

HELEN  
CORCORAN

QUEEN  
OF  
COIN  
AND  
WHISPERS

Prequel Stories

OBRIEN

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OF  
COIN  
AND  
WHISPERS

Prequel Stories

Three Times a Future Queen  
Almost Met her Future Whispers

(And The First Time She Did)



HELEN CORCORAN grew up in Cork, Ireland, dreaming of scheming queens and dashing lady knights. After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, she worked as a bookseller for over a decade. She lives in Dublin, writing fantasy novels and haunting coffee shops in search of the perfect latte.

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## THE SEA

It wasn't a pity invitation if it involved family, no matter what Matthias said.

'It's your *stepfather's* family, Xania. They can pity you plenty.' The wind finally managed to yank strands of Matthias's hair into his eyes; he scraped them away and swore. 'Do they even *like* any of you?'

True, they hadn't been thrilled at Mother's lower rank, but they'd come round. Eventually. Lord Martain had given them no choice. It was a bit much of Matthias, considering Papa had all but unofficially adopted him into our family. I scuffed the toe of my shoe against the ground, and swallowed the irritation prickling in my throat. There was no point starting an argument, not when I would soon be gone for a while. Besides, he always wanted the final word, even if it was weeks later.

'They like Zola,' I finally said, as we turned for another circuit of Papa's rose garden. Why did we keep coming back here? It felt like poking at a tender tooth, and we never ended

up talking about anything pleasant. But then, we weren't the sort of friends who met for a harmless gossip over tea and cake. 'Mama won them over, as she always does. And me...'

'And you?' Matthias prompted after a few moments, though a flash in his eyes made me suspect he regretted asking. He dabbled in secrets across the Steps, and charmed his way into information, but he was never cruel unless someone deserved it. I was one of the few who mostly didn't, though neither of us would admit it.

'They... I don't think they like me.' I sighed. It was a secret I'd held close since I'd first met Lord Martain's family, but saying it felt freeing rather than a mistake.

'That's unsurprising,' Matthias said gently. 'You've always taken after your father. I mean, don't get me wrong, you're also like your mother, but not half as terrifying, maybe you'll grow it into it—please don't tell her I said this—but there's a spark in you that reminds me of him.'

My lips twitched, but I held the smile in check. If he was babbling, he felt bad.

He eyed me for a moment, then held out his arm. I tucked my hand in the crook of his elbow, and we continued on in relatively peaceful silence. Despite the wind, it was still a good morning for a walk: warm enough that we could dawdle and still enjoy it. It boded well for the remainder of summer.

I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath, and for a moment

it felt like I was younger again, before Papa had died. He'd wanted to keep the garden strictly for winter roses, but Mama had included other seasonal roses after his death. It wasn't the same, but now we could be here at any time and the scent would always remind us of him.

My chest squeezed, tightening around my heart. The grief had dulled, as so many had assured me it would, but it would never go away, as I had also been sadly assured.

I wanted Lord Martain's family to like me, even as I hated the very idea.

'The visit won't be so bad,' I finally remarked, keeping my voice light so we'd part on good terms. 'They adore Lord Martain, so they always put out the best silver and crystal, the freshest offerings from the kitchens. And he always insists we try everything.'

'Good,' Matthias said. 'Forcing them to pull out the good wine is the *least* he can make them do.'

While smiling and enquiring after his siblings, and his nieces and nephews, for Lord Martain was a good son with an iron spine.

He made Mama happy. And that was the most important thing.



My stepfather's family lived on the western coast, known primarily for its fishing and frequent flooding when the storms rolled in. I'd grown up in the south-east of Edar—as had Matthias though we hadn't known each other—until Papa had reluctantly sold the estate and we'd moved to Arkaala, the capital, and rented apartments in the palace.

The west might as well have been another country compared to the south-east. We'd visited plenty of times before, but I still stared out at the rolling hills and fields, lush and green from the rain. The south-eastern estates still struggled, the land good for little apart from grazing. The towns were mostly stopgaps on the way to the southern estates and port cities.

The Kierth estate sat far away enough from the cliffs and beaches for protection from the storms and pirates, but close enough that we could take walks. I had full intentions to spend as much time outside as possible, preferably with a book.

We were allowed to freshen up before we dutifully presented ourselves to Lord Martain's family. Zola took one look at my lacklustre attempt and didn't even hide the full extent of her sigh. 'Xania, why do you make life so difficult?'

'Because it's an older sister's job to keep you humble.' I smiled as she swept around me, plucking at folds and straightening the shoulders of my dress. She picked up a comb and eyed my curls, which were already falling victim to the

salt-laden breeze blowing in through the open windows. The smell of salt permeated everything here. I never got used to it, though Lord Martain adjusted within a few hours as if he'd never left.

Zola didn't return my smile. 'Why are you always so difficult here?' she muttered, quiet enough that I suspected she didn't want me to hear.

