

Crown of Secrets

Darius – Rescue

Enough important people had attended the Midwinter Ball that the entire next day was filled with meetings and farewells. My time was not my own. It never had been, of course, but that fact had never grated as much as it did now. It took all my hard-won control to give sufficient attention to the people around me while my thoughts were consumed with the one face that was absent.

Verene.

I didn't have to close my eyes to call up a mental picture of her beauty at the ball. But I couldn't think of her without remembering the confusion and hurt on her face when I abandoned her. I had mismanaged everything. And I didn't like the feeling.

I needed to fix my mistakes. That knowledge gave me just enough focus to get through the day. The last thing I needed was to make my problems—and hers—worse.

I didn't allow my court mask to slip until I finally closed the door of my suite behind me. Dark had already fallen, and my servant had drawn the curtains and stoked the fire in my sitting room. But I ignored the pull of the bright flames as well as the tray of food he had left for me.

Instead my strides took me directly to the door in the other wall. I contained my impatience and forced myself to knock rather than pulling it open.

The seconds stretched out, and my composure slipped, causing me to pound on it again, more loudly this time. Still I was met with nothing but silence and stillness.

I frowned. Could Verene be in bed already? I shook the thought away. It might be dark, but it was far too early for that.

Could she be ignoring me? My frown deepened. Despite my missteps the night before, it didn't seem likely. The princess had too much poise and control to behave in such a petty way.

She must be out, then. My hand was already on the door to the passage as the intention to go looking for her formed in my mind.

She wasn't in the library, however. And when I climbed the stairs to the first year floor, I caught a glimpse of Bryony entering her room. She was alone, so I didn't disturb her.

Verene clearly wasn't running through the servants' corridors with Bryony, but could she be running them on her own?

As I descended slowly past my own floor, a servant appeared, moving toward the library. I called out, stopping her, and she dropped into a deep curtsy.

"Is Princess Verene running in your halls?" I asked.

She hesitated, and I lightened my expression, not wanting her to think I was displeased with either her or Verene.

"I have a message for her," I added, "and I know the servants can always be trusted to know everyone's location." I smiled, and the maid's lips curved tentatively in response.

"Of course, Your Highness. She was running earlier, certainly, but the halls are crowded at the moment." She hesitated again. "Someone saw her going outside."

"Outside." Only long practice kept my surprise and displeasure from my voice. "Thank you."

I strode off while she was halfway through another curtsy. It was already dark. What was Verene doing jogging alone outside?

The bright moon provided some illumination as I trod the familiar path from the front door of the Academy. I hurried first to the training yards but could see no sign of her. Without realizing it, my pace picked up, an unreasoning dread driving me forward. The training yards served to remind me of the previous accident she had suffered there.

I headed back toward the Academy, thinking she might have set out to jog around the building. But as I passed the gardens used by the grower trainees, I hesitated. If she was in there, she would be concealed from sight in this dimness.

I tried to tell myself she was only jogging, but the darkness crowded around me, and a desperate need to find her speared through me.

"Verene!" I called, abandoning subtlety. "Verene, are you out here?"

I paused for a moment, straining to hear anything in the soft sounds of the night. For a moment I thought I heard a faint whisper, but it could have been the wind in the plants. Frustration sapped the last of my patience, and I growled, thrusting my hand into an internal pocket and pulling out a composition.

As I tore it, I hoped I wouldn't have to explain to Verene why I had a search composition keyed to her at hand. The situation justified my carrying it, however.

I had written a number of compositions after her admission about her injury in the training yard. I carried the shame of not yet uncovering who had planned the accident, and I needed to ensure further harm didn't come to her in my kingdom.

I could hear the defensive tone to my thoughts. But Kallorway couldn't afford for anything serious to befall a princess of Ardann under our care.

My thoughts cut off as the power released from my composition returned to me. It glowed softly in the darkness, lighting a path into the gardens. It had found her!

Verene must have felt the power when it wrapped around her, but I could hear no sounds of movement or any call in response. Did that mean she was unconscious?

I ran, racing at full speed as I followed the trail laid out for me. The end of the path appeared, but I could see no sign of the princess. I slowed anyway and caught sight of the pit just in time to avoid stumbling into it.

I dropped to one knee and looked over the edge, my heart racing. Another trap laid for the Ardannian princess.

"Verene!" Relief filled me at finding her, fear close on its heels at the sight of her crumpled far below me. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so," she replied, but the confusion in her voice evaporated the last of my relief. "I just feel so tired. So very tired."

