

The Crown's Debt

by Clara Ashwick

A prince who belongs to duty. A woman he cannot stop wanting.

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The King of Valdris had twenty-three advisors and trusted none of them.

This was not paranoia, exactly. It was evidence-based. His advisors were selected by old families who wanted influence, not competence, and the court had been running on tradition and inertia for forty years before Dorian Ashvale took the throne at twenty-four and discovered that half the royal treasury existed primarily in ledgers.

He trusted no one. And then there was Maren Sollis.

She arrived as a replacement archivist — the previous one had retired, the position was low in the hierarchy, nobody paid attention to archivists. She was thirty, dark-haired, with ink-stained fingers and the specific expression of someone who had decided on honesty as a policy and was aware it had costs. She organised his historical records in the first six weeks without being asked. She flagged a land grant from the previous reign that had been misappropriated. She left both facts and flags on his desk with short notes in a handwriting that was precise and completely devoid of courtly embellishment.

He called her to his office. She came without either the nervous deference of someone expecting consequences or the performed calm of someone managing ambition. She just came in and stood there.

"The Mervale land grant," he said.

"Fraudulent from inception," she said. "The date stamp is in an ink formulation that didn't exist until two years after the supposed signing. The duke's family has been drawing revenue from crown land for eleven years."

"How did you know to check?"

"The previous archivist had a note in the margin of the index. Very small. I think he found it and decided not to say so."

"Why are you saying so?"

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She looked at him directly. "Because you're trying to run a functioning kingdom, and you can't do that if your historical record is full of deliberate holes."

He looked at her for a long time. She didn't fill the silence.

"You're not afraid to say that," he said.

"The worst you can do is dismiss me," she said. "The archive will still be here. Someone will have to manage it."

He did not dismiss her. He called her back the following week, and the week after that.

The rule existed for obvious reasons. A king formed attachments at the cost of objectivity, and objectivity was the only thing standing between him and the advisors who had been managing the throne for a generation. He knew this. He applied it rigorously. He had not formed an attachment since the early years of his reign and he did not intend to form one now.

This decision was made somewhat academic by the fourth month of Maren Sollis's employment, when he found himself looking for reasons to call her to his office and aware enough of this to dislike it.

She was not trying to be liked. That was the specific problem. Everyone in the court was trying to be liked — or feared, which was the other side of the same currency. She was trying to be useful. She brought him problems she'd found and solutions she'd considered and occasionally a footnote from some twelfth-century text that was directly applicable to a current political situation, which she delivered with the same manner as everything else: directly, without drama, with a slight edge of amusement at the fact that twelfth-century problems were still twelfth-century problems.

"You find this funny," he said once.

"I find the consistency of human behavior across six hundred years of documentation moderately amusing, yes," she said. "Your Grace."

He had told her not to use the honorific. She used it when she was being

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slightly ironic, which he had taken some weeks to parse. He now found it funny, which was a problem.

In the sixth month, the Duke of Mervale filed a formal complaint about the archivist's irregularities investigation. There was a night, a long one, where Dorian Ashvale sat in his study with the complaint and a letter she had left summarising everything she'd found and the letter was thorough and clear and at the bottom she had written: *I understand if the political calculus requires you to close this. I'd rather you didn't, but I understand.*

He did not close it. He called her in the next morning.

"You gave me an out," he said.

"It was a real one."

"I'm not taking it."

She looked at him. Something in her expression that was not the usual professional composure — something underneath it that she managed quickly and that he had, despite his best judgment, been cataloguing.

"Good," she said, quietly.

It was winter when it shifted. A night when the archive had needed working late — a fire in one of the storage annexes had damaged a section of treaty documents and she'd been there until past midnight, and he'd come down himself because he'd been awake anyway and the thought of her alone in a room with damaged irreplaceable documents was specific and personal in a way that gave him information he hadn't asked for.

She was covered in ash. The important documents were stacked and wrapped. She was sitting on the floor with a very old parchment in her lap and the expression of someone who had been worried about something and discovered it was alright.

"The Kelvaine Treaty," she said, when she saw him. "Damaged at the edge but the seal is intact."

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"You've been here since—"

"It's the Kelvaine Treaty," she said, as though this were sufficient explanation, which to her it clearly was.

He sat down on the floor across from her, which was not a dignified position for a king and was also the right thing to do in a room with a damaged parchment that mattered to her. She looked at him sitting on the floor and the corner of her mouth moved.

"Your Grace," she said, mildly.

"Maren," he said.

She looked at him. The archive was very quiet. Ash-smell and old paper and the single lamp she'd been working by.

"I'm aware this is inadvisable," he said.

"Extremely," she said. "By several different mechanisms."

"Yes."

"The political complications would be—"

"Considerable," he said.

"And your advisors would—"

"Find a way to use it," he said. "Yes."

She looked down at the treaty in her lap. Back at him. The lamp between them.

"Are you asking me something?" she said.

"I'm explaining the landscape," he said. "So that when I ask you something, you have the full picture."

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She waited.

"Stay," he said. "Not just the archive. Stay."

A very long pause. The quiet of a room full of old documents. Six months of professional restraint on both sides, which was its own kind of negotiation.

"I should tell you something," she said. "I've known for about two months."

"Known what?"

"That I would say yes." She looked at the treaty. "I was waiting to see if you'd ask."

He reached across and lifted the treaty carefully from her lap and set it on the stack with the others. She watched him do this. He reached back and took her hand.

"I'm asking," he said.

"Yes," she said. Simple as everything else she'd ever said to him.

She stayed.

The complications were, as predicted, considerable. The Duke of Mervale made pointed remarks at court. Two of the old-family advisors resigned, which Dorian found he could live with. The remaining twenty-one were, on balance, more useful without the two who had been managing the Mervale interests.

There was a night — months later, in the tower room she had taken over for her working library, surrounded by her cataloguing system which was her specific and beautiful mind made physical — when she said: "The court thinks I'm your archivist who stays too late."

"The court can think what it likes," he said.

She turned from her shelving and looked at him with that look — the underneath one, the one she gave only in rooms where the court wasn't.

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He crossed the room and kissed her with six months of archived restraint and she kissed him back with the same directness she brought to everything.

What followed was thorough and unhurried and real, which was the quality of everything she did, and he said her name in the dark in a way that was nothing like *Your Grace* and everything like *stay*, and she said his in a way that was nothing like *my liege* and everything like *yes*.

Afterwards: "The Kelvaine Treaty's seal," she said, into his shoulder.

"Intact," he confirmed.

"Good," she said. "That was what I was worried about."

He held her in the lamp-light among her books, which were her real country, and thought that the twenty-three advisors and the Duke of Mervale and the complicated architecture of politics could wait until morning.

Some things were more important than the calculus.