'Because they don't like me. They like you, and Mama, but—'

'They like us because we try,' Zola snapped. 'We smile, and make conversation, and inconvenience them as little as possible because it helps Lord Martain. He doesn't enjoy coming back here, you know. They went along with the marriage because they assumed he'd make a niece or nephew his heir, but they've never really approved. Mama and I do everything to prove them wrong. *You* do everything to prove them right.'

I'd grown used to being the one who saw through people's masks and lies. Zola believed, like Mama, that Papa had died from illness. It was the tidiest explanation, and a deliberate denial of the fact that Papa had rarely even caught a cold.

I knew better. His death had to have been deliberate. *Must* have been.

At least Matthias believed me, even if I didn't know how to prove it.

My chest still twinged with guilt that I was making things harder for everyone.

I scoffed. ‘We have little to prove! He’ll pick a favourite niece or nephew and—’

‘He wants to pick us.’

‘What? But—’

Zola shrugged helplessly, still holding the comb. ‘I overheard him and Mama one night, when you were working late at the Treasury. He wants to follow through with the official adoption so we can be in the will as his heirs.’

‘Oh.’ We stared at other, and I knew my expression had to be mirroring hers. I liked Lord Martain, we both did, but neither of us had yet figured out how to balance having him in our lives while still remembering—and mourning—Papa. I... needed time to sort out how I felt about this—

Realisation dawned. ‘Is that why we’re here? For Lord Martain to justify his decision, or for his family to fight him on it?’

‘Maybe. Probably both.’ Zola took the comb to my hair with grim determination. ‘So if you could just not be yourself for a few days, please, we’d all appreciate it.’



Lord Martain’s parents were the epitome of the older generation. Their clothing was still in the old style, more stiff and elaborate than current fashions, but with the brighter fabrics currently favoured, which always impressed Zola.

Lady Kierth, his mother, had perfect grey and silver curls, unaffected by heat, humidity, or sea air, which made me despair for my own. They were pulled back today, the pins topped with crystal shards; surprisingly extravagant, considering she only entertained locally. Her dark brown skin might have more wrinkles than the last time we'd seen her, and she'd recently acquired spectacles, but her posture was better than mine and as imperious as her gaze.

We sat, clutching teacups like they were shelter in a storm, and carefully worked our way through strained conversation.

The glass doors were flung open, revealing a view of the distant horizon and sea. The breeze ruffled around us. This had been a fighting estate centuries ago, Lord Martain had remarked once, but time and an improved Navy now meant it was decorative as the inland estates. The rooms were painted in pale colours, with large windows and high ceilings, a world away from the palace's tightly packed rooms.

Lord Kierth was 'unavoidably delayed', which meant he was avoiding us because he, like Lord Martain, was essentially good-natured and upset by awkward situations like this one.

When a moment of silence had dragged past politeness, Lady Kierth remarked. 'You missed Her Royal Highness and the Duchess by a few days.'

'Oh?' Mama sipped her tea. 'I thought they'd already started their journey north.'

It made no sense to me, why the Princess went north in late summer when the rest of Court flocked back to Arkaala and the palace, revelling in the gatherings and parties that culminated in the Midwinter ball. But Mama had pointed out that Northern tenants needed the most help during winter, and the King and Queen's tolerance for their niece—and heir—became strained as summer faded into autumn.

'The Duchess wished to check on her own estate so they briefly came west,' Lady Kierth said. 'Then, of course, came the obligatory visits.' She sniffed. Royal visits were good for one's status, but also a pain to manage. At the very least, security had to be tightened to prevent an assassination attempt on the heir to the throne, and that was before having to feed and entertain the party.

'I presume they were in good spirits,' Mama ventured.

'The Duchess was, naturally. Her Royal Highness is a grave young woman, but that is to be expected. She is doubtlessly aware of the situation she stands to inherit. They say she'll be on the throne within a year or so.'

This was also the thing about the older generation: they'd lived through the old King's reign, who'd tried to expand Edar's borders with domineering diplomacy and drained the Treasury to do so. It was a brutal time to be a courtier, by all accounts, so people like Lord Martain's parents were blunt in their assessment of royalty. The current King was similarly

draining the Treasury, but for his own entertainment. And thanks to his ally, Lord Vigrante, the Head of Government, criticism was kept behind closed doors.

People who found themselves trapped in Lord Vigrante's sights seldom met pleasant ends.

Princess Aurelia, however, was a cautious player at Court.

'So this was a detour to gauge potential alliances.' I realised too late that I'd mused aloud. 'The Princess is considering who could be a future ally through her mother.'

All eyes turned to me.

Mama's eyes sparked as she pressed her lips together, but she knew better than to rebuke me in front of her mother-in-law. Zola's back and shoulders had turned rigid.

Lady Kierth eyed me thoughtfully, which was far worse than when she'd simply dismissed me every other time we'd been in the same room. I'd shown shrewdness when I should have stayed silent, and Lady Kierth had not survived decades as a courtier to ignore such a blunder.

The doors opened, and Lord Kierth ambled in. 'Apologies, I—' He stuttered to a halt, abruptly aware of the tension he'd walked in upon.

