



His Forbidden Princess

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: She was never meant to be his. But he's done pretending.

Princess Lirien has spent her life in a gilded cage, suffocating under royal expectations. When she slips away for one night of freedom—one reckless night to taste life beyond the palace walls—she never expects her shadow to follow. But he does. And when another man dares to touch her, her ruthless, possessive bodyguard snaps.

Dain Vorex has spent years keeping his distance, watching over his princess with silent, brutal devotion. But the moment she steps into the city, unprotected, his control shatters. He drags her away from prying eyes, his hands branding her, his mouth proving what she should have always known—she belongs to him.

Now, there's no going back. Not when he's had a taste. Not when the king announces her betrothal to another man. Not when Dain is willing to betray his kingdom, his honor, and his very soul to make her his.

He swore an oath to protect her.

But he'll burn the world before he lets another man touch what's his.

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Lirien

I pace my chambers like a caged animal, each step marking another second of my life ticking away behind these gilded walls. Twenty-three years old and I've never felt the rush of true freedom—just the hollow echo of my footsteps in rooms too large and too empty. My fingers trace the silk curtains framing windows that might as well be painted scenes, for all I'm allowed to engage with the world beyond them.

The crown sits heavy on my dressing table—not the actual crown, but its weight, its inevitability. Crown Princess Lirien Vellara, heir to a throne I never asked for, trapped in a life I never chose.

"Your Highness?" My lady's maid enters with a soft knock, her eyes downcast in practiced deference. "The council awaits your attendance."

"Tell them I'm ill." The lie slips easily from my tongue, practiced from years of small rebellions.

"Your father specifically requested?—"

"I said I'm ill." My voice hardens, and I immediately regret it. It's not her fault I'm suffocating. "Forgive me. Tell them I'll be there shortly."

She bows and retreats, leaving me alone with my reflection. My auburn hair has been tamed into an elaborate updo, emerald pins holding captive the strands that would rather run wild. My eyes—the same green as the pins—stare back at me, bright with a defiance I rarely voice aloud.

How many more hours must I spend listening to ancient men debate grain tariffs and marriage alliances while my youth withers away? How many more nights must I lie awake, imagining streets I've never walked, conversations I've never had, kisses I've never...

I press my fingers to my lips, banishing the thought. Princesses don't daydream about kisses from nameless, faceless men. They accept the husband chosen for them and bear heirs for the kingdom. The same tired story, generation after generation.

But not today. Today, I'll ask for something different.

I adjust my formal dress, smoothing the emerald silk that matches my eyes. If I'm to convince Father, I must look every inch the responsible heir.

The palace corridors stretch before me like the inside of a jeweled serpent—beautiful, cold, and winding. Guards stand at attention as I pass, their faces impassive. All except one.

Dain.

His eyes follow me from his post near the council chamber, a storm brewing in those blue depths. My personal shadow for years now, the man who saved my life when I was sixteen and has rarely spoken more than ten words to me since. Yet sometimes, when he thinks I'm not looking, I catch him watching me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

Like now.

I straighten my spine and lift my chin, refusing to acknowledge the heat that floods my cheeks under his gaze. He's nearly twice my age, worn by battles I can only imagine, scarred both visibly and invisibly. And he is forbidden—not just by the vast gulf of our stations, but by something deeper, something that makes the air between us crackle with unspoken tension.

I force myself to look away and continue toward Father's private study. This is not the time to dwell on my peculiar relationship with my silent protector.

Two guards flank the massive oak doors to Father's sanctuary. They bow and announce my arrival, then swing the doors open to reveal the King hunched over maps and correspondence, his crown discarded carelessly beside a half-eaten meal.

"Father." I curtsy out of habit, though we're alone.

"Lirien." He looks up, his face softening slightly. For all his strictness, I know he loves me. Which makes what I'm about to ask all the more difficult. "I expected you in council."

"I needed to speak with you privately." I approach his desk, forcing my hands to remain still at my sides rather than fidgeting with my dress. "I have a request."

His eyebrow rises. "Proceed."

I take a deep breath. "I wish to travel beyond the palace walls. To see our kingdom—not from a carriage window during ceremonial processions, but truly see it. The villages, the countryside. I want to understand the people I will one day rule."

Silence stretches between us. His fingers drum against the polished wood, a nervous

habit he's never managed to break despite years of royal advisors urging him to appear more decisive.

"Absolutely not." His voice is firm, but not angry.

"Father, I'm twenty-three years old. How can I possibly be expected to lead a kingdom I've never truly experienced?"

"You've attended every council meeting, received the finest education from the most esteemed tutors in the land. You know our kingdom through maps and reports and histories—the only way a ruler needs to know it."

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My carefully constructed composure begins to crack. "Books and maps don't show me how our people live. They don't let me hear their concerns firsthand or?—"

"They also don't expose you to dangers you're not prepared for." He rises now, his height still imposing despite the gray creeping into his beard. "Have you forgotten how close we came to losing you seven years ago? If not for Vorex's quick thinking..."

"So I'm to remain a prisoner because one man once thought to harm me?" The words burst out before I can temper them.

Father's expression darkens. "You are not a prisoner, Lirien. You are a princess. There is a difference, though in your current mood you seem determined to ignore it."

"What difference? I cannot leave these walls without an armed escort. I cannot speak to anyone without their words being dissected for potential threats. I cannot even—" I stop myself before mentioning the marriage negotiations I know are underway. That battle is for another day.

"Enough." His palm slams against the desk, making me flinch. "You were born to privilege and responsibility. The sooner you accept both, the happier you will be."

"Happy?" The word tastes bitter. "Is that what you think I am? Happy to be dressed up like a doll and paraded before foreign dignitaries? Happy to have my life plotted out from birth to death without a single choice of my own?"

"Choices?" He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You think the common folk you so

romanticize have choices? The farmer's daughter who must marry to secure her family's land? The widow who takes in washing to feed her children? Do not confuse freedom with hardship, daughter."

"At least they know who they are." My voice drops to barely above a whisper. "At least they've felt the rain on their faces without guards holding umbrellas. At least they've chosen who to love."

Something in his expression shifts—a flash of pain, quickly masked. "This discussion is over. You will attend council as expected, and you will not bring up this foolishness again. Do I make myself clear?"

I should curtsy. I should agree. I should retreat gracefully and plot a more strategic approach. Instead, I feel hot tears pricking my eyes and turn away before he can see them.

"Crystal clear, Your Majesty."

The corridor blurs as I hurry back to my chambers, ignoring the concerned looks from servants and guards. Only when I reach my rooms do I allow myself to collapse into a chair, breathing hard, willing the tears not to fall.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror—cheeks flushed, eyes bright with unshed tears, hair coming loose from its pins. I look wild, untamed. I look like someone I don't recognize.

And suddenly, I know what I have to do.

If Father won't grant me permission to leave, I'll take it myself. Just for one night. One taste of freedom before I'm shackled forever to duty and expectation.

I cross to my wardrobe and push aside silks and velvets until I find what I'm looking for—simple clothes I bribed a kitchen maid to bring me months ago, thinking someday I might find the courage to use them. Plain brown trousers, a loose linen shirt, a hooded cloak. Clothes that would let me blend into a crowd, become invisible in a way I've never experienced.

My hands shake as I pull them out and lay them on my bed. This is madness. If I'm caught, the consequences would be severe. Father would never trust me again. Dain would be furious...

Dain. For a moment, I picture his face when he discovers I've slipped away—those intense blue eyes darkening with anger, perhaps even hurt. He takes his duty to protect me with deadly seriousness.

But isn't that part of the problem? Everyone sees me as something to protect, to preserve, to control. No one sees me as simply Lirien—a woman with desires and dreams of her own.

I stroke the rough fabric of the cloak, already imagining how it will feel against my skin. Tonight, after the palace sleeps, I'll find my way out through the passages I've memorized from old architectural plans in the library. Just a few hours of freedom, of anonymity. A few hours to breathe air not filtered through the expectations of a kingdom.

And who knows? Perhaps once I've had my taste of freedom, I'll return content to fulfill my duties. Perhaps I'll find the outside world less appealing than I've imagined.

But I doubt it.

I tuck the clothes back into hiding, a secret promise to myself. Tonight, Princess Lirien Vellara will disappear, and in her place, just a woman will walk the streets of

the kingdom she is destined to rule.

For the first time all day, I smile.

The waiting is the hardest part.

two

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Dain

My hands rest on the pommel of my sword, still as death while my eyes track her movements down the corridor. Princess Lirien Vellara—my assignment, my duty, my obsession. Her emerald silk dress whispers against the marble floor as she glides past, chin high, spine straight, completely unaware that each swish of fabric is a lash against my skin. Fifteen years separate us in age. A gulf of status and propriety stretches between us like an ocean. Yet for seven years, I've stood in her shadow, dying by inches with each passing day.

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She passes me without acknowledgment, but I catch the slight flush on her cheeks. She knows I'm watching. She always knows.

"Vorex," Captain Merritt nods as he approaches. "Shift change in an hour."

I grunt in response. Words are weapons that can betray, and I've learned to use as few as possible.

"Princess seems agitated today," he continues, oblivious to my disinterest in conversation. "Heard she had quite the row with His Majesty."

This catches my attention, though I don't show it. Lirien rarely argues openly with her father. She's too clever for that, preferring to outmaneuver rather than confront.

"Not our concern," I mutter, though it's a lie. Everything about her is my concern.

Merritt shrugs and moves on. I return to my vigil, mind drifting back to the moment that sealed my fate.

Seven years ago. A state dinner celebrating the princess's sixteenth birthday. I was newly promoted to the royal guard, stationed along the wall, watching for threats while nobility danced and feasted. She was radiant that night, hair like burnished copper in the candlelight, laughing with a freedom she rarely displays now.

I spotted the assassin before anyone else—a serving man with eyes too sharp, hand too steady as he approached her table. When he drew the blade, I was already moving, throwing myself between steel and princess. The knife sliced across my jaw

instead of plunging into her heart. I killed him with my bare hands, snapping his neck before the nobles had time to scream.

Blood dripped onto her white dress as I turned to check her for injuries. Her eyes—wide, impossibly green—locked with mine, and something passed between us. Something that hasn't broken in seven years.

The king made me her personal guard the next day. My reward and my punishment.

Now I stand outside the council chamber, a silent sentinel while she meets with advisors. I can hear the low murmur of voices inside but can't make out her words. I don't need to. I know her voice better than my own—the way it rises when she's passionate about something, the slight tremor she fights to control when she's angry, the rare musical quality when she truly laughs.

Guards aren't supposed to listen. We're furniture—useful, necessary, but not worthy of notice.

But I listen. I watch. I memorize.

"Did you hear about the Westland prince?" A chambermaid whispers to another as they pass, not bothering to lower their voices around me. I'm furniture, after all.

"Arriving within the month, they say. For the princess."

"About time she was matched. Twenty-three and still unwed—the old king would never have allowed it."

"Handsome, I hear. Young too."

Their voices fade as they turn the corner, but the damage is done. A white-hot rage

floods my veins, though my expression remains impassive. I've suspected marriage negotiations were underway—it's the logical next step for the crown princess—but hearing it confirmed is like a knife between my ribs.

The council doors open, and nobles file out. Lirien emerges last, her face composed but eyes stormy. Something happened in there. Something that upset her.

My job is to follow at a discreet distance as she returns to her chambers. To protect, not to care. To serve, not to want.

But God help me, I want.

I want in ways that would see me executed if anyone could hear my thoughts. I want to unwrap her from that court finery, to see if the freckles I've glimpsed on her nose continue down her throat, across her shoulders, over the swell of her?—

I clench my jaw, forcing the thoughts away. The scar there pulls tight—her scar, in a way. The physical reminder of the moment my soul was lost.

She moves faster than usual today, almost running by the time she reaches her chambers. The door slams behind her, and I take up my position outside, mind racing.

Something is wrong. I've guarded her long enough to recognize when she's plotting something reckless. It's in the set of her shoulders, the rhythm of her steps, the way her fingers twitched at her sides.

Hours pass. The palace settles into evening rituals. Servants deliver her dinner, then remove the barely-touched tray. Her lady's maid enters, then leaves earlier than usual, looking confused.

"She dismissed me," the woman mutters. "Said she'd prepare for bed herself."

Alarm bells ring in my head. In seven years, Lirien has never prepared for bed herself. It's not the princess way.

I should report my suspicions to the captain. That's protocol. That's duty.

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Instead, I wait, listening at her door during the changing of the guard, using the brief handover to press my ear against the wood.

Silence.

Too much silence.

When my replacement arrives, I feign receiving special orders.

"I'm to maintain watch tonight," I tell him. "King's request."

He doesn't question it. No one questions Dain Vorex, the princess's shadow, the scarred guard who speaks only when necessary.

I wait until the corridor empties, then test her door. Unlocked. Wrong. She always locks it.

The chambers are empty, the bed undisturbed. A window stands open, curtains fluttering in the night breeze.

She's gone.

Panic seizes me—not the controlled alertness of a guard, but the visceral terror of a man whose reason for breathing has vanished. I force it down, searching the room for clues.

Her jewelry remains. Good—she's not foolish enough to make herself a target for

thieves. The simple clothes she sometimes wears for riding are missing from her wardrobe. A rope of knotted sheets hangs from the window, reaching down to a lower roof.

Clever princess. But not clever enough.

I should sound the alarm. The entire palace guard would mobilize within minutes. She'd be found, returned, protected.

But then she'd never forgive me. And selfishly, brutally, I want her to look at me with something other than the careful distance she's maintained these past years.

I make my decision in seconds. Shrugging off my guard's cloak and sword belt, I keep only my daggers. I pull on a plain black tunic from my own quarters nearby, clothes that will let me blend into the shadows of the city. Then I follow her path down the knotted sheets, tracking her by the faint scuff marks on the rooftops.

She's heading for the eastern gate, the smallest and least guarded. Smart girl. She's studied the palace defenses, probably planned this for months.

I keep to the shadows, twenty paces behind her hooded figure. Close enough to intervene if needed, far enough that she won't sense my presence. She moves with surprising stealth for someone raised in silk slippers and formal processions.

My heart pounds against my ribs, contradictory emotions warring within me. Anger that she would risk herself like this. Pride at her resourcefulness. Fear for her safety in a city where a princess without guards is just a young woman with a pretty face. And underneath it all, a dark, possessive thrill that tonight, she belongs to no one but herself—and me, her unseen guardian.

She slips past the gate guards with a bribed pastry and a story about a sick mother.

They let her through without question—two young men too bored and too trusting to recognize royalty in disguise.

I follow, using a different gate where the guard owes me a favor, and emerge into the city proper moments later.

The streets pulse with night life—taverns spilling light and laughter, vendors hawking late dinners to revelers, couples and groups moving from one entertainment to another. And there she is, standing in the middle of it all, head tilted back to look at the stars without a palace roof obstructing her view.

The wonder on her face stops me in my tracks. In that moment, with her hood fallen back and her hair loose around her shoulders, she looks nothing like the contained, proper princess. She looks free. She looks like the woman I see in my most dangerous dreams.

She begins to walk, drinking in the sights and sounds of her kingdom with undisguised delight. I follow, a shadow among shadows.

This is madness. I'm risking everything—my position, possibly my life—by allowing this escapade to continue. If any harm comes to her, my failure would be unforgivable. If we're discovered, the scandal would damage her reputation irrevocably.

I should stop her now. Grab her arm, drag her back to the palace, face her fury but know I've done my duty.

Instead, I watch her run her fingers over market stall fabrics closed for the night. I watch her inhale the scent of street food with closed eyes. I watch her smile—truly smile—at a street musician playing a haunting melody on a battered string instrument.

I've given my life to protecting her body. Perhaps tonight, I'm protecting something equally precious—her spirit.

