



His Runaway Princess

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Category: Romance

Description: She's a princess adrift in her own life. He's a royal protection officer on holiday. How far is he willing to go to keep her safe?

Of all the things Princess Johanna Betlinde Amalia of Øyanord thought she would do in her life, sneaking away from her protection detail wasn't one of them. At least not once she'd outgrown her slightly rebellious teenager phase. But she does anyway, hoping to spend a few days as just Amalia, without the stress – or trappings – of her everyday life. Ryker Drasil of Eyjania is almost finished with his long overdue holiday to Ravenzario. As he prepares to return to his daily life, he recognizes someone who should have security with her at all times – but doesn't. He tries to convince himself she'll be fine, and he should just head home. She wasn't his protectee, after all. They weren't even from the same country. But when Ryker realizes she's not as alone as she seems, he knows none of that matters. Ryker's personal and professional reputation depends on keeping Amalia safe, but falling head over heels in love with a princess from another country borders on treason. When Amalia professes her feelings, will Ryker walk away or confess he's found the one his heart longs for in His Runaway Princess?

Total Pages (Source): 73

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

1

Ryker Drasil knew he shouldn't wear his sunglasses inside the ferry.

But old habits die hard - or not at all.

Especially when you're trying to watch someone who doesn't want to be watched.

He'd been on holiday for three weeks, but Ryker still hadn't been able to turn off his internal protection officer. Not after so many years on the job.

And the person he watched seemed to be alone - and she definitely shouldn't be.

Unless his eyes deceived him, Princess Johanne of Øyanord was on the Ravenzarian ferry with him.

Alone.

He didn't know that royal family very well, but he'd worked a number of events where she had been along with his primary protectee, Princess Genevieve of Eyjanian.

After looking her up on his phone to be sure, Ryker did something he hadn't done in quite some time, if ever.

"Is this seat taken?"

The young woman with the dark blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail looked up at him.

Had he ever noticed how incredible her green eyes were?

Focus, Ryker. Taking his sunglasses off, he tried to brush the attraction out of his mind.

“Pardon?” The music, obnoxious as it was, couldn’t have drowned him out.

He turned on his best smile, the one he’d been told was charming. Princess Genevieve had been the one to tell him that, while trying to distract him when she’d done something against the advice of her security team - but that was beside the point. His smile widened. “Is this seat taken?”

She glanced down at the empty seat beside her then looked around the half-full ferry. “If I said yes?”

“Then I would walk away,” he told her with a deferential nod of his head. “Or you can tell me it is available, and we can both have a hopefully pleasant conversation instead of whatever that music is supposed to be.” At least she’d picked a quiet corner, or the quietest one available anyway.

The princess shrugged. “I suppose you can sit wherever you’d like.”

Ryker sat down close but not too close to her. “I would never want you or anyone to feel uncomfortable.” He held out a hand. “I’m James, but they call me Ryker.” There couldn’t be any harm using his legal name could there?

She took his hand cautiously. “Amalia.” She’d made a smart choice to use one of her middle names.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Amalia.” He didn’t want to let go of her hand, for reasons that weren’t as professional as they should be. “Where are you headed?”

“Ichnusia.” She didn’t offer any more information.

The southern island, but not a specific location on it. Good for her. “Got any big plans while you’re there?” He stuck his sunglasses backward on his head to keep them out of his way.

She shook her head. “Not yet. I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Spur of the moment trip?” That would make sense. She couldn’t have planned very far ahead if she didn’t want her security teams to know where to look for her. It seemed likely she would have deactivated her phone.

Having been on a security team with a protectee who liked to disappear from time to time, he could easily imagine how frantic they must be at the moment. After the first few times, Princess Genevieve had worked out a system of code words with her team. She refused to stop, so it was the best option. Much later, they learned she’d been meeting with Levi Prescott - who she eventually married.

“I suppose you could put it that way.” She gave him a smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Do you have any recommendations?”

“There are any number of things to do. You can plan your own tour, rent an auto, and drive around the islands.” He gave a casual shrug. “It may be cheaper to rent one on each island instead of taking one across between the two.”

“I don’t think I would like to plan my own tour. I don’t know enough about the islands to do them justice.” Her hands rested on her lap, but her fingers began to twist together.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Ryker had an uncanny ability to sense and see things on the periphery. It had served him well many times. It didn't take that ability to sense the tension coming off her in waves.

"You can find a resort and relax." Another good option. Keep her in one place until he could get in touch with her team.

The ponytail swayed as the princess shook her head. "I don't think I want to sit still. The parts of the country I've seen are quite lovely. I'd like to see more of it."

He shifted until he half faced her, his arm stretched along the back of the bench toward her, but not close enough she should feel threatened. "There are organized trips you can do. You sign up, they do all of the work."

"That sounds like something I might enjoy." She looked back over at him. "Where would one go if they didn't want to be taken advantage of by someone unscrupulous? How do you know the services are legitimate and not simply out to take your money?"

An astute question - and a good thing Ryker wasn't out to take advantage of her. "I can steer you toward a couple of good ones." Unzipping his backpack, he pulled his personal tablet out. "We can look some up and see what looks interesting."

Princess Johan... Princess Amalia nodded. "That would be lovely."

Ryker needed to keep the name she currently preferred in the forefront of his mind, but even given the circumstances, he couldn't lose the title. It just wasn't done.

He moved closer to her, careful not to get too close. For the next fifteen minutes, they looked at a couple different websites and discussed the kinds of things she would like to do. Some of them didn't start until the next morning. If she wanted one of those, she'd need a place to stay for the evening - or at least until Ryker could get in touch with her team. Hopefully, he wouldn't miss his flight.

Internally, he shook himself. Could he really be considering leaving the princess unprotected? Being incognito would certainly assist in keeping her safe. No one would know who she was. Øyanordian royalty wasn't well known in the Mediterranean.

He could get her to a resort, a high end one. Pay for it himself if needed. Let resort security know a VIP wanting time alone would be staying then call her team. Or more, likely, get in touch with Justin, the head of security for the royal family in Eyjania. Justin would be readily able to contact Øyanord and get in touch with the right people. It would be much easier for him than Ryker.

The more he thought about it, the more he thought she'd be just fine if he did that.

But the more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, but Ryker couldn't identify why.

Yet.

And until he did, the princess would go nowhere alone.

* * *

Princess Johanne Betlinde Amaliadidn't know what possessed her to have an actual conversation with someone she'd never met.

True, once she'd slipped away from her security team, it became inevitable.

She wasn't sure what possessed her to do that either.

Her team, her parents, and her grandparents would be frantic soon, if they weren't already.

Something in this guy - Ryker - shifted. The subtle change reminded her of someone or something, but she couldn't put her finger on who or what it could be.

"Let's see what we can find." He looked around, then stood and moved to sit in one of the seats facing her. Wouldn't it be easier to share his tablet if he sat next to her?

Ryker asked a number of questions as he input information on his table.

"Do you like camping?"

That was an option? "I've never been."

"Water sports?"

Those made more sense. "Watching or participating?"

"Either."

"Perhaps watching, but likely not participating." The waters around Øyanord were too cold year-round. She and Regina found that out the hard way nearly a year earlier.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Somehow, the powers-that-be were convinced to let a boat captain take them out by himself. Just the three of them on a fairly small boat. When a large whale breached, they were knocked overboard.

As much as Amalia had hated to admit it at the time, Ginny had taken charge of the situation. She found them shelter and firewood and help - before running into some separatists who'd been after them all along. Fortunately, the cavalry in the form of the Øyanordian military, showed up not too long after that.

It took days for the chill to truly dissipate.

Amalia shuddered just thinking about it.

“Are you all right?” The concern on Ryker’s face and in his tone struck Amalia in a way she wouldn’t have expected.

“I am,” she nodded. “Just remembering the last time I went for a... swim. The water was really too cold for anyone. It took nearly forever to feel warm again.”

“All right. No water sports.” He tapped on his tablet. “What about hiking?”

“Nothing too strenuous. I do enjoy being in nature. I am not fond of it feeling like work to get there.”

His chuckle sounded... different than any others she’d ever heard. Warmer, maybe? “I can understand that. Would you like to swim at all? The water is warm enough. There are a number of places protected enough to be enjoyable without the surf.”

“Possibly.”

He scrolled with his finger. “What about an ATV ride? Beaches, forests, some ancient ruins.”

Amalia tilted her head to one side and stared out the window behind Ryker. “That could be fun.”