'Miss Bayonn, Miss Zola,' Lady Kierth said, her voice iron-polite, 'the day is lovely, and the breeze is not too strong. You both must be restless after such a long journey. Might I suggest that you consider a walk along the cliffs? A servant

will accompany you for safety.’

Both of us knew to accept a veiled order, so we meekly rose, curtseyed, and Zola all but dragged me out of the room, avoiding Mama and Lord Martain’s eyes. Lord Kierth watched us leave in bewilderment. Even before the doors closed behind us, I was ready for her fury.

‘*Why* are you always so difficult here?’ she demanded, tears of furious embarrassment pricking her eyes.

I had no joking response ready this time. I was her older sister. I was meant to set a good example, not cause a social mishap that Zola had to remove me from.



I stood at the edge of the cliffs, Zola still ignoring me. We’d managed to outpace the servant, who’d taken the hint while keeping a careful eye on us.

I tilted my face and screamed at the sea and sky. As if it could leech all the rage, and sadness, and secrets out of me.

As if it screaming could turn me back into the person I’d been before Papa died.



That night, Zola finally deigned to say goodnight to me, the

first words she'd spoken to me since our cliff walk. After Papa's death, we'd stopped going to bed angry.

I picked up my head wrap, then went still at a knock on my door.

Mama, then, to get her anger out before bed. Or, much worse, Lord Martain with his quiet disappointment.

Best to get it over with, whoever it was.

Lady Kierth stood in the hall, a towel folded over her arm, several combs in one hand and hair oils and creams balanced in the other.

She glared. 'Your hair is in frightful condition. That simply can't continue.'

I knew a peace offering when it stood before me.

I also recognised when someone wanted to keep a closer eye on me.

I'd learn from this. I would school my expressions and voice better, and think before I spoke. If I could manage it, I'd smooth my edges, bury my intelligence into more acceptable topics, and not draw attention to myself.

I'd turn my grief into a weapon, not a hindrance. I'd prove to them all that Papa had been murdered.

I stepped aside, and allowed her into the room.

## TWO

# COIN

‘**B**ayonn!’

A head of curls popped up from the pit, dark eyes momentarily panicked before returning to their usual calm. Coin had it on good authority he was one of the few people who could terrify Miss Xania Bayonn, but she was doing her best not to show it. That was interesting. It usually took Treasury workers a few years to reach that point.

‘Master Coin?’ She glanced around, as if suddenly aware that evening bell had rung and everyone else was already gone. That was one way she differed from her late father, Baron Bayonn. He’d been ready to go moments before his day was done, even before he’d had a wife and children to return to. Bayonn seemed to prefer her own company, even including spending time with her family.

He jabbed at the empty space beside him. ‘Up here. Now.’

She tidied away and locked up her work first. He’d never admit it—she surely had a scrap of overinflated ego some-

where—but she was also more careful than her late father. He'd relied on charm to smooth his path, from his workload to courting his wife, whereas Bayonn assumed general competence would work in her favour.

Truthfully, general competence did go far with Coin. But it was better to wait and see if said general competence was *consistent*.

She stopped before him, her hands folded behind her back. 'Sir.' She mostly took after her mother, with her curls, dark eyes, and brown skin, but there was something of the baron in her wary gaze. Coin couldn't quite put his finger on it.

'I'm reassigning you to Lady Ruelle's command.'

It was a step up but not yet a full promotion; slightly less running around getting reports signed off by others in exchange for increased responsibility and more challenging work. It was time. Bayonn knew when to use her initiative and when to seek guidance from the right people. She'd have face-to-face contact with nobles, many angry or upset by their financial choices or predicament, but she was also was ready for that.

Bayonn went still, though she kept her face respectfully calm. Coin suspected that behind this facade, she was furiously deciphering how to respond to this unexpected news.

'I'm honoured, sir,' she finally replied, so carefully formal that Coin wanted to laugh but knew better. Bayonn had been one of the youngest he'd accepted into the Treasury ranks,

partly out of pity for her visible grief and misplaced rage. He hadn't expected much, nor had her first supervisor, but she'd flung herself into the work and surprised them all. Yet she was keenly aware that she was younger than everyone, and one of the newest, and therefore held herself to higher standards than almost everyone—except him.

'Very good, Bayonn.' He wanted to add, *Most people would be happy.* After they got over the initial panic. Treasury promotions were almost on par with those in the Royal Household: more responsibility meant more stress, even with the financial gain.

'I won't let you down, sir,' she added, suddenly fierce. Her eyes lit up with a grim determination. Coin had the keen suspicion that he wasn't actually the person she was truly directing the comment to.

'See that you don't.' He hoped her family would make her celebrate. Her mother would certainly be pleased.

Whatever about Bayonn's father, she got her knack for numbers from Lady Harynne. One didn't distinguish oneself in the cutthroat world of private banking without being good at it, and Coin had almost taken it personally when she'd given up the career after marrying into the Steps. After the baron's death, he'd approached her with a position, both out of concern for their livelihood and wanting someone of her calibre in the Treasury. She'd politely refused, but not stopped her

daughter from approaching Coin herself.

