

Good Night

‘Your Majesty, the hour is late and the boy’s tired.’

Edward would never have dreamt of a day that his etiquette instructor would entertain the notion of cutting lessons short. He didn’t move a muscle as his father loudly paced back and forth. ‘The *young man* should act his age and as is expected of his station.’ His father swooped down in front of him. Edward knew to look him in the eye. ‘If there is *anything* you remember, remember this. You are *not* a simpleton traipsing down the countryside for entertainment. You are the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Setonia. While away from Setonian soil, not only are you a representative of this kingdom, but you are the physical *embodiment* of Setonia. Everything that you do, every misstep, every mistake, how you act and behave will reflect upon not only you - but on me - on our family - on our people - on Setonia herself. Understand? UNDERSTAND!’ His father’s fist slammed in the table.

‘Yes, sir,’ croaked Edward.

His father turned away in a sigh of disgust and waved his hand. ‘Dismissed.’

Edward promptly took his leave and wound his way through the empty palace hallways to the royal residences. No hint of light crept out from under his younger sibling’s bedroom doors. The carpeted stone floor muffled his footsteps but did nothing to stop his creaky door hinge. He gritted his teeth as it let out a painfully loud squeak. Peace and quiet eluded him as he could hear the voices of his instructors echoing in his mind.

Edward washed his face with cold water and sighed. It did little to abate his throbbing headache. He took off his signet ring and stared at his family crest. If things proceeded as arranged, he could be wearing a different ring altogether - much sooner than he ever expected. The well of dread in the pit of his stomach threatened to overwhelm him again. However, an inexplicable sixth sense put a stop to it and gave him pause. He sauntered across the room and whipped open his door.

Jacqueline had a hand up, seemingly about to knock. She jumped in shock, her hands over her mouth to hide a gasp. ‘Edward!’ she said under her breath. ‘You frightened the life out of me.’

‘Shouldn’t you be asleep?’ said Edward, narrowing his eyes at her. ‘As should *they*.’ His eyes flicked over to their younger siblings. Damien was wearing a cape over his nightgown while holding up a lantern in one hand and a wooden sword in the other. The twins, Gerard and Belle, were hiding behind Jacqueline. Edward spotted the head of Belle’s doll floating above Jacqueline’s elbow.

Jacqueline cleared her throat, and lightly bounced on the spot, composing herself better than most ladies at court. ‘Well, it was quite the strange turn of events actually. Belle was having nightmares and swore she could hear the monsters coming for her. So, brave Gerard escorted her to find Damien to fight off the monsters. Hearing that monsters were afoot, Damien rushed with the twins in tow to make sure that I had not been eaten. Seeing that I was fine, we came to check that they hadn’t whisked you away!’

Edward was as unmoving as a statue as Jacqueline smiled up at him. They both knew she was the mastermind behind this, and Edward was more than happy to employ some of his

recent diplomacy lessons. He said nothing and continued to glare at her. To his surprise, she broke the silence first.

‘Seriously? I practiced for that,’ she pouted.

‘I noticed - very good delivery,’ said Edward. A slow grin crept across his face. Without another word, he waved them inside and checked that no one had noticed he was now harbouring wayward fugitives. He shut the door and turned to find that they now occupied his bed. Jacqueline was sitting at the edge of the bed, her back straight as an arrow, holding Gerard in her lap. Belle sat behind Jacqueline, her doll within arm’s reach, and played with her older sister’s chestnut hair. Meanwhile, Damien stood guard next to the bed, imitating the palace guards.

Edward swung a chair around to sit and face them. ‘To what do I owe this visit?’

Jacqueline didn’t meet his eyes for a moment, but when she did, they were as cold as steel. ‘Were you honestly going to leave without saying goodbye?’ The hurt in her voice was worse than the accusation. ‘You start getting extra instruction that *father* is overseeing, you’re visiting the tailor an awful lot, we barely see you anymore - and when we do - you’re acting strange and uncle Varus arrives out of nowhere and is leaving tomorrow without saying where he’s going. I can put two and two together.’ Jacqueline’s voice was a special blend of a concerned reprimand unique to only one other individual.

‘You sound a lot like mum, you know that?’ said Edward with a weak chuckle. Jacqueline didn’t share his mirth, but her eyes softened.

‘So, where are you going?’ she asked.

‘I can’t say - ask father if you want to know,’ said Edward, pre-empting Jacqueline’s next question. Her shoulders sagged knowing that there was no way past that wall.

‘Can’t you tell us?’ chimed in Gerard.

Edward took a moment to gather his thoughts. He shuffled his chair closer and lowered his voice. ‘Can you keep a secret? You mustn’t tell another soul - including mother.’

Belle poked her head from behind Jacqueline. ‘Yes! I can keep a -.’ Jacqueline quickly put a hand over Belle’s mouth. Gerard simply nodded his head eagerly.

‘Damien?’ asked Edward.

‘No one get nothing from me, even under torture.’

Edward turned his gaze on Jacqueline awaiting her answer. ‘Yes,’ she said, rolling her eyes.

Edward leaned in close. ‘I can’t say much, but I will say this - I’ve always wanted to go travelling south.’

