

## Chapter Three

### Mirabelle

Ten years had passed since that fateful night when the Astier had come to her home, and despite her father's attempts, the proposal was officially accepted and a plan for marriage put underway. Before that, though, there was one more meeting required between the two families – excepting the bride and groom would not be allowed to meet. As the weeks before their second visit to her home came and went, she found herself unable to do much but continue her studies. She poured over information about the Wyverns, specifically the Astier. She was not bashful about hoping that she would be able to find some way to refuse them, something to excuse her from this duty.

In truth, she was terrified. Her parents had spent much of her life explaining the horrors of the people of Nid de Vouivre. They were descended from barbarians and bandits and gave no weight to the honor that the rest of the nations so firmly stood by. Nothing she found changed her mind, but she could not square that away with the fact that her Majesty would call on them often as advisors and members of her court. A lady of virtue and honor, who trusted a veritable band of thieves.

Mirabelle had grown well, her looks straying away from her mother a bit as she aged. While her pale eyes and snow-white hair were as striking, she had grown thin and tall for a woman of her kin. Most importantly though, she was intelligent – much more so than her sister, or perhaps even besting her older brother. She learned quickly and was incredibly well-read and observant in all things, but especially with those actions of the people around her. She had become a natural in court and was even trained alongside other future ladies of her Majesty's Court. Her mastery of the Masquerade grew from her people's natural grace and the strict codes they followed to ensure their path was a pure one.

A waste, now that she would be cast with devils.

One morning after they had returned, when the sun was still low, Mirabelle sat in her room watching the wisps of snow tossed about by the wind. It was still warm enough that the snow would not amount to much, at least not for some time – but it had begun to freeze to the stone windowsills and shaded patches of earth around her home. Her handmaiden entered her chambers after a small knock. She was a timid young thing, from some distant foreign part of the kingdoms.

"My lady," She said in a whisper, bowing and holding herself low to keep from drawing her mistress' ire. "Marquise Tienette Astier is here and she asks if you would like to join her for a walk along the seashore."

"Tell her no." Mirabelle said with a shake of her head. "Give her whatever excuse you like."

"Yes, madam." The handmaiden spoke, backing out of the room.

This scene was growing old for the young woman. She wondered at the Marquise persistence and willingness to be rejected at every turn. She had no intention of spending time with them and hoped it would drive a wedge between them early. Despite her father's demands and threats, she would not be moved to give them an inch.

Then something odd happened. Sitting in her room, she spotted a woman walking along the shore. She was alone, with one hand held out before her pausing to catch and examine snowflakes as they fell around her. Mirabelle was a bit confused. She had thought, like everything else, that it was an attempt to speak to her and put a dent in her resolve. The Wyverns' were all tricksters, all working some scheme to get their way. She shook her head. "Coralie, come in here please?" She asked loud enough for her handmaiden to hear.

"Yes, madam?" The timid girl spoke as she pushed the oaken door open.

"Did the Marquise take her walk?"

"She is still on it. Yes." The handmaiden spoke as she gave a quick bow.

"And yesterday, when she asked if I would join her for dinner?"

"I don't understand the question, my lady. I'm sorry." Coralie nervously replied.

"Did she adjust her plans?"

"No, my lady. She ate alone when you declined."

"And the did she walk the gardens?"

"Yes, madam. I believe she even picked a few of the winter bloom flowers." The handmaiden gave a nervous shrug, "She did ask for a weight to press them, though I believe that is the only change from the invitation she gave to you."

Mirabelle turned to her handmaiden. "Has she spent the entire time she has been here alone?"

"Yes, madam. When not with your mother or father, or at another function required of her, she has reliably asked me to give you an invitation to join her and then carried on as invited."

"Why?"

"I'm sorry, madam, she hasn't shared that with me," Coralie said softly.

"Coralie, bring me a coat – and get one for yourself," Mirabelle ordered, standing from her position. She quickly moved to find her boots, and her handmaiden soon returned with a warm furred coat. She was quick to wrap it about her shoulders and headed out of her room and into the complex.

