

DERNANCOURT
Novella

The
Secret
Legacy

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Pronunciation Guide

People

Yu-Jun – Yu-san

Ha-Yoon – Ha-yun

Places

Dernancourt – Dern-an-court

Aven – Aveen

Pendref – Pend-treth

Arsalan – Aseu-sallan

Naranbold – Nalan-boldeu

Temujin – Tem-u-jin

Alamein – Ala-mein

Altrane – Al-train

Echokos – Echo-kos

Other

Jangchang – Jun-chung (spear)

Nagseaon – Nan-see-on (spear with thorns)

Dungpae – Dung-pae (shield)

Ssangdo – Sang-do (double-edge sword)

Harrawong – Harra-wong (young military men training)

Maengleohan – Maeng-leo-han (fierce warriors)

Shima enaga – Shee-ma enarga (messenger birds)

Welcome to the *Dernancourt* series.

May you always choose happiness,

be kind to yourself and to others,

believe in who you are,

and never forget that you deserve to be happy and loved for who you are.

Chapter 1

Reign of King Taejong, Battle of Lexmon

Commander Griffith Ryeland was studying the map laid out on the table, its edges curling slightly in the humid air. The silence in the room was tense after the rowdy discussions just minutes earlier, and it was finally quiet enough for Griffith to think. He allowed his mind to wander over the distant landscape and try to build a mental image of their position and his options.

‘You’re not happy,’ Prince Yu-Jun said, stepping closer and standing beside him. Griffith did not immediately respond as he was lost in thought. His eyes were fixed on the map, as though searching for something just beyond the lines and contours and hoping the answer arose from the page.

‘No,’ Griffith muttered, his voice distant. ‘I need to walk and think.’ He stood up abruptly, and together they made their way through the small, empty village they had camped beside and had been using as their temporary base.

As they reached the edge of the village, they looked toward the distant hills, a large shoulder of land that rose sharply. In front of them loomed another rise, a massive mound of earth covered in grass. The villages didn’t use the area as it was not productive for crops or cattle.

‘I want to go there and take a look.’ Griffith lifted his chin in the direction he wanted to go and started climbing the hill. When they reached the top, the land stretched out in every direction, and a slight breeze ruffled Griffith’s dark-brown hair. What had seemed like a mere hill from the ground offered a commanding view of the surrounding terrain. Below them, their scattered forces were spread out across the valley and far into the distance. Yu-Jun knew that Griffith had an ability to plan complex, multi-pronged attacks. He understood landscapes and was able to plan accordingly.

‘Your cousin’s forces are to the south, about two hours away,’ Griffith observed, his eyes scanning the horizon as if he could see inside their enemy’s camp. Prince Yu-Jun kept silent, knowing Griffith was going to talk his way through his thoughts. They had been friends since childhood, and he was used to the way Griffith strategised.

They had been at war a few years, mostly small skirmishes around Dernancourt with Prince Jae-Sang and his son Prince Danu who had rebelled when his father had died. Although King Taejong had been crowned prince of Dernancourt by his father King Dangun when he came of age, his illegitimate older brother believed the crown should go to him instead.

Sixteen-year-old Griffith had steered them towards victory many times and was quickly developing a reputation as an exemplary battle commander. Yu-Jun wasn’t surprised, Griffith came from a family that had a long line of warriors who had held the south of Dernancourt before the House of Yi had united the many tribes under one country. The dukes of Aven were one of the most prominent families and were loyal to the Imperial Family of Yi.

Both Griffith and Yu-Jun had met as children and completed their Harrawong training together, forming a brotherhood with three other boys in the process.

Griffith exhaled sharply, his gaze narrowing as he spoke. ‘Your uncle has two units with him to the north. For some reason, he is not moving forward to engage with your father and brother. I’d say he is looking for a better location to engage with them. We risk being outflanked by him. Your cousin Prince Danu has moved up behind us. If your uncle and cousin decided to attack us, we will be overrun. I don’t like the idea of fighting on two fronts. We have no hope of getting reinforcements here as the main contingent of our army is somewhere between here and Volis.’

‘Agreed,’ Yu-Jun said.

After a moment, Griffith continued. ‘I’ve just received an intelligence message from Reid that your cousin and his followers settled in at Lexmon a few days ago. They’re eager for glory. Your cousin wants to prove himself, prove he is better than you and your brothers, and he wants the

crown. He's been waiting for the right opportunity and now he thinks he has it. His mother's brother, who has been guiding him with his recent success, has just been called away. Danu is arrogant, foolish and easy to anger. He will rush into things without thinking. Rumour has it that he and his sycophants have been out having a wild time partying. If we can goad Danu into attacking us, we might have an opportunity, but it is not without risks.'

'The risks?' said Yu-Jun.

'If there was a message delivered to your uncle Prince Jae-San saying his son was in danger, he would need to ride fast and hard here. He would only bring a small troop with him to get his son out; he won't be interested in anything else. I met one of the villagers who returned yesterday to check on his crops, and he told me that there's a cold front coming that will bring a thick fog that will stay for a few hours.'

Yu-Jun turned to look at his friend. 'So what is your plan?'

Griffith's eyes gleamed with a quiet resolve. 'I want to engage your cousin. We will request he come and see us today or tomorrow at the latest. I want to show him that we're ready to surrender and that we are weak. I want him to see our troop movements—just a small force around the village. I want him to think that if he acts fast, he can capture both of us. He'll rush back to his men, and I'm willing to bet that, by next morning, he'll be on the move to attack us. It will be a rushed plan because his uncle is not with him to temper him and, because he will think our defeat is going to be easy, he and his men will celebrate in advance. Then they will ride into battle with us unprepared and probably still hungover.'

Yu-Jun studied Griffith for a moment, sensing the strategic brilliance in his plan, but also the danger. 'It's a risk.'

'I know,' Griffith said, nodding slowly, 'but it's the only way to get him to act. Once he's committed, we can turn the tables on him. We can make it look like the best opportunity to attack is via the village. When he takes the bait, we'll draw him out past the village and into the open space where we'll be able to hit him hard with our long-arm bowmen and the fog as cover. Then we can send in the cavalry and infantry.'

Yu-Jun exhaled, the weight of the decision settling in his chest. 'If it works, it could be a decisive blow.'

'And if it doesn't,' Griffith said, 'then we adapt, which our men are very good at, or we run, but this is the best option that I can see. We don't have the luxury of time.' Griffith, who had been staring out across the landscape, turned to face Prince Yu-Jun.

'I think you have come up with our best option,' Yu-Jun told him.

'You need to brief all the leaders. Reid is going to assist Danu by organising some drinking parties after they come here. It is critical that once we can confirm Danu is going to attack, we shift into position. Every commander must know the plan and be ready to execute it.'

Yu-Jun listened intently, his mind already working through the details. Griffith's confidence was infectious.

Griffith laid out his plan. 'If we can force Danu's hand, he'll attack us here at Lexmon. If they come up the centre of this ridge, which is the most obvious route, we'll have a surprise waiting for them. We can hide our main forces in the surrounding area. If the villager is right about the fog, they won't see us until it is almost too late.'

Prince Yu-Jun walked away from Griffith, his mind racing as he felt the cool breeze on his face. He ran a hand over his growing beard as he weighed up Griffith's plan. After a few moments, he turned, his expression resolute. 'Let's go back. I'll send the missives to the leaders to come in for a meeting so we can outline our plan.'

*

The next day, Griffith and Yu-Jun walked their unit commanders through the terrain, explaining every detail of their plan and checking for any suggestions or adjustments. By the end of the day, everything was set in motion. All they needed now was for their enemy to take the bait, so the invitation was sent to Prince Danu. This was the part that Griffith hated, as did most military men—the waiting.

At mid-morning, one of Griffith's men approached him, announcing that Prince Danu and two of his senior generals had arrived for talks. Commander Taiden Holder had been chosen to meet Prince Danu and guide them along a path designed to show them exactly what Griffith and Prince Yu-Jun wanted them to see. Prince Danu's expression was one of barely contained triumph as he took in Prince Yu-Jun's seemingly limited forces, which appeared to be preparing to flee Lexmon, and the empty rise in the distance where there were no forces at all.

On the outskirts of the village, Commander Holder escorted Prince Danu into Prince Yu-Jun's tent. The interior was modest yet carefully arranged, with rugs on the floor and seating set up in the centre of the tent. The bedding area to the side, however, was a mess of bottles piled next to the bed and clothes haphazardly draped over trunks. After the guests had settled, Griffith, Taiden and Reid took their place silently at Yu-Jun's back, standing watchful and still.