After a few more questions, he stared at something beyond Amalia then turned back to the tablet. “Here are a couple of options.”

They discussed them briefly which led Amalia to an embarrassing discovery. She had no funds. Her cards were useless unless she wanted to be found and quickly. She’d have to figure something else out.

“This one looks nice.” She pointed to it and handed the tablet back to Ryker before pulling out her phone. “Could you tell me which one it is? Then I can get a Yfir, other ride share, or cab to the pick-up point.”

Why did he hesitate? Only for a second, but long enough for her to notice.

“I’d been thinking about going on one of these tours myself. Perhaps we could share a ride?”

What was it about this man that made her feel safe? She didn’t feel that often, not with people she didn’t know well. “That would be lovely.”

It pained her to say, but Amalia didn’t know a whole lot about living outside of the royal bubble, as it were.

She’d said she’d catch a Yfir but had no idea how one actually did that.

Before she realized what happened, Ryker sat next to her. Close enough to feel his leg alongside hers and his arm along the top of the bench behind her.

“My apologies, ma’am.” He spoke just loud enough to be heard over the noise of the ferry. “Please trust me if you can.”

What...

“Hello, darling.”

Amalia looked up to see a slovenly man stumbling down the walkway between the two sets of benches. Tension mounted in her shoulders, but Ryker gave them a light squeeze before standing up.

“Can we help you?”

The man tried to push his way around Ryker, but Ryker somehow managed to quickly and quietly get him to leave. Amalia couldn’t tell exactly what he’d done, but he’d done it well.

He turned to look at Amalia once the other man could be seen lying down on seats across the ferry. “Ma’am, I would hate to make you feel uncomfortable, but he’s been watching you since about the time I sat down. We have quite a bit of time left before we arrive. May I have the pleasure of your company at least until we arrive at the tour stop?”

With another glance at the man now lying across three seats, she nodded.

Ryker sat next to her again, but not quite as close.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

She missed that.

Even as the thought sprang to mind, Amalia didn't understand where it came from.

She'd had her share of male attention. Being a princess helped. The tabloids seemed to think she was quite attractive. One of them even put her on their top ten royal bachelorettes list.

That had made her quite uncomfortable.

To her chagrin, she'd encouraged some of the attention a bit too much. She - and they - never crossed any real lines, but still too much.

Like the captain the year before. The one who'd been working with the separatists, but had managed to ingratiate himself to her family and have himself declared trustworthy.

She found it impossible to stifle the yawn that came on quite suddenly.

Ryker laughed again and took off his coat. "Here. Use this for a pillow if you'd like. I won't let anything happen to you."

Amalia believed him. So she took his coat, pulled it around her with her arms snuggled inside, then leaned toward Ryker.

With her head on his shoulder, she dozed.

At least Ryker knew he was trustworthy.

The princess probably shouldn't have trusted him quite so easily. The drunken man who'd approached her earlier wasn't what he seemed. There had been something in his movements, in the clearness of his eyes, that told Ryker it was at least partially an act.

So what did he want with the princess?

Keeping an eye on that guy and any others had to be Ryker's top priority for the moment, but he also pulled his official tablet out of his bag. Maybe he could get secure enough service to reach out to Justin from here. It didn't seem overly likely, but worth attempting.

The secure signal locked on just long enough to download a couple of communications from the palace. Before typing up one of his own, he read through them, frowning at the first one before glancing back over at the man lying on the other seats.

Potential Compromise of Communications

The subject line of the email appeared far more innocuous, but unless the person who compromised the secure means of communication also had access to high level code words and other means of obscuring information, they'd never know what the message truly meant.

Fantastic.

It would increase the difficulties for his team and all of the others exponentially until

they could get it sorted, but overall, it wouldn't be a huge imposition as long as everyone stayed close to home. He didn't think there were any major trips coming up, unless something had changed while he'd been away.

It would, however, impede his ability to get in touch with Justin.

And there wasn't a codename for Princess Amalia, so he couldn't communicate the danger like he would about Princess Genevieve or any of the other members of the Quatremaine family.

As he scanned the interior of the ferry, he wondered if he could upgrade to a cabin for the last hour or so of the trip. If he did, would the princess be willing to use it? Without him, of course, though he would be nearby.

Deciding he would if the opportunity arose, he composed a message to Justin.

Tiny - Having a great time in Pagosa. Made a new friend. She's hot. Exploring on her own. Can't let her do that. Extending my stay for a while. Will be back eventually. Will let you know when I'm going to return.

Justin would understand that something happened, that Ryker couldn't talk freely about it, and he'd be in touch when he could safely do so.

The sentence fragments and informal tone of the email would be an immediate clue even if he wasn't able to work in any other references to what was going on. With a lack of details and codenames, he wasn't sure what more he could do. "Tiny" was Justin's code name when something had gone awry, but not so terribly that their world could come crashing down. Ryker didn't know who had come up with using the last three letters of the head of security's name to create the code name. Justin wasn't a small man by any means, but he wasn't so overly large that the name became ironic.

Just typing the moderately crass statement about the princess made him cringe, but it might help them figure out who he was with.

If the Øyanordians reached out for help.

If Justin and his team didn't know Princess Amalia had disappeared, they would have no reason to put two and two together.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

They would, however, know Ryker hadn't just abandoned his post and decided not to return.

With that accomplished, he shut down the tablet and returned it to his bag, all while being careful not to disturb the sleeping princess.

On his personal tablet, he opened a local news site, just to see if anything had been leaked about her. He didn't see anything, which relieved him.

A loud clanging sound caught his attention as well as Princess Amalia's.

She sat up suddenly, looking around in wide-eyed fear. "Where am I?"

"On the ferry in Ravenzario," he told her with a smile. "I do believe we're almost to the dock."

She blinked a couple of times. "Of course. And you're..."

Ryker found the way she squinted her eyes closed and wrinkled her nose in concentration adorable.

"Ryder? Riley? Ribbon?"

He couldn't help but laugh. "Do you actually know someone named Ribbon?"

"No, but It's an R name. Close enough."

“It’s an R word, but I don’t think it’s an R name. And I’m Ryker.”

“Yes. But that’s not your given name is it?”

“No. My given name is James Thomas Drasil.”

She tilted her head. “How do you get Ryker from James Thomas?”

“Well... my parents were Trekkies.”

The princess blinked. “What is a Trekkie? Someone who goes on treks?”

He laughed again. “No. They’re what you’d call Star Trek nerds. James is for James Tiberious Kirk, captain of the Star Ship Enterprise in the original series. Thomas for William Thomas Riker from The Next Generation. That’s also where my preferred name comes from, only they spelled it with a y instead of an i. So Ryker it is.”

“Interesting. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen an episode and might have seen one of the movies. I am aware of them, of course, but would never have put all of that together.” As she spoke, she folded his jacket neatly then handed it to him.

“Most people wouldn’t. That’s part of why they named me the way they did. They argued over what my name should be. My dad wanted Riker as a first name. This was the compromise. I could still use either my first or middle name if I wanted to without it being something like Tiberious. All of our animals had Star Trek names, too.” He stretched his legs out in front of him, while his eyes never stopped sweeping the interior of the ferry.

She laughed. A full laugh, not one of the I’m-a-princess-trying-to-be-polite laughs he’d heard all too often from Princess Genevieve and her family. “Oh, do tell!”

Before he could, the bell clanged again, indicating their arrival. “I’ll fill you in later.” Standing, he held out a hand to help her to her feet. As they started to walk, he tucked her hand inside his elbow. “Just to be on the safe side,” he told her quietly as the other man stood, glared at them, and wobbled his way toward the exit much too cleanly and easily for him to actually be drunk.

With a deep breath, Ryker led the princess out a different door.

He wanted to be off the ferry long before that man.

It likely wouldn’t keep their next location a secret for long, but he’d do whatever he could to make it a little more difficult for them.

Whoever they were.

* * *

Why did Amalia find it so easy to trust Ryker? It didn’t make any sense.

From the time she was young, it had been reiterated to her that she couldn’t trust anyone, not really.

They were either after her for political reasons, or for the fame that could come with being friends with a princess, or whatever else they could get from a relationship of any kind with her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

So why did she trust Ryker?

Should she trust Ryker?

For the moment, unless she wanted to turn her phone back on, she had no choice. Not when that other guy kept looking at her the way he did. She supposed it could be possible they were in collusion with each other, but she didn't really think so.

Instead, as they shuffled off the ferry along with a crowd of others, she found her hand in Ryker's to make certain they didn't lose each other.

