

The ride to Castle Morver was too short for Aren's preference. Their inn was close enough to the fortress that even a common man could follow the trail back to Aren. Luckily, this was not the part of town for common men. The shopkeepers were too focused on making their morning sales and their customers were too absorbed in bargaining. The best time to be invisible was when everyone else was busy. The footmen of the carriage refused to make eye contact with the nobility and the blacked-out windows kept their privacy.

"Your name?" Torren asked without much pretense.

"Lady Forel Tomperen of Uru, County Fallay," Aren answered with confidence.

"How do we know each other?"

"We're cousins, three times removed on your father's side."

"Beverage of choice?"

"Uh... a strong ale at the end of the day?"

"Green tea from Laeros," Torren corrected, a bit harsh.

"I said I needed an alias. I didn't need a life story."

"Well, these are things we'll need to know. The real Lady Forel Tomperen visited when she was younger. We can say that you changed as you've gotten older, but one slip in a detail may endanger the mission."

"Not every royal is a Crystal Mind."

"Enough of them are. I'll try to keep too many people from talking to you, but protocol might prevent us from snubbing everyone. And if you can remain consistent with the Crystal Minds, our subterfuge will remain intact."

"A little advice?" Aren smiled. "If you want to start a life of crime, don't use words with so many syllables. But I understand. We'll keep your precious subterfuge intact without tarnishing your distant cousin's name."

"Her reputation is the least of my worries," Torren said, allowing a small smirk. The carriage slowed and the clatter of hooves ceased with a command from the deep-voiced driver ordered. "We're here. Remember, you're nobility now. Act like it."

The door opened and the uniformed footman held the door open for them. Torren exited first and held a hand out for Aren. Aren felt herself melt away as she dropped into the character of Lady Forel. She set her hand in Torren's palm as she gracefully moved down the steps.

The face of Castle Morver was black stone with weatherworn streaks of a thousand storms. The life-like gargoyles glared down and scrutinized Aren with a fanged snarl. The King's Sun Lion banners fluttered in the sea breeze, fluttering over the song of the queen's birds in the aviary. As the gate closed behind them, Aren oriented herself to the narrow view of the castle she'd seen before. Beyond that tiny sliver, she was out of her depth.

“Torren!” A voice laughed. Aren turned and watched a tall man coming through the yard. He was a handsome-looking man with light hair and straight teeth. Even for a noble, he looked very well looked after.

“Deven,” Torren smiled. “Thank you so much for seeing us.”

“Who wouldn't extend some hospitality to the king's nephew? I'm honored. And who is this?”

“This is my distant cousin, Lady Forel.”

“My lady,” Deven bowed and took her hand. Aren focused on the proper protocol and allowed Deven to kiss her hand. Not looking down on him, but also not looking away, Aren played a delicate game and ended up looking between Deven's meticulous eyebrows. He rose with a gentle smile. “Welcome to Castle Morver. How was the journey?”

“Dreary while crossing, but I'm happy to be on solid ground after a week at sea. My dear cousin has looked after me well. It's an honor to meet you, High Lord Deven.”

“Please, call me Deven. I hope that I may treat you to a tour of the castle.”

“Actually,” Torren began, “we wondered—”

“Torren, don't embarrass me!”

“What's this?” Deven smiled. “Don't keep me in suspense.”

“Well, I don't know if you're aware of this, but Forel is quite the artist. She was hoping we could see the Galleria.”

“It was an idle fantasy!” Aren said, swatting Torren playfully. “I told him I didn't mean it as soon as I said it.”

“Do you paint?” Deven asked.

“I...on occasion I'll paint a landscape from the villa,” Aren said, forcing a shy blush to her cheeks. “I'm no master artist, but I know the basics.”

“Are you a fan of Master Riovani's work?”

“I'm not privileged enough to say I've seen his work, but Torren tells me it's astonishing.”

“I doubt he could give you the true experience. As an artist myself, I know a Crystal Mind is far too analytical to express such a piece of work properly. Not without a few hours and certainly not through letters.”

“I did find his descriptions lacking,” Aren admitted, “but one of my instructors told me Riovani was the greatest painter of his time.”

“By far the greatest, but why not judge it yourself?”

“I...I wouldn't dream of—!”

“Nonsense,” Deven smiled. “It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience to gaze upon a Riovani with your own eyes. Maybe it will inspire the next great artist.”

“See?” Torren said, nudging Aren, “I told you he could get us into the Galleria.”