Coralie struggled to keep up, walking fast behind the young lady. As they passed through the corridors, she spoke to no one and eventually turned out of the main complex and followed the paths out to the beach.

Soon enough, she found herself a few lengths away from the Marquise, who stood just at the waterline watching the snowfall over the cold gray waters of winter. Mirabelle couldn't think of anything to say at first. The woman she saw was so different than what she was used too. She didn't wear the silken gowns she was used too, instead a blouse and pants. While they were nicer than many, they were practical and well worn – and at her hip she wore a blade. Then there was the mask. That basilisk mask hid her eyes and much of her face. Even the dark colors gave a foreboding look to her, but here she seemed different.

“My lady, you honor me.” Tienette’s voice broke the silence, but she didn’t turn to greet the young woman. “I didn’t expect you to join me today. Your girl said it was too cold.”

“What are you doing?” Mirabelle asked with little empathy in her voice.

“Enjoying the snow on the beach.” The woman responded softly.

“You are Tienette au Basilic. But you are walking the beach alone?”

The woman laughed softly, “Yes, I am. I thought it might be something we both enjoyed. There is little prettier than light snow over the sea, is there not?”

“Why did you eat alone last night?”

“Because you did not join me.” Tienette paused and turned to the young lady finally.

“You could have eaten with another or your husband.”

The woman sighed. “I suppose. But to be honest, I was in no place to go see eat with another.”

“Why?”

“Honestly, because my husband does not like to see me cry.”

There was a long pause. Mirabelle was silent. “Why would the Basilisk cry?”

There was a moment when she caught a glimpse under that mask. Flushed cheeks, an awkward twist of her lips. It was bittersweet, the only way to describe it. It was a sad look. “I...” She shook her head, and then there was a small smile that crept across her lips. “I had this fantasy on my way here.” She took a breath, “I knew you would be resistant. I was when my marriage was decided. But I thought maybe I could find something we both enjoyed, some way to bond and find some common ground to stand upon.” She let out a chuckle at herself, “The fantasy was that you and I would actually be fast friends. When you were a girl, you were not scared of anything. Or at least your curiosity overruled your fear. Something we shared.”

She paused for a moment, before giving a shake of her head. “Truthfully, in the stories I hear, I see myself a lot. I hoped we would be close.” She let out a long breath, “Unrealistic, even in the best situations. I hope you’ll forgive me – it isn’t something to put on you.”

Mirabelle was a bit confused by the display. It seemed genuine. More than genuine even. She glanced at Coralie with an inquisitive look, and the girl simply gave back a quick nod. It hastily confirmed the sincerity of the woman’s admittance. It was something she didn’t understand, that she couldn’t understand.

“Why?” Mirabelle asked. “Why did you hope?”

“Because, my mother in law is a challenge, but we did connect over dueling.” Tienette gave a soft shake of her head and then looked away to the sea one more time. “It made the transition to a wife much easier for me.” She took a long breath of the sea air and gave a sideways glance across to the young woman. “You don’t believe me.”

"I," Mirabelle started to say something, but she realized she had been blindsided a bit. "I don't know."

"My lady, if I may..." Tienette spoke quietly, "Wyverns have a reputation, often well deserved, but just as often one they cultivate. But we are her Majesty's subjects, just like you. Our worlds are not so different."

"You are monsters."

Tienette laughed at the term and gave a nod. "I see you remember our first meeting. My husband loves nothing more than to play into the stories." She stepped towards the sea. "Why am I called Basilisk?"

Mirabelle didn't say anything.

"You studied us, did you not?"

The girl gave a nod and finally answered. "You are Tienette au Basilic," She swallowed, "You kill with a single glance, more poisonous than the deadliest viper." She paused a moment, glancing across the woman and letting her eyes fall to the blades at her hip. "And you are never without your Fangs."