She turns down an alley leading to the entertainment district, where taverns and gambling houses compete for the coin of sailors and merchants. Too dangerous. Too many men who would see a beautiful young woman alone as an opportunity.

I close the distance between us, ready to intervene if necessary. Tonight, I'll be her shadow. I won't ruin the princess' night of freedom.

Unless I have to.

three

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Lirien

Freedom tastes like honey wine and wood smoke. It feels like rough-spun cloth against my skin instead of silk. It sounds like laughter without protocol, music without ceremony. I can't stop smiling as I move through the crowded streets, my hood pulled low enough to shadow my face but not so low that I can't drink in every detail of this vibrant, messy, glorious world I've been denied for twenty-three years.

My heart pounds with the thrill of my escape, still amazed I managed to slip past the guards. Years of eavesdropping on palace staff, months of planning, weeks of gathering courage—all leading to this moment of perfect, stolen liberty.

The night market sprawls before me, lanterns strung between stalls casting golden light over vendors selling everything from roasted meats to intricate jewelry. No one bows as I pass. No one watches their words or adjusts their posture. I am gloriously, magnificently invisible.

I pause at a stall selling fried dough sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar, the scent making my mouth water. The palace kitchens could produce any delicacy I requested, but somehow I know this simple street food will taste better than any royal feast.

"How much?" I ask, then blush when I realize I have no idea what constitutes a fair price. Palace tutors taught me economic theory, not practical commerce.

The vendor—a woman with laugh lines etched deep around her eyes—looks me up and down. "Two copper for you, love. You look like you could use something sweet."

I fumble with the small pouch of coins I brought, careful not to reveal how much it contains. My fingers close around what I hope is the right amount, and I place it in her weathered palm.

She counts it quickly, then hands me back a piece. "That's too much."

"Keep it," I say, surprising myself with my boldness. "The smell alone is worth it."

Her smile shifts from professional to genuine. "First time in the city?"

"Is it that obvious?"

She laughs, a rich, uninhibited sound I immediately envy. "You've got that look—like everything's new. Country girl?"

"Something like that." I accept the paper-wrapped dough and take a bite. The crisp exterior gives way to soft, warm insides, the sweetness exploding on my tongue. I can't help the small moan of pleasure that escapes me.

"Good, ain't it?" She winks. "Be careful out there. City folk can spot newcomers, and not all are as honest as me."

I nod my thanks and continue through the market, licking sugar from my fingers in a way that would horrify my etiquette instructors. Each step takes me further from the palace, from duty, from the weight of a future not of my choosing.

A group of street performers has drawn a crowd up ahead. I join the circle of onlookers, delighting in the acrobats who flip and tumble with impossible grace.

When they pass a hat for coins, I contribute without hesitation, rewarded with a flourishing bow that makes me giggle.

It's strange how quickly I'm adapting to anonymity. All my life I've been the center of attention—Princess Lirien Vellara, heir to the throne, subject of constant scrutiny. Now I'm just another face in the crowd, and the freedom is intoxicating.

I continue my exploration, passing through quieter streets where couples walk arm in arm, then noisier ones where taverns spill light and music onto the cobblestones. The guards at the gates warned me against this area, but curiosity pulls me forward.

One establishment seems less raucous than the others—a tavern with a painted sign depicting a crown made of wheat. The Crown and Sheaf. Appropriate, given my circumstances. I hesitate only a moment before pushing open the door.

The interior is warm and wood-paneled, crowded but not chaotic. A musician plays a stringed instrument in one corner while patrons talk, laugh, and drink at scattered tables. I make my way to the bar, trying to project confidence I don't feel.

"What'll it be?" The barkeeper barely glances up from the mug he's drying.

"Whatever you recommend." My voice sounds steadier than I expected.

He eyes me more carefully now, taking in my plain clothes and probably noting my accent, which I can't quite disguise despite my best efforts. "First time here?"

"First time anywhere," I admit, then bite my tongue. Less information is safer.

Something like sympathy crosses his face. "Try the honey mead. Gentle but sweet."

The drink he slides toward me is golden and fragrant. I take a cautious sip and find it

surprisingly pleasant—nothing like the watered wine I'm permitted at state functions. I turn to survey the room, leaning against the bar as I've seen others do.

That's when I notice him.

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A man sits alone at a corner table, partially shadowed but with eyes that catch the light. He's watching me. Not in the leering way of the drunk nobles I avoided earlier, but with quiet intensity that feels both familiar and unsettling.

When our eyes meet, he doesn't look away. Instead, he raises his glass slightly, a gesture somewhere between a salute and an invitation.

I should ignore him. I should finish my drink and continue my exploration. The last thing I need is an entanglement with a stranger.

But there's something about him that draws me. Something I can't quite place but that makes my pulse quicken. Before I can reconsider, I'm crossing the room toward his table.

"Is this seat taken?" I ask, surprised by my own boldness.

Up close, I can see him better. Older than me by at least a decade, maybe more. Broad-shouldered beneath a simple black tunic. A beard shadows his jaw, partially obscuring features that seem strangely familiar, though I'm certain we've never met. I would remember those eyes—blue as a winter sky, observant and guarded.

"It is now." His voice is low, controlled. He gestures for me to sit.

I slide into the chair across from him, setting my mead on the rough wooden table.

"Do you make a habit of staring at women in taverns?"

The corner of his mouth twitches—not quite a smile. "Only the interesting ones."

"And what makes me interesting?" I ask, taking another sip of mead to steady my nerves. I've never flirted before, never had the opportunity, but something about this man makes me want to try.

"You don't belong here." It's not a question.

I stiffen. "What makes you say that?"

"You carry yourself differently. Your eyes take everything in like it's the first time you're seeing it." He leans forward slightly. "And you're not afraid, though perhaps you should be."

"Should I be afraid of you?" The question comes out softer than intended.

That almost-smile again. "Not in the way you think."

There's something oddly comforting about his presence, despite the cryptic responses. The tavern bustles around us, but it feels like we're in our own private world.

"What brings you to the Crown and Sheaf tonight?" I ask, attempting normal conversation.

"I followed someone." His directness startles me.

"A lover?"

"No." His eyes never leave mine. "Someone I'm sworn to protect, whether she wants it or not."

A cold shock runs through me. The timbre of his voice, the set of his shoulders, the intense focus of his gaze—how did I not recognize them immediately?

"Dain," I whisper, the name falling from my lips before I can stop it.

His expression doesn't change, but something flickers in those blue eyes—acknowledgment, perhaps even approval that I've solved the puzzle.

"Princess." He inclines his head slightly, the gesture aching familiar despite his altered appearance.

My exhilaration curdles into fury. "You followed me. You're spying on me." I move to stand, but his hand shoots out, fingers closing around my wrist.

"Sit down," he says quietly. "Unless you want everyone in this tavern to know they're drinking with royalty."

I sink back into my seat, anger making my cheeks burn. "I ordered no guard tonight."

"And yet, here I am." His thumb brushes over my pulse point, sending an unwelcome shiver up my arm before he releases me.

"How did you know I'd left?" I demand, keeping my voice low.

"I know everything about you." The simple statement hangs between us, loaded with implications I'm not ready to examine. "Your breathing changes when you're planning something rebellious. You've been collecting information about the city gates for months. Your lady's maid left your chambers looking confused tonight because you dismissed her early."

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My mouth goes dry. Has he been watching me that closely all these years? And more disturbingly, why does the thought send heat pooling low in my stomach instead of frightening me?

"So what now?" I force myself to meet his gaze. "Are you going to drag me back to my gilded cage?"

"If I wanted to do that, we wouldn't be having this conversation." He takes a drink, throat working in a way that draws my eye. "You have until dawn. Then I return you to the palace."

I blink, not having expected any compromise. "Why?"

"Because you'll go willingly at dawn, or I'll carry you back over my shoulder like a sack of grain." His voice is matter-of-fact. "And because I'd rather you experienced the city with protection than sneak out again without it."

"You're not in uniform," I observe. "Won't you be punished if we're discovered?"

Something dark crosses his face. "Let me worry about consequences."

I should be outraged at his presumption, at the way he's infiltrated my one night of freedom. Instead, I find myself studying him with new interest. Without his guard's uniform, with the beard shadowing his jaw, he looks different—more human, less the impassive sentinel who's shadowed me for years.

The scar along his jaw—my scar, as I've always thought of it—seems more

pronounced in this light. I have a sudden, inappropriate urge to trace it with my finger.

"You changed your appearance," I say instead. "Your beard..."

"Easier to blend in. Harder for anyone to recognize me as your guard."

"You planned this."

A slight shrug. "I suspected you might try something foolish eventually."

"Freedom isn't foolish." My fingers tighten around my mug. "It's necessary. Especially when—" I stop myself.

"When what?" His eyes narrow.

I shake my head. He doesn't need to know about the marriage negotiations, though if he's as observant as he claims, he probably already suspects.

"Nothing." I drain the last of my mead, making a decision. "Fine. You can accompany me, but don't hover. And don't speak to me as if I'm a child needing supervision."

"As you wish, Princess." There's a hint of mockery in the title.

"Don't call me that. Not tonight." I stand, steadier this time. "Tonight, I'm just Lirien."

"Lirien," he repeats, and something about the way my name sounds in his deep voice makes my skin prickle with awareness.

Our fingers brush as he rises to follow me, and I feel a spark—static from the dry air,

but it jolts me nonetheless. For a moment, we're frozen, connected by that small point of contact, by something electric and dangerous passing between us.

Then he steps back, gesturing toward the door. "After you."

I move past him, feeling his presence at my back like a physical touch. My night of freedom has become something else entirely—a dance with my shadow, a game with rules I don't fully understand.

But as we step back into the night air, with the city spread before us and Dain a solid presence beside me, I can't bring myself to regret it.

four

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Dain

I stay two steps behind her as we wind through the crowded streets, close enough to intervene if needed, far enough to maintain the illusion of her independence. My blood still simmers from our encounter in the tavern. She recognized me—not immediately, but faster than I expected. Those green eyes widened with shock, then narrowed with anger, but beneath both, I caught something else. Something that makes keeping my distance a special kind of torture.

She moves through the night market with undisguised wonder, stopping to examine trinkets and taste exotic foods. The copper-gold strands of her hair escape her hood as she leans over a jewelry display, and I have to clench my fists against the urge to tuck them back, to feel their softness between my fingers.

"Look at these," she calls over her shoulder, forgetting momentarily that she's

supposed to be angry with me. She holds up a pair of simple wooden earrings, carved with delicate leaves. Nothing like the priceless gems that adorn her at court, yet she looks at them as if they're treasures.

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"Pretty," I manage, the word inadequate for what I really want to say.

She replaces them carefully and continues her exploration, shoulders relaxed, steps lighter than I've ever seen at the palace. Out here, away from duty and expectation, she's transformed. The weight of the crown lifts from her, and I glimpse the woman she might have been in another life—carefree, curious, unbound by protocol.

It's dangerous, how much I prefer this version of her.

"Are you hungry?" she asks, pausing at a stall selling skewered meat that fills the air with spicy fragrance.

I nod, reaching for my coin pouch, but she's already handing over money, proud of this small act of self-sufficiency. I accept the food she offers, our fingers brushing in the exchange. She doesn't pull away immediately, and for one reckless moment, I imagine trapping those delicate fingers against the rough skin of my palm.

The spell breaks when she steps away, continuing her tour of the market. I follow, tasting nothing of the food, aware only of her and the potential threats surrounding us.

And there are threats. I catch the appreciative glances from men we pass, the way eyes linger on the curve of her hip, the slender column of her neck when she tilts her head back to laugh at something. She doesn't notice, or perhaps chooses not to, but I catalog each look, each potential danger.

She leads us toward the sound of music drifting from further down the street. A tavern—more raucous than the Crown and Sheaf, spilling light and noise into the

night. The Drunken Sailor, according to the weathered sign swinging above the door.

"No," I say, stepping closer to block her path. "Not this one."

Her chin lifts in that stubborn way I know too well. "You promised not to interfere."

"I promised to keep you safe. That place isn't safe."

"How would you know?" Challenge flashes in her eyes. "Have you spent many nights in taverns like this, Captain Vorex?"

The formal title is a reminder of our respective positions, a barrier she throws between us when she feels cornered. But tonight I'm not her captain, not her guard. I'm simply a man following a woman who owns his soul without knowing it.

"Enough to know it's no place for you," I growl, stepping closer. "Choose another."

For a moment I think she'll argue, but then she shrugs, a casual gesture that doesn't match the mulish set of her mouth. "Fine. That one, then." She points to another tavern across the street—slightly less rowdy, but still not what I'd choose.

Before I can object, she's already moving toward it, leaving me to follow or lose sight of her in the crowd. I swallow a curse and lengthen my stride to catch up.

Inside, the air is thick with smoke and the smell of bodies pressed too close together. A small space has been cleared for dancing, and several couples twirl to the lively music of a three-piece band. The rest crowd around tables or the long bar that spans one wall.

Lirien weaves through the press of people to secure a small table in the corner, looking pleased with herself as she claims a seat. I remain standing, scanning the

room for threats, positioning myself so my back is to the wall and my eyes can track every movement.

"Sit down," she says, patting the stool beside her. "You look like you're about to murder someone."

"That remains to be seen," I mutter, but I take the seat, my thigh brushing against hers in the cramped space.

A serving girl appears with remarkable speed. "What'll it be?"

"Ale," Lirien says confidently, as if she orders it every day instead of the watered wine she's served at court.

"Two," I amend, not trusting the quality of anything stronger in a place like this.

When the drinks arrive, I watch her take a tentative sip, then a longer one, licking foam from her upper lip in a way that makes heat pool in my gut. She grimaces slightly at the bitter taste but takes another drink, determined to embrace the experience.

"Well?" she asks, setting down her mug. "Aren't you going to lecture me about royal dignity and proper behavior?"

"Would it make any difference?"

A small smile tugs at her lips. "No."

"Then I'll save my breath." I scan the room again, noting a group of sailors getting progressively louder at a nearby table. "Drink your ale, Princess. Dawn comes sooner than you think."

She follows my gaze to the sailors, then turns back to me. "Have you ever wanted something you couldn't have, Dain?"

The question catches me off guard. We don't have personal conversations. We don't discuss wants or desires. We exist in carefully delineated spaces that never intersect, except in my darkest dreams.

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"Yes," I answer finally, because tonight is already so far beyond the boundaries of what's allowed.

"What did you do about it?" Her eyes hold mine, searching for something I can't afford to give her.

I take a long drink of ale to avoid answering immediately. "I learned to live with the wanting."

"That's very noble of you." There's a hint of mockery in her tone, but something else beneath it—disappointment, perhaps.

"There's nothing noble about it." My voice is rougher than intended. "It's survival."

She opens her mouth to respond, but the music changes to something faster, more insistent, and her attention shifts to the dancers. I see the longing in her face as she watches them, free and uninhibited.

"I've never danced like that," she says softly. "Only formal court dances with appropriate partners and appropriate distance."

I should discourage her. I should remind her of the risk, of her position, of the dawn deadline that looms closer with each passing minute.

Instead, I hear myself ask, "Would you like to?"

Her eyes widen in surprise, then crinkle with delight. "Yes. Very much."

I stand, extending my hand in a gesture that mimics court formality but feels entirely different in this smoke-filled tavern. She places her fingers in mine, and I lead her to the edge of the dancing area.

I'm not a dancer. The movements I know best involve weapons and combat. But I've observed enough to fake my way through, and the steps are simple enough—a spin, a stomp, a clap, bodies moving in rhythm with the pounding drums and wailing fiddle.

Lirien picks it up quickly, laughing as I twirl her, her hair coming fully loose from its constraints. She's radiant in her joy, and for a few precious minutes, I allow myself to simply exist in this moment with her. Not guard and princess, not servant and royal, just man and woman moving together to primal rhythms.

