

## *The Crown Awaits*

An Orbus Arcana Short Story by Viki Lyn and Vina Grey

Vince's steps slowed as he approached his father's quarters. Although he was set on his path, and would never take back his decision to be with John, he couldn't help the very slight fluttering in his stomach at the prospect of discussing his wedding with the King. A wedding to his male partner. Such an event had never been witnessed in the Kamateros royal line before. Never in any of the Orders as far as he knew.

He hadn't even asked John. Maybe he should do that before he talked to his father. But if there was going to be opposition from the King, Vince wanted to know first.

Palace guards stood to either side of the door, which meant his father was not in.

Vince nodded to the two females who bowed their heads, one at a time. "I will wait inside for my father."

"Yes, Lord-Heir."

Inside his father's suite, Vince prowled around the sitting room, finally flicking the velvet drapes to one side to look outside. Another guard stood outside on the wide balcony. He dropped the curtain and circled the space around the couch and chairs.

His nerves endings danced under his skin. Even when he had to tell John about being a vampire, and about the unbreakable bond established between them precipitated by his taking John's blood, he hadn't been this panicked.

Vince couldn't give up John. John was the other half of him, his better half, the bonded half of his soul.

And he wanted the world to know that.

Curling his fingers into his palms, Vince tried in vain to slow his racing heart. If the king objected, what was he going to do?

Beautiful, loving, loyal John. His John.

"Cazzo." He circled the room and beelined to the wet bar. Thank the Creator his father enjoyed a good Scotch. Vince rooted in the cabinet and pulled out the long, slim bottle of Dalmore. Glancing at the label, he whistled. Only sixty bottles were ever made of the '78 liquor. Not even he had the courage to open a bottle that special.

He grabbed the 30-year Macallan instead, poured a double, and sipped. Leaning on the marble top of the bar, he rolled the glass in his hand. The amber liquid glinted with the reflection of the muted lights winking in the chandelier above. His eyes unfocused until the pinpoints of lights bled into a single glow.

How often had they sat out on the porch, him and John, under the star-

studded Arizona sky. The Chinese lanterns John had found at Home Depot and strung along the branches of the carob tree, their only illumination, causing the Scotch in their glasses to glow just like it did now.

John had given up so much. They no longer had the Tempe house. Vince could afford to take John anywhere in the world. But he'd seen the regret in John's eyes when Vince sold that house, even though John agreed it was for the best. It was too risky for them to make roots in the city where John's family resided.

John had lied to his family. Told them he had joined a special task force based in Washington, DC. That his work was undercover. He called every week to check in with them, and dropped in every few months, but until John mastered the power of illusion his family would notice how he never aged.

John's life as he had known it was over. Yet he never complained. Never indicated by word or action that he missed the human world. Accepting his place in the *shaan*, standing behind Vince on many an occasion, never publicly being acknowledged as Vince's partner, John had chosen his path, and nothing seemed swerved him from that commitment.

Vince wanted to shout it out to the world—his love for John, his admiration, his respect. And the one way he knew how to do that was to marry John.

Vince had mulled over the proposal, planned a hundred ways to ask, and then discarded them all. There was no way he could subject John to the humiliation of not being accepted by the king.

Vince tensed as his father's formidable power preceded him into the room. King Gabras was old school, and didn't believe in hiding his light under any bushel. The vampires of Vince's generation were more likely to shield their power, move casually in and out of the human world.

Typical of his father, the king greeted his son with a question. "I thought you were going to the meeting of the Council of Four in Auster?"

"I am...I mean I will. The meeting is later today." Uncharacteristically flustered, Vince fumbled with his words.

His father's amused glance raked over Vince. "You have something on your mind, Vincenzo. And judging from the way you are acting, I will need a drink to listen to this."

Vince's nape warmed with a flush that only his father could elicit. "How am I acting?" *Cazzo*. Could he revert any further to stammering adolescent status, facing his father after some infraction of royal protocol?

"Sit, son, pour me a drink and get yourself another."

The king lowered himself into a plush leather chair. Faded in places, with cracks that showed the history of his father's love for his favorite seat, the king would not allow anyone to replace it. The Creator knew, his mother had tried.

