

## Drawing the Line

Lynn Renard

*Back when Saria's story was in the early stages of the second draft, I had trouble keeping track of Ellisar's motivations – what he wanted for himself, what King Belanor wanted for him, and how he balanced the two. I decided to lay it all out in as much detail as possible. This story, taking place a few days before Sarsalor's prophecy about you-know-who, is the result.*

The king must have caught wind of my arrival, for he met me in a main corridor outside the guest suites. “Ellisar, what are you doing here?”

“It's nice to see you, too, Father.” Hints of a smirk grew at the edges of my mouth.

Despite the frost on my riding suit, he swung an arm across my shoulders. “Did you see Lady Fye settled already?”

“She's still at the estate.”

Father's face darkened. “We shall discuss this in private.”

“Yes, sire.” I didn't want my thoughts broadcast to the entire palace, and he didn't want a spectacle of his son and heir's unruliness. I had made great strides in obedience since my messed-up late childhood, but Father and I still couldn't see eye-to-eye on many topics. I was about to add Fye Faehana to that list.

“Ellisar!” my baby sister squealed as I walked into the suite we shared. She launched her eleven-year-old frame at me, and I caught her in a sweeping hug.

“Oof! Ooh, Serenna, you're warm! I might not let you go.” I was only half joking as her body's heat seeped through her nightgown.

She laughed and stepped back. “I'm so glad you're back! Father had just reminded me not to get my hopes up until spring!”

He stroked her hair. “It's bedtime, star; run along. For better or worse, Ellisar will still be here when you wake up.”

She pouted and wrapped her arms around my waist. “You two are going to stay up, aren't you? I don't want to go to bed yet.”

“Bed, star.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “We're going to my office. You won't miss much.”

Sulking, she obeyed.

Father fixed his eyes on me. “Do whatever you need to in order to look like a prince instead of a half-frozen foot soldier, then meet me in my office. No longer than twenty minutes.”

“Yes, sire.”

\* \* \*

When I entered his office in eighteen minutes, he was pacing, a sure sign of his irritation. I lounged in the chair behind his desk.

“Sit up straight,” he snapped, whirling to face me.

“I never slouch in public.”

“Blessed is the man whose private life isn't eventually made public. Blessed and yet to exist in this world.”

Fine. I shouldn't further antagonize him, anyway. “Forgive me, Father.”

“For slouching or for abandoning the mission I assigned to you?”

“Wasn’t it supposed to be a vacation?”

“It was supposed to be a push to action for the both of you.”

“So you knew she didn’t like me, either.”

“That’s not the point.”

“No, it is the point.” I leaned back in the chair, not enough to slouch, and propped one of my ankles on the other knee. “You married Mom for love, but you’re not willing to give me the same chance?”

The mention of Kudora’s late beloved Queen Celaena stopped him. He perched in the window seat. “Your mother and I were blessed. I’m sorry, son, that you don’t have that luxury. Times are different.”

“Because everyone thinks Lord Faehana will dethrone you if he has no hope of seeing one of his grandchildren on that throne.”

Father sighed. “You insist on mocking the situation?”

“I suppose the fact that you used to be friends doesn’t count for anything.”

He glared. “You are too cynical about the wrong aspects of the problem.”

“If you still believe in him, why are you listening to the rumors?”

“Durlan is a good man. His wife, however, is...”

“Obscene?”

He renewed his glare.

I held up my hands in surrender.

“Ambitious.”

“Ah, there’s the diplomat’s word.”

“You would do well to learn better diplomacy.”

I’d tried. I had a mental block, though, that I was fully capable of acknowledging, even if Father didn’t want to hear it. Jandar Venra, once my best friend, had a silver tongue, and I didn’t want to be anything like him.

“As I was saying,” Father continued, “Durlan is a good man, but we cannot ignore his wife’s ambition. Durlan and I *drifted* apart,” his pointed emphasis needled me about my explosive parting with Jandar, “and I do not know how Lady Aravae may influence him. She always wanted the throne, and she never forgave your mother for our marriage.”

“Father.” I lowered my leg and leaned forward. “How do I put this? Fye is a royal stick in the mud, and I’m done.”

“You haven’t outright protested until now. What happened?”

“Someone told me I was being stupid for associating so much with someone I don’t care about. Only she worded it a lot better.”

And a while ago. It had taken me a couple months to decide to risk the unknown but potentially brighter future without her.

