

“AN emissary from Gestahl, Your Majesty.”

Edgar tensed. There'd been communication with some of the other minor states, but it was the first time he'd heard anything from the Empire since his recent accession to the throne. During the whole period when the rumours that his father was poisoned had arisen, been quashed, and resurfaced – they'd remained silent. So what did they wish to say to him now?

“Your Majesty,” the footman pressed.

“Thank you,” said Edgar, gathering his wits. “Send them in, please.”

They'd sent a young man, not much older than Edgar himself, whose black hair was gelled back in the fashion that had failed to catch on outside the Vector region. He strode towards the throne with a confidence that Edgar hoped to someday project himself, and presented himself to the king with a brief bow. “Your Majesty. May I first offer sincerest condolences from the Empire on your father's passing.”

“What are you here to discuss?” Edgar asked tightly.

The man acknowledged his dismissal of the small talk with a nod. “The Emperor wishes to propose a treaty of peace between our nations. Your Majesty will have noticed that our attentions have been turning towards expansion recently, and it would be a shame if we had to take up arms against such a well-kept little kingdom.”

The pieces came together in Edgar's mind. "So you're threatening us," he concluded.

"I wouldn't put it like that," the emissary replied. "But such a small state, with a young and inexperienced king, would surely benefit from the protection of a larger power."

"I need to discuss this with my advisers," said Edgar, using a line he had already found himself saying countless times over the course of his nascent reign. "What would the treaty involve, exactly?"

"A simple exchange. You agree not to come to the aid of any nation we subjugate. And in return, we will refrain from visiting your lands with our – dare I say it – considerable military force."

"I see," Edgar replied, trying not to shake visibly. "As I said, we'll discuss it. If we choose to begin negotiations, my men will inform you."

"Very well, Your Majesty," said the emissary. "I look forward to our next meeting." He bowed once more and retreated with the same swagger he had displayed coming in.



"We can't let him see," Duncan whispered.

Marta shook her head. "We won't be able to hide this from him, darling. He'll find out soon enough, and better that he finds out here."

She was right, as usual. Duncan acquiesced with a sigh; having the former prince living with them wasn't a walk in the park at the best of times. He turned to his breakfast and tried to concentrate on enjoying it, even as he heard the two boys thundering down the stairs.

Vargas and Sabin took their places at the table, and it didn't take long before the latter noticed the newspaper that lay there; despite Marta's insistence that he be allowed to see it, Duncan hadn't been able to stop himself trying to cover up some of the offending material with a strategically placed pot of jam, but most of the front-page article was still visible. He watched warily as Sabin deciphered the upside-down headline, his face gradually clouding with shock.

"He can't have," Sabin muttered.

"What's up?" said Vargas between bites of toast.

Sabin ignored him, and stood up. "That – bastard. I don't believe it." He made for the external door and walked out, letting in a brief draught.

"Sabin!" Duncan called after him as the air grew warm again.

Marta caught his eye. "Let him. He needs some time alone."

"He'll hurt himself," Duncan protested.

"Not if you've been training him right," she replied.

"What's going on?" Vargas demanded.

"Vargas –" Duncan began, and at the same time Marta said, "Not now, dear."

“What?!” Vargas exclaimed. “How am I supposed to help him if you won’t tell me –”

“Don’t shout at your mother,” Duncan cut in sharply.

Vargas rose from the table suddenly. “I’m fed up with this. Both of you treating me like a kid,” he declared, and charged back upstairs.

Duncan stared morosely after him. “Damn it,” he complained. “Can’t even deal with my own son, and I thought I could look after the king’s brother –”

“He’ll be fine,” Marta insisted. “You can’t protect him from everything.”

“Someone’s got to. He doesn’t know how to take care of himself yet.”

She smiled. “He’ll get there. That’s your line of work, isn’t it? Know thyself and that sort of thing. I’ve heard that son of ours complaining about it enough.”

Duncan was cheered by her optimism, but almost immediately sobered by the reminder of Vargas and how difficult he’d been recently. “They’re a handful, those two,” he admitted.

Marta looked at him fondly. “One thing at a time. Don’t let your eggs get cold.”



Edgar had been summoned for a private meeting with one of his advisers, but the lord in question had been called out in turn

for some urgent business that, from what Edgar could surmise, had to do with pigeons getting trapped in the castle's ventilation system. He'd been asked to wait in the man's private office, and that was where he stood now, casting an idle eye over the room's innumerable papers and files.

A lot went into running a kingdom. The king was at the head of it, of course, and Edgar usually felt like he had so much to deal with that that must have been almost all of what went on, but he knew when he thought about it that there was a whole extra layer of work that never even came near him. The labels on the files he was looking at now were proof of that: *servants' promotion and recruitment* was certainly something he'd never had to deal with, nor *livestock importation regulations*, nor the rather thinner group of papers marked *library public consultation records*.

A further file caught his eye. *King's mail – withheld*, it said, and Edgar hesitated. It made sense, he supposed, to vet his post before it was sent on to him; reading through a bundle of pointless letters would be a waste of his increasingly scarce time. But another part of him felt resentment: things were being kept from him, still, even though he was supposed to be in charge now. Surely a look through wouldn't hurt, just to get a sense of the kind of things that his subjects were trying to communicate to him and that his own advisers considered worth concealing. He gently removed the cardboard cover and lifted up the papers inside.

The letters went back over some time; those at the top of the pile had clearly been intended for his father. He turned them over carefully and sought out the postmarks dating to the recent beginning of his own reign. A lot of the letters appeared to be begging for inappropriate personal assistance, or trying to sell him things; others were clearly written by crackpots, accusing him of wanting to bring down his own kingdom by various outlandish means. At the very bottom of the pile there were a few letters castigating him for the recent treaty with Gestahl. A number of them seemed to have got their facts solely from the hurriedly written *Figaro Reporter* article from the morning after the deal had been concluded, and understood the alliance to be much closer than had been agreed. It was unfortunate, but he understood the confusion; that rag could never be trusted to report on things properly. One of the shorter missives, however, caught his attention with its familiar handwriting.

*Edgar,*

*I'm trying to convince myself you had a good reason for this.*

*S. R.*

He stared at the letter in shock. Sabin had written to him, and his men – who would surely have realised – had thought it best not to let him know. But the worst thing of all was that scrawled *Edgar* – he couldn't help focusing on it. He and his brother had barely ever addressed each other by their first names, even in writing.

I'm losing him, he thought.

He replaced the letter, set the pile to rights, and gently rested his forehead against the wall.