Vince brought the drinks over. His father waved Vince to a chair. Every movement, so graceful, yet laced with the potency of his power such that the air crackled.

Vince crossed his legs and frowned. "You seem...agitated."

The King raised a brow. "A King is furious, mellow, thoughtful. Never

*agitated.*”

Vince shrugged. Clearly, he had touched a nerve.

“However, in this case, I must admit to feeling something close to the emotion you describe.”

Vince waited out it, knowing his father’s habit of drawing out the conversation.

“That Vaggio. Never, in my years in court have I seen a more difficult male.” The king sipped his Macallan. “Yes, a true pain the arse, as your John would say.”

Startled into a shout of laughter, Vince grinned at his father. “John does have a unique turn of phrase. What has the Lord Justice done now?”

“He is determined to attribute the recent natural activity to a prophecy of bad tidings. I listened to him prose about the ill-wind that is blowing through the Orders for a full half an hour.”

“The volcanic activity in Auster?” Vince frowned, rapidly running through the news items he had scanned that morning. “He thinks it is an ill-omen? Portending what?”

“The usual. The coming of evil, the downfall of the Orders. You have but to name something disastrous and Vaggio will tell you it is imminent.”

“He’s always been a wet blanket, Father. Why does this bother you so much now?”

“Perhaps because I wish to live out the rest of my age in peace without his fanciful mutterings in my ear.” The King of Boreas, and the most powerful of the four Kings, sighed, seeming to shrink in his chair. “It is time, Vincenzo.”

Vince’s heart hammered in his chest. Sweat, only formed in times of extreme stress for their kind, beaded on his nape. It was too soon for him to take the throne. His father had mentioned it once when he requested Vince make Verno his home base again. But never since then.

Vince wasn’t ready. Oh, he had no doubt about his power, increasing even, after his return from exile. He attributed that partly to the fact that as a young vampire male, he was coming into his prime, and partly to his life bond with John. But the fount of wisdom, the art of ruling, the military strategies—all the things that made his father powerful, was still not his to draw on. He had imagined, once he settled things with John, he would spend many hours with his father, learning.

“No amount of teaching will prepare you to be a True King,” his father remarked, divining Vince’s thoughts. “It is something you must believe in. Not a role that you take on, but a life that you live. Being a True King is in the skin that covers you, the breath that expands your chest, the thoughts that race in your head. The blood that runs through your veins. It is your very life.” A commanding hand raised, stopped Vince from speaking. “It is a quality, indefinable with one word, but instantly recognizable when it exists. You have that, my son. Misumi has it too.”

Misumi, the only female King in centuries, ruled the Order of Aurora. Vince had not interacted with her much. The most remote of all the Orders, the Aurorans kept to themselves.

“Misumi’s Lord-Heir does not have this quality and well the King knows it. So do the other Kings and their sons lack this innate ability.”

Fascinated, Vince listened carefully, shoring up his ever-increasing knowledge about the world of rulers that he had only experienced as an on-looker. Thinking that his father would rule for at least a few hundred years more, he hadn’t embraced his role as heir. Besides, he had been exiled for the past few years, never believing he’d be asked to take on the role of Lord Heir again.” King Gabbras finished off his scotch. “We will talk again of this, and soon. But I think you came here to speak of something else.”

Still reeling from his father’s plans to hand over the throne, Vince sucked in a deep breath and ordered his thoughts. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasping his glass.

“Father, you know John and I are life-bonded. He saved my life. But he has given up so much of his world. His family, his friends, his job. I...I have not given him half as much in return for what he had lost. I wish to have a bonding ceremony, or what he would think of as marriage. It is unusual-.”

“You do not have to justify your reasons to me, my son. You are young, you are bonded, you want to give your mate everything he desires. I may be old, but I remember being in love. Even though your mother and I were not life-bonded, we loved each other.” He frowned at the dregs of amber liquid in his glass. “It is not what I would have wished for House Kamateros. Or for you. But you were ever difficult, son. Your mother used to say, *give that stripling a choice and he will take the hard path every time*. You will cause a furor. Not just in Boreãs but all over the Orders.”

“Father, I’m—.”