Prince Danu was clearly pleased with the situation and took his seat opposite Prince Yu-Jun. Sneering, he said, 'You seem to be at a disadvantage, cousin. My father and his forces are to the north, and I am behind you. You won't be able to slip past either one of us nor can you fight a battle on two sides.'

'I think you should be the one who surrenders,' Yu-Jun told him.

Prince Danu laughed. 'You are clearly getting the wrong advice, cousin.'

Prince Yu-Jun remained silent, watching Danu like the insect he was. He had learnt from his father King Taejong that saying nothing sometimes made the person lose control.

Danu broke the silence, his eyes burning with fury. 'You are going to lose this war,' he spat through gritted teeth. 'When I am crown prince and my father is king, you, Ji-Wan and Huan-Jung will all die. I might even ask my father if I can carry out your execution myself.'

Yu-Jun said nothing, his expression composed.

Unable to contain his rage, Prince Danu stood abruptly and stormed out of the tent, his men following him while sneering.

Taiden leaned in and asked, 'Do you think he took the bait?'

'Yes,' Griffith replied, his tone calm. He turned to his men. 'Send the messages. It's time. If there are any issues, let me know straight away.'

His men nodded and rushed from the tent to carry out their orders.

'I'll head back to organise what I can at all the local taverns that he and his men go to. I have a lovely night planned for them,' Reid said then departed.

Yu-Jun glanced at Griffith and Taiden, his face set with determination. 'Let's get Bowie. We should spend the night talking to all the men.'

'Agreed,' Griffith said.

Together, they moved through the encampments, checking in with the leaders and taking time to speak with the soldiers. There was no turning back now.

*

Just after midnight, Griffith and his men took up their positions and waited. Griffith waited hidden in a doorway on the furthest part of the village. Reid's operation had been successful—his people had helped Danu's troops get drunk, and the leadership had passed out. The enemy came at first light, the dawn barely able to pierce the thick fog. He could hear the skirmishes breaking out on the outskirts of Lexmon. The fog continued to creep in, thick and heavy, reducing visibility to mere feet. The enemy, unfamiliar with the village, struggled to navigate through the haze. Yu-Jun

had ordered campfires to be lit during the night on the leeward side of Lexmon, the billowing smoke through the village now further disorienting the enemy.

Within the village, the fighting had turned brutal at close quarters. Griffith shouted directions to every corner, his presence constant as he rallied his men and held the line. Slowly and methodically, he pulled his men back to outer Lexmon and into the open fields beyond. One man came into the barn he was hiding in, and Griffith threw a knife into his neck. As the man lifted his hands to his neck and gurgled, Griffith moved towards him, swiping his sword across his neck. The man dropped, blood pooling around him.

Yu-Jun watched the battle unfold on the rise where he and his forces were waiting like a coiled spring. Though poised, his heart pounded as he waited. Finally, he saw it: the enemy's troops coming from the ridge Griffith had left undefended to make Prince Danu think they could attack Lexmon from the rear. The infantry, cavalry and bowmen stood silent and ready to strike. Yu-Jun moved up and down the lines, offering reassurance and steadying the resolve of his men.

The tension was thick. Then, as if on cue, the sun broke through the fog, a pale, weak light cutting through the haze, accompanied by a light wind. Yu-Jun smiled. His voice steady, he commanded, 'Start the battle signals, shoot at will.' He watched as Griffith and his men ran toward the hidden troops in the fog with small lights to illuminate their way.

Loud drums began to beat, the rhythm carrying across the battlefield. Within moments, massive balls of fire were hurtling through the air, crashing into the enemy ranks with terrifying force and hitting buildings that exploded amid fire, dust and debris.

The enemy, disoriented by the attack, could see no targets to counterstrike and had to keep moving forward. As they advanced, thousands of arrows rained down upon them. They raised their shields, but it was already too late. Panic set in and men began to scatter, their discipline crumbling as fear took hold.

Griffith ruthlessly slashed at the enemy, his focus on interrupting their balance and breath. He'd been taught to be ruthless in a fight, and he used stability, oxygen and orientation as the keys to his success. It was an old method of fighting.

One of the enemy commanders tried to rally his troops, pushing them forward with desperate shouts. But his advance was cut short as he encountered Taiden and his infantry troop running at them head on. The battle was fierce. The sound of hooves thundered in the distance as the cavalry led by Bowie charged through the enemy's scattered forces, their momentum unstoppable.

Yu-Jun saw a small group of enemy troops on horseback galloping to Prince Danu's rescue. It looked like his uncle Prince Jae-Sang.

'Keep firing on that advance till they start to run and scatter!' he ordered his men on the ridgeline, and he picked up a bow and moved to stand in line with his bowmen.

Chapter 2

Griffith was standing on the battlefield and coughed—the air thick with smoke, the smell of blood, and the sounds of men screaming.

‘Griffith.’ Taiden appeared in front of him, his sword dripping blood.

‘We need to find Prince Danu,’ Griffith said with urgency.

‘You don’t think he’s run yet?’ Taiden asked as he stood back-to-back with Griffith searching the field.

‘No. I saw him charge through the village and followed him. He has to be on the field somewhere.’

They moved towards the sounds of clashing swords and engaged with Danu’s forces. Griffith kicked a soldier’s knee, forcing him to stumble, then hit him with the back of his pommel. The man staggered, and Griffith thrust his sword into him.

Through a break in the smoke, Griffith spotted Danu. ‘Taiden!’

Griffith started to push through the men battling man to man, kicking, slashing, thrusting his swords as he moved closer and closer to Prince Danu. He and two of his soldiers protecting his back helped him push forward until he was facing the prince’s guards. With a sword in each hand, he attacked the man closest to him. The fight was fast and furious, Griffith weaving and slashing as much as possible. His sword nicked the guard’s neck and blood squirted from the wound before he fell to the ground with a thud. Griffith raised his swords again, breathing heavily. Danu looked at the fallen guard in horror. He was loosely holding a sword, but it didn’t look like he had used it. He was red faced from his fury.

Griffith could see the fear on his face. ‘Prince Danu, you can surrender to me now or after I kill this man,’ Griffith said calmly.

‘My father...’ Prince Danu spat back at him.

‘If your father is stupid enough to come after you, I will take him too,’ Griffith said.

Danu screamed in fury and ran at Griffith. They clashed swords, but Griffith was quick to flip the sword in his right hand and hit Danu square in the forehead. Danu staggered back and fell to the ground with a thump.

Griffith turned to the remaining guard. ‘Your choice, here and now.’

The guard nodded at him then ran.

Two of Griffith’s soldiers appeared. ‘Take Prince Danu to Prince Yu-Jun on the ridge. Make sure he is secure; I don’t want him running off.’

They hooked their arms under Danu’s shoulders and started to drag him away. Two more soldiers appeared to help them.

‘It’s starting to wind down,’ Taiden told Griffith.

‘Do you know if Prince Jae-Sang arrived?’

Before Taiden could answer, they both heard a faint sound.

‘Horses coming in fast,’ Taiden said, lifting his crossbow.

‘If it’s Prince Jae-Sang, take out as many of his men as you can. I will go after the prince myself.’ Griffith pulled a whistle out of his shirt and sent two blasts throughout the battlefield. He heard the twin blast of fireworks in response and looked towards the ridge. ‘Yu-Jun has Prince Danu, and Prince Jae-Sang is on the field near us.’

Griffith’s men started to appear around him in a circle, shields in front of the men on the outside forming a barrier, the second layer ready to move forward to replace anyone who fell. All of the men held junchungs. This was a new tactic Griffith was developing that hadn’t yet been put into practice in the field. He hoped this would work.

‘Horses coming in, be prepared,’ Griffith said.

Each of them pointed their junchungs in the direction of the sound. The wind blew the smoke at them, and Griffith could only see the immediate circle of men and Taiden beside him. The sound of hooves slowed then stopped.

One of his men moved closer and bumped him, showing him the arrows ready to be lit. Griffith nodded.

The wind blew again and parted the smoke. Within a few feet of Griffith was Prince Jae-Sang and four of his men. Griffith's men raised their shields and arrows waiting for the attack.

'Your Highness, please dismount from your horse and surrender,' Griffith called out.

'Where is my son?'

'Your nephew is entertaining your son. I voted to gut him like a fish,' Griffith drawled.

'What is this stupid formation.' Prince Jae-Sang snarled and kicked his horse, riding toward Griffith. He charged at the shields, but the junchungs pushed him back. The man beside Griffith lit the arrow and sent it flying towards Prince Jae-Sang, Taiden releasing two long bow arrows then two more. Taiden's first two hit Prince Jae-Sang in the shoulder, but the second ones hit him so hard that he fell off the back of his horse, landing on the ground with a grunt. His men tried to rally around him but were soon overwhelmed by the firepower of Griffith's men.