He stiffened. “‘She’?”

“Serenna’s age.”

“A child.” He relaxed.

Admittedly, she was a few years older than my sister – but still too young for me. And yet, her people didn’t see her as a child. For now, though, I let Father relax.

He frowned again. “You’re letting a child order you about?”

“I’m not letting anyone make me do anything.” I felt my eyes harden.

Father caught the nuances of my statement and narrowed his own eyes at me. “Lady Fye is the natural choice for your future queen.”

“Stick. In. The. Mud.”

“One of these days, Ellisar, you’re going to learn to word things more delicately.”

“Yes, sire.”

“At this point, you would condemn her to spinsterhood. Few would want a prince’s castoffs, and she’s past the usual age of marriage.”

“You’re not going to guilt me into changing my mind.”

He sighed. “What about her sister Lady Taenya?”

“The girl who can’t carry a logical conversation in a bucket?”

Father gritted his teeth. “*Where* are you picking up these coarse expressions?”

I raised my hands with an expression of innocence. “You told me our knights are some of the most refined men in the world.”

“For *commoners*.”

“Not all of them are commoners.”

“What about marrying Lady Riniya Faehana?” Father sounded exasperated. “You’ll be insulting her family almost as much as esteeming it, but it might be enough.”

“Isn’t she Serenna’s age?”

“A couple years older. You can wait for her, if you swear to me that you’re not just buying more time to wriggle out of responsibility.”

“Not interested.”

“This isn’t a game, Ellisar!”

“I know that! It’s my marriage we’re talking about, remember!”

“You are the crown prince; your marriage is the kingdom’s marriage. Consider your sister’s safety in the face of a military coup.”

That was uncalled for.

“Consider the hundreds of thousands of people depending on you! They deserve a stable monarchy. How do you expect to provide that if you insist on selfishness?”

“I’ll find another way.”

“Another way to protect yourself from the vengeful fury of a woman scorned – nay, *four* women scorned? Lady Faehana and her daughters are not to be trifled with. Even if the daughters don’t care for your attentions, Lady Faehana will ensure that the people will not see the situation so objectively, and Durlan will have no choice but to react.”

“Then, sire, the solution is simple.” My tone was quiet, calm. “If I choose someone who has the people’s adoration, Lady Faehana will have no ground on which to stand.”

He blinked, his anger draining. “You sounded like a prince just now.”

I flashed a grin. “I have my moments.”

“Publicly, but rarely privately.”

Resisting the temptation to roll my eyes, I added, “I’m getting better.”

He stood from the window seat. “Are you willing to stand by that solution?”

I hesitated. “I want to say yes, Father.” Especially since I finally had his attention in a good way. “But she’s so young yet.”

“Agreed.”

He knew whom I meant?

“I’m interested in her, but not romantically. I don’t know if love will come into play as she grows up.”

Father was silent for a few heartbeats. Then, “Ellisar, love is a luxury you may not be able to afford. Fan your interest. Defend it from extinction. Lady Fumia may be your saving grace.”

I recoiled. “Fumia *Venra*?”

He blinked, then scowled. “Yes, Fumia Venra. Who else could it be?” I opened my mouth, but he didn’t wait. “The answer is in the rumors. The people know of the danger should you scorn picking a Faehana for your bride, and they know the Venra family is your only defense. I agree. Lady Fumia is, what, seven years younger than you? But she’ll be old enough to court in a few years – or less, if she’s anything like her brother.”

“If she’s anything like her brother, what makes you think I’d give her the time of day?”

“Because like it or not, these four girls are your only hope!” Father roared.

I sprang to my feet. “I’m telling you, there’s got to be another way!”

“There isn’t!”

“Listen to me!”

“I ought to lock you in iron chains and cart you back to Lady Fye!”

“I’m done pretending to have any interest in her!”

“Why, after six years, are you suddenly digging in your heels?”

“The people practically worship the Lady of Hearts!”

He blinked.

I took a few deep breaths.

Father turned, took a few steps away from me, turned back, and planted his feet. “Who or what is the Lady of Hearts?”

Another deep breath. “It’s a title that the people have given to Lady Saria Daeris.”

He shook his head. “The Daeris family has been popular among their own people since my father’s reign, but their place in society is a sort of limbo – too high for familiarity with the commoners, but too low to garner respect with the nobility. I’m sorry, son, but Lady Daeris cannot help you.”

