

Chapter 3 – The Beast

I stood unmoving in the furthest shadows of the entryway. My carriage should return at any time, and I could only hope whichever princess had won the tournament possessed enough sense to be inside it. If she had lost courage and run, there would be another kingdom cursed. At least she had the wits to obey my instructions and come alone. I had been able to ascertain that much, at least, from the glimpses my father's mirror had deigned to show me. My carriage was safe, but it wouldn't fit a troop of guards.

The mirror hadn't given me a good look at her face. I had spent the last weeks in uncomfortable suspense. Calling the Tourney had been a final, desperate move. I hated the necessity of stooping to such depths—Palinar, the greatest of all the kingdoms, needing to force a princess into marrying its heir.

But time was running out.

The worst possibility was that it wouldn't even work. I had hoped the betrothal itself would be enough to free me, but it had not been—clearly. And now I couldn't imagine any of the princesses I had known since childhood breaking my curse. Not when most of them were far too young, and I had never liked them much to begin with. But I had been unable to come up with any other options.

I growled, low and deep, the sound the only physical outlet of frustration I allowed myself. Several servants rustled around me, but none of them spoke. They were anxiously awaiting the princess, my betrothed, as well, although they were all pretending they had some other valid reason for lingering in the entrance hall. There had been much discussion about who would win, although rarely in my presence.

Only Matthew, my old stable master, had dared to broach the issue with me directly. "You made the right decision," he had said. "You placed your trust in the ancient laws, and they will not fail you."

I had actually laughed in his face, one of the few sounds I was still capable of making. The ancient laws had destroyed my kingdom, my family and my life. I wouldn't have turned to them if there had been any other option.

It had probably been one of the older girls who had won—perhaps Emmeline or Millie. I ground my teeth, and a snarl emerged. I couldn't imagine a life shackled to either of them. I forced myself into silence. Any princess from the lands would be preferable to the life I currently lived. And even if she wasn't, I had no other choice. Things could not continue as they were.

At least, I would be able to search for Adelaide once I was free.

Noises outside filtered through the heavy doors. The carriage had arrived. The sounds of the servants stopped and then increased as several of them rushed forward. They ignored the small door I usually used to enter and exit and began unbolting the main ones. I could only imagine they hoped to impress their new mistress.

The heavy wood swung slowly open, and I leaned forward, my keen eyes taking in the small figure dwarfed by the doorway. She appeared slightly rumped after her long journey, and her skirt trembled slightly, betraying the state of her legs beneath.

A surge of satisfaction rushed through me. Palinar could still inspire awe, even if it was now of a different kind. A moment later the feeling was forgotten as I examined her face. A stranger! How was such a thing possible? Was she not the winner of the Tourney, then? What sort of trick were the other kingdoms attempting?

A smaller part of me noticed that despite her condition she remained beautiful, her face suggesting a quiet strength. The crash of the closing doors jarred me from my thoughts. The girl spun around, her face showing a glimpse of her fear. She moved quickly towards the door and discovered the small one I usually used, unlocked as it always was.

She unlatched it, and for a moment I thought she would flee. But instead she merely closed it again and turned back to the entryway. Just testing her exit, then. I reluctantly appreciated the good sense of such an action when entering the unknown. Not that there was anywhere safe for her to run.

I had ordered a fire lit in the fireplace, and the girl moved toward it. At first, she seemed merely appreciative of the warmth, but then a strange expression transformed her face. A wave of panic and terror swept out from her, hitting me with such force that it almost overwhelmed my own emotion. Through the foreign sensation came a name, almost more feeling than word. Lily. Was that her name, then?

She sank into an armchair that always stood beside the fire, her whole body shaking. Curiosity filled me. Who was this strange girl, and what was happening to her? Why had she come here to face me in my isolation?

Unconsciously I took a step forward, and she leapt to her feet at the soft sound of my footfall. I got another clear glimpse of her face just as her expression changed from burning anger to fear. I couldn't understand the rapid changes or intensity of her emotions. I wished I could reach out into her mind and pluck her thoughts.

She seemed to control her fear, however, leaning toward me in the darkness. "Who's there? Show yourself."

I hesitated for a moment and then stepped forward into the light. She gasped as she saw me, moving behind the armchair. I could see the fear and disgust on her face, and fury consumed me—at my father, at the godmothers, at everyone. That I, the strongest and most handsome of the princes—heir to the throne of Palinar—had been reduced to an object of revulsion.

But then something in her face changed, softened. She met my eyes and hesitation replaced my anger. Could she see me underneath this facade? It didn't matter if she was a princess, really. As long as she could break the curse. Was such a thing possible?

She stepped back around the chair and dropped into an elegant curtsey. I noted she didn't sink as deeply as required from a common subject. Instead she gave me the greeting of one royal to another. But how could that be? There was no royalty in these lands I did not know.

She was clearly waiting for me to speak, and I silently cursed the affliction which prevented me from doing so. Something flashed in her eyes, and I thought she might turn away from me. But instead she spoke, once again filling me with hope.

"Greetings. I am Princess Sophia of Arcadia. I assume you are Prince Dominic, my betrothed."

Princess. Betrothed. So she *was* the winner of the Tourney. I gave a slight bow to acknowledge her words, while my mind raced. Arcadia? I had never heard of such a kingdom. The whole situation seemed beyond impossible.

Sophia. I rolled the name around in my mind. It had both strength and softness. I examined her face, my eyes caught by a single tear which rolled down her cheek. What circumstances had led her here? If only I could speak.

Something changed inside her, because the sadness disappeared, swallowed up by a return of her earlier anger. "They call you the Beast," she said, and I stiffened at the name. "But I had hoped some part of the royal prince remained."

My eyes narrowed at the insult.

"I see now that I was wrong," she continued. "How far noble Palinar has fallen."

How dare she? She knew nothing of my circumstances: if I could speak I would. Fury whipped through me, but it couldn't entirely cover the shame beneath at the truth of her words.

It took me a moment to realize the low growl filling the room was coming from me. Princess Sophia stumbled backwards against the chair, her mouth dropping open, her eyes fixed on my fangs.

I cursed silently and stepped forward, wishing to reassure her. But at my movement, she almost fell backwards, rushing to place the chair between us again.

Despair overwhelmed me at this reminder of my hideous state. I would never be free. My kingdom would remain fallen, and my sister forever lost. This beautiful princess could never look at me with anything but disgust. I threw back my head and roared out my anger and pain.

When I opened my eyes again, she was gone.