The four men with the prince were shot by arrows that came from behind Griffith. He twirled around to find a small group of Taiden's longbowmen inside the middle of the circle. Their arrows could pierce any armour. After Griffith waved his arm and the men stopped firing, he walked between two shields to Prince Jae-Sang who was on his back, panting, blood pooling around him.

'Take the Prince to Prince Yu-Jun. He'll need medical attention. Keep him secure, keep him alive,' Griffith ordered.

Fireworks and drums started over the battlefield. Griffith felt the tension release from his shoulders. The battle of Lexmon was over, and they had won.

*

The setting sun cast long shadows across the battlefield as dusk settled in. The fighting had ceased, the din of war now replaced by a grim silence. Griffith surveyed the field, his eyes scanning the survivors. He wiped his sword and put it away. He remembered his grandfather telling him once that the aftermath of a battle was worse than the battle itself. Griffith needed to look after his men, check on the wounded and bury the dead. His body aching, he made his way up to Prince Yu-Jun.

Yu-Jun pulled him into a hug, slapping his back. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes, and Taiden is fine. Has Reid come back yet? Have you seen Bowie?' Griffith asked.

'Reid is back. He got wounded in the village and is getting stitched up now. It's not serious, but he'll have a pretty good black eye. Bowie is fine, but he lost his horse. He's out looking for any enemy runners he can round up. Medical is overwhelmed as expected, so some of the soldiers are going to help. Men have already started cooking. I'm not sure of our numbers.'

'Prince Jae-Sang and Prince Danu?'

'My command tent. My uncle is still unconscious. They pulled the arrows and told me that he will recover. I've sent a message to my father already.'

A rider appeared, the soldier carrying a message pouch attached to his leg. He handed the message to Yu-Jun.

'It's from my father. He wants us to bring my uncle and cousin to Altrane.'

Griffith turned to the soldier. 'Get the leadership team here as soon as possible.'

*

The command tent was full of the leaders from the various units under Yu-Jun, Griffith, Taiden and Bowie.

‘The King wants us to return to Altrane as soon as possible,’ Yu-Jun said. ‘Bury your dead, get the wounded into wagons and we’ll be on the move tomorrow morning. Let the men drink one small flagon tonight—they will have leave when we return to the capital. There will be a full parade in thirty minutes.’

The calvary, longbowmen and infantry stood in their unit formation at attention waiting for their commander, Prince Yu-Jun. They looked tired and dishevelled having survived the battle, but their morale was high as they had beaten the enemy and ended this war. They could go home to their families.

Prince Yu-Jun stood. ‘We found ourselves in a difficult position surrounded by two armed forces that left us with no option but to fight our way out. Your dedication and determination allowed us to prevail against our enemies. Our King has requested our immediate return to the capital. Take the night to mourn our dead, and we will honour them with a burial tomorrow morning before we depart. Thank you to you all.’ Yu-Jun bowed deeply to his troops before Griffith dismissed them with a shout.

Chapter 3

Prince Yu-Jun wanted to be on the road as soon as possible, but Prince Jae-Sang had to have medical attention removing the arrows from his body and stopping the bleeding to ensure he made the journey to Altrane. His men needed time to gather up the dead off the battlefield and bury them with full honour. He was sitting at his desk writing reports and keeping an eye on Reid.

Reid hadn't taken his eyes off Jae-Sang and Danu. It was as if he was daring them to make a move so he could finish them. They would answer to the people through the courts for their crimes against Dernancourt along with the captured enemy commanders of prominent ministry families.

Yu-Jun addressed Reid, his face hardening as he spoke. 'Organise the transport for their departure tomorrow. I want guards inside and outside this tent. I don't want any of them to escape.'

Reid nodded. 'Yes, Your Highness.'

*

Prince Yu-Jun scanned the battlefield, taking in the damage and the quietening of the camp. He turned to Griffith. 'We've won many skirmishes, but this was our first major battle. Its success was all thanks to you,' Yu-Jun said, his expression serious. 'Thank you on behalf of my brother and father. The rebellion is over, and we can have peace.'

Griffith nodded, his gaze lingering on the fire. 'I wasn't sure which way it was going to go, to be honest.'

'Neither was I,' Yu-Jun said quietly, his expression far away, 'but I'm grateful it went our way. I just hope my father and brother have been as successful. I want to find out who else was involved and purge the Imperial Court.'

'I guess Reid will be busy then,' Griffith grinned.

'Are you going to stay in the capital or head to Aven?'

'I will stay with you. I haven't heard from my father,' Griffith said.

'You, Taiden, Bowie and Reid are all welcome to stay at my manor,' Yu-Jun offered. 'I can introduce you to the lovely ladies at court.'

'I'm sixteen, Yu-Jun. I'm not interested in getting married yet. You'll be married well before me, given you are older than me,' Griffith scoffed.

'I was thinking that one day we may join our families together in marriage. What do you think?'

'We'd need wives first. I wouldn't be opposed to marriage between our children, providing that's what they want. How much would you give me for a dowry?'

'Isn't my child enough for you? What do you need more money for? Your family is already beyond wealthy.'

Griffith laughed then turned serious. 'What would my son or daughter be worth to you? My family has a longer history in this country than yours. But to be truthful, I'm not sure I would want any child of mine to join the Imperial family given the stories you have told me over the years.'

'I'm glad to be the second son of the King. I get a lot more freedom than my brother as he will need to rule Dernancourt when the time comes and have a political marriage. I am more than happy to be his defender as I'd like to be the Imperial Commander one day.'

Griffith handed a flask to Yu-Jun, then tipped his own flask before drinking.

*

Yu-Jun and Griffith returned to the command tent where Prince Jae-Sung was sitting chained on the ground, the weight of his defeat settling over him like a shroud. Danu was beside him chained and gagged, his eyes showing his fury to anyone who looked at him. Yu-Jun stood tall and resolute in front of his uncle while Griffith stood at his back.

‘You will be returned to the capital for trial. I have to ask you, Uncle, why did you do this? My father treated you like a brother, why did you betray him?’ Yu-Jun’s voice cut through the tension like a blade.

His uncle remained silent, his gaze cast downward.

Yu-Jun’s voice grew colder. ‘There were other ways open to you, but you chose to betray Grandfather’s wishes. My father was crown prince long before Grandfather died. He’s your brother—you should have supported him. All of this was to gain power that doesn’t belong to you. Look around you, Uncle. Look at what your vanity has cost you, your son and our country.’

The mood in the room grew heavier as Yu-Jun’s words hung in the air. He took a slow, deliberate step forward, his face hardening. ‘You will go to trial. Given all the evidence of your treachery, you will be executed for treason. I will not mourn you or honour you in death. I hope you spend the afterlife burning in hell.’

A whisper cut through the room, the last plea of a desperate man. ‘Spare my son.’

Yu-Jun’s eyes flared with a cold resolve, his posture stiffening. ‘Your actions have consequences, and the House of Yi will follow the law.’

The room fell silent again, the weight of Yu-Jun’s words settling like the dust on the battlefield outside. His uncle remained bowed, his request for mercy fallen like dead leaves on the ground.

‘Reid, get them into the wagon. We leave now.’

*

Three months later, Prince Jae-Sang and his son Danu were found guilty of treason. They were stripped of titles and lands, which were returned to the crown. Prince Jae-Sang was beheaded in front of the court, and Prince Danu was imprisoned for life. Jae-Sang’s wife, having lost both her husband and her only child, was given the choice to be exiled or cloistered. She chose to be cloistered in Dernancourt.

*

Six months later, Prince Yu-Jun followed the guards up the long flight of stairs to the tower where high risk prisoners were kept in the Imperial Palace. The guard unlocked the door to reveal Prince Danu reclining on his bed. His cell was devoid of any personal items. It was a far change from his rooms in the palace. The room contained a bed, a table and two chairs. There were no bathing facilities, only a chamber pot.

‘Hello, Danu.’ The prisoner was wearing very simple clothes, the opposite of what he had worn when he was at court.

Yu-Jun put down a basket full of food, a change of clothes and some soap and candles and put a blanket on the bed.

‘What do you want?’ Danu sneered at him.

Yu-Jun was not surprised that he still had the attitude of one who had been wronged.

‘I wanted to see you.’

Danu kept silent, turning his head to look at the cell wall.

‘I brought you some things that you might need, but it seems that someone is also sending you care items as well,’ Yu-Jun said, noting a good supply of candles and a couple of books to read.

‘I am not without friends.’

‘Maybe for the time being, but how long will that last? The longer you are in here, the more people will fade away because you will not be of any assistance to them.’

‘I am not defeated, cousin.’

‘Then I guess I will see you in another six months. Take care.’ Yu-Jun knocked on the door for the guard to let him out.