‘Finish up for the night, Bayonn,’ he said gently.

She curtsied, then immediately bent down when his cat popped out from a shadow and made a beeline for her, shamelessly purring for the adoration she knew Bayonn was good for.

It wasn’t professional, but Coin did keep an eye on who his cat liked. Cats had unfailingly good judgement.

After Bayonn left, he scooped her up and tugged on her left ear as she preferred. ‘Sometimes I wonder if you like her more than me,’ he muttered. ‘I’m the one who feeds you.’

She chirped, and slowly blinked at him.

He was doing a window check as he locked up, when a brisk knock broke through the comfortable silence of his wood-and-money scented domain. The cat’s ears pricked.

He opened the door, then bent into a bow. ‘Your Royal Highness.’

She inclined her head. ‘Master Coin. My apologies for the late visit.’ Despite the hour, she was impeccably neat in her appearance: her dress unwrinkled and not a wisp of dark brown hair out of place. The exhaustion marring her grey eyes and pale face ruined the effect.

Coin had been introduced to Princess Aurelia by her father soon after they had returned to Edar from his diplomatic post, and she was a quiet child even then. Her father’s death had

turned her serious and grave, to the point where some had speculated she hadn't truly grieved him at all.

But Coin had watched the way her gaze had followed the Prince around the room. She'd stayed within his line of sight while dutifully remaining quiet, and the Prince had immediately taken her hand as they'd left Coin's office.

He'd never wanted children, but watching the Princess and her father together, their mutual adoration obvious despite royal dignity, had almost broken his resolve.

Coin had taken in a kitten instead, the first of his Treasury cats, much to his husband's baffled amusement. The mother of the cat now circling the Princess and deciding whether climbing up her skirts would get her a head scratch.

The rumours were true, then.

The Royal Physician couldn't buy the dying King any more time.

There was no other reason for the Princess to appear like this. She was still only the heir, but the Court was already feeling out the shifting tides of power and presenting themselves to her. Her coming here was an offer of alliance. A plea for help.

She wanted to know how bad Edar's finances truly were. How much of a financial burden was about to drop on her head.

He rubbed his fingers together to distract the cat from

ripping up the royal skirts, and beckoned the Princess to his office, where a closed door offered further privacy. He only spent time here when he was alone, preferring to spend his days overseeing the pit of junior workers. Most felt he did so to remind them of his position, but in truth the room was too stuffy, and lacked decent windows to make it more bearable.

‘How many I be of assistance, Your Highness?’ he asked, after she’d politely refused refreshment, something her uncle never would have done.

The Princess’s gaze flickered around the room; he wondered if she remembered the visits here with her father as a child. She clasped her hands together and raised her chin. ‘My mother and I soon go north,’ she said. ‘I would appreciate if, in future, you would also remember me when giving your reports to my uncle.’

As he’d suspected then. She wanted to ready herself for the strain that was to come.

He would have to be careful. It was a delicate matter, bringing an heir into these things when the ruling monarch still lived. But it wasn’t as if the King and Queen actually *read* his reports. They just expected him to pull more money from thin air.

Lord Vigrante was the true headache, the Head of Government and the King’s closest ally, the one who read the reports and manipulated the King’s money for his own means. Lord

Vigrante was also, doubtlessly, keeping this important information from Princess Aurelia.

For once, a member of the royal family would actually see the Treasury as more than an endless money pot. The Princess's great-grandfather, the founder of their royal line, had apparently considered the Treasury as something to be filled, not just to be emptied. It had probably been pleasant to serve under such a monarch. Even if he and his wife had, by all accounts, been equal to the bloodshed they'd sown to begin their dynasty.

'I understand,' he said, weighing up each word. 'I would be delighted to keep Your Highness informed of our financial matters.'

*I'll give you the access that Lord Vigrante denies you.*

She broke into a wide, undignified smile. 'My thanks, Master Coin.'

An awkward silence fell. For a horrified moment, he wondered if she would attempt small talk. The cat promptly appeared, somehow having conquered the closed door in true feline fashion, and hurtled herself onto the Princess's lap.

Coin was halfway out of his seat to yank her off, already braced for the hissing and claws, as the Princess's face lit up.

Princess Aurelia—Lia to those closest to her, though Coin would never use it even if she gave permission—smiled and rubbed the cat between her ears, then petted her thick black

and white fur. ‘Hello. You’re a beautiful thing, aren’t you?’

Coin abruptly realised that the quiet, serious Princess, already well aware of the duty that lay before her—in ruling, in marriage, in raising an heir—was lonely.

And his cat liked her.

He had the brief, almost absurd thought that should the Princess and Bayonn ever meet, they would almost certainly be friends.

# MATTHIAS

‘**Y**ou’re daydreaming again.’

‘I do *not* daydream.’

