



# **Primula**

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# Chapter 1 - To Meet the King

The main house of Primula Manor was abuzz with preparations for the king's arrival. Lord Primula fought to maintain his focus, preparing himself for the upcoming meeting, however his wife, the Lady Primula, seemed determined to divert him by bombarding him with questions about the most inane minutiae.

"I'm not wearing that stuff! It's scratchy and it's too tight!" His youngest son, Gillian, or Gil as he was known around the house, announced defiantly as he raced into his father's study.

"You'll wear your finest today! And that's the last I'm hearing of it!" Lady Primula bellowed as she stormed into the room after the boy.

Lord Primula took in a slow breath to calm himself, then said to his son, "Gil, go to your room and do as your mother says."

"She's not my mother!" Gil said indignantly.

"No. But I am your father, and I'm telling you to go and do as she said." Lord Primula said firmly.

"I'm sorry, daddy. I love you." Gil said as he walked to his father's side with his eyes downcast.

"I love you, too. Now go and do as you were told." Lord Primula said more gently. Gil leaned in and gave his father a kiss on the cheek, receiving a quick hug in return before scurrying out of the room.

Lord Primula glanced at his wife and found her venomous glare directed at him. Physically, she was the image of his late wife, whom he had loved so dearly. But any similarity ended there. His beloved Lydia had been a gentle soul, bringing a quiet calm joy into his life. His current wife seemed to revel in discord and never seemed to be satisfied with anything.

"I need to prepare for the meeting this evening. Would you keep everyone away from this room for a while?" Lord Primula asked hopefully.

"We still need to move the furniture so we can properly clean in here. Why don't you take your books and..." She dismissively gestured toward his desk, "...things, and lie about in some other part of the house?"

"Because everything I need to review is here. The king is coming to visit to get my insights on a matter, not for your pomp and finery." Lord Primula said seriously.

She flashed him an impatient glare, then angrily stalked out of the room.

Lord Primula looked after her for a moment, overcome by loss and regret, then turned his attention back to the papers on his desk.

Just as his thoughts seemed to be solidifying into workable ideas, the shrill, demanding scream of Lady Primula jolted his attention toward the next room.

It seemed that the Lady Primula found dust on a table leg in the sitting room and was verbally thrashing a member of the household staff for being a dimwitted sluggard.

Eventually, there was a blessed moment of silence, at which time, Lord Primula took in a slow relaxing breath to prepare himself to go back to work.

“I haven’t a single thing to wear. How do you expect me to stand before the king dressed in rags?!” Lady Primula huffed as she stormed onto the study again.

Lord Primula slowly released the breath as he fought not to lose his composure.

Finally, he calmly said, “He’s not coming to meet with you. Now, please, allow me to prepare for his arrival.”

“You don’t understand anything! If the king is well received in our home, we’ll be looked up to by all the other houses in the kingdom. This may be our only chance to gain his attention!”

“I’m afraid that we will gain his attention in a very different way if I’m not prepared for this meeting.”

“What could you possibly know that he doesn’t?”

“I know about the past disputes and agreements with our neighbors to the west.”

“I need a new dress... and shoes!”

“Then you’d better go and get them. Time is running out.”

“Will you follow after the staff to be sure that they’re following my instructions?”

“No. As I’ve said, I’ll be reviewing the agreements that we’ve made with the Marguins. Just tell Pierz what you expect and I’m sure that he’ll see that it’s handled.”

“Haven’t you been paying attention to anything? I sacked him and that woman of his two days ago when he refused to carry out my orders.”

“They’ve been with me for years! How could you do that without talking to me about it first?”

“You wanted to be left alone to sort out your precious papers.” Lady Primula said in a superior and self satisfied voice.

For some reason, Lord Primula was surprised by her snide tone. Although he knew of his wife’s contempt for him, she usually didn’t display it so openly.

“If you want a new dress, go and get it now.”

“If they’re not done by the time I get back, I will be very displeased.”

“Aren’t you always?” Lord Primula thought to himself as he watched her stomp out of the room in a cloud of indignant rage.

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“Daddy! She says we’re not going to get to meet the king!” Tristan, the eldest son, said as he ran into his father’s study.

