

**May I Lead
This Dance**

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D. Moonfire

Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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Chapter 1

Measured

The debutante's best chance to fulfill her purpose as a married woman comes from the debutante balls where the bedame, unmarried woman, is presented before eligible men, besires, from all ages of eighteen to eighty.

—Polistar da Halin, *The Dance of Grace*

Galadin perched on the uncomfortable seat of the tailor's front room and stared into front window display. Four mannequins with formal black suits filled the area but his interest remained fixed on the fifth, an exaggerated female shape made of wood and reeds. The fabric of the mannequin's dress rustled with the wind breezing through the open door and he loved how the sleeves moved like ocean waves.

He wondered what it would feel like if he wore it. A faint smile crossed his lips as he tried to imagine the layers of light material against his skin. Would it be heavy or light? He didn't have breasts, would it sag too much? He wanted to reach out and touch it. To feel it against his naked skin.

"Galadin!"

He jumped at his mother's voice. Turning around, he clasped his hands in his lap. "Yes, Mother?"

“Stop staring like an imbecile at that damn dress and come over here.” She gestured curtly to a platform next to her.

“Sorry,” he said with a blush and got up.

“Don’t say sorry. Men do not say sorry.”

“Sorry.”

She glared but didn’t add anything. After a moment, she snapped her fingers and pointed to the pedestal again.

“He’s fine, Tadame Maran,” said the tailor.

The use of “tadame” was to acknowledge that Maran was a married woman, the ultimate goal of everyone in Tarsan society. For Galadin, he was supposed to work toward being married to a beauty. Then he would be known as a “tasire” while his wife would become a “tadame.”

That wasn’t what he wanted though. When his mother found his journal with his secret fantasies of going, it wasn’t as a besire looking for marriage. However, she missed that in her excitement in hopes of seeing her only son entering High Society.

The tailor clicked his tongue. “Lift your arm a little higher. There, you’ll be just fine.”

He wore a black suit like the ones in the display area but without the jacket. Instead of a tie, he wore a pair of cloth measuring tapes around his neck. The long strips of marked fabric reached down to his belt.

Maran hissed. “No, he isn’t fine. He’s never fine in places like this.”

Quietly, Galadin got up on the platform, turned around, and held out his arms. As much as he dreamed about going to the annual presentation balls, he was rapidly being dragged away from his dreams.

The tailor gave terse instructions as he measured Galadin from wrist to ankle, inseam and even around the neck. His movements were rough, the fingernails digging into

Galadin's sensitive ribs as he worked his way down a notebook filled with measurements.

"What will the young Kasin desire?" asked the tailor.

"Black," his mother answered for Galadin.

"Of course, there is only one color for a true gentleman. Are you interested in a single-breasted jacket? They are quite popular."

His mother pulled a face. "The Kasins are a proper family with respect for the traditional ways." She straightened her back. "We are not people who follow the fashions of the lazy. My son will not be found dead in those... things."

The tailor didn't even pause. Almost everyone in town was a Kasin, that was why the town had their name. He took more directions from Galadin's mother with grace and patience. Her sharp tones didn't even bring a twitch to the old man's face. Throughout the process, neither spoke to Galadin as if he was present.

The effort to keep his arms up began to burn. He lowered them minutely. When his mother glared at him, he forced himself to lift again.

She rolled her eyes and returned to giving the tailor directions.

To distract himself, he gazed around the room but found nothing but somber, strict outfits. None of them were appealing, not a single would invoked even a hint of joy in his heart. He let his gaze drift to what he really wanted, the only bright point in the room, a light blue dress in the window.

A group of women crossed in front of the store. His gaze drifted from the dress to follow them through the window. It was a cluster of mothers and aunts around a pair of young women wearing cream outfits. They were all laughing as they carried bags from clothing stores, boxes of shoes and hats, and even the remains of a lunch.

Galadin knew that young women's role was far more difficult. A presentation was their best chance of finding a husband. They were primed, feathered, and trained for most of their childhoods in hopes of being selected. Starting at age sixteen, they would enter a world of elegant balls, spectator sports, and amazing social events across the entire city as they performed for the eligible bachelors.

Despite all that, he desperately wished he had been born a girl.

"Are you looking at that Couple-damned dress again?" hissed his mother.

Galadin tore his eyes away guilty and pointedly stared at one of the suits. It was nice, but he dreaded wearing it. Whenever he thought about the somber outfits that his mother wanted him to wear, it was as if he was looking at someone in the suit, not him looking out.

"Answer me."

"No, Mother."

She glared at him. "Get down, we're done."

Turning to the tailor, she held out her hand.

He kissed it lightly, his lips skimming the surface. "Always a pleasure, Maran da Kasin ho Kamer."

The tailor had used her formal name, identifying her father's family of Kasin and her mother's of Kamer.

Maran guided her son out of the store and down the street in a brisk pace. "You need to stop staring at the dresses and start focusing on the women inside them. You are a young gentleman now. You need to act like it."

Galadin followed and said nothing.

"Come on, you are late for your dance lessons."

Chapter 2

Dance Lessons

At the presentation, every step is planned. The choices of dance speak of the politics of the day. The order of the suitors is reflected in the ebb and flow of power.

—Renard Robins-Grace, *Musings of a Failed Society*

Dame Dorin's School of Dance was a small studio on the corner of Apple and Oak. It used to have a reputation of being a great school but time and scandal had whittled away at its reputation to nothing more than an old building with too much paint and creaking floors. However, Dorin's lessons were still cherished and her price low enough for those seeking to enter High Society.

Galadin had been training for a month now. Dame Dorin's teaching style was brusque but effective. She had precise ideas of where the hands, feet, and hips all went to ensure a courtly dance in synchrony with everyone else on the floor.

His mother stopped at the entrance. She looked up at a nearby clock tower and hissed between her teeth. "I'm late to arrange for a carriage. Go inside and behave."

"Yes, Mother."

She gave him a perfunctory kiss on his cheek before crossing the street.

Galadin watched her until a trio of mechanical vehicles roared pass, obscuring everything in a cloud of sharp-tasting steam. He turned and headed up the stairs.

“Gal! Wait for me!”

At the sound of Kalir’s voice, Galadin smiled to himself. He and Kalir had met on the first day of their lessons at Dorin.

About the same age as Galadin, Kalir was a fit young man who had a promising future. He also had a smile that caused Galadin’s stomach to flutter and his cheeks to blush.

Galadin turned around.

Kalir wore a leather jacket with an embossed symbol of the Tarsan Navy. Unlike Galadin who was to marry up into High Society, Kalir had already gotten his foot past the threshold with a letter of commission as a junior officer. He had to be married before he gained more than a few ranks and the presentation balls were the best place to find a wife.

Galadin smiled brightly. Dance lessons next to Kalir were one of the highlights of his day.

“How are you doing?” asked Galadin. “Usually you beat me here.”

“Well, I want to claim Missun’s hand before you got your fingers on her. I’m sure she has eyes for slender, delicate men like you.”

Galadin shrugged. Missun and her sisters were attractive, but they didn’t fan any flames. “You can dance with whoever you want.”

“But she’s the prettiest.”

He couldn’t explain that he had no interest in either of the girls that took classes with them. They were nice and friendly, but he didn’t find his eyes drifting toward them

when they weren't looking, not like Kalir did. Instead, it was Kalir that drew Galadin's sly attention.

"You can have Talin," Kalir said patted Galadin's shoulder. "She's pretty enough."

Kalir ran his hand through his thick hair and smiled.

Galadin blushed faintly. Then a surge of guilt rose inside Galadin and he looked away. He cleared his throat to distract himself. "Usually you beat me here" before he realized he had already said that.

"I got distracted and almost forgot to show up." Kalir glanced over his shoulder as a second man started up the stairs. "I almost didn't come."

The newcomer was just over six feet tall and gorgeous. He had a casual grace as he walked up the stairs, his hands buried deep in a pair of plain but functional-looking trousers. He had an open navy jacket, not unlike the one Kalir wore, but it had the insignia of a First Lieutenant and a single gold bar underneath it. The new man shared Kalir's smile, but somehow it was brilliant and stunning, refined by age and confidence.

Galadin's throat grew dry. He was standing in front of a fantasy.

Kalir twisted his face into a scowl and gestured to the door. "Come on, we're late."

The other man chuckled and then gestured for Galadin to go ahead through the narrow door. He had large hands that were heavily tanned, no doubt from hours in the sun.

Galadin stared at him for a moment, a strange fluttering growing in his stomach. "Um, I'm Galadin."

"Benard, Kalir's older brother. Though I think I'm also the more heroic one at the moment." He smirked. "I like saying that part."

Kalir glared before storming inside and slamming the door behind him.

Benard grinned. "I'm afraid my younger brother doesn't care for me. Whenever I'm around, he's sour toward everyone else because he isn't allowed to slug me. Don't take it personally. I think he doesn't like me anymore."

"Oh," Galadin said before he headed up the stairs. "Why?"

"Probably the same reason most of my family hates me: I prefer the company of men in my bed instead of women." Benard waved his hand nonchalantly.

Galadin froze when he heard words that reflected his own thoughts only moments ago. Love between men was forbidden which is why Galadin kept his own desires hidden. To hear it spoken casually and openly shocked him. Whatever Benard had done to be a hero obviously gave him the confidence to be open with his forbidden interests.

"I'm just tired of keeping it a secret and messing around. That is why they sent me to the Navy, to keep their dirty secret hidden. But then I had to go and save a ship." He grinned and shoved his hand back into his pocket.

"I-I..." Galadin stammered.

Benard reached around Galadin. His arm brushed against Galadin before he caught the handle and pulled it open. "Here, let me."

A waft of his cologne, a musky scene with a hint of cedar washed over Galadin. It smelled good. It also set off a rapid beating of Galadin's heart.

Nervous, Galadin look at him with confusion. He wanted to ask questions, starting with "why?"

The naval officer inclined his head and then smiled, his lips curling and drawing Galadin's attention. "Don't worry, it isn't contagious."

"No... I... I didn't think... sorry."

Benard gestured again. "Please, don't worry about it. Let's enjoy an afternoon of tripping over our feet instead?"

“Okay,” Galadin said in a distracted voice. He felt hot and dizzy. His stomach fluttered as he mulled over Benard’s words.

Inside the studio, Dame Dorin paced back and forth. Her neat bun of light brown hair had a few strands peeking out like a fan. “Three, only three? I can’t work with only three gentlemen. Why couldn’t at least some of the ladies come? They can’t all be indisposed.”

Kalir looked disappointed. He turned and peered out a nearby window toward the street.

Dorin grumbled for a moment. “They aren’t coming, Be-sire Kalir. They appear to have a case of... bad food and are too sick to learn how to dance. Damn the Couple, I can’t reschedule this. There are far too many lessons before the balls.”

Benard stepped up next to Galadin. His body heat and scent washed over Galadin again, sending little flutters from their closeness. “Then you be one of the partners.”

She narrowed a glare at him. “You should have stayed on the sea like a man of your...” Her eyes scanned him over. “... nature.”

He shrugged and smiled. “I earned this, Dame. You know that.”

She stared at him for a moment. Galadin could see her resolve cracking.

“We can switch leads, it’s better than nothing. You and I trade places with the boys.” He had a smirk that Galadin couldn’t tear his eyes away from.