‘How was he?’ Griffith asked when Yu-Jun met him at the bottom of the tower stairs.

‘Not defeated, apparently,’ Yu-Jun replied.

‘Give it time. He still has hope that he will be released sometime, but your father is never going to agree to that. Rebellion against the Imperial Crown is not something that is forgiven. He will spend the rest of his life locked in that cell.’

*

Yu-Jun kept his word. Every six months or so, he would make the journey to see his cousin. He made sure that supplies were provided to his cell. Three years later, Griffith and Yu-Jun heard that Danu had died of a fever. His body was not buried among the Imperial family; instead, it was taken to be buried next to his mother in her cloister.

Chapter 4

Altrane – Imperial Court

The King had requested to meet with twenty-year-old Griffith. During the past few years, Yu-Jun, Taiden, and Bowie had all taken positions in the Imperial Guards, while Reid had continued with the Imperial Investigation Bureau.

Griffith thought he knew the palace well, but he was being escorted through an entryway he had never seen before. The Imperial Secretary, the link between the King and the Dernancourt ministers' offices, explained that this was the King's private entrance.

Griffith was told to wait in a beautifully appointed space; there was a table and chairs in the middle of the room and the walls were hand-painted with landscapes in soft greys and blues. As he got closer, he noticed the wood around the room was carved with the King's personal symbols.

The door swung open and his father and the King entered. Griffith smiled his welcome to his father and bowed deeply to the King, who motioned for him to sit.

'Griffith, you look well. Your father was just congratulating me on Yu-Jun's upcoming wedding. You already know Lady Ha-Yoon. I think she will be a splendid match for him.'

'Lady Ha-Yoon is lovely; all of Prince Yu-Jun's friends like her very much. She is beautiful and smart, and I think she will keep him on his toes,' Griffith advised the King with a small grin.

'Yu-Jun has indicated to me that his goal is to become the Imperial Commander of Dernancourt. He wants to protect this country and support his brother, the crown prince. Which brings me to you. While we have had peace for the last few years, I am not convinced that my uncle's rebellion was on his own. I believe he had someone's support. We have long suspected that support came from Echokos, but we can't prove it. Your father and I have been discussing the long-term security of this country and think we have come up with a plan that will save Dernancourt should we have a rebellion or an invasion. You are going to be key to this plan. You are both loyal subjects of the Dernancourt throne, and your family has defended this country through many generations. I think you both know what I am asking of you.'

'We are deeply honoured that you would trust us with this, Your Majesty,' Griffith's father replied solemnly.

'Mallen, I want you to build an academy where our best and brightest will attend. There will be an entry exam, and it will be followed on from the mandatory service. It will hopefully build a strong leadership in both our military and our ministry. I will leave it with both of you to sort out the protocols. There is also another side to this plan that will never be discussed at court. I want you to build a force of fierce warriors: maengleohan. Everyone feared them, and I know that you have both been trained as maengleohan. These will be the secret force of Dernancourt. If you need to send messages to me about this part of the plan, I want you to use the spiral lock method and use an enigma puzzle box.'

Griffith felt the words weigh on him. His father didn't say anything, so he considered the first issue they would have.

'Where would we build the academy?'

'There is a space between the ranges in front of Aven. We would need to clear it, which will take time and resources, but it can be done,' Griffith's father said.

'What shall we call it?' Griffith asked.

'Alamein,' Mallen replied, looking at the King. Something passed between them that Griffith was not privy to.

'The Academy of Alamein,' Griffith said.

'I have one thing more I wanted to raise with you, Griffith,' King Taejong said. 'Is there any lady who has captured your attention at court?'

‘No, Your Majesty. I am not considering marriage as I am only twenty and still a soldier. I would follow in my father and grandfather’s footsteps and wed when I have completed my service.’

‘Princess Bo-Mi has expressed an interest in you and wonders if that interest would be returned. To be transparent, she has expressed an interest in three other men from prominent Dernancourt families. I have also received a request for her hand from an Echokoan duke’s son. He’s a third son, and I have given him permission to come to court to see if they would be compatible. He will be attending our Imperial Court festivity next week. I’m inclined to accept his proposal should it be agreeable to both of them. I would like to keep Echokos relations friendly.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty. With the deepest respect, I have to decline. I don’t think we would be a compatible couple,’ Griffith said, dread filling his bones. He hoped the King accepted his refusal and wasn’t offended.

‘Thank you for your honest answer. I didn’t think you would make a compatible couple either,’ the King said with a slight smile.

‘We should leave, Your Majesty,’ Griffith’s father said. ‘I am sure there are things waiting to claim your attention.’ He bowed before they both left the King’s chamber.

When they were in the carriage heading back to their manor, Griffith’s father spoke. ‘The King wasn’t expecting you to say yes to Princess Bo-Mi’s offer. He understands the reputation she has but had to put the offer to you so he could say that you had declined. I didn’t know he was going to ask you today, otherwise I would have warned you. Be prepared for her wrath when she finds out you said no.’

Griffith shuddered. ‘She keeps medical on their toes with her servants’ injuries. Yu-Jun has told me there have been many fights with her parents because she refuses to leave Dernancourt to marry in other countries. He calls her the she-wolf.’

‘I will start engaging builders for the academy. We will discuss the King’s other request further when we are both back at Aven,’ Griffith’s father said.

*

The Imperial Palace gardens were packed with people. Griffith, Reid, Taiden and Bowie made their way through the crowd looking for Prince Yu-Jun and his wife. Yu-Jun had surprised them when they had returned to Altrane, he had fallen in love and married within the month of their return.

‘We should have said where to meet,’ Bowie grumbled. ‘The crowd is way too big. We’ll never find them.’

A servant approached them and handed Griffith a folded piece of paper. After reading it, he said, ‘Excuse me for a moment, gentleman. I need to see someone. I will find you outside the main gardens.’ He motioned for the servant to lead him away.

The servant took him to a secluded part of the garden. Princess Bo-Mi sat in a resplendent white-and-gold outfit, her hair bejewelled with white opals. Griffith felt deeply uneasy, but he knew that she would cross his path at some point tonight.

He bowed deeply. ‘Your Highness, how may I assist you?’

She looked him over like a spider who had caught something in her web. ‘I wish to know why you refused my offer of marriage.’

Griffith chose his words carefully. ‘Your Highness, I am deeply honoured that you would consider me as your potential husband. However, I don’t think we would be compatible as I will be continuing my Imperial Guard service for several years, which would take my focus away from you. Also, when I eventually retire, I would only be in the capital on a yearly basis, and I don’t think that a life in the country would suit you. You deserve a husband who would devote every minute to keeping you happy and loved.’

‘I agree. I only put your name forward because my father thinks very highly of you. I do not wish to marry someone who is so stupid as to throw away progression to the highest ranks of Dernancourt. Your current rank is good, but you need to raise yourself to my level. Given what you just said, you won’t be able to achieve that. Dismissed.’ She waved her hand at him.

He bowed and left her, returning to the party to find his friends.

Griffith had downed two drinks when Reid found him. ‘You met with Princess Bo-Mi?’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘I heard she threw quite the tantrum when she heard you had declined her offer,’ Reid told him.

‘Does everyone know?’

‘No. She doesn’t like the word “no”, so it won’t get out. I did hear she had a good first meeting with Lord Ismael from Echokos. I see her marrying him, but she won’t leave for Echokos. They will live here.’

‘I think everyone was hoping she would leave Dernancourt,’ Griffith said softly, not wanting to be overheard.

‘I feel uneasy at their marriage,’ Reid admitted.

‘Why?’ Griffith asked.

‘I don’t have a reason, but I just do.’

‘I guess we’ll wait and see.’

Chapter 5

Five years later, Griffith was still part of the Imperial Guard. He had left Yu-Jun's residence to give the newlyweds their space and privacy, moving to his family's manor along with Reid, Bowie and Taiden. The Academy of Alamein was close to being finished, and his father had asked him to consider developing the entry protocols as well as the training program. The King had announced that enrolments would be ready for consideration in the new year, and they were to begin looking at instructors shortly. Griffith was hoping Bowie and Taiden would be instructors and help him with the Aven barracks.

Griffith arrived at Yu-Jun's residence for their spring festival party. He always felt a bit of a third wheel to them, but Ha-Yoon was so lovely, and she treated him, Reid, Bowie and Taiden as her brothers. Tonight, they were welcoming a contingent from Linith, the country a five-day voyage by sea away to the south of Dernancourt. During the last five years, Dernancourt had been strengthening ties and building relationships with their neighbouring countries Linith, Teranbaerk, Echokos and the Tribals.