Tienette nodded and spoke softly. "When you face the Basilisk, you are already dead. To turn towards her is to invite death, as even a single gaze will steal the life from your blood. The only way to win against such a creature is to look away." She took a breath, "Exaggerations, I assure you. I am a competent duelist and have been lucky. I simply never denied the other stories and they grew from there. Do you know what I spend most of my time doing?"

Mirabelle shook her head.

"I handle our estate's books. I make sure that everything runs smoothly. My husband is often dealing with our province's court dealings, so that leaves the day to day things to me. So, I spend a lot of time working with the villages under our care." She smiled to herself. "It is not as glamorous as the claims that I am some great assassin."

Mirabelle just stared for a moment more, saying nothing. With the wind coming in along the coast, she took a breath of the cold sea air and finally relented. "I'm sorry." She said quietly. "I misread your intentions."

"No, you were cautious." Tienette corrected. "A bit prejudiced, yes, but all the same. That is something our people hold higher than most of the other kingdoms. Still, I only want to get to know you. I hope to find some common ground, of course, but perhaps more importantly, I am still a mother. I want to know I've made the right decision for my son."

Mirabelle nodded, speaking softly. "Then, a small dinner tonight? To make up for the others missed."

"That sounds wonderful," Tienette admitted with a little bit of excitement in her tone. "Thank you, lady d'Argent."

The young lady was not sure what to say, and merely let the words lie there with a bow before she turned and headed back to the towers. She looked back after some time, with Coralie following

behind her as close as she could. The air was chilling more as the day pressed on, and she knew that meant more snow would come. Coralie's breath was already beginning to show with each exhalation. It was the sign of a storm, the air continuing to cool despite the day wearing on. She noticed that Tienette had not moved much, though. Instead, she took a seat there on the sand, watching the sea.

The Basilisk would stay there for nearly another hour, before finally heading inside to prepare for their meal, and the young silver lady would return to her quarters to do the same. She began to read a bit more, calling on Coralie to fetch everything they could about the province that Tienette and Valamir oversaw. There were the legends she had always heard of the Wyverns' Nest, but now she needed to know more.

In the stories, the place was under the shadow of the Great Mountains, hidden away and well protected, but with dangers around every turn – from bandits and raiders to monsters and worse. It was described as a scary place, but in looking through the books and scrolls she had been brought, she found the province of her prospective family to be anything but that. Located in the foothills of the Great Mountains, it was a lightly forested region known for crags and rock formations in the hills, but with a lot of fertile valleys thanks to the abundance of streams. To the north, it was bordered by the Great River, and to the south the dense forests of the Rane province.

When she looked up the holdings of the Astier family, she was surprised to find they were on the borders of the Rane province and the Wyls to the East. The couple hamlets and single village in their domain were small. They had a few farms that kept the populous fed and happy, but really it was just a small region with little of import. That was, except for may the road. It was the only Kingdom rode between Rane and Vouivre, and in turn, was the only way to get from the outer provinces and kingdoms to places like Ava by foot. But even then, it was rarely visited, as it was generally faster to travel up the river or by sea. It was just a small, poor, corner of the Republic.

There was a bit of curiosity that climbed into her thoughts as she flipped through the tomes that she had collected, all spread out across the room and opened to their appropriate location. She was used to having to find answers herself, and this was no different. As she searched, she found herself almost disappointed that there was nothing more groundbreaking. For the rest of the day though, she would study up on as much as she could, knowing that nothing would really prepare her in a day, but knowledge of the region would make her meal a little bit easier if nothing else.

As the evening approached, Mirabelle changed into simple dinner attire and went to meet with Tienette. The dinner that night was surprisingly pleasant, if mostly uneventful. The cooks prepared a few light courses for the two, and they sat in a small antechamber and talked. Before the young girl had realized it though, hours had passed and they were still talking. It was mostly of little things, soft conversation designed to be more or less unimportant. It gave some great insights for both though, she found that Tienette was a fan of dry wit, that she painted when she had the spare time, and that she enjoyed snow so long as she was able to just watch it. Apparently, their manor was surrounded by willows, and with light snow, there was little the Marquise found more beautiful. Mirabelle was similar in a lot of ways, though she still was not willing to admit it. More importantly, both women were straightforward and a bit brash.