“But, it is good to raise a furor at times. After all, my one son committed a crime. My Lord-Heir, confessed to a crime he did not commit and was stripped of his power. And my daughter-in-law conspired with my enemies to bring down my House. Surely, the male King being bonded to a male consort, is only...how would your John say it? Icing on the cake?”

Vince gaped, unsure whether to believe his ears. Was his father joking about Vince marrying John? “Sire, are you serious? Do you mean what you say?”

“When have I ever said what I did not mean to say? Is it so unusual for me to make a humorous remark?”

Vince wisely held his tongue.

“I mean it. If this is what you desire, reach out with your head, your mind, your heart and seize it. Bonded mates do not come along very often. But be very sure this is what you want. It cannot, nay, should not be undone.”

Oh yes, Vince wanted this. Badly. It was the unstated dream of every vampire, to find the life-bond. While many vampire couples fell in love and lived long and happy lives, most did not experience the absolute joy, the joining of souls that came with being with a life mate. Vince had found his bliss, in the most unlikely of places (Tempe, Arizona) and with the most unlikely of persons (a human cop).

“Father,” began Vince, intending to make sure the King knew exactly

what he planned. “I wish to have your blessing for a proposal. After which, if he says yes, I will have a public bonding ceremony.”

This was it. His father would agree or not. And Vince would still do what he wanted to, what he needed to. If it cost him the throne, so be it. The calm mantle of resolution settled over him at the realization that nothing mattered more than John. It’s comforting presence like a worn but familiar blanket.

“You do not have to be belligerent with me, son. I understand, and I accept what must be.”

In a rare demonstrative moment, Vince reached out with his arms. His father, not the king, enveloped him, held him tight and close.

*“Molta sort.”*

Vince frowned at the Catalan phrase, unusual for his father. “And to you.”

“So it shall be—this marriage you insist on. This I can guarantee.”

They pulled away, each stepping back to assess the other.

“Do not let your compassion get in the way of your duty.” King Gabras warned.

Vince frowned but his father did not elaborate.

“Call him. Call them all! John, Serafina, Angelo, Cent, and Carlos. And Rafe and Jude Mikhail. We will celebrate this occasion with them.”

Wincing at suddenness of it all, he dared to make a suggestion. “Father, I have not spoken to John of this.”

“Then I will not either. We will simply toast to being a family. Call them, Vincenzo.”

Who was this male and what he had done with King Gabras?

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Vince tapped into John’s mind with caution.

*Amante, can you come to my father’s study? Immediately?*

*What the fuck, Vin? What’s happened? Are you okay? Is your dad okay?*

Vince suppressed a grin. John would be a very powerful vampire one day, but he had still had to learn control, whether that was teleporting somewhere or sending his thoughts to someone.

*Everyone is fine, lover. My father wants to talk to all of us as a group.*

*He asked for you.* He added that hastily knowing the King had not exactly welcomed John with open arms. Not that he had been mean, just not warm and fuzzy in the hey-here’s-my-son-in-law-to-be kind of way.

He contacted the others—his sister, Serafina; Rafe, the head of the King’s *shaan*. His nephew Cent (named Vincent after him), his brother Carlos, and Angelo, one of the most powerful Quester in the Four Orders, and certainly the best in Orbus Arcana. Jude Mikhail, master healer and the one who shepherded John through his transition to vampire, and even now, was John’s go-to person for help in living this new life. Vince still repressed a shudder at the memories of John’s blood being drained and his rebirth. To think John had intentionally chosen to become one of them—the ultimate sacrifice—his humanity for Vince’s love.

He tracked back to Angelo and hastened to add a reminder to find Carlos. His brother had lost focus and direction since it was discovered his wife had conspired to bring Vince down. *Understood. I'm the official babysitter.* Angelo's flippant retort reassured him. His best friend might be capricious, but he would shepherd Carlos gently.

Angelo and Carlos were the first to arrive. Their father led Carlos to the wide French windows, an arm around his shoulders. Vince watched them, regret weighing him down. Years ago, he had taken the blame for a crime Carlos committed. Later they found Carlos had done it to defend the honor of a young female. Vince had been exiled, knowing Carlos would have had a far heinous payment for his crime. Vince couldn't regret it, however. How could he? It was during his exile, that he had met John. His lover, his soul-mate. A human, who despite his shock at finding out his lover, Vince, was a vampire, had not only staked a serial killer in the heart before the murderer killed Vince, but had offered his blood as Vince lay dying.