The young twins were not impressed but Jacqueline’s eyes lit up. ‘No, really? Turellia!?’ Her tone shifted from disbelief to cautious optimism. This time it was the three youngest siblings to shush Jacqueline.

‘How long will you be away for? Weeks? A month?’ asked Jacqueline.

Edward scratched the back of his neck, deciding not to correct his sister’s assumption. ‘No idea. It could be a two short weeks or months for all I know.’

‘Quiet!’ hissed Damien, holding his lantern towards the wooden door. ‘Someone comes.’

Two heart shaking raps on the wooden door caused everyone to freeze into statues. Edward held one finger to his lips. ‘Don’t come in - I’m getting changed into my nightgown,’ he said, perhaps a bit too loud given the hour. They all held their breaths and were as still as

mice. When Edward was satisfied whoever it was had moved on, he lowered the finger from his lips. 'Alright, tell me what you want me to bring back and then off to bed.'

Damien raised his wooden sword into the air above him. 'I want a sword fit for a king!' He lowered it back down and stared at the trainer. 'This is beneath my station.'

'You'll get one when you stop hitting yourself in the head with the hilt,' said Edward. Gerard descended into deranged laughter and slipped from Jacqueline's lap and onto the floor.

'At least I can *hold* one,' Damien directed at his younger brother.

'Belle?' asked Edward.

The little girl stared at her doll, occasionally holding the doll's mouth to her ear. Eventually, she nodded at the doll and turned to Edward. 'We want a shiny necklace - like - the one mummy has.'

Edward looked down at the rolling mass on the floor. 'And you Gerard?'

'Something magic!' Gerard threw his hand up in the air and babbled incoherently.

Jacqueline sat up and smoothed the folds of her nightgown. 'Come on you lot, time to go back to bed.'

Edward accompanied them as Jacqueline tucked them into bed starting with the twins. 'You listen to your sister now while I'm away, clear?' Gerard and Belle mumbled in agreement. Their eyes were already starting to droop as they snuggled into their blankets. 'And your watch has ended soldier, time for some shut-eye.' Edward took the lantern from Damien and marched him back to his room.

Damien neatly squared away his cloak and returned his training sword back on the rack before crawling into bed. He grabbed the sheets from Jacqueline and turned his back towards her. 'I don't need you to tuck me in, I'm not a child.'

'You're so adorable when you're acting all grown up,' said Jacqueline.

'Shut up,' snapped Damien.

'You don't speak to her like that. You know better - so be better,' said Edward.

'I was just poking fun,' said Jacqueline as Edward shook his head at her.

'Keep training and remember to keep your hands up high. When I get back, maybe we can properly fence with steel,' said Edward.

'I'm ready now!' said Damien.

'Not until the master-of-arms says so,' replied Edward. 'And don't forget to practice your riding - ask Jacqueline for help.'

Damien mumbled his discontent at the notion into his pillow.

Edward patted Damien's leg and accompanied Jacqueline to her door. 'Be safe,' she said. She held out her arms and Edward returned her tight hug.

'I'll be fine. Don't let them get under your skin too much. I'll be back before you know it,' he said and released her. 'Tell Mira I said goodbye - and to everyone else.'

'I will,' replied Jacqueline with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Edward tried to ignore what possible scheme Jacqueline was concocting up. 'You haven't said what you wanted me to bring back for you,' he said.

Jacqueline ran her hand through her hair and glanced at him coyly. 'A big sister?' Without another word, she pirouetted to open and close the door behind her in a quick blur, leaving Edward staring quizzically at the wooden door. He shook his head and returned to his room. As he went to blow out the candle to sleep, there was a soft knock and his door eased open.

‘Are they all in bed?’ the woman said, her voice gentle and soothing. Edward’s mother had barely aged a day from his first memory of her.

‘Yes, Jacqueline tucked them in,’ he replied. The woman took the candle from him and ushered him into bed. ‘Mum, I don’t need you to tuck me in.’

‘Don’t grow up too fast - for my sake. At least let me mother you this night. It appears I may not get the chance again for quite some time.’ Edward relented and stopped his feeble protest. He didn’t realise he was sitting there dazed on his bed until his mother eased him down. ‘Your father’s been hard on you again, hasn’t he?’

‘It’s fine,’ he said reflexively.

His mother sat on the edge of the bed stroked his hair. ‘Between you and me, I think your father’s worried you’ll make the same mistakes he did when *we* first met. Oh yes, your father was a very different man - still very serious - but completely hopeless with people and women especially. It was strangely charming actually.’ There was something unnatural about that thought that sent a shiver down Edward’s spine. ‘You needn’t worry,’ his mother continued, leaning down to kiss his forehead. ‘I never expected a wistful correspondence to reach this point at all. You’re a fine gentleman. Just be yourself and relax. Remember, she’s going to be much more terrified than you are. Now, get some rest. You have a long journey ahead of you tomorrow.’

‘Mum,’ Edward blurted as she stood up. ‘Sing me to sleep?’

A soft melodic hum filled Edward’s ears as he closed his eyes. Sleep took him before the first verse because he didn’t recall hearing it. That night was a good night - the best.