For the first time, that night, she saw the Marquise as just another woman, though. Despite the fact that she still wore the basilisk mask, she wasn't a monster. She was bound by the same sort of

honor rules. They were odd, in ways, but they did pique her curiosity. So, for the next few days, they would have a meal together and chat. The snows came, and they laid heavy upon the island. Mirabelle was astonished to watch the Marquise walk along the paths of snow so happily each day, and they would trade stories over meals at night. Finally, after a couple of weeks, though. This came to an end. They met again, and while she knew they would leave soon, she found herself not looking forward to that day.

Tienette joined her for a meal that last night, as she had for many days, but seemed quiet at first. Then, as questions bounced back between the two, one question was hung in the air that all of her training and etiquette could not find a polite answer for.

“Do you want to marry my son, Mirabelle?”

There was a long pause. Neither moved or spoke and for that pause neither woman would move or adjust. It was as if time froze with the question.

Finally, “No.” was the word that slipped from the young woman’s lips. She shook her head. “I’m not ready to marry yet, and while I know these things are arranged for me, I...” She sighed. “I don’t know him, or your culture or people.” She shook her head quickly, “I’m sorry.”

“No, that’s the right answer. You’ve never met him.” Tienette spoke softly. She let a lingering sigh escape her lips and then turned away from the young woman. “Would you consider coming and living in our old manor for a year?”

“What? I’m not sure I understand...”

“Traditionally, a woman of marrying age will come live near her husband for a few months.” The Basilisk’s words were calm, “I thought, maybe, if you came early and lived among our people you might not find everything so daunting.” Her head shook softly, and she reached up to adjust her mask for a moment. “You’d be allowed your own support. Your girl, some guards, whoever you like really, could come with you and stay with us for the time. I could keep having meals with you. You could meet my daughter and youngest son. And maybe,” She huffed, “Get to know my fool of a husband when he isn’t living up to his reputation.” She turned back to Mirabelle.

For a moment Mirabelle started to speak, but then her eyes landed on the woman’s fingers. They gently pressed against the bottom of her mask, pressing up and raising it softly. For the first time, she saw the woman’s face. She was, well, normal. There were no monstrous scars, no ethereal or wicked beauty, no disfigured face – she was just a woman. She was, actually, disarming. Her face was rounded softly, with lower cheekbones than most. Her eyes seemed bright and were a striking blue that differentiated her well from the other men and women of her province, but the mask cast shadows and kept such things well hidden. She had a slightly crooked nose too, once you got to where the mask normally rested. She smiled and tilted her head softly to one side before she removed the mask fully and sat it down on the table.

“And if after half a year, still three months out from your marriage, you can let me know if you want to stay or go.” She spoke quietly, “No tricks, no cost to you. Just a promise from one woman to another.” She offered her hands over to her, crossing the table with a warm if nervous smile on her lips.

Mirabelle was astonished. This wasn't something that she had expected, or even really considered. She saw the offered hand, turned up towards her and laying on the table waiting. Her eyes drifted to the mask, and then back to Tienette. She didn't know what to say. "How will you get permission from my father?"

"I'll ask." Was the only reply.

For a moment Mirabelle was terrified about the prospect. She didn't know what to say or what to do. She was scared, and it showed on her face for a time. She didn't know how her father would react, or even if it was something she should do or that she wanted to do. But as she dwelt on the topic for a few more minutes, she finally showed her decision with a slow nod.

"I think I will agree." She said, resting her hands atop Tienette's. "I'd like to see your home. But it will need to wait until after my sister's wedding."

"Of course. Family first." Tienette said giving a quick squeeze to the girl's hand. "Leave everything to me."