"Hold on," I called down, trying to inject as much support into my voice as I could. I took several steps back, my fingers selecting a different parchment. As I tore it, I whispered her name, and the power rushed into the pit, seeking her.

Seconds later, she appeared, as if cupped in the invisible hands of a giant. My working placed her gently down beside the hole, and I once again dropped to a knee, leaning over her.

"That was nice." She smiled at me, and my heart thudded in my chest. It was a soft, sweet smile, and I would have drunk it in if it hadn't been so out of place for the situation.

"What happened to you?" I asked, unable to keep my concern from my voice. "What is this?"

She paused for a moment, her brow crinkled in thought. "It appears to be a hole. It certainly felt like a hole. But perhaps I'm wrong. My brain seems a little muddled right now."

My concern deepened at her uncharacteristic babbling, and it must have been visible on my face because she looked up at me with the same concern in her own eyes.

"Don't worry. They just drained most of my energy. But I got some of it back."

“They?” I almost snarled the question, latching on to the little sense I could make of her words. There had obviously been more to the attack than just a giant hole. “Who’s they?”

“Well...” She paused for a longer time, and the rush of my emotions caught me off guard. Was she protecting them? Why would she do that? I was ready to tear them apart.

I forced myself to take a calming breath while I waited for her response, seeking for the icy control that usually came so easily.

“I suppose it must have been whoever dug the hole. They didn’t introduce themselves, though.” She frowned. “Very rude.”

I groaned. “You’re nonsensical.”

I almost wished she had been trying to protect someone. It would scare me less than this strange behavior. If her energy had been taken as she claimed, they must have come frighteningly close to draining her completely to produce such nonsense from her.

“Am I? How strange.” She babbled on. “I’m glad you came, though. I thought I might freeze to death in there overnight. I don’t think I would have liked that.”

“Neither would I.” The words slipped out on a soft breath. Seeing her in this state had shaken me more than I thought possible.

“But how did you find me?” she asked, her voice steadying a little. “Do you often walk the grounds at night? It’s quite strange of you.”

This time I just managed to suppress the groan as she accused me of her own reckless behavior. “No, of course I don’t! And neither should you be! I was looking for you.”

“But the corridors were too crowded for running. There was nowhere else to go.” She sounded small and pitiful, and a sudden longing to gather her into my arms swept over me. I would find whoever had done this to her and make them pay.

“And someone must have known that,” I said. “Someone who was watching you, ready to follow you out here and spring their trap. We can just be grateful one of the servants saw you leave the Academy.”

“Oh, do you think it was a trap?” She frowned. “I suppose it must have been, now that you mention it.”

Her final bit of nonsense threw me over the line, and I shifted into action. “You need help. And you’re not walking anywhere.”

I scooped her up and cradled her against my chest. The movement was easy—vastly easier than it had been to refrain from pulling her close.

She rested her head against my shoulder and sighed. “This is nice, too. I might like it better, even.”

I almost laughed, every part of me lighter now I clasped her in my arms. “If you remember any of this, you’re going to be horrified.”

I began to walk back to the Academy, moving more slowly than her weight necessitated. I tried not to think about why I wanted to prolong this moment, letting myself instead dwell on her warmth and the tightness uncoiling inside me at the feel of her head resting trustingly against me.

“What’s this?” A sharp voice intruded on the moment, reminding me we were not in some enchanted moonlit land but in the Academy grounds. “One of my guards heard shouting, and…” Captain Vincent inhaled sharply as he got a clear view of us. “Is she hurt?”

“Thankfully not.” At his appearance, my usual manner returned, slipping back on with the ease of long practice. “But she needs to rest.”

“What happened?” Only Captain Vincent would have dared question me, and I couldn’t fault him for it.

I wanted to believe he took his duty to Verene seriously, but I couldn’t entirely discount the possibility it was something else that had brought him out to the garden on this particular night. He had been appointed by my father, after all, and I wasn’t ready to trust him yet.

“*Someone* was foolish enough to dig a large hole in the garden and then leave it there.” I forced my voice not to show any hint of the true level of my fury. “She was running and didn’t see it in the dark.” Let him think it was an accident. Or think I thought so, at any rate.

“I’ll have it filled in immediately,” the captain said. “And have a talk with both the grower instructor and the gardeners.” His voice dropped a little. “And my men, too. It’s their job to notice any threats to safety, even ones that don’t come with a sharp blade attached. One of them should have seen it on patrol.”

“Indeed.” I let ice seep into my voice, ready to be away from him. I needed to get help for Verene. “Now if you’ll let me pass?”

