

## Chapter 1

Princess Istorina watched as her home disappeared and the Empty closed behind her. She squeezed her eyes closed to block out the nightmare, to awaken. She breathed in, out, and waited. The carriage jostled and her father's voice carried on with the same conversation as before. Stori opened her eyes and forced a small smile as she pretended to listen.

King Tristram's frown was unconvinced when he glanced at her.

"I know this is hard, darling," he said as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

Stori nodded but glanced away from the pinched expression on his face. She might give up and cry again if she had to witness how much this was hurting her father too.

"I would have wished for any other solution, any that didn't require this sacrifice from you, if I believed one existed," the king continued.

"Father, I know." Stori turned to him and grabbed his free hand. "You wouldn't wish this." She relaxed her grip as she ducked her head again. "There are limited ways for us to resolve this conflict before it reaches all-out war."

"I just wish there was a better solution than marrying you off to that bastard of a king." King Tristram clenched his fists as his rage began to surface again. "Whatever kind of king that bastard Vlasis's son turns out to be."

Stori nodded again, but it didn't stop a few built up tears from escaping down her face.

"I'm sorry, Stori darling, I didn't mean for this..." He stroked her hair. "I didn't mean for any of this responsibility to fall to you."

"Father, it is my duty now." She mumbled again, pulling out her handkerchief to clean her face of the tears. She stared at the piece of cloth with its embroidered *N* written in fanciful calligraphy.

*Mother wouldn't have cried for this.* The thought made her stomach turn as another tear escaped. *She would have been strong.*

Silence filled the carriage again and settled across the caravan. Stori returned to staring out at the void space, lost in her own thoughts.

A scream echoed through the blackness from the front of the line. Glancing at her father, Stori saw he was already opening the door and calling to the driver for information. More screams rang out, louder and closer than the first.

Stori heard the king shouting orders but she couldn't make out the words he was saying. His white-knuckled hand gripped the carriage door. Finally, one word reached her ears—*Shades*. That was enough to make her blood freeze as she moved closer to her father.

The carriage lurched with force enough to knock Stori against the seat. The king sat back down with the same ungraceful effect. He grabbed an AaD from its place under the seat and began smashing at the screen of the tablet, inputting commands.

A sharp turn threw Stori back again as the carriage adjusted course without slowing down. Stori pressed her face against the window and could barely make out the other carriages following behind.

"Father?" She pulled away from the glass and turned around.

King Tristram was still typing furiously and cursing in a quiet voice. Stori turned back to the window. A ball of fire lit up the distance from where they had come. Clapping a hand over her mouth, Stori tried counting the number of carriages behind them.

*Six? I must have miscounted.*

She hoped desperately and started counting again. The fire faded in the distance and darkness returned all around. She counted seven this time. Still less than half of their caravan.

She sat back in her seat and prayed more of the carriages made it. She prayed Leha's carriage had made it. She couldn't go through whatever misery awaited her in her new life without her faithful maidservant and friend.

A light spread in front of the carriage as Tristram used the AaD to open a doorway. The carriage raced through before the driver could even pull them into a slower pace. Stori had barely blinked and they'd already put distance between them and the doorway. She turned around and quickly counted again. Seven carriages followed them through before the doorway shut. Stori's stomach knotted at the low number, but she breathed a sigh of relief that Leha's carriage was one of the few which made it.

"Darling?" Stori jerked toward her father when she realized he was talking to her. The king rested a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze as his eyes continued searching her face. She supposed he had asked her a question and was waiting for an answer.

"I'm fine." She lied, hoping her stomach wouldn't betray her. "What happened?"

The king took in a deep breath and released it with slow deliberation. "It was a Shade." He paused and waited for her to nod before continuing. "It attacked the front scout and carriages first, which is the only reason we got away. If it had attacked anywhere else in our caravan, its damned powers would have affected us too."

Stori nodded again with a frown that didn't soften. "I thought..." She waited for her father's attention to return to her. "I thought Shades didn't travel often, especially not through the Empty." She made a conscious effort not to bite her lip even as she was trembling. "What in all the seven spheres would it go in there?"

The king's jaw tightened hard enough to crack a tooth. He stared out at the space in Medius they now found themselves sitting in. His expression darkened.

"You don't think the Median king..." Stori trailed off as her throat tightened against the thought of the man she was to marry.