John, tall and broad-shouldered in his crisp white linen shirt and gray dress pants, entered behind a guard in the King's shaan, crossing immediately to Vince.

"So what's up?" John muttered, leaning close enough to touch shoulders but refraining from any other display of intimacy in public.

"I don't have a clue. I came...er...to discuss a court matter with my father. We chatted a bit. Then he wanted everyone brought here. Immediately."  
"Uh-oh."

"It will be fine, John. He's in a strange mood but a good one, I think. I have never seen him like this."

Angelo came up to stand beside them. "So what's this shin-dig about?"

Vince sighed. "You know as much as I do. The King asked for those intimate to his circle to be summoned. So I did what I was commanded."

Angelo scoffed. "Since when did he become one of the intimate circle?"

Vince followed Angelo's gaze to find him scowling at the healer, Jude Mikhail, who in his typical quiet way, propped up a wall, his dark eyes intently watching everyone.

Interesting that. Something was going on with Angelo and the healer but he hadn't figured out what. Vince bit back a groan as John opened his mouth to say something to Angelo—probably to bait him about Jude Mikhail. The King spoke just then, sparing Vince playing referee between his best friend and his life mate. He swore they were born to irritate each other, despite the fact that when things got serious they had each other's back.

"My dear family and friends, thank you for attending to me."

A quiet comment from Angelo, something along the lines of *like we wouldn't* and hastily smothered snort from John.

King Gabras met each vampire's eyes, holding their gazes. Finally, he looked at Vince and beckoned. "Come Vince and John, stand with me."

Vince and John exchanged a quick glance, and Vince brushed a soothing hand over John's as they walked to stand to the left of King Gabras. *The side of the heart.* Vince quelled a sudden panic that his father might preempt his own

proposal to John. That would be a disaster. He knew instinctively, John would hate the public spectacle, being unprepared.

“We have been through several years of turmoil, this family. But you have stood tall beside the House of Kamateros. Beside me and your Lord-Heir. Sometimes to a foolish degree.” He eyes cut to Angelo. “Though I cannot fault your loyalty to my son.”

Angelo gave a curt nod to acknowledge his role in Vince’s exile.

“The House of Kamateros has withstood several storms, but I suspect we will face more in the days to come. I have led you and been honored to hold your love and your loyalty. But just as seasons pass through our beloved land, and the old is phased out to make room for the new, so too should leaders be ready to consider when their time is past. It is one of the first lessons of leadership that my father taught me. Know when you are needed, when to act, when to watch, and when to let others lead.”

A gnawing unease began in the pit of Vince’s stomach. He locked gazes with his sister, and knew Serafina had also realized where this was going.

“*Hush, baby brother. You will be fine.*” Her telepathic voice soothing as always stemmed his panic. “*I’ll be beside you.*”

King Gabras glanced at his daughter with a faint lift of his mouth.

“The time has come for an old King to prepare for his successor. It is unusual, I know, for a King to step down when he has many more years to live.” He paused to let the gasps and murmurs dissipate.

Vince wished he could squeeze John’s hand.

“But that is precisely what I wish. A few years spent in the pursuit of music and art without the weight of the crown to hold me back. Surely you would not begrudge your king that much?”

Put like that, what was there to say.

“But Vincenzo has shown himself to be an excellent leader. He may have made mistakes, but his error in judgment had been driven by compassion. A leader without compassion is like the *Parijath* tree without its pristine flowers. The tree is magnificent, its leaves intricate and beautiful its branches graceful and offering shelter, but without its rare white flower, it lacks something at its core. It lacks the ability to inspire, to give hope. Vincenzo has this quality. *Daya.*” The king lapsed into the old language. “You all have it to some degree. Hold your *daya* close. It is a precious gift.”

Vince squirmed, not daring to reach into John’s mind, unwilling to interrupt his father. John’s hand inched closer, his little finger twined around Vince’s and Vince smiled. No matter what came next, his mate had just made it clear he would stand by him.