Griffith was not a big fan of these kinds of parties, and he kept asking Yu-Jun to be posted to one of the five military bases around Dernancourt to avoid them. He was starting to feel the pressure of pursuit. He had been introduced to many prominent women over the last few years, but they all felt the same to him. There was nothing wrong with any of them, they were generally polite, well-educated and musical, but he found them all boring. He had been told that once he met the right person, he would know. So far, he hadn't.

'Griffith you look very handsome tonight. I'll have to have to hang on to Yu-Jun to avoid the stampede and avoid getting my toes crushed,' Ha-Yoon teased him.

'I would rather be on the battlefield than going to these events,' Griffith mumbled back at her, making her burst out laughing.

*

Prince Yu-Jun's manor was starting to fill up with people. It was a lovely summer night, and the party was outside in the gardens. Music was playing, there were a few people dancing, refreshments were laid out on tables and servants were moving through the crowd providing drinks and finger food to guests.

Griffith was looking for Reid, Bowie and Taiden but spotted his father first. He moved through the crowd with ease, nodding hello to people until he stood in front of him.

'Your Grace.' He bowed.

'Griffith, how are you? It's a bit of a crowd tonight,' his father replied.

'Is Mother with you?'

'Yes, but the Queen spotted her and she hasn't returned as yet. They are probably giggling over the latest court gossip.' His father sighed. Griffith's mother had grown up with the Queen in Teranbaerk and had come with her to Dernancourt when the marriage was arranged to King Taejong.

'Have you met the contingent from Linith? Any issues?' Griffith asked him quietly.

'No issues. It has gone well with the new deputy governor of Volis in charge. He is impressive. His father was a diplomat, so he has grown up in that environment. He comes across as someone genuine and with integrity. He doesn't seem to have any interests other than serving Dernancourt.'

'What is his name?'

'Robert Pae. He has just married a woman from a prominent Linith family. I will introduce you to him. He's about your age, and I think you'd like him. He's coming this way.'

Griffith took a sip from his glass of wine. Robert Pae was a tall, lean man with olive skin. He had dark hair but in the light a hint of red shone through. There were two ladies by his side both of them were very similar in height and looks. The darker haired lady had her arm through Roberts,

her dark hair curled at the ends, her skin was a light, almost creamy colour, and she had green sparkling eyes. The other lady was slightly taller, lean, brown hair with hints of gold running through it like she spent a lot of time outdoors in the sun. Her skin was the same shade of cream, and her eyes were hazel coloured.

‘Robert,’ his father greeted him. ‘This lovely lady must be your wife.’

‘Your Grace, my wife, Eleanor. This is her sister Lady Roslind. Roslind is going to stay with us for a while to assist my wife in settling into life in Dernancourt.’

‘Lovely to meet you both. This is my son Lord Griffith Ryeland.’

When Griffith’s eyes met Roslind’s, he felt like he had been hit by a thunderbolt. She was beautiful. She looked like her sister with the same lean build and long dark hair. She had a straight nose, deep blue eyes and coral-coloured lips. When she smiled at him, he felt sweaty and thought his heart might stop beating.

‘My father tells me you were recently wed, congratulations and welcome to Dernancourt,’ Griffith said to Eleanor. Turning to Roslind, he asked, ‘Are you staying in Altrane for long, Lady Roslind?’ He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

‘A few months. My parents will be arriving in a couple of months to check on Eleanor and to take Roslind home. They mostly stay in Volis and have not seen much of Dernancourt, so they expressed a desire to see Altrane before we return to Volis,’ Roslind told him.

‘Could I take you all to lunch tomorrow? I’ve lived in the capital a few years now and know all the best places to eat.’ Griffith hoped his face didn’t give him away. He mainly ate with his friends at street stalls. He would ask Ha-Joon where he could take them.

The ladies exchanged glances, and Eleanor nodded to Robert, who accepted the invitation.

‘Promise you won’t tell Mother,’ Griffith begged his father.

‘She’ll have to torture it out of me,’ he said with a large grin on his face.

*

Griffith found his friends talking in one of the garden pergolas. He wanted to talk to Ha-Yoon without being overheard by anyone outside of their circle. He sat down next to Yu-Jun.

‘Are you free tomorrow for lunch?’ Griffith asked Ha-Yoon while leaning around Yu-Jun.

Yu-Jun looked directly at him. ‘Are you asking my wife out?’

‘Yes, I am. I have invited the Lady Roslind out for lunch tomorrow along with her sister Eleanor and her husband Robert Pae. He’s the new deputy governor of Volis,’ he said out of the corner of this mouth, not taking his eyes off Ha-Yoon as he waited for her to reply.

Taiden spat his drink out, leaning over to avoid the spray hitting his clothes. Bowie sighed and wiped the side of his jacket.

‘You asked a girl out. Where is she?’ Taiden started craning his neck around at the crowd like she was going to magically appear in front of him.

‘Never you mind.’

‘Of course I will come with you,’ Ha-Yoon replied serenely.

‘I’m available too,’ Yu-Jun said.

‘As am I,’ Taiden added. ‘You two?’ He pointed at Reid and Bowie. They both nodded. ‘We could all go to lunch with you and Lady Roslind.’

‘Only Ha-Yoon. She will be able to tell the ladies the best places in Altrane.’

‘Your mother could do that,’ Reid pointed out.

‘I don’t need my mother along,’ Griffith replied.

Reid put his drink down and stood up.

Griffith had a funny feeling. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Bathroom.’

Griffith stood up as well. ‘No, you’re not. You’re going to look for Lady Roslind.’

Reid beamed at him. 'Am I?' He bolted out of the pergola.
Griffith cursed and followed him.
The others burst into laughter.

Chapter 6

Griffith had considered wearing his commander's uniform but decided against it, instead going for dark navy-blue pants, black boots, and a white shirt with a navy jacket. He was pulling at his sleeves when Ha-Yoon made a soft sound beside him.

'Are you nervous?'

'No' he scoffed. When he turned, he saw her smiling slightly, and he felt his cheeks turn pink.

'Just be yourself,' she said. 'Here they come.'

Griffith made the introductions and, after they had ordered, said, 'I hope you don't mind that I bought along my sister-in-law, Princess Ha-Yoon. She has lived in Altrane since she was young so I thought she might be able to suggest the best places.'

'Your sister-in-law? I understood you to be an only child,' Eleanor said.

Ha-Yoon chuckled at her confusion. 'Prince Yu-Jun, my husband, and Griffith were raised together. They did their Harrawong training together and are blood brothers. When I married Yu-Jun, I ended up with four new brothers. They spoil me outrageously. I think it has become a competition between them, to be honest.'

'That is very kind of you, Your Highness.'

'Have you been to the Imperial Palace?' Ha-Yoon asked them.

'No. I would love to see it,' Eleanor said.

'The King and Queen are hosting a party in a few weeks for the court. I will ensure you all receive an invitation. We will be there, so you will know someone there.'

'Thank you so much, Your Highness.'

'How did you two meet?' Ha-Yoon asked, looking at Robert and Eleanor.

'Our father has trading connections in Volis so we would often travel with him,' Eleanor explained. 'One day, Roslind and I were having lunch at this lovely riverside location. When we went to leave, we discovered that our bill had been paid for by Robert. A few days later, we were at a party, and the hosts introduced Robert to us. We had a long-distance relationship, then Robert approached my family for marriage.'

'That is a lovely story, and you both look very happy,' Ha-Yoon smiled warmly at Eleanor. 'While you are here, is there anything you are interested in seeing in Altrane?'

'I like cultural places, art and music. My sister loves plants and gardens. She spends most of her time out in the garden,' Eleanor said.

'I would like to invite you all to dinner at our manor; it is part of the Imperial Palace. I would like you to meet my husband and some of our friends. We can have music and I will show you our gardens, they are so beautiful,' Ha-Yoon said.

Eleanor looked at her sister, who nodded in agreement.

'I would like that very much, Princess Ha-Joon,' Roslind replied letting her gaze roam over Griffith.

*

'That went well, and I organised two opportunities for you to meet Roslind again,' Ha-Yoon said with satisfaction once they were in their carriage.

'She barely talked,' Griffith said.

'She may not have talked much but she did keep sneaking looks at you. Eleanor mentioned that she likes unusual plants, so I suggest that you start studying them. If you're not into plants, find a common topic that you can talk about.'

'Thank you, Ha-Yoon.'

'You are very welcome.'

*

A few weeks later, Prince Yu-Jun and Ha-Yoon were hosting their friends in the Imperial Palace in the late afternoon. The pavilion opened up onto gardens that branched off the formal gardens.

Griffith had toured with the head gardener a few days ago and had learnt some of the plants' names and some information about planting and growing.

It was a small gathering of their immediate friends with a sunset dinner. Griffith was holding a drink and half-listening to Taiden and Reid talking about their day and some court gossip before he realised the topic had changed.