“Of course, Your Highness.” He stepped aside, and we had made it just out of earshot when Verene spoke. Apparently she hadn’t been asleep as I thought.

“Do you think he’ll notice it’s not an ordinary sort of hole?”

“If he’s half as good at his job as he’s supposed to be, he will. And then it will be very interesting to see what he does with that information.” We would hopefully learn something about his true motivations and loyalty from how he responded to this situation.

“We could tell him,” Verene suggested, as if trying her best to be helpful, and my arms tightened instinctively around her. Her sweetness was endearing, but the dulling of her usual sharp mind worried me. She needed more energy, and she needed it fast.

I knew suddenly where I needed to take her, and it wasn’t to Raelynn.

“We could.” I kept my words focused on the recent encounter with Vincent, not wanting her to realize the extent of my concern for her. “But he’s new here and appointed directly by my father. I haven’t had enough time to work out exactly where his allegiances lie.”

“Layna liked him,” she said. “But I didn’t tell him about the other hole either.”

“Yes. That other hole.” I spoke slowly, trying to understand how the two attacks fit together. This one had certainly been an escalation.

“It wasn’t quite so large as this one, though,” she said. “So he probably didn’t notice it.”

I chuckled soundlessly, unable to entirely suppress the amusement at her words. Verene really was going to hate every moment of her weakness when she remembered it later.

She burrowed against me, rewarding my lack of control and sending heat rushing through my body.

“You’re so warm,” she said. “I like it.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I pressed my lips softly against the top of her head, so tantalizingly close.

“Sleep if you need to, Verene.”

“I think maybe I will,” she said, and her breathing changed, becoming more even.

I shook my head in wonder. I had never been further from sleep. Warmth still suffused me, but it was tainted with less pleasant emotion. I had lost control, and I could never afford to do that.

By the time we entered the building and started up the stairs, I had myself more firmly in hand, my careful mask back in place. The entranceway was deserted, but Simone, a second year trainee from my law enforcement class, caught sight of us as she came down the stairs. I couldn’t blame her for staring at the strange picture we must present. I could only imagine the various scenarios she must be imagining, none of which I wanted spread around the Academy.

I focused my most intimidating look on her, warning her with my expression not to get involved. She must have received the message because her eyes widened with dismay before she disappeared from my view at full speed.

I took the rest of the stairs as quickly as I could, once again stopping at the first year floor. Thankfully I knew Bryony would be in her room. When I reached her door, I kicked it in place of a knock, given the burden in my arms. Bryony didn't immediately answer, so I kicked again, willing her to hurry. I didn't want anyone else seeing us.

"I'm coming!" Bryony sounded irritated, but any such emotions were forgotten when she pulled the door open and gasped at the sight of us.

I ignored her, striding into the room and laying Verene down on Bryony's bed. She was awake again now and looking at her friend in surprise.

"Bree! I've never seen your room before. Why have I never seen your room before?"

"What's wrong with her?" Bryony sounded as horrified as I had felt at my first sight of Verene in the hole. "What happened?"

"That's what I want to know," I said. "But it seems she's been drained of energy. She's not talking sensibly."

"Excuse me!" Verene's weak protest was easy to ignore.

"Oh! Of course!" Bryony brightened. "That's why you brought her here. Wait, I'll get my strongest one." She retrieved a parchment from her desk. "I only composed it this afternoon."

Verene frowned at her friend. "So that's why you feel so low. That's no way to spend a holiday, Bryony."

My eyes narrowed as I tried to make sense of her words, but I said nothing as Bryony pressed the composition on Verene.

"I wrote it for the arena," she told her, "so you need to rip it yourself. Go ahead, Verene."

Verene frowned. "But this is yours. I didn't like it when someone took *my* energy. I don't want to take yours."

Bryony looked at me with wide eyes, and I couldn't tell if she was shocked at Verene's words and looking to me for answers, or if she was concerned her friend was giving away too much information in front of me. Sharp curiosity lanced through me. But I couldn't satisfy it until I knew Verene was safe. I leaned over her, speaking as if she was a young child.

"Rip it, Verene."

Normally such an attitude would have infuriated her, but in her current state she capitulated to my stronger will.

"Fine."

A burst of anger hit me as the slow pace of her movements once again demonstrated her weakness. Whoever had attacked her had drained her dangerously low. But I calmed somewhat as the composition did its work and her color returned. It was impossible not to feel some amusement as she sat up and looked at me, her cheeks once again turning white as she recalled our recent interactions.

