

Prologue



Year 1064

The Tamar Civil War

A civil war ravaged the land. For forty-three years the royal house, under the Banner of the Bear, fought against the House of Tamar. On the day of the last great battle, the king lay on the battlefield, gasping his last breath. From the mud and blood, the young Prince Ulric took up the sword from his fallen father. In a duel that would echo throughout the night, Ulric slayed Coden Tamar ending the long war with a final swing.

With the head of the powerful House of Tamar dead, the usurpers were overthrown. Ulric was crowned the Beast King, and the sounds of ringing swords halted as he united the houses under his rule. This new realm joined by the Beast King's might set forth a renaissance of beauty

and bureaucracy. The destruction and needless death ended. The land once again became fertile underneath the scorched earth. Under his rule, and aided by his powerful allies, the land and people rejoiced.

The joy did not last. Over time the land turned sour and whispers of madness permeated the castle. As the Beast King grew ill his commands became more erratic and volatile. Growing increasingly reclusive, the King handled all his commands through secret meetings and messengers. Motivated by either fear or paranoia, no one was sure, the trade routes were stopped by Royal Decree. The houses loyal to the Beast King, sworn to station at the Crowning Ceremony, were soul-bound to protect and uphold the Beast King's reign. Failure would result in a punishment worse than death.

Famine began to devastate the land and its people. Battles were fought among the noble houses for fertile land. Farmers and the townspeople, hungry, angry, and afraid, revolted. The sons of the fathers who fought alongside the Beast King picked up their swords. It was only the power of the Houses still loyal to the Beast King court that a tenuous peace was maintained.

As years passed under the ill king's reign, it was only a matter of time before a new civil war would emerge.

Chapter One



Year 1079

Reign of King Ulric the Fifth

“I don’t understand.”

The Grand Chancellor Harman glanced at the speaker with pity. She sat in front of his great oak desk, trying to keep her spine straight and proper like her mama taught her. A nervous twitch had her chewing her bottom lip. Her skirts rustled with unease as her toes swayed inches from the ground. She was anxious, and, if she admitted it, a little afraid of the cold dark room. Her papa told her she shouldn’t be with men alone, even if it was someone as important as the Grand Chancellor. The only comfort was the faint smell of cinnamon that clung to the air.

“Nor do I,” added a cold voice. The girl turned and
looked up

at the young man leaning in the doorway. His lithe figure radiated power and controlled energy. The Grand Chancellor could tell rage boiled under the surface.

"Please, your lordship," Harman gestured to the seat beside the girl. "Sit."

"No."

The man's rudeness caused the girl to sit up straighter. "My papa will be looking for me. Can I go now, Grand Chancellor?"

Harman sighed heavily, his tall paunch figure shaking with the effort. He smoothed his white pleated robe over his belly. "Not yet, my dear." He gathered his full height and stared at the arrogant young man. "Your lordship, on behalf of your king, I command you to sit!"

Dark eyes flashing, Lord Elgin crossed the small stone room and took his seat. His eyes slid from the girl to the chancellor. "I am very busy, Grand Chancellor. Why have you summoned me?"

"I have not summoned you here, Luke." Harman used the head of the House of Elgin's informal name to soften his earlier rebuke. "Your king has."

The girl jumped in her chair at the announcement. Arranging her skirts, she glanced around the room into the shadows. Harman felt a lump of shame in his throat. She was so young. The young lord, however, seemed unaffected.

Sitting down, Harman began, "On behalf of your king, his holiness King Ulric the Fifth, The Beast King, Master of the Land, Ruler of the..."

“Enough!” Elgin cut in. The girl’s eyes widened. “Get to the point, Grand Chancellor. You know as well as I the king is no longer ruler of his own sense, let alone the people.”

The young girl gasped. No one had dared before talk about the king in such an audacious manner! This type of speech was treason!

