

Your Majesty,

THE LETTER



A FROM THE ASHES BONUS STORY



Laura R. Hepworth



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BONUS STORY



LAURA R. HEPWORTH





THE LETTER

“You wanted to see me, Father?” Nathyn asked, frowning a little as he took in the way his father’s brows pinched together in a rare display of untempered emotion.

He knew his father had been under a strain lately due to recent bickering within the Rynnian Assembly, but this looked different. It was stronger, deeper than what he was used to seeing his father reveal, even in private, and Nathyn couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was, but he could have sworn it looked like worry. Not the mild passing kind, but the kind of worry that took root and grew like the blackthorn vine from cursed soil until it threatened to choke you. It was the kind that festered – the kind that woke you in the dead of night with sweat dripping from your brow and fear freezing in your veins.

“Father?” he said a little more loudly and with a light tap of his knuckles against the carved, wooden doorframe when King Laedryn didn’t respond.

At last, his father finally looked up from hunching over the desk that was overcrowded with reports and stacks of letters. There was a new stack too that must have only just arrived from the Royal Postmaster judging by how only about half of it had been unsealed. It was this newest pile that seemed to occupy his father’s attention. The worry lines across his face softened when his eyes landed on him.

“Ah, Nathyn, I’m sorry I didn’t hear you come in,” he gestured to the chair in front of him, “Please, sit down. There’s a matter I wished I discuss with you.”

Nathyn hesitated for only a moment. There was an odd note in his father’s voice that niggled at him in a way he couldn’t put a finger on, but, in the end though, his curiosity won out and, shoving all nagging feelings aside, he crossed the room to take a seat.

The king stared at him for a second or two before a look of decision flashed across his face, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. The niggling feeling soon gave way to full suspicion when Nathyn watched as his father dropped his gaze to his hands and began toying with the silver paper knife he kept there.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” he said, his words making Nathyn tense.

It was a tone he’d heard before and one he’d come to associate with the deliverance of news or some task he wasn’t going to like. Last time he’d used that tone, Nathyn had been tasked with accompanying his sister, Ilysa, on her visit to Navoria. His father had claimed it was because she was still much too young and wild to go alone and in need of a suitable escort – their other brothers failing on the ‘suitable’ qualification being nearly as impulsive as she was, only Ilyus knew what sort of mischief the three could have concocted together left to their own devices. While, no doubt, a remarkable story and adventure would have come of it, it would have been at the cost of a substantial headache stemming from the vast number of letters their kingdom would have to write in apology for whatever embarrassment they had inadvertently created. It was a sound reasoning and one Nathyn hadn’t been able to argue with at the time; however, no matter how reasonable it was he remained convinced that there was more to it than that. From the very beginning, it had felt like a poorly contrived attempt to arrange a match between himself and the Navorian princess.

“About?” Nathyn asked, suppressing a shudder at the recollection of Princess Ashrill as he pulled himself out of memory. It had had his mother’s doing written all over it.

“Oh, many things – the future, the kingdom,…” King Laedryn replied coyly, his lips twitching up into a smile before turning serious once more. His eyes flickered up to look straight into his as he continued. “You.”

A groan escaped him before he could bite it back. “Father, if this is because of mother –”

The king chuckled and raised a hand to stop the flow of frustrated speech before it could turn into a flood. “No, Nathyn. Although your mother daily, and dramatically, expresses her desire for you to find a wife, it

is not your mother's latest matchmaking machinations that have been occupying my thoughts where you're concerned. It's about you and the kingdom. One day, you will be king –"

"Not for a very long time, I hope!" Nathyn blurted out, his brows knitted together with sudden worry over the direction this conversation was going.

He was still boring a concerned hole into his father's head when the king set the feather-shaped paper knife back on the desk and met his worry-filled eyes. The ice-grip on his heart melted a little as he took in the soft, warm smile on his father's face, but his panic didn't really ease until he spoke again with a shake of his head.

"Only Ilyus knows the number of our days, but I trust that that day is still a good ways off," he assured him with a smile, "even so, a wise king does all that he can to prepare his son or daughter for the day when they do take the crown. A wise king is also one that takes the time to truly understand his people. They aren't there to serve him, he is there to protect and care for them."

Nathyn watched as his father's smile faded away into a stern line, not grim per se but serious as the grave and the intensity of his hazel eyes was like they were lit with an inner fire that made them almost glow.