“What exactly did I say?”

I grinned. “I wondered if you would remember. Maybe don’t try too hard to recall all of it.”

She groaned, hiding her beautiful face behind her hands. “How about you try not to remember it as well?”

“No chance of that. I intend to savor every word.”

I let a chuckle slip out, and her cheeks flushed, making her look as stunning as usual, despite her otherwise disheveled appearance.

“Ugh, Bryony, kill me right now.”

“Um, I have no idea what’s going on, but it kind of looked like someone already tried that.” Bryony’s words immediately erased my amusement, returning my thoughts to the unknown attacker.

“Yes,” I said. “It did look a lot like that.” Internally I berated myself. The absence of my usual focus was just another cause for concern.

With her energy restored, Verene was able to explain the situation to Bryony with more sense than she had shown when responding to my earlier questions. I watched her face, remembering the look Bryony had given me and the seemingly nonsensical words Verene had been spouting earlier. She had clearly recovered, and I didn’t mean any of us to leave this room until I had some proper answers.

“You said you got some of your energy back,” I said, not taking my eyes from her face, as I watched for truth in her expression. “What exactly did you mean by that?”

She bit her lip, looking between me and Bryony.

“And just now you said you could feel Bryony was tired,” I pressed. “It’s time for the truth at last, if you please. How did you save yourself?”

She threw up her hands. “I don’t know! I don’t understand it myself.”

My gaze didn’t waver, and I could see the capitulation in her eyes. I registered a feeling that was half triumph, half disappointment. I was right that Verene had been keeping secrets from me, but I was finally going to get some answers.

“When I arrived at the Academy, the only ability I had was the ability to sense power,” she said, keeping to the unbelievable claim she had made from the beginning.

“And to read and write,” Bryony added, although that scarcely counted as an ability.

Verene nodded. “I was basically a sealed mage. That’s it. I swear it. But when I worked Tyron’s energy composition in the arena during our battle, I started sensing energy as well.”

“Like an energy mage?” I frowned at her, trying to make sense of such a thing. Power mages sensed power and energy mages sensed energy. No one sensed both.

Except the Spoken Mage, I reminded myself. Was she claiming she had suddenly developed her mother’s powers?

“Yes, but limited to just that sense,” Verene said. “I think working his composition unlocked the ability somehow, but I couldn’t do anything else. I tried everything—I redid all the experiments we did back in Ardann. Nothing else worked. It hadn’t unleashed any other ability.”

She had revealed one small piece of information, but it didn’t make sense of what had happened this evening. “Sensing energy wouldn’t have saved you in that pit,” I said.

“No.” She drew the word out. “That was something else. It started with the sensing, though. I followed the energy back to where it was going, and then I got angry and declared it was mine. So...it turned around and came back to me.”

“A verbal composition? So you *are* like your mother!” I stepped back, my mind trying to race through all the ramifications of such a thing. I had been right all along, but I couldn’t see the Ardannian purpose in this, let alone my own best way forward.

Verene leaped up, reaching for me, a strange desperation on her face.

“If I am, this is the first time I’ve ever done it.”

For a brief moment my thoughts were thrown off track as I was caught by the intensity of her emotion.

“Oh sit down, both of you.” Bryony pushed Verene back onto the bed, and pulled up a chair for me, gesturing for me to sit with as commanding a manner as my own mother. “She’s telling the truth, so stop getting all high and mighty, and help us figure out what just happened out there.”

I sat slowly, crossing my arms over my chest as I tried to wrap my mind around Verene’s outrageous story. Could it be true? Had she only just developed some new and unheard of ability?

Her friend either believed her or put on an exceptionally good act.

“I can’t believe it, Verene!” She was almost bouncing with excitement. “You composed! This is amazing!” She paused, remembering the actual events of the night. “Well, not the part where someone’s trying to kill you, obviously. But the rest. So you composed an energy shield for yourself? That must make you an energy mage, then. A shielding one.”

Verene shook her head. “No, it wasn’t a shield. I didn’t stop my attacker’s composition, I just...reversed it. I started pulling the energy back to myself. But he—or she—must have activated a shield themselves because I didn’t get much before the flow cut off.”

“You mean you worked a composition to drain their energy?” Bryony asked. “That’s a slightly more common ability than shielding.”

Verene shook her head, frustration and confusion pouring out of her. “No, I didn’t take *their* energy, I just took control of their composition and changed it.”

Changed it? I leaned forward, shock breaking through the last of my disbelief. I spoke slowly, wanting to make sure I hadn’t misheard.