It's a mistake. I know it as soon as I see the drunken sailor watching her from the edge of the dance floor, his eyes fixed on the way her body moves. He's tall, younger than me, with the muscled build of someone who hauls ropes for a living. And he's decided he wants what I can never have.

The dance ends, and before I can lead Lirien back to our table, he's there, inserting himself between us with alcoholic confidence.

"Dance with me, pretty girl," he slurs, reaching for her hand.

She steps back, her smile fading. "No, thank you. I'm with someone."

He glances at me dismissively. "Him? Old enough to be your father, ain't he? Come on, one dance."

"I said no." Her voice carries the authority of someone used to being obeyed.

It's the wrong tone to take with a man too drunk to recognize danger. He grabs her

wrist, yanking her toward him. "Don't be like that. Just one?—"

I move without conscious thought, my hand closing around his throat before he can finish his sentence. I drive him backward until his spine hits the wall, lifting him slightly so he's forced to stand on tiptoes.

"She said no." My voice is barely human, a guttural snarl that silences the nearby conversations.

His eyes bulge, hands scrabbling ineffectually at my forearm. I tighten my grip fractionally, feeling the satisfying give of his windpipe under my thumb.

"Dain." Lirien's voice reaches me through a red haze. "Dain, let him go. Please."

The please does it. I release my hold, stepping back as the sailor collapses, gasping and clutching his throat.

"If you touch her again," I say quietly, "I will break every bone in your body, starting with the small ones in your hands. Do you understand?"

He nods frantically, scrambling away on all fours like a beaten dog.

The tavern has gone silent, all eyes on us. On me. On the violence that simmers just beneath my skin, visible now for all to see.

"We're leaving." I grab Lirien's arm, not gently, and steer her toward the door.

She doesn't resist, allowing me to guide her through the crowd that parts without a word. Only when we're outside in the relative quiet of the street does she pull away.

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"You didn't have to do that," she says, rubbing her wrist where the sailor grabbed her. "I could have handled it."

"Like you handled getting out of the palace undetected?" The fear and rage of the past hour converge, making my words sharper than intended. "Or perhaps how you would have handled all the vagrants who would have cornered you had you gone into that first tavern alone?"

Her eyes flash. "I didn't ask you to follow me. I didn't ask you to protect me. I just wanted one night—one night—to be normal."

"You're not normal!" I step closer, backing her into the shadows of an alley beside the tavern. "You're the crown princess, the heir to the throne, the most valuable person in this kingdom. And you're out here playing commoner like it's a game."

"It's not a game to me." Her voice breaks slightly. "It's the only time I've ever felt real."

"This isn't real." I gesture to the street, the tavern, the city around us. "This is a fantasy. A dangerous one."

"Then what is real, Dain?" She doesn't back down, even with my body caging hers against the rough brick wall. "The palace? The endless duties? The marriage to a stranger that my father is arranging even now?"

Her words hit me like physical blows. So she knows about the marriage plans. Of course she does—little happens in the palace without her knowledge, just as little

happens around her without mine.

"That's your reality, Princess." The title is deliberate, a reminder of what separates us.

"That's your duty."

"And what about what I want?" Her chin lifts, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Does that matter to anyone?"

"What do you want?" The question tears itself from my throat, raw and desperate.

She stares at me for a long moment, something shifting in her gaze. Then she reaches up, her fingers brushing the scar on my jaw with a gentleness that undoes me.

"This," she whispers.

The last thread of my control snaps. I surge forward, capturing her mouth with mine, swallowing her gasp of surprise. She stiffens for half a heartbeat, then melts against me, her lips parting beneath the onslaught of my hunger.

I kiss her like a drowning man finding air, like a starving man finding sustenance. My hands frame her face, then slide into her hair, angling her head to deepen the connection. Her fingers clutch at my shoulders, nails digging through the fabric of my shirt to the skin beneath.

She tastes of ale and sweetness and forbidden fruit. I press her harder against the wall, my body flush against hers, letting her feel exactly what she does to me, what she's been doing to me for years.

A small sound escapes her—half moan, half whimper—and it pierces the haze of desire clouding my judgment. I tear my mouth from hers, breathing hard, forcing myself to step back.

Her hair is a wild tangle around her flushed face, her lips swollen from my kiss. She stares at me with dazed eyes, confusion and desire warring in her expression.

"Dain?" Her voice is husky, uncertain.

"I shouldn't have done that." The words taste like ashes. "Forgive me, Your Highness."

Her face crumples at the formal address, at the distance I'm desperately trying to reinstate between us. "Don't. Don't pretend this didn't happen."

"It can't happen." I rake a hand through my hair, trying to regain some semblance of control. "You know that as well as I do."

"Because you're my guard? Because of duty?" She steps toward me, and I force myself not to retreat. "Or because you're afraid?"

"Because you are the future queen," I growl, "and I am nothing."

The hurt that flashes across her face is almost worse than the kiss was forbidden. But it's necessary—this line between us must be redrawn, the boundaries reinforced.

Even if it kills me to do it.

"We need to go." I glance at the sky, where the first hint of pre-dawn gray is becoming visible. "Dawn approaches, and I promised to return you by then."

She doesn't move. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I'll carry you, as promised." My voice softens despite my best efforts. "Please don't make me do that, Lirien."

The use of her name without title is a concession, a plea. She studies me for a long moment, then nods once, her face settling into the composed mask I recognize from court functions.

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"Take me home, Captain Vorex."

The formality stings, but I deserve it. I betrayed her trust and my duty in one moment of weakness. I'm lucky she's agreeing to return at all.

As we begin the long walk back to the palace, I keep a careful distance between us. But I can still taste her on my lips, still feel the imprint of her body against mine.

And I know, with soul-deep certainty, that this night has changed everything.

five

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Lirien

We don't take the direct route back to the palace. I realize this when Dain leads us away from the main thoroughfare, down winding side streets that grow narrower with each turn. The sky hasn't yet begun to lighten—we have time before dawn—but my curiosity outweighs my promised compliance. "Where are we going?" I ask, my voice still raspy from that kiss. The kiss I can't stop replaying in my mind, the kiss that ignited something dangerous and wonderful inside me.

"Somewhere safe." Dain doesn't look back, his broad shoulders tense beneath the black fabric of his shirt. "We need to make sure you weren't recognized before returning you to the palace."

I want to argue that I was careful, that no one would connect a plainly dressed young woman to the crown princess. But the words die on my lips as he stops before a nondescript door set into a stone building, produces a key from somewhere on his person, and unlocks it with practiced ease.

"What is this place?" I ask as he ushers me inside, checking the street before closing the door behind us.

"Safehouse." He moves around the small space, lighting candles that reveal a spartan but clean interior. "Royal intelligence maintains several throughout the city."

I take in the single room with its narrow bed, small table with two chairs, a fireplace with cooking implements, and a privacy screen that presumably hides a washing area. "You've been here before."

It's not a question, but he answers anyway. "Yes."

"Why?" I can't help the note of jealousy that creeps into my voice—an emotion I have no right to feel, yet cannot suppress.

Dain pauses in his methodical inspection of the space, shooting me a look that's part exasperation, part something darker. "For work, Princess. I don't bring women here for trysts, if that's what you're asking."

Heat floods my cheeks, but I lift my chin. "I wasn't."

"You were." He moves to the fireplace, stoking the banked embers into a small flame. "There's water in the pitcher if you want to wash."

The mundane suggestion feels surreal after the intensity of what passed between us in that alley. My lips still tingle from the pressure of his, my body still hums with an

awareness I've never experienced before. And he's offering me water to wash, as if nothing has changed, as if he didn't just shatter every boundary between us with that kiss.

I remain standing near the door, watching him move with efficient grace around the small space. Without his guard's uniform, in these simple clothes, he looks different—more human, less the untouchable sentinel. The scar along his jaw catches the firelight, drawing my eye. I remember tracing it with my finger, the roughness of it beneath my touch, the way he shuddered before claiming my mouth.

"Why did you bring me here instead of the palace?" I finally ask, needing to break the charged silence.

He straightens from the fire, keeping the width of the room between us. "Dawn is still an hour away. You said you wanted one night of freedom. I'm giving you that."

"After you told me it was a dangerous fantasy," I remind him.

"It is." His eyes meet mine, hard and uncompromising. "But you've earned an hour of quiet before returning to reality."

"How generous of you." I can't keep the sarcasm from my tone. "And it has nothing to do with avoiding the palace guards who might question why you're returning the princess in commoner's clothes before dawn?"

A muscle ticks in his jaw—the telltale sign I've hit a nerve. "That too."

I move away from the door, emboldened by this small admission. "You could lose your position for this. For following me, for not reporting my absence immediately." I take another step toward him. "For kissing me."

"I'm aware of the consequences." His voice remains steady, but his eyes track my movement like a predator.

"Yet you did it anyway." Another step. "Why?"

"You know why."

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"I want to hear you say it." I'm pushing deliberately now, testing the limits of his control, curious to see what would happen if it snapped again.

He doesn't back away as I approach, though every line of his body radiates tension. "It doesn't matter. It can't happen again."

"Can't it?" I stop just inches from him, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body. "Because it felt like something that could happen again. Something that wanted to happen for a long time."

His nostrils flare slightly, the only visible sign of his reaction to my proximity. "What do you think you're doing, Lirien?"

The use of my name without title sends a thrill through me. "Exploring my night of freedom." I tilt my head, studying him. "Unless you're rescinding your generous offer?"

"This isn't a game." His voice drops to a dangerous register.

"Isn't it?" I reach out, my fingers hovering over the scar on his jaw without quite touching it. "The rules seem simple enough. You want me. I want you. But you won't allow yourself to act on it because of duty, position, propriety."

"Those aren't trivial concerns." He catches my wrist before I can touch him, his grip firm but not painful. "You are the crown princess. In a few months, you'll be betrothed to strengthen the kingdom's alliances. That is your duty."

"And if I don't want that duty?" I challenge, not pulling away from his hold.

"We don't always get what we want." His thumb moves almost imperceptibly against my pulse point, betraying the restraint he's exercising.

"You got what you wanted in that alley." I lean closer, emboldened by the flicker of desire I see in his eyes. "You wanted to kiss me, and you did."

"A moment of weakness." His jaw tightens. "It won't happen again."

"Won't it?" I deliberately lick my lips, watching his gaze drop to track the movement. "Because I think it could happen right now, if I wanted it to."

"You overestimate your influence, Princess." But he doesn't release my wrist, doesn't step away.

"Do I?" I use my free hand to push a strand of hair behind my ear, a deliberately innocent gesture that draws his attention to my neck, my collarbone, the swell of my breast beneath the simple shirt. "Then prove it. Let me go and step away."

For a long moment, he doesn't move. Then, with what seems like physical pain, he releases my wrist and takes one step back.

"Satisfied?" he growls.

"Not particularly." I rub my wrist, though he didn't hurt me. "What are you so afraid of, Dain? That you'll like it too much? That I will?"

"I'm afraid of ruining you." The blunt admission hangs in the air between us. "I'm afraid of being the man who took advantage of his position to seduce the woman he's sworn to protect."

"Seduce me?" I laugh, the sound brittle even to my own ears. "Is that what you think this is? You following me like a shadow for years, never speaking more than necessary, keeping me at arm's length while watching my every move with those eyes that see too much?"

"I was doing my job."

"Your job doesn't require you to look at me the way you do when you think I don't notice." I step forward, erasing the distance he created. "Like you're starving and I'm a feast you can't touch."

His breathing changes, becoming shallower. "Lirien?—"

"Say it." I place my palm flat against his chest, feeling the thunderous beat of his heart. "Tell me why you kissed me. Tell me why you brought me here instead of the palace. Tell me the truth, just once."

The struggle plays out across his face—duty warring with desire, propriety with need. When he speaks, his voice is rough with suppressed emotion.

"Because I've wanted you since you were eighteen and I realized you were no longer a child to be protected, but a woman who haunted my dreams." The confession tears from him like it causes physical pain. "Because every day spent at your side, watching men court you while I stand guard, is its own special kind of hell. Because when I saw that sailor touch you, I wanted to kill him with my bare hands for daring to put his fingers where mine can never be."

The raw honesty of his words steals my breath. This is Dain Vorex—the stoic, silent captain who has shadowed me for years—laying his soul bare with a vulnerability I never imagined him capable of.

"Why can't they be?" I whisper, my hand still pressed to his chest. "Why can't you touch me, if I want you to?"

"You know why."

"Pretend, just for tonight, that those reasons don't exist." My fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt. "Pretend we're just a man and a woman in this room, with no titles, no duties, no future arranged by others."

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"I can't pretend that." His hand covers mine, not pulling it away but holding it against him. "Because when dawn comes, you will still be the princess, and I will still be the guard who overstepped."

"And if I order you to kiss me again?" I tilt my chin up, a challenge in my eyes. "Would you disobey a direct command from your future queen?"

Something dangerous flares in his gaze. "Don't."

"Don't what? Don't want this? Don't admit it? Don't use the only power I have to get something I actually desire for once in my life?"

His free hand comes up to cup my face, the touch surprisingly gentle for a man capable of such violence. "You have no idea what you're asking for."

"Then show me." I turn my face into his palm, my lips brushing his callused skin. "Show me what I'm asking for."

A tremor runs through him. I can feel it where our bodies connect, can see it in the tension of his shoulders. For a moment, I think he'll give in—that he'll claim my mouth again, that he'll let whatever is building between us consume us both.

Instead, he drops his hand and steps back, putting the table between us like a shield.

"No." The word is quiet but firm. "Not like this. Not with you testing boundaries you don't understand, not with dawn approaching and reality waiting."

Disappointment crashes over me, followed quickly by anger. "So it's fine for you to kiss me in an alley when you lose control, but not here, not when I'm asking for it?"

"Yes." His honesty disarms me. "Because in that alley, I was weak. Here, I'm choosing to be strong. For both of us."

"I don't need your protection from this." I gesture between us, frustration making my voice rise. "I know what I want."

"Do you?" He leans forward, hands braced on the table. "You want the thrill of rebellion, Princess. You want to taste freedom in all its forms. I'm just convenient—the forbidden guard, the older man, the excitement of crossing lines you've never crossed before."

His dismissal stings, especially because part of me fears he might be right. Is that all this is? The culmination of a night of breaking rules, of testing limits?

No. It's more than that. It has to be.

"You're wrong." I move to the table, mirroring his posture. "I wanted you before tonight. I've wanted you for years, watching you watch me, wondering what you were thinking behind that stone face, wondering what it would take to make you see me as a woman, not a duty."

Something shifts in his expression—surprise, perhaps even hope, quickly masked.

"It doesn't matter what either of us wants." He straightens. "Dawn is coming. We need to prepare you for return."

"So that's it?" I don't try to hide my bitterness. "We go back to princess and guard, pretending nothing happened, nothing changed?"

"Everything changed." He moves to a small chest against the wall, opening it to reveal clothing—a simple dress, modest but clearly of better quality than what I'm wearing. "But we can't change who we are."

I watch him remove the dress, laying it carefully on the bed. "Where did that come from?"

"I keep emergency supplies here. Including appropriate clothing for various scenarios."

"You planned for having to disguise me as a respectable woman instead of a commoner?" I'm oddly touched by his foresight.

"I plan for everything." He gestures to the privacy screen. "Change. I'll wait outside."

He moves toward the door, but I step into his path. "And if I don't want you to leave?"

Weariness settles over his features. "Then you're still testing boundaries, and I'm still saying no."

We stand at an impasse, neither willing to yield. Finally, I sigh and take the dress. "Fine. But this conversation isn't over, Dain."

"It never began." He opens the door. "You have ten minutes."

After he leaves, I change slowly, my mind racing. The dress fits well enough—simpler than my court attire but still suitable for a merchant's daughter or minor noble. He's thought of everything, down to soft slippers to replace my boots.