'She's very pretty. Good family, no issues. She is known for being very kind to everyone, but shy. Everyone spoke very highly of her. She is the youngest of her siblings, all girls, and she is very close to Eleanor,' Reid said.

'What about the Pae family?' Taiden asked.

'Solid. Old family, good reputation. They have a country manor outside of Volis. Wealthy enough to be comfortable. Eleanor's family provided a sizeable dowry which they said she will manage herself in preparation for any children. It seems like it was a love match between Eleanor and Robert. The Pae family is very dedicated to community—not only Volis but also Dernancourt. Robert is one to watch and know. I have heard a whisper that inquiries have been made about Griffith, probably because they haven't met the rest of us yet,' Reid explained.

'What? Did you investigate them? Did you do this to Ha-Yoon?' Griffith hissed at Reid in horror.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Of course. Due diligence, old man. Comes with the territory.'

Griffith mumbled under his breath. 'I'm younger than all of you. Nothing is going on. I haven't even spoken to her without other people around.'

'Then tonight is a good opportunity. I heard that the Queen has recently given some unusual plants to Ha-Yoon. They are just in the second garden over there.' Reid pointed through an opening in the wall. 'Big pots, can't miss them.' He clapped Griffith on the back.

'You scare me sometimes. And I already know. I spoke to the gardener a few days ago,' Griffith said.

'Let me be godfather to one of your children and I'll call it even,' Reid joked. Before Griffith could respond, Bowie spoke.

'They have arrived.' Bowie pointed his glass towards Robert, Eleanor and Roslind.

Griffith watched Ha-Yoon introduce Eleanor and Roslind to a few guests. At one point, Roslind was distracted by a potted plant and knelt to touch one of the flowers. Griffith made a mental note to ask Ha-Yoon if Roslind said she liked any of the plants. It might be a nice memento of their visit to the palace and something to remember him by.

Ha-Yoon caught his eye and motioned him over. Griffith could tell she was going to give him an opportunity to spend time with Roslind.

Reid slapped him on the back. 'Good luck.'

'Griffith, Roslind was just asking after the garden tour. If you go through that archway, we have a lot of interesting plants that she may not have seen before. The Queen collects plants from all over the world, and she sent me a few recently.'

'Of course. This way, Lady Roslind.'

He trailed along behind her as she examined the various flowers. He found it nice to spend time with someone who didn't expect him to entertain them. He wanted to know everything about her because she enchanted him.

'Do you like plants?' she asked him.

'Not really,' he said, wondering if being too honest would work against him. 'I was going to try to pass off that I was interested but, to be truthful, I've never really thought about them. Aven does have gardens, but I haven't been home for a long time. My parents spend most of their time here in

the capital as they are both close with the King and Queen. Our Altrane gardens seem nice, we have koi fish. We have an excellent estate manager who I assume keeps everything alive,' he said to her with a slight smile.

'Do you miss your home?'

'Yes. But I have been so busy working that it doesn't usually cross my mind. I also often see my parents here,' he explained.

'You are very close with your parents, I understand.'

'Yes, I am. I am very lucky; my parents are wonderful people, and I enjoy spending time with them when I can. I have seen more of them in the last few years as we are all in Altrane now.'

'Do you plan to keep serving in the Imperial Army?' she asked him

'I was planning to stay till I wed. Then I would go back to Aven to raise my family and help my father with the estate so he wouldn't have to divide his time between Aven and court. He prefers court life—he says it is interesting and gives him the same feeling as when he served in the Imperial forces.'

'What's Aven like?'

'It's one of the safest places in Dernancourt. It has never been taken. It has only one entry and exit point with five iron gates to pass through. Then there are the castle defences, high stone walls and a deep moat, and it sits between mountains and the ocean. Even if the gates were breached, we are self-sufficient.'

Roslind smiled at him. 'I meant what it's like living there.'

'Oh. It was built over a century ago, but I find it very comfortable. The castle is kept immaculate by the servants. Not much has changed—just a few tweaks here and there, as my mother says. It is a mixture of very formal historic rooms and rooms that we use as a family. My father says that those are the rooms he likes best as he can put his feet up on the couch or have an afternoon nap.'

Roslind giggled. 'I can't imagine your father having an afternoon nap. He seems formidable.'

They approached a bench under one of the larger trees, and Roslind sat down on one end, Griffith on the other.

'Tell me about your family,' he said.

'I am the youngest of three sisters. Eleanor and I are closest in age, and our older sister is ten years older than Eleanor. I have two nieces and a nephew. My father is a successful merchant. When I was young, he travelled a lot. As we got older, my mother, Eleanor and I went with him. We have a house in Volis as we went there a lot.'

They had been talking for a while, and Griffith knew that their time would soon come to a close. He hoped he had made an impression on Roslind. He was enjoying her company, and he was starting to like her.

'Roslind,' Eleanor called. 'We should head back to the party now.'

Chapter 7

A week later, Griffith was getting dressed when his father called to him, 'Where are you headed?'

'The crown prince is having a party tonight. I had to come home to get my formal wear as I can't wear my uniform.'

'Ah. Then I wish you a good evening. Have fun. Try to make it for breakfast tomorrow, your mother misses you.'

'Will do,' he called as he rushed out the door to his saddled horse. He made his way through the congested city roads till he was at the gates of the Imperial Palace. Due to his role as one of the captains of the guards, he was able to ride all the way to the royal stables. He dismounted and made his way through to the crown prince's residence. Although he wasn't on guard duty, he checked in with the duty guard team lead before making his way over to where all the guests were. Music was playing in the background, the rhythmic sounds of flutes and string instruments and the tinkling of the aarks. Everywhere was lit by pink lanterns and seating areas were set out amongst the gardens. Servants were carrying platters of food to the tables while others were offering smaller platters of food to guests who were talking in groups.

'Lord Ryeland.' Griffith saw the crown prince calling him over. He was standing with his wife and a few of the junior ministers.

'Your Highness,' he said as he bowed deeply.

'May I introduce you to Lord Ismael from Echokos.' Griffith held his hand out to the other man to shake. He had dark skin, hair and eyes. His nose was almost too thin for his face, and he had a wide mouth. He wasn't as tall as Griffith, and his outfit was so ostentatious that he stood out in a crowd of people where everyone was competing for best dressed.

'Welcome to Dernancourt, my lord. I hope you have a pleasant time with us.'

'Thank you for your warm welcome. I am looking forward to getting to know Dernancourt better.'

'Could I have a moment with Lord Ryeland please?' Crown Prince Ji-Wan asked. He turned to his wife. 'I will come and find you shortly, my love.'

When it was only the two of them, Ji-Wan said, 'I believe you met with our fathers recently. Do you think what they are proposing is feasible?'

'Yes, it is feasible.' Griffith said softly, realising that the King must have told his son.

'We have known each other since childhood, Griffith. I will need to put my trust in you, as well as in my crown, for my country. I know Yu-Jun considers you a brother and he speaks very highly of you. I've studied your battle strategy, particularly at Lexmon; it was brilliant. I want the same kind of relationship the other men in my family have with you.'

Griffith spoke directly from the heart. 'I look forward to getting to know you, Your Highness. Know that I would never betray the crown or my country. My family swore an oath, one that I will keep.'

'I don't want to be obvious that we are talking about something important, but I thank you for your continued support. The palace can be a place of battles between ministers and prominent families. I need people I can trust when the time comes, which I hope is a long time away,' Prince Ji-Wan said.

'You will have my support as well as that of Taiden, Bowie, and Reid. Yu-Jun is our friend; we won't abandon him or you.'

'I'd shake your hand on that, but this is not the time or place.'

Griffith smiled. 'I'm available to you anytime, Your Highness.'

'I believe Lady Roslind is sitting with her family towards the middle of the garden,' Prince Ji-Wan said.

Griffith pursed his lips. 'Your brother has a big mouth.'

*

Griffith found Roslind sitting with her sister and a few other ladies from the court; she looked like she was having fun. He looked around for Robert Pae, hoping to be able to talk to him, when he felt an arm around his shoulders.

‘Robert is over here,’ Reid said, pulling him towards a group of men.

‘Lord Robert,’ Reid said, bringing Griffith and himself into the conversation Robert had been having. ‘I don’t think we have been introduced. I’m Commander Reid Hyeon. Of course, you already know Lord Ryeland.’

Robert introduced the two other men with him, both of whom were from Volis.

‘Have you been enjoying Altrane?’ Reid asked.

‘Yes, we have. My pockets are a little lighter,’ Robert joked.

They spoke for a short while before the other two men moved off to another conversation.

‘We are going to lunch tomorrow. I was wondering if you, your wife and sister-in-law would be interested,’ Reid said.