"Silence, Istorina." Her father's tone was enough to silence her. It was also enough to assume he agreed with her.

Stori nodded and cursed her fiancé in her head. There would be no proof the Shade was his doing, but it was something the former king of Medius, Vlasia, used to do. Stori cursed her poor luck to be marrying the Median.

King Tristram pulled up the tablet again and glared at the screen for a long moment. "We are still about 35 met-reaches from the capital. We should be there by midday."

Closing her eyes, Stori attempted to steady her breath and, if possible, her mind and stomach as the uneven ground made for an uncomfortable ride.

"Darling." King Tristram waited for Stori to open her eyes and look at him before continuing. "If you'd prefer, when we get to the castle, I will have you brought up to your private suite immediately. That way you won't have to meet him right away."

Stori sniffled in relief at not having to face the man she would marry just yet. “I would not want to cause you any trouble in explaining my absence,” she mumbled, hoping her father would disagree.

Tristram shook his head with a smile. “It has been a trying day. I will make the Median king understand you need your rest and that he should not even consider disturbing you.”

Stori nodded with her best excuse for a smile before closing her eyes again.

## Chapter 2

Late morning in Sentre saw an unusual bustle as the whole city prepared for the royal wedding. There was a tangible stirring of extra life in the mountain side city.

An added tension had been building throughout the latter half of the morning—a low mumbling between passersby when no guards or castle folk were present. In the castle, however, the rumors were more pronounced and more hushed.

The Sylvan Princess was late. After her expected arrival time had come and long gone, doubt began to grow—doubt and fear of war—a fear which had only grown since then and now had a vice grip on the city.

On one of the top floors of the castle, last moment preparations were being made yet again. The rooms fitted for the guests were immaculate, but every moment they remained empty, the servants added just a few more ornaments, cleaned one spot just a bit more, and re-polished everything that could be polished. It seemed there was a mutual effort to make up for the lack of occupants by making the rooms even more magnificent in and of themselves.

On the floor above, in a large study attached to the king's bedchamber, King Brynte pushed his advisors out the door and closed it, trapping the peace and quiet inside. He let out an unsteady sigh. With his fiancée so late to arrive and no signs of the Sylvan caravan in the Empty or on the roads yet, all his advisors seemed to think he was responsible for it. A ploy his father might have used, they had said. Bry could have kicked them for that comment.

Stomping back to his desk, Bry ignored the amusement in the glowing blue eyes that followed his every move. Sitting down with a thud in the chair, he grabbed a handful of papers that were threatening to spill over the edges of the desk and tried to focus on reading. Several moments dragged by as he reread the same line over again without comprehension.

After another half moment passed, Bry gave up and threw the papers back onto the pile. Blue eyes continued to stare and Bry could sense the cheshire grin behind them without looking up.

“Shad, if you have something funny to say about all this, now is a perfect time to shut up.”

A half-shadow, half-human shrug of innocence followed from Shad's position in the dark corner of the attached bedroom where the wraith had been hiding from the judgment of the royal advisors.

“I was just going to say, if you glare at those papers any longer they might burst into flame.” The disembodied blue eyes moved forward into the light where the wraith's form materialized into a more solid state.

Shad's gray and bluish skin tone showed his wraith side. Black wisps of his Shade blood moved underneath his skin, alive, betraying that he was not all wraith even when he wasn't dematerializing in shadows.

“I don't know what happened. The guards searched for dozens of met-reaches around where the closest doorway should have opened,” Bry said, tapping the edge of a discarded AaD resting in the mess on his desk. “If they missed the door...”

“Then there would be nothing you or them could do until the next doorway. And they couldn't call you either.” Shad leaned against the desk with a heavy groan. “I thought you being king was gonna make our lives easier. Now *your* people might just string us both up.”

Bry scoffed, "This is Sentre. They don't hang people." Pinching the bridge of his nose, he continued frowning. "They might behead us though."

"I know." Shad cracked a grin, "I just like that Terranian expression. It's so fun, isn't it?" Shad wagged his head side to side and smiled at whatever fun he found in it. "And beheadings seem more brutal." He remained thoughtful for a moment before turning back to Bry with a grin in place.