Princess Aurelia—Lia to Matthias since childhood, when she’d dragged him before her astonished mother and wary father and announced he was her friend—took a delicate sip of wine completely at odds with the wicked glint in her eye. ‘Oh, really?’

‘Yes, *really*.’ It was dangerous to pick an argument with a princess, even when she was in a playful mood, but Lia had increased tolerance for Matthias’s annoyance when it centred around his love life.

‘Since I can’t have a romance of my own,’ she always said, while relentlessly teasing him, ‘I must simply live through yours.’

To anyone else, it would have been ludicrous bordering on discomfort. For the heir to the throne, it somehow made sense.

She toyed with the glass stem, an affectionate smile on her

mouth. The late summer light pouring in through the windows made her hair gleam. ‘What do we call this one?’

Matthias shifted in his seat. ‘The gentleman with the green velvet waistcoats,’ he mumbled.

Lia choked on a mouthful of wine. ‘He wears *what?*’

‘I don’t pick people for their *fashion sense.*’

She didn’t pursue that particular topic; there was always a point where she wished for no further details, and she was firm about maintaining that boundary. Which was excellent, because as close as they were, there were some things Matthias wished to keep to himself.

‘Well, I hope he makes you happy,’ she said, eyeing the dregs of her glass. ‘That’s all I wish for you. Happiness.’

He rolled his eyes, but affection swelled in his chest, even as he braced himself for the return of their eternal argument. Lia insisted that one day he’d have no further desire to remain at Court, or be a member of her staff, that he would inevitably fall in love and wish to begin his own life, his *true* life, away from her.

Matthias let her maintain her conviction that she was right. It was better than informing her that she’d placed her own secret wish upon him. It wasn’t Matthias who wanted to fall in love and begin a new life far away from Court. It was her.

Lia wanted to smile at a pretty lady, and flirt, and eventually marry one, and maintain an estate and share a bed and argue

and peacefully grow old together.

And she never could.

She would be Queen, when her uncle inevitably breathed his last, which would be soon because everyone knew the Royal Physician had run out of ways to keep him alive. There was no else left to take the throne. It was her duty to rule, and marry, and raise a child to do the same after her. Her life—and her ability to love—would never be her own. It would always be entwined within politics.

Matthias's heart broke for her.

But better to let her think she was only concerned for him, and not make her realise she was also actually concerned for herself.

There was already enough for her to worry about.

He laughed, hoping it would divert the argument. 'How could I be happy, when my admirers must measure themselves against you?'

Her expression fractured in disbelief. 'Matthias, you can't use me as a measuring stick for any man. How could they measure up against me?'

He loved her more as a sister than a friend. So he supposed it made sense that loving a Princess like a sister often meant feeling like he wanted to scream at her.

It was a bit much of Lia, really, considering duty made her too terrified to even smile at a lady she considered pretty.

She drained her wine. ‘Mother and I are preparing to go north for the winter. The last preparations are underway.’

‘What.’ Matthias took a deep breath, counting slowly in his head, though it was always a fruitless endeavour. ‘You’re returning north now? Your uncle is—’

‘Dying.’ Lia briefly pressed her lips together. ‘Yes, I *am* aware, even if the physician must report to me secretly.’

Matthias knew Xania wanted nothing more than to shove a dagger between Lord Vigrante’s ribs, but sometimes he wondered if she’d very much mind if he or Lia somehow got there before her.

‘You can’t leave now.’ Dimly, he was aware of how ridiculous he sounded, telling a Princess, a future Queen, what she couldn’t do. But her time had finally come, and she had to be here, ready and prepared.

Matthias didn’t often miscalculate when it came to Lia. They’d known each other for years, and he’d swiftly learned to recognise the signs of when he’d displeased her. She was the most unflappable in her family, the least likely to stand on ceremony, and it took a lot to get her temper going.

But when her shoulders stiffened, and she paused before turning to fully face him, Matthias instantly knew that he’d let his eagerness overtake his common sense. This was his moment, as much as hers; they’d prepared for years after her father’s death, when it was finally accepted the King and

Queen would have no children of their own, and she became the heir apparent, no longer the heir presumptive.

As part of the plan, they'd hidden their friendship from the Court, giving Matthias the freedom to be her eyes and ears. They usually only met in Essinfall, the heir's Northern estate, where the staff were unquestionably loyal to Lia and her mother. In Court, they barely crossed paths. He should have known that when Lia came to his office through the passages in the walls—something she avoided unless absolutely necessary—it was to tell him something he'd wouldn't like.

'I don't recall you having control over my movements,' she said in a dangerously soft voice.

He had a sudden vision of the future, when she would switch to the royal *we*, and fought the urge to shudder. 'Your uncle is dying. The *King* is dying. You must be here for a smooth transition. For his blessing, if he will give it.'

'He will not,' Lia said, though she'd often expressed the faint hope that he could, perhaps, have a change of heart on his deathbed. 'You would prefer me to remain here, waiting for the crown, hovering over my uncle like a scavenger bird?'