Robert looked at them. ‘I’m beginning to think, Lord Ryeland, that your friend group is trying provide opportunities for you to spend time with Roslind.’

Reid made an impressed face. ‘You would be correct, Lord Pae. Do you think it’s working?’

Robert laughed, putting his hand over his heart. ‘I could never betray my sister-in-law.’

‘Scared of your wife?’

‘Yes. I don’t want to sleep on the couch.’

They all laughed.

‘I’m beginning to like you. Please, call me Reid and call him Griffith.’

‘Call me Robert.’

‘Wonderful. Now that we are all friends, does she like him?’ Reid asked, raising his eyebrows up and down.

‘There is always hope,’ Robert replied solemnly, then he smiled. ‘I won’t betray my wife’s trust with details but I think it would be safe to say she does like him.’

When Taiden, Bowie and Yu-Jun joined them, Reid introduced them to Lord Robert.

‘Where is Ha-Yoon?’ Griffith asked.

Yu-Jun nodded towards the ladies who were making room for her to sit down with them. The men were deep in discussion about shipping and the recent raids from pirates when Griffith heard his name being called.

‘Lord Ryeland.’

Griffith turned to see Princess Ha-Yoon calling him over.

‘Does she not see me standing here?’ Yu-Jun said as he followed Griffith towards his wife.

‘Your Highness.’ Griffith bowed. ‘Ladies. How can I assist you?’

‘Lady Roslind was wondering what the crown prince’s gardens were like, so we decided you should escort us.’

Ha-Yoon held her hand out. Her husband quickly grasped it and tucked it beneath his arm. Griffith found himself paired with Roslind as they followed Ha-Yoon towards the garden. It was traditionally set out in the middle of the building with grassed areas full of flowering plants and matching trees set at regular intervals. A white path flowed around the gardens and large standing stones, and Griffith could hear the trickle of water. When the breeze caught the trees, a smattering of blossoms blew over them. Roslind looked up in delight.

‘I heard you are a commander and that you guard the Queen’s residence. I also heard you are very good friends with Prince Yu-Jun and Princess Ha-Yoon,’ she said to Griffith.

‘Yes, I grew up with Prince Yu-Jun. We went through Harrawong training together with Bowie, Taiden and Reid. They are a big part of my life. If I moved to Aven, I think Bowie and Taiden will come with me, but I expect to see Reid and Yu-Jun throughout the year.’

‘Princess Ha-Yoon is very down to earth—not what I was expecting of a princess.’ Roslind’s voice was soft and had a lilt that, to Griffith’s ears, sounded very lyrical.

‘Ha-Yoon has been part of the Imperial Court since she was young. She is a very nice person. She is very smart too; she used to be part of the Ministry of Culture before Yu-Jun convinced her to marry him. As part of the Imperial family, she had to give that up, but she tells us that she has not been bored since she got married.’

‘Your father is the Minister of Culture?’

‘Yes, he is. He loves his job.’

‘Are you going to follow him into the ministry?’

‘No,’ Griffith said. ‘I will retire to Aven to look after the estate. My father is spread too thin, and it’s time for me to help him.’

‘So, you will live in Aven full time in the near future.’

‘Yes. I want to settle down and have a family.’

‘How many children would you like?’

Griffith thought about it. ‘As many as my wife wants to give me.’

‘Do you believe in love?’ she asked, looking directly into his eyes.

‘Yes.’

She moved away from him, and he followed her.

‘What kind of husband would you be?’

‘I don’t know, to be truthful. I think my wife would have to tell me what would make her happy.’

‘Would it matter to you if you only had girls?’ She threw the question over her shoulder.

‘No, the eldest child inherits Aven along with the title. Any child of mine would be educated and trained to protect themselves.’ He watched her digest his answer.

‘What would your wife do?’

‘Whatever she liked. I have no expectations; it would be something we would work out together. If she wanted to help run the estates or our businesses, there is always something to do. I haven’t been home to Aven for a while, but I expect the gardens are probably perfectly fine. My mother tends to leave it to her gardeners.’

She looked at him. He hadn’t really said anything personal, just provided her with as many honest answers as he could.

Just as she was about to speak, they were interrupted by the servants advising them that the fireworks display was almost set to begin. She turned to go back to where everyone was gathered to watch. Griffith couldn’t be sure if it was deliberate or not, but her hand brushed his as she walked past. He waited to see if she would look back at him. When she eventually glanced over her shoulder, a wave of happiness rolled over him and he put his hands behind his back and whistled softly, following her.

Chapter 8

Two months later, Griffith was on duty guarding the Queen's residence. It was going to be a busy day as the Queen was meeting with her household staff and would not be leaving the premises. He had started his day with training then checked in with the team leads who looked after various aspects of the residence. He then checked in with the Queen's personal staff in case there were any last-minute visitors or changes to the schedule.

He headed to his office and found Yu-Jun waiting for him.

'Are you on duty today?'

'No, but I knew you would be. I wanted to see you.'

'You have news?' Griffith asked, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on the edge of his desk.

'Yes. I am thinking of putting in a request for Temujin. I need to start considering my career path as I want to be the Imperial Commander in the future. What are your plans?'

'I can see you as the Imperial Commander, although I'm pretty sure you just want to stay out of court politics,' Griffith joked before turning serious. 'I have to think of my father. I think it's time for me to take the burden of the estate off him so he can focus on his work. Also, when Alamein is built, I am going to have to get that up and running.'

'So, your mind is really on Lady Roslind and getting married and having lots of babies?' Yu-Jun asked.

'Yes, it is. I've had enough of war and fighting. I want a quieter life now. I've given this a lot of thought. Roslind and I have gotten to know each other better in the last few months, and I think we would make a great couple. I'd like to think that if I proposed to her, she would accept. Aven is close enough to Volis that she will be able to see Eleanor frequently. But nothing has been said, and I haven't raised anything with her or her family.'

'I don't think she is going to say no to you. Ha-Yoon is convinced that Roslind likes you very much.'

'I'll talk to my parents. If they think it's a good match, then I will let them approach her family. Her parents are here now,' Griffith said.

'I wish you good luck, my friend. Married life is pretty good. Just remember you are always wrong, and you will be fine.'

They laughed together.

*

Later that day, Griffith was having dinner with his parents. 'I'd like to raise something with you both. I like Lady Roslind and I am wondering what your impressions are of her.'

'She is lovely, Griffith,' his mother replied. 'I've spoken to her several times, and everyone says the same thing about her. While she is very shy, she is a kind, thoughtful person. She is very practical and won't be swept away in silliness like some of these young ladies. I like her. Why?'

'I've not heard anything about her either way,' his father added.

'I was thinking that we should invite her and her family to Aven.'

'Are you considering marriage?' his mother asked.

'I have a few things that I want to talk to her about. She has seen life here at Altrane, but I think she needs to see Aven. We need to talk about what we each see for ourselves in the future. I don't want to get ahead of myself if her goal is to travel the world or if she has someone in Linith that she likes.'

'Very sensible of you. I will write to her family tomorrow and invite them to Aven.'

*

Griffith and his parents were standing on the front steps of Aven watching three carriages approach.

When the carriages stopped, Robert, Eleanor, Roslind, and her parents alighted.

'Welcome to Aven,' Griffith's mother said. 'Please come inside.' She led them through to a yellow room. Servants were waiting to serve them tea and juice, and on the side table were an assortment of small cakes, biscuits, cheese, and fruit.

'What a lovely room,' Eleanor exclaimed.

'Thank you so much for having us. It is more isolated than I expected, and the Academy is larger than I expected,' Robert commented with a chuckle.

'The building was delayed but we should open next year. I will take you over for a look, if you are interested,' Duke Ryeland offered.

'Yes, I would be interested.'

After dinner, Griffith took Roslind, Eleanor, and Robert out to the garden via the main ballroom.

'This is one of my favourite places here at Aven.' He opened the doors of the ballroom that led onto the terrace. Throwing his arms out, he said, 'These are the gardens.'

He knew Roslind was disappointed by the look on her face. 'I am sorry. It's just grass and some trees that have probably been there since Aven was built. They are nothing like the ones in Altrane. We should take a day trip to Tenby while you are here.'

'Tenby?' Roslind asked.

'It is our getaway. When the weather is nice, we can go swimming, or sometimes we hike up the nearby mountains for the hot springs. Tenby is more relaxed than Aven and, during the summer, we usually have a full house of friends and family.'

'Is that where your grandparents live?' Roslind asked.

'Yes. When we started to build the Academy, they decided it was way too noisy for them. They know I am home so I expect they will arrive tomorrow. I haven't seen them for a while as they don't come to Altrane anymore, the journey is too far for them.' Griffith didn't like to lie to her about his grandparents, but that was the story they had used for many years.

