."

Prince Jonathan spoke up, his face determined. "I know an argument between a young woman and her father should not involve diplomats, but I feel we must speak up – it was, after all, a member of our delegation who made the offence."

Count Leandre stared at him with confusion.

"There is still one sticking point in our treaty, and that is the issue of rights to travel freely through the borderlands east of the Drell River. Tortall would prefer no access, still cautious after the months of war that crippled the border towns. The people of Tusaine naturally fight for access to that river, as you have no ports.

"This was a crucial point with my father and his council. We were to agree to limited access – trade only, no military units or supplies – if Tusaine offered something in return. But as of yet nothing has been suggested to warrant any bend in our stance."

Vivenne wasn't completely certain where the prince was taking the conversation, but she liked the small smile that crossed Duke Gareth's face. Looking at her husband, she saw a curious expression as his dark eyes flicked from the prince to her father and back.

"We would offer this exchange: do not challenge the marriage of Lady Vivenne to a Tortallan noble. She will remain married to the man of her choosing and you will treat it as though you had chosen him yourself. He is a good man from an honorable family, and I believe you would have seen him as an ideal match, were it not for this war and his nationality.

"And in return," he continued, "we will allow trade access to the Drell River." His bright eyes rested on the count's face. Vivenne wasn't quite sure why he would make this offer, knowing that their marriage would be defended in any temple or court. "Is this something you could agree to?"

"It's something to consider," her father replied, looking thoughtfully at the prince. "Vivenne, are you sure? Do you love this man?"

"Yes," she replied emphatically, reaching out to take Wyldon's hand in her own.

"We should get to work, then," her father said after a long moment studying Vivenne. He gestured for everyone to take seats. "Let us work out the details."

Vivenne had no ideas of what qualified as a substantial dowry, but she could tell from Duke Gareth's expression that her father's initial offer was barely adequate.

He had begun to respond, but she interrupted. "No dowry is necessary if my father lets me take my horses with me."

The duke looked at her, surprise and disappointment etched on his face. "This isn't a time for sentimentality," he advised. "Sir Wyldon must be financially compensated for agreeing to provide for you until the end of your life."

Count Leandre scowled. "Had Sir Wyldon spoken to me before taking matters into his own hands I would have been happier to oblige. But Vivenne does not plead for beasts she loves to ride. She is more far-thinking than you credit her."

"What do you mean?" asked Prince Jonathan, leaning forward in his chair.
"He means that I would like to keep my stallion and three mares because I have every intention to breed more," Vivenne answered. "They were gifted to me, and I would ask to take them with me when I leave for Tortall."

"What do you make of this, Wyldon?" the prince asked.

"I expected nothing but her hand in marriage," he answered honestly. "Whatever makes Vivenne happy will please me."

Her father smiled, seemingly glad to finally be at the better end of this arrangement. "I would agree to that."

"But I do not," Duke Gareth replied coldly. "Your daughter is accustomed to a lifestyle that is more opulent than that of Cavall, if you will pardon me, Sir Wyldon, for saying so. Wyldon is an heir, certainly, but right now he is only a knight. Would you have your daughter sell her earbobs so that she might have dresses for the new season? And when they have children – would you want her to be unable to travel to Drell Valley so that she might raise these children knowing their family?"

Vivenne did not know what to make of her father's expression. He was uncomfortable, at least.

"While I can completely understand that you would not want to grant the considerable dowry you might have in normal circumstances," the duke continued. "And while we will make accommodation for any horses you give Lady Vivenne, we would still expect some kind of financial acknowledgement of their union in order to proceed with the peace treaty."

Her father sighed. "I offer her half of what I am giving as her sister's dowry, adjusted, naturally, for the inclusion of the cost of the animals. My instinct is to give less than that, but I understand that there are things we are unprepared for – her bridal trousseau, for example." He took a sheaf of paper and pen, compiling a list. "There are, of course, things she will be taking with her – clothing, some jewelry, personal effects – we will have those packaged and ready to leave when the delegation sets out. Unless you would like to stay longer, my dear."

Vivenne exchanged glances with Wyldon. He nodded slightly, as if telling her it was her decision to make. "I would prefer to stay after the delegation leaves," she answered. "It will give me a few more days with my family. Including you, Father."

Her father nodded and slid the paper to Duke Gareth, who gave it to Sir Wyldon without glancing at it.

Wyldon's eyes read over the list twice before he spoke. "This is an acceptable offer as far as I am concerned," he said, giving the sheet back to the duke.

Duke Gareth nodded curtly upon his review. "Satisfactory," he agreed. "Now we will have to incorporate all of this into the final treaty. You will have access to the river, as Prince Jonathan indicated. And if you don't mind, Sir Wyldon, Lady Vivenne, my prince," he bowed slightly, "Leandre and I need to work out the language of this contract."

The three of them stood, Jonathan and Wyldon bowing while Vivenne curtseyed. She kissed her father's cheek, then left his study with Wyldon and the prince. They paused in the hall when Wyldon suddenly stopped short.

"Your highness," he said haltingly. "I-I thank you for doing everything in your power to assist us."

Prince Jonathan smiled casually. "I should thank you two, actually. This treaty would not have
been accepted without addressing the river rights – my father did not ask me to withhold them, either. But I didn't want to offer as easy a settlement as he had suggested; the last thing we need is another war because my father is too lenient and others continue to think Tortall can be easily marched over. I thought that if the leaders of Tusaine felt they were paying a precious price, it would be worth throwing into the treaty. And you, Lady Vivenne of Cavall, are precious to us all."

Vivenne blushed, unsure if she should admire or be wary of this man.

"Someday I will repay this debt," Wyldon insisted.

"Yes," Jonathan agreed, appraising him. "I will remember you, Wyldon, if I ever need to call upon you. But for now think no more of it. You have much to celebrate." He sauntered back to the dining room, where the nobles were still twittering over the day's revelations.

And suddenly it seemed as though it had been days since she and Wyldon had been alone. She threw herself into him, twining her arms around his neck as his own firmly encircled her waist. "Lady Vivenne of Cavall," he said against her ear, his voice scratched with wonderment. Then, with a laugh, he spun her around in sheer delight, adding to her dizziness with the fiercest kiss she'd yet had from him. She answered in kind, gleefully realizing that there were endless kisses still to be had.

- The End -

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!