As they made it out of the crush of people, he turned to her. "Do you have luggage?"

She shook her head. "No. Spur of the moment, remember? Do you?"

"Nothing I need to get right now."

Before Amalia could ask what that meant, they were off again, still hand-in-hand as Ryker did something on his phone.

She still hadn't figured out where they were going when she found herself in a vehicle driven by someone Ryker didn't know.

As they pulled away from the dock, he leaned closer to her and spoke softly. "Welcome to your Yfir."

The ride-sharing app she would have had no idea how to use.

“We’ll go make our reservations then we’ll have a better idea of what we need to go find for you.”

“You don’t have anything either.”

“Very true. We’ll figure out what we both need.”

The drive didn’t take overly long, and they exited the auto. Ryker thanked the man then held the door to the building open for Amalia to enter ahead of him.

Two men entered a few minutes after she and Ryker did. Amalia glanced at them then turned her attention back to the pictures of different excursions offered by this particular agency.

She didn’t pay much attention to Ryker as he filled out the paperwork for both of them.

“Wonderful. Thank you.” He wrapped up his conversation then came over and took Amalia’s hand. “We don’t have long, sweetheart, but there is a shop across the street where we can pick up a few supplies.”

Sweetheart? Amalia didn’t say anything but they left the building.

Ryker didn’t let go of her hand, but walked quickly across the street and through the door. But he didn’t stop until they were near the back wall.

Then he leaned close. “I know you have no reason to trust me, but I really hope you feel that you can. There was only one room still available. It could be given to a single person or a couple. I told them we were together. I promise you, on my honor as a gentleman, on my life, you are safe with me.”

Emotions warred within her. She shouldn't trust him. She'd known him maybe two hours. Everything she'd ever been taught told her to run, far and fast, until she could find a safe place.

And yet... he was a safe place.

She knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Everything logical told Amalia to turn her phone on and have her security team come find her, but sneaking away wasn't logical and trusting Ryker wasn't either.

She did both.

With a nod, Amalia took a deep breath. "I trust you. I know it doesn't make any sense, but I do."

"Then let's find a few things we need for the first few days. We can get the rest of what we need as we go." Ryker walked toward the luggage section and picked out a suitcase for himself. "What would you like?"

She'd never chosen her own luggage. Ryker managed to let her know what size to look for without making a big deal out of it. The shiny purple one called to her.

They went through the store, choosing a few items of clothing and quickly picked a pair of trainers. Before she knew it, they'd made it through the store and the checkout. When she snuck off, it hadn't occurred to her that she'd need financial means.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Fortunately, there had been a bit of cash in her bag. That got her onto the ferry and to the other island, but Ryker must have paid for the trip and for the clothes and supplies.

She'd pay him back when she returned to her real life.

As each item was rung up, they placed it in the correct suitcase. They'd deal with tags and everything else later.

Ten minutes after they left the store, they were on the shuttle van taking them to their first destination. Three other couples traveled with them. They all seemed to know each other already, which left her and Ryker to themselves.

"How are you?" he asked quietly. "I know this has to have taken you by surprise, even on an unplanned trip."

"I'm all right, thank you for asking." She stared out the window of the van. "Thank you for your assistance, Ryker. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"It's my pleasure, Amalia."

He seemed tense or maybe it would be better described as alert. His eyes seemed to be in constant motion, and he made certain she sat on the inside of the van, putting himself between her and the door.

It could be construed either as a way to obstruct her means of egress or a way to keep himself between her and any potential dangers.

This drive also didn't take long, but left the city of Zarifan and headed south down the coast of Ichnusia. At the resort, all of the rooms faced the private beach. Each of the five buildings housed two or three suites. The other three couples were in one building. Amalia and Ryker were in the same building as the tour guide.

The door closed behind Ryker, and it hit Amalia.

They were alone.

3

As soon as the door closed, Ryker saw the tension increase in the princess.

A glance around the suite showed a sofa with a table. Through an archway, he could see a king-sized bed with sliding doors beyond. Picture windows looked out over the beach from both rooms. A television hung on a swivel-mount in between the two.

He nodded toward the other room. "Take the bed. I'll take the sofa." Without waiting for a response, he carried her new suitcase into the other room and set it on the luggage rack, but didn't open it. She wouldn't want him to access it, even just to lay it open.

"Thank you." The princess went to stare out the sliding door. "What is next on the agenda?"

Ryker pulled his phone out and opened the itinerary. "We eat in about an hour. It says dress is casual, but it will be a traditional Ravenzarian meal."

"What's in a traditional Ravenzarian meal?"

He shrugged. "I'm not quite sure. I suppose we'll find out." As he shoved his phone

back in his pocket, something occurred to him. “Do you have any allergies?”

Princess Amalia shook her head but didn’t turn to look at him. “No. Thankfully.”

“Good.”

“What would you like to do in the meantime?” She finally turned around. “Do we have time to actually do anything?”

“Probably not. We could go for a walk for a bit or watch some telly, but not much more.”

She looked longingly at the bed. “Not enough time for a nap, I suppose.”

Ryker shrugged. “Depends. Are you a ‘give me a twenty minute nap, and I’m good to go’ kind of person? Or are you one of the ‘if I don’t sleep for at least two hours, I’m crankier than a Trekkie stuck at a Star Wars convention’ people?”

“Cranky,” she admitted. “It’s probably not the best idea. But I don’t really want to go for a walk, and I seldom watch telly these days. I wouldn’t know what to pick.”

He picked up the remote. “We’ll just scroll until something looks interesting. Would you prefer the sofa or the chair?”

“Sofa, if you don’t mind.”

Ryker moved toward the chair. “Not at all.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

It took a few minutes, but they settled on an HEA TV movie about a prince. It took Ryker a minute to recognize the actor.

“That’s Christopher Bayfield.” He paused the screen. “His brother is Prince Alexander, Prince Consort to Queen Christiana.”

“I believe you’re right.”

Nothing in her tone of voice would lead Ryker to believe she’d likely spoken with the prince in the last few days. Pressing play, he watched the story begin to unfold on the screen.

There were far too many inaccuracies for a movie with a royal relative in it, but Mr. Bayfield may not have had enough creative input to matter.

The most glaring had to do with ascending the throne. From what Ryker could tell, the prince’s father had been monarch, but passed a number of years earlier. Now the prince’s mother seemed to be queen and was running things.

Reality said the prince would become king the moment his father died, just like King Benjamin had when King Alfred II’s heart failed. When Queen Elizabeth passed, Prince Charles - reportedly at her side, became King Charles III the moment she took her last breath. In fact, Queen Elizabeth was likely the only monarch in British history not to know the exact moment she ascended the throne, since her father passed unattended in his sleep.

Ryker tried to ignore the erroneous plot points and just take it for what it was - a

story, rife with issues, designed to entertain. The target audience did not include members of a royal protection detail, especially male ones.

“This is kind of ridiculous.” Princess Amalia apparently couldn’t keep quiet any longer but did wait for a commercial. She’d know even better than he would what issues there were. “I know Americans don’t have royalty, but even a cursory search online would tell you that an adopted child is ineligible for the throne. The late king simply wanting his adopted son to take over isn’t enough. At bare minimum, it would take an act of their governing body. At worst, a bloody war. Either way, the late king saying ‘Hey, my adopted son is totally capable so we just won’t tell anyone he’s adopted’ is probably treason.”

Before Ryker could say anything, she went on. “Plus this prince would have been king immediately. His mum would be the queen mother. Even if he couldn’t rule in his own right, he’d be king, with a regent to assist him. That’s what happened in both Eyjania and Ravenzario this generation - and the actor’s brother is a part of that world.”

Ryker couldn’t stop his chuckle. “I concur. He may have tried to get things changed, but clearly, it didn’t happen.”

They both winced when someone introduced the queen as “Her Royal Highness” and the prince as “His Majesty.”

“If he’s a prince, he’s an HRH,” the princess pointed out. “He’d only be ‘Your Majesty’ if he’s king. His mum would still be ‘Your Majesty’ as queen mother and former queen consort.” She let out a very unladylike snort. “This is completely ridiculous.”

“It is a bit much,” he conceded. “The likely target audience for this film either doesn’t know any better, doesn’t care, or turns it into a drinking game.”

She continued to mutter as the prince-who-should-already-be-king-if-he-wasn't-adopted and his love interest wound up in a snowball fight.

Ryker checked his watch as it buzzed then paused the movie just as the two leads looked like they were about to kiss. If they followed the standard plot, this would be the first of two or three near misses. "It's time to get ready. We need to leave in about ten minutes."