“You took control of their composition. And you changed it.”

“Sort of.” Verene shifted uncomfortably. “I mean, I didn’t change it completely. I just reversed it.”

“That’s impossible.” I said the words baldly, trying to hide the explosion of thought going on behind my facade. To be able to take control of someone else’s composition...it was unthinkable—revolutionary.

I had known from the beginning this girl couldn’t be as ordinary as she claimed, although the months we had spent together had worn away my initial mistrust. If her ability really was entirely new, perhaps it was possible she hadn’t known about it herself. According to the stories, her own mother’s powers had only been revealed slowly, over time, as circumstances forced her into new discoveries.

But what would it mean for Ardann to have such a power? What would it mean for me? For Kallorway?

Could it be true?

“Of course it is!” Verene’s frustration was now directed at me. “Do you think I don’t know that? But I’m telling you what happened.”

“Spoken compositions were impossible too, thirty years ago.” Bryony sounded unnaturally calm. “And Verene is literally the daughter of the Spoken Mage.” She gave me a piercing look. “Do you really want to refuse to consider the possibility she might have an unprecedented ability? It would explain why no one could work out what it was. Who would ever think to test such a thing?”

Of course I was considering it. But at least my mask was working again if she still thought I felt nothing but disbelief. She didn't wait for my response, however, turning back to Verene.

"You can feel power as well as energy. Do you think you could take control of a power composition?"

Verene bit her lip while I tried to hide my keen interest. If she could do that the possibilities were endless.

"I'm not sure," she said. "It wasn't like a regular composition. This one was attached to them. They were pulling my energy into themselves. I don't know if it would work with a regular sort of composition."

Bryony nodded, tapping her finger against her lip. "That makes sense. Power mages are always avoiding open compositions that connect to them after they're worked because of the danger of draining so much energy that they die. But it's different for us. We don't have the same risks."

My brows drew together. "What do you mean? Are all your compositions open ones then?" Fear of open compositions had been drilled into me at such a young age that it was a strange thought.

"In a way?" Bryony looked at Verene, as if she thought the princess might like to take over, but Verene gestured for her to go on. "Our compositions have to be open because the whole point is for them to connect to someone's energy. But they're not draining our energy, so there's no risk to us. Those of us who give energy—like me—have that energy drained when we write the composition. Once it's worked, it connects with the person who works it, but since it's giving them stored energy, there's no concern. For those who drain energy, the composition connects with them in order to feed the energy into them, but once again, there's no risk."

She laughed wryly. "Well, no risk to the person working it. There's a great risk to the victim, of course."

"Shielding is different, though," Verene said. "Energy mages who can compose shields write them closed just like most power compositions."

"That's true," Bryony conceded, flashing Verene a look I couldn't read.

"But taking and giving energy are the most common," Verene said quickly. "And those are done as open compositions—in a way, at least. So it's possible I need a connection to the mage's energy before I can...twist it—or whatever we're calling it."

“We need to experiment!” Bryony sat up straight, glee on her face. Of course the irrepressible Sekali girl felt that way. But I hadn’t forgotten Verene had nearly died. I cut into her excitement.

“But not now. It’s the middle of the night. Verene needs to sleep.”

“I’m fine,” Verene tried to claim. “Now that I have Bryony’s energy.”

I shook my head. I needed time to process her claims, and she needed rest. She couldn’t afford to exhaust herself when we still didn’t know who was behind any of the attacks.

I intended to find out, of course, and once I did, they would no longer be a threat. I would make sure of it. But I needed time.

“Classes start again tomorrow, remember,” I said. “You’ll just end up exhausting all your new energy if you spend the night trying to compose.”

Bryony looked disappointed, but she was obviously thinking along the same lines as me. “And apparently someone wants you dead. So exhausting yourself doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

Verene muttered rebelliously under her breath, and we both chose to ignore her words. There was no valid argument she could put forward against our concerns.

“I don’t want you alone,” I said suddenly, gripped by a vision of her lying at the bottom of that pit. “Bryony, you need to move in to Verene’s suite.”

“What?” Predictably Verene wasn’t going to accept my pronouncement without a fight. “Since when did you have the right to order me around?”

I met her gaze without flinching. “Since I pulled you almost lifeless out of a pit on the Academy grounds. You’re a royal guest in my father’s kingdom. I will not have you assassinated here.”

I couldn’t bear to lose you like that.

I kept the final thought locked tightly inside. I had regained control of myself, and I didn’t intend for any more secrets to be revealed tonight.