

## Duty

Alanya carefully skirted out of the servant girl's way, watching her carry a huge plate of food as she walked down the corridor. Any other day, the young noblewoman would stop and watch the staff of the castle go back and forth about their business, but today she could not be late. Her father had sent a message to her chambers a few seconds before, ordering her to come see him and her mother at once. The note did not divulge what this supposed meeting was about, but Alanya knew that if her father had put in the effort to send it to her directly instead of sending a servant to relay it, she knew it must be important. Over the years she had learned not to take him lightly in such situations.

Alanya's heels rapped smartly against the white marble floor as she walked to her parent's rooms. She preferred never to set foot in there again, after the incident with Leona three years ago. But whenever she was called, she had always taken care to be in the company of others. Except for today. Here she was, all alone in her haste to be on time. Taking a deep breath, she clenched her fingers into a fist as she spoke to the guards standing beside the doors of her parent's chambers, their faces like stone.

"My father is expecting me," she told them. They nodded and announced her entrance.

"Lady Alanya is here to see you, my Lord."

"Enter," commanded the deep, mighty voice of her father from within the chamber. She did as she was bid, crossed the threshold and tried to stop her palms from sweating. Her footsteps were measured and even as she approached her parents, who sat rigidly on high backed, velvet chairs. The heels of her shoes dug into the thick, brightly colored rug as she steeled herself for the upcoming encounter.

"Father. Mother," Alanya said politely, curtsying deeply to each parent.

"Daughter," Lady Arden replied tersely. Lord Arden did not deign to respond verbally; he only gave a slight inclination of his head towards his younger child. As one of the most powerful men in the kingdom of Briador, his mere presence commanded respect. Most of the time, it was not necessary for him to use words.

Alanya expected nothing less, and arranged herself in the most docile way possible. Her hands were clasped demurely into front of her, and her face was a mask of respect, intelligence, and obedience.

"You wished to see me?" A simple question, and a dangerous move to speak without being addressed first. But from Alanya's lips, it was an innocent inquiry from a dutiful daughter to her powerful parents. Her father loosed a weary sigh, and exchanged a meaningful look with his wife.

"Your seventeenth birthday is coming up," he said suddenly.

"Yes, in three days," Alanya replied, wondering what this could be about.

"There is a . . . family secret we must tell you."

"Regarding my birthday?" Ignoring her query, Lord Arden opened his hand. Flames danced lazily in his palm, a thin curl of smoke slowly rising into the air above them.

There was a crash as Alanya darted back and knocked into a table, gray eyes wide with equal parts fear and astonishment. Her composure forgotten, she tentatively drew closer to her father's flame engulfed hand with an almost disgusted expression.

"How. . . are you doing that?" she asked, her voice shaky with disbelief. "Is this witchcraft?"

“No, it’s an ancient, sacred, gift.” Lord Arden reached out his flaming hand, and fixed Alanya with a demanding look. “Touch the flames.”

“Touch them? With all due respect, Father, are you asking me to touch fire? I’ll burn!”

“Do as I say.” His voice was the same as before; the only indication of his annoyance were the flames cupped in his hand, which had grown slightly larger than they were before. Lady Arden let out a small choking noise, which went unnoticed by her husband.

‘He must be mad’, Alanya thought to herself, still caught off guard from the initial shock. But surely a small burn on her finger was preferable to Leona’s fate for disobeying their parents. She bit her lip, trying not to remember her elder sister’s screams as she was dragged away from this very room, and how she never returned. All because she refused to marry a man of their parent’s choice.

“Do it.”

Alanya thrust her index finger into the small fire burning in the palm of her father’s hand. She braced herself for the pain, but there was none. Instead, a hot, tingly feeling rushed through her body and made her feel warm and safe. Quickly pulling away from her parents, Alanya examined her finger, and found that there was no burn. The skin appeared no different from before the direct exposure to the fire. Forgetting all etiquette, she glared at her parents.

“How is this even possible? Why am I not burned?” Lord Arden scowled at his daughter, as if he could not stand her incompetence for a moment longer, but kept his cool.

“Our family has been granted this unnatural ability to manipulate fire for one purpose--to protect the king of our country from outside, and evil, magic. There are four families, including us, that have powers such as these. Each controls one of the four elements: water, earth, air and fire. They are used to enforce an ancient protection spell protecting our kingdom. However, these gifts are quite uncontrollable. If not reigned in, they would cause great destruction. Thus, we must marry someone from a--” Lord Arden shot a look at his wife, who seemed to shrink under his gaze. “--lesser family. A family whose power is to suppress ours, and make them safer to wield. An inconvenient necessity, if you will.”

She had not missed the appalled look that came from her father. Over the course of her life, Alanya could never remember Lady Arden having such control over her husband. She began to feel an overwhelming sense of pity for her mother, but Lord Arden interrupted her thoughts.

“Once your gift manifests on your seventeenth birthday, you will marry promptly.” Alanya’s brows lifted at this sentiment.

“Marriage?” she repeated incredulously.

“Yes. We have called you here to discuss your nuptials as well. It’s high time you were wed. You are of age, and time is of the essence,” he said smoothly. “We have already decided on your future husband.”

“You have?” she choked out, feeling betrayed. Arranged marriages were common, but Alanya had always assumed she would get more freedom being the second daughter.

She should have given up such dreams three years ago, when she became the sole Arden heir. Her family commanded a vast fortune and a favorable place at court, due to the proximity they had to the king. This made her an appealing match to many nobles just by hailing from the Arden family. But when she was left all alone after Leona had been sent away, the amount of her suitors had tripled and practically every noble in Briador was vying for her hand.

Alanya pulled herself from her train of thought when she realized her father still had not revealed whose bride she would become.

“You will marry Lord Robert Irming,” Lord Arden ordered. His daughter went still at the name.

“Leona’s fiancé,” she said coldly. “You intend to engage me to my exiled sister’s betrothed?”

“They are betrothed no longer. He is a distant relation; he comes from the same family as your mother. Not to mention, he has enough money to support you and keep you comfortable your entire life.”

“Does he know about this family gift?” she demanded.

“Lord Irming will be sworn to secrecy on the eve of your wedding. He will manage the use of your power, and that you use it correctly.” Alanya wrung her hands with desperation.

“Mother, please don’t make me marry him!” she cried, trying to appeal to her as a last resort. But Lady Arden never got to speak.

“Do not drag your mother into this. He is to be your husband. This is his duty, as it is yours to be an obedient and loving wife.”

“It feels wrong to be engaged to a man that was once meant for my sister!”

“Enough! It does not matter whether it feels right or not. The union is for the good of this family, and it is your responsibility to see it through,” her father said sharply. “You will marry Lord Irming on your seventeenth birthday. You are dismissed.”