

TWILIGHT'S FALL

A TALE OF LIAMEC



J. STEVEN LAMPERTI

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Twilight's Fall by J. Steven Lamperti

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For Natasha, Alexandra, and Nicole,

who,

through no fault of their own,

are my beloved daughters

Ardstead

The young king looked every bit the image of what a young king should look. He was strong and tall, wore a plain gold circlet on his head instead of a heavy crown, and had a purple velvet cloak draped over his simple but fine-quality clothing. He strode down the stone-walled corridor, flanked by a group of attendants.

He stopped at the entrance to the chambers that were assigned to him. Two guardsmen stood there, one on each side of the closed oak door. He turned and spoke to the attendants. “Thank you all for your help today.” He nodded to one man in particular. “Thank you for your advice, counselor.” His chief minister Lord Taedum had sent one of his ablest assistants to provide the king with his wisdom. “But,” continued the young king, “I won’t be needing your help anymore this evening. I’m going to bed early to get some rest.”

The guardsmen opened the door for him. They were armed with spears and wore chain mail and dark green tabards with a black silhouette of an octopus on the front.

As the young king turned to enter the chamber, one among the attendants moved forward as if to pass him and enter the room ahead of him.

The king put his arm across the opening, blocking the man’s entrance. “That goes for you as well, Gil,” he said. “I think I can take off my own boots this evening.” The valet reluctantly followed the departing group, giving the king a resentful look.

The duke, Finley, the Lord of Ardstead and Warden of the Eastern Coast, had given the king the finest guest quarters in his castle, of course. For the king, it didn’t matter how fine the

chambers were; no place was going to feel like home without his queen, his Vix, there.

As soon as the guards closed the door behind him, he took off the circlet and the heavy cloak, threw them onto the end table beside the door, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The room was spacious and elegant. A soft cushioned couch was on one side and an enclosed sleeping alcove with a large four-poster bed on the other. There was a desk laid out with writing supplies and a bookshelf in the corner. A fireplace adorned one wall.

Walking over to the couch, the young king sat and started to kick off his boots. It was still early in the spring, so there was a chill in the evening air, but it wasn't enough for him to feel the need to call for the fire to be lit. He hesitated, looked thoughtful for a moment, and gently, almost theatrically, slapped himself on the forehead. He rose back up to his feet, walked over to the door, and opened it.

The two guardsmen stood at attention on either side of the door. One of them was speaking to the other, but his voice stopped the instant the door opened. They were both young men, about the same age, not too far past the point where shaving was a new thing. One had wisps of blond hair sneaking out from under the edges of the leather-padded steel cap he wore, and the other brown.

The king noticed one of the spears drooping a little bit, but it, and the young men's spines, straightened as he watched. "Lads," said the young king. The guardsmen were only a few years younger than he, but the irony of this escaped him completely.

"You ... Your Majesty?" said the young man with brown hair.

"Call me Twilight," said the king. He continued, "I wanted to thank you for your service. I hope you don't have to stand out here all night."

The guardsman with the blond hair snapped his heels together. It made a pleasant clicking sound that made him smile a little. "It's an honor, Your Majesty," he said.

The young king nodded, "And what are your names?"

"Blaine," said the blond one, crisply.

"... Corentin," came a more hesitant response from the guardsman with brown hair.

"Blaine," said the king with a nod to the first young man. "Corentin," he inclined his head toward the second. "Thank you again. I appreciate your time." He turned and went back into the room.

There was silence in the corridor when the door closed. The last glow of the setting sun came in through the arrow slits on the opposite wall—the flickering light from the ensconced torches mixed with the remnants of daylight.

The blond guard, Blaine, looked across at his counterpart and said, “Corentin? Not, Corentin Fisher?”

Corentin nodded a little reluctantly.

Blaine smiled. “I’m working with a celebrity,” he said.

“It was my father who saved the duke,” Corentin said carefully. “I didn’t have anything to do with it.” He hoped that was the incident that Blaine was thinking of.

It seemed that it was. The answer satisfied Blaine. There was a companionable quiet for a while.

“Did he really pull him out of the ocean?” said Blaine. “I’ve heard that he would have surely drowned if your father hadn’t seen the ship start to go down.”

“I’ve heard the same as you,” repeated Corentin, “I think so. As I said, I wasn’t there.”

They lapsed into silence again. After a while, Corentin started shifting his weight from side to side.

Blaine looked over at him. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

Corentin shook his head. The fidgeting stopped for a bit, then resumed. It even increased.

Blaine looked over at Corentin again. He made an inquiring grunt.

“I have to go,” said Corentin urgently.

“Well,” said Blaine, “if you have to go, then go.”

“Am I allowed?” said Corentin. “We’re supposed to stay on duty.”

“Well,” said Blaine, “I think some things are pretty important.”

“Where should I do it?” said Corentin.

“Not right here,” said Blaine quickly. “We don’t want the smell to bother the king. I think I saw a garderobe down the corridor a bit.” He pointed.

Corentin made his way carefully down the corridor. The flickering torchlight cast long shadows. After a little way, there was a narrow door on the outside wall between two arrow slits. He pulled the door open and stepped into the small room. There was nothing inside, except for another arrow slit on the outside wall and a round wooden cover on a stone ledge. The cool night wind whistled through the arrow slit and up through the hole revealed once he opened the lid. Corentin tried not to think about what was below.

3

When Twilight stepped out of the guest chambers in the morning, Blaine and Corentin fell into step with him, one to the left and one to the right. A few steps behind. He turned his head to Blaine, “Blaine, right?” He turned his head to the other side, “and Cor ...”

