

4 Assistant and Lover

1312, the 8th month, 21th day

Iason and I remained at our mentors' sides the entire day. We were woken up by the men rising to use the chamber pot. As we followed their example they returned to the bed. We were about to join them but something made Iason hesitate. On inspection we could see our fathers engaged in a very tender, non sexual embrace. We turned, as if in one mind, to our clothing. Uncle Iason had laid his head on Father's chest, much as I do and Father was kissing his forehead, as he does me. They were whispering things to each other. We both just seemed to know this was a private moment between lovers and we best not intrude. Not from fear, from respect. It was Father that had told me if you want respect you must be respectful.

Having dressed, Iason looked around the room and spotting several large feather quills, turned and signaled silence. He looked at the men and looked at the quills. He repeated this as my eyes followed his. I knew what he was thinking. We smiled at each other doing our best not to giggle. Each taking a quill we crept toward the bed. Dropping to our knees I crawled around to Father's side. Our coordination was just a little off. The idea was to reach up and tickle the nearest man. It did not quite work that way. Once we were stretched and committed the fathers in perfect unified action each clasp our outstretched hands and dragging us on the bed tickling and kissing and yes, using the quills on us. After a short time we were swatted on the butts and told, "get the to the dining hall," in the gruffest voices they could muster, while laughing so hard the butt pat was less effective than a gently push.

We went as instructed, telling each other how well we did with our silent communication and vowing to give that trick much more practice. I am sure Heron and Pyrros thought this amusing, being so well trained said nothing. The castle has several dining halls. Iason lead me to the Royal Families private hall. Two guards stood at the door. These were very large men, much older than our fathers. Heron was first and they both came to full attention at his sight. He asked them not to announce us and introduce me to them. They both did the hand kissing thing but at least this time I knew what to do. One asked Pyrros, "Is this the prince your partner Volos has fallen in love with?"

"Yes and so have I." He turned to me and smiled. "Word of your arrival has spread through out the castle and the roomers of your great beauty as well, my prince."

I was about to protest but Iason jumped in, "Do not be embarrassed or modest brother, those roomers are false they do not do justice to you." (TN: It should be pointed out that beauty in Arden's mind is just a little different then in our modern world. He is expressing the Classical Greek notion of the ideal male as expressed in art, sculpture, poetry of that time. This was rediscovered in the Renaissance. It was obviously never lost in Parga.)

Come gentlemen, I said, all this flattery, while nice to receive is less then filling for my stomach.

"Has anyone else arrived yet," Iason asked?

"Not yet Prince Iason, you and Prince Arden are the first."

"Good then we can hold court, this will be great fun." I could see the twinkle in his eye. The doors opened and we followed Heron and Pyrros into the hall. The doors closed behind us and I could hear the guards laughing. They know the Crown Prince and his ways I thought. This dining room is managed by the number 2 steward. I did not know that but was quickly informed, as I endeavored to get the very old and small man with a very white beard and hair off the floor. Iason assisted me. Once down, his old joints did not allow else.

Please sir, ceremony is just not required here I was saying. Iason added, "But you can help us mock my mother when she arrives." He looked just a bit puzzled now that he was on his feet again. I said, Prince Iason has some mischief in his mind, he will not draw you in unless you are willing. I am Prince Arden and you are?

"I am Alexandros second steward."

"Then you are in Uncle Iason's service and not our servant." He took my hand and kissed it. Iason presented his which he also kissed.

"Princes please be seated and let us serve your food."

"In our father's places if you please." Iason had that eye twinkle in his eye and Alexandros for all his years suddenly became much younger in spirit.

We took our places at the head of the table. Heron and Pyrros at a small table to our left. I could see several other small tables that would hold perhaps 4 placed at strategic points around the room. In our place we were behind a half circle table along the straight part our backs against a stone wall. The small tables controlled access to our side of the table. Even the servers need pass them to access us. We would put our fathers in our places.

No sooner had we seated ourselves than about six of the kitchen staff pored into the room. I was quite surprised most of them were young men in their mid to late teens having a striking resemblance to Karyakos. Perhaps their was more truth to the story of last night than jest. They brought us large mugs of what I was told is called Tea. A light green beverage, drank warm, that comes over great distances from the east. Bowls of warm boiled eggs, hot flatbeds, bowls of pasta, plates of cheese and olives, baskets of figs, dates and the like. The four younger ones held back until the two older men departed. One of them spoke to Heron. He nodded and approached us with him in the lead.

