

# *Torment and Threnody*

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## Chapter One

Kieran

A woman genuflected on the blue-and-silver carpet, dark hair spilling over her shoulders. Frost-patterned windows scattered pale light across the throne room.

I watched from outside, crouched beneath a stone arch in the snow. The cold bit through my gloves, breath rising in pale clouds, but I stayed still. I was used to the cold.

“I am here to care for Prince Kieran.”

Her voice was calm, confident in a way that suggested she did not yet understand the trouble she was inviting.

Marcus, the last caretaker, was hiding in the stables. Perhaps I’d send this one to the kitchens.

If I ever earned a grand title, it would probably be *Kieran, Bane of Caretakers*.

“And you would be Marisol Zèle?” my mother asked.

She stood poised at the top of the dais, fingers brushing the gilded arm of her throne.

Diplomatic, composed — and unfortunately responsible for hiring my caretakers.

“Yes, Your Majesty. May I meet the prince?”

The room stilled.

“I should warn you,” Mother said, amusement fading, “he has frightened away many caretakers.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Her smile was small. Certain.

That would change.

I rubbed my frozen nose and pulled my hood higher. Finally — someone confident.

“You may stand, Marisol,” Mother said.

Marisol rose. Then her eyes narrowed.

“Prince Kieran,” she said softly.

Mother blinked. “What?”

“I can see you beneath the stone arch in the snow. Would you be so kind as to come inside?”

This one was good.

I stood, slipping through the side door I'd propped open and trying to appear dignified.

"Hello."

Seriously? That was the best I could do?

"Hello to you too."

I blinked. She seemed... different. Too brave. Too sure.

And far less afraid of me than she ought to be.

I had no idea what the proper formal response should have been.

That night I was reading beneath the covers when my door creaked open. "You need sleep," Marisol said, sitting beside me and brushing hair from my eyes. "But I'm not tiiiiired."

She laughed softly. "A terrible excuse."

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm laughing *with* you. No more reading."

“How did you—”

“There’s a book under your pillow.”

I groaned.

“It would’ve been less suspicious on the nightstand.”

“...Are you giving me advice on breaking rules?”

“You need it.”

She turned off the lamp.

“Sleep.”

I decided I might let her stay.

Chapter Two

Marisol

I began to enjoy Kieran’s company, and the realisation filled me with guilt. His father had

murdered my son — my sisters, my nieces. I had no right to care for him. I should not have been able to.

And yet he was so much like my Téo.

Naughty and lovable, kind but feisty, the sort of child who filled a room without noticing he was doing so.

*He isn't Téo.*

*Téo is dead.*

*And it was his parents who had killed him.*

*You cannot afford sentiment when you have come here to assassinate his father.* I was here to do a job.

“Marisol?”

I turned.

Kieran stood in the doorway, a precarious stack of books balanced in his arms. “You said you wanted books,” he said, setting them carefully on my desk.

“I did,” I replied, forcing steadiness into my voice. “I meant to ask — what subjects are you learning?”

He shrugged. “Not really anything.”

“Not anything at all?”

“Mother and Father made sure I could read and write,” he said stiffly. “But that’s it.

They’ve been no help to me beyond letting me live here.”

I stared at him.

“Well,” I said gently, pity slipping into my tone before I could stop it, “could you ask them to teach you more?”

His mouth tightened. “I don’t see them. So... no.”

*So he doesn’t know them.*

*He’s not like them.*

The thought undid me.

Before I could think better of it, I pulled him into a hug. Kieran froze, then hesitated — as though trying to decide whether to allow himself the comfort. He clutched at me for half a heartbeat before pulling away, pride reasserting itself.

His eyes were wide, shining with delight — and something sharper beneath it.

“Kieran—”

*He isn't my Téó. He's a different boy.*

Téó stumbling backwards, Amara's blade through his chest as she screamed, pinned against the tree. Blood soaking into the snow as Oskar— *King Oskar*— watched without flinching.

My son dying while the monsters who ordered it stood unmoved.

The monster who took my son.

The father of this boy and the father of mine.

And I haven't killed him yet.

Téó, writhing, crying, calling for me — the light in his eyes dimming into a lifeless, glassy stare.

“Marisol?” Kieran's voice cut through the vision. “Are you... okay?” Reality snapped back. I forced a mask over the panic threatening to surface.

“I'm fine,” I said, far more calmly than I felt. “Now — show me some of your beloved books.”

Chapter Three

Kieran

“Kieran, sit up straight,” Marisol said calmly.

“I *am* sitting straight!” I protested, leaning back so far I nearly tipped over. “Okay, nearly straight.”

“Perfectly adequate,” she replied. “Let’s begin.”

I groaned. “Do we have to? This is too easy.”

“You haven’t tried yet.”

I gave her my most royal expression.

“I already know everything about arithmetic, strategy, and annoying tutors.” “Everything?” she asked quietly. “Even how to defend a castle with limited resources?” I froze.

How did she know about that?

She spread a parchment across the table — a simple map of the castle grounds.

“An enemy approaches from the southern ridge,” she explained. “You have archers, infantry, and traps. The drawbridge may be raised, but if done too soon the enemy will flank the east tower. What do you do?”

I leaned closer, instantly interested.