Princess Amalia nodded then stood. "Can we finish later?" She didn't look at him as she asked.

"Want to know what happens?" He grinned as she looked at the ground. "Me, too. Even though they have to get a happily ever after. It's baked right into the name of the channel."

In a few minutes, they were both ready to leave. Ryker extended his arm. "May I escort you to dinner?"

She gave him the most genuine smile he'd seen so far. "That would be lovely."

* * *

Trusting Ryker so completely should have scared Amalia far more than it did.

But with her hand tucked securely in his arm, she felt safer than she had in quite some time.

Not that she didn't trust her security team implicitly, but this felt different.

From the time she was old enough to understand, Amalia had been warned not to trust anyone who hadn't been vetted by the security team. Even her friends were

subject to being checked out.

Not that she'd had many.

Being the presumed second to the throne didn't exactly lend itself to true friendships.

Becoming the official third didn't either.

Not when your older half-sister had been missing for just shy of twenty-four years, since hours after her birth, and reappeared looking like a younger version of your mother.

Complete with a fiancé.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Followed a few months later by a lavish wedding fit for a future queen.

The kind Amalia always thought she would have, that she wanted.

Now she wasn't certain.

They reached the outside restaurant dining area where the rest of their group already waited.

A small bench with just enough room for the two of them remained open. Ryker stood to the side and let her slide in first.

Entertainers from the region performed and a local chef explained the different parts of the meal.

The whole time, Amalia found herself way too aware of Ryker just inches away. Their hands and arms brushed repeatedly. She even found their legs touching from time to time. The thrill that went through her each time disconcerted Amalia.

"Did you not like it?" Ryker's quiet voice caught her attention as he pointed his fork toward her plate.

She forced herself to smile rather than focus on the distraction he continued to cause. "It's delicious. I'm not certain I would be able to finish all of it and whatever is to come."

"And you want to leave plenty of room for the rest of the meal?"

With a nod, she used her fork to spear another bite.

“And dessert?”

She didn’t have to look at him to hear the twinkle in his eye. Not quite an accurate statement, of course, but true nonetheless.

“Definitely dessert,” she told him. She’d loved every Ravenzarian dessert she’d ever had.

“Good plan.”

By the time they came to take the plates away, she’d finished a reasonable portion of the meal.

More entertainers came out after the tables had been cleared. By the time the staff served dessert nearly an hour later, Ryker had relaxed and put his arm around the top of the bench behind her. It caused her to both relax and tense up at the same time.

Something about him did both to her.

Especially when she remembered how uncomfortable the couch had been.

And that she’d at least offer to let him share the large bed in the other room with her. Amalia suspected he’d try to decline.

Walking back to their room, Ryker took her hand. “I hope I’m not making you uncomfortable,” he told her softly. “I think it’s best the others believe we are what we say we are, though.”

She didn’t say anything, but didn’t try to drop his hand either.

Once the door closed behind them, he let go.

“Do you want to watch the rest of the movie?” Amalia headed straight for the couch, unwilling to let Ryker take it even for watching telly, not after he seemed to have put his own life on hold to make sure she had a good time in Ravenzario - and protecting her from the drunk guy.

He pointed to the other room with a thumb over his shoulder. “Do you want to change into something more comfortable first? Joggers maybe?”

She’d bought a couple of those along with some cozy feeling shirts and a couple of pajama outfits. Well, Ryker had purchased them for her.

As she changed, it struck her. He hadn’t questioned her lack of funds. No questions about why she didn’t have any cards she could use. Hadn’t asked her for any identification when they registered for the tour. Nothing of that nature.

She had identification and cards with her, but no desire to use them. Not until she deemed it time to return to her daily life. It would be too simple for security to find her.

By the time she returned from changing in the bathroom, Ryker had changed as well.

And he’d taken a seat on the couch, his legs stretched out onto the ottoman in the middle of the sitting area.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Amalia took a seat in the chair and grimaced.

“Neither one is very comfortable, are they?” The sympathy in his voice told her he’d noticed.

An idea flitted through her mind, but she hesitated to say anything.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” His feet hit the floor as he leaned forward.

“Is everything all right?”

“I just had a thought.” Amalia glanced between him and the television.

“What’s that?”

She didn’t look at him as she blurted it out. “The telly is on a swivel. We don’t have to sit in here. The mattress seems much more comfortable than either one of these.”

“That’s an idea, but I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

This time when she looked over, Amalia saw something akin to trepidation on his face. Rather than replying, she stood and walked to the telly, pushing on one side until it faced the other direction.

Without looking back, she took a seat on the closer side of the bed.

By the time Ryker sat against the headboard with his legs once again stretched out in front of him, he’d maneuvered the guide to the movie and restarted it.

“This would make a good drinking game,” he mused. “Not that I’m suggesting it. We could take a drink every time we found a royal inaccuracy.”

Amalia looked at him, her head tilting slightly as a confused look crossed her face. “We’d be drinking constantly. Is that the definition of something that makes a good drinking game? Something where you’d get drunk quickly?”

Ryker laughed. “I supposed it is. I’ve never played one, and seldom drink enough to get remotely drunk, so it would be kind of pointless.”

She picked up the remote and paused as it came back from a commercial. “There has to be something we can do. Every time there’s an inaccuracy glaring enough to mention... something.”

He seemed to think it over. “Like truth or dare? Whoever notices something first gets a truth or dare from the other one? Nah. Seems too hard.”

And too dangerous for Amalia when she kept such a big secret from him. “Or we could just watch?”

The grin he gave her made her stomach do slow flips. “That works.”

4

By the time the movie ended, Princess Amalia had fallen asleep.

Ryker wasn’t quite sure what his next move should be. He knew there had to be another blanket somewhere that he could cover her with. At some point, the princess had moved from sitting on the bed to lying on it.

He really didn’t want to sleep on the couch for multiple reasons, with comfort being

the least important. The idea of leaving the princess even a bit unguarded didn't sit well. Maybe sleeping on the floor? The other side of the bed simply wasn't an option, despite how the emptiness beckoned.

Or maybe the chair in the bedroom area would be more comfortable than the ones in the living area. It didn't look like it would be any better than the others, but then the ones in the other room looked like they should be far more comfortable than they were. This one could be the opposite.

After looking through the drawers and closet, Ryker found the stash of extra pillows and blankets. Carefully, he laid a blanket over her and made sure it covered her completely. Once the lights were turned down, he took another blanket and tried out the chair.

Deciding it felt much more comfortable than the one in the other room, he propped his feet up on the end of the bed and settled in.

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep when something woke him.

"Ryker?" The princess's sleepy voice told him what it had likely been.

"Go back to sleep." He kept his voice as calm and soothing as he could.

"Why are you in the chair?"

Ryker knew he shouldn't notice how adorably rumpled she looked. "Go back to sleep," he said again. "We'll talk in the morning." Or they wouldn't. One of the two. He'd prefer not.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

They'd be moving on to another location for the next evening. Hopefully the sleeping arrangements would be more amenable. He'd told the guy running the program that a room with more than one bed would be acceptable to them. Apparently at least one of the locations may not have any single bed rooms left.

Most of them catered to couples, but there were a few that made it easier for non-couples to stay. Ryker would be all right with that.

The princess laid back down, clearly never having fully awakened. It didn't take long for Ryker to fall back asleep, and the next time he awoke, it was the light streaming in from outside that did the trick.

His first conscious action was to check on the princess.

And jump to his feet when she wasn't where she was supposed to be.

"Amalia?" Ryker had to stop himself from being more formal. It felt foreign and uncomfortable when he didn't use her title, even though he understood the reasons why.

She walked out of the bathroom already dressed for a new day. That made Ryker frown. How had she done all of that without waking him up?

Not a good start to keeping her safe.

"What's wrong?" She leaned against the door frame.

He gave a slight shake of his head. “Just wondering how you managed to not wake me up.”

“I know how to be quiet when I need to be.” She took a sip from a mug. Had she found a coffee maker? “You could have shared, you know.”

“Shared what?” he asked cautiously, fairly certain he knew what she meant.

She shrugged a shoulder as she took another sip. “The other side of the bed. We’re both adults. You didn’t need to sleep in the chair. I meant to tell you that last night, but I guess I fell asleep. How was the end of the movie?”

Ryker stood. He needed to get ready for the day, but also figure out a way to make sure this didn’t happen again. “I didn’t finish either. It wasn’t getting any better, though.”