I'm fighting with the laces at the back when he returns, knocking once before

entering. He takes in my struggle without comment, then moves behind me.

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"Allow me." His fingers brush my skin as he works the laces, each touch sending shivers down my spine.

"You seem practiced at this," I observe, unable to resist the jab.

His hands pause momentarily. "I told you, I don't bring women here."

"But you've undressed women before." It's not a question.

"I'm thirty-eight years old, Lirien. Yes, there have been women. None that mattered." He finishes the laces with a decisive tug. "None that were you."

The simple statement knocks the breath from my lungs. I turn to face him, finding his expression more open than I've ever seen it.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because dawn is coming." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch lingering longer than necessary. "Because after today, we return to our roles, and I need you to understand why."

"I don't want to return to that." I catch his hand before he can pull away. "I don't want to marry some foreign prince I've never met. I don't want to pretend this night never happened."

"What we want rarely matters in the grand scheme." His voice is gentle, almost tender. "You have a duty to your kingdom, as do I."

"And if I refuse that duty?" I search his face, looking for some sign that he would support such rebellion.

"Then you would not be the woman I—" He stops, jaw clenching.

"The woman you what?" I press, heart hammering.

"The woman I have served faithfully for seven years." He withdraws his hand from mine. "It's time to go, Your Highness."

The return to formality feels like a slap. I step back, wrapping dignity around me like armor. "Of course, Captain Vorex. Heaven forbid we keep duty waiting."

If my words hurt him, he doesn't show it. He simply opens the door, checks the street, and gestures for me to precede him.

As we make our way back toward the palace, taking a more direct route now, I can't help but feel that something precious is slipping away with each step. For a few hours, I glimpsed a different life—one where I wasn't just the crown princess, where Dain wasn't just my guard. One where we could act on the current that runs between us without fear of consequences.

But that life exists only in the space between midnight and dawn, in safehouses and shadowed alleys. With the rising sun comes reality, duty, the weight of a crown I never asked to bear.

Still, I can't bring myself to regret this night—not the escape, not the city, not the kiss, not even the rejection. Because now I know what freedom tastes like. I know what desire feels like.

And I know, with absolute certainty, that I can never go back to being the princess

who didn't.

six

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Dain

I return her to the palace the way a thief returns stolen goods—furtively, with constant vigilance, my nerves stretched taut as bowstrings. We slip through the servants' entrance as the kitchen staff begins their day, her once-immaculate disguise now replaced with the modest dress from the safehouse. To anyone who notices, she could be a lady's maid returning from an assignation, head bowed appropriately. Not the crown princess. Certainly not my princess, though my treacherous mind persists in thinking of her that way after last night.

"This way," I murmur, guiding her through back corridors I've memorized over years of service. My hand hovers near the small of her back, not quite touching. Even this close to safety, I can't risk anyone seeing such familiarity.

We haven't spoken since leaving the safehouse. The silence between us pulses with unresolved tension, with words unsaid, with the ghost of that kiss still haunting us both. I tell myself it's better this way. Silence can't be used against us. Silence can't become evidence of treason.

Because that's what this is—what I've done, what I've allowed, what I've wanted. Treason against the crown. Against my oath. Against every principle that has defined my existence for the past fifteen years.

We reach the servants' staircase that leads directly to the royal apartments. No guards are posted here—a security oversight I've reported multiple times without result, but

one I'm grateful for now. Lirien pauses at the foot of the stairs, turning to face me.

"Thank you," she says quietly, "for my night of freedom."

The formal words feel like a wall erected between us, but I recognize the necessity. We are returning to our roles now, inch by painful inch.

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"It was my duty," I respond, the lie bitter on my tongue.

Something flickers in her eyes—hurt, perhaps disappointment. "Of course. Duty above all else."

"Always."

She studies my face for a moment longer, as if searching for some sign of the man who kissed her in that alley, who confessed forbidden desires in a safehouse. I keep my expression impassive, though it costs me more than she can know.

"Goodbye, Captain Vorex." She turns and ascends the stairs, her borrowed dress whispering against the stone steps.

I remain at the bottom until she disappears from view, then force myself to walk away. By now, my absence will have been noted. Questions will be asked. I need to fabricate explanations, resume my post, pretend nothing has changed while everything has.

My quarters are spartan, as befits a soldier. I change quickly into my uniform, the familiar weight of it settling on my shoulders like a sentence. The sword at my hip, the dagger in my boot, the insignia of the royal guard on my breast—all symbols of my sworn oath to protect.

An oath I betrayed the moment I followed her instead of reporting her absence. The moment I kissed her instead of maintaining professional distance. The moment I took her to the safehouse instead of returning her directly to the palace.

I examine my reflection in the small mirror above my washing basin. The same scarred face stares back at me, unchanged by the night's events. Only my eyes betray me—something haunted lurks there now, something hungry and desperate that I must control at all costs.

By the time I report for duty, the palace is fully awake. Captain Merritt raises an eyebrow at my appearance.

"Late night, Vorex?"

"Patrol duty," I lie smoothly. "Eastern quarter had reports of suspicious activity."

He nods, accepting the explanation without question. My reputation serves me well—Dain Vorex, the taciturn, dutiful captain who volunteers for extra shifts, who has no life beyond service to the crown.

If only he knew.

"You're assigned to the princess today. Council meeting this morning, then private audience with the king." He hands me the duty roster, already moving on to other matters.

I scan the schedule, noting with grim resignation that I'll be in Lirien's presence almost continuously today. A test of my resolve, of my ability to stand silent and unaffected while remembering the taste of her lips, the softness of her skin beneath my calloused fingers.

The morning passes in a blur of rigid professionalism. I escort Lirien to the council meeting, standing at attention behind her chair, eyes focused on a point above the councilors' heads. She plays her part perfectly—the dutiful princess, attentive and composed, offering insights when appropriate. No one looking at her would guess she

spent the night wandering city streets, dancing in taverns, challenging her bodyguard's control in a safehouse.

No one except me.

I notice the small signs of fatigue—the slight shadows beneath her eyes, carefully concealed with powder; the way she stifles a yawn behind her hand; the extra cup of strong tea she requests midway through the meeting. I notice, too, the distance she maintains, never once glancing in my direction, never acknowledging my presence.

As we should be. As we must be.

The council meeting concludes, and I follow her to the private audience with the king. Outside his study, she pauses, squaring her shoulders like a soldier preparing for battle.

"Wait here, Captain," she says, voice formal and distant. "I'll call if I need you."

I bow slightly, eyes downcast. "Yes, Your Highness."

The doors close behind her, leaving me alone in the corridor with my thoughts—dangerous companions after last night. I force myself to focus on my surroundings, on potential threats, on anything but the memory of her pressed against me in that alley.

I'm so intent on my mental discipline that I almost miss the hushed conversation between two passing courtiers.

"—announcement at midday. The foreign delegation arrived last night?—"

"—Prince Aldric himself? How fortunate?—"

"—such a handsome match for our princess?—"

Their voices fade as they turn the corner, but their words remain, settling like lead in my stomach. So it's happening already. The betrothal Lirien mentioned, the duty she can't escape.

The foreign prince who will claim what I can never have.

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My hands curl into fists at my sides, nails digging half-moons into my palms. The pain helps center me, reminds me of my place. I am her protector, not her lover. Her guard, not her choice.

The doors to the king's study open, and Lirien emerges. Her face is pale, her expression carefully blank, but I see the slight tremor in her hands, the rigid set of her spine. Whatever passed between her and her father has left its mark.

"The King requests your presence, Captain," she says, not meeting my eyes.

I bow and enter the study, finding the king at his desk, expression grave.

"Vorex." He doesn't look up from the document he's signing. "There will be a formal announcement at midday. Double the guard presence in the great hall."

"Yes, Your Majesty." I keep my voice neutral. "May I ask the nature of the announcement?"

Now he does look up, one eyebrow raised at my presumption. After a moment, he sighs. "Princess Lirien's betrothal to Prince Aldric of Westland. The marriage will secure our eastern border and bring significant trade benefits."

I bow again, hiding the rage that flares at his clinical assessment. "I'll see to the security arrangements immediately, Your Majesty."

"Good." He returns to his papers, a clear dismissal. "And Vorex? The princess seems...unsettled today. Keep a close eye on her."

"Always, Your Majesty."

I exit the study to find Lirien waiting, her face a portrait of composed resignation. We walk in silence to her chambers, where her ladies-in-waiting descend upon her like bright birds, chattering about the proper attire for such an important announcement.

I position myself outside her door, statue-still, as protocol demands. But inside, I'm anything but still. Inside, I'm a storm of rage and possessiveness and helpless fury.

She is to be given to a stranger. A political bargaining chip, wrapped in silk and jewels, presented on the altar of diplomacy. And I must stand by and watch it happen, must protect the very arrangement that will take her from me.

By midday, the great hall is packed with nobility and foreign dignitaries. The Westland delegation occupies a place of honor near the throne, their formal attire marking them as men of importance. I study them from my post near the dais, assessing threats out of habit.

Prince Aldric stands at the center of the delegation—young, perhaps thirty, with the polished good looks of nobility who have never known hardship. His smile comes easily as he converses with courtiers, his manner charming and confident. The perfect prince for the perfect political alliance.

I hate him with a visceral intensity that surprises even me.

The trumpets sound, announcing the royal entrance. The king appears first, followed by Lirien. A collective murmur of appreciation ripples through the crowd as she takes her place beside her father. She wears a gown of deep emerald that matches her eyes, her hair arranged in an elaborate style that emphasizes the elegant line of her neck. Diamonds glitter at her throat and ears—royal jewels befitting a royal announcement.

She is breathtaking. And she looks utterly miserable to the trained eye—to my eye.

The king raises his hand for silence, and the hall quiets immediately.

"Esteemed nobles, honored guests, loyal subjects," he begins, voice carrying to every corner of the vast space. "Today marks a momentous occasion for our kingdom and for the royal house."

I watch Lirien as her father speaks. She maintains perfect posture, perfect composure, the picture of regal dignity. Only I notice the slight whitening of her knuckles where her hands are clasped before her, the almost imperceptible tightening of her jaw when the king mentions "securing our future through alliance."

"It is my great pleasure," the king continues, "to announce the betrothal of Crown Princess Lirien Vellara to His Highness Prince Aldric of Westland. Their union will bring prosperity and security to both our realms."

Polite applause fills the hall. Prince Aldric steps forward, bowing deeply to the king, then turning to Lirien with a practiced smile.

"I am honored beyond words, Your Majesty," he says, voice carrying clearly. "And I vow to be worthy of the princess's hand."

He approaches the dais, taking Lirien's hand in his. Even from my position, I can see how she stiffens at his touch, though her smile never wavers.

Prince Aldric raises her hand to his lips, pressing a lingering kiss to her skin—her skin, which hours ago trembled beneath my touch, which bears the invisible imprint of my fingers.

My vision blurs red at the edges. My hand moves unconsciously to my sword hilt,

fingers tightening around it. For one insane moment, I imagine drawing the blade, cutting down everyone who stands between us, taking her away from this charade.

The fantasy is so vivid that I actually feel the cool metal of the hilt against my palm before I realize what I'm doing. Horror washes over me. This is madness. Treason. The kind of thinking that ends with my head on a spike and her reputation in tatters.

I force my hand to release the sword, to hang empty at my side. Force my breathing to steady, my face to remain impassive as the ceremony continues.

The king invites Prince Aldric to join them on the dais—a symbolic welcoming into the royal family. The prince stands next to Lirien, close enough that their shoulders almost touch. He leans in to whisper something in her ear, and though she smiles politely, I see her nearly imperceptible recoil.

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Court protocol keeps me rooted to my post as nobility file past to offer congratulations. I watch as men who have never spoken to Lirien beyond formal pleasantries kiss her hand and wish her happiness. I watch as women who have gossiped about her behind their fans embrace her with false sincerity. I watch as Prince Aldric plays the role of devoted betrothed, his hand occasionally resting on the small of her back in a gesture of possession.

Each touch is a knife between my ribs. Each smile she forces is a wound that will not heal.

The formal receiving line seems endless. Through it all, Lirien performs her role perfectly, the consummate princess accepting felicitations for a match she never chose, never wanted.

Only once does she glance in my direction, a fleeting moment when the press of well-wishers briefly recedes. Our eyes lock across the crowded hall, and in that instant, all pretense falls away. I see the desperation in her gaze, the silent plea for...what? Rescue? Understanding? Permission to accept her fate?

Whatever she seeks, I cannot provide it. Not here, not now, not as Captain Vorex of the royal guard.

But later, when the crowds disperse, when night falls and the palace sleeps...

The thought forms unbidden, dangerous in its allure. My duty is to accept this arrangement, to continue protecting her as she transitions to her new role, to eventually watch her leave with her prince.

Instead, for the first time in my career, I find myself planning treason.

Because I cannot—will not—watch her be given to another man. Not after last night. Not after tasting what could be.

My hands are numb, but I feel a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as rage, as possessiveness, as a decision taking shape that will either damn us both or save us.

Let them have their betrothal ceremony. Let them plan their political alliance.

They do not know what I am capable of when it comes to her. They have no idea what lines I am prepared to cross.

And neither, God help me, does she.

seven

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Lirien

I dismiss my ladies as soon as propriety allows, unable to bear another moment of their excited chatter about wedding preparations and Prince Aldric's obvious charms. The moment the door closes behind them, I tear the diamonds from my ears and throat, flinging them onto my dressing table with satisfying little clinks. Fine chains tangle, earrings scatter, and I can't bring myself to care. Let them break. Let them be lost. Small rebellions are all I have left now.

My fingers work at the elaborate pins holding my hair in place, yanking them free without regard for the strands that come with them. Pain prickles my scalp, but it's a

welcome distraction from the hollow ache in my chest. With each pin that clatters to the floor, I feel a fraction of the court persona slipping away, revealing the raw, wounded woman beneath.

"Princess Lirien Vellara, betrothed to Prince Aldric of Westland." I say the words aloud, testing their weight, finding them impossibly heavy. "Future queen of two united kingdoms."

The perfect political alliance. The culmination of my royal upbringing. Everything I was born to be.

And nothing I want.

I sink onto the edge of my bed, still wearing the emerald gown chosen specifically to impress my future husband. Husband. The word sticks in my throat like a fishbone. Prince Aldric seemed pleasant enough during our brief introduction—handsome in the bland way of nobility, respectful in his address, clearly pleased with the arrangement. He spoke of his kingdom with pride, of our alliance with enthusiasm, of me as if I were a particularly valuable mare he'd acquired at auction.

Not once did he ask what I wanted. Not once did he look at me and see beyond the crown.

Not like Dain.

The memory of last night rises unbidden—his hands in my hair, his mouth on mine, the scar rough against my fingertips. The way he looked at me in that safehouse, desire warring with duty. The honesty in his confession, the restraint that must have cost him dearly.

The contrast between those raw moments and today's carefully choreographed farce

makes me want to scream. I press my palms against my eyes, willing back the tears that threaten. Princesses don't cry over political marriages. They accept their duty with grace and dignity.

But I don't feel like a princess tonight. I feel like a woman trapped in a gilded cage, watching her one chance at happiness slip away.

During the reception, I caught Dain's eye exactly once. That single glance nearly undid me—the barely contained fury in his expression, the possessive heat that made my skin flush despite the distance between us. For one wild moment, I imagined him cutting a path through the crowd, seizing my hand, leading me away from it all.

A fantasy, nothing more. Captain Vorex performed his duty impeccably today, as always. Standing at attention, face impassive, the perfect royal guard while his princess was promised to another man.

I rise restlessly, moving to the window that overlooks the palace gardens. Moonlight silvers the pathways and fountains, making them look like something from a fairy tale. How many times have I stared at this same view, dreaming of escape? And now, having tasted freedom for one night, the prospect of a lifetime of duty feels more suffocating than ever.