“I’m sure you’ll meet him at the dinner. And I’ll make a point of introducing you.” Lord Primula said gently to his son.

“But she said we have to wear these scratchy clothes and stay in the kitchen while he’s here, but we’re not allowed to eat because we might mess up our good clothes.”

Lord Primula looked at his son and for a moment it was as though he was looking through a mirror into his distant past. Then he snapped back to the present and really looked at his son, primed to take his first steps into adulthood, dressed in his best clothes.

“Leave it to me, Tris. I’ll see that you get to meet the king tonight. I promise.”

“Thank you, daddy.” Tristan said to his father and gave him a firm hug, since he was now ten years old and too old to kiss his father.

“What are you doing in here!? I told you to stay in the kitchen! The king will be here any minute!” Lady Primula screeched hysterically.

“Go on, Tris. I’m counting on you to take care of your brother and sister.” Lord Primula said to his son with a slight smile.

“Yes, daddy.” Tristan said to his father, then spared a distasteful glare for his stepmother before he left.

“You’re not going to wear that are you?” Lady Primula asked with a look of revulsion.

“These are the proper clothes befitting a man of my station. I suppose that if the king finds that they are inadequate, I’ll tell him that I was depending on my wife to keep me suitably attired.”

Lady Primula stared at him in horror at the suggestion.

“Which, after all, is the truth. But you seem to be so concerned with your own appearance that you’ve neglected anything to do with me or the children. I’m sure you’ve noticed that Tristan’s finery that you’re forcing him to wear is too small and not suitable for a young man of his age.”

“Yes, but the king won’t be seeing him...” Lady Primula stammered.

“I am the Lord of this manor and I make that decision. Find suitable clothing for him.” Lord Primula declared, then stood and walked toward the door.

“You can’t...”

“The king will arrive any minute. I’ve already decided that Tristan will be meeting him at some point during the evening. Think of what that means to you and make your decisions accordingly.” Lord Primula said, then continued out of the study.

Although he knew that his wife would make his life miserable for it, it felt good to stand up to her for a change.

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“Your majesty, welcome to my humble home.” Lord Primula said respectfully.

“It isn’t often that I have the opportunity to visit the outer estates, these days. I had forgotten how lovely it is out here. I must make a point of visiting more often.” The king said in a low, tranquil voice.

“We would like that very much. I remember when you would visit my father, sometimes twice a year. It was nothing short of a celebration, like an extra holiday.” Lord Primula said fondly as he remembered.

“Yes. Although, I hope you don’t have anything such as that planned for this visit. We have too many serious matters to attend to.”

“No, your majesty, I’ve done as you instructed and spent all my free time familiarizing myself with my father’s treaties with the Marguins.”

“Good. Although the pomp and ceremony has its place, there are times when it’s a nuisance.”

“If you would like to come to my study, I have the treaties and the maps all set out so we can review them.”

“Before that, you should eat. I’ve hired the best chef in the village to prepare for you his greatest achievement.” Lady Primula interrupted.

“But it’s nearly two hours until dinner time.” Lord Primula said cautiously.

“Yes, but I’m sure the king must be hungry after his travels.” Lady Primula in an obviously fake and gushing voice as she focused entirely on the king, completely ignoring her husband.

“Then provide him a snack. We’ll dine in two hours, at the usual time.” Lord Primula said in a tone that didn’t invite argument.

Lady Primula stood, astonished by having all her plans derailed all at once.

“Your majesty, the study is right this way...”

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“Although the terms of our original agreement appear to prevent expansion, those terms were later revised during a trade negotiation two summers ago.” Lord Primula carefully explained.

“You negotiated that agreement, did you not?” The king asked quietly.

“Yes. It was one of the first since my father’s passing. But I was fortunate that my father had made a point of bringing me with him to every negotiation so I could become familiar with the process.”

“It also introduced you to the other negotiators, which opened a door for you that might be closed to many others.”

“Yes. Although I have always respected my father’s skills, I don’t think I appreciated his wisdom until after his passing.”

“I believe that is natural.” The king said, then cleared his throat.

“Can I get you a drink? I became so involved in our discussion that I forgot my manners.”