“I didn’t want to embarrass myself asking him!” Aren flushed. Deven offered his arm to Aren and she took it, gleefully fingering his bicep as they walked. Deven guided Aren through the history of the Queen’s Aviary, the Gardens, and the castle’s architecture. The Great Doors were open, letting in fresh air and stray birds to brighten the massive hall. Cool air rushed over Aren’s shoulders and moved the tapestries in the King’s Hall that showed Temnin as heroes rather than conquerors.

Deven explained each as they passed by: the alliance of the Eight Houses, the liberation of the Ives, the victory of Laeros, Uru joining the alliance and so many more. The King’s Hall was full of servants cleaning and rushing between tasks. Aren kept her eyes only on Deven, emphasizing the role she had to play. She smiled and clutched at his arm, giggling at his terrible jokes like a silly schoolgirl. It was all for the sake of disarming him, but Aren was doing her best to remember every step and turn they made. Walking up a flight of stairs that spiraled around the banquet hall, the group moved to a large door protected by two soldiers in steel armor.

“Gentlemen,” Deven nodded. “I’m here to show the Galleria to Lord Torren and his guest.”

“Lord Deven, only scheduled viewings...”

“We can make an exception,” Deven said. “Or do you fear that the king’s nephew and dear cousin will breathe too hard on one of the portraits?”

The guards looked at one another. One shrugged and stepped aside. The other seemed resistant to do so, looking Aren up and down.

“Is there a problem, sir?” Torren said, stepping forward. “I’d hate for the king to mistake your hesitation for disrespect.”

“I’ve never seen her before...”

“I’d hate to cause trouble...” Aren said, a little disappointed.

“Please,” Deven said, assuring her. He turned to the guard and furrowed his brow. “This is getting absurd, sir. If you think the king’s nephew would do such a thing, we can put him in irons before his majesty. Though I’m sure that would endanger any future promotion.”

“We’ll be able to find them should anything go wrong,” the first soldier assured his partner.

After some staring, the second guard stepped aside. Aren could tell he was a Crystal Mind from the way he watched her, the way he cataloged her face, her movements, down to the way she breathed. Aren kept her ruse up, using the tiniest details of the character she’d made to fortify her appearance. A Crystal Mind with proper training could pick her out of the street no matter what she did to her appearance. Now, he was memorizing the completely unconscious factors in her gait and mannerisms. Aren hid behind the character of Lady Forel and passed by him without looking. It all melted away the second she stepped into the Galleria.

San’s counterfeit captivated her attention, but the Galleria held her soul. There were dozens of portraits rendered in such unfathomable realism that Aren felt she was in a silent crowd of

people all staring at her. The landscapes were so clear that Aren could count the individual leaves on the trees. The room was lit by pale blue rods of crystal embedded in the alcoves, but Aren felt the sun from the landscapes lit her way. Staring her in the face, Aren saw the original Idore of the Ives. She masked the flicker of uncertainty that the counterfeit may not be good enough.

“The King’s Galleria,” Deven beamed, “the cultural jewel at the center of the kingdom in the king’s hall. Many call Master Riovani the greatest painter of all time and the Galleria is proof of that. Some of these were commissions by the king, enemies he wanted painted as a sign of respect, or opponents he wanted to honor in death. Yet, many are personal works that Master Riovani gifted to the king.”

“They’re beautiful,” Aren said, awestruck. It was the first thing she had said to Deven that wasn’t in character.

“Yes,” Deven said. “I see you’ve taken a liking to Idore.”

“Yes,” Aren said, firming up her mask again. “She’s beautiful.”

“Master Riovani loved Idore for her charm. The Ives were famous for their beauty, but Idore captured the special attention of Master Riovani. She was his greatest muse. He painted this shortly after her death so that her beauty would persist—are you alright, dear?”

“I’m afraid I’ve quite lost my breath,” Aren said. “It feels as if the room is spinning.”

“Here, sit my dear,” Deven urged, pulling one of the chairs to the middle of the room. “I’ll fetch a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine,” Aren urged shying away. “A little overwhelmed...”

“Could you fetch her something?” Torren urged Deven. “Water or something?”

“Of course,” Deven said, “I’ll be back shortly.”

“Please, don’t worry the guards?” Aren said. “Fainting in front of a painting? I’m so embarrassed.”

“No need to be,” Deven said. “I’ll be right back with some water for you. Or would you prefer something stronger?”

“The only thing I could handle would be Learos Tea if you have any?”

“I’ll be sure to get you some,” Deven said. “It’s a favorite of the queen as well. Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

The concierge strode to the door, walking with purpose rather than running. He spoke a few words to the guards and the doors closed behind him. After a few minutes of faking to catch her breath, Aren glanced towards the door to make sure they were alone.

“Laying it on a little thick, don’t you think?”