Matthias had no answer to that. Of course Lia wouldn't stay. She was acutely aware of her reputation, how her every move and conversation was noted and judged by the Court, how her conduct reflected on her family.

She'd return to the North, as she always did, and spend the

winter helping her estate and tenants through the treacherous season. And when the King died—because he *would* die—Matthias would ensure she returned to the capital in time for a smooth transition.

They didn't quite part on bad terms, but their goodbyes were stiff, formal, and his head was pounding when someone else knocked on his door. '*What?*'

'There's that famous charm I always knew you possessed,' Xania replied, her voice muffled through the door.

Matthias gritted his teeth, but dragged himself to the door. Picking a fight with Xania was much different to picking one with Lia, who went cold.

Xania yelled back, for a start.

'You look wonderful,' she said, concern flickering over her face as she took Lia's recently vacated seat.

'I'm not having the best day,' he muttered. When she glanced pointedly at the second drained wineglass, he added, 'A meeting didn't go as expected.'

'If you slept more, no one could resist your charms.'

He plonked a fresh wineglass before her. 'Why are you here?'

Xania toyed with the glass stem much as Lia had.

He eyed her: she was nervous, though she'd worked hard in the last year to reduce her tells and habit tics. She wasn't quite at Matthias's expertise, but then he'd started years before.

‘I have news,’ she said.

He gulped the wine.

‘Coin promoted me yesterday. Almost.’

He choked on the wine.

*‘Matthias!’*

He swallowed frantically, trying not to cough all over the table. ‘No, not because you got promoted—almost’—he held up a palm to prevent her from instinctively thumping him—‘I just... Coin doesn’t even *almost* promote someone this soon!’ The man only had feelings for his husband and cats. He’d never understood how Xania respected him so highly.

‘I’m joining Lady Ruelle’s team.’

Matthias raised his eyebrows. It was definitely a step up, and yes, not a full promotion. Yet. But Ruelle was Coin’s testing ground. If Xania didn’t mess up, this would be her first step on the promotion ladder.

From the way Xania kept fidgeting with her wineglass, she was also aware of this.

The silence stretched until Matthias wanted to kick her out. He had work to do, and a future appointment with his bedroom floor later, where he intended to stare up at the ceiling and fully regret annoying Lia just before she went to the other end of the country.

‘I’m not sure I’m ready,’ Xania finally admitted, and Matthias viciously tamped down on his impatience. This was more

important than indulging in his over-inflated sense of doom.

‘Are you well?’ he demanded, deciding to try humour first, since it usually irritated Xania enough that she worked herself out of her own self-doubt. ‘Xania Bayonn, not ready for a challenge?’

‘Don’t.’ She sipped her wine, then wrinkled her nose. ‘This is what happens when people let you choose the wine.’

‘Just because you have no taste.’ The words *A Princess didn’t mind it* rested on his tongue, but he knew better than to say them. Not yet. It wasn’t the right moment. Lia needed to be Queen, setting her alliances in order, and he had to be certain that Xania was the right person to be her Whispers.

For a start, she needed to not be fretting about the position she was already in.

‘Why do you not feel ready?’ he asked, more seriously, forcing her to make proper eye contact. They exasperated each other in a way that felt different to how he was with Lia, but he’d never once doubted that Xania would find her place in the world.

Once she’d avenged her father’s murder. Or realised she was up against forces—or people—that she could never bend to her will. Whichever happened first.

Some days he didn’t know which would happen. Or what he *wanted* to happen. Vigrante was clever and ruthless, charming and brutal. Sometimes, Matthias had nightmares about what

would happen to Xania if she finally crossed him. What would happen to Zola.

What would happen to him, and how that would rebound on Lia.

Xania drained the wine, then twisted her mouth in reluctant agreement for Matthias to refill it. ‘What if I let him down?’

They both knew she wasn’t talking about Coin.

The familiar stab of grief—and guilt—twisted in Matthias’s gut. Maybe it was wrong of him to encourage Xania like this. Lia, who’d resigned herself to never knowing the full details behind her father’s sudden death, would certainly think so. Or maybe she’d understand.

But he missed the baron, with his calculating mind and sardonic smile. He’d made Matthias feel like he could rise far above his meagre Third Step beginnings, the same way he expected Xania and Zola to do so through marriage.

The baron had been more of a father than the one whose blood Matthias shared. He’d *seen* him in all the ways that mattered, all the impulses and prickly edges and cutting remarks that his family had disapproved of.

He’d been relieved when his family had died from illness.

He’d felt like he was breaking apart when the baron died.

Before he could think better of it, he reached across and gripped Xania’s hand, the one that wasn’t threatening to shatter the wineglass. ‘He loved you,’ he said, refusing to let her

look away. ‘He *always* loved you. You could never disappoint him.’

For a moment, he thought Xania would cry.

She hadn’t cried in years.

Neither had Lia.