"Yeah, well. Let's try not to get there just yet." Bry stood and began pacing an already worn path on the rug. "Assuming they didn't reach the exit point in time—"

"Then there is still nothing you could do," Shad added, earning a scowl from the king. "Just sayin'."

"If they didn't, we could send a patrol to the next doorway opening." Bry walked back to his desk and began searching on the AaD for more information.

"And what's that going to do?" Shad watched his friend without moving from his spot. "The best a patrol could do is call us, which is what the caravan would do."

Bry growled and paused his search. "But I'm supposed to do something! That's what kings do, isn't it?"

Shad shrugged. "If you can't do anything, then don't do anything."

"And what of the stringing up and beheading part? Remember?" Bry growled a heavy sigh and dropped his head. "Everybody here already thinks I'm the same as my father. Just 'cause we look alike." Bry muttered the last part, pulling calloused fingers through the tangles in his flaming red hair.

Shad looked thoughtful again. "Nah. You look younger than he did in pictures."

Bry kicked his friend's leg and ignored the yelp, growling, "I'm being serious."

Shad hopped a few steps away. "I'm not." He rubbed his shin before moving with care out of striking range, back to the desk. "Bry, there is nothing you can do."

"I hate this!" Bry yelled as he went back to pacing. "Maybe I should have sent an escort to bring them back." He paused at the idea before frowning again. "If we go to war with Sylva because of some stupid... I'm going to be a dead king. And I've only been here a few weeks."

Running footsteps and a heavy knock on the door interrupted the conversation.

"Wow, the executioner's here already," Shad teased, though he frowned as Bry called for the person to enter.

A guard came in panting. "Your Majesty. We have spotted a caravan about eight met-reaches out." The man gestured to Bry's patio with the sightglasses in his hand.

"Thank the Vis," Bry exhaled as he followed the guard to the open space and looked with the glasses in the direction pointed. "For all the blessings of the seven sphaere, thank the Vis again. But I thought they'd have more carriages."

"They should have, sir," the guard offered, taking the glasses as Bry handed them back. "The stable master had space reserved for twenty."

Bry frowned at that before thanking and dismissing the guard. Shad sauntered to the railing and leaned his back against it, eyeing Bry.

"How many were there?"

"Eight," Bry answered. "They must have run into trouble somewhere. But..."

“But why didn’t they call?” Shad finished, glancing over the railing into the distance. “Maybe they lost all their AaDs.”

Bry shifted his jaw, grinding his teeth as he thought about it. “Not likely. If whatever happened came after they arrived in Medius it’s possible, but that might be worse.”

Shad hummed. “Yes, your sphaere, your responsibility. And if something happened in the Empty, they would have had at least one working AaD to get out. Either way, I think it’s going to be a ton of fun, your beheading.”

Bry glowered.

“I meant wedding.”

Bry rolled his eyes and moved back inside. He sat down at his desk with less huffing this time. “I’m not sure this is gonna work out, Shad. I mean, she’s just a kid.”

“Seventeen isn’t that much of a kid,” Shad muttered, poking at the odds and ends he found on the bookshelves as he passed. He paused at the glare Bry was giving him and shrugged. “I’m just saying, you’re only, what? Six, maybe seven years older than her?”

“Eight,” Bry grumbled into the hand he was resting his head on. “Practically half her life.”

“And a third of yours. Err... Wait.” Shad starting counting on his fingers. “Where was this math going?”

“Over your head?”

Shad shrugged. “Anyway, my point was... It’s not that much of a difference.” He slouched into a chair on the other side of the desk. “Sides, she’s willin’ to marry you. With your reputation—or your father’s anyway—it shows fortitude at least.”

A growl emitted from behind the pile of papers.

“I know, I know, don’t mention Vlasis.” Shad leaned over the back of the chair to gaze at the ceiling. “But you know she has to have heard of him and all the comparisons people make between you two.”

“We’re not at all similar.” Bry spat shifting some papers to see across better. He propped his head up on his hands so he could see Shad’s tilted head over the pile of documents. “But I know the rep I get from him.”

“You never know.” Shad stretched as he threw Bry a grin. “You give her a chance, and you might end up liking her.”

“She’s still just a kid,” Bry repeated with a sigh.

“Two chances, then.” Shad scoffed before continuing, “Do you remember us when we were that age? I don’t think anybody called us ‘kids’ when we were... What was that Terranian expression?” Shad paused and scrunched up his face as he tried to remember.