“I requested your presence for a small announcement. It is my wish that this information not leave these walls. There will be time enough to tell the world.”

The dramatic pauses may be helping his father deliver a message with great flair but they were playing hell with Vince’s insides.

“Within the turn of two moons, I will step down as your king. Vincenzo will be crowned King of Boreãs.”

The babble of voices were background noise to Vince. Two months. He wasn't ready. He wasn't cut out to be their King. It was always his father who knew the right way. He merely followed.

A warm male body pressed to his side. "Breathe." Vince inhaled, the musky scent of John, vampire with a hint of human, the whiff of his after-shave, steadying him. "Just breathe, babe. You'll make a fine king."

King Gabras clapped his hands for silence. "This is unexpected and we have much preparation to do. You are here because I would ask one last gift from you. Pledge allegiance to the Lord-Heir and his Consort."

*Whoa.* Vince hadn't seen that coming.

"If there is anyone here, who cannot accept John Reeder as the King's bonded mate, then they should speak now. I respect the right to your opinion, but if that opinion will hurt my son, I must know now. Your memory of what transpired in this room today will be wiped but otherwise you may leave unharmed."

Serafina's melodious voice, as compelling as their father's, filled the room. "No King is whole without a mate. A mate balances the ruler. To be mated alone is a gift. But to have life bond with that mate, is rare indeed and more precious than even I can describe. I do not care if that mate is male or female." With characteristic grace, she came forward until she faced Vince. "I only care that my brother has the good fortune to have found his John. And I another brother."

She sank into a deep bow before Vince, her gaze meeting his, as royalty did not dip their heads to anyone. "I pledge my allegiance in this life and those after to Vincenzo Kamateros, my future king." She rose and turned to John. "And to his Consort, I extend my welcome, my loyalty and my love."

Serafina was taller than John and her arms enveloped him in a warm hug that John returned with enthusiasm. Vince could feel the waves of shock, surprise, and love emanating from his mate.

One by one, they came up to him, humbling him with their fidelity, boosting his confidence with their jokes, warming his heart with their ready acceptance of John. Most surprising was the fierce hug from Carlo after he pledged his loyalty and the whispered words *I will give my life for you.*

There would be no easy path ahead for him or his family. Verno might accept John more readily, but the people of Boreãs would need to be convinced. Old prejudices, both against John being the *male* Consort of a male king, and John having been human, would rise up, again and again.

But with this stalwart group beside him, Vince knew he could weather what was to come. Finally, the last of their intimate group completed the ritual. Everyone had hugged John, only Rafe and Jude Mikhail as non-nobility, bowed to him, something that made John fidget.

Expectation hung in the air. It was John's turn. Vince wanted to tell John that he didn't expect anything formal. After all, John had barely had time to learn their customs.

But John stepped in front of Vince. Blue eyes, as deep blue as the Boreãs ocean on a spring day, met his.

John cleared his throat and turned slightly to address the room. “A year ago, a man crashed his car into a bakery, and my life was never the same again.” Chuckles all around. “I never planned for this as you all know. But as I made a conscious choice to renounce my mortality, I now welcome the chance to stand beside Vince.” He moved to face Vince. “I pledge my allegiance to you, Lord-Heir, my future king.”

Vince’s eyes widened in shock as John slowly sank down on one knee before him, the ultimate in humility and duty. Still kneeling, his steady gaze never leaving Vince, John spoke. “I will be whatever you need me to be—consort, friend, lover, protector—whenever you need it. I will never bow my head in case I miss a threat to you. My skill is yours to demand. My trust and my love are freely given. My life, however, is mine, and today I pledge it to you to command.”

Vince swallowed hard and not for all the crowns in the Orders could he have stopped the sheen of moisture in his eyes. This male, so worthy, but was Vince worthy of him?

“Bravo, John.” Serafina clapped her hands. “Well said.”

Vince bent and helped John rise. Words stuck in his throat, his breath caught in his chest. But he knew John understood how much this meant to Vince. Vince might never beat this moment but he had to at least try to plan the perfect proposal.

Angelo as usual got the last word. “Well, you know what, Vinny? I think we’ll keep him.”

THE END

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