He hadn’t been at Essinfall when the Prince had died. They hadn’t been as close then, were still figuring out how their friendship worked around their rank. He’d arrived a few weeks later, arranged by the staff, who’d realised well before the Duchess that Lia needed someone to scream and cry at who wasn’t a servant or her mother.

Lia had given herself one day, from dawn to dusk, to fall apart. She’d wept and screamed and broken priceless objects, and Matthias had endured it and made certain she didn’t physically injure herself in the process.

The heir presumptive lay in the shattered remains of her grief, and the heir apparent had risen, wiped her eyes, and said, ‘I’m done now.’

Years later, Matthias suspected that frightened girl was still inside Lia, hidden away and kept under tight control.

A similar frightened girl now gazed at him from Xania’s eyes.

*You’d be good for each other*, he found himself thinking. He’d never considered that aspect of it before. Friendship. Not just a professional relationship between Queen and Whispers.

He'd hedged around the topic with Lia. It was impossible not to obsess over who he could trust as her spymaster. They'd agreed he would take on the position temporarily, alongside his official capacity as her Lord Secretary, and that she trusted him to fill the position.

Most courtiers around her were her uncle's allies, or truly considered themselves to be her dead father's, or they were Lord Vigrante's, since he would naturally try to infiltrate her household and ladies with his own spies.

Lia would feel insulted if he *didn't*, for then he wouldn't even consider her someone to be wary of.

Xania had, through wanting to avenge her father, begun showing signs that she had the makings of an adept Whispers. Matthias had turned the possibility around in his head for months, considered it from all angles as he'd subtly tried to encourage Xania in her path. Lia needed a spymaster, and Xania needed a proper way to avenge the baron's death other than suspicions she could otherwise never prove.

Neither knew each other, but he knew them both.

He'd make it work. He always did.

'You could never disappoint him,' Matthias repeated, squeezing Xania's hand once more before letting go. 'You'll work for Lady Ruelle, and make her gush about you to Coin, and in ten years you'll be the next in line for his job.'

Xania scoffed. 'Hardly. I don't want that stress, especially

not with royalty involved.' She paused, then added, 'I wouldn't mind his office, though, and his cat.'

*You'll change your mind*, Matthias thought, *when it comes to royalty*. But right now, he needed her confidence and determination back, and he needed her mind focused on the Treasury and avenging her father.

He needed her calm, and sharp, and cunning.

Because the King would die sooner rather than later, and Lia would be Queen, and she would need them both on her side, even if she didn't know about Xania yet.

And if his gut was right, Xania needed to become Whispers just as much.

# THE DAGGER

‘**H**ave you made progress on my Whispers?’

Matthias could juggle being my secretary and temporary Whispers for only so long. He’d kept my position in Court secure up until now, but a proper Whispers would keep me alive. Every Queen needed a spymaster.

‘I have someone in mind,’ he said. ‘Xania Bayonn. Lady Harynne’s daughter.’

‘And the late Baron Bayonn’s daughter.’

An unusual choice. Xania Bayonn wasn’t just from a less influential family, which wouldn’t make navigating between social circles any easier—she was young. But then, so was I. And if she was suitable for Whispers, her rank aside, then Matthias trusted her. He wouldn’t be reckless about such an important position.

‘She has potential,’ he said. ‘I’ll arrange a meeting.’

He left. I sat, stared at my cooling tea, then pushed it away. It now looked like blood.

The room, still filled with my uncle's belongings, felt stifled by the ghosts of my ancestors. The grief swelled inside me again, tinged with spite. As I grew up, Uncle and I had loved each other less and less, yet the throne was mine now, and I would be a better ruler.

Raised voices outside propelled me up and towards the doors. I flung them open and froze.

A young woman, around my age, stood before me. My mind registered snippets of her appearance like candlelight flares: smooth brown skin, thick black curls, a spring-green dress embroidered in white and yellow.

It took me several moments to realise she was threatening Matthias with a dagger.

My common sense finally reasserted itself.

'Drop the dagger.'

Our gazes met.

Her dark eyes bored into mine, full of rage, fear, and—grief. I recognised that all too well.

I'd seen it in my own eyes, too, once.

'*Drop it now.*' I injected every bit of iron will into my voice.

In the immediate aftermath of Father's death, they accidentally left me alone. Mother was insensible with grief and panic; her screams echoed through the halls, sinking into the walls and paintings of my illustrious ancestors. The staff were trying to comfort her and figure out how best to report Father's death,

and they forget me.

They left me alone, momentarily forgetting I was no longer just a Princess, one of the blood royal, but now my uncle's heir. The heir apparent to Edar.

I'd stood before my looking-glass, wondering when someone would remember me, and stared at my face. The tears had not yet come, but they would.

But the grief was there—it would never leave, though I'd put a mask in place to hide it from the Court, my mother, and Matthias. The grief overflowed in my eyes, and it was painful to look at for very long.

The young woman watched me with grief-stricken eyes, and wordlessly let the dagger slip from her fingers. Matthias nudged it towards me with his boot, and I scooped it up and held it against my skirts.