“That is improper.” She turned on him. “You might think it is fond idea, but I will not allow you to—”

Benard interrupted her with a grin. “Blame me then. That’s how I got here, isn’t it? By the way, how are your brothers? I heard they just got out of hospital.”

She took a deep breath and let it out, her body shaking with the effort to calm down. When she spoke, her voice was calmer. “You don’t have to remind me how you earned that commission, besire. Or that you saved them.”

He inclined his head but said nothing.

Galadin frowned as he looked back and forth.

“Not more than a few minutes at a time, I don’t want you giving them any foul ideas.” She pointed accusingly at him. “And no touching where you aren’t supposed to.”

Kalir held up his hands. “I’m not dancing with... my brother. I’m not the girl!”

She almost lost her temper. “Fine, you dance with me.” She pointed at Benard. “Start with Galadin and switch roles. I’ll give directions to all three of you.”

Galadin’s heart beat faster. He turned to his new partner. His throat felt dry and constricted. He wanted to reach out and touch him, to feel the rough skin on his fingertips. No girl had ever made him feel that way and he felt foolish for not realizing it.

Benard smiled warmly and gave a little bow. His smile was hard to look away from. He seemed more comfortable with himself than anyone Galadin had known, as if he had chosen his body and wore it like a well-tailored suit.

Galadin felt a little jealousy. He didn’t feel the same about his body. It was wrong, it didn’t fit. He couldn’t say why, only that he was uncomfortable inside his own skin.

“Now, the first dance we’re going to do the Fox Square,” announced Dorin. “Start with Galadin and Kalir in the lead. Lift your right hand up, palm up...”

Chapter 3

Decision

Skilled mages are the cornerstone of a family's reputation. While they are arguable insane to talk to, they pull more than their weight for the greater good of society.

—Lanister da Dusen ho Gason

Galadin had to concentrate on his dinner for the first time. His mind spun furiously with all the rules of how to hold his fork, where to put his hand, and even where he was allowed to look. There seemed to be exceptions to every rule.

His mother had insisted on a formal dinner arrangement at home. Galadin could see how she held her utensils with exaggerated care. He suspected the last time she ate formally, it was before she married his father. More than once, he saw her reach for the wrong fork only to change her mind and pick up the correct one.

On the other side of the table, his father worked his way through his meal efficiently and without grace. He used the same fork and knife, shoving the rest of them to the side as he stared down at the table in concentration. His other hand moved in gestures that mimicked the symbols he used for his job as a civil mage.

“How were the lessons today?” asked his mom.

“Good.” He thought about Benard’s hand against his own. He could remember how the firm grip guided him from one step to the other, commanding but not demanding. He smiled.

“I heard the Tifin girls were sick.”

“They were. We had to use each other as partners.” He thought about Benard’s body next to his and found himself struggling with an erection. He cleared his throat and brought his hand under the table to adjust his napkin.

His mother’s grip on her fork tightened. “Really?” she said in a wary tone.

“Dame Dorin da Kasin watched over all three of us.”

His father stirred and leaned toward Galadin’s mother. “I thought there were only two boys and three girls in the class.”

His mother glared at him.

“What? I was paying attention,” his father said with a wry smile.

“There were.” She turned back to Galadin. “Who was the third? The dame?”

“No, um, his name was...” Galadin knew he was stalling but couldn’t let her know. “Benard kia Kasin.”

His mother’s face paled. “No,” she said. “Not him.”

Looking up, his father stared at the ceiling for a second before resuming.

“What?” asked Galadin.

“No, you don’t do that. Storan, he can’t do that.”

“Who? Take lessons with Benard? Why not? He’s a Kasin hero.” His father shrugged. “He just granted a commission. Something about saving a fleet from some fire mages? Made First Lieutenant on the spot. They’ve been talking about that for days down at the dock office.”

“That’s beside the point! Your son cannot dance with that man!”

Storan shrugged. His eyes glazed over and he began to trace imaginary sigils in the air.

“Storan! Don’t you dare drift away.”

His father ignored her.

Maran folded her napkin into her lap. “Then I’m going to pull you from those lessons. You are good enough for the ball. As long as you don’t stumble on your feet, you’ll find a wife.”

She took a short breath. “Besides, we need to get you fitted for a proper top hat next week. Tomorrow, your suit should be done. We will deal with that.”

Galadin fought back a wave of disappointment. Everything else reminded him that he was being forced into a role he didn’t want. Why did he have to go to the dance in a suit? Why did he have to find a woman?

Benard was the only thing he enjoyed about the day. His pulse quickened at the memory of feeling Benard’s palm against his own, the way the stronger man would twirl him around as they danced together.

His mother pointedly look at her husband. “Well?”

Storan didn’t look up.

“You are useless,” she announced before storming away from the table.

Galadin watched her leave, the edge of her maroon dress catching on the corner before being pulled into the hall. He remembered the touch of the fabric, it was rough but delicate at the same time, like how silk changed when he brushed it one way verses another.

He sighed. Tomorrow would be more of the same. He dreaded getting fitted for the suit as much as the idea of wearing it.

Galadin pushed himself up. “I’m going to bed.”

His father grunted and continued to draw in the air.

Dejected, Galadin left the plates for the cook and headed after his mother.

“Gal?” His father’s low voice stopped him.

Galadin turned to see him no longer drawing. “Yes, Father?”

“You can say ‘no,’ you know.”

“What? Say ‘no’ to what?” He was confused, but that described most of his father’s conversations. Being a mage changed how he saw the world.

“You’re becoming a man. No matter what your mother says, you are the one who chooses what type you’ll become.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

His father smiled. “I know. Just remember it. Whatever you choose, no matter what path you take, I will support you. Even against the furies of the storm itself.” He winked. “I’m talking about your mother, that is.”

Galadin stared at his father who returned to his thoughts. Nothing he said made any sense, yet at the same time, it felt comforting. He dismissed it as the musings of a mage who didn’t quite see the world the same.

With a muttered thanks, he returned to his room.

Chapter 4

Revelation

As a patriarchy, the gender roles in Tarsan are very strict, more so with High Society events and those that dance with the founding families.

—*Death Among High Society*

At the prick of the pin, Galadin flinched and let out a grunt.

“Be quiet,” snapped his mother. She sat in one of the chairs along the side of the fitting area, her back straight and her hands neatly folded over her purse.

“Arms up, please,” said the tailor.

Galadin closed his eyes and obeyed. His shoulders and back hurt from the last hour of being fitted. The heavy black cloth hung over his frame like a horse blanket, dragging him down and making him claustrophobic. He wanted to rip it off and run away, or at least return to his own outfit.

The tailor worked quietly. He was almost done. “Only another few minutes, besire.”

His mother glanced up, a smile ghosting across her lips. “You look handsome, Gal.”

He opened his eyes.

“You are going to make some wife very happy after all this. Just remember that. Once you are married, then you don’t have to wear it again.”

Galadin focused his attention on the window. For the third day of the week, the afternoon was relatively quiet. He hoped to see more debutantes walking by. At least then he could pull himself out the dark thoughts that haunted his mind.

“Galadin.”

He didn’t want to answer. “I’m just waiting, Mother.”

He heard the rustle of her dress. He glanced over to see her lifting the edge of her skirt to walk over. He returned his attention to the window.

“Give us a minute?” she asked the tailor.

“Of course, Dame da Kasin.” The man bowed before heading toward the back. “Please, call me when you are ready.”

Galadin listened to the door creak shut and then latch. He fought the sick feeling in his stomach.

She stared at him with a hard look. He could hear her foot tapping through the pedestal. “What’s wrong you? I need you to be present.”

“I’m here, Mother.”

“Yes, your body is but your mind has gone on a voyage. Why?”

“I’m here. That’s what you want.”

“Look at me.” When he didn’t, she repeated herself with a stamp of her foot.

Galadin lowered his arms as he regarded his mother. “Yes?”

“What is wrong with you? You’ve been acting like I’m sending you to prison all week.” She shook her head and gestured toward the door. “No, you’ve been like this ever since you asked to go the presentation balls.”

“Yes but...” Even as a child, he had always wanted to go to the presentation balls. He loved the ritual of them, the pronouncements, the swirl of dresses, and all the events that surrounded the pomp of suitors and debutantes. But when he wrote in his secret journal, he wasn’t the suited man finding the perfect woman, he was the woman looking for a suitor.

His mother had somehow found his book despite his efforts to hide it underneath his bed. She must have skimmed over it before she decided to fulfill her version of his fantasy. Galadin first found out when she surprised him with a formal invitation, something that was just above their family’s position in society. He didn’t know how she got it, only that it must have cost his parents to get it.

She gestured for him to continue.

He sighed. “I do want to go,” he said lamely knowing it wasn’t quite the truth.

“You... is that it, you don’t want to go now? After everything we’ve done? This is the best—”

His chest felt tight but he had to speak up. “I... I know, Mother. I know what you’ve both had to do to get me here.”

“Then what is it? You’ll have a handsome suit, the best outfits. I even have a carriage service arranged. You are going to be stunning and find a beautiful wife.” Her voice had softened. “That is what you want, trust me. You are going to have a life neither that I couldn’t have, a life in High Society.”

It wasn’t what he wanted. What he wanted was to feel the dress on his skin, to be surrounded by a loving family going from one place to the other, to have his name announced to society as an eligible debutante. What he wish was that he had been born a girl, not a boy.

“No,” snapped his mother. She smacked his thigh.

Galadin paled. He didn't realize he said that out loud. Looking down, he saw fury painted on his mother's face. "Mother—"

She slapped him. "No son of mine will ever be that!"

It felt like she had kicked him in the testicles. He let out a sob and sat down heavily on the pedestal. "I-I don't know how to explain it. I don't want to be a besire."

She stepped back, one hand on her chest and her face paling.

"I like the dresses. I want... I think they feel better than this... this... thing." He hefted up the pieces of his suit.

"Is it just the material? I can have him change it. If you want anything, just tell me. Please?" There were tears in her eyes as she held out her hand. "Please? Just tell me."

Sniffing, Galadin knew that she would do it. A thousand jems would mean nothing if he did what she wanted. But it still wouldn't be what his heart wanted. He thought about his father's words from the night before. If he wanted to be happy, he had to make the choices for his life. Heart pounding and his stomach twisting, he spoke quickly, "I don't want to wear a suit, Mother. It doesn't matter how it's made, it's the suit itself. It's the role that I don't want."

He gulped and gestured to himself. "It's this body that I don't want. I want to have one that fits in a dress."

"But... a dress? Why? Why would you do that to me?"

He glanced at the blue dress in the front. He worked his mouth while shaking his head. He pointed to it and then to a debutante walking in front of the glass with her mother. "That's me. That's what I want."

"No." Maran shook her head. "No! I will not allow it!"

"I—"

She snapped up her hand to block him.

He grew silent.

She turned away for a moment, sniffing. When she looked back, there were tears in her eyes. “Why? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, I... I’ve always wanted—”

“You don’t know what you want!” She grabbed her purse. “Get dressed now, we’re leaving before you embarrass your entire family with your fantasies!”

D. Moonfire

Chapter 5

Plans

Maril took the charge of the hunt. His cries led the other besires in the most glorious of hunts, none of them wiser to the womanhood inside his breeches.

—*The Lady's Consort*

Galadin's mother stormed into the house, slamming the door as she entered. The magical lock sparked as the door swung back. "Damn you, Stanton! This is all your fault!"