'I look forward to meeting them.'

Griffith looked over his shoulder and saw that Robert and Eleanor had gone in the other direction, giving them privacy.

'Roslind, are you here to look over Aven and consider what your life would be like here? You must have gathered how much I admire you. If I were to ask you a question, would you know the answer or should I wait?'

She was quiet for what felt like a long minute. 'Yes. I am here to look at Aven.' She took a deep breath. 'I've come to like you very much, Griffith. I think we would make a good couple. I didn't expect to meet someone while I was staying with my sister. While I don't think we love one another yet, we have good communication and I find you very handsome. I believe I could love you in the future.'

'I agree.' He pulled her deeper into the shadows of the garden and knelt before her. 'Roslind, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife? I want us to be partners, sharing our life together. I would respect, love and cherish you.'

She smiled at him, 'Yes, I will marry you. I only ask that my children hold Linith names and we observe some Linith traditions.'

He stood, pulling her into his arms. 'Thank you. You can call the children whatever you like, and I am happy to uphold any traditions that are special to you.' He leaned down to brush his lips against hers. 'Let's go tell our families. Do I need to get you a ring?'

'I am shocked you were so unprepared. I've heard you were a brilliant strategist,' she said as she elbowed him.

‘I didn’t think you would say yes so quickly.’
She giggled.

Chapter 9

Linith weddings were traditionally held just before dusk in the bride's family residence. Once the ceremony was finished, it was followed by a banquet. Griffith and Roslind had decided to hold their wedding at Aven to be married in what would become their new home. They had decided on a garden wedding, and it was a very small group of people in attendance. Yu-Jun had offered to host a big party the next time they were in Altrane.

Roslind had a silver cornet on her head with tiny bells that jingled lightly as she walked. She was dressed in a very light blue gown with silver embroidery, and the lamp light reflected off her dress every time she moved. Griffith's mother had taken them into the family's jewellery vaults, and Roslind had found a ring that she loved. Griffith had offered to buy her something new, but she liked the one she had picked knowing that one of Griffith's ancestors had worn it.

The back terrace of Aven held tables covered in white linen cloths with a centrepiece of tall and small candles and green ferns and flowers. In the centre of the garden was a wire arch that had been decorated with flowers and candles. Large hanging and standing lanterns provided some romantic light, and a small group of musicians were playing softly in the background.

Griffith watched Roslind make her way down the terrace and across the grassed area to stand in front of him.

'You look like a vision,' he told her as he held her hand. He felt his heart racing.

Their hands were tied together in red ribbon. After they committed their lives to each other, Griffith leaned forward to kiss Roslind's forehead.

*

Six months later, Roslind was in her sitting room at her desk, looking over Aven's record book. They were in good order, but she knew that there was some room for review and improvement more aligned with her personal taste. She had organised her initial meetings with the key staff members, which she felt had gone well. She was finding her feet at Aven and settling into her role. It was a little isolating, but she knew that she would make friends with some of the women whose husbands were either assigned to Aven barracks or were instructors at the Academy. She had yet to go into Pendtref, but Griffith was going to take her there soon.

'My lady.'

'Come in,' Roslind called

The housekeeper bowed. 'Are you happy with the menus for next week? Are there any changes? Also, the estate manager is here to meet with you.'

'Ah, bring him in when we are finished. The duke and duchess will be at Tenby next week and advised they will come for dinner Friday and stay for a few days. They may bring some friends.' Roslind smiled at the housekeeper—the duchess often invited people to come with them from Altrane to visit Tenby and Aven.

The next two hours were spent going over the estate management. Roslind had been shocked when she had first begun—it wasn't just the estates of Aven, Tenby and Altrane. There was the shipping business, the tenants and the retail stores; it was a vast business that looked like it just kept growing. But what surprised and delighted her was the resources spent on the people of Aven, educating the children and providing medical care to the people.

'Thank you so much, Mr Halen. I feel like I am getting better at this as we seem to be getting through it quicker.'

'I think you are doing very well, my lady. The Ryeland business is a vast one.'

'Please call me Roslind; you call Griffith by his first name. Will you be staying overnight, or do you need to head off again?'

'I need to see Griffith before I go, there are a few things I need to run by him for Alamein, Roslind. And please, call me Everett.'

*

After dinner, Griffith and Roslind made their way out to the garden. He could already see the changes that Roslind was beginning to implement. There was still the large, grassed area next to the terrace, and it looked like Roslind was building a central courtyard with three outdoor rooms interconnecting from the central one that joined to the back walls of Aven. The outline of the various winding paths had begun; Griffith was interested in seeing the final product.

‘This will be the bamboo garden. I can’t wait to put the plants in. I think I will have a winding water feature and a large pergola. All the paths will be lit, so you can use it both day and night.’ She sighed with happiness.

‘I will admit I am enjoying watching the gardens come to life,’ he told her.

‘You want to help me plant?’

‘I said watching, not doing.’ He grinned at her, pulling her in for a hug.

They stood standing in the dark just holding each other.

‘After my parents come to visit, I think we should take a little trip. I need to show you something. We’ll be gone for a couple of weeks, but I’ll ask that you pack light because it will just be you and I on horses,’ Griffith said.

*

They left under the cover of darkness heading into the mountains. They climbed for days, stopping each night. Roslind didn’t think there was a path they were following, to her it seemed they were just moving through the forest, rocks and hills, but Griffith seemed to know the way. He wouldn’t tell her where they were going. He just kept saying she would see when they got there.

‘Griffith, where are we?’

‘We will crest the Geomeunsan mountain range soon. Is the altitude affecting you?’ he asked her in concern.

‘No, I am fine.’

They had been leading their horses through a narrow path between two rock walls. It wasn’t a tunnel, as way above her she caught a glimpse of light, but she couldn’t see any ahead.

‘Just up here the path opens. If you don’t like heights, don’t look down. Just keep walking and follow me.’

Roslind wasn’t scared of heights, but when the path opened up, all she could see was sky. She knew they had to be very high up given the amount of time they had been climbing. She paused at the opening, taking a moment to look around. It was such a clear bright day that she could see the ocean far off in the distance. Griffith had taken the path to the left, so she patted her horse’s nose and clicked softly, tugging the reins to follow him. The path was frightening; one move could send you tumbling down the sheer rock face. She was happy when the path turned inwards to another one enclosed by rocks. Some of the ground was muddy as there were small trickles of water forming puddles on the ground. A clear space opened up, and Roslind brought her horse to a stop next to Griffith’s.

‘What I am about to tell you is only known to a few people outside of Tettenburg. My family is from a long line of warriors known as the maengleohan. In the past, they were fierce warriors, feared in battle. My family has retained the teachings and training. It is part of the reason I was so successful in my military career. What you are about to see is Tettenburg. My family are responsible for it; it is the King’s secret. He wanted something for the safety of Dernancourt because he believes that there is a threat. This place needs to remain secret, and it needs to be self-sufficient. While it may not have seemed like it, these signs are carved into the three pathways up the mountain.’ He held out a token with a square with a circle in the middle surrounded by four arches that were engraved with dragons and flowers on a patterned background.

She looked at him in shock.

‘Come,’ he said as he pulled his horse through the small opening.

Chapter 10

Roslind was deep in labour with their fourth child, Griffith sitting beside her holding on to her hand.

As the baby cried, the midwife announced, 'It's a girl, my lady.'

Roslind felt the tears running down her face as the baby was placed on her chest. She was crying and laughing with joy. She looked at Griffith, who looked a little dazed. They were happy with whatever sex the baby was, but Roslind had been secretly hoping that their last child would be a girl.

Eleanor entered the bedroom later to find Roslind sitting up, tired but radiant after her birth. 'She is a beautiful child. Congratulations. How are you feeling?' Eleanor said. 'What are you going to call her?'

'I am fine, tired. We are going to call her Aislinn. After three boys, she is our dream.'

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When rebellion erupts within the royal bloodline of Dernancourt, sixteen-year-old commander Griffith Ryeland is forced onto the battlefield sooner than anyone expects. Gifted in strategy and loyal to the House of Yi, Griffith stands beside Prince Yu-Jun as rival princes move to seize the crown—and the future of the realm hangs in the balance.

Outnumbered and surrounded, Griffith must rely on cunning, discipline, and deception to turn certain defeat into victory. But war is only the beginning. As traitors are brought to justice and peace returns, new threats emerge in the shadows of the Imperial Court—threats that cannot be faced with swords alone.

From brutal battles and court intrigue to secret legacies and forbidden knowledge, Dernancourt is a tale of loyalty, honour, and the cost of leadership. As Griffith's path leads him from war to love, from soldier to steward of a greater destiny, he must decide what—and who—he is willing to protect.