As HEA TV movies went, it seemed pretty on point, but not something Ryker would voluntarily watch. The royal protocol and other things had only continued to go downhill.

Yes, every country did things a bit differently, but not to the ridiculous point they did in the movie.

He headed for the bathroom to get ready for the day.

“Do you know what the plans for today are?” she called after him.

Ryker changed into clean clothes. “I think we’re heading down the coast to a winery or something along those lines. I don’t remember exactly.”

He needed to study the itinerary more closely. Any potentially dangerous situation

needed to be at the forefront of his mind. She hadn't gone into details, but it didn't seem like she'd be okay with any water borne excursions, and there was at least one of those in a couple of days.

After pulling a shirt over his head, he poked his head into the room to see her as he spoke. "We can look at it together over breakfast. They're supposed to deliver a tray in a few minutes."

Ryker quickly finished getting ready. He didn't want the princess to answer the door if it could be avoided, but also didn't want to be weird about it.

Walking back through the room, he tilted his head toward the telly. "Turn the movie back on if you want. Rewind it a bit to catch what you missed."

She picked up the remote. "I thought it didn't get any better."

"It didn't, but that doesn't mean one or both of us don't want to know exactly what happened."

Her laugh made him smile. "Good point. How long do we have until we have to be ready to leave?"

Ryker checked his watch. "About an hour."

Before either one of them could say anything else, a knock sounded on the door. He'd positioned himself in such a way that he could answer it without the princess questioning why he wouldn't let her.

Steering the cart into the other side of the suite, Ryker wondered what they'd sent. Princess Amalia lifted the domed lid off the tray.

“This looks delicious.” She set the lid to the side then filled a plate before taking a seat on the bed.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Ryker filled his own plate and sat back down in the chair where he'd slept. She turned the movie back on, and that's where he put his attention.

Better to focus on the inaccuracies of a make-believe royal than the reality that he was starting to think there might be something a little extra special about the a very real princess.

* * *

Something seemed a bit off with Ryker as they ate breakfast and watched the last half hour of the movie from the night before.

Amalia never let herself load a plate like she had when she'd seen the pastries a few minutes earlier. At least not when literally anyone else was around. Maybe her assistant. The Auverignonian had always been the first one to pile a plateful with Amalia, but she was a world away, even if she remained in Ravenzario.

A bit of guilt ate at her as she wondered how intensely Zoey had been questioned. They would have talked to her, but Amalia made certain her assistant didn't know anything. Zoey had become the closest thing she had to a true friend. She didn't think they'd push Zoey too hard, and that it would quickly be apparent that she actually didn't know anything she could keep from them.

Ryker propped his feet back up on the edge of the bed, already wearing trainers and ready to go at a moment's notice.

He'd surprised her by not sleeping on the other side. There had been plenty of room,

at least she presumed so. Amalia hadn't shared a bed with anyone since her sister when they were little girls.

Her younger sister.

Not her older half-sister.

The one she'd always known had existed, but who'd only appeared about a year earlier.

She still didn't know the whole story - didn't know if anyone truly did.

A snort from Ryker drew her attention back to the telly where the prince wondered aloud if he could abdicate his role to his best friend.

Nope.

That wasn't how it worked.

By the time the kiss came and the credits rolled, the prince had accepted that his place was in the palace as the heir, because he wasn't adopted after all, and with a decidedly non-aristocratic woman by his side.

"Want to look through the itinerary?" Ryker pulled a folder out of the bag he'd had with him since the ferry.

"Sure." Amalia twisted until she lay on her stomach facing him. "You said we're going to a winery today?"

He moved the chair until he sat closer to her. "Yes. We're doing a tour and a tasting before continuing on. Tonight, we'll stay at another boutique hotel. Tomorrow, we

have a beach excursion of some kind. The next day, we'll stop a couple of places before we travel to Baicampo in the afternoon. We'll do a tour of the area and some kind of dinner with special guests."

She reached for the paper, but it didn't say who the special guests were. "I wonder who they could be."

Ryker gave a shrug. "I have no idea." They went through the rest of the itinerary.

By the time they reached the end, Amalia knew she couldn't stay away any longer than that. She really shouldn't stay that long. Another couple of days, tops.

And, when she was honest with herself, she knew she never should have left at all.

"It sounds lovely." Amalia meant it. The whole thing sounded lovely, but she wouldn't be able to enjoy it if the guilt continued to eat at her.

The rest of the day didn't veer too much from the afternoon before. The other three couples didn't intentionally exclude Amalia and Ryker, but given their apparently long history, didn't include them much either. The tour director did his best to help them stay engaged, but for the most part, the two of them kept to themselves.

In the van, Ryker kept her laughing with his faux-tour guide commentary. By the time they reached the winery, she'd relaxed a bit more.

They were introduced to their local tour guide who began to show them around. Amalia breathed an internal sigh of relief when she recognized the name of one of the wines the winery produced. She tried not to be a snob about food and wine, but it would be difficult for her to pretend she loved a wine when she found it truly unappealing. At least this should be good enough.

As they walked through the vineyards and processing areas, Ryker stayed close to her, sometimes taking her hand. Amalia knew he only did it to keep up the pretense, but she let herself imagine what it might be like to have someone special in her life.

Someone who didn't care that her place in the family - and the world - had been ripped away and remained uncertain. Ginny still hadn't told the country if she planned to retain her place in the line of succession. Until she confirmed one way or the other, Amalia remained in a kind of limbo.

Which had led to her official visit to Ravenzario in the first place.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

When the time came to eat dinner, they did so with the same wine they'd helped make - just quite a bit further along in the process than the part they'd worked on. The two tables of four led to some awkward glances between the other three couples.

None of them really wanted to sit with Amalia and Ryker. That much was clear.

Ryker was the one who offered a solution. "Why don't we move the tables together? Then there's no need to separate any of you."

One of them smiled as they all gave a sigh of relief. "Our apologies, Ryker, is it?"

Ryker nodded.

"This is a trip we've been planning to take with our parents for a decade." The woman pointed to the other two men. "Those are my brothers. We booked it over a year ago, but our parents..." Her breath caught in her throat.

"They were killed in an accident about two months ago," one of the brothers went on. "We completely forgot to cancel their reservations until we got here."

That explained why there were two open slots - for a couple.

"We're so sorry for your loss," Amalia said, hoping her tone sounded as sincere as she meant it to. That was horrible. "Please, don't feel the need to include us. We completely understand why the six of you want to spend this time together as a family."

At least she hoped Ryker did as well.

That was how she ended up, once again, having a cozy dinner with the man pretending to be her significant other.

And kind of wishing it could be real.

5

By the time they returned to their room, Ryker found himself grateful they hadn't changed hotels overnight. At least they hadn't needed to check in to a new place after all day on ATVs.

"Do I look as ridiculous as I think I do?" The princess turned to look at him. "This is not what I expected."

Ryker laughed. "No more ridiculous than I do, I'm sure."

Her muddy nose wrinkled. "You're covered, except the area around your eyes where the goggles were."

"Then we're about the same." He nodded toward the bathroom. "Why don't you shower first? Do you need anything from the desk or the store? I can run over while you clean up."

As soon as he said it, Ryker wanted to kick himself. He couldn't leave Princess Amalia here by herself. Unprotected.

Thankfully, she shook her head. "No. I don't think so. I have clothes I can wear to dinner this evening." After she took some clothes out of her suitcase, the princess went into the bathroom. "I'll hurry so you can get cleaned up, too."

“Thanks.” After the door closed behind her, Ryker went out to the balcony rather than trying to find a place to sit where he wouldn’t get something completely covered in dried mud.

Somehow the fact that it was dried mud made it worse than just being dirt. The breeze coming off the Mediterranean felt cooler than he expected. He really should have looked at the schedule more carefully before agreeing to the day’s excursion. The ATV ride had been a lot of fun, but also had moments that could have bordered on dangerous - at least slightly dangerous.

It wasn’t a trip he would have let Princess Genevieve take without someone driving it before her. He suspected most other protection details would feel the same way.

But they’d survived. The princess had the time of her life and had told him so. They were both covered in dried mud from head to toe, except for the areas covered by goggles and gloves.

He didn’t know how long the princess took in the bathroom, but it seemed like forever. As he waited, the mud continued to dry on his forearms. He picked at it, wincing as it pulled on his arm hair.

“Ryker, it’s all yours.”

He turned to see Princess Amalia looking freshly scrubbed and wrapped in a tightly belted robe. Her hair had been piled on her head with a towel wrapped around it.