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The betrothal celebration continues below, music and laughter drifting up from the great hall. By now, Prince Aldric will be deep in his cups, accepting congratulations, perhaps boasting of his good fortune in securing such an advantageous match. By tomorrow, negotiations for the marriage treaty will begin. By next month, preparations for the ceremony. By next year...

I press my forehead against the cool glass, closing my eyes against the future rushing toward me like a charging horse.

A soft knock at my chamber door startles me. "Enter," I call, assuming it's a maid come to help me undress.

The door opens, then closes with a decisive click. No rustle of skirts, no murmured "Your Highness." Just silence, heavy with presence.

I turn—and my heart stops.

Dain stands with his back to my door, still in his formal guard uniform, sword at his hip. But this is not the controlled, professional Captain Vorex who stood watch today. This man's eyes burn with something wild and dangerous, his jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscle jumping beneath his scar.

"Dain?" My voice emerges as a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"Tell me you don't want him." The words are rough, almost guttural. "Tell me the thought of his hands on you doesn't make your skin crawl."

I should order him to leave. I should remind him of his place, of protocol, of the thousand reasons he shouldn't be in my chambers making demands.

Instead, I take a step toward him. "I don't want him."

"Say his name." Dain pushes away from the door, closing half the distance between us. "Tell me you don't want Prince Aldric of Westland to be your husband."

"I don't want Prince Aldric." Another step. "I don't want any prince or king or noble they might choose for me."

"What do you want, Lirien?" His voice drops lower, a dangerous rumble that sends heat spiraling through me. "Tell me what you want."

We're close enough now that I can see the rapid rise and fall of his chest, can smell the faint scent of leather and metal that clings to him. Close enough to touch, if I dared.

"You." The admission falls from my lips like a stone into still water, creating ripples that can never be undone. "I want you, Dain. Only you."

Something breaks in his expression—restraint shattering like glass. He moves with the lethal speed that makes him such a formidable guard, closing the remaining distance between us in one stride. His hands cup my face, tilting it up to his, eyes searching mine for any sign of hesitation.

"There is no going back from this," he warns, giving me one last chance to retreat.

I don't want to retreat. I want to advance, to claim, to possess as fiercely as he does.

"I don't want to go back." I lift my hands to his wrists, feeling his pulse race beneath

my fingers. "I want to go forward. With you."

His mouth crashes down on mine with none of the restraint he showed in the alley. This kiss is possession, claiming, marking. His hands slide from my face to my hair, fingers tangling in the loose strands, holding me steady as he devours my mouth.

I match his intensity, opening to him, my arms winding around his neck to pull him closer. Our bodies press together, his armor hard against the softness of my gown. I should feel overwhelmed, even frightened by the ferocity of his desire. Instead, I feel liberated, exhilarated, finally free to want without reservation.

He walks me backward until my spine meets the solid wood of my chamber door. One hand leaves my hair to fumble with the lock, securing our privacy without breaking the kiss. The other slides down my throat, my collarbone, hovering at the edge of propriety.

"Tell me to stop," he murmurs against my lips, "and I will."

My answer is to guide his hand to my breast, arching into his touch with a soft gasp. "Don't stop."

A growl rumbles through his chest as his palm covers me, thumb brushing over the peak that tightens beneath the layers of fabric. His mouth leaves mine to trace a burning path down my neck, teeth scraping lightly over sensitive skin.

"I watched him touch you today," he says against my throat, voice raw with remembered fury. "Watched him put his hands where mine should be. Watched you smile at him like a dutiful princess while your eyes screamed for escape."

"I hated every moment," I confess, head falling back against the door as his lips find a particularly sensitive spot beneath my ear. "I felt nothing when he touched me."

Nothing but revulsion."

"And this?" His hand squeezes gently, making me gasp. "What do you feel now?"

"Everything." My fingers dig into his shoulders, seeking purchase as sensation threatens to overwhelm me. "I feel everything."

He lifts his head to look at me, something almost reverent entering his expression despite the heat still burning in his eyes. "I have wanted to touch you like this for years. To hear the sounds you make when pleasure overtakes you. To know every inch of your body better than I know my own."

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His honesty undoes me. Tears prick my eyes—not of sadness but of relief, of recognition. "Then touch me, Dain. Make me forget everything but you."

He kisses me again, slower this time but no less intense. His hands find the laces of my gown, working them with surprising dexterity for a soldier. As the bodice loosens, his fingers slip inside, brushing against skin that has never known a man's touch.

I gasp into his mouth, the sensation almost too much to bear. He swallows the sound, his hand gentle despite the urgency that vibrates through him.

"Beautiful," he murmurs as his palm cups my bare breast, thumb circling the sensitive peak. "So beautiful."

My body responds to his touch with a eagerness that might shame me if I weren't beyond caring about propriety. Heat pools low in my belly, between my thighs, making me restless against him. I arch into his hand, seeking more, though I'm not entirely sure what "more" entails.

He seems to understand my wordless plea. His free hand gathers the fabric of my skirt, raising it until he can slip beneath, his palm warm against my thigh through the thin material of my underthings.

"May I?" he asks, his voice strained with the effort of restraint.

"Yes." The word is barely audible, but he hears it.

His fingers slide higher, tracing patterns on sensitive skin, moving inexorably toward the heat at my center. When he finally touches me there, through the silk, I cry out, unprepared for the jolt of pleasure that races through me.

"Shh," he soothes, his mouth finding mine again to silence my sounds. "The guards will hear."

The reminder of where we are—of who we are—should douse the fire building between us. Instead, it only adds to the forbidden thrill. Here, pressed against my chamber door with my royal guards just outside, the captain of those guards is touching me in ways no man ever has.

His fingers move with deliberate skill, finding places that make me tremble, that make my knees weak. When the silk barrier becomes too much, he shifts it aside, touching me directly for the first time.

"Dain," I gasp against his mouth, clutching at his shoulders as sensation threatens to overwhelm me.

"I've got you," he murmurs, his free arm around my waist supporting my weight as my legs threaten to give way. "Let go, Lirien. Let me see you fall apart."

His words, combined with the increasingly insistent rhythm of his fingers, send me hurtling toward something I've only read about in forbidden books smuggled into my chambers. My body tenses, then shatters into a thousand pieces of pure pleasure. I bury my face against his neck to muffle my cries as waves of sensation wash over me.

He holds me through it, murmuring praise and endearments against my hair, his touch gentling as the intensity subsides. When I can breathe again, I lift my head to find him watching me with naked adoration.

"That," he says softly, "is how your betrothed should make you feel. That is what you deserve."

I grab his face and pull his lips down to meet mine.

He immediately takes control of the kiss, pulling my body flush against his as he humps his hard erection against me through his clothing. "Jesus, sweet princess, what you do to me. If you only knew all the ungodly ways I've fantasized of taking you. Selfish bastard that I am I want to be the one to shred your virginity. The only one to ever be in between your sweet thighs.

The raw possessiveness in his words should frighten me, but instead it ignites something primal within me. I press closer, feeling the hard evidence of his desire against my stomach.

"Show me," I whisper against his mouth. "Show me those fantasies."

He groans, his hands tightening on my waist. "Not like this. Not rushed against a door with guards outside who could interrupt at any moment."

"I don't care." My fingers work at the fastenings of his uniform jacket, clumsy with inexperience but determined. "I want you. All of you."

He captures my hands, stilling them against his chest. "I care." His voice softens, though desire still darkens his eyes. "Your first time shouldn't be a hurried coupling borne of rebellion. You deserve better than that."

I don't have a clue what I'm doing, but in an act of sheer desperation, I fall to my knees in front of him. I follow some innate instinct as I palm him through his trousers. His hisses in a breath as his head falls back, his fingers tangling in my hair.

My hands are shaking as I free him from his constraints. His sex bobs out, and I wrap my hands around it. It's huge and hot and heavy with moisture beading it at the tip. I lick my lips and lean forward, tasting him.

"Dear sweet mother of god," he curses. "Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it," groans as I begin to suck on his tip.

His fingers wind tighter in my hair, guiding me, his body trembling with restraint. I look up through my lashes, emboldened by the raw need etched across his face.

"You have no idea what you're doing to me," he growls, voice barely recognizable. "The innocent princess on her knees, mouth around me like she was made for this."

I'm drunk on his reaction, on the power I feel despite my submission. I take him deeper, following his wordless guidance, learning what makes his breath catch, what draws those delicious sounds from his throat.

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"Enough," he finally gasps, pulling me away. "I won't finish like this. Not the first time."

In one fluid motion, he lifts me from the floor and carries me to my bed, laying me down with surprising gentleness given the desperation in his eyes. My gown is half-undone, my hair a wild tangle, my lips swollen from his kisses.

"Look at you," he murmurs, standing at the edge of the bed, drinking in the sight of me. "If you could see yourself through my eyes..."

"Show me," I whisper, reaching for him. "Show me how you see me."

He sheds his uniform with military efficiency—jacket, weapons belt, boots—until he stands before me in just his trousers, chest bare and magnificent in the moonlight filtering through my window. The scar on his jaw is just one of many that mark his body, each telling a story of battles fought and survived.

When he joins me on the bed, hovering above me with his weight braced on his forearms, I reach up to trace the largest scar—a jagged line across his ribs.

"For you," he says simply. "All of them, for you."

The admission steals my breath. I pull him down to me, needing his weight, his heat, the solid reality of him after years of distance.

His mouth finds mine again as his hands work at my gown, sliding it down my body until I lie beneath him in nothing but thin silk underthings. I should feel exposed,

vulnerable, but instead I feel powerful, desired, alive in ways I never have before.

"Are you certain?" he asks one last time, his voice rough with need but eyes serious. "Once I take you, there's no going back. You'll never belong to your prince, not really. Not in the ways that matter."

"I never wanted to belong to him." My hands frame his face, thumbs stroking the stubble along his jaw. "I've been yours since you took that knife for me. I just didn't know it until now."

Something breaks open in his expression—the last of his restraint giving way to naked hunger. He captures my mouth in a kiss that's pure possession, hands roaming my body with reverent greed.

When he finally removes the last barriers between us, when his body joins with mine in a moment of exquisite pain and pleasure, I feel the world shift beneath me. My body arches as he pushes deeper, his thickness stretching me in ways I never imagined. The pain flares bright then dissolves into something else entirely—a building pressure that makes me claw at his back.

"Look at me," he commands, his voice a rasp against my ear. "I want to see your eyes when I claim you."

I obey, locking my gaze with his as he begins to move. Slow, controlled thrusts that make me gasp and writhe beneath him. His eyes never leave mine—dark with possession, tender with something I'm afraid to name.

"That's it, princess," he murmurs, adjusting his angle until I cry out. "Let me hear you."

My hands grip his shoulders, feeling the muscles bunch and flex with each

movement. The silk sheets slide beneath my back as he drives me higher, deeper into sensations I never knew existed.

"Dain," I whisper, his name a prayer on my lips. "Please."

I don't even know what I'm begging for, but he seems to understand. His movements quicken, one hand sliding between our bodies to touch me where we're joined. The pressure inside me builds to something unbearable.

"Let go," he urges, his own control fraying. "I've got you."

When release comes, it shatters me completely. I feel myself splintering into a thousand pieces of light as waves of pleasure crash through my body. Dain follows moments later, his powerful body tensing above me, my name a broken sound on his lips.

Reality crashes back, unwelcome but unavoidable. I am still Princess Lirien, still promised to Prince Aldric, still bound by duty and expectation. What just happened between us—beautiful, transformative—is still forbidden.

"What are we going to do?" I whisper, my hands framing his face, thumbs tracing the strong line of his jaw, the roughness of his scar.

He turns to press a kiss to my palm. "I don't know yet. But I will not lose you to him, Lirien. I cannot."

The fierce possessiveness in his voice should frighten me. Instead, it feels like a lifeline in the stormy sea of my future.

"I don't want to be lost." I rest my forehead against his, our breath mingling in the small space between us. "I want to be found. By you."

He kisses me again, tender this time, a promise rather than a claiming. "Then I will find a way. Trust me."

And despite everything—the impossibility of our situation, the duty that binds me, the consequences we would face if discovered—I do trust him. This man who has guarded my body for seven years, who now guards my heart with equal fervor.

"Stay with me tonight," I whisper, a plea I never thought I'd make.

Regret flashes across his face. "I cannot. The risk is too great. Your ladies will return soon to prepare you for bed, and my absence from my post would be noted."

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He's right, of course. But the thought of him walking away now, of returning to pretense and protocol after what we've shared, is unbearable.

"Tomorrow night, then?" I ask, hating the vulnerability in my voice.

His expression softens. "Tomorrow and every night I can manage it without risking your reputation. This I swear."

He helps me straighten my clothing, his touch lingering as if he can't bear to stop touching me. When I'm presentable again, he steps back, visibly gathering his control around him like armor.

"Remember this," he says, his voice low and intent, "when your prince speaks of alliance and advantage. Remember what it feels like to be wanted for yourself alone, not for your crown or your kingdom."

"I'll remember." How could I forget? My body still hums with the echo of his touch, my lips still bear the imprint of his kiss.

He unlocks the door, checking the corridor before turning back to me one last time. The guard captain is firmly back in place—posture straight, expression neutral. Only his eyes betray him, still burning with everything he feels for me.

"Goodnight, Your Highness," he says formally, loud enough for anyone nearby to hear.

"Goodnight, Captain Vorex," I respond in kind, maintaining the charade.

But as he closes the door between us, I know with bone-deep certainty that everything has changed. I am still a princess, still bound by duty and tradition and the weight of a kingdom's expectations.

But now, I am also a woman who knows what it means to be truly wanted. And I will not settle for less again.

eight

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Dain

I stand at my post, perfectly still, while something primal rages inside me. Six feet away, Prince Aldric leans too close to Lirien as they walk the palace gardens, his hand occasionally brushing hers in a way that looks accidental but isn't. She responds with practiced smiles and appropriate laughter, every inch the grateful bride-to-be. Only I see the tension in her shoulders, the slight tremor in her fingers when he touches her, the way her eyes flick to me when she thinks no one will notice. Last night I made her cry out in pleasure against her chamber door. Today I must watch another man stake his claim on what is mine.

The possessiveness of my thoughts should disturb me. I've spent a lifetime in service, understanding my place, accepting the natural order of things. Guards don't claim princesses. Soldiers don't challenge royal decrees. Men like me don't reach above their station.

Yet here I stand, planning treason with the same tactical precision I once applied to battlefield strategy.

Prince Aldric gestures to a flowering vine, making some undoubtedly insipid

observation about its beauty. Lirien nods politely, maintaining the perfect distance—close enough for courtesy, far enough to prevent further "accidental" touches. I've watched her perfect this dance of avoidance all morning, subtly reinforcing boundaries while appearing to welcome his attention.

She is magnificent in her restraint. And I am dying with every minute of it.

"The gardens at Westland Palace are twice this size," Aldric says, voice pitched to carry to the nearby courtiers who hang on his every word. "You'll find them most impressive, Princess."

"I look forward to seeing them someday," she responds diplomatically, avoiding any mention of when that "someday" might be.

He smiles with the confidence of a man who has never been denied anything in his life. "Perhaps we could arrange a visit before the wedding. I'm certain your father would agree it's important for you to see your future home."

Something in me snaps at the word "home"—as if he could ever provide her with the sense of belonging she craves, as if his palace of strangers could ever be where she's meant to be.

She belongs with me. Not in his kingdom, not in his palace, not in his bed.

The thought crystallizes with such clarity that I nearly stagger under its weight. I have spent seven years protecting her for others—for her father, for the kingdom, for the abstract concept of duty. Now I will protect her for myself, for her, for us.

The garden tour continues. I follow at the prescribed distance, cataloging information with each step. Guard rotations. Servant schedules. The phases of the moon and how they affect visibility on the palace grounds. The identity of every guard who can

be bribed or distracted or, if necessary, disabled.