“You needn’t bother. We need to stay focused on the task at hand.” The king said, then gestured to one of his personal guards.

He spoke only a few hushed words to his guard, then turned to Lord Primula and explained, “My personal attendant will bring us drinks and some light snacks.”

“My apologies, your highness, as your host it’s my duty to provide such things for you.”

“You’re busy doing what must be done. I would have sent him sooner, but I heard you ask your wife to provide snacks earlier, so I thought they would be forthcoming.”

“I should have seen to it myself. I’m so sorry.”

“Trent, I’ve known you since you were a child. It troubles me to see you so unhappy.”

“When Lydia died, I didn’t know how I would be able to continue on without her. Then I met Carmen... she looked so much like Lydia... I suppose that I was blinded by my grief. I didn’t take the time to get to know her. I was such a fool...”

Lord Primula was interrupted by a furious screech and a crashing sound.

The king's personal guards moved closer to around him and were on alert for any sign of attack.

The sound of Lady Primula's furious screams filled their ears as Lord Primula looked down in shame at the behaviour of his wife.

Everyone turned suddenly when another of the king's guards rushed into the room and went to one knee before the king with his head bowed.

"What has happened?" the king asked cautiously.

"I relayed your instructions to Fel. We went immediately to the kitchen to prepare your refreshments and the Lady of the house responded violently toward him." The guard said as he kept his gaze on the floor before him.

"Was he hurt?" The king asked quietly.

"Yes, Highness. She was able to hit him with a cooking pot before I realized that we were under attack. I restrained her as quickly as I could and she is being held by the guards." The guard said remorsefully.

The king quickly stood and walked to the door.

"I'm so sorry, your highness." Lord Primula said as he followed immediately behind.

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As the king walked into the kitchen, he was surprised to find his attendant, Fel, laying unconscious. A boy was knelt at Fel's side, gently washing Fel's bloody forehead with a wet cloth.

"She hit him for no reason! He didn't do anything!" the boy said as he looked up at the king in anguish.

The king looked around to find two younger children, a grossly obese sweaty man and a young housemaid standing back and looking on in horror.

"How is he?" The king asked gently.

"I don't know. He won't wake up." The boy said frankly as he dipped the bloody cloth in a pan of water, then rang it out.

"Keep bathing the wound with cool water and I'm sure that he'll come around in a few minutes." The king's guard said with certainty, then glanced at his king apologetically for speaking out of turn.

"Where's the woman that did this?" The king asked as he looked to the oldest of his guards.

"She's been taken outside, so we can care for Fel in peace and quiet." The guard said seriously.

After a moment to consider, the King quietly said, "Have her taken back to the castle and locked away. I'll decide what to do with her when I return."

"Yes, Highness. Right away." The senior guard said before glancing at one of his junior officers and giving him a nod.

The younger guard dashed away to do as the king had commanded.

"I'm so sorry, your highness. I don't know why she would attack one of your people like that." Lord Primula said in anguish.

“Fel isn’t simply one of my people. He’s my personal attendant and someone who has become very dear to me. Your wife has attacked a member of my household and I can not and will not let that go unanswered.” The King said firmly.

“Yes. Of course. Please let me know if there is any way that I can make reparations.” Lord Primula quietly said as his gaze fell to the floor.

The king looked once again at the boy who was now holding a cold wet compress against the lump on Fel’s head.

“Who is this?” The king asked, indicating the boy who was attending to Fel.

“My eldest son, Tristan.” Lord Primula said anxiously.

The king gave a contemplative nod, then glanced across the kitchen and asked, “Is one of you the cook?”

The obese man shrank back in fear, but eventually nodded.

“Bring dinner when it’s ready. We’ll be waiting in the dining room.” The king said firmly.

The cook opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t form any words, he finally gave up on that and nodded his agreement.

The king then turned to Lord Primula and said, “We still have matters to discuss. I suddenly feel the need to dispose of them so that we can be on our way.”

“Yes. Your highness.” Lord Primula said gravely, then escorted the king to the dining room.

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“You seem distracted. I need for you to pay attention.” The king said seriously.

“I’m sorry, your highness. I’ll try to focus.” Lord Primula said quietly.