“I tried to make sure all the dirt rinsed down the drain, and I didn’t leave a mess in the shower. My clothes are in a plastic bag to give to the hotel laundry. I’d imagine you want to do the same thing. There’s a second bag in there for you to use.”

“Thanks.” Ryker smiled at her as he went into the bathroom.

As quickly as he could, Ryker set himself to rights. Fairly certain he'd cleaned most of the dirt and mud and gunk off, he hurried to get dressed and back into the living area. He knew there was very little risk to the princess in a hotel suite on the eighteenth floor when no one knew she was there, but leaving her alone still didn't sit well with him.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

He already wore the jeans and flannel shirt provided by the excursion guide when he emerged from the bathroom. The princess still wore the robe though she'd clearly been working on drying her hair.

"I know you need a bit more time in the bathroom to get ready than I do," he told her. "I'm done."

"Thanks."

She didn't wear much makeup. Ryker didn't think she needed any. It could be that she'd wear much more on a regular basis when she had access to her normal things, but for now she didn't.

A knock on the door sounded. Ryker opened it to find a bellman with two shoe boxes.

He handed over a bit of cash as he took the boxes.

"Who's that?" The princess called from the other room.

"The boots." He opened the larger of the two boxes and put the boots on. They were nice, but not so nice as to draw attention. He suspected hers would be the same way.

They'd been provided as part of the package, which was a good thing since Ryker hadn't even considered that when they shopped before leaving.

A few minutes before they needed to leave, the princess emerged from the bathroom.

“How’s this?” She held her arms out from her sides and twirled. The skirt of her long dress swirled around her legs.

“You look very nice.” He wanted to stare, to take in how it accentuated all of the right places, but made himself look at her face.

At the green eyes that had the power to mesmerize him if he let them.

In an effort to change the subject, he spun much the same as she had. “How about this? Do I look about like I’m supposed to?”

She shrugged. “I guess. I have no idea what kind of place we’re headed to this evening. The itinerary said it would be a surprise, didn’t it?”

Ryker nodded. “I’d guess some sort of American location with the clothes and boots they provided for us, but I don’t actually know.”

Together, they left their suite and headed for the elevator. In the lobby, they found the other couples already waiting for them, wearing similar clothes.

The tour guide corralled them all into the van for the drive to one of the local hot spots. He promised they’d have a great time, but Ryker sensed most of those in the van were a bit dubious.

He certainly was.

After a short drive, the van pulled up in front of the Boot Scootin’ Boogie Bar.

“A country bar?” One of the other women started to laugh. “We’re from Nashville, the country capital of the world. This should be fun. I hope there’s line dancing.”

The princess leaned toward Ryker. “What’s line dancing?”

All he could do was give her a smile. He only knew because he’d been part of the extended detail when the Queen Mother went to a country bar in Akushla. “You’ll see. She’s right though. This could be a lot of fun.”

They exited the van as Ryker prayed he was right.

This could go very well... or it could go very, very wrong.

* * *

Line dancing wasn’t something Amalia had learned growing up.

Her mother had made certain she learned quite a few dances, but they were all of the formal variety and definitely didn’t involve cowgirl boots.

They started with dinner on the restaurant side of the building.

The other couples came from the States and were much more familiar with the offerings of a BBQ restaurant than Amalia and Ryker were.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

On their recommendation, Amalia chose the pulled chicken and Ryker got ribs of some sort.

Rolls had been placed on the table when they arrived, enough for each of them to have a couple. Amalia had eaten at some of the best places in Europe and the island nations of the Atlantic had to offer, but these were on a different level.

“Oh, my word.” She pulled another bite off the roll and popped it in her mouth. “These are incredible.”

Ryker laughed as he did the same. “Are these standard at a restaurant like this?”

“Typically, they have some sort of bread.” The husband who wasn’t related answered the question. “Usually with a special butter or spread of some kind.”

Before she could try the spread to go with it, someone arrived with their salads.

For once, she and Ryker were included in the dinner conversation. Maybe because the Americans at the table had a much better idea of how restaurants like this normally worked.

Whatever the reason, they spent nearly an hour eating, talking, and laughing before the group moved into the other room where the music had been turned up significantly louder.

“Come on. Let’s do this!” One of the sisters-in-law grabbed her husband’s hand, and he followed her into the line on the dance floor.

The other two couples joined them almost immediately while Amalia stayed to the side with Ryker.

“Do you have any idea how to do these?” he asked her, nearly yelling to be heard over the do-si-do music.

Amalia shook her head. “I think I’ve seen it in a couple of movies, but I’ve never attempted it.”

Together, they watched as the others danced. “I think we could do the steps if we knew what order to do them in.” Ryker tapped his toe in time to the music.

One of the couples from their group came over and each grabbed one of them by the hand and pulled them to the floor. “Come on!”

Laughing, Amalia learned a couple of basic steps from one of the brothers and before she knew it, she was line dancing with the rest of them. Ryker danced next to her, laughing as he did.

In between songs, they both decided to step to the side to get a drink of water and catch their breath.

“That’s a lot more fun than I expected,” Amalia told him between sips.

“It is.”

They waited out the rest of the song before going back out for another dance.

The next time, the song switched to a much slower one with Amalia still holding Ryker’s hand from the dance before.

Someone bumped into her from behind putting her squarely in front of him. Without saying anything, Amalia put her hand on Ryker's shoulder as he slid partway around her waist, pulling her closer to him than she'd ever purposely been.

As the song went on, Amalia found herself shifting closer to Ryker, her hand slipping farther up his shoulder until she found the back of his neck.

The warmth from his hand as it splayed on the small of her back spread through her.

His breath teased the hair at her temple.

Amalia closed her eyes and let herself imagine she was dancing in the arms of someone who didn't love the titles or the money or the prestige, but who loved her.

Ryker was the only person who even came close to knowing the real person without the trappings of her everyday life.

Until she found someone who could know both sides of her, she'd never find the person she wanted to spend her life with. She wouldn't be able to truly be her full self with someone who never took the time to get to know who she was in private.

And, although Ryker knew that part of her, he didn't know anything about the tiaras and paparazzi and political pressure to do the right thing - even if no one could agree on what the right thing would be.

For now, she could just relish being in the arms of someone who didn't want to know what she could do for him or how she could support his pet cause.

So she focused on the way the hair at the nape of his neck felt under her fingertips and the rasp of his few-day-old beard against the side of her temple.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

This, right here, was what she'd always wanted.

What she'd seen in Ginny and Ollie since they arrived in Øyanord a year earlier. What many of her counterparts in other countries had found - like Christiana and Alexander or Nicklaus and Yvette here in Ravenzario. Or most of the next generation in the Quad Countries, Belles Montagnes, and New Sargasso.

Who was left?

Alfred in Eyjania. Lydia in New Sargasso. Neither of them were adults just yet, though they were getting close. Esme's brother in Islas del Sargasso, though Amalia couldn't remember his name off the top of her head. Her younger siblings. Maybe the ones in Athmetis, though Øyanord didn't have much of a relationship with the Mediterranean country, so she could be wrong.

"What are you thinking about?" This time Ryker didn't have to practically yell to be heard. Instead, his voice was nearly a whisper.

"Not much," she told him, unwilling to voice any of it just yet. "Mostly how much I'm enjoying this dance."

"Me, too." The husky tone in his voice caught her off-guard.

Amalia leaned away from him and looked up into his dark eyes. The look there took her breath away.

Could he...

Did she...

Was he going to kiss her?

Would she let him?

In that second, looking at him looking at her, she wanted it more than anything in the world.

6

By the time they made it to the late afternoon on the fourth day, Ryker began to wonder if he'd overreacted on the ferry and afterward.

There had been no sign of anyone following the princess.

Better to overreact and be wrong than to underreact and have something irreversible happen.

At least the couch in this hotel had been quite comfortable.

“What’s the plan today? Didn’t the guide say there might be a change?” Princess Amalia set her bag on the floor and pulled out the telescoping handle.

Ryker nodded as he zipped his suitcase closed. “Something about the weather, but I’m not sure what it was. The chance for rain maybe? They didn’t say what our mode of transportation was supposed to be, but that could play a role.”

They spent the day much as they had the first couple. Seated together in the van, in their own bubble since the others were in one of their own. He did his best to keep her laughing or at least rolling her eyes at his ridiculous tour guide impression.

And avoiding at any mention of the dances or near kiss they'd shared.

After stopping at some ruins from the days much closer to the formation of the Commonwealth of Belles Montagnes, they went back into Zarifan. Ryker found himself more on edge and could tell it affected the princess. Doing his best to relax, he found he couldn't.