By the time they return to the palace proper, my decision is made. I will not allow this betrothal to proceed. I will not watch her marry a man she doesn't love, doesn't want. I will not spend the rest of my life guarding the prison of her political marriage.

I will burn the world for her.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of planning. Every skill I've acquired in fifteen years of military service, every secret passage and security weakness I've discovered in seven years of guarding the palace, every contact and resource I've cultivated—all of it now serves one purpose. Getting her out.

I'm scheduled for night duty outside her chambers, which gives me the opportunity I need. As darkness falls, I make my final preparations. A pack hidden near the eastern postern gate contains essentials—food, clothing, money, forged papers. Horses, arranged through contacts who owe me favors, wait at a stable two miles from the palace. A diversion set to draw guards away from our escape route at precisely the right moment.

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When I take up my post outside her door, the other guard nods in greeting.

"Quiet night," he observes.

"So far." I position myself so I can see down both ends of the corridor. "The princess retire early?"

"Just after dinner. Seemed tired from all the festivities."

I nod, careful to keep my expression neutral despite the anticipation coursing through my veins. "You should check the eastern corridor. Thought I heard something on my way here."

He frowns. "Probably just servants."

"Probably." I shrug. "But with foreign dignitaries in residence, better to be thorough."

This appeal to his sense of duty works as I knew it would. He nods and moves down the corridor, leaving me momentarily alone outside her door.

I don't knock—too risky with servants possibly within earshot. Instead, I use the signal we developed years ago for security concerns—three soft taps, a pause, then two more. After a moment, the door opens just enough for me to slip inside.

Lirien stands in a simple nightgown, her hair loose around her shoulders, face free of the cosmetics she wore for court. She looks younger, more vulnerable, and infinitely more beautiful than the poised princess who walked the gardens today.

"Dain?" Her voice is hushed, concerned. "What's wrong?"

I close the distance between us, taking her hands in mine. "We need to talk."

She searches my face, sensing the gravity of the moment. "Tell me."

"I'm taking you away from here." The words fall between us like stones. "Tonight."

Her eyes widen. "What? That's—that's impossible."

"It's already arranged. Horses, supplies, a route that will take us beyond the kingdom's borders before they realize you're gone." I squeeze her fingers gently. "But we need to leave now, while the palace is settled for the night."

She pulls her hands from mine, turning away to pace the room. "You can't be serious. Leave the palace? Leave the kingdom? Dain, that's?—"

"The only way." I remain where I am, giving her space to process. "Unless you prefer to marry Prince Aldric."

"Of course I don't want to marry him!" She keeps her voice low despite her agitation. "But I have responsibilities, duties?—"

"To whom?" I challenge. "To a father who trades you for political advantage? To subjects who've never met you? To traditions that treat you as property to be bartered?"

She flinches at the harshness of my words, but doesn't deny them. "What about your duties? Your oath to the crown?"

"My oath means nothing if it forces me to deliver you into a life you don't want." I

step closer, not touching her but near enough that she has to look up to meet my eyes. "I have been loyal to the crown for fifteen years. Now I choose to be loyal to you."

Conflict plays across her face—the duty she's been raised to honor warring with the freedom she desperately wants. "Where would we go?"

The question sends hope surging through me. She's considering it.

"South, across the border to Valenia. I have contacts there, people who owe me favors. We can disappear, build new lives." I reach for her hand again, relieved when she doesn't pull away. "You wouldn't be a princess. We would have to work, to struggle like ordinary people. But we would be together."

"And if we're caught?" Her voice trembles slightly. "They would execute you for abducting the crown princess. You know that."

"Then I die having tried to give you the life you deserve, rather than standing guard at a marriage that will destroy you." I bring her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her palm. "It's a risk I'm willing to take."

She stares at me for a long moment, something shifting in her expression. "You would really do this? Abandon everything you've built, risk your life, just to free me from this betrothal?"

"I would do far worse to keep you from a man you don't love." The truth of it burns in my chest. "Say yes, Lirien. Come with me."

She closes her eyes, and for one terrible moment I think she'll refuse. Then she opens them, determination replacing doubt. "What do I need to bring?"

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Relief crashes over me. "Nothing that would be missed immediately. A change of clothes, if you have something plain. We have supplies waiting."

She moves to her wardrobe, pulling out the simple clothes she wore for her night in the city. "How will we get past the guards?"

"Leave that to me." I move to the door, listening for the return of the other guard. "Change quickly. We leave as soon as the east wing diversion begins."

She disappears behind her dressing screen, emerging moments later in the plain trousers and shirt, a cloak over her arm. Her hair is tied back simply, all traces of the princess hidden beneath common garb.

"How long until the diversion?" she asks, fastening the cloak around her shoulders.

"Any moment now." I check the corridor again—still clear. "When it happens, stay close to me. Move only when I move, stop when I stop. If we're separated, make for the eastern postern gate and wait in the shadows. Can you remember that?"

She nods, her expression solemn but determined. "Eastern postern gate. Shadows."

"Good." I reach out to touch her face, allowing myself this brief moment of tenderness. "No matter what happens, know that I?—"

A distant commotion interrupts me—shouts, the sound of running feet. The diversion has begun.

"It's time." I drop my hand, switching instantly to the focused alertness of a soldier in combat. "Stay behind me."

I open the door carefully, scanning the corridor. As expected, the guard hasn't returned—drawn away by the commotion in the east wing where my contacts have staged what appears to be an attempted break-in. I gesture for Lirien to follow, moving swiftly but silently down the servant's passage that will take us to the lower levels.

We encounter no one as we descend—the night servants occupied with their duties, the day staff long asleep. The few guards stationed along our route have been carefully selected—men who owe me favors, who will conveniently be looking elsewhere as we pass.

At the ground level, we pause in the shadow of a column as a patrol crosses the courtyard. Lirien's breath is warm against my neck as she presses close, her hand gripping mine tightly. When the guards pass, we slip into the kitchen gardens, using the herb beds for cover as we make our way toward the eastern wall.

The postern gate is small, meant for servants bringing supplies from the nearby market. During the day, it's guarded and busy. At night, it's secured with a heavy lock—a lock to which I acquired a key months ago, though at the time I hadn't known why I felt compelled to do so.

Now I understand. Some part of me has been planning this escape since the first time I saw the trapped look in her eyes.

I retrieve the hidden pack from behind a stack of empty barrels, slinging it over my shoulder before approaching the gate. The lock opens with a soft click, and I ease the gate open just enough for us to slip through.

"Almost there," I whisper, guiding her through the narrow opening. "Stay close."

Outside the palace walls, the city sprawls dark and quiet. Most citizens are asleep at this hour, though taverns still spill light and noise onto the cobbled streets. We keep to the shadows, moving quickly but not running—running attracts attention, makes people remember faces and directions.

Lirien matches my pace effortlessly, her hand in mine, her breath coming quick but controlled. In the dim light of occasional street lamps, I catch glimpses of her face—determined, alert, alive with a fierce joy despite the danger.

"Where now?" she asks as we reach a crossroads.

"The River Road." I lead her down a narrow alley that will take us toward the eastern edge of the city. "Two miles to the stables, then south through the forest. We'll reach the border by dawn if we push hard."

She nods, trusting me completely. The weight of that trust settles on my shoulders—not a burden but a precious responsibility. I will get her safely away from here or die in the attempt.

We continue through the sleeping city, every step taking us further from the palace, from duty, from the lives we were assigned. My training keeps me vigilant—watching for patrols, listening for pursuers, constantly scanning for threats—but beneath that professional awareness runs a current of exhilaration I haven't felt since my first battle.

This is right. This is necessary. This is the only possible path.

As the city thins into scattered buildings and the forest looms ahead, Lirien suddenly stops, tugging at my hand. I turn, instantly alert for danger.

"What is it?" I scan the darkness behind us, one hand moving to the dagger at my belt.

"Nothing." She steps closer, eyes shining in the moonlight. "I just—I needed to do this."

She rises on tiptoe, pressing her lips to mine in a swift, fierce kiss. "Thank you," she whispers against my mouth. "For choosing me over everything else."

My free hand comes up to cradle the back of her head, deepening the kiss for just a moment before reluctantly pulling away. "We're not safe yet."

"I know." She smiles, and in that smile I see a glimpse of the woman she might become, free from the constraints of court and crown. "But for the first time in my life, I believe I could be."

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I take her hand again, leading her toward the forest, toward freedom, toward whatever future we can carve for ourselves beyond the reach of kings and duties.

My hands are numb from the night chill, but I feel a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as hope—fragile, dangerous, but undeniably real.

nine

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Lirien

Freedom tastes like pine-scented air and sounds like thundering hoofbeats. I can't stop grinning as we ride hard through the forest, Dain just ahead of me, leading the way through moonlit paths. My muscles burn from hours in the saddle—princesses don't often ride at breakneck speed through wilderness—but the pain is exhilarating rather than unwelcome. For the first time in my life, I'm not running away from something, but toward something. Toward a future of my own choosing. Toward him.

The eastern sky shows the first hint of pale gray—dawn approaching. We've been riding since midnight, stopping only briefly to rest the horses and check our bearings. Dain promised we'd reach the border by morning, and from the increasing urgency in his commands, I sense we're close.

He reins in suddenly, raising a hand for me to do the same. Our horses pant beneath us, steam rising from their flanks in the cool pre-dawn air. I pull alongside him, following his gaze to the valley below where a river gleams like liquid silver in the

fading moonlight.

"The Veridian," he says, voice low. "Once we cross, we're outside the kingdom's jurisdiction. Half a mile more."

The hope in his words makes my heart soar. We've nearly made it. In mere minutes, we'll be beyond my father's reach, beyond the betrothal, beyond the suffocating weight of royal obligation.

"Then what are we waiting for?" I nudge my horse forward, eager to claim our freedom.

His hand shoots out, grabbing my reins. "Wait." His voice has changed, tension threading through it. "Listen."

I still, straining my ears. At first, I hear nothing beyond the usual forest sounds—wind through branches, distant birdsong, the soft nickering of our tired mounts. Then it comes to me—the faint but unmistakable rhythm of hoofbeats. Multiple horses, moving fast, coming our way.

"Palace guard?" I whisper, fear clutching at my throat.

Dain's expression hardens. "Yes. They've found our trail sooner than I expected." He scans the terrain rapidly, the soldier in him calculating odds and options. "We make for the river. If we can cross before they catch us, we still have a chance."

He wheels his horse around, spurring it toward a narrow trail that descends steeply through the trees. I follow close behind, ducking low branches, heart hammering in my chest. The pursuing hoofbeats grow louder with each passing minute—they're gaining on us.

My horse stumbles on the uneven ground, nearly sending me over its head. Dain glances back, concern flashing across his face.

"Stay close!" he calls over his shoulder. "The trail widens ahead."

We emerge from the densest part of the forest into a clearing that slopes gently toward the riverbank. The water flows swift and dark, perhaps twenty yards across. Freedom waits on the other side, tantalizingly close.

Dain pulls up sharply, cursing under his breath. I follow his gaze and my heart plummets.

Royal guards—four of them on horseback, wearing the distinctive blue and silver of the palace—block our path to the river. They must have split their forces, circling ahead while others pursued us from behind. A perfect trap.

"Princess Lirien." The lead guard inclines his head respectfully, as if this were a chance meeting in the palace corridors rather than a desperate pursuit through the wilderness. "Your father commands your immediate return."

Dain shifts his horse slightly, positioning himself between me and the guards. I recognize them all—men he's trained with, fought beside, commanded. Men who now look at him with a mixture of pity and condemnation.

"The princess is not returning to the palace," Dain says, his voice deceptively calm. "Lower your weapons and stand aside."

The lead guard—Sergeant Thorne, I recall—sighs heavily. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Vorex. The king is willing to be merciful if she returns unharmed."

"And what of Captain Vorex?" I demand, moving my horse forward until I'm beside Dain rather than behind him. "What mercy does my father offer him?"

Thorne's hesitation tells me everything. There will be no mercy for Dain. The man who kidnapped the crown princess—never mind that I went willingly—will face execution.

"That's what I thought." I straighten in my saddle, summoning every ounce of royal authority I possess. "I order you to stand down, Sergeant. I am not being abducted. I am choosing to leave."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness." Genuine regret colors his tone. "But our orders come from the king himself. We cannot disobey."

Behind us, the sound of approaching horses grows louder. The rest of the pursuers will be upon us within minutes, cutting off our last escape route.

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"We can still make the river," Dain murmurs, his eyes never leaving the guards before us. "But I'll have to clear a path."

I understand immediately what he means. He will fight—four against one, with more on the way. Impossible odds, even for a soldier of his caliber.

"No." I clutch his arm. "There must be another way."

He turns to me then, and the tenderness in his expression nearly breaks me. "Trust me, Lirien. I will get you across that river if it's the last thing I do."

Before I can respond, he wheels his horse toward the guards, drawing his sword in one fluid motion. "Last chance," he calls to them. "Stand aside."

Thorne shakes his head sadly, signaling his men to spread out. They draw their weapons—swords gleaming dully in the pre-dawn light. Not the lethal efficiency of a battlefield formation, but a half-hearted perimeter that betrays their reluctance to fight their former captain.

"Take her unharmed," Thorne orders. "Subdue Vorex if possible."

If possible. The qualifier speaks volumes. They know what Dain is capable of, know that "subduing" him will likely cost lives.

Dain doesn't wait for them to make the first move. He kicks his horse forward, sword flashing as he charges directly at the weakest point in their line—the youngest guard, who hesitates fractionally too long.

Steel meets steel with a sound that slices through the morning air. The young guard goes down, disarmed but not seriously injured, as Dain's horse pushes through the gap in their formation.

"Ride for the river!" he shouts to me, already engaged with a second guard who swings wildly at his exposed back.

I spur my horse forward, aiming for the opening Dain has created. One of the remaining guards moves to intercept me, but Dain is there somehow, his blade a silver blur that forces the man to defend himself instead of blocking my path.

I break through their line, galloping toward the riverbank, the sounds of combat ringing in my ears. I reach the water's edge and pull up, turning to look back.

What I see freezes the blood in my veins.

Dain fights like a man possessed, keeping all four guards at bay, preventing any of them from pursuing me. But he's outnumbered, and as I watch, Thorne manages to slice across his thigh. Blood darkens the fabric of his pants, but Dain barely seems to notice, pressing his attack with undiminished ferocity.

"Dain!" I scream, unable to help myself.

He glances toward me, a split-second lapse in concentration. It's enough for another guard to land a blow—this one to his shoulder, making him grunt in pain.

I cannot leave him. I will not.

I turn my horse back toward the fray, drawing the small dagger Dain insisted I carry. I have no illusions about my fighting ability—princesses learn statecraft, not swordplay—but I cannot watch him die for me.

"Princess, go!" Dain roars when he sees me approaching. "Cross the river!"

I ignore him, charging toward the nearest guard, my dagger raised in what must look like a pathetic threat. The guard turns, surprise written across his face at the sight of the crown princess bearing down on him with a weapon.

His hesitation gives Dain the opening he needs. With a vicious swing, he disarms the man, then wheels his horse around to engage Thorne, who presses forward relentlessly.

"Lirien, for God's sake, RUN!" Dain's voice cracks with desperation.

More hoofbeats thunder through the trees—the rest of the pursuit catching up. Within moments, we'll be hopelessly outnumbered.

I open my mouth to respond when sudden pain explodes across my temple. One of the guards, seeing me as the easier target, has struck me with the flat of his blade. Not hard enough to cause serious injury, but enough to disorient me. I sway in the saddle, the world spinning sickeningly around me.

Through blurred vision, I see Dain's face transform. Gone is the controlled soldier, replaced by something feral and terrifying. He abandons all defensive posture, charging directly at the man who struck me with such violence that both horses rear in alarm.