“‘Kickin’ ass and takin’ names,’” Bry offered with a sigh.

“Yes! That was it. ‘Kickin’ ass and takin’ names’.” Shad snapped his fingers with a rare, true grin flooding across his features.

“And how does this relate to me marrying the princess?”

“Well, I’m just sayin’ you shouldn’t go about dislikin’ her when you’ve never met her.” Shad nodded almost as if to himself and said in a quieter voice, “That’d be the same as her judgin’ you by your father’s reputation.”

Bry grumbled at that and dropped his head against the desk and papers. “Did you have to put it like that?” He groaned.

“Yes. Yes, I did.” Shad stood and leaned against the desk, staring at his friend. “Come on, we’ve got some time before they get here. What do you wanna do?”

Bry lifted his head and glanced around. A scowl settled on his face. “Not that it’s gonna be fun, but hell, I need to clean this room.”

Now Shad groaned. “Really? Your last bit of freedom and you wanna clean? That’s kinda pathetic.”

Bry threw a handful of papers at the wraith. “I’m not getting married ’til tomorrow, so it’s not my ‘last bit of freedom’. And, I want to make a good impression with King Tristram.” He glanced around the messy room and rubbed his head. “I at least need to appear to have shit under control.”

Shad tried to scoff and chuckle at the same time, only to choke for a moment. “Good luck with that.”

“You’re helping,” Bry ordered as he started sorting the heap of documents.

“Why?” Shad crossed his arms.

“‘Cause your king ordered it and you’ve got nothin’ better to do.”

“That’s not true. I’ve got plenty of nothing better to do, and I’ve never listened to a king’s orders before.”

“Your friend is also asking and you listen to me all the time,” Bry said as he gathered some papers off the floor.

“Only in battle,” Shad said with an arched eyebrow, but relented and began gathering a handful of books to stuff onto the nearest bookcase.

Bry grunted in satisfaction at that and went about his own organizing and hiding of messes. By the time a guard appeared to relay that the caravan had arrived the study was as close to presentable as possible. As long as Bry steered the guests away from the drawers or behind one particular sofa in the corner where all the unknown and odd-sized objects had amassed, everything should be fine. At least, that’s what he hoped.

### Chapter 3

*Kingly*, he repeated to himself, trying not to grit his teeth at the reminders his advisors always gave him. He tried and failed to keep his gait casual as he strode down to the courtyard to greet the carriages.

Shad kept perfect pace next to him, grinning his sun-bright smile at everyone who passed and ignoring the nervous-bordering-on-disgusted glances everyone gave in return. Bry noticed his friend had grabbed an extra cloak before leaving the study to hide the skin on his arms and hands; though it didn't do any good to hide the bits of Shade smoke that moved across his face.

Bry made sure to send an extra glare to anyone who looked at his friend with anything close to hatred. Sometimes he wished Shad didn't hate his Shade powers as much as he did. Otherwise he might be able to use them to make people like him—at least for long enough for them to see him as a person, not a monster in disguise.

*Damn these people*, Bry thought despite himself.

He did love his people, he reminded himself as another group of servants turned away without trying to hide their disgust at his friend.

"Is it just me or is everyone a bit out of sorts for a wedding?" Shad chirped with an overly bright smile.

Bry just scoffed. He was still too irked at his people for a follow-up comment.

"Hey, just a thought, but..." Shad stopped walking just as they reached the doors to the courtyard.

Bry motioned the guard not to open the door yet as he turned to Shad.

Shad stumbled over his words for a moment before finding a good way to say what he was thinking. "Maybe I should wait in my room, or with Klaas and Eleanora." He failed to hide his fidgeting.

"Why? I'll need your good opinion of my fiancée, won't I?"

Bry was only partially joking. Mostly, he wanted to see how she would react to Shad. Bry hadn't considered earlier what he would do if the princess insisted on hating Shad the way everyone else did. He supposed he'd just have to find a nice courtesan.

"Bry, maybe it wouldn't be a good idea to give the King and Princess of a sphaere we're nearly at war with another reason to mistrust you. By, let's say, meeting them for the first time with a half-blood Shade present," Shad suggested, trying and mostly failing to keep up a smile.

"Nonsense," Bry growled and added a few choice words in the Glasic tongue.