'Your Majesty,' he said through gritted teeth, 'may I present Miss Xania Bayonn, daughter of the late Baron Bayonn and Lady Harynne.'

His face was bone-white, apart from two splotches of embarrassed rage on his cheeks. He looked ready to spit and snarl at both of us. This had not been his plan for an arranged meeting.

'If this is a joke,' I said, 'it's in poor taste.'

Miss Bayonn glanced at me, sharply, already sensing something was amiss. She was clever, then. Good. To be expected, if

she could lay ruin to Matthias's schemes. He needed someone to keep him alert.

I met her dark and wary gaze again, briefly swerved to the proud set of her mouth, then focused on the dagger against my side. Flexed my grip on the hilt. A good weapon, well-loved and in good condition.

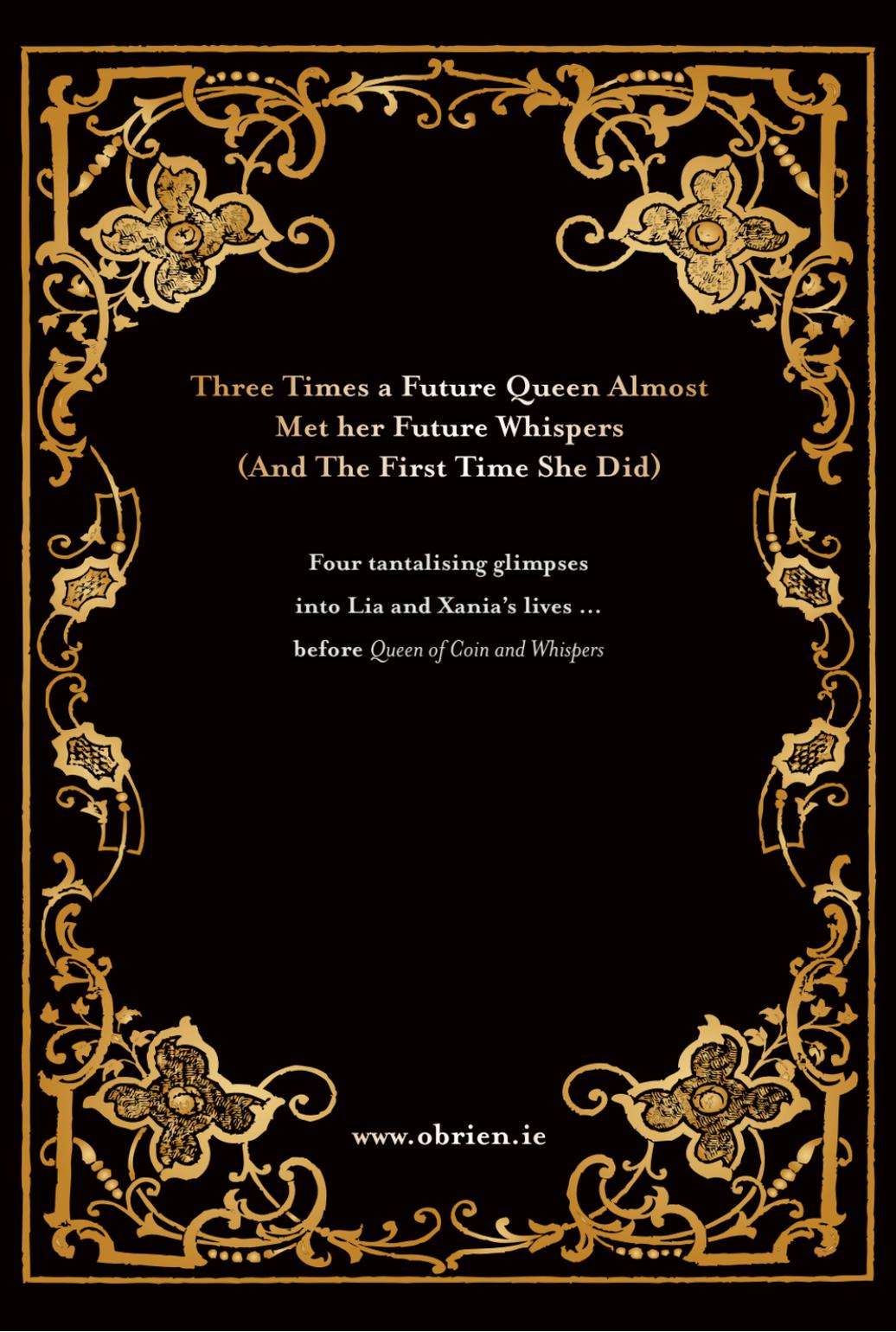
I took a deep breath.

A Queen was merely waiting for death if she didn't have a good Whispers.

I needed someone I could trust.

I wasn't sure if I could trust Xania Bayonn. Not yet.

But I trusted Matthias's judgment, and he trusted her.



Three Times a Future Queen Almost  
Met her Future Whispers  
(And The First Time She Did)

Four tantalising glimpses  
into Lia and Xania's lives ...  
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