Galadin winced and continued after her. He felt sick to his stomach and his eyes burned with tears. He didn't mean to tell her that he wanted to wear a dress to the ball, but a part of him was glad that it had finally been brought into the open. His mother's fury, on the other hand, was exactly what he feared.

The carriage ride back home could have been through a frozen wasteland. She had said nothing. When he tried to speak, she had silenced him with a glare or a hiss.

Inside, his father looked up from his working desk in the living room. He still wore his normal suit and tie, even when he remained at home for the day. He seemed unperturbed by his wife stomping in front of him.

“I told you! I told you that would happen if he was near that... that... Benard! That monster turned my baby into a sissy!” She raised her hand to strike him.

Stanton looked up at her palm, his face impassive.

Maran swung her hand.

To Galadin’s surprise, his father leaned into the strike.

Her palm caught his cheek. The crack of flesh on flesh caused Galadin to flinch.

Silence.

Then Stanton looked up at her. “Feel better?” he said as if he was tucking her into the couch.

“No, I don’t!” she screamed. Her hand lifted to strike again but didn’t come down. “I hate it when you do that!”

“Then hit me again.” He winked at her. “Harder this time.”

She sank to her knees. “I can’t,” she sobbed. “You know that.”

His father slid out of his chair and joined her on the floor. He pulled her into a tight hug.

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder and sobbed. “My baby. What is wrong with my baby?”

Galadin inched into the room. There were tears in his eyes. Guilt hummed inside him, guilt that there was something wrong and regret that he wanted something he couldn’t have. He knew that she was in pain, but he couldn’t tell her he would be the man she wanted. He couldn’t. It felt like a dam had burst and he had a chance. He caught his father’s gaze. “I’m sorry, Father.”

Stanton gave him an impassive look, one of innocent confusion that he wore when fighting or when someone was emotional near him. “For what?”

He wanted to say he would go back to the tailor to get the suit fitted but he couldn’t. It felt like a horrible lie, as if he had to shove his true self back into a box just to make his

mother happy. He sniffed and shook his head. "I... I can't. I want—"

"No, you don't," his father said.

"What?"

"You are who you are. You haven't magically changed from a week ago. You are the same person who had dinner with us a year ago. Your realization of your needs has simply grown, day by day, year by year."

Galadin stared at his dad in shock.

His mother looked up at him. "How can you say that? After everything we've done?"

"After what you've done," Stanton corrected her. "I remember the first day you saw him differently. You were in tears because you caught Galadin trying on that little girl's dress. He always wanted to wear his cousin's dresses and skirts, remember?"

His mother sniffed. "You remember that?"

Stanton kissed the top of her head. "I'm always paying attention, you know that."

"What do we do?"

"Well, first we talk as if our child is in the room." He looked up at Galadin. "And then we ask how you want to move forward."

Galadin gasped. Blindly, he reached out for a chair. When he caught it, he found his legs wouldn't move.

"Have you figured out you like men? Or do you still think you just prefer to wear dresses?"

An image of Benard rose up followed by a sudden heat across his cheeks. The world spun around Galadin again. He tried to sit in the chair but missed. His hip caught on the wooden arm before he sat heavily on the ground. "You knew?"

Stanton shrugged. "As I said, I'm always paying attention. I also know you can't force someone to be someone else.

Wishes, dreams, and actions will never speed up the process either. I didn't think you knowing that I guessed would have helped; either you would have raged against it or threw yourself into the role too fast."

"Maybe I would have not felt like a monster," whispered Galadin.

His father's face cracked, a sadness crossing over it. "I did not consider that."

His mother sobbed. "No, no. I can't do this."

"Really, Love? Does your child's happiness mean so little to you?"

She looked up at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. "How can you say that? It's my son! I love him."

"Enough to let him live his own life?"

"N-No. Yes! Damn you!" She punched his arm but it was a weak blow.

Stanton shrugged again. "You accept or you fight, those are you only two choices. You already know I struggle with this world and talking to people. That's who I am and I can't change that." He cupped her chin with his finger. "You knew what I was when we met so many years."

She let out a choked sob. "You were such a pile of shit when we first married."

"I'll admit, you weren't the most pleasant of flowers either. Yet, here we are. Your pile of shit." He wiped the tears from underneath her eyes.

"How can I do this? How can I pretend he's a girl."

"Because we're parents, Love. Our child needs this."

"But, he's a boy."

His father smiled to his wife. "That is mutable, that can be changed. We can pull favors. My mother might take a bit of convincing after getting that invitation but I'm sure all three of us can convince her. We make a new list, find new

instructors, get a dress.” He smiled broadly. “Coordination is something I’m very good at doing.”

She sniffed as the tears rolled down her cheeks. “Just like that?”

He kissed her on the nose, and then on the brow. “When we held our child, we said we would move the world, right?”

Galadin realized that he wasn’t part of the conversation, but he was also on the edge of losing his own emotions. His father, though confusing to understand, seemed to have done exactly what he said, he took on the fury of his mother. He staggered to his feet and inched out of the room, never taking his eyes away from his parents.

As soon as he could, he spun and race up the stairs. His throat seized up as a sob of his own threatened to tear out. He shook with the effort to keep it bottled in. He managed to make his room before he lost it. The cry rose out of his throat, a terrifying mixture of fear and relief.

He had a chance to be what he wanted.

Now that he had it, he wasn’t sure if he could go through with it.

Burying his face in his pillows, he let the tears flow.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 6

Ladies' Fashions

Tarsan favors the golden locks as a sign of purity. The longer, brighter, and more brilliant, the more desirable. However, poorly manipulated strands can easily bring revile and scandal to even the most exalted of debutantes.

—*Tears of the Rejected Beauty* (Act 1, Scene 5)

Their carriage came to a rattling stop in front of a relatively nondescript storefront with a crowded display area filled with feathered hats, a milliner's. Galadin leaned against the side and peered at the darkened store wondering why they had stopped.

Outside, rain splattered loudly across the carriage, drumming across the wooden roof until it rolled down the glass in crystalline rivulets and splashed to the cobblestones. Below, garbage floated past in a stately procession.

He nervously glanced around the other windows. The rest of the surrounding buildings were clothiers, milliners, and shoemakers. It didn't look or smell like the docks. He leaned back with a soft sigh of relief.

Society had a way of pushing away the undesirables. Bernard was one example, gay men were frequently pushed

into the navy to keep the family's reputation secure. Many of them never returned, either by choice or dying.

When his mother demanded a late night carriage, he was afraid that was his own fate.

"Are you sure about this?"

Galadin jumped at his mother's sudden question. He looked to see her sitting primly on her bench. Her straight back revealed her discomfort. She didn't want to be there.

He knew she wanted him to agree to go back, to pretend to be a man for her sake. It didn't feel like an option anymore, he finally had a chance and his heart ached for the chance.

She glanced at him, her eyes red-rimmed. "Why are you doing this to me?" Her low voice cracked.

Galadin cringed. "I'm not doing this to hurt you."

"But every time you follow your father's foolish plan, it feels like you are stabbing me with a knife." She rested her fingers on her left breast to illustrate.

He stared to his lap and blushed. The last few days had been a whirlwind of activity, terrifying in how fast everything was moving, scary in how much was left unknown, but also exhilarating. It was the promise that kept him going, the hint of seeing a life that he didn't think was possible.

Maran gave an exasperated sigh. "If you do this, you can't ever go back. We can't pretend that I suddenly have a daughter, then have her disappear again when it turns sour. Once this happens, then you have to disappear."

He tensed. She was talking about being forced into the navy or sent out to the country estates. In either case, he wouldn't be able to return home.

Galadin thought about Benard and a hint of a smile crossed his lips. There were ways back, though he would never be as handsome as Benard.

Wiping the smile from his face, he nodded. "I know."

"I-I could lose you, Gal. Forever. Do you understand?"

He nodded again, blushing as he stared at his lap. Then, screwing his courage, he looked up and said, "Please? I want this. I need it more than anything I have needed before."

Tears burned in his eyes. He sniffed and wiped them with the back of his hand.

His mother spoke in her low voice, "This is the final chance to—"

Someone knocked on the door.

Both of them jumped.

Outside, a man with a bowler stood outside. He peered inside. "Maran and Galadin von Kasins?" He had a low, rumbling voice. Despite wearing a black suit that fit his broad shoulders perfectly, he had the appearance of a sailor with a deep tan and weathered lines on his face. His appearance reminded Galadin of Benard, though the new man was much older than Benard not any less attractive.

Maran sighed and shot a glare at Galadin before she unlatched the door. "Last chance. You don't have to do this."

The other man opened the door with a bow. "Good evening, I am Kendrick bo Martin hio Kasin. I was sent out to escort you to the Tadame Lily bo Martin."

Galadin was surprised, it was rare for someone to leave the Kasin family to join another family and yet still remain within the city. The "bo" indicated that there was something about Kendrick and Lily that made them desirable to both families.

The rattle of rain suddenly stopped. Galadin looked around the carriage in surprise. It continued to pour down everywhere including the top of the carriage, only the area around Kendrick was still.

Galadin's mother sighed dramatically. "Come on."

She allowed Kendrick to help her out.

When it was his turn, Galadin hesitated. It was tradition to have a man help a woman out of carriages. He held out his hand and then pulled it back, unsure of how to ask.

Kendrick smiled and kept his hand held out.

Galadin held his breath. When Kendrick winked, he hesitatingly placed his fingertips along the broad palm and let himself be drawn out. The little action brought a thrill coursing through his veins. It felt good, it felt right.

Kendrick led both of Galadin and his mother down the block to the only store that still had lights on. The front was filled with elegant dresses with matching hats and shoes. They were arrayed in a rainbow of colors. The graduation from yellow to purple was almost perfect.

Lily bo Martin hio Kasin

An Emporium of Fabrics and Colors

Comprehensive Coordinator of Ladies' Fashions

There wasn't a single suit on display. Galadin stared in shock, his mouth opening slowly as he stared at beautiful dresses. He could feel a sob of joy rising up in his throat.

"Get inside before anyone sees you," muttered his mother.

Galadin ducked his head and went inside.

Two women greeted him. One was slender with blonde hair so brilliant it looked white and an elegant dress that made Galadin instantly jealous. He could have sworn he was looking at one of the many pictures that hung on the ball walls. She was almost exactly what Galadin fantasized about becoming.

The second woman was fat and just as beautiful. Her dress threatened to burst along her bust and hips. The deep

valley of her cleavage no doubt drawing the attention of any man nearby. Her wide hips swayed with her steps as she came up to Galadin and his mother. "Welcome to Lily's. I'm Mindil da Kasin ho Pavin."

Maran pulled a face and jerked her attention to the side. "Lily?"

Lily, the slender blonde, inclined her head and smiled. "A pleasure to meet you, Maran da Kasin de Kamer."

"Thank you for staying open past your normal hours. If it wasn't a delicate matter, I wouldn't have asked. I do ask that you exercise discretion in dealing with my son."

Lily glanced at Galadin. "You mean your daughter?"

Galadin flinched.

Maran's lips tensed. "He... Galadin wants to attend the ball as a debutante instead of a proper besire. I have decided that he gets a week, the third week of the Season, to see if it works out."

Galadin flushed. He glanced at the door to the store and wondered how far he would make it before someone caught him. A tremor coursed along his hands as he pressed his palms to his side.

Lily smiled broadly. "Of course."