"Bry..." Shad paused again as the sound of carriage wheels on cobblestone caught both of their attention. "I'm just suggesting you don't do something that could be questioned by all the people who are going to be hearing of this."

"I'm not." Bry put extra effort into smiling as he walked back to Shad. "I'm also thinking that it might be worse if they think I'm hiding you for some reason."

Shad thought about that for a moment before yielding. "Fine, but if they flip out, I get to say I told you so, and you know I will." Shad leveled a finger at Bry before stepping past him and waving for the guard to open the door.

Bry walked passed Shad who made a sweeping gesture toward the great outside. In the bright courtyard now filled with silver crested carriages, Bry watched the Sylvan king exit the largest



one with a sweeping grace he wouldn't have imagined. The king stood in regal silence, seemingly taking in the entire courtyard, including Bry, before settling his facial features into a look of elegant disdain.

All fears that the marriage was somehow off and the threat of war came crashing back down on Bry's shoulders.

"Not a princess in sight." Even Shad's whispered voice was strained.

Bry swallowed hard and moved down the flight of steps to the cobblestone as fast as possible without looking, even if it was—as his advisors would call it—un-kingly. He hated the constant reminder that he was sorely out of practice in acting like a king.

"Your Ma—King Tristram," Bry caught himself, remembering that he now held the same title as the foreign diplomat. Such an odd thing that was. He shook his head at the idea. "It is a pleasure to welcome you to Sentre," Bry spoke as properly as he could, then remembered to smile.

The Sylvan king glared at him, his frown settling even deeper into his lined face. He took a step to greet Brynte but stopped short as his gaze focused on something behind him. Tristram gripped his sword as he shifted immediately into a fighting position.

*Shad*, Bry thought at once, glancing back to see his friend reach the same conclusion. "Shadric here is a personal friend, so I'd suggest you damper any hostilities before this becomes a problem." Bry shifted to stand between Shad and King Tristram.

A tap on his shoulder drew Bry's attention back to his friend.

"I told you so," Shad grumbled with a sigh as his smile fell away slightly.

Bry grimaced at the reminder and his friend's poor sense of comedic timing. A small movement in front of him brought his gaze back to King Tristram.

The Sylvan king had straightened out of a fighting stance, though he still gripped his undrawn sword with a white-knuckled hand.

"Why does the King keep company with a Shade?" He growled without taking his steely eyes away from Shad.

"I don't." Bry struggled to keep his own voice above a growl. "I keep company with friends. And if it's escaped your notice, Shad ain't a full-blooded Shade." Bry bit back a few choice words he would have liked to add.

King Tristram shifted his intense gaze between the two of them, searching for an answer to a question Bry couldn't guess. After a moment more, Tristram seemed to reach a decision and released his grip on the sword.

"I apologize, King Brynte." King Tristram stepped forward to greet his host, keeping a cautious eye fixed on Shadric. "I meant no insult."

Bry glanced at Shad, surprised at the sudden change in mannerism from the foreign king. Shad just shrugged and mouthed the word 'kingly' while making a small gesture to remind Bry to straighten out of the fighting stance he hadn't notice he'd slipped into.

Bry paused for a moment, remembering not to call the other king "Your Majesty" before continuing his greeting. "Apology accepted, King Tristram. I too must offer my apology if my speech was or is... crass."

“Your apology is accepted but unnecessary. I understand you are just coming to castle life from a long journey away, some mild differences in thought should be expected,” Tristram said with a light, tense smile that didn’t reach his voice or eyes.

Bry tightened his jaw and made a conscious effort not to frown. This king was mocking him. Still, Bry carried through the motions of a formal greeting with Tristram before asking after his fiancée.

“I fear she was rather exhausted from our unexpectedly exciting journey. She went up to her rooms as soon as we reached the first entrance of the castle.” Tristram smiled again, the same rather mocking smile. “You can meet her tomorrow.”

Bry did grimace at the other king this time. “Yes, there’s no rush. I suppose I can meet her anytime.”

Tristram narrowed his eyes and focused his already intense gaze. Bry surmised he had found something he didn’t like in that statement, though Bry couldn’t imagine what.

Shad cleared his throat and took a careful step forward, still acting with caution not to startle Tristram. “May I ask about your ‘unexpectedly exciting’ trip... Your Majesty?” He added the salute with an uneasy glance to Bry.