"Which is why I've decided," he continued, his attention turning back to his desk as he spoke, picking up a quill and fishing out a fresh sheet of parchment, "that the best way for you to understand them is to hear it all directly from them, or, more specifically, to read about their needs and concerns in their own words."

His quill flew elegantly across the page with practiced ease and Nathyn shamelessly tried to spy what he was writing – though his skill in reading both upside-down and backwards, he was loath to admit, was not as accomplished as those sneaks he called his siblings. Ilysa in particular was a terror in knowing more than she should and it was a matter of great frustration, not to mention considerable concern, that he'd yet to ascertain how she did it. A masterclass snooper, his sister was in a league entirely of her own.

"To that end," the king said, putting his final mark on the parchment, not bothering to fold or seal it before handing it to Nathyn when he looked back up at him, "I'm assigning you to the Kingdom Archives. I want you to read their letters and read them carefully."

Of all the ideas that had flashed through Nathyn's thoughts upon returning from a visit to his favorite book merchant and being approached by one of the castle footmen with a message that his father wished to see him, this, had never entered into them. He felt his mouth fall open as he gaped at his father.

“A...all of them?!” he blurted, tripping over his tongue when he found it again. “But there must be...” The words faded out as his mouth went dry at the thought even as his eyes blew wide.

The Kingdom Archives had been established centuries ago after a particularly bloody uprising under a king who was still reviled to this day as the worst ruler in Rynnian history. With a heart that was as black and poisonous as cephalonyd ink, King Vorlyn had wreaked terror on his own people from the day he took the crown. He wasn't just grasping, but sadistic as well, actually deriving enjoyment from the misery he left in his wake. It had led to a decade long revolt backed by the guilds and culminating in the king's death and the ascension of his much-loved son who was little more than a child himself but with a wisdom that surpassed his scant years. Though only a boy of fifteen, Prince Caeron had immediately set about righting his father's wrongs and ensuring that such a king could not so easily possess such a stranglehold again. The establishment of the Rynnian Assembly was his first accomplishment towards that end followed quickly by the Kingdom Archives where the people's letters to the Crown would be held in public record. Royal decrees were already publicly accessible, but the creation of the Kingdom Archives was a way to rebuild trust by allowing for the public scrutiny of the Crown's actions in comparison to the interests and concerns of the people as expressed in their letters to the Crown. It had been largely successful too.

While Nathyn understood the significance of the Archives, it was, nonetheless, a daunting task due to the sheer scope of it. There had to be countless millions of letters in there and, even with the carefully methodical way in which they were categorized and stored, a thorough reading of them would be a massive undertaking.

The air rushed out of him in relief at the king's amused chuckle over his reaction.

“No, no, of course not,” he assured him, a warm smile tugging at his lips at Nathyn's dismay, “I believe just the letters from the last hundred or so years should be sufficient for you to gain an adequate understanding. I realize that that will still be no small feat, and, as such, this letter will allow you access to the Archives beyond their public hours. Present it to Master Saeyril, the curator, and he'll ensure you can come and go as you please regardless of the hour.”



Nathyn waited for the last of the Archive patrons to leave and the sound of Master Saeyril locking the door before slipping around the corner to where the side entrance was hidden. The side entrance wasn't really an entrance, as such, as it had no doorway to speak of. In fact, to any passersby it just looked like a spot of wall and remained just such without the necessary means to make it otherwise. However, true to his father's word, the curator had seen to it that it was made available to Nathyn's use so he could come and go at any hour.

Fingering the medallion in his pocket, Nathyn looked around to make sure no one else was about before turning back to the wall and, with a deep breath, pressing forward into the glamour. Soon, the wall and alley behind him disappeared and he stood in the hall outside the curator's office.

"I trust you know your way around by now, Your Highness?" the lyrical voice that always sounded like it held some deep secret or hidden amusement rang from the other end of the hall.

A wry laugh escaped him as he turned to come face-to-face with the Archive's curator who was just rounding the corner. It had been nearly seven months since his father had tasked him to the Archives and he'd been more than faithful to that assignment, spending more hours than was likely healthy holed up in the dusty vault of Rynn's history. At first, Nathyn had arrived during normal visiting hours, but the more time he spent there, the longer he stayed. His father had not been wrong when he anticipated that he would be spending long and late hours within the Archives, but Nathyn doubted that he'd thought it would turn into the obsession it had.