Galadin breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

His mother took a deep breath of her own. "I am willing to go along with this deception but I'm not entirely happy with his desires. I am willing to pay a premium for your discretion. I heard that you..." She paused as her lips tightened again. "... understood the need for silence."

"Of course, Dame Maran. I am nothing but discrete."

Mindil smiled, her lips curling broadly as she glanced at Kendrick.

"Whatever you can do to make him less of an embarrassment would be appreciated."

Galadin blushed hotly.

The smile on Lily's lips didn't move. She gestured to the back room. "Why don't we get you measured. Mindil? Please get the dame a bottle of the Kaber '32? I heard that she enjoys that vintage."

Maran looked surprised. A bit of the frown on her lips faded as she let Mindil lead her to the comfortable-looking chairs in the front. She shot one last look at Galadin before sinking down.

Lily gestured for Galadin toward a door in the back of the store. "And what would you like to be called?"

"G-Galadin" he answered automatically and then realized she had asked a different question than he expected. "I... the invitation was for Glorias. My father... helped me pick the name."

She didn't seem to hesitate, not even a twitch in her smile. Her arm slipped around his waist and gently guided him through the door. "Oh, that's a lovely name. Are you planning on going as a girl or a boy dressed as a girl? There are subtle differences in how I cut your dress."

The door closed behind them with a click, separating him from his mother. They were in a room filled with fabrics, dress forms, and large tables. A bottle of wine misted on a table along with four glasses. There was also a small tray of crackers, cheese, and fruits.

He stopped in shock, stunned by a second question in a row that came easily off her lips. She didn't seem bothered by Galadin's desires at all. The answer was easier though, he had been thinking about it for most of his life. "I want to be a girl. I've always wanted to be one."

It was a rush to finally say it, to hear it echo against the walls.

"That won't be a problem, Beautiful. Since this is new, do you want me to walk you through everything on my side?"

Your mother may have just said a week, but the payment she had delivered was for the rest of the Social Season.”

Galadin looked in surprise.

“Are there others involved?”

“M-My father and his mother. And Tadame Potsur down on Ash Street, she’s teaching me how to dance as a girl. I don’t think anyone else knows. We haven’t really figured out everything.”

Lily guided Galadin to a corner. There was a simple cream dress hanging from a bar. “Well, I’ve been hired to handle all of your fashion. With everything going on, we are going to focus on you entering the events during the third week. This year, the color that week is Dawn on the Summer Sea, which is a lovely green color. As a debutante, your dress will be mostly cream but the green will be used for accents, shoes, hat, and trim.”

As she spoke, she ran her hand along a red ribbon. A green spread out from her fingertip, running like paint. In seconds, the entire ribbon had changed color to match.

Galadin looked in surprise.

“We all have talents. I’m good at color. Mindil will ensure that you and I can talk in privacy. In fact, anything you say will remain in here unless you decide to share it. Do you have a talent?”

Every adult had a magical talent of some sort. His father had one of the rarest, the ability to channel magic into spells that could do almost anything. For the bulk of the population including his mother, magic was more focused into a single ability such as his mother’s ability to clean anything with a touch.

“I don’t.”

“It will come, it always does. Mine came out when a duel two men were having over me set fire to my mother’s house.”

Galadin's jaw opened in shock.

Lily winked. "Don't worry, both Kendrick and Hasan have apologized many times."

"K-Kendrick? The man outside?"

She smiled happily. "My husband. Hasan is Mindil's. It was a journey though, but in the end, no matter how painful it was, it brought me great joy."

Lily hugged him lightly. "I have no doubt that yours will be the same."

Nervous and blushing, Galadin reached out for the dress. "Do I need to wear this?" It was light and airy. He loved how it felt along his fingertips.

"It's a fitting gown. Light material but transparent. That's why you are back here alone. It will help me make measurements but give you some..." Her voice trailed off when she looked at Galadin stroking it. "Do you want to put it on?"

"I-I can?" He gripped the fabric and tugged on it.

"It will make it easier to measure you. Don't worry, just go behind that screen and change."

Galadin's heart pounded in his chest as he stepped behind the screen. He shook while he stripped down, pulling off his masculine clothes and carefully folding them on a small table. Clad only in his small clothes, he rubbed the delicate fabric of the dress for a long moment before pulling it own.

At the sensation of the delicate touch on his skin, he let out a moan of desire. His fantasies were coming true and it felt right to feel it settle over his shoulders and tickle his thighs. It was shorter than he expected but felt good.

Nervous, he paused to catch his breath. His cheeks were burning and tears blurred his vision. He tugged on it, pulling it one way and then the other.

"Come on," Lily said in an encouraging voice.

Embarrassed, Galadin inched out from behind the screen.

Lily handed him a glass of a pale wine. “You look beautiful.”

Galadin glanced at his hairless chest, the flatness of his skin caused the front of the fitting gown to sag. There was also nothing in the hips, no flare or narrowness. “It doesn’t fit very well.”

“Thankfully,” Lily said with a grin, “I’m very good at fixing that. Come on, over to the mirror.”

This time, as Galadin stood up on the platform in front of the mirror, it wasn’t a feeling of dread that filled his body. It was excitement and hope. He smiled and wiped the tears from his eyes.

“There’s a pretty lady,” Lily said. She had measuring tape coiled over her shoulder and one around her neck. It was similar to the tailor, almost surreal, but a world of difference to Galadin.

Lily started with Galadin’s left arm, measuring everything from the length of his fingers to the distance between his wrist and elbow. As she did, she asked light questions about the designs that Galadin liked, the patterns and styles that caught his attention.

He could answer clumsily at first. He didn’t have the names but she seemed to understand what he wanted. But after a while it was easier just to picture what he wanted and describe that.

When she started to measure his neck, she stopped to brush along his short, brown hair. “Do you want to change this?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Short isn’t really common in High Society.”

He sighed. “I know, and neither is brown.”

Lily smiled brilliantly. She ran her hand through the short strands and color began to flow through them. In a matter of seconds, he had a head full of honey brown.

Galadin's knees felt weak. He thought about the stories in his journal, his illustrations of his ideal body if he had been born a girl instead of a boy. "Any color?"

"Of course, I am the comprehensive coordinator."

"Could you do brighter? Like Suar de Pun?"

Lily's eyebrow raised. "Suar's? About fifteen years ago?"

He thought about one of the paintings he had walked into as a younger child. It was a beautiful image that stole his heart away and started the longing.

"*A Dance Among the Swans and Roses*. I always loved that painting, I have a copy of it in my journal."

"A very beautiful choice." As Lily spoke, Galadin's hair turned to a bright blond with a few platinum streaks. "I recall that she had a gorgeous dress in that painting. Would you like me to make something like that?"

Galadin couldn't talk. He lifted his hand to his hair and stroked it along his fingers. He felt hot and tingly across his entire body as he imagined himself dancing in the famous painting. His eyes blurred for a moment and he almost swayed.

"We'll have to get your hair lengthen to pull that out. I have a discrete friend over on Bone Flower's Road that will do that."

He didn't say anything as he pictured the painting and himself. Everything was happening faster than he expected as he rushed toward his fantasy instead of away from it.

Another tremor coursed through his body for a moment, a shiver of anticipation and flush of excitement.

Lily lifted up her measuring tape again "I promise you, by the time you show up at that ball, you are going to steal the show."

Chapter 7

Dysphoria

The image painted inside the eyes can be more vivid and descriptive than the pale illustration outside.

—*Queen of Ice and Salt* (Act 1, Scene 4)

Galadin stared at the mirror with tears in his eyes. Helplessly, he ran his hand through the long blond hair that now flowed down his back. The color and length was perfect in every way, except that now it looked like an uncomfortable boy wearing a wig instead of the beautiful woman he hoped would have come out in the last few days.

He didn't want to be a boy in a dress. He wanted to be a lady. A beautiful, gorgeous lady that would steal the show.

With a sniff, he wiped the tears with the back of his arm and looked down across his table. In the last few days, he had acquired a dizzying array of makeup jars, perfumes, and brushes of all types. Most were impulse purchases from whatever looked pretty or was suggested by the various ladies who were helping him prepare for his debut.

There were too many choices to look at. He knew what he wanted but his hand didn't seem to move in the right way. Glancing up, he looked at the makeup smeared across

his face. It was wrong with sharp lines and blotches. Even the places he tried to blend looked wrong, the lines were too obvious and painful to examine.

With a choked sob, he picked up a wiping cloth and started to remove it again. He would try again before giving up.

He had said that hours ago. Now, it was probably after midnight and he still couldn't erase the image of a boy from the mirror. He felt sick and hot and flushed, a sensation that had been coming more frequently in the last few days. He wondered if he was getting sick.

"Glorias?" It was his father's voice from the other side of the door. Unlike his mother, Storan seemed to easily switch to calling Galadin by his chosen name.

Giving his face another wipe, Galadin leaned back. "Yes, Father?"

"You sound distressed."

"I..." Galadin looked at the boy staring at him in the mirror.

"May I come in?"

Galadin set down the washing cloth and sighed. "Yes."

His door creaked open. Storan came in wearing his sleeping outfit, a long silk shirt and a pair of boxers. He looked frazzled but concerned.

Galadin sniffed and wiped at the tears.

"What's wrong? Have you been up all night?"

"I'm not pretty. I try, but I can't make it."

A helpless look crossed his father's face, highlighting the wrinkles for a moment. He grabbed a wooden chair from near Galadin's bed and carried it over to set it down. "I don't understand. How can I help?"

"I... I..." Galadin sobbed for a moment and then gestured to the mirror. "I don't see what I want in the mirror."

"What do you want?"

“I want to be a girl.”

His father’s confused look softened. “And you just see yourself with long hair, right?”

Nodding, Galadin took another sob.

His father looked down at his lap. He lifted his hand and awkwardly rested it on Galadin’s thigh. It was cool and firm. “You’re seventeen. You’ve been all that time looking in the mirror and seeing yourself, right?”

It was Galadin’s turn to be confused. “Y-Yes?”

“Well, were you seeing the image you wanted?”

“No.”

“Right, you were seeing a boy. You may not have wanted it, but it was still a boy looking back at you. Day after day, night after night. You’ve gotten used to seeing that boy so much you can’t see anything but that boy.”

Galadin rested his hand on his father’s.

“If you close your eyes, you can still imagine yourself in the mirror, right?”

“I, I don’t know.”

“Try it.” Storan said.

Galadin closed his eyes and the image of his disjointed face came clearly. The hair was fuzzy and he couldn’t seem to focus on both his face and his hair at the same time.

“That’s your memories filling in the blanks. Your body is changing, you are changing. It takes time for your head to forget what you look like and your eyes to start seeing again.”

Galadin opened his eyes and looked into the mirror. The sense of discomfort was still there but he got the smallest hint of what his father saw. By focusing on just the hair, he found it easier to imagine his face fitting it.

Storan’s hand lifted from his thigh. Instead of pulling away, he turned his hand and clasped Galadin’s.

Galadin looked at him in confusion.

“Have you been feeling flush lately?”

Galadin nodded. “And tingly. I think I’m getting sick.”

There was the briefest of smiles and then it was gone. “Maybe, maybe not. But let’s focus on the problem. What is wrong?”

“I look horrible.”

“Too vague, more details.”

“I look like a boy wearing a wig.”

“Okay, why?”

“My face, it’s all wrong. It isn’t smooth and pretty and glowing.”

“That’s probably makeup then. You seemed to be focusing on that.”

Galadin glanced at his father.