Would something happen now that they were back in the city of Zarifan? They wouldn't stop anywhere until they reached the location where they'd depart for Baicampo. The guide hadn't said much else about their travels or who the special guests would be.

But until they were out of the city, Ryker wouldn't be able to relax.

"Where are we going?"

The apprehension in the princess's voice caused him to look around more carefully, uncertain what could be causing the anxiety. He couldn't see anything. "The marina?" That seemed to be the only thing in the direction they were headed.

She nodded. "I'm not fond of smaller boats. I found it difficult enough to convince myself to get on the ferry."

Interesting. She lived on a small island nation. Surely she'd grown up on and around the water.

He didn't press for details. Maybe she'd trust him sometime, but unless it actually affected her ability to get on the boat, he wouldn't push her.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Her nervousness remained apparent as they exited the van, and she put her floppy hat on. The other three couples walked ahead of them. If she'd known he knew her true identity, he doubted she would have taken his hand. Instead, she clung to it as they moved down the dock toward a fairly large yacht near the end.

Not as big as the one the Quatremaines had, or likely any of the other royal families, but definitely not small either.

In the distance, he could see clouds gathering, but the sun warmed their current location. Maybe that had something to do with the change in travel plans, though he wasn't certain what they would have been. Helicopter? Airplane?

Jet ski?

Probably not.

The closer they walked to the yacht, the more tightly she held onto his hand.

"I can't do this."

The whisper stopped Ryker in his tracks even before she stopped walking.

"What is it?" Ryker looked around for a threat, something catching in the corner of his eye, but gone before he could assess it.

"A yacht. I can't do it. Not after..." Her voice caught, and she didn't finish the sentence.

He moved to stand in front of her, taking her other hand. “What can I do to help?”

Tears shimmered in those green eyes. “Can we do something else? Go somewhere else and meet them again tomorrow?”

Ryker hesitated then turned to look at the yacht where the others waited for them. “We can ask.” He squeezed her hand. “Let’s go talk to him.”

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as they walked. He tried to scan around without being obvious, but he couldn’t get a good look behind them.

When they neared the yacht, the princess began to make a bit of small talk with the tour guide.

Ryker managed to keep a frown off his face as he realized subtle security surrounded them. Had the princess been discovered?

No. They weren’t being looked at specifically. Security seemed much more general.

While she talked, Ryker took the chance to look all the way around and the reason for his disquiet became apparent.

The “homeless” man watched them from nearby. Given his change in attire and even hairstyle, Ryker knew only his training allowed him to recognize the other man. Most people wouldn’t have. Princess Amalia almost certainly wouldn’t.

“Amalia mín?” Ryker slid his arm around her waist. “We don’t want to keep everyone waiting any longer.” He used the pressure of his arm to encourage her toward the gangplank, feeling her resistance with every hard-fought step. Leaning down, he whispered in her ear. “I need you to trust me. Please.”

The steps came a tiny bit easier, but she still resisted.

“Jeg er livredd.”

From the context and tone, Ryker felt certain he knew what her whispered words meant.

“Jeg kan ikke.”

He knew enough of the various Scandinavian languages to understand she didn't think she could, but somehow, she managed to put one foot in front of the other until they reached the deck.

Ryker turned to the guide, noting the crew already worked to move the gangplank. “Is there somewhere we can go?” he asked quietly.

The guide motioned to another member of the yacht crew who showed them to a small seating area with no one else around. Ryker helped the princess take a seat on a sofa then crouched in front of her. “Amalia, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have pushed you if I didn't think it absolutely necessary.”

Princess Amalia nodded but didn't look at him. Instead, she stared at her hands tightly clasping the brim of her hat as it sat in her lap.

The yacht started to move beneath them, causing Ryker to feel the smallest bit of relief.

“What was it?” she whispered.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“The man from the ferry. He was on the dock, watching us.” Watching her, but he wouldn’t say it that way.

After a slight nod, he could see her try to take a deep breath.

Whatever happened to her that meant she wouldn’t do the water activities clearly wasn’t something insignificant.

He took her hat and set it aside, then covered her hands with his own. “I’m right here, Amalia mín.” That he’d reverted to the Icelandic term of endearment sometimes used in his country told him just how strongly he’d felt about getting her on board. He’d never have done so otherwise.

Moving to sit next to her, Ryker did something that surprised even himself and put an arm around her shoulders.

“I’m right here,” he told her again.

The princess leaned into him, as close as she could get, and clutched the front of his shirt in one of her hands. “Don’t let me go.”

* * *

With Ryker’s arm around her shoulders, Amalia almost felt safe.

Almost.

When he'd first used her name, along with what she suspected had been a term of endearment, she'd known something had to be amiss.

It had taken every ounce of courage in her to walk up the gangplank and then step onto the deck.

Anyone watching would have known.

Ryker knew.

But helped her do it anyway.

Because she was likely in danger.

Her security team would have dragged her on board, either kicking and screaming or, more likely, stumbling along because legs simply moved without thinking about it in those kinds of situations.

That had only happened a couple of times in her public life, when there had been a perceived threat, and they'd decided she needed to move - now.

Amalia curled farther into Ryker's side as he tightened his hold on her shoulders.

"I'm not going anywhere."

She could feel him kiss the top of her head and tried to force herself to relax a bit. Her hand still held tightly to his shirt, but the extreme tension in her shoulders dissipated the tiniest amount.

"What was it?" she asked again. He'd already told her, but she hadn't absorbed it.

“The man from the ferry was on the dock.”

Resting against him as she was, Amalia could feel the vibrations from his words as well as hear them. “Are you sure?” She’d looked around but hadn’t seen him.

“I am. He didn’t look the same, but I know it was him.”

That would explain it. “How could you know for certain if he looked so different?” Her security team would have known. Could he do something in that line of work for a living?

She felt him shrug. “I just did. The portion of the dock where the yacht was had significantly more security than we’ve seen so far. I don’t know that one thing has anything to do with the other, but if he was following us, then at least there would be people around to help keep you safe.”

“Why is there extra security?” Could someone have discovered where she’d gone? Were they trying to intercept her?

“I don’t know. Maybe something to do with the special guests on Biansola?”

It seemed as logical as anything else she could come up with through her fear. “How long is the boat ride?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“I’m not sure. I can find out, but I’d have to either leave you or you’d have to go with me.” He didn’t move, except perhaps to tighten his hold on her.

“Don’t do that.” Amalia needed him to stay more than she needed to know how long it would be.

“I won’t.” His hand rubbed up and down her arm. “We know we’re going to Biansola, which is south of Pagosa where the ferry left from. We departed from a much more northern port than where the ferry went. We’re also in a much better boat. That ride took several hours. I’m guessing this one won’t be more than two at most, but that depends on the weather and how long they want it to take.”

She nodded against him. They stayed like that until Amalia felt herself begin to relax. Eventually, she was able to let go of Ryker’s shirt and sit up on her own.

“Are you all right?” Ryker kept his arm wrapped around her.

Amalia blew out a breath. “I think so. I haven’t been on a boat in a nearly a year, not since I had very bad experience.” She wasn’t ready to tell him the whole story. It would mean telling him who she really was.

“I wish it hadn’t been necessary, but I think it’s for the best. Biansola has the Baicampo property run by Prince Alexander’s family. It seems like it should be fairly secure.”

That made sense. But it also came with the slight risk that the prince consort would be there. She’d just have to keep an eye out for the royal family and duck out of sight

if necessary.

By the time they reached the dock on the island, she felt much better than she would have expected. Rather than bolting down the gangplank, she walked just as sedately as everyone else - or as sedately as she could with the wind whipping her hair all over the place. They all climbed into another van, much like the others they'd been riding in.

The drive didn't last long, and they exited under an awning leading into what appeared to be a barn.

"This is the same location where Queen Christiana and Alexander, Duke of Testudines were married." The local guide led them into the building. "It's believed that she's the first monarch of Ravenzario not to be married in the chapel on the property. However, it was under construction due to extensive water damage when their wedding took place. Prince Nicklaus of Ravenzario and Princess Yvette of Mevendia were married there, fulfilling the contract between the two nations."

They spent the next few minutes looking around before they were ushered back into the van and driven over to the chapel.

A few of the photos of Nick and Yvette were on easels around the narthex, in the locations where they were taken.

"This is a lovely place to get married," Amalia said to Ryker, looking around as she did.

"Would you like to get married somewhere like this?" Ryker studied one of the photos.