"Princes, the four servers wish a privet audience with yourselves, it is a matter of importance."

Iason told him yes, of course. I signaled to Pyrros to bar the entree door and Heron went to the kitchen entrance. Iason and I moved around the table to the four boys. I looked at Iason and he at me. I wanted his agreement to let me do the talking. I was not sure if he understood my message.

Again the four boys immediately dropped to their knees. "Please," I said, turning my palms up and lifting my hands. They stood. "You know us but I do not know your names."

"I am Drakon, we have little time Prince, we have learned the royal family is in grave danger and we palace boys, their are 12 of us in all, have decided to dedicate ourselves to your protection and service."

I reached my hand out to him and he took it. "Prince Iason and I are honored and appreciate your offer. We accept of course. Why not just approach my Father or King Iason?"

"It is hard for us plaiice boys to do so Prince, we fear they will not take our words or dedication seriously. We also believe our special dedication must be kept a secret between as few as possible. More goes on here then you or your Fathers realize."

"Some one approaches Prince Arden," Volos announced.

"Bring together your 12 and meet us in this room at the 10th hour, is that possible," Iason interjected.

"Unbar the doors, please." We returned to the table and the boys to the kitchen. They are more than boys but not by much.

Iason, we must tell our mentors not our fathers.

"Yes, tis true. They will still insist on accompanying us, that is their way."

"Yes, let me think on it." Just them Princess Elpis, Iason's sisters, brothers, nurses and ladies in waiting came in. The guard announced "Princess Elpis and the Royal Children."

Iason stood, "Greetings mother please join Prince Arden and myself."

I did not know quite what to expect. I have no knowledge of the princess. For some unknown reason, no one, not even Iason spoke of her to me. She is a short woman with long brown hair and hazel eyes. Her figure is somewhat plump like my own mother. She is younger than my mother but has already had five living children and obviously another in her belly.

She smiled warmly and after taking her seat greeted me and her son warmly. The ladies in waiting, one on each side of her, took their places and while the nurses tried to control the children, that failed. Iason had two brothers and two sisters clambering for his attention and demanding to meet me. "Let the children be children, they cause no harm," I said, pointing to empty chairs for them to fill at the next table. One of the ladies in waiting was about to say something but the Princess stopped her. Iason and I got out of our chairs and dropping to one knee we hugged and kissed each child. The youngest was probably 3, a girl. With bright shining eyes. I scooped her up and took her to the second to the end seat to my right. I nodded to her nurse who came over and took the end seat. I left the next seat unoccupied for Uncle Iason and placed the next oldest a boy, perhaps 8 years there next to me. Iason place the other two like I had leaving a space for Karyakos on the other side.

More food and beverages began arriving, with Alexandros hovering around the Princess. Father and Uncle Iason were announced and everyone rose except the children. For young children they were Uncle Karyakos and daddy, other titles have no meaning. All the children wanted to know was when we: daddy, uncle, brother and new brother, would come and play with them. The ladies that attended Princess Elpis seemed to fuss over her considerably and I took this to mean she was in some difficulty with the new child. I know little of these things. In a flash the children were up and jumping into the arms of father and uncle. Once seated I could see Uncle Iason had his youngest on his lap and was feeding her from his plate, leaving the nurses to sit idly by. I had figured that would happen. Being surrounded by the children both men would be completely occupied leaving Iason and I a chance to talk with his mother.

I knew from my experience with my own mother that as soon as she got to know me a bit, I would be adopted by her heart. It is the way of women with many children. They may have titles and power and influence but they are mothers first and all else second. I was right in this supposition. As I answered her questions about Koalhurst, my siblings and family, she warmed to me greatly. Being as beautiful as everyone tells me I am did not hurt. I think the most important aspect were Iason's comments about how close we have become in such a short time.

Now the woman is no fool. She knows that he and I are what we are and will be what tradition dictates. She can not change that and should she try and come between us or between Iason and his future wife, it would make the King and Consort very unhappy. I have no way to know if she and Uncle Iason were lovers like my parents but given this number of children in the space of 12 years I suspect they must at least enjoy each other to some extent.