Storan shrugged. “I’ve seen your mother when she wakes up. I know what makeup can do.”

Galadin smirked.

His father grinned and shrugged. “I still think she’s the most beautiful woman in my world, but she refused to stop wearing it on my account.”

There was the faintest of creaks beyond the door.

Storan didn’t seem to notice. “Okay, I don’t know much about makeup but I’ve seen your mother put it on more than once. Do you want me to help? I’m good at guessing.”

Galadin took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Storan shifted his chair closer and peered over. He picked up a pot of deep purple. “Okay, what we do is take the brush and then put this on you.”

He grabbed a brush and unscrewed the top. “Looks dark, but I’m sure it will lighten up. Okay, just all over your cheek, right?”

Galadin started to laugh but then remembered he was supposed to giggle. His voice lightened up as he smiled.

“No, Father. That’s an accent color. You don’t smear that on.”

“Okay, so white?”

“No, a foundation. Like...” Galadin’s voice trailed off until he found the larger pot of foundation that he thought looked the best. “This one. You brush it on lightly as a base.”

Storan peered at the pot for a moment, set it down, and started to inspect the other pot. “Now, your mother had these lines between the colors so I would expect you to have colors that match.”

As his father’s effort clinked the clay pots, Galadin looked up. He noticed his door was open still and started to get up to close it when he saw a shadow moving on the other side. With a gasp, he turned away and sat down. His mother was watching.

“Okay,” his father said holding up the foundation that Galadin had picked. “So this one first, right? Start the bottom and work toward the eyes?”

It didn’t sound right.

Storan picked up a brush and started to rub it into the foundation, smearing it around and thoroughly coating the brush.

Galadin giggled, it came more natural this time, and pried the brush from his father. “No, lightly, you want to dust it, not smear it.”

“But this is how you paint a room.”

Rolling his eyes, Galadin shook his head. “My face is not a wall. Is that how mother does it?”

Storan shrugged. “I never figured that out but now would be a good time. Okay, show me then?”

Galadin set down the ruined brush and picked up a new one. It still smelled of fresh bristles and glue. Gently dabbing it into the pot, he leaned forward and began to apply it with smooth strokes."

“Do you have an image in your head?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe try to picture what you want?”

Galadin tried, focusing on the paintings that he wanted to mimic. After a few seconds, he started to see the flaws again and he set down the brush. When he looked at his father, there was a look of concentration furrowing his father’s brow.

Storan looked up and straighten. “No, it isn’t visualization.”

“W-What?”

The frown faded. “Okay, that doesn’t look right. Maybe we start with your eyes. You’ve been crying so they are red. So we just use this white stuff to hide it?”

“No, Father, that isn’t it!” Galadin said with a giggle.

“Oh, for the Couple’s sake,” announced Maran as she shoved open the door. “Storan, you’re useless.” She had on her nightgown, a gossamer outfit that brushed against the ground. Her hair had been pulled up for the night, wrapped around bone rings to give it curls in the morning.

Galadin’s humor faded. The serious look on his mother’s face brought a flush to his cheeks.

“I’m not useless, I’m experimenting. Mistakes need to be made to figure out how to do it.” As Storan talked, he was still looking at Galadin. It was a sharp, piercing gaze that made Galadin uncomfortable.

“And you are going to teach him now to paint himself like a street whore. Go get us some mead.”

“Glorias should have ice water.”

She waved her hand dismissively.

Storan stood up and patted Galadin on the shoulder. “Your mother is probably a better choice than me.” He turned and left but not after smilingly warmly to his wife.

Galadin cringed as his mother sat down. She was going to be rough with him, no doubt reminding him once again that he was going to ruin her life.

She clicked her tongue. “That man might be brilliant at magic, but he’s terrible at makeup. Here, let’s start over.” She ran her fingers over Galadin’s face. In the mirror, he could see the makeup fading away to bare his masculine features once again.

A sinking sensation flooded over him. He hated the sight he saw in the mirror.

Once she finished cleaning his face, his mother inspected the jars. She didn’t fumble like his father. She quickly set pots aside, moving the colors to a side table as she isolated only a handful of pots near the center. “Men never know how to put makeup on, but you’ve seemed to be fairly understanding of this.”

Stunned at the almost compliment, Galadin couldn’t find any way of responding. His body grew hot for a moment and then started to tingle again. He frowned but concentrated on her actions to keep the woozy feeling from overwhelming him.

His mother picked up the drenched brush and used her thumb to clean it off. It only took a single stroke with the caked-on foundation disappearing without even marring her skin. She gently dabbed it to gather some before handing it to Galadin. “Okay, start with the cheeks.”

Galadin took a deep breath and started to apply it.

As he did, his mother gave quiet suggestions. “Lighter... more delicate... there, now come around in a wider circle... There. Much better. You want to put some along that ridge, it will help smooth out your lines.”

The strange sensations grew. He almost felt like he was a young girl learning how to apply makeup for the first time.

He smiled to himself and lost himself in the unexpected moment of his mother helping instead of complaining.

Time grew fluid as they worked together to start filling in the colors. Before he knew it, he saw a hint of the woman he desperately wanted to be in the mirror.

“Let me see,” his mother said with pursed lips. She turned Galadin and cupped his chin as she turned him from one side to the other. “You did a good job for the first time,” she finally said.

Galadin smiled, his heart swelling.

His mother suddenly jerked then her eyes widened. She kept tilting Galadin’s head from one side to the other.

“Ah, it’s mental state, I should have guessed,” his father said cryptically from the door. He had two misting wine glasses, one with a white wine and other clear.

Galadin took the offered glass of water. He felt heated and his skin was crawling. He squirmed in discomfort.

“Drink, all of it, now,” commanded his father.

Obedying, he saw his mother look at Storan with a strange look. His father nodded once and handed her glass over.

Galadin felt a quiver of fear but didn’t ask. The ice water felt like exactly what he needed, calming his racing heart and subsiding the tingling sensation. Even the flush seemed to fade as the bitterly cold liquid poured down his throat.

“Maybe one more tonight, a short snack, and then she needs rest. You can’t learn everything in a night.”

She. His father called Galadin a “she” and for the first time, it felt like the right thing. Galadin smiled happily as he set down the glass. He felt like a girl in that moment, a proper daughter instead of a son.

When he looked up, both of his parents were watching him closely. He gulped with a flicker of nervousness racing along his veins. “W-What?”

“Definitely mental frame and emotional state,” his father said cryptically. “A second lesson tonight would be exactly what she needs.” He emphasized the “she” when he spoke.

His mother looked nervous, but his words seemed to relax her. She nodded. “Thank you, Storan.”

Storan leaned over to kiss the top of his wife’s head. Then he reached over and did the same to Galadin before announcing he was going back to bed.

“Mother? What is going on?”

“He’s right. It’s late. One more, but with a green tint to match your dress. Then you need to go to bed. A... girl needs her sleep.”

D. Moonfire

Magic in the Makeup

It takes years to look casually beautiful.

—Dornit Kesser-Gamp

Galadin sat on his side of the carriage with his back straight and his hands resting on his lap. He had his eyes closed as he sang softly, trying to get his voice to “slide” into the higher register. He had done it a few times that day, but it was harder without the voice instructor right there. The sensation of doing and hearing it correctly was fleeting.

“... and then the ship came sailing, sailing along the shore...”

His voice cracked and he frowned.

“You almost have it,” his mother said.

He opened his eyes. She was watching him closely and an uncomfortable look on her face. He had noticed it a few times lately, starting with the night she taught him how to apply makeup. They had been doing it every night since, with him getting more comfortable every time with every compliment.

Galadin smiled to himself. He found himself craving the compliments, not only because his mother had turned a

corner that night but she started using “she” and “my daughter” to describe Galadin. It almost made him feel like a real girl—

“There!” snapped Maran. “Right now, what were you thinking?”

Galadin gasped. “W-What?”

“That moment? Just now, can you remember?”

A blush burned in his cheeks and his skin was tingling. “I-I was thinking about how you told the instructor ‘my daughter’ needed lessons.”

Maran’s frowned deepened.

“W-Was I doing something wrong?”

His mother inhaled sharply and let it out. The frown faded. “No,” she said with a rare smile. “Apparently your father does know what he is doing. He’s just clumsy at doing it, and it’s painful.”

Galadin worried his lower lip for a moment. “You’ve two been making strange comments lately. I don’t—”

His mother silenced him by tapping the cushioned seat next to her. “Come here,” she said before digging into her purse.

Confused, Galadin obeyed.

She pulled out a hand mirror and set it down on Galadin’s lap. “Hold that and look at your face.”

He did, looking at the face. It was still the masculine features he had grown to hate, but it didn’t quite look as jarring as before. The long hair felt right on his scalp and bound into a tail over his shoulder. His makeup was much better, he only saw a few flaws, but it did a lot to mask the man beneath.

“How did your father say to do this...” whispered his mother to herself. Then she cleared her throat. “Close your eyes.”

Galadin obeyed.

“Now, think of a picture, a woman that you want to be. I don’t know, a painting or illustration.”

“A Dance Among the Swans and Roses?”

Maran chuckled. “Of course, I forgot how much you loved that painting. You met Suar de Pun when you were babe, you know. It was when she was a brilliant star of society right before...”

She cleared her throat. “You were only two, but I remember her saying you were a beautiful baby.”

Galadin smiled.

“I guess, I’ve somehow missed that you were so unhappy these years. I figured it was just being seventeen, but this last few weeks, since I... we... you finally told us, I’ve seen such a happiness in you that I didn’t think was possible.”

His smile grew wider. He still had his eyes closed. The flush was filling him down, a tingling sensation that coursed from his toes to his fingertips. He felt like he was vibrating as he sat there.

Maran took a deep breath. “I always wanted a daughter. I know I shouldn’t, a boy was best for this world, but the idea of seeing her grow up into a beautiful woman was one of those dreams of mine. Now, I think I’m finally getting that.”

Galadin could feel tears of joys brimming in his eyes. He smiled broadly. “I hope so.”

“Open your eyes then.”

He did. In the mirror, he saw someone different looking back. It was his face but wasn’t at the same time. The rough lines had been smoothed over and the shape looked subtly different. It wasn’t anything that he could easily identify but somehow, he looked like a young woman in the mirror.

Galadin opened his lips in shock.

“When you...” his mother started. “When you feel like a lady, you start to look like one. Deep down inside, when you lose yourself, it changes. I’ve been able to see you cha-

nge from thinking of yourself as a woman versus a man.” Her voice had cracked. “I missed it at first but your father is, as you know, ‘always paying attention.’”

He grinned at her mimicked voice.

“But as we’ve been going from lesson to lesson, I’ve been seeing it happening more often. Your face changes. Not physically, you are still the... child I raised but it looks different. Appearance, makeup maybe?”

He looked up to see tears in her eyes.

She cupped his chin and smiled at him as one bead ran down her cheeks. “You look so happy in those moments that I’m ashamed that I somehow missed it. But over these last few days, I couldn’t help but see it. Your joy and love are tied into who you want... no, who you are, not what you were.”

“I-I don’t understand.”

“You’ve been feeling flushed, right? And your skin crawls and you feel like your body doesn’t quite fit with your thoughts.”

Galadin could only nod.

“That’s was you manifesting a talent. That was it breaking out of its shell to reveal your powers.”

His breath caught in his throat. He opened his mouth a few times before the words came out. “I... I can change my appearance? I can look like a woman? A real woman?”