“Archers on the north tower for coverage. Infantry at the gate. Traps along the eastern ridge.

Then wait for the right moment to raise the drawbridge.”

“And if the enemy anticipates your timing?”

I blinked.

That wasn't part of the plan.

“Then I'd... adjust,” I muttered.

“Strategy requires adaptability.”

I slumped dramatically.

“Fine. But it's still easy.”

“Is it?”

I hesitated.

“Explain your reasoning.”

I groaned but walked her through it anyway. She listened patiently, occasionally asking questions that forced me to rethink my choices.

By the end I leaned back, flushed with pride.

“There. Done.”

“Not today,” she said. “But next time it might challenge you.”

I stared at her.

A challenge?

This caretaker might last longer than a week.

Later that night the candlelight flickered across my room.

“I don’t like them,” I muttered, kicking the blankets.

“Your parents?” Marisol asked gently.

“They don’t see me. They care about the castle. About appearances.” The words spilled out faster than I could stop them.

“I mess things up. I scare people. I’m supposed to be the Prince of Ice, but to them I’m just

trouble.”

Marisol listened quietly.

“Sometimes talking about things that hurt helps,” she said.

“Talking doesn’t help. No one listens.”

“Then just for tonight, let me.”

I nodded slowly.

For the first time in a long time, I fell asleep easily.

## Chapter Four

Marisol

The first light of dawn fell pale and fragile across the windows.

A soft hum reached me. High, careless, off-key. That would be him.

Peering into Kieran’s room, I saw him on the edge of the bed, a piece of parchment balanced

on his knees. He was drawing — arrows, beasts, lines of impossible geometry — and humming that tune again.

My breath caught.

It wasn't just the hum. The tilt of his head, the flick of his wrist, the curl of his lips — it was Téó. My Téó. My little boy, who should have grown into this clever, defiant child, alive and safe.

But he wasn't. Kieran was not Téó.

And yet, my chest ached as though someone had plunged ice through it. Téó stumbling through the hallway, laughter bouncing off stone walls, a scrap of paper in his tiny fingers, trying to prove he was clever. Téó reaching for my hand after he fell, tears and blood mixing with snow in the garden.

I clenched my fists to my sides, nails biting into my palms. I could not falter here. He looked up suddenly, catching my gaze.

“Good morning,” he said, bouncing slightly on the bed. “You’re here early. Breakfast yet?”

“Yes,” My voice was clipped. “No more drawing in bed. And stop humming that tune — it’s... distracting.”

He cocked his head, mock-offended. “Distracting? That’s harsh.”

I knelt beside him. Every inch of him, his hair brushing my fingers, the way he held his pencil like a dagger — it was Téó all over again. I could see my son in him. Hear him. Smell the snow on his clothes from the garden where I had once promised him the world.

He bounced off the bed, oblivious, eager, unguarded.

But the line between them — my Téó and Kieran — was thinner than I wanted to admit.

And that truth, sharp and raw, would haunt me forever.

## Chapter Five

Marisol

The morning light fell fragile across the frost-patterned windows, but it did nothing to warm the hall.

Kieran sat across from me, his cocoa untouched.

And then the doors slammed open.

Queen Annaliese.

My heart stopped.

Oskar.

Téo's father and his murderer.

I hoped he wouldn't recognise me.

Hope didn't work out for me, as usual.

"You came back." His voice was soft.

"You expected me to stay away?" I shot back, voice light as I stood up, the dagger on my waist more comforting than ever.

"I hoped the death of your son would deal with you." He sighed as though I was inconveniencing him.

"You hoped the murder of *your* son would deal with *me*." I tipped my head, voice cold.

"Marisol?" Kieran looked up at me, confusedly tugging on my sleeve. My world slowed. This was Téo, alive again, and I had to protect him this time.

"Kieran, I need you to go upstairs, okay?" I told him. "I'm going to talk to your father

about some past issues we ran into.”

“Father?” Kieran whipped around to face the king. “What’s she talking about?” The king hesitated.

“Do you really want to know what it is?” I asked him.

“Yes! I... I don’t understand.” He looked up at me with big bright eyes, and I realised what made him Téo to me. He looked like his father. He looked like the father that Téo shared.

“Fourteen years ago, I was married to your father and your older brother Téo was born. Téo only lived to be five years old.”

“Why?”

“He was murdered. Stabbed in the chest by his cousin's blade as royal guards pinned her to a tree. He bled to death on a rock. Stabbed by his own *father*.” I spat the last word, drawing my dagger.

“I did what I had to do.”

“You killed eleven children that day.” I hissed. “I’m sure that was entirely necessary.” “I removed the stain from my reputation.”

“A stain no one knew or cared for!” I snapped.

“So you’re here to get... revenge.” Kieran said softly. “To kill... *his* son.” I paused.

No.

*No.*

“Kieran. She will not. She is *weak*.” The father of my child looked at me with hatred and disdain.

“But now, you have been told what is meant to die with me.” A dark shadow passed behind the king’s eyes and my blood ran cold.

“F-Father?” Kieran’s voice shook and he pressed his back to my chest.

“Don’t be dramatic about it. We did it to your sister too.” His mother- *his own mother*- was completely unbothered by the fact her husband was about to kill her child.

“So you must die, son.”