His sword arcs down in a killing blow that only Thorne's desperate intervention prevents from splitting the guard's skull. Even so, the man goes down hard, unconscious or worse.

"Don't touch her!" Dain roars, his voice barely human. "I'll kill any man who lays a hand on her!"

He fights like a demon now, heedless of his own safety, driven by rage and desperation. Blood streams from the wound in his thigh, from a new cut along his arm, from a gash on his forehead. But he doesn't slow, doesn't yield, his only goal to keep the guards away from me.

My vision clears in time to see reinforcements burst from the trees—six more palace guards, weapons drawn, faces grim. Ten against one. Impossible odds, even for Dain Vorex.

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"Enough!" I cry, finding my voice at last. "Stop this madness!"

To my surprise, the guards hesitate, conditioned to obey royal commands. Dain doesn't. He uses their momentary distraction to disable another opponent, sending the man sprawling from his saddle with a well-placed blow.

Thorne signals to the newcomers, who spread out to surround us. "Stand down, Vorex," he calls. "It's over. Don't throw your life away."

"My life was forfeit the moment I chose her," Dain responds, blood dripping from his blade. "But I'll take as many of you with me as I can before I fall."

"NO!" I urge my horse forward, placing myself between Dain and the advancing guards. "No more bloodshed. These men are following orders, just as you once did."

Dain's eyes burn with terrible resolve. "Move aside, Lirien."

"I will not." I meet his gaze steadily. "I will not watch you die for me."

"Better to die fighting for what matters than live serving what doesn't." His voice softens despite the harshness of his words. "Please, go. Cross the river. I'll hold them as long as I can."

The selflessness of his plea breaks something inside me. This man—this brave, stubborn, impossible man—is willing to sacrifice everything to give me freedom. A freedom that means nothing without him.

"I'm not leaving you." I reach out, my fingers brushing his blood-streaked hand. "If I return to the palace, I return with you beside me."

Confusion crosses his face. "They'll execute me the moment we're back inside the walls."

"No." I straighten in my saddle, turning to face the guards who have paused, uncertain how to proceed. "They will not harm the man I love. The man I choose to stand beside me. Not if they wish me to cooperate with anything ever again."

Thorne exchanges glances with his men, clearly weighing the situation. Finally, he speaks. "Princess, our orders are to return you to the palace. The king will decide Captain Vorex's fate."

"Then hear me clearly, Sergeant." I infuse my voice with every ounce of royal authority I possess. "You will allow Captain Vorex to bind his wounds before we travel. You will treat him with respect as my chosen companion. And you will deliver a message to my father: if any harm comes to Dain Vorex, I will never—never—fulfill my duties as crown princess again."

A long silence follows my proclamation. The guards look to Thorne for direction, while Dain stares at me with an expression hovering between disbelief and awe.

"Your Highness," Thorne begins, clearly uncomfortable, "I cannot guarantee?—"

"You don't need to guarantee anything except our safe passage to the palace," I interrupt. "I will handle my father."

Thorne hesitates a moment longer, then nods. "Very well. Tend to your wounds, Vorex. We ride when you're ready."

The guards withdraw a respectful distance, leaving Dain and me in a small bubble of privacy. He slumps slightly in his saddle, the adrenaline of battle beginning to fade, revealing the true extent of his injuries.

"You should have gone," he says quietly, eyes locked on mine. "You were so close to freedom."

I guide my horse closer until our legs touch, reaching out to cup his face in my palm. "What use is freedom if I can't share it with you?"

His hand covers mine, turning to press a kiss to my palm despite the guards watching from a distance. "What you said—about loving me?—"

"Is the truth." I stroke my thumb across his cheekbone, sm

"Is the truth." I stroke my thumb across his cheekbone, smearing blood and dirt. "Perhaps the only truth that matters now."

His eyes close briefly, leaning into my touch. "Lirien, your father will never accept this. Never accept me."

"Then he will have to learn." I glance at the waiting guards, then back to Dain's wounded body. "But first, we need to tend to your injuries. You're bleeding badly."

He looks down at his leg as if noticing the wound for the first time. "I've had worse."

"That doesn't comfort me." I dismount, gesturing for him to do the same. When he sways upon hitting the ground, I'm there, slipping under his arm to support his weight. "Sit. Let me see."

The guards watch warily as I help Dain to a fallen log near the riverbank. He sits

heavily, face pale beneath the blood and grime. I tear strips from the hem of my shirt—a princess rending her own clothing, something that would scandalize the court ladies—and bind his leg wound as best I can.

"Where did you learn this?" he asks, watching my hands work with surprising competence.

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"I read." I secure the makeshift bandage. "Extensively. On many subjects not considered appropriate for princesses."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Of course you did."

I move to the gash on his arm, binding it with similar efficiency. His blood stains my hands, warm and viscous, a visceral reminder of what he was willing to sacrifice for me. When I reach for the cut on his forehead, his hand captures my wrist.

"Enough. I'll survive." His eyes search mine, intense despite his weakened state. "Are you certain about this? About returning? We could still make a run for the river."

I look at his battered body, the guards surrounding us, the slim chance of escape. "And then what? You bleed to death insome foreign village? I watch you die knowing I could have prevented it?" I shake my head firmly. "No. We return together. We face what comes together."

He studies me for a long moment, then nods once. "Together, then."

I help him back to his horse, supporting him as he mounts with a barely suppressed groan of pain. When I'm certain he won't fall, I return to my own horse and swing into the saddle.

"We're ready," I call to Thorne, who signals his men to form up around us.

As we begin the long ride back toward the palace, dawn breaks fully over the forest. Sunlight filters through the trees, turning dew drops to diamonds on the undergrowth.

It should be beautiful, this new day, but all I can think about is what awaits us at its end.

Dain rides beside me, straight-backed despite his injuries, eyes alert for any opportunity. I know he hasn't given up, know that he's still calculating odds and escape routes. But he respects my choice enough not to act on those calculations.

"Whatever happens," I say quietly, for his ears alone, "I don't regret this. Any of it."

His hand reaches across the space between us, briefly clasping mine before returning to his reins. "Nor do I."

We ride toward an uncertain future, surrounded by guards who were once Dain's brothers-in-arms. But for the first time in my life, I'm not facing that future alone. For the first time, I have something—someone—worth fighting for.

And fight I will, with every weapon at my disposal. Because Dain Vorex has spilled his blood to protect me, and now I will use every ounce of my position and power to protect him in return.

ten

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Dain

I sit in the palace dungeon, counting heartbeats like a miser counts coins. Each pulse that continues to drive blood through my veins feels like stolen time—hours and minutes and seconds that should have ended with a headsman's axe. My wounds have been dressed by a palace physician who worked in stony silence, unwilling to meet the eyes of a traitor. The stone bench beneath me is cold and unyielding, much like

the fate I've accepted. But I regret nothing—not the escape, not the fight, not loving a woman I had no right to love.

They separated us immediately upon our return to the palace. Lirien was escorted to her chambers—a prisoner in silk rather than iron—while I was brought here, to the cold cells beneath the palace where enemies of the crown await judgment. The irony doesn't escape me. Fifteen years of loyal service, of risking my life for king and country, erased by one night of defiance.

One night of choosing love over duty.

My leg throbs where the sword caught me, but the pain is distant, unimportant. All that matters is that she's safe, that in my final act of service I protected what truly needed protection—not her body, which has never been in danger, but her spirit, her right to choose her own path.

The guards posted outside my cell are men I've trained, men I've fought beside. They avoid looking at me directly, whether from respect or disgust I cannot tell. They've brought food and water, which sits untouched on the floor beside me. Condemned men have little appetite.

I wonder what she's doing now. Is she still fighting for me, as she promised? Or has reality reasserted itself—the reality of her position, her duty, the weight of a kingdom's expectations? I wouldn't blame her if she surrendered to it. What we shared was beautiful but brief, a flash of lightning in an otherwise darkened sky. Perhaps it was always meant to fade.

The thought brings a physical ache to my chest, but I push it aside. Better to focus on the memory of her in my arms, her lips beneath mine, her voice whispering my name in the darkness. If these are to be my final hours, I choose to fill them with her.

A commotion outside my cell draws me from my thoughts. Keys rattle, voices murmur. I rise to my feet, ignoring the pain that shoots through my injured leg. Whatever comes next, I will meet it standing.

The door swings open to reveal Captain Merritt, his expression unreadable. "The king demands your presence."

No "captain" before my name, no acknowledgment of rank. I have been stripped of everything, as expected.

Two guards flank me as we climb the stairs from the dungeon, Merritt leading the way. They haven't bound my hands—a small courtesy or simple practicality, given my wounded state. The palace corridors are unnaturally empty, cleared of servants and courtiers who might witness a disgraced captain's final walk.

We approach the throne room, its massive doors guarded by four of the elite royal guard. They salute Merritt but regard me with stony faces. The doors swing open, revealing the vast chamber beyond.

The king sits on his throne, crown gleaming in the light that streams through the high windows. His council members are arrayed to his right, their expressions ranging from solemn to openly hostile. To his left stands Prince Aldric, looking vaguely uncomfortable but determined to maintain his claim.

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And before the throne, her back straight and head high, stands Lirien.

She wears a simple gown of deep blue, her hair loosely bound rather than elaborately styled. No jewels, no royal trappings. Just a woman facing her father, her future, her destiny with quiet determination.

She turns at our entrance, and the relief that crosses her face when she sees me nearly brings me to my knees. She's been fighting for me all this time, uncertain if I still lived.

Merritt halts our procession at a respectful distance from the throne. "Your Majesty, the prisoner as commanded."

The king's gaze falls on me, cold and assessing. "Dain Vorex. Once captain of my guard, entrusted with my daughter's safety. Now charged with treason, abduction of the crown princess, and assault on royal guards in the execution of their duty."

I say nothing. There is nothing to say. The facts are not in dispute.

"Have you anything to offer in your defense before sentence is passed?" the king asks, a formality only.

I lift my chin, meeting his gaze directly. "I acted according to my conscience, Your Majesty. I would do so again."

A murmur runs through the council members at my lack of remorse. The king's expression hardens.

"Then by the power vested in me?—"

"Father, wait." Lirien steps forward, placing herself between me and the throne. "You promised to hear me before passing judgment."

The king sighs, clearly having already endured much argument from his daughter. "I have heard you, Lirien. For hours, I have heard you. But this man?—"

"Is the man I love." Her voice rings clear in the vast chamber. "The man I choose."

Prince Aldric shifts uncomfortably, his pride clearly wounded by this public declaration. The council members exchange glances, shock evident on their faces.

"A passing infatuation," the king dismisses. "The result of too many romantic tales and too little understanding of what is at stake."

"You think me a child?" Lirien's voice is quiet but steel-edged. "A silly girl captivated by her guard? Is that truly how little you know your daughter?"

The king leans forward, his patience visibly wearing thin. "What I know is that you have responsibilities greater than your personal desires. What I know is that the alliance with Westland is vital to our kingdom's security. What I know is that this man took advantage of his position to seduce you away from your duty."

"He did not seduce me from anything." Lirien stands her ground, unintimidated. "It was I who left the palace that night, I who sought freedom, I who asked him to take me away. If anyone is guilty of seduction, it is me."

I open my mouth to protest—to take full responsibility, to shield her from blame—but her glance silences me. This is her battle to fight.

"Even if that were true," the king counters, "it changes nothing. The alliance must proceed. Westland?—"

"Westland can have its alliance through trade agreements and military pacts." Lirien gestures to Prince Aldric. "It does not need my hand in marriage to secure it."

"Princess," Prince Aldric interjects, apparently feeling the need to defend his position, "our betrothal represents more than mere political convenience. It symbolizes the unification of our peoples, a visual representation of?—"

"I am not a symbol," Lirien cuts him off, though not unkindly. "I am a woman. A future queen. And I will not build my reign on a foundation of personal misery."

The king rises from his throne, patience exhausted. "Enough of this nonsense. Captain Vorex will face the consequences of his actions, and you, daughter, will fulfill your duty to this kingdom. The betrothal stands."

"Then you leave me no choice." Lirien's voice drops to a deadly calm. "I renounce my claim to the throne."

Shock ripples through the chamber. The king stares at his daughter as if she's sprouted a second head. "You cannot be serious."

"I have never been more serious." She meets his gaze unflinchingly. "I will not rule a kingdom that forces me to sacrifice my heart for political advantage. I will not wear a crown that weighs more than my happiness."

"Lirien," I interject, unable to remain silent, "don't do this. Not for me."

She turns to me, her eyes soft with emotion but her resolve unshakable. "Not just for you, Dain. For me. For the queen I wish to be—one who rules with both wisdom and

compassion, who understands that duty without love becomes tyranny."

The king sinks back onto his throne, suddenly looking every one of his years. "You would abandon your birthright, your people, all for this... this guard?"

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"I would abandon a system that treats women as bargaining chips." Lirien takes a step toward her father, her voice gentling. "Father, you loved my mother. I've seen the portraits, heard the stories. She wasn't a political match—she was your choice, your heart."

Something flickers in the king's expression—pain, remembrance, perhaps even understanding.

"That was different," he says, but with less conviction.

"Why? Because you were a man? Because you were already king?" Lirien presses her advantage. "Did your love for her make you a weaker ruler? Or did it give you strength, purpose, someone to build a better kingdom for?"

The king is silent, his gaze moving from his daughter to me and back again. I stand motionless, barely breathing, watching as Lirien fights not just for our love but for the very nature of power and choice.

"The alliance with Westland is still necessary," the king finally says, pragmatic even in retreat.

"Then find another way to secure it." Lirien gestures to Prince Aldric. "His Highness deserves a wife who will welcome him with her whole heart, not one who gazes at another man whenever his back is turned."

Aldric clears his throat, looking surprisingly relieved. "If I may, Your Majesty... perhaps there is wisdom in the princess's words. A marriage built on resentment

serves neither our kingdoms well." He bows slightly to Lirien. "I withdraw my suit, with gratitude for your honesty."

The king looks thunderstruck, watching as his carefully constructed alliance crumbles before his eyes. The councilmembers shift uncomfortably, uncertain how to proceed in such unprecedented circumstances.

"Even if I were to consider this... madness," the king says finally, "there remains the matter of Captain Vorex's treason. He abducted the crown princess. He attacked royal guards. Such actions cannot go unpunished."

"He protected me," Lirien counters. "As he has done for seven years. As he was sworn to do."

"By taking you from the palace? By placing you in danger?" The king's voice rises with renewed anger.

"The only danger I faced was a lifetime of unhappiness." Lirien moves to stand beside me, her shoulder brushing mine in silent solidarity. "Dain saw what no one else at court was willing to see—that I was suffocating under the weight of expectation. That I needed to be valued as more than a political asset."

The king studies us for a long moment, his expression unreadable. When he speaks again, his voice is measured, controlled.

"And if I were to pardon Captain Vorex? What then? Would you have me welcome a former guard as a suitable match for the crown princess? Would you have the people accept a commoner as their future king consort?"

I stiffen at the implication. The chasm of status between us has always been vast, but hearing it stated so plainly by the king himself makes it seem truly insurmountable.

But Lirien doesn't waver. "Dain Vorex is the son of a respected general. He has served the crown with distinction for fifteen years. He bears the scars of his loyalty." Her hand finds mine, fingers intertwining. "And he is the man I choose to stand beside me, to advise me, to share my life and my reign."

Our fingers brush, and we feel a spark—not static from the dry air, but something deeper, something powerful enough to challenge kingdoms and rewrite destinies. It jolts us nonetheless.

The king rises from his throne, descending the dais to stand before us. Up close, I can see the weariness in his eyes, the burden of rule etched into every line of his face.

"You truly love her?" he asks me directly, man to man rather than king to subject.

"With everything I am, Your Majesty." The truth flows easily, publicly, dangerously. "Enough to die for her. Enough to live for her, if allowed."