Maran nodded. “You can, I’ve seen it. When you speak as one, dress as one, and see yourself as a daughter and not a son, you look like a woman. When you smile, you are my daughter.”

Galadin let out a sob of happiness. He hugged his mother tightly. “T-Thank you!”

“No, thank you. It took me too long to see with my eyes again not my heart. I’m glad I did because apparently I had

May I Lead This Dance

missed something important to you. Now that I see it again, I couldn't be happier for you."

D. Moonfire

Chapter 9

Arrival

The ultimate goal of the debutante ball is the offer, where a besire finds the father of the debutante and negotiates a deal for the hand in marriage.

—*The Hidden Businesses of High Society*

The only name she had heard for the last two weeks was Glorias. It no longer felt like a bandage or a mask that fit poorly, but something integral to her life. Somewhere along the way, she stopped thinking herself as a “he” and settled firmly into viewing herself as Glorias, a visiting niece of Maran’s from the countryside.

Manifesting her talent was the turning point. After that, it was easier for her entire family to call her Glorias and use the correct pronoun. Her mother still struggled though, but it had been weeks since “he” had slipped from her tongue.

Glorias smiled and took a deep breath, or at least as deep as she could. The bones in the dress dug comfortingly into her waist, pulling it into a narrower waist. The excellently-made outfit gave her the appearance of a bust and flared hips. It also made it difficult to slouch but she was getting used to the restrictions.

Looking down, she admired the cream and green dress. It had been masterfully crafted to focus on the parts Lily had identified as the most feminine while hiding the parts that magical makeup, rushed lessons, and clothing couldn't change. She had done a beautiful job.

Glorias wrung her fingers together for a moment. When her long fingernails clicked together, she remembered the carefully painted tips with little flower designs on them. Delicately, she unfolded her fingers and carefully spread her hands on the fabric that covered her thighs.

Next to her, her mother reached out and warmly clasp her fingers. "Nervous?"

"Yes. My stomach is fluttering, my chest is tight, and I feel like everything is going to explode without warning." Glorias turned and gripped her mother's hand tightly. "And I think I have to pee."

Maran laughed and pulled Glorias into a hug. "That's about right. Every girl feels like this when she first goes to one of these balls. I remember my mother holding my hand as I was sobbing in the carriage, though that ball wasn't nearly as fancy as this." She sighed. "Not being groomed for High Society made things easier, I guess, but the potential for greatness is less."

Glorias ducked her head and smiled briefly. "I feel a little foolish now."

"No, no," whispered her mother. "Don't feel that. You have done so much, and I want tonight to be as wonderful as can be."

"I just wish..." Glorias sighed. "I wished we weren't sneaking into the side entrance."

Maran pulled her into a hug. "I know. And your father wanted to be here, but the most important part is that you are here, and you are going to have a wonderful time."

Glorias sniffed.

“Don’t cry, you won’t...” Her mother ended with a soft laughter. “You shouldn’t cry though, even if you can fix your face with just a laugh.”

Glorias reached over and stroked her mother’s face. “Same for you.”

Maran pressed her cheek against Glorias’s hand. “I promise, I’m not going to cry. At least not where you can’t touch me up.”

They found out that Glorias could use her powers for anyone, and her mother had the same nearly flawless makeup on her though it wasn’t subject to the shifting emotions; once on, it remained in place until smeared or removed.

The carriage came to a stop. The narrow window by the driver slid open. “We’re at the north entrance, Tadame Kasin.”

Glorias caught her breath.

“Are there a lot of people around?”

“No, the event is currently in the middle of a dance set. Only a few servants are walking around but I think they are about to head inside. If you wait a few moments, you will be able to get out.” Somehow, Glorias’s mother had found a carriage driver that was willing to sneak them in; Glorias didn’t want to think about how much it cost in terms of price or dignity.

Glorias took a deep breath to stop the nervous giggle rising up.

“We’ll be fine, Glorias.”

“I know Mother, I’m just—”

“Okay, Von Kasins,” interrupted the driver. “This is your best chance.”

In a hurry, Glorias and Maran got out of the carriage. It took them a few frantic moments to straighten their dresses with the fear that someone would come walking into sight.

By the time they finished getting everything back in order, Glorias had a few strands of hair that escaped her hairdo and her mother had a mar on her cheek.

With a soft smile, Maran reached up and fixed Glorias's hair.

Glorias used her hand to fix her mother's makeup.

They shared a giggle and a secret smile.

"Ready?"

Glorias nodded. Slipping her hand into the crook of her mother's arm, they headed toward the din inside the estate's great hall with all the dignity they could muster.

"I wish your father was able to come. It would have made this official. If things were different...?"

Glorias knew what her mother was referring to. They had to sneak in because they couldn't afford the rest of the events. This was a debutante ball where a young lady like herself danced and flirted. If a suitor found her desirable, he would seek out the debutante's father and make an offer of jems, property, or even businesses. It was the exchange, the moment where she would be engaged. Without her father there, the offer couldn't be made. Of course, it would also be a faux pas not to have him present, but the latter was less embarrassing than the having an offer that could not be honored.

Of course, having a potential suitor find out that Glorias was really a guy underneath the dress would be far more devastating to everyone.

"No, no, no," whispered Maran. "Daughter thoughts. You're my beautiful daughter, remember?"

Glorias realized that she was losing her appearance. Fighting back a tear of sadness, she took a deep breath and concentrated on the feel of fabric on her skin, the swirl of her dress, and the caress of silk.

May I Lead This Dance

“There you go. Just a little more, my beautiful daughter.”
Maran smiled. “There, you’re beautiful.”

D. Moonfire

The Dance

Magic underneath emotional control can be powerful and delicate at the same time. It is dependent on a delicate balance of keeping one's mind framed in a certain state.

—*Techniques of the Crystal Spheres*

After years of fantasies and days of worry, Glorias's first presentation ball exceeded everything she had dreamed it would be. For the last hour, her dance card had been filled with one partner after the other. No one seemed to notice her late arrival, the lack of announcement, or that the first three lines on the card were faked.

She loved every moment on the floor, hand-in-hand with her partner and her dress flowing in the wide circles of the classical dances. It was easy to keep the sensation of being a woman while moving, it was everything she had dreamed about.

The last minute dance lessons still echoed in her head as she looked into the eyes of her current partner, an older man with a military badge of honor on his breast. He was easily twice Glorias's age but seemed to be enjoying himself.

She knew that her parents had been careful about her dance card. Her father had spent hours poring over the Stonewait's Gallery, a collection of illustrations and histories of every politically important person in the area. No doubt, the only names that her mother would allow to be written in the card were ones that Storan had made his wife memorize.

One of the twirls came up. She smiled with joy, those were her favorite parts of the dance. She could taste the fruity flavor of her lipstick. With a delicate maneuver, she lifted her hand and stepped into the twirl. Her heels threatened to twist but she bore down and stepped into it, spinning on the tips of her toes before coming down in perfect harmony with thirty other debutantes dancing. The almost simultaneous click rang out across the dance floor and the sound brought a swell of joy to hear her. She smiled until her cheeks hurt.

"You look beautiful, bedame," said her partner. Glorias already knew he wasn't seriously looking and there was no chance he would be asking for her hand. All he wanted was to be seen dancing with one pretty woman after the other.

"Thank you."

The song ended with a flourish.

Her partner made the customary bow and kissed the back of Glorias's gloved hand. Then, keeping a light grip, he tugged her gently toward the edge of the dance floor.

With a blush, Glorias curtsied and let herself be drawn to the edge of the dance floor. Tradition dictated that the debutantes be delivered back to the table before the next partner arrived. There was a bit of crowd milling around the edge of the dance area but the others quickly parted around Glorias and her dance partner with no more than a curious look.

While they made their way, Glorias glanced up at the balcony. There were three painters with easels frantically drawing and working their brushes. Two other artists were concentrating on their canvas with a haze of magic drawing colors across the page.

The idea that she would be in one of the pictures of the balls sped up her pulse. She smiled broadly and felt more like a debutante than before.

Then she caught sight of Dame Dorin, her original dance instructor. The older woman's gaze was focused directly on her, tracking her movement. A pale shiver of fear rose up in the back of her throat then she hurried down the stairs.

Turning away, Glorias struggled as the feeling of being a woman begin to crumble. Her sense of self, the delicate balance collapsed. It tingled across her skin as the sensation of being Galadin returned like a wet cloth draped over her. Did Dorin notice him? Would she ruin his secret?

Heart pounding, Galadin slipped his hand from his partner. He focused on not letting his tension grip the fingers of her partner; if the other man turned around, he would notice that the pretty lady he was dancing wasn't quite the same as before.

They weren't moving quickly enough. Galadin wanted to rush forward but couldn't, not without drawing attention to himself. He tried to get his head back into the right frame of mind, to draw the feeling of being Glorias back and restore Glorias's face.

"There you are!" Dorin came over and pulled Galadin into a light hug. Her voice was cheerful but Galadin could tell it was slightly forced.

Galadin's grip with his dance partner slipped apart briefly.

His partner stopped. "Oh, you are from Dame Dorin's school?" It was a pointed question. There were a lot more

than just debutantes by themselves at the ball, there were also all the seamstresses, instructors, and women involved with presenting them. The success of a debutante expanded to include not only herself but those who helped her.

Galadin gulped and glanced at Dorin.

She gave an encouraging nod.

Terrified that he was about to have his secret revealed, Galadin stared toward the ground and said, “Y-Yes. I’ve been going to her for weeks.”

Her partner gave Dame Dorin a bow. “Your instructions were impeccable, Taladame Dorin. One of the best partners I could ever have.”

“Thank you, besire,” Dorin said with a tightening of her lips. Even though Dorin was a widow, a taladame, she preferred the unadorned but unusual title of “dame” even though that was just as unusual as taladame.

“I’ll leave your charge in your hands, I have some business to attend to.” He turned to Galadin and kissed his trembling hand. “Thank you for the dance, my dear.”

Galadin’s heart rose up in a brief worry. As much as Storan was sure everyone on the card wasn’t going to make an offer, what if this one decided Galadin was the right one? Would he try to find Storan? What if he couldn’t?

Dorin took Galadin’s hand and deftly brought him to the side. “He’s not going to your father, love. A pair of his card game friends had just arrived with their daughters and he has his eyes on one of them ever since she was thirteen.”

“W-What?” Galadin’s throat felt dry. “How did you know?”

“It was clear on your face.” Dorin caught Galadin’s chin and lifted it up.

Galadin wanted to resist but couldn’t. Dorin was a difficult woman to say no to her face.

“Oh,” Galadin wasn’t sure if he was disappointed or relieved.

Dorin turned and held his hand, looking him over carefully. She looked around for a moment and then took a few steps away from the rest of the crowd, giving them space near a column. Her lips pressed tightly together. "So, this is why you stopped coming to my lessons?"

A deep blush colored Galadin's cheeks. He felt naked in front of Dorin. Slowly, he nodded. Inside, he was trying to remember the feel of silk but the fear prevented him from drawing the right thoughts.

"Tadame Potsur?" she asked, guessing the name of his new dance instructor, a drunk woman who could barely move but his mother trusted to keep her mouth shut.

"Y-Yes."

Dorin shook her head. "Oh, she's just... the worst. You should have come to me. I would have helped."

"Would you?"

