

Chapter Two

At the Silver Coast

Cote d'Argent was a land without parallel in its natural beauty, at least to many people. Named for the long silver sand beaches that stretched across its shore with the Great Seas, it was almost paradise to so many. The crown jewel was the home of its noble family, the Palais de la Lune. This palatial complex was sat atop a small, hilly island just off the silvered coast. Its white stone towers rose out of the sea like a beacon, all surrounding one massive cathedral at its center. These spires were a sign of hope for so many. The Palace itself was open to the public, all save for one section reserved for the family.

Since the beginning of the nation, and even before, the noble family of Cote d'Argent had served as caretakers of the temple. They were a lineage of Magi, powerful but honorable, and blessed by the goddess of the moon and sea with abilities and quirks that set them apart from many of the other houses. This was no different for Duc Vedast. Vedast was a striking man, tall, well built, and undeniably handsome. His skin was warmly toned, bathed by the light of the sun along the beaches. His eyes were bright, with a defined twinkle to them behind those blue starlight colors. His position afforded him many comforts, and he was always dressed in the finest clothes that tailors of the kingdoms could provide, with vibrant blues a favored color. He was marked with the sign of his family as well. His hair, from birth, had been a crisp white, as bright as a blanket of fresh snow. His voice was deep, calming, and he was a natural orator – and he served proudly as the high priest of Lune.

With an entourage of his servants and guard, he stood on the bridge connecting the small island to the mainland. It was ornately decorated, with intricate imagery of the goddess they served carved into the massive curved planks that made up the bridge. On this day, it was unseasonably warm, and the Sun was high in the sky as they waited, dressed in finery to greet their guests. As the horses were seen in the distance, Vedast could not help but fidget anxiously at the approach. He glanced to his side, where stood his wife, Lutisse – a tall and slender woman, also blessed by Lune with striking white hair, now pulled up into an elaborate style ordained and tied with gold and jewels of every sort. Her dress was just as ornate, and in a matching blue color to that of her husband.

She glanced back to him with a soft smile, pulling her children a bit closer to her. Two of her three children were there – both of her daughters. She was protective of them, holding them tight to her body, with only the occasional glance to her husband or a guard. The young ladies were dressed somewhat more conservatively and did not quite seem to understand why they had to stand atop the bridge and wait. They fidgeted and moved back and forth, scolded by their father from time to time when they started to slip from their mother's grasp.

The wait seemed to drag on and on before finally the entourage of Marquis Valamir arrived. There was a collective shiver that rolled through the men and women of the Argent Coast as he and his party came into view. While not dressed for war, his entire party came with their masks adorned. Made from the feathers of Wyverns, each mask bore the visage of some great monster. While for many, it was simply an interpretation of a wyvern, there were a few that were more ornate. Valamir stood out, but none more than the mask of his wife.

Sitting atop a steed next to her husband, she bore a twisted and deformed mask resembling and basilisk. When paired with her otherwise simple dress and accouterments, it seemed almost out of place – but then one’s eyes were almost drawn to the twin blades at her hip. The scabbards and hilts were all that was visible, but they brought to image the blades within rather quickly. They were pristine and exquisitely made of finely crafted leather. The hilts were wrapped in scarlet cloth, and the pommel inlaid with obsidian stone. She was Tienette Astier, Marquise du Nid de Vouivre, and she had a reputation to match that of her husband.

Vedast gave a warm smile and opened his arms wide in greeting, stepping forward towards the riders. He gave one last glance across them before settling on Valamir. “Hail traveler, and welcome to the Palais de la Lune. May the Goddess of the Moon and Sea smile upon your arrival, and bless you while you are guests in our home.” He spoke warmly. “I am Duc Vedast d’Argent, and this is my wife Lutisse, and our two daughters – the eldest Roheis, and our youngest Mirabelle.” He motioned to the two young girls. They both had their mother’s eyes and hair, and the resemblance to their mother was astonishing.

Valamir smiled from his horse and dismounted before speaking. “You honor us, your grace.” He spoke as he dusted off his black and red clothes – which matched the general formal style of the Duc but were of much simpler construction and material. He gave a bit of a bow. “I am Marquis Valamir Astier du Nid de Vouivre, and this is my wife, Tienette.” He motioned up to her, and she likewise dismounted. “Our son is young, so we did not want to risk bringing him on such a long journey. A few months with his grandmother and uncles will likely do him well, though.”

The Duc was a tilted his head and then gave a slow nod. “Of course, perfectly understandable.” His voice was quiet, and he spoke slowly for a time his eyes glued to the newcomers. “I was surprised to see your letter – and then to receive one from Duc Gilles.” He twisted about and raised one hand back towards the island and his home, “Come, let us walk and talk. I’d like to show you my abode, and perhaps we can enjoy a meal before we get deep into the conversations at hand.”

“Of course, your grace. A wonderful idea.” Valamir spoke before walking up next to the Duc. The two were quick to fall into benign conversation, and as they walked those behind them fell into step. For nearly an hour, they walked the grounds. Despite a decent tour, not a single word of importance was shared between the two. They spoke of unimportant and distant ideas. There were some common ground topics that were brought up, such as the health of Gilles, but beyond some of these nothing seemed to transpire.