At the very least, Bry was secretly glad he wasn’t the only one who couldn’t remember the proper mannerisms for dealing with a king when they weren’t being paid for it.

Tristram shifted his steady gaze between the two of them as a new frown formed. The silence lasted a moment longer before he decided on the wording to use. “A Shade attacked our caravan. In the Empty. We lost 12 carriages.”

“What!” Bry and Shad shouted in unison. A frown passed between them as Bry shifted his weight and started pacing in tight circles around the spot Shad stood thinking.

“Shades so rarely travel in the Empty and I haven’t heard of any in Medius,” Shad thought aloud, rubbing his chin.

“Yes, there haven’t been any reports of Shades in this sphaere, so it must have come from another.” Bry carried on the thought. “Sentre is closer to Eidola this season, but that is still too far a distance for a Shade to travel on its own.”

“If they were attacked closer to an edge of Medius, it may not have been that great a distance,” Shad pointed out as they both turned back to Tristram for an answer.

Tristram glanced between the pair with some level of surprise and confusion written across his face. He blinked a few times before remembering to answer. “We come out about 35 met-reaches East of Sentre.”

Bry growled, “Wrong direction.”

“That would have been much longer for the Shade to be traveling. And very convenient for it to appear at just the right place to attack the caravan.” Shad went back to frowning.

“If you’re suggesting—” The obvious rage in Tristram’s voice was interrupted as Bry continued his thought.

“It is possible someone was trying to ruin this truce by stopping the wedding, but...” Bry trailed off as Shad picked up the thought trail, both ignoring Tristram’s anger as he sputtered in confusion.

“Moving a Shade is no easy task and there would have been much easier ways.” Shad finished. He turned slightly as Bry stopped his pacing and they ended up facing each other. “Using a Shade though...”

“Something people keep telling me my father used to do.” Bry grimaced at the thought.

“And since you keep company with me, that would be a great way to throw doubt onto what kind of king you’ll be.” Shad shifted to look at Tristram. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, sir, if we could prevent these events from becoming wide spread knowledge it may be best for the success of the truce.”

Tristram nodded, still glancing between them with an odd look on his face. “Yes, that is what I thought for the time. I have ordered my men and servants not to say anything on the matter.”

“Very good, sir.” Bry nodded with respect to Tristram and shifted his attention back to Shad. “We need to hunt it, I could take a—”

“You’re king,” Shad interrupted. “Kings don’t go hunting Shades in the Empty, especially not the day before their wedding. I can go.”

Bry cursed in the Glasic tongue. “The hell I’m going to send you to hunt Shades. The men you hunt with would be just as likely to mistake you for the Shade and kill you.”

“Well, you. Can’t. Go,” Shad sneered at Bry. “And you just called him ‘sir’. You’re not supposed to do that now,” Shad added, pointing to Tristram.

“I did not.” Bry stepped into Shad’s space with a glare.

“Actually, Brynte.” Tristram motioned for the two to settle down. “You did.”

Bry swallowed his inclination to swear.

*I was doing so well.*

Bry glanced between Tristram and Shad, hoping they’d drop the subject. The sneer on his friend’s face told him he wasn’t going to get away that easy.

“You ’bout called him ‘Your Majesty’ before too.” Shad continued smirking, seeming to enjoy Bry’s discomfort.

“I caught myself on that one,” Bry defended, glancing at his feet.

“Barely.”

Bry cleared his throat and determined to steer the conversation way from himself. “Weren’t we discussing something more important?”

“We already decided,” Shad said, giving Bry a pitying pat on the shoulder. “You and I will fight no monsters. You’ll have to send out a hunting party to settle it.”

“I also think that would be wise,” Tristram stepped in, though he looked amused at having witnessed the last conversation. “It might also be prudent to continue keeping these occurrences to ourselves for now. Of course, I will let my people know that you are handling the situation. They should feel more secure that way.”

“We’ll have this matter settled before the events tomorrow.” Bry gave a nod and glare to Shad, whose smile was ever-lingering.

Shad continued smirking to himself and jumped the steps up to the front, waving for the door to be opened as he did. Bry turned and tried to smile in what he hoped was a kingly way, clearing his throat again to beckon the greeting party inside.