I have no knowledge of how she gets along with Karyakos. I did notice she had several Christine religious symbols on her person. I do not know all that much about his group or any other for that matter, to understand what significance it might have, if any. I also knew that she understood Iason's education was no longer in her hands but in Karyakos' and mine was in the King's.

Alexandros came in several times to ask for direction addressing his questions to Iason the Crown Prince not to the King. Uncle Iason seemed to understand this little game and played along with it. The Princess played as well. Perhaps one he played as a young crown prince. It was almost comical when she asked "Prince Iason, by your leave I shall return to my quarters along with the children." I even got giggles from the older two when I suggested that Uncle Iason accompany Princess Elpis and the children.

Just as everyone was leaving I stopped Ouranos and whispered to him that special Royal Guards should be assigned to the Princess and little ones immediately. I would explain later. Iason went to Alexandros and requested as a favor to him the kitchen be emptied except for Drakon and his 3 companions, on some pretext or another, by the 10th hour and not to be reoccupied until after the 11th

hour.

Iason and I made our way to the King's council chamber. Several of the councilors were already in attendance along with 4 pages. I sent a page to our sleeping chamber with a note telling Volos, Damao and the Kings person guardians to meet us for Tea in the Royal Family Dining Hall at the 10th hour.

This working council is made up of about 15 knights. The room was large and while their were seating places, no one sat except for the pages and two scribes. In the middle of the room was a large table. It was a table with a specific purpose, carved into it was a map of the kingdom. Pyrros alerted me that Father was about to enter the room. I slipped out and intercepted them in the hall.

Uncle Iason, I said, Iason and I request you join us, in strict secret, in the family dining hall at the 10th hour. He gave me that look to say, is this more of your mischief? "This is not mischief or a game mentor, this is deadly serious. "

"We will come with you son," Father said. I should have known at that point they already knew something I didn't about this business, but I didn't. I knew and know that I still have much to learn about everything. I hoped Iason had a better understanding of how the castle and family worked. I was not comforted by his obvious lack of direction in this matter. He seemed more interested in the prospect of adventure than the importance of it.

The room was alive with conversation as we entered. Iason was immediately at my side and we were flanked by our fathers or mentors I was not sure which. Upon seeing the King quite descended on the room. "Welcome Knights of the King's Council, We have important business today. I see five of us are missing." Two were at sea, one commanding the Eastern Army, one is very ill and not able to travel and one did not respond. I could see the look on Father's face at the announcement that Prince Tertius had neither answered his call or responded.

Iason whispered, "Tertius is our uncle, father's younger brother. I like him, so will you."

Uncle Iason is not one to hold fast to useless ceremony and he flung open the door to the outer room and summoned Janus. My heart was light as I had become fond of Janus even though our meeting had been brief. Janus was instantly inside and the door was closed. "What news of Prince Tertius?"

"None Sir, I handed the dispatch to Lady Lucia and rode on to complete my circuit."

"Thank you Janus, please wait as we may need you again. Quietly ask the Captain of the Guard to come in."

"Captain, I am greatly concerned for my brother, send six of your best riders to find him. Sire I have six able men but only 5 quality horses at the ready." Father's hand drifted along my backbone. I was immediately filled with desire for his love and attention followed by the almost instant realization he was signaling me.

"Captain, my horse Zephyros is ready and in need to a good run, he is at your disposal."

"It is done then, good speed Captain," Uncle Iason responded and the Captain gave me a broad smile and a slight bow and departed. "Now to our most serious business."

"Just one slight diversion. I think is best if the Pages and Scribes leave us for a time." They got up making for the door. Iason and I were about to follow them when firm hands clasped our shoulders and held us in place.

"This is most delicate and difficult for me to say. I am greatly angered. It is only through the strength and good temper of Prince Karyakos that I have not turned loose Kerberus in this matter." He laid out the facts that he had.

1. About a year ago three groups of spies had come into the land. They came as Christian clerics, merchants and troubadours. Two from the Pope and one from Florence. The exact purpose of these interlopers was not known. The kinds of information they sent are several. First, military; second, political; third, social and religious; fourth, sources of wealth.