“I’m not angry with you, Trent. But I can understand if you’re concerned for your wife.” The King said gently.

“No. She attacked a member of your household. She’ll get whatever punishment you feel is appropriate.”

“Then what’s distracting you?” The King asked curiously.

“I know that you need for me to go with you for these negotiations, but I don’t know what I’m going to do about the children. Without my wife, I have no one to watch over them.” Lord Primula said reluctantly.

“Can’t your staff watch out for them?” The King asked curiously.

“No. The housemaid is quite young and couldn’t possibly watch after the children, she’s barely more than a child, herself. My wife let our cook go a few weeks ago. The cook that you saw in there was hired from town, just to serve us for the evening. My wife has run off nearly all my household staff since her arrival.”

Both the king and Lord Primula looked up as someone approached.

“I’m sorry you had to wait. Here are your drinks.” Fel said as he placed drinks before them.

“How are you feeling?” The King asked sympathetically as he looked at the large goose egg lump on Fel’s forehead.

“I’ll be fine. Thank you for your concern. I would have brought you the snacks that you requested, but the cook seems to be nearly ready to serve.” Fel said quietly.

“That’s fine. When dinner is served, why don’t you come in and dine with us?” The King asked with an encouraging smile.

“Yes. Thank you, your highness. I would like that very much.” Fel said respectfully, then withdrew from the room.

The king stared at the doorway for a moment after Fel passed through, then turned to Lord Primula and said, “I think that when we leave for our meeting, that I’m going to leave Fel here.”

Lord Primula looked at the King with interest.

“It’s partly because I’m not sure that he’s fit for travel with his injury. But I’m also interested to see how he would handle being given some responsibility.” The king said distantly.

Lord Primula waited, not quite sure what the king was talking about.

“What would you think if I left Fel in charge of your household while we were away?” The king asked as he turned to look Lord Primula in the eyes.

“But he looks like he’s barely older than Tristan.” Lord Primula said cautiously.

“Although he may not look it, he *is* an adult. Despite his stature, he’s strong and very level headed. I get the sense that if he’s given the opportunity, that he will rise to the challenge and thrive.”

“If you have such confidence in him, then I would gladly accept his help.” Lord Primula said seriously.

“One last thing, then we can get back to preparing for the meeting. Before your wife attacked Fel, I was talking to you about how unhappy you were. Do you think your marriage was a mistake?”

“The worst I’ve ever made. When Lydia died, I felt such emptiness and saw my children suffering without her here to care for them. I felt that I needed someone to fill that void... and I chose badly.”

“Would you wish to be relieved of the burden?”

“More than anything.”

“Then, it is done. Your suffering has come to an end. As of this moment, your marriage is dissolved.”

“Thank you, your highness...”

“Would we be interrupting if we served dinner now?” Fel asked from the doorway.

“No. Now would be the perfect time. Proceed.”

Fel gave a single nod, then withdrew from the room.

A moment later he walked in carrying a platter.

The cook and the housemaid followed, each carrying serving dishes.

Lord Primula looked to the door and saw Tristan looking back uncertainly.

“Your highness, would you mind if my son joined us for our meal?” Lord Primula asked cautiously.

“I think after the events of the day,, that it might be nice to divert our attention for a time. Please ask your children to join us.” The king said with a slight smile.

Lord Primula looked around, but Tristan had already retreated. None of his few remaining household staff were present, so he quickly left the room to gather his children.

The king took the quiet moment to look around the dining room that he had been in many times in previous years. He could see some new, showy things added to the room. But, somehow, the room still seemed to be trapped in time. The king briefly wondered if that weren’t representative of the situation in his old friend’s home. Despite the tacky glitz and finery that had been added, beneath it all, they were wallowing in a changeless void.

“I think the meal will be to your liking. The cook seems to be very good.” Fel said as he placed another bowl on the table, before taking his seat.

“Before Lord Primula returns, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“You may ask anything of me. I only wish to serve you.” Fel said reverently.

“I know, thank you. But please keep in mind that you are free to refuse. I will not be displeased.”

“I will, your highness.”