Dorin shrugged. "When I can count the number of bedames and besires I'm teaching with one hand?" She sighed. "Yes, I would. It may have taken me a bit, but when I saw you with that... man, I knew there was a chance you went that way."

She lifted Galadin's gloved hands to her shoulder height, "Just not this way. You do make a lovely bedame but some of your movements still scream besire." Drawing her hand down, she brought Galadin's hand closer to mid-arm. "Here."

"I'm sorry." He turned away slightly then he glanced back.

Dame Dorin's eyes grew hard for a moment and then she smiled. "I'll tell you what. You tell everyone that I'm still your teacher, and we resume your lessons after the ball. Your form is beautiful, but you need to bring your hand more into a curve when you spin. It has to look like a ribbon flowing in the water."

She gave a short laugh and some of the fear faded. “Besides, Potsur won’t be standing much less attending this ball. A silk lady should always attend the affairs of their charges. That goes triple for their most promising.”

Galadin’s heart almost exploded as the tingling sensation danced along his skin. “You think I’m promising?”

“I’m willing to steal Potsur’s efforts and have you claim your skill as from mine. That is putting my name at risk as much as you are putting yours.” She nodded her head and pulled Glorias close to kiss his cheek.

Stepping forward, Galadin leaned forward. At the motherly caress, he felt like a real debutante again and a rush exploded along his senses. It brought back sensation of being a woman and it felt like he was floating before settling back as a woman once again.

“I’ll see...” Dorin’s eyes widened and then she smiled broadly. “Oh my, that’s how you did it.”

Galadin, now Glorias again, smiled bashfully and nodded.

“You have turned out to be a beautiful young woman.” She stroked Glorias’s cheek gently. “I would love to see you. Tomorrow? I want to hear all about this and I’m curious how this all came about.”

“Okay,” Glorias said with a sigh of relief.

“I’ll make the arrangements with your mother. I’d ask to join your table but I suspect you’d like to keep at least a little attention away from you tonight, right?”

“Yes, Dame Dorin.”

“Tomorrow then.”

Chapter 11

A Breather

Doubt is the killer inside the room, the murder weapon that cannot be found.

—*The Troubled Queen* (Act 3, Scene 4)

The brief respite between each dance brought a number of other men coming to the table for a few minutes of carousing or to request their names be placed on Glorias's dance card. Every time they approached, Glorias was sure they were there to reveal her secret, or to distract her enough that her magic would fade.

Only her mother's comforting hand underneath the table cloth and a few pointed reminders kept her focused enough to maintain her appearance while spinning her lies about being a country niece.

As the men left, both of them let out nervous giggles. Every time, Glorias felt like she had survived an interrogation where one wrong word could ruin everything. However, country life was always different than the city and the few mistakes she made were easily passed off as being from outside town.

That would change after the Social Season, if she made it that long. Glorias couldn't go back to being Galadin again, it felt too right to being Glorias. At the same time, it would be risky for her to remain in the city after the country story faded.

To her surprise, she wasn't scared. Glorias smiled to herself and nodded to a passing besire. She was living her fantasy, doing something she dreamed about for years. If this was the only time in her life she could live it, so much the better. Anything, if she didn't have to go back to being Galadin.

Maran reached out and gently took Glorias's hand. She squeezed and smiled, her eyes shimmering. "Keeping daughter thoughts?"

"Yes, Mother," Glorias said with a smile of her own.

"Good. The next one on your card is Besire Rilar. He's sweet and charming, a bit of a dandy, but everyone knows he has his eyes for Bedame Larkimas who is currently stealing hearts over there." She nodded with her head toward a blond surrounded by dozens of men. "From the rumors your father heard on the docks, she already has a dozen offers and her father is drowning from the bottles of whiskey and wines poured into his glass. He has no chance but he isn't ready to admit it."

Maran shook her head in bemusement. "He really does listen to everything."

"We asked him to come up with a plan. Father's good at that."

"He is. He's a good man." Maran kissed Glorias's cheek. "You are doing beautifully."

A handsome man came up. He was broad-shouldered with a square jaw. Gold trim marked his black suit, no doubt to show off his wealth and figure.

A longing filled Glorias. Even though it could never happen, Rilar was close to the fantasies that warmed her at night. She could only imagine what it would be like to have his body tight against hers. Gulping, she realized she was getting hard and had to put on her best smile while thinking about ice water.

“Tadame Maran da Kasin de Kamer, I believe I have the honor of being the next dance for your niece.”

Glorias beamed as she rose up, lifting her hand for his. Her heart fluttered inside her chest, carefully hidden behind the dress.

He took her hand, brought his lips close to the gloved knuckles, but stopped before kissing. He looked at her mother.

His mother smiled. “You are welcome, please enjoy yourself.”

Rilar kissed Glorias’s knuckles and the touch sent a ripple of heat along her skin.

She smiled as he drew her away for the next dance.

D. Moonfire

One Last Dance

The homosexual, as an aberration against the divine will of the Couple, has no place in society where it can spread like poison. But like all curses, it remains in the shadows to only poison a few.

—Tantol da Disrobin, *Faith of the Families*

“**T**hank you, bedame, for the lovely dance,” said the older gentleman looking for a second spouse.

Glorias curtsied. “My humble thanks for your company, Tasire.”

He escorted Glorias to the edges of the dance where Maran sat alone at a table. He bowed deeply to Galadin’s mother. “I bring your daughter safe to your side,” he intoned the ritualistic words before slipping away. From what he said while dancing, he already had his name on two more cards before the evening ended.

Glorias gave her mother a nervous smile. It froze on her face when she saw a strange look expression on her mother, one that she had never seen before. The shimmering tears were one thing, but this was almost sadness, as if she wished they weren’t deceiving everyone that evening and Glorias was a real girl.

“Glorias!” The seamstress approached with three others surrounding her. Lily wore a brilliant dress that looked like a thousand feathers, each one the prescribed green of the dance yet somehow appearing to be a different color. Her ability to tint anything appeared to have no bounds.

On one side, Kendrick walked next to her with her fingertips resting on his elbow. On the other, a man Glorias didn’t recognize held Mindil’s hand. The second man looked slender compared to his wife but it was obvious they were in sync by the way their feet stepped in harmony and the way Mindil’s bountiful hips swayed without touching his.

Lily pulled Glorias into a hug that wouldn’t risk marring either of their makeup. “You look beautiful, my dear.”

“Thank you,” Glorias whispered back.

“How does it feel to be out here?”

“Like everything I ever wanted.”

A sob startled her. She looked over to see tears on her mother’s face. She was smiling as she held a piece of silk to her lips. “Mother? Is there—”

“You are so beautiful. I didn’t think it would touch me, but then just now, I couldn’t stop thinking about you as a daughter,” she said through the tears. She glanced to her side, where one of her friends would have been sitting if things were different. Then she took a deep breath and looked back. “You are my daughter, aren’t you?”

The world spun around Glorias as she looked at her mother. “Really?”

“Y-Yes!” She staggered up out of her chair. Stepping around the table, she grabbed Glorias. “My baby. I’m so sorry.”

Glorias hugged her mother back. She could feel her crying, the soft sobs shaking her body as they held each other tightly. “Thank you. Thank you so very much.”

His mother kissed her sweetly. “You are so beautiful.”

When they broke the embrace, Lily and Mindil were still there smiling broadly.

Maran pushed her hair back. “S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to do that.”

“No, it’s beautiful seeing you two.”

Mindil glanced over. “Dame Maran, you look alone here.”

Lily’s eyes widened and her fingers tightened on Kendrick’s hand.

Maran gave an apologetic look. “You can probably guess why though.”

“Well, we’re looking for a place to sit. Would you mind if we joined you?”

Mindil’s husband lifted his head. “What about our seats —?”

Mindil stamped on his foot with her heel. She smiled sweetly. “A mother should always have company when her beautiful daughter is on the floor. May we?”

Glorias blushed.

Maran stammered for a moment and then hugged Mindil. “Thank you.”

Kendrick chuckled. He withdrew from Lily, kissed her cheek, and turned to the other man who Glorias had not previously met. “Come on, Hasan. I bet we could find some drinks for our wives.”

He turned to Maran and Glorias. “Would you care for anything, dames?”

Maran lifted her glass. “More of the blush? And grape juices for my da... niece... Glorias.”

Glorias blushed and smiled.

Kendrick nodded and then tapped Hasan on the shoulder. “Come on.”

Hasan sighed but followed the other man away.

Lily took Glorias’s hand and sat down. After a moment, Maran and Mindil joined them.

As they were settling down and talking about the fashions, Glorias glanced at her dance card. There were only two more slots left in the evening but no names filled the lines.

The rush, the point of being someone else faded. She was disappointed but at the same time happy that the other lines had been filled in. For someone who thought she would never be able to live even a day as a lady, having five men wanting to dance with her was like reaching the stars. She smiled and ran her finger along the last few lines.

Mindil picked up the card and frowned. "A pity, so few men have good taste."

"Do you want to stay the night?" asked Lily.

Glorias nodded with a sad smile. "Yes, even if I can't go out again, I want to enjoy this evening. I don't want it to ever end."

"Then we would be honored to keep you company. As people say, silks should always stand next to their best works."

As Glorias blushed, her mother pushed a glass of wine over to her. As she took it, she lifted the glass. "This is everything I hoped for. Thank you for the wonderful night."

"So, any cute guys?"

"Mindil!" chided Lily. "What my lovely friend said is: are you feeling like a beautiful debutante here?" She reached out and took Mindil's hand, holding it firmly.

Glorias hesitated. Knowing that the fantasy had to end ached. She wanted to it to keep going, to not worry about a secret or being exposed. Why couldn't she be born like this?

She couldn't go back, that much she knew. Wearing the dress, hearing her name as Glorias, and being told she was beautiful was everything she craved. It felt like walking out into the sunlight for the first time.

Maran spoke quietly. "You can keep doing this, if you want. Your father and I have already talked."

Glorias's eyes teared up. "Really? I can?"

"Yes, I promise." She chuckled. "I didn't know this day was coming for years but I do now. It just... took me a while to realize that I shouldn't stop it. Your father was right. Just don't tell him that, I hate it when he's right."

Glorias started to say something but someone's presence interrupted her. "Excuse me."

The voice quickened Galadin's pulse. It was Benard. Trembling, she looked up to see the Navy officer standing a respectful distance wearing a sharp black suit. He stood at attention with an easy smile that somehow brought an instant warmth to Glorias's cheeks.

"Oh my," whispered Mindil. "I like Navy boys."

"Shush," responded Lily in a low voice.

Glorias's heart beat faster as she looked at the broad-shouldered man who stood with one hand held out. He had cleaned up since Glorias had last seen him.

"I wasn't aware that you had a beautiful daughter coming to this affair, Maran da Kasin ho Kamer." He bowed deeply. "I beg for forgiveness for not requesting it earlier, but when I saw her at the table, I realized I had to come over."

All four of them let out soft sounds, giggles and sighs.

"I would be honored if I may have her hand for this dance."

Maran cleared her throat. "It's... she's my niece... from the country."

He cocked his head and grinned. "Indeed. But even if she's but a niece, she has your beautiful eyes and I would be deeply honored for a dance."

Glorias whimpered, her face growing flushed as she stared up. She desperately wanted to say yes, the memory of their touching during dance lessons still bright in her

thoughts. The easy way Benard spoke and moved, the firmness that they held hands while dancing, it was another thing she hoped to finally have.