"This is nothing that we ourselves do not do and far better than any of our neighboring states or duchies. That is because our reporters are mostly scholars or military people and our purpose is defense not conquest or mischief." Most of this seemed to be already known to the others but for Iason and I it was like magic. We had no idea of the implications. We were taking in this information like sponges taking up water.

"Do we not have people or scholars in Avignon," One who I didn't yet know asked.

"No, however the Pope was kind enough to share his information with his Bishop in Florence."

Next he told them about the arrival of assassins less than 14 days ago. They had traveled here at the invitation of the local Bishop. They were dressed and presented themselves as religious scholars. We know they are not scholars or part of any holy order. One has been killed, two are captured and three remain at large. The Bishop claims no knowledge and expressed great surprise when told these six were not in the libraries as he supposed. Prince Karyakos suggested that may be true and that his invitation letter may be real, those that appeared may not.

Uncle Iason reminded everyone that the Bishop had been his father's friend and the man seemed to understand our policy to have no official state religion. He also pointed out that the Bishop is now very old and perhaps his power is being usurped by others.

"To move on. We do not know exactly who their targets are but they appear to be the princes of this place. The dead man was shot by one of our archers attempting to enter the Eastern Hunting Lodge, the other two captured at the same time."

I thought this was strange since Father had clearly said the King's message said he and I were in danger. That seemed to me stronger than a suggestion. Perhaps my mentor was not sharing all his information with the council.

We have pieced together the puzzle thus far:

Upon arriving, the assassins found that Prince Karyakos was traveling in the land. The "purpose" of his travel was learned in Koalhurst from false information the Prince planted there. The two captured men are in our dungeon. Only you knights and the soldiers from the Eastern Hunting Lodge garrison know about this. The three were traveling as troubadours. A search of their belongings revealed a copy of the letter mentioned above and large amounts of poison, weapons and musical instruments made in Florence.

The poison is being investigated but appears to come from some plant or herbs that grow in the Frankish lands. They had a much larger purse than ordinary players would have. It is coin of several realms and offers no clue.

Iason interrupted, "Father, I mean Sire, they must have had horses do we know how they came by them?" This got a chuckle for the assembled group and a red face from the Crown Prince.

"No, we should keep as much of our knowledge to ourselves as possible until the other three are caught."

I could see the clock was approaching the mid point of the 9th hour. The discussion was on going now everyone expressing some view or another. I had many questions of my own. The consensus of opinion was the assassins were sent here to cause chaos and a power vacuum. The guise of being church scholars was chosen so that if the plot was exposed and some punitive action against the Bishop was taken it would provide excuse for military invasion.

"Knights let us seek refreshments and reassemble here at the 11 hour." Uncle Iason looked at me for confirmation.

"Let me remind you not to discuss any of this outside this room, in the Castle the walls have ears. It would not surprise me to learn our people know more of this than we," Father said.

We four along with our guardians departed for the family dining hall. Behind me I could hear Father reminding Iason, not to interrupt the King, even if you are the Crown Prince. Uncle Iason reached around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. Now it dawned on me why he was my mentor and not my father. A father's agenda and a mentor's agenda are not the same. A boy or student will take comment from the mentor in even harsher words than the father with little emotional effect. Uncle Iason then told me he and Karyakos enjoyed our little play at the morning meal, but perhaps, we should not make a habit of usurping the King's authority. "It did do my heart good to see that sower old steward smile, like I remember him when I was a boy seeking his help in my mischief."

We stopped just before the grand door. Iason took our men's hands, "mentors, you are here to advise us and the others, you are not here in your royal capacity, please." My brother can still muster that childlike quality that melts even the most royal heart. They nodded in agreement. I asked two of the guardians to take the kitchen side of that door and the others to remain here.

When we entered the 12 boys were all seated at the table. There was a low murmur when they saw the King and Prince Consort. Our men were good to their word and sat off to one side. One of the boys quickly produced tea and mugs for them. He was waved off with a smile when he went to pore.

After filling our mugs Drakon spoke, "We are your bastard brothers, the ones still living in the castle. We all desperately want to know our princes." Each one gave his name around the table. "I have been elected spokesman but I feel just a little..."

"All is well brother, our fathers are here only in the capacity as mentor. We are only 12 and new to this business," Iason said. I followed by saying, a father is always greatly concerned with his children's welfare. We could do nothing less but honor that. We boys all, we will only benefit from their advice and council. Please share with us what you know of this assassination business.