Eventually, they were taken to eat a meal. The families enjoyed a large meal together, one that would be a feast in nearly any other house. It was a show of wealth and comfort, as had been the tour. Vedast hoped that showing off might dissuade the Marquis from continuing in this errand. He had no intention of letting his daughter marry a wyvern, and his reluctance to even broach the topic in the slightest made that abundantly clear to everyone who walked with them. This was all a formality to both families. Both men had seemingly made up their minds, and it was a long time until any decision had to be made for such an arrangement.

There was a token acceptance of the Astier right to be considered, and that was all. The families began to separate ways and head to quarters to rest for the night. The silence was broken by the voice of the young Mirabelle. “Why do you wear masks?”

It caused the families to pause. “Mirabelle, it is impolite to speak out of turn.” Her father responded quickly. “My apologies.”

“No, it is a good question,” Valamir spoke, before glancing at the young girl. “Has your father explained the Masquerade?”

“No.” She said with a bounce up in her voice.

“She is young,” Her mother explained but gave no details beyond that.

“Yes, well, the Masquerade is our Court – where we nobles go to speak. We wear masks to hide our faces, so we can speak freely.” Her father explained. “The Vouivre wear masks at all noble functions, and many day-to-day.”

“Why?”

“They say your mask is the face you present at court,” Tienette spoke, kneeling to the girl’s level and offering a smile from behind that mask. Realizing the girl was still very young, she reworded her sentence. “You act one way in temple, and one way at home, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, we do the same in court. So, we wear masks to show who we are right then.” She continued, motioning between her and her husband, “We, and others from our provinces, believe differently though. We are the masks.”

“Why monsters?”

“Because we are monsters,” Valamir spoke softly, before giving her a twisted smirk. “Just like the stories you will hear all of your life.”

The girl did not have a response to that, but her father quickly ended the conversation with a quiet rebuttal of the idea and a promise that he would explain it more as she grew older. The families split apart for the evening and went to their separate quarters, but the lords would meet again that night to speak to one another about the real reason they had met. Late, long after their wives and children were away, Valamir and Vedast met in the Magi’s study. This conversation was spoken in hushed tones, with even the attendants at an arm’s length to make sure that none could overhear them, at least to any detail that would matter if leaked out from these chambers.

The room was filled from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, with massive book and scroll cases. Thousands of tomes and countless loose scrolls and paper surrounded the central object in the room – a small sitting area and writing desk. It was here, by flickering candlelight, that the two men would speak frankly to one another about the purposes of this visit. For this night, for this conversation, the two sat across from one another. Valamir was calm and collected, sitting with his back straight and emotive motions of his arms as he spoke.

Vedast, however, lacked such composure. “You think I’d ever let a daughter of Lune marry into the Wyverns?” He spat the words. “What are you really here to accomplish?”

“Just that. Our people are more powerful together. A marriage would be mutually beneficial, granting you the resources of the Nest, and the specialists she trains.” Valamir crossed his legs and leaned back, barely raising a hand as he seemed to yield the floor.

“Or, she could marry one of Ava, or of the Dunelan – Cael Varin de Auduna, Theiry Matisse de Ava, even Eponnia Vania de Rigani have all been put forward by their parents.” Vedast took a breath and leaned forward, “Why would I let her marry a poisoner and schemer... You said it yourself... a monster?”

Valamir’s lips curled into a smile, the eyes under the mask catching a shadow moving along the wall of the corridor beyond the study. “Why not?” He spoke, and then a coldness returned to his voice, and almost cruel bite, “She is the daughter of monsters...”

The sound in the Marquis’ tone sent a shiver up the Magi’s spine. He knew that tone. It was a tone of knowledge, “You can’t possibly,” The Magi spoke softly, a quiver in his voice as he looked to the floor.

“I do, Duc,” The Marquis spoke, an uplifted and almost happy tone in his words as he pushed on the topic a little, “I found the evidence,” His hand waved lightly in the air in front of him. “Well, disturbing seems such an understatement.”

“So.” Duc Vedast shook his head. “How did you find out?”

“Your mistake in the Last Watch.” The Marquis spoke. “You covered yourself well there mind you. It was not easy.”

The Duc nodded, “And what will you do to her?”

“Nothing. You have my word.” The Marquis said, and then there was a silence that hung in the air.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Very well. My proposal is this. Your daughter Mirabelle and my son Sarus are married when they come of age. We shall come and visit, from time to time, before. Should she refuse her duty, we’ll allow it, given you accept the fault.” Valamir said with a little tilt of his head to one side. “Then, they take over our Manor, and live peaceful lives overseeing a village on the borders.” He raised his hands, offering a pause before adding. “That is all.”

“What is your end game, Valamir?” Vedast asked, raising his head. “If I am to share a family with you...”

Valamir’s smile widened, “Then perhaps I’ll tell you when that is official.” He paused a moment. “But,” He reached a hand to pull his mask away from his face, for the first time, “To show you I am serious... I have no plan to include our children in it.”

Vedast shook his head. “Fine, Wyvern.” He all but growled the words, “It is not as if I have a choice.”

The next morning, they had planned to meet again, but Vedast was suddenly called away due to some political trouble in the region, and it was decided that the Astier would leave. After their

conversation, Valamir was not surprised that something would come up. He knew Vedast would set to work to head off this plan, as best as he could.

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