“I need for Lord Primula to accompany me on the next part of our journey. If you would agree to it, I would like for you to stay and oversee his household and see to the wellbeing of his children.”

“I don’t know if I will be able to do good enough...”

“Whatever you do will be good enough.” The king assured him.

“Please pardon my absence, your highness. I instructed the children to change into more comfortable clothing.” Lord Primula said as he entered.

“I’m glad you did that. I think we’ll all enjoy the meal quite a bit more that way.”

“Those clothes were itchy.” Gil proclaimed in agreement.

The king smiled, then turned to Lord Primula and said, “Fel has agreed to watch over your household during our travels.”

Lord Primula looked at the young man and said, “The king has told me of his confidence in you, so when I leave, I will go with the feeling of assurance that my children and home will be in good hands.”

“Thank you.” Fel said to Lord Primula, then turned to the king and asked, “May I ask Lord Primula a question regarding his household?”

“Yes. But keep it brief. Once this food is served, I intend to eat, conversation or no.” The king said simply.

Gil turned to the king and nodded his wholehearted agreement.

“Lord Primula, if I am to manage your household, I must know how you want things to be. Do you desire for this to be a showplace or a home? Should it be a haven for your children or a formal venue for entertaining?”

“It was my wife who was enamored of all these formal trappings. All I really want is a roof, a hot meal, and a warm bed. And, of course, I’d like it kept clean, but not so clean that it looks like no one lives here.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind if I removed some of the ornaments to make your house a bit more livable for children?”

“Mind? I despise living in this museum where you can’t touch anything.”

“I think I understand. I will do my best to fashion your home to your liking.”

“Thank you.” Lord Primula said in astonishment.

“If you have had all your questions answered, let us enjoy this fine meal.”

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“Your highness, may I introduce my eldest son, Tristan.” Lord Primula said proudly as he gestured toward his son.

“Yes. It is a pleasure to meet you, young man.” The king said with a genuine smile at the boy.

“It’s an honor to meet you, your highness. My father has said that starting next summer, he will take me with him so I can learn what he does so I can become lord of the manor, someday.” Tristan said proudly.

“I will look forward to having you along when we have to negotiate with our neighbors. Should all go well in the coming days, I foresee many negotiations in the future.” The king said warmly.

“Although I know that Tristan is excited about his training, I’m encouraging him to remain calm and enjoy his childhood for a bit longer before we start in on that.” Lord Primula said gently as he looked at his son.

“And daddy needs for me to take care of Gil and Mattie so his wife won’t forget them or hurt them.” Tristan said frankly.

“Tris, we don’t need to be discussing that now.” Lord Primula rushed to say.

“That’s quite alright, Trent.” The king said, then turned to Tristan and continued, “And I promise you that your father’s wife won’t be troubling you anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Tristan asked in confusion.

“She hurt Fel, so I had her taken away.”

“So she’s gone? For good?” Tristan asked hopefully.

“Yes. She’s gone for good…” the king said to Tristan, then looked at Lord Primula and continued, “For the good of all, it seems.”

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Through dinner, each of the children told the king about the things they were learning from their tutor.

To the king, it felt more like a visit with his grandchildren than a dinner with one of the Lords of his kingdom. Or, at least it’s what he imagined it would be like, since neither of his sons had seen fit to settle down and marry.

“What a lovely meal. Fel, be sure to pass on my compliments to the chef.” The king said as he pushed away from the table.

“Yes, your highness.” Fel said respectfully.

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“Tristan, I’m going to have to leave, now. The king was good enough to leave Fel here, to take care of things. Be sure to help him however you can.” Lord Primula said seriously.

“Can’t I go with you?” Tristan asked his father hopefully.

“I tell you what, Tris, if you can help me thing get settled here at home, so I don’t have to worry about what’s going to happen when I leave, then I’ll take you with me the next time I have to negotiate.” Lord Primula said seriously.

Tristan was about to agree, but instead he asked, “You’re worried about Gil and Mattie, aren’t you? That’s why you want me to stay?”

“Yes. The king seems certain that Fel can take care of everything here, but it would make me feel a lot better if you were here to watch over Gil and Mattie... just like you always have.”

**To Be Continued...**