"We are called the Palace Boys, Wards of the Royal Family. Most of us were sired by Prince Karyakos as was explained to you last night." I took that to mean Drakon or some of the others were in the kitchen or even serving.

"Prince Arden, Prince Iason, we have learned that your lives are in the gravest of danger. Last night two men were brought here and are now in the dungeon. They are said to be assassins sent to kill the Royal Family. We too are part of that family. Family stands together in times of danger. We have chosen to stand especially close to you."

I looked at Uncle Iason and he gently nodded his head. I needed permission to break the code of silence. "Yes we know about these events. If you 12 are aware of it how many others?"

"Probably half and by tonight all. When the Royal Guards doubled in the Princesses' residents that served to confirm what was partly speculation."

"Drakon," Father asked, "does anyone outside the castle know this?"

"No, Prince Karyakos, not as yet."

"Do you have a plan Drakon?"

"Yes, that is why we asked for this meeting. We Palace Boys have formed a secret society to serve our young princes to the fullest of our ability. We are not skilled fighting men as you can see. We are dispersed throughout the castle. Few outsiders pay much attention to any of us, they assume we are

ordinary servants who chafe under harsh conditions. That gives us an advantage when it comes to learning of things and in being in the best possible position to assist your guardians. One or more of us will always be close at hand”

I could see Uncle Iason was smiling. I could see Karyakos was half smiling. He was concerned for those boys that he had sired. “We accept your plan. We are all brothers in this venture together,” Iason interjected.

“We need some kind of symbol and name, some way to identify each other,” Iason suggested.

I looked over at Uncle Iason again. I could see from the look on his face he wanted to get involved. Why don’t you ask our mentors for advice, Drakon.

“Sire would you assist us with advice.”

“This family was founded by Iason the First, the motto he left has remained unchanged since, you know it Drakon.”

“Fraternity, Loyalty, Trust.”

“That trinity of principals is what you and this family is all about. A trinity implies a triangle, a simple closed figure that is significant for its strength.”

Karyakos added, “A right triangle so as to differ from the delta of our writing.” Drakon looked around and since everyone nodded in agreement he declared it so. We all moved to a circle and placing our hands on each others swore our oath of fraternity, loyalty, trust and silence. Karyakos came forward as did Uncle Iason. Father had tears in his eye expressing his pride in all his sons. Uncle Iason made a few suggestions about things to watch for, questions to ask and so on. Each boy received their personal blessing save Iason and myself and we all returned to our duties.

I could hear Father telling Uncle Iason how proud he was of Drakon and what a fine steward the lad will make. Iason and I were very excited by what had just happened, I thought we did well given our lack of experience in such things. At first I missed my interacting with the olive groves and vineyards. Now I almost never think of such things. People are much more interesting.

When we reassembled, the knights of the council, seemed to have organized their thinking. Several presented a plan of sorts to root out the three remaining assassins and try and ferret out the spies. Uncle Iason would quietly prepare our military to repel an invasion. The council was then opened again and the scribes and pages reentered the room. Several scribes were busy preparing papers at the directions of the most outspoken knights, while others came and went seeking audience with the King on this or that matter. He sat in a huge chair and we boys on smaller chairs next to him. We learned that running a kingdom is not only hard work but can be even more boring than tending the vineyards. We also learned a small army of officials worked unseen.

At our mid day meal one of the Triangles whispered that an unknown Christian priest was visiting the Princess and her Ladies and he would surly hear the news. Uncle Iason called a page who produced paper and a quill. He scratched a note to the Captain of the Guard. Prince Tertius arrived and took a seat next to Uncle Iason. They chatted in a friendly and I thought loud voice about cousins and crops. I was puzzled. At one point he mentioned Lady Lucia failed to give him the dispatch, he thought at the urging of her priest.

All through his meal he kept looking over at Iason and I, we were on the opposite side of the table. When he finished eating he leaned back and let out a loud burp, slapped his hands on the table and declared. “By all the gods, Karyakos this new nephew is the most beautiful boy in this or any other kingdom.” I was mortified and I now turned bright red. Father laughed, “Tis true but I fear that unless people stop declaring it to him he will become smitten by his own countenance. We do not want another Narkissos.”