“Glorias?” asked her mother.

Galadin didn’t know if Benard knew that Galadin and Glorias were the same. She almost said no, but she couldn’t pull her thoughts from the smell of his cologne and the electric touch between them. “I... yes,” she whispered.

Benard bowed again and held out his hand. The song was about to start.

When he took Glorias’s hand, sparks coursed through her body. She felt exposed and bared, every part of her nerves burning with anticipation.

Benard guided her to the floor, turned around, and then slipped his hand around Glorias’s waist. It was firm and strong.

With weak knees, Glorias turned into the first position, her hand in a position to be led. It was just like Dame Dorin’s lessons, except this time it was finally clear her role between the two of them.

“What do you think about these dances? They are simple enough.”

Glorias laughed nervously. “I haven’t had enough lessons and Dorin—”

With a start, she clamped her mouth shut. She didn’t want to reveal that she already knew Benard as a different person. Her heart pounded in her chest as the music swelled up.

“I know what you mean. I feel like I’ve been going to this old lady’s lessons forever but she keeps matching me up with women who really aren’t...” He smiled broadly. “My thing. You know what I mean?”

He winked and drew Glorias around in time with the music.

Glorias's stomach clenched. She knew exactly what Benard wanted, he was gay and wanted a man not a woman. The surreal sensation draped over her as she struggled with who she was. Benard would want Galadin but at the same time, it was Glorias that he was dancing with. Of all the men, of all the possibilities at the ball, he was the one man could accept Glorias for who she was.

She may be exactly what Benard had been looking for. A troubling stiffness strained underneath the green dress and Glorias was thankful that the garment would hide her sudden desire.

The music brought them in a circle. Glorias's dress swirled out in perfect harmony with the other dancers. She felt like she was in one of the paintings that she had admired for years. It brought tears with the feeling of being complete.

Too soon, the music slowed and came to a stop. When a ripple of applause filled the room, the dancers began to drift back to their tables.

Glorias didn't want to leave. She looked into Benard's eyes, wondering if there could ever be anything between the two of them. New fantasies rushed through her mind, setting her skin on fire and quickening her heart.

"I don't want to leave," Benard said quietly.

"Do we have to?"

"No," her partner said. "You never have to leave."

Glorias's heart skipped another beat. In that moment, it felt as if Galadin has ceased to ever exist. All the fear, terror, and doubt burned away, leaving only an intense longing and happiness.

The musicians started up a quieter dance for the intermission between the formal ones. Normally it just filled in the silence but, this time, Glorias wanted to keep dancing.

Benard ran his fingertips starting from Glorias's elbow to her wrist. "Now, do you remember the Fox step from Dame Dorin's class? You were very good at it but I seem to recall you were in the lead at the time."

Glorias shivered with fright and excitement. She looked up. "H-How... when did you know?"

He smiled and drew her close. "When I first saw you, I thought you were a beautiful. Nothing has changed."

Her blush grew hotter.

Benard gently turned Glorias's wrist until it was Benard taking the lead.

Glorias's breath locked in her throat. She trembled as she looked up into Benard's warm eyes.

"May I lead this dance?"

With a happy smile blurred by happy tears, Glorias nodded. "Yes."

"Good, because I couldn't wait to ask for a chance to dance with you tonight. I would be honored to fill your dance card for the rest of the evening, Bedame Glorias kia Kasin."

Chapter 13

Casual Talk

The offer is a noble affair between two men of means. Rarely are women involved with the negotiations as it is their hand that is being exchanged.

—Elias da Wilim ho Martin, *Brides of Tradition*

After a month of going to balls and sporting events, Glorias didn't need the country niece story anymore. Her forays into the light had gradually been getting bolder and she was comfortable chatting with the other debutantes and bedames.

It was exhausting. With her wider acceptance, more invitations came. Tonight was one night where she sat in her nightgown at her father's work table, sorting through piles of perfumed letters and wax seals.

She caught one and sniffed it, smiling at the apple flower scent. It must be from one of her newfound friends, another country bedame from the opposite side of Tarsan and dangerously close to where they had placed Glorias's false past.

Across the table, her father worked on his diagrams. They were convoluted and confusing, a mess of circles and

lines that were somehow a magical spell he was responsible for. She didn't understand exactly what he did but she didn't really want to have him explain it again. Her own talent was more than enough for her happiness.

He suddenly stopped and peered over at the pile of letters. "Choosing one for tomorrow night?"

Glorias put down the letter. "I was thinking about going down to the river with Bedames Tiril and Natas."

Storan frowned for a moment, his eyes flickering back and forth. "Tiril is the one that had the dark flecks?"

"Freckles," supplied Maran. Glorias's mother was sitting near the fire with a book in one hand and a nearly empty glass in the other.

"Right, freckles. Rare to see on debutantes, though. Don't they usually cover them? You can usually see the paint or..."

Glorias thought about the men who flocked around Tiril when she was riding one of the new steam-powered carriages and it upended. "I think they're cute."

"Speaking of which, did I tell you about my lunch today?" Storan asked.

The book slipped from Maran's hand as she turned around to stare at her husband in confusion. The book bounced off her lap, then the hearth, before it smacked against the ground.

Glorias's mouth opened as she stared at her father. He rarely talked about his work and she couldn't think of a single time he talked about a meal.

Storan cleared his throat. "It was a good day."

"Storan? Are you okay? You didn't lose your job, did you?"

He started to say something but then closed his mouth. It was obvious he wanted to say something but his attempts at a segue were confusing.

"Go on, Father," encouraged Glorias.

"I had a visitor for lunch."

“And...?” both Glorias and Maran.

“A young man by the name of Benard kia Kasin, that was that naval hero everyone—”

Glorias didn't hear the rest of the sentence. The blood rushed to her ears as she pressed a hand against her cheek. Benard? He was looking for her father?

Maran scrambled to her feet. She rushed over to the table, hitting it hard enough the stack of envelopes dropped over. “What did he want!?”

Storan blinked at her. “I was trying to ease into it,” he said in his deadpanned voice.

“Did he make an offer!?” Maran was sweating, her fingers clutching the table as she peered at him with what looked like hope and excitement. From Glorias's vantage, she could see her mother up on her toes.

Glorias could barely concentrate herself. Images of Benard flashed through her head. They had danced more than once in the last few weeks. Each time was close and intimate. She enjoyed his company as much as they had something in common.

“Storan!? Answer me! Did he make an offer!?”

Storan shrugged. “He did. It was a rather sizable one including taking her to his ocean-front estate that he just—”

If he tried to say anything else, it was lost in the scream of joy that ripped out Maran. She turned on her toes and grabbed Glorias, pulling her out of the chair and swinging her around.

Glorias gasped as she felt an indescribable joy rising inside her. Benard wanted her, he wanted to spend his life with her.

“He made an offer!” Her mother was screaming in joy, bouncing around with tears of happiness sparkling in the air.

“—of course, it would be rude to accept it immediately,” finished Storan.

Both of them stopped instantly.

Glorias let out a soft whimper.

“He was about to ship out for a month-long tour. When he got back, the Social Season would be over so he wouldn’t have the opportunity in case anyone else made an offer.” Her father looked at them impassively, his face blank.

“You didn’t accept the offer, Storan? You know that Glorias likes Benard! She really likes him! Why didn’t you accept the offer!?” Maran’s voice scraped against Glorias’s ears, high-pitched and frantic.

He blinked again. The corner of his lips curled up into a smile. “After we shared a lager, then I accepted the offer. I know enough not to be rude—”

Maran silenced him with a tight hug and kisses.

Glorias sank down in her chair. Benard knew exactly who she was and he wanted her for that. There wouldn’t be any secret between them. She didn’t have to give up her dreams.

Sniffing, she realized she couldn’t stop smiling or crying.

One Ending, Another Beginning

There is something about the country, where a distance from judging eyes and gossip fades into obscurity. It was the only way I could survive and still be myself.

—Glorias dea Kasin

Glorias sat on the steps inside her parent's house and stared at the door. Her heart pounded as she silently willed it to open.

Despite the weeks of happiness that had followed the news, there was still that doubt. Would Benard realize he had made a mistake and void the offer? Would her father have to give back the sizable bride price that had been offered?

She tugged on the bottom of her dress. It felt more comfortable than ever before. It felt right, as if she had been born to wear it ever since the beginning. The corset was a bit tight. Her mother and she had decided to tighten it and she was still getting used to the pressure. It would give Glo-

rias a more feminine appearance for those who saw her leaving town.

“Glorias?” Her mother came in. Her eyes were red with tears but a smile glowed on her face. “Don’t sit at the stairs like a little... girl. He’ll come.”

“W-What if he doesn’t?”

“He isn’t a fool.”

“He’s handsome and High Society. I... I’m...” Glorias opened her mouth to finish but the words wouldn’t come out. She sniffed and wiped the tears from her eyes. “What if he changes his mind? He can do that, I’ve heard the stories.”

Mindil came strolling in behind Glorias’s mother. She beamed as she leaned against the door frame near the stairs. “Trust me, he’s going to come. Navy boys always do.”

Glorias looked at her. “It’s easy for you to say, you’re beautiful. You have a husband who obviously adores you.”

Mindil looked up at the ceiling and grinned. She sipped from her wine. “More than you know.”

She lowered her glass and stretched out. Her belly strained her dress and the gesture pushed her breasts further up. “But your Benard isn’t into big girls like me.”

Relaxing, she continued, “He’s into beautiful girls like you. Slender, brown hair, and sweet.”

Glorias ran her fingers through her still-blond hair. She wouldn’t have Lily’s magic in the country, so it would turn brown later but she planned on keeping it long. “With boy parts?”

Maran made a disapproving noise as she stared at Mindil.

Mindil laughed. “Oh yeah, he likes the boy parts. And the girl parts. And the girl heart and love and joy and everything else. Trust me, he’s going to be here. The world may

ignite on fire and he will be knocking on that door before the sky burns away.”

“Excuse me,” said Storan as he walked down the hall toward the door. He was just working at his table.

“Where are you going, Storan?” asked Maran.

Storan turned around and shrugged. “The man marrying my daughter is about to pull up in front of the door.”

Glorias’s heart skipped a beat.

He continued, “Tradition dictates that we speak outside the door and make a show of how a rich and powerful hero of this city is interested in my niece before asking her to join me. Then you will come out, say some things, cry a lot, and then we are going to see our daughter leave.”

His measured voice took longer to register than normal.

He stepped over to Glorias and knelt down. Taking her hands, he smiled. “You will always be my child. I love you very much. I always hoped you would find your place, I think you did.”

“I love you.” Glorias hugged him tightly.

“Your mother will be coming up in the beginning of fall to help with the ceremony and I will be up two weeks later. I promise.”

Tears running down her cheeks, Glorias sobbed and smiled. “Is it going to work out?”

“Of course. You are going to have the wonderful life you had always wanted, with plenty of visits from both of us. You won’t miss the city that much, but you can still winter here.”

He held her hand tightly. “We’re going to see you grow old but never sad. It will... it will...” There was a shimmer of emotion in his eyes but it faded. The sight of it burned into Glorias’s mind, the day her father almost cried. “It will be glorious.”

Glorias giggled and wiped the tears. “Thank you.”

Storan kissed her forehead.

Maran rushed in to hug Glorias tightly and kiss her also. “No, thank you for becoming the beautiful daughter we both wanted.”

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

D. Moonfire

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