

THE APPROVAL OF A PRINCE

A side story on Prince Irus' conversation with Administrator Kazan.

It was warm under the golden coat Irus wore. He smoothed his fingers against the material of soft silk, his fingers dragging against the golden thread of embroidery. Once, his life had been nothing but banquets and bedding those who complimented him. It had been a simpler life then, where he bore the title of a prince, without the repercussions of the burdens that came with it.

Now, he felt the sharp press of the weight that rested on his shoulders. He was supposed to win the favour of the councillors of Vinia, yet, he was not certain how to manage it in a single night. Irus was not deaf to the whispers around him. The banquet hall was filled with guests, some staring at him pointedly while others cast him sideway glances when they thought he was not looking.

For a moment, he thought about the consequences of failing tonight. He thought of Virion and the Blood Guard who would most certainly come after him and then, he thought of *you*. The thought of placing you in danger was enough to coil his gut with a stab of fear. He had never wanted to endanger your life, but it seemed that simply fleeing had altered his fate as much as it had yours.

Irus sighed, rubbing his fingers over his brow. The guests were already mingling around him, the music loud and the feast still a few hours away. He cast a glance around the room, searching for you, but wherever you were, it was not inside the banquet hall.

A few courtiers approached Irus and the nerves that had been tugging at the back of his mind, clawed at him to leave. He ignored their approach and strode deeper into the room. He heard their tittering as he walked past, but he could not bring himself to care. He had never realised how afraid he was, until then.

“Care for a drink?”

The voice was deep, an octave lower than it needed to be that spoke of conspiracies and secrets. Irus turned towards the owner of the voice and found himself looking at a young man, dressed in fine attire. His eyes were dark and twinkled with a hint of amusement as he stared at Irus.

“Yes,” Irus answered. “*Blood and tears*, I need a drink.”

The man offered Irus a goblet, a brass cup filled with spiced wine. Irus tipped back the goblet to his lips, drinking deeply until the voice in the back of his head quietened. For a moment, Irus worried about drinking too excessively. After all, he still needed to win over the councillors’ favour and a drunken fool would not help him in his quest.

“You are Prince Irus?” the man, this well-dressed stranger, asked.

Irus paused, his blue eyes raking over the man’s features again. His left hand was adorned with rings and his right was gripped around a goblet. His dark hair glistened under the firelight of the banquet hall, and Irus was struck by the way the man carried himself.

“I am,” Prince Irus replied. “And who might I have the pleasure of addressing?”

The man smiled, his teeth flashing. With a flourish, he bowed low, though there was nothing deferential about the gesture.

“A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Your Highness. I am Administrator Kazan,” he responded.

Administrator Kazan flashed Irus another smile, the expression sharp and laced with hidden motives. It caused the hairs on the back of Irus’ neck to prickle. He was used to the look Administrator Kazan was giving him. It was the same look the courtiers in Cyre would give Irus when they learnt that his father had been the king.

“Will you join me?” Administrator Kazan asked.

Irus wanted to turn away and hide, but he knew that it was only a matter of time until he was forced to converse with the other guests and councillors. He nodded at Administrator Kazan, following the lean man towards a low table at the edge of the room. A pitcher of wine was already waiting for their arrival, as they took their seats.

Sinking into the chair, Irus forced away the unease that threatened to bring up the contents of his stomach. He was not enjoying this. The banquet was too much and the people around him were too obvious in their staring. Irus suddenly wanted nothing more than to flee the palace and leave everything he had ever known.

“Many of the guests are curious about you,” Administrator Kazan murmured. “I am pleased to say that you are not what I expected.”

Irus arched an eyebrow. “And what did you expect, *Kazan*?”

Administrator Kazan’s lips twitched, a look of irritation flashing through his eyes for the briefest of moments before it was gone in a second. Irus grinned, suddenly grateful for the wine’s effect on dulling his senses. Grabbing the pitcher, he refilled his goblet and swallowed the wine, enjoying the burn in the back of his throat.

“Someone inexperienced,” Administrator Kazan replied. “Though, time will tell if my expectations are proven to be correct.”

The jab did not go unnoticed by Irus. His fingers tightened against the goblet, his jaw clenching at the implication of Administrator Kazan’s words. In Cyre, Irus had been left to do as he pleased. His father barely involved him in courtly affairs and Irus had been content in ignoring the lessons his tutors had tried to ingrain into his mind. He had no use for them then, but he was beginning to realise just how foolish he had been.