"Yes, Master Saeyril, you need not worry over the state of your archives or that I'll be lost in them," he laughed, smiling at the knowing look in his dark, mauve-grey eyes – a startling contrast to the pale silver of his mussed hair clipped short enough that the points of his ears were clearly displayed. It begged the question of just how old the elf really, was though his face bore few signs of age apart from eyes that had seen, perhaps, too much.

The curator smiled at his response and made to walk past him. "Excellent, then I will bid you goodnight."

He paused though when he came up beside him. "Although, Your Highness," he said without turning his head, "if you should find anything you feel requires longer study than what the night will provide, I'm sure it can be missed for a time. Naturally, I'd expect, that you'd keep a careful record of such documents signed out to your care and return them when their use is fulfilled."

Nathyn's eyes narrowed as he studied the man beside him. His interactions with the wizened curator had been curious from the onset from the sparkle in his eyes and almost crafty smile he'd given him when Nathyn had

produced the letter from his father to his subtle suggestions in the beginning of where to start his reading. Even now, Nathyn couldn't help but feel that the master bookbinder turned curator knew some secret that wasn't his to know.

"Naturally," he replied when his study turned up nothing.

The curator's lips twitched in that careful, secretive smile of his and, with a soft nod of his head, he continued on to the glamoured entrance and Nathyn was left alone with his thoughts.

Nathyn stared at the fading ripple in the glamoured wall, his brow furrowed. "Just what do you know, Master Saeyril?" he muttered under his breath.

With a sigh, he shook his head and continued on to the part of the archive the curator had recommended on his last visit. It was a newer room, less dusty than the first rooms he'd spent his time in, but just as filled to overflowing with letters as the others, possibly more so.

Ignoring the tattered, old leather-topped stools in favour for a spot on the floor, Nathyn pulled out one of the deep, cedar-lined drawers from the wall of wooden cabinets and placed it on the ground before dropping to the floor himself.

He closed his eyes as he took a deep, steadying breath and blindly reached in to grab the first letter. "Let's see what you have to say."



Nathyn bit back a cry of pain as his fist collided with the tiled stone floor on which he sat, the letter still clutched in his other hand which was shaking with barely constrained rage. It had been more of the same – another elven parent worried about their missing child and asking for help.

How many had he read now? Thousands? Tens of thousands? He'd long since lost count, but far too many for it to be coincidence.

In accordance to his father's instructions, Nathyn had started with the letters dating back through the last hundred years and, at first, they had all been as he more or less expected they'd be – concerns about the day-to-day as taxes changed and shortages appeared after failed crops or poor trading agreements, or as sparks flew with some of Rynn's hotheaded neighbors. Somewhere along the line, though, that had changed and the more Nathyn read, the more concerned he grew. The first few letters that trickled in dated more than thirty years ago, but since then they'd become a flood and all reiterations of the same thing – elves were disappearing and at an alarming rate.



Folding the letter back up and replacing it in the drawer, Nathyn frowned when his hand landed on the next letter. It was different than the others, the parchment thicker and of a quality that had to have cost more than a few silver aylas. Certainly greater than what the average household could afford.

Pulling it out, his frown only deepened when he found that it bore no name. In fact, it wasn't even addressed to the king though it was placed among those having already been read by him. His breath caught when he turned it over and spied the unbroken seal.

"What are you doing in the Kingdom Archives?" Nathyn muttered, a finger tracing the wax emblem of a rearing stallion with star above it. This was no ordinary letter, that much was obvious even without opening it, and certainly not one that should have been placed in the public record.

He bit his bottom lip, eyeing the letter in his hand. *Well, Father did task me with a careful and thorough reading of whatever I found*, his curiosity eating at him as he debated opening it.

In the end, his need to know won out over the propriety of opening what his instincts were telling him was meant only for the king's eyes, and yet it evidently hadn't found the king's eyes and that was all the more curious.

Pulling a small knife from his boot, Nathyn gingerly cut open the seal, careful not to ruin the parchment beneath it, and, returning the blade, slowly unfolded the letter and started to read.

Your Majesty,

I fear I have stumbled upon something dark and festering. A cancer in our midst that has been growing unnoticed and working in our midst - unnoticed except by a few, some of whom I fear have already paid for it with their lives, and now it threatens to overwhelm us all if we don't stop it.

I dare not put into writing what I suspect, not yet, not without proof, but there are things in motion even now that I trust will bring to light the missing pieces I need. There are too many lives at stake for me to get this wrong now, I must be careful or else they'll get away with it again. And they mustn't. Not again. Never again. Not if I can help it. It must be stopped.

~ V ~