“Corentin,” Corentin finished helpfully.

“You two didn’t get any sleep, did you?” the young king said with a frown. “When are you off duty?”

“Your Majesty, we’re supposed to escort you to see the duke,” said Blaine. “Then, we’re off until this evening.”

“Well, then,” said Twilight, “let’s go find the duke.” He started down the corridor with a focused look on his face.

The morning sun was peeking through the narrow windows and arrow slits on the exterior wall. Corentin puffed up his chest a little as he walked after Twilight. This was one of his first duties since he completed his training with the guard, and he got to escort the king! The feeling almost made him forget how tired he was.

They didn’t have far to go to find the duke. He was clearly coming to see the king. As they headed toward a junction in the castle’s chilly stone corridors, the duke, followed by one

guardsman, strode into the intersection. The guardsman wore the same dark green tabard with the black silhouetted octopus, which decorated Blaine and Corentin's chests.

"Your Majesty," the duke called out heartily.

"Twilight," said the young king.

The duke was just a little taller than the king, a little older, as well. In fact, if you wanted to be poetic, you might have said that he was precisely as much older as he was taller. In addition to being taller, the duke had jet-black, immaculately coiffed hair and a face that looked like it was chiseled out of granite. For all the duke's looks and height, though, somehow, the king held his own.

Corentin, Blaine, and the guard who was following the duke stepped back a little to allow the two men to confer without being overheard. One of the responsibilities of the assignment that was drilled into them was not to listen to things that they weren't supposed to hear.

The two rulers spent a moment exchanging pleasantries. Then, the duke looked up at Blaine and Corentin, said something to the king, and walked directly toward them with a purposeful stride.

4

The duke was heading straight for Corentin. For a second, he had the urge to run away. He fought the impulse to step backward and look from side to side to see if there was any way to escape. The duke stepped up beside Corentin and clapped him on the shoulder.

“You don’t know who you’ve got guarding you, Twilight,” said the duke. Even though the king had told him to, you could hear a slight hesitation in the duke’s voice at using his given name. “This lad,” he continued, “is the son of the man who saved my life.”

Corentin could feel a warm flush creeping out from just above his collar to the bottoms of his ears and onto his face. He really wasn’t fond of being put on the spot like this, and it was hard to imagine a more troublesome spot to be in.

The duke continued, “We have high hopes for this young man.” He paused for a moment, turned from Twilight to Corentin directly, and said, “You just finished your training, didn’t you? Your first assignment is guarding the king? I guess the meek *shall* inherit the earth.”

“Sir, yes, sir, Duke Finley, sir,” said Corentin. He was trying to focus on his breathing to keep the warm flush from getting to his nose.

Finley laughed. “That’s too many Sirs,” he said with a smile.

Twilight interjected. “They’ve been outside my door all night. They told me that they would be off duty and able to get some rest as soon as they escorted me to you.”

“Well, we’ll have to see that they get some rest, then, won’t we,” said Duke Finley. “Be off with you. We’ve got a long day ahead of us.” He waved a dismissal at Corentin and Blaine, and he and Twilight started down the corridor. The guard who was escorting Finley fell in behind.

Blaine and Corentin made their way back to the barracks. Corentin hadn’t realized how tired he was until his head hit the pad on his cot. The morning faded into the black quiet of sleep.

5

The peace of dream was shattered by the world moving. Someone was shaking Corentin's cot. He moaned indignantly, even before opening his eyes, "I'm trying to sleep." The shaking stopped, but a voice cut what remained of the slumber out of him.

"Wake up, Corentin," said the voice. "You're missing everything."

Corentin opened his eyes. Blaine's short ragged blond hair was dangling over him, with his face just below it.

Corentin sat up. He liked the feeling of being woken up by someone who wanted to talk to him. His time training with the duke's guard had been a little lonely. Even though it was exhausting, guarding the king's door with Blaine left him with the feeling that he had a comrade-in-arms. He liked the feeling.

"All kinds of stuff has been happening," said Blaine. "I don't know where to start."

"How much sleep did you get?"

"Less than you," said Blaine.

Corentin looked at one of the arrow slits on the exterior wall of the barracks hall. There was an apricot-colored glow of light trailing in through the opening. The room was mostly empty of people, except for a few other sleeping guards that were working the night shift the night before, like them.

“What time is it?” he said groggily.

“Later than it was earlier,” said Blaine. “A messenger arrived at noon. While I was still sleeping. The king’s been recalled back to Cap. Something about an uprising.”

Corentin sat up and tried to focus. Cap was Capitol, the traditional seat of the kings of Liamec. An uprising? Twilight was enormously popular.

“Who would rise up against the king?” he said.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.” Blaine was talking so fast Corentin was worried he would bite his tongue. “The king is leaving to return to Cap tomorrow. He asked the duke for a small levy of troops to escort him and join his men at Capitol. He asked for us!”

“Us?” said Corentin.

“Us,” said Blaine. “Apparently, he liked us or something. He asked if we could continue to guard him on the trip. The duke is giving him twenty-five men and us!”

Corentin just looked at Blaine in silence. His first thought was how he could tell his mother and his sisters that he was leaving. His mother had been proud, but his sister Annabelle tried to talk him out of joining the duke’s guard. “You don’t need swords and spears in your life, Corentin,” she said. Maybe he’d have time to write them a letter.

“We’re leaving in the morning,” said Blaine. “We’re off duty tonight. We’re supposed to get lots of rest, so we’ll be fresh for travel.”

“Rest?” said Corentin. “I just slept all day.” He started thinking about where he could get hold of paper and a quill.