“Perhaps I might surprise you,” Irus replied, his eyes finding Administrator Kazan’s over the table.

“Perhaps,” Administrator Kazan remarked. “Or perhaps you will only prove to be a liability in the months to come.”

Irus’ lips pulled into a frown and he swallowed another gulp of his wine, the burn not enough to soften the bite of Administrator Kazan’s words. Looking up, his blue eyes searched the banquet hall again, suddenly desperate for your presence. You had proven time and time again that you were better at this than he ever could be. But still, you had not made an appearance as yet and Irus was beginning to regret not finding you before attending the banquet.

“Something on your mind, or should I say, someone?” Administrator Kazan asked.

Irus stiffened at being caught looking for you. Turning, he glanced at Administrator Kazan and offered him a smile. He was certain that he must look like a dog about to lash out, but whatever Administrator Kazan saw, seemed to please him. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. His perfume, a smoky thing that carried hints of honey, clung to his skin and Irus was aware of how close the man had shifted towards him.

“The others say that you did not travel to Vinia alone,” Administrator Kazan breathed.

Your face flashed in his mind and Irus found himself tensing under Administrator Kazan’s stare. Whatever reaction he was looking for, Administrator Kazan seemed to have found it in Irus’ face. He smirked, a sly look that spoke of the thoughts that he must have formed about Irus and his relationship with *you*.

“I did not travel alone,” Irus said. “But that hardly matters now. Tonight is about the banquet.”

Administrator Kazan shrugged, leaning back in his seat once again. “I thought tonight was about impressing the councillors to support you.”

Irus stared at the man across from him. He wore a smug look, something that rattled Irus and left him feeling untethered.

“You are a councillor,” Irus stated, realisation dawning on him.

Administrator Kazan tipped his head, grinning lazily. “I am. And I must say, you have held yourself far better than I thought you would.”

“That was a test?” Irus asked, confusion threatening to overtake his mind.

“A test of sorts,” Administrator Kazan replied. “You see, Irus, if I may call you that.” He did not wait for Irus’ answer as he continued. “Vinia has been a neutral kingdom for as long as I have been a merchant. In fact, our people have stayed away from the useless wars your late father waged against Ishari.”

Irus opened his mouth to speak, but Administrator Kazan waved his words away as if it did not matter.

“It is bad business to get involved in something like a war between an exiled prince and a brutal king,” Administrator Kazan explained. “You must understand, many of us do not care what happens to Cyre or its people, as long as our borders remain safe.”

Irus frowned. “My uncle is not a generous man, Kazan. He will not abide by Vinia’s stance on neutrality, simply because you choose not to help me.”

“Oh? But he might agree to an alliance with Vinia if it proves to be in his best interests,” Administrator Kazan replies. “Look at the situation through my own eyes, for a moment. Would you rather support a prince with his tail between his legs or the man who could crush any who stood his way?”

“You would be dooming Vinia,” Irus hissed. “Virion cares for nothing but himself. He will kill you all if it meant that it would get him more power.”

Administrator Kazan shrugged. "Perhaps, but that is a gamble we must all decide to take. Do we choose to support you or your uncle?"

Irus refrained from responding, taking this moment to sip from his goblet once more. The wine did not come and Irus realised that he must have drained his cup earlier. With a sigh, he reached for the pitcher, emptying the contents into his goblet. Administrator Kazan raised a dark eyebrow, appraising Irus' thirst with keen interest.

"Do slow down, Irus," Administrator Kazan purred. "I would not think it would do you much good if I had to escort you back to your chambers."

The poorly veiled attempt at flirtation found Irus with a start. He blinked, the attention not uncommon and yet, something he had not found himself prepared for. In the weeks that he had been travelling with you, Irus had quickly forgotten about the nobles who would clamour for his attention in favour of enjoying the way you would sometimes smile at him. It was more than just your attractiveness, though that had been a contributing factor early on, but the way your eyes softened when you spoke his name and the way you smelt when were close to him.

Irus shook away the thoughts, unbidden and suddenly sacred to him, as he glanced at Administrator Kazan.

"I assure you that even if I drank you under the table, I will still be able to stand upright for longer than you can," Irus announced.