Amalia shrugged. "I'll probably get married in the cathedral at home."

It surprised her when Ryker didn't follow up with a question about where she called home.

After a few more stories from the tour guide, they were taken to one of the other buildings.

"We'll be eating shortly, and our special guests will be joining us there." The guide looked positively giddy.

Who on earth could it be that had the guide so excited?

After finding their place cards, Ryker held her seat for her then took his to her right at the foot of the table. The special guests, whoever they were, would be seated at the other end.

The six family members talked quietly, pointing out one thing or another about the elegant room they'd been seated in, or about the place settings or flatware.

Amalia didn't think any of it was overly fancy, but her life experiences were far different than the other's.

"Are you all right?" Ryker's quiet voice accompanied his hand covering hers for a slight squeeze.

She nodded. "I'm fine. Just a little out of sorts."

"You did amazing on the boat ride over." His grasp tightened on her hand. "I'm very proud of you for facing your fear, even if it was only because that fear was the lesser of two evils."

Before she could respond, the doors opened to let the VIP guest, or guests, in. A

voice told them to stand which meant Amalia couldn't see who they were immediately. But after a few seconds, they came into view.

She felt the color drain from her face. This couldn't be happening.

The VIPs were Prince Nicklaus and Princess Yvette.

Now what?

As soon as the prince and princess came into view, Ryker could feel the tension begin to radiate off Amalia. Her excursion would come to an end here rather than on her own terms - whatever she wanted those terms to be.

Ryker could see confusion on Princess Yvette's face as she looked at Princess Amalia. The Øyanoridian princess gave a slight shake of her head. When everyone had taken their seats, servers began to deliver the first course.

Amalia only picked at her food, but Ryker didn't let that stop him from enjoying his. He kept an eye on her as well as on the guests at the other end of the table. Though he knew their security teams had to be around, they weren't immediately apparent to Ryker. As locations went, this one was about as secure as they came.

One of the security team members on the dock might have noticed Amalia, but the floppy hat she'd worn might have obscured their vision. He hadn't noticed as much security on this end of the trip. He might have missed it - or it was more electronic than physical - but he didn't think so.

The meal lasted over an hour as the prince and princess talked with the other three couples. Amalia and Ryker both stayed out of the conversation for the most part. The royals at the other end of the table didn't make an overt effort to include them, likely because of the distance as well as the realization that no one else knew Princess Amalia's true identity.

Besides, the other three couples were enamored with having royalty to talk to. They

didn't gush, but were clearly star struck.

Eventually, they took a longer tour around the property with Prince Nicklaus and Princess Yvette promising to catch up with them later. They both gave Princess Amalia a look, but the princess more than the prince.

"What about dinner?" Princess Amalia asked Ryker as he drove them in the electric cart toward their evening accommodations where their luggage was supposed to be waiting for them.

"Uh..." He hesitated, the uncomfortable feeling in his stomach coming back, just as it had when he'd read it the first time. "It's a dinner for two at the cabin where we'll be staying this evening. I'd imagine it's meant to be a romantic dinner, though the description didn't specify. We can find a way to make it unromantic." Letting up on the pedal, he looked more closely at the map he'd been given then took the right fork in the path.

"Thank you."

He hoped there would be a good place for him to sleep. "Did you get a chance to talk to the prince and princess?" Since the meal ended, Ryker had been waffling over whether to ask the question or not, but finally decided she'd think it was weird if he didn't.

She stared at the landscape rather than looking at him. "Not really, but that's all right. I'm sure they're lovely people."

Ryker knew better than to press for more information.

"Did you have a chance to talk with them?" she asked in return.

“Nah.” He winked at her, knowing he shouldn’t even as he did it anyway. “I’ve got a princess to hang out with already.” Keeping his tone light should keep her from thinking about it any more deeply. “I’m no prince, but I’d like to think I could hold my own in a conversation with them.”

“They’re just people, like anyone else.”

He could barely hear the whisper and decided to let it slide. A few minutes later, he glided to a stop in front of a small cabin. After putting the cart into park, Ryker turned it off. He hopped down and hurried to the other side to tuck the princess’s hand into her arm as they walked up the steps onto the porch.

Once inside, it looked about like he suspected. A king-sized bed against the wall opposite the door. A rocking chair. A jetted tub. A door Ryker suspected led to a bathroom. And a small kitchenette and table for two on the other side.

Which meant he’d be sleeping on the floor between the bed and the door.

“It’s... quaint.” The princess sounded like she was trying to be kind.

“It is.”

She opened her suitcase where it already sat on the rack. “You know, there’s no other place for you to sleep tonight. We can share. It’ll be all right.”

“Thanks.” He wouldn’t, but she could think what she wanted.

Half an hour later, once they had everything situated, a knock on the door told them their meal had arrived.

Rather than sitting at the table with the candles waiting to be lit, they took the meal

out to the porch.

“It’s a beautiful night.” Ryker took a sip of his wine.

Princess Amalia nodded. “Sitting out here was a stroke of genius.”

Ryker propped his feet up on the railing as he took another bite of his meal. “I’m glad the cabin is facing west so we can watch the sunset.” The sky glowed with pinks and oranges as the sun slipped toward the horizon.

“Same.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

They ate in silence, watching as the last red glow died out.

From where they sat, with the cabin lights off, stars began to appear. “It’s beautiful out here.” The princess set her plate to the side and stood, leaning against the rail, bracing her forearms against it.

“It is.” Ryker joined her. Close, but not touching and wishing he’d stayed a little farther away, but not knowing how to move now that he’d staked a spot.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “Do you have views like this where you’re from?”

“We’re much farther north, so we have nearly perpetual night in the winter and perpetual day in the summer, so right now, there’s not much of a night sky at all. But the views in the winter can be breathtaking.”

“It’s the same in my country. I don’t particularly care for the never-ending nights, but when the Aurora Borealis are out and you can see a whole galaxy worth of stars... It’s indescribable.”

Ryker looked at the top of her head where it rested against his shoulder and resisted the urge to kiss the top of it.

He could only come up with one word for how it felt standing here with her.

Indescribable.

* * *

What had possessed her to rest her head against Ryker's shoulder? Amalia didn't know, but she did know that she didn't want to move.

He'd almost kissed her when they were dancing.

She'd wanted him to. Would have kissed him back.

Keeping the near-miss kiss at the forefront of her mind kept the looming confrontation with Yvette further from her thoughts.

She didn't know how long they stood there, looking up at the stars as they continued to emerge.

When Ryker's phone buzzed, he moved just enough to pull it out of his pocket. "The resort staff will be by soon to pick up the dinner dishes and drop off dessert."

"What's for dessert?" She loved a good dessert.

"They didn't say."

In a couple of minutes, lights from a cart could be seen approaching on the path. As though they'd agreed, Amalia and Ryker stepped back from the railing and gathered the dishes and leftovers so they'd be easy for the staff to gather.

Once they'd traded the dirty dishes for dessert, a slight chill had started to settle in the air.

"Do you mind if we go back inside?" She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her upper arms with her hands.

“Of course not.” Ryker held the door for her as she walked through carrying the trays with dessert.

It struck her as odd that one felt cold while the other felt quite warm, but not too hot for her to carry.

“Where do you want to eat?” Ryker flipped the light on as he closed the door behind him.

For the thousandth time since they left the ferry, Amalia wondered how she could feel so safe alone with a man she barely knew.

She tilted her head toward the small table where they were supposed to eat dinner. “Why don’t we pull that over here. The chairs aren’t that comfortable, but we can sit on the end of the bed and use it.”

Ryker quickly moved the candles and other items to the seats of the chairs and pushed the table to the end of the bed. “How’s that?”

“Perfect.” She set the two trays on the table and lifted the domes, gasping as the dessert came into view. “Oh my! Mi-cuits au chocolat!” The warm tray had two smaller plates and a larger plate with six servings of the chocolate cake filled with gooey liquid chocolate. The cold tray held bowls of vanilla gelato.

“The last time I had this was in the States,” Ryker told her, toeing his shoes off before sitting on the end of the bed. “They called it molten-lava cake there.”

“Sounds about right.” Amalia hesitated then put the domes back in place. “I’d like to change into something more comfortable. Do you mind?” After a couple of awkward conversations the first times they mentioned getting comfortable, they’d agreed to just take the phrase at face value.

“Go ahead. I will, too.”

It didn't take long to change into a pair of comfortable pajama pants and a soft t-shirt. Amalia took a scoop of the gelato and put it on one of the