He studies me with the shrewd assessment of a ruler who has seen men at their best and worst. Whatever he searches for in my face, he seems to find it.

"The council will need to be convinced," he says finally. "Traditions will need to be reconsidered. The nobility will resist."

Hope flares in my chest, so sudden and bright it's almost painful. "Your Majesty?"

"If my daughter is to rule after me, she will need a strong partner. Someone who understands loyalty, sacrifice, protection." The king looks between us, resignation and something like grudging approval mingling in his expression. "Perhaps the captain of her guard is not the worst choice she could make."

Lirien's hand tightens around mine, but she maintains her regal composure. "Thank

you, Father."

"Don't thank me yet." He turns back toward his throne. "Vorex will need a title, of course. Something befitting a consort. And training in statecraft, diplomacy, the finer points of court politics."

"I am a quick study, Your Majesty," I manage, still stunned by this unexpected turn.

"You'd better be." He retakes his seat, gesturing to the council members who look varying degrees of shocked and intrigued. "I expect a full proposal for how this... unusual arrangement might work. Trade alternatives with Westland, a suitable title and position for Captain Vorex, and a statement for the people that presents this as strength rather than scandal."

The council members bow, already murmuring among themselves as they exit to begin their work. Prince Aldric follows, offering Lirien a surprisingly gracious nod of farewell. The guards withdraw to a discreet distance, leaving us in a small bubble of privacy before the throne.

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"You understand what you're sacrificing for this choice?" the king asks Lirien quietly. "The simpler path, the established alliance, the unquestioned acceptance of the nobility?"

"I understand what I'm gaining," she responds, her shoulder pressing against mine. "A partnership based on love and respect. A consort who sees me clearly and values me completely. A chance to rule with my heart intact."

The king sighs, but there's a glimmer of pride beneath his exasperation. "You are too much like your mother." He rises again, approaching us. "Captain Vorex—or Lord Vorex, as I suppose you'll soon be styled—I entrusted my daughter's safety to you seven years ago. Now it seems I'm entrusting her happiness as well. See that you guard both with equal vigilance."

I drop to one knee before him, head bowed in genuine gratitude and renewed allegiance. "With my life, Your Majesty."

"Rise," he commands. "That's the last time you'll kneel to me if you're to be my daughter's consort. From now on, you stand beside her."

I rise unsteadily, my wounded leg protesting, but Lirien's hand on my arm steadies me. As it always will, I realize with wonder.

"The formal announcements will take time," the king continues. "There will be resistance, adjustments, compromises to be made. Are you prepared for that battle, Captain? It may prove fiercer than any you've faced with sword and shield."

"Any battle fought with her is one worth winning, Your Majesty." I look at Lirien, finding strength in her unwavering gaze. "And I have never been afraid of a fight."

The king nods, seemingly satisfied. "Then I will leave you to begin planning your new future. Together." He eyes Lirien pointedly. "With appropriate chaperones until the formal betrothal, of course."

Lirien smiles, the expression lighting her entire face. "Of course, Father."

He departs with his remaining guards, leaving us alone in the vast throne room—the place where Lirien will one day rule, where I will one day stand beside her as consort rather than sentinel.

"Did that just happen?" I ask quietly, still unable to fully believe our sudden reprieve, our unexpected victory.

"It did." She turns to face me fully, her hands coming up to frame my face. "Are you ready for this new duty, Captain? To be my partner, my confidant, my king in all but name?"

I cover her hands with mine, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what she's offering, what she's fought for, what she's won against all odds.

"I have only ever wanted to serve you, Lirien," I tell her, my voice rough with emotion. "Whether as your guard or your consort, my purpose remains the same—to protect you, to support you, to love you until my last breath."

She rises on tiptoe, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss that feels like both benediction and promise. When she pulls back, her eyes shine with tears and determination.

"Then serve as my husband, Dain Vorex. Serve as my love. Serve as the man who

taught a princess that duty without heart is no duty at all, but merely a cage with golden bars."

I pull her against me, propriety be damned, holding her as I've longed to hold her for years—openly, without shame or secrecy. The road ahead will not be easy. There will be resistance, resentment, obstacles at every turn. But we have already faced impossible odds and emerged victorious.

"My princess," I whisper against her hair. "My queen. My heart."

She smiles against my chest, her arms tightening around me. "Not just a princess anymore. Not just a duty or a crown or a political asset." She lifts her face to mine, eyes shining with a future now possible. "A woman who chooses. A queen who loves. Yours, as you are mine."

And in that moment, in that promise, we are both finally, completely free.

epilogue

...

One year later

Lirien

The coronet no longer pinches my temples like it used to. Strange how a year can transform the weight of duty into something almost comfortable—like the way Dain's eyes follow me across every room, heavy with protection and possession. My husband. My bodyguard. Soon, my king. The words still catch in my throat sometimes, sweet and impossible as honey.

I catch his gaze across the council chamber as the ministers drone on about trade agreements. Dain stands at his usual post by the wall, refusing the chair that's rightfully his as my consort. Even now, after the vows and the nights tangled in royal sheets, he positions himself as sentinel rather than royalty. Some habits of fifteen years don't break easily. Some, I've learned, don't need to.

The meeting finally concludes with shuffling papers and bowing heads. I rise, and Dain is instantly at my elbow, his palmhovering just above the small of my back—not quite touching me in public, but close enough that I feel the heat of him through my gown.

"You're frowning, Princess," he murmurs as we exit, his voice for me alone.

I am still "Princess" to him, even though in private he's called me by my name for months now. In public, though, he maintains the formality, the distance—as if titles can somehow negate the fact that he's seen every inch of me, claimed every part.

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"Just thinking about how much hasn't changed," I say, tilting my head to look up at him. At thirty-eight, the threads of silver at his temples have multiplied, and the scar along his jaw seems more pronounced against his tanned skin. His eyes, though—those stormy blues—remain unchanged, eternally vigilant.

If anything, marriage has only intensified his protectiveness. Where once he shadowed me from a respectful distance, now he rarely lets me out of arm's reach. The royal court whispers about it—how my once-rebellious spirit has allowed itself to be so thoroughly contained. They don't understand that his attention isn't a cage but a sanctuary I willingly enter.

We reach the royal wing, guards stationed at intervals, each nodding deferentially as we pass. Dain nods back with the silent communication of men who understand what it means to stand between danger and something precious. Even among our most trusted security, his hand now finds my waist, a subtle claim.

"You have correspondence waiting," he says as we approach our chambers. "And your father wishes to discuss the summer progress before dinner."

I stop walking abruptly, causing him to halt mid-stride. "I don't want to talk about schedules or duties right now."

A flicker of concern crosses his face. "Are you unwell?"

"Quite the opposite." I take his large hand in mine and tug him toward our bedchamber door. "I'm feeling exceptionally well, in fact."

The shift in his expression is subtle—a slight darkening of his eyes, a tightening at the corners of his mouth—but I've learned to read these micro-changes like my own personal cipher. Desire, wariness, and that perpetual control battling beneath the surface.

Once inside our chambers, I dismiss the attendants with a wave. They scurry out, eyes averted in practiced discretion. The heavy door clicks shut, and suddenly the air seems thicker, charged with potential.

Dain moves to check the balcony doors—his unbreakable security routine—but I intercept him, pressing my body against his, feeling the solid wall of his chest against mine.

"They're locked," I whisper. "You checked them this morning. And after lunch. And before the council meeting."

His hands find my hips, steadying rather than passionate. "Habit."

"I know a better habit." I stretch up on tiptoes and press my mouth to the underside of his jaw, right along the scar that marks the moment he nearly died for me years ago. The raised tissue feels different against my lips—a physical reminder of his devotion long before we acknowledged what existed between us.

"Lirien," he says, a warning and a plea in those three syllables.

I slide my hands up his chest, feeling the controlled rhythm of his heart beneath my fingertips. Even now, after countless intimate encounters, he maintains that iron discipline. It makes unraveling him all the more intoxicating.

"I sat through three hours of discussions about grain tariffs," I murmur against his neck. "I think I deserve a reward for such diligence to my royal duties."

His laugh is more vibration than sound, a rumble I feel against my cheek. "Is that so, Princess?"

I draw back to look at him, letting my hands trail downward until they rest at his belt. "It is. And as future queen, I expect my demands to be met with enthusiasm."

Something flashes in his eyes—that dangerous, possessive heat that never fails to make my stomach tighten with anticipation. His hands tighten briefly on my hips before he says, "And what does my princess demand?"

Instead of answering, I slowly sink to my knees before him, maintaining eye contact as I descend. The plush carpet cushions my knees, but it's the sudden sharpness of his intake of breath that I focus on. This position—me kneeling before him—creates a delicious inversion of our usual dynamic that never fails to affect us both.

"Lirien." My name again, rougher this time, as I work at his belt buckle.

"Yes?" I ask with feigned innocence, fingers deftly navigating the fastenings of his trousers.

"The correspondence?—"

"Can wait." I free him from the confines of fabric, immediately wrapping my hand around him. He's already hardening in my palm, betraying his body's response regardless of his words. "Nothing is more important than this. Than us."

His hand cups my cheek, surprisingly gentle given the tension I can feel radiating through him. "You shouldn't be on your knees. You're?—"

"About to make my husband forget his own name," I finish for him, leaning forward to replace my hand with my mouth.

The sound he makes—part groan, part surrendered sigh—sends a thrill through me. For all his strength and control, for all the walls he maintains even now, I can reduce him to this with nothing but my lips and tongue and desire.

I take him deeper, savoring the weight of him against my tongue. His fingers thread through my hair, careful not to disrupt the braids that took an hour to arrange this morning. I appreciate the consideration, but right now I'd welcome the dishevelment, the physical evidence of his passion.

"Look at me," he commands softly.

I tilt my eyes upward without breaking rhythm, finding his gaze burning into mine. The vulnerability in this exchange—me physically submissive yet holding all the power, him standing yet completely at my mercy—creates an intoxicating tension between us.

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His breathing grows more ragged as I work, his hips beginning to move in shallow, controlled thrusts. I can tell by the tightening of his fingers that he's approaching the edge faster than he'd like to admit.

"Enough," he says hoarsely, attempting to pull back. "Lirien, enough."

I grasp his hips firmly, refusing to release him, instead increasing my efforts. This is what I want—to push past his endless control, to make him surrender completely. The taste of him, the sounds he makes, the knowledge that I alone can reduce this powerful man to trembling need—it's a heady power I've grown addicted to.

"Princess," he warns, voice strained, using my title as a last attempt at distance.

I respond by taking him deeper, my hands sliding around to grip his muscular backside, pulling him closer in unmistakable intention. I want this—want to taste his pleasure, want to know I've shattered his composure.

His resistance breaks with a muttered curse. His head falls back, the cords of his neck standing out in sharp relief as he surrenders to the inevitable. His release floods my mouth, hot and sudden, and I accept it eagerly, continuing until I've drawn every last shudder from him.

When I finally pull away, looking up at him with undisguised satisfaction, his eyes are nearly black with dilated pupils. His chest heaves with labored breathing, and for a moment, he looks almost undone—exactly what I wanted.

The moment doesn't last. With startling swiftness for a man who just experienced

such intense pleasure, he pulls me to my feet, his recovery time nothing short of miraculous.

"That wasn't the plan," he says, voice graveled and low.

I smile, wiping the corner of my mouth with my thumb. "I don't recall asking for your plan."

Something predatory crosses his features, and before I can react, he's lifted me bodily, carrying me toward our massive bed. "Always so willful," he murmurs against my ear, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. "Always pushing boundaries."

"You'd be disappointed if I didn't," I reply, fingers already working at the laces of my gown.

He deposits me on the bed with surprising gentleness, then steps back to shed his clothes with efficient movements. I watch, propped on my elbows, as each new expanse of skin is revealed—the broad shoulders marked with old battle scars, the tapering waist, powerful thighs dusted with dark hair. My husband's body is a roadmap of duty and sacrifice, each mark telling a story of protection. And now, as he stands fully naked before me, I'm struck anew by how completely he belongs to me.

He helps me with my gown, hands that can break a man's neck with terrifying ease now carefully navigating delicate fabric and laces. Despite his obvious renewed arousal, he takes his time, unwrapping me like something precious. When I'm finally bare before him, his eyes track over my body with possessive hunger.

"A year," he says, almost to himself, "and still I can hardly believe you're mine."

I reach for him, pulling him down to cover my body with his much larger frame. "Show me I am."

The words ignite something primal in him. His mouth claims mine in a bruising kiss, all pretense of gentleness abandoned. His hands map my skin with urgent need, finding all the places he knows will make me gasp and arch against him. When his fingers slide between my thighs, he groans against my mouth at the evidence of my desire.

"This," he murmurs, "this is what I live for. Knowing that you want me as desperately as I want you."

"I've always wanted you," I confess, the words punched out of me as his fingers work their magic. "Even when I shouldn't have."

He shifts suddenly, positioning himself between my spread thighs, the blunt head of his renewed erection pressing against me. "I'm going to make you forget there was ever a time we weren't like this," he promises, then drives forward in one powerful thrust.

The sensation of fullness makes me cry out, my nails digging into the hard muscle of his shoulders. He stills for a moment, letting me adjust, his forehead pressed against mine, our breath mingling in the narrow space between us.

"Move," I command, lifting my hips in encouragement.

A feral grin crosses his face. "As my princess demands."

He establishes a rhythm that's just shy of punishing, each thrust deliberate and deep. His usual control has slipped, replaced by something rawer, more instinctive. His hands grip my hips, angling me to take him deeper, and the change in position sends sparks of pleasure shooting up my spine.

"You feel so fucking perfect," he growls, words he'd never use outside this room, this

bed. "Made for me. Only me."

"Only you," I agree, breathless, my hands clutching at him, trying to pull him impossibly closer.

He shifts his weight to one arm, his free hand sliding between us to find the center of my pleasure. "Come for me," he demands, circling his thumb in knowing patterns. "Let me feel you."

I'm already close, balancing on the knife-edge of climax. His words, his touch, the relentless drive of his body into mine—it's overwhelming, a sensory assault I have no defense against. When he lowers his head to my ear and speaks again, his voice is rough with emotion.

"I want to breed you, my little princess," he whispers, the crude words somehow transformed into something sacred by the reverence in his tone. "Fill you with my child. Watch your belly grow round with the proof of what we are to each other."

The image his words conjure—me swollen with his child, his possessiveness multiplied tenfold—sends me careening over the edge. I shatter beneath him, crying out his name as pleasure washes through me in pulsing waves. My body clenches around him, and I feel the moment he loses himself in response, his rhythm faltering as he follows me into release.

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He collapses beside me, pulling me tight against his chest, our skin slick with sweat, hearts hammering in tandem. His large hand splays possessively over my stomach, and I wonder if he's imagining what he just spoke of—our child growing beneath his palm.

"I meant it," he says after our breathing has steadied, confirming my thoughts. "About wanting a child with you."

I turn in his arms to face him, tracing the line of his jaw with my fingertips. "I know you did." I press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "I want that too."

Something vulnerable flashes across his features, rare enough that it makes my chest tight. "I don't deserve you?—"

I silence him with a finger against his lips. "You deserve everything and more."

He captures my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. "I will spend the rest of my life making sure you never regret choosing me."

"I know." I curl closer to him, my head tucked beneath his chin. "That's why I love you."

His arms tighten around me, and I feel his lips press against my hair. "And I adore you, my princess. More than duty, more than honor, more than my own life." His voice drops to a whisper, reverent and fierce. "You are everything to me. Always have been. Always will be."

We lie together in the fading afternoon light, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear, his hands still protective even in our most private moments. Outside these walls await crowns and duties, a kingdom to rule, a life of public scrutiny. But here, in the circle of Dain's arms, I've found the freedom I truly sought all along—the liberty to love and be loved without reservation.

My bodyguard. My husband. My king. Mine.