Harman halted. Weary and resigned, he rubbed his temples to ease the mounting pressure. “Of course, you are right Lord Elgin. The king, after all the good he has done in this land, is no longer the wise ruler he once was.” Uncomfortable at his own admission, he firmed his voice. “Regardless he still is your king!”

Elgin said nothing, letting the silence swallow the two men. Realizing the Grand Chancellor had no intentions of letting him leave, Elgin spoke. “Why am I here, Grand Chancellor?”

Harman gestured towards the girl. “Her.”

“What about her?” Elgin asked.

The girl was starting to get annoyed with how the adults talked around her. She was bright, she understood things most kids didn’t. And right now she understood that they were being rude.

“Kylia is the daughter of King Ulric’s nephew, Lord Sampson.” Kylia’s ears perked up at her father’s name. “You know of him?”

Elgin nodded, his dark hair falling across his forehead.

“Kylia,” the Grand Chancellor took a deep breath, “is now your wife.”

Kylia couldn’t breathe. His wife? She didn’t even know

him! Did her parents know what was going on? Her young brain tossed and turned. Panic swelled within her.

“Her?” Elgin stood, knocking back his chair. “She is but a child! An ugly one at that!” The Grand Chancellor hissed at him. Not knowing what else to do, Kylia stared at the stone wall behind the desk. Tears formed on her lashes. Ugly? She was never considered beautiful compared to her companions, but ugly? She tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

Harman’s heart tugged at the little girl with the mousy hair and green eyes, rigid in her chair. He sliced a hand through the air. “Enough, your lordship! Sit down!”

Elgin ran a hand raggedly through his hair. “I demand an explanation, Grand Chancellor.”

Harman spread his hands apart, palms up, in a gesture of defeat. “I have no explanation to give, your lordship. It is the king's wishes. As you proclaimed, he is not right of mind. He believes that by tying you to his only eligible family member he can control you. Which I can see,” Harman said with a pointed look, “is not the case with your temper.” The Grand Chancellor spared a glance at the young girl. He focused his attention back on Elgin. “There is a positive side to this. The king wants the marriage to remain a secret. He does not want any harm befalling the girl before she comes of age. Knowledge of the girl will only give your enemies an advantage. Though you are known for your battle strategy, you are also known for your compassion. They will use that against you, and, most fortunately, the king recognized the danger. Thus, the marriage will remain

a secret.”

“No one will know?” whispered the girl.

Having forgotten about her, both men turned towards the small voice. “Correct,” Harman answered. “Besides the three of us, no one is to know, on the punishment of death as per the king. This includes your parents young one,” he warned.

“Good.” Kylia slipped out of her chair and stood in front of the men, chin held high. While the men had been squabbling, she had time to sort out her thoughts. With a regalness befitting a queen, she inclined her head to Harman. “I know this must have been hard for you Grand Chancellor. Thank you for being as compassionate as possible while fulfilling your duties.” Unsure how to respond to the change in the young girl, the Grand Chancellor simply nodded.

“As for you, your lordship,” she spat, eyes blazing, “I have no desire to ruin your life. You will not spare one thought to me, and I not of you. As this is a secret, as your wife I give you permission to continue your life, your battles, and your beautiful women. To stop would only cause concern and suspicion.” She glared at him. “Not that I believe you would need my permission, but I have heard tales of your loyalty. I only wish to reaffirm that you have no loyalty to me. We are only married in name, we have no other bond than that.” She turned to the Grand Chancellor. “Is there something I need to sign?”

The Grand Chancellor pulled out a long parchment from the desk. Taking the quill, Kylia signed in silence. El-

gin, his face unreadable, did the same.

“If that is all, I will take my leave of you gentlemen.” Harman granted his assent. With a terse curtsy, the young lady walked head high and proud out of the room.

“Congratulations, Lord Elgin. I believe you just married a spitfire.”

“Yes,” Elgin murmured, his eyes angry. “I suppose I have.”