“I’m not talking about Lady Daeris or about the Daeris family. I’m talking about the influence that the daughter personally wields.”

He gave me a funny look.

I held up my hands in a ‘wait’ gesture. “Hear me out.” I shared the rumors that my men, the knights Father had sent to accompany me and Lady Fye, had overheard at Hazelvale Manor and Everhallow. Then I told him what I’d seen when walking with Lady Saria.

Father was still shaking his head. “I don’t know, Ellisar. She might merely be more eccentric than her father.”

“Even if you’re right, does that mean she can’t possibly have the people’s fervent favor?”

“Yes, if her reputation doesn’t go beyond Everhallow. Perhaps I should ask Zaos to find out.”

Maybe. Even if Lord Venra’s spies didn’t find anything, perhaps their questioning would stir interest in the Lady of Hearts, and her reputation would spread. But...

“Don’t.” I dragged the word out with reluctance.

Father quirked an eyebrow. “Why not? Asking around about the Lady of Hearts may actually tip the scales in your favor, raising curiosity and all that.”

So he thought so, too. “I know, but I... I don’t really want to do that to her.”

“Do what to her?”

“She doesn’t have a clue about her reputation, Father. And if she did know, I’m not sure she would like it. She’s not like Serenna, thriving on attention. She likes people, but I think she’s happiest with a small circle of friends.”

I shook my head as though to clear it. How did I know any of this? I’d spent all of five days in her company those few months ago, and it wasn’t like we had ever really spoken before that.

And yet, walking through Everhallow with her, I’d gotten the impression that she was sincere, but not entirely comfortable – unlike her more relaxed demeanor that evening during stargazing.

“I don’t want to drag her into politics without her knowledge and consent,” I said.

Father stepped closer. “You brought her up, convinced she could be your answer. Now you’re telling me not to verify your argument?”

“I don’t know that Lady Saria is the answer. I’ll keep looking into other options, to do this my way and still be faithful to you and Serenna and the people.” So help me, Alphere. “I’m just asking for a chance.”

Father folded his arms across his chest and scowled.

I suppressed a smile. I knew that look. I’d inherited that look. He was considering my request.

“Fine.” His eyes flashed to mine. “How old is Lady Saria?”

“I believe she was thirteen when I saw her a few months ago.”

“See if you can find her birthdate in the royal records. On her sixteenth birthday, if she hasn’t attached herself to someone else, we’ll send her an official invitation to court. We’ll see how she fits in - if she’s inherited her parents’ reputation, or if her own reputation is stronger.”

I nodded.

“Ellisar.”

“Yes, sire.”

He closed the gap between us with a hand on my shoulder. “Promise me that within a year of her arrival, you’ll implement a decision, one way or another, for the good of the people.”

I held his gaze. “I promise, Father.”

“And pray to Alphere this delay won’t cost us the kingdom.”

“It won’t.”

The faith of Priest Glyndove and Lady Saria had rubbed off on me. I believed that, one way or another, this was the path down which Alphere was leading me. He wouldn’t steer me wrong.

“Good. Now sleep. I want you back on a horse bound toward Lady Fye at first light.”

I groaned.

“Complaints do not suit a prince, Your Highness! I retract my order for you to woo her – for now. But do not forget that there is a political rift you *must* heal. I still say picking a Faehana bride is the right move.”

“Of course you do, Father.”

\* \* \*

We didn’t know it at the time, of course, but Lady Saria’s visit at court would be delayed a year, and Father would not be present for it. A couple weeks before her sixteenth birthday,

scarlet fever broke out in the city and spread throughout the kingdom. Serenna fell. And then Father fell.

Serenna recovered.

Father did not.

I stepped onto the throne ahead of my time.

Though busy with new responsibilities, I never forgot the fascinating young Lady of Hearts, nor the secrets I learned after my discussion with Father.

On my way back to the estate where I'd left Fye, my men and I calmed a rioting town and chased down a couple of renegade dabnors that attacked a priest and his ward. I learned a secret then – a number of secrets, really. Magic still lived in my people.

The following autumn, I met her again, and the encounter ended up far less joyous than even a dabnor attack.

I never told Father or anyone else about these meetings.

Nearly a year after my coronation, there she was at court. No longer a child, the Lady of Hearts had arrived to deliver me and my people.