“You were the one who insisted I keep the character specific,” Aren said. “We don’t have much time.”

“Eight minutes and eleven seconds,” Torren calculated, “Plus the time it takes for Deven to boil the water for your tea...”

“I told you I’d remember,” Aren said. She reached down and undid some of the buttons on the side of her dress. With the buttons undone, Aren pulled the side of her dress open, revealing the counterfeit in the secret compartment. The counterfeit was flat, only rolled around Aren’s legs. It was intact from the journey which boded well for the mission if they could extract the original.

Torren removed the painting from the wall and worked the canvas free without damaging the wire holding the frame together. He laid the frame on the ground, lowering the painting facedown on the tile floor. Aren drew a longer metal rod out of her hair and started to remove each of the small nails in the canvas with the notch in her tool. Torren spread out the counterfeit and smoothed out the wrinkles.

“We have to be quick,” Torren urged.

“We can’t damage the painting,” Aren said. It was more than the job and keeping things clean for the client. Aren wanted to keep the painting perfect. As a nail came out without incident, Aren felt her heart stop as she set about pulling the next one free. She worked carefully around the edge as Torren told her their remaining time.

As the final nail came free, Aren lifted the canvas frame away from the painting. As if carrying a newborn, Aren set the masterpiece aside. Torren arranged the frame to fit the counterfeit and started stretching the canvas. Aren knelt and helped Torren work the nails back in with the heel of her shoe. It was quieter than using hammers, but each strike felt like Aren was pounding the nail in with the flat side of her hand.

“Two minutes,” Torren said, not looking up from his work. “Almost finished?”

“Yeah,” Aren said, “Set the painting back up.”

Aren cradled the stolen canvas and spread it across her lap. She folded the gown back over, seeking a last, longing look at the true face of Idore. The counterfeit hung from the wall and—in the poor lighting—Aren might have even believed it was the original had it not been caressing her thigh. They argued about the straightness but finally accepted their work. Aren had just sat down in her original spot when Lord Deven returned with a white porcelain cup.

“There you are,” Deven said, gently guiding the cup to Aren’s hand. “I hope you don’t mind that I took the liberty of adding some milk.”

“That’s lovely, thank you,” Aren said, panting a little.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t want me to fetch the healer? You look a little flush and out of breath.”

“Just a fainting spell,” Aren fanned herself. She raised the cup to her lips and took a delicate sip. She’d never liked tea, but nothing could have brought her more relief.

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Aren spent the rest of her visit to the castle going from room to room worried that the painting would slip out of her skirt at any moment and reveal the whole ruse. The character of Lady Forel Tomperen saved her once again. Aren was a common thief, but the Lady of Uru was eager to see the castle. She exchanged pleasantries with a few minor nobles they met, careful to remember Torren's whirlwind lesson on courteousness and manners in nobility. As an outsider, she deferred to everyone, which favored them since Aren couldn't look anyone in the eye.

"I'm afraid we must be going now," Torren said, after some time. "Mother is expecting us back for afternoon tea."

"Can't we stay a little longer?" Aren pleaded, almost whining. "It's been such a wonderful day and I'd hate to—"

"Castle Morver will always be here, my lady," Deven said. "It would do well to see to your health after your adventure today. I still don't know if you quite recovered from your fainting spell in the Galleria."

"So embarrassing," Aren shook her head and covered her face. "Could we keep that between us? I'd hate for word to get out that I'm nothing better than a starstruck artist who fainted in the presence of a master."

"Well, Riovani was always said to 'take your breath away.'" Deven smiled and Aren beamed back. Torren summoned a servant to ready the carriage as Deven led Aren by the arm back to the courtyard. Her other hand gently grazed the buttons on the side of her gown, as if the action kept her secret sealed away. Though with the way Deven was looking at her, the palace could have been on fire for all the lord would see.

Torren's carriage met them in the courtyard and Aren climbed inside with Torren's help. She peered out the window and smiled at Lord Deven. "Thank you for the tour today. I hope to come back and see you again soon."

"As do I, Lady Forel," Lord Deven smiled. "And you, Lord Torren. I'll see you soon, I'm sure."

"Until then," Torren said, shaking Deven's hand diplomatically before climbing into the carriage himself. There was a moment of silence before the cart lurched forward. Aren only let herself breathe again once she saw the walls of the portcullis pass the windows.

"We did it," Torren smiled. "I can't believe it..."

"We did," Aren smiled, touching the fold of her dress that hid Idore of the Ives. She wanted to gaze at the painting more but settled for the touch of her fingers through the fabric. "I may keep this dress after all."

"Whatever happened to 'no luxuries?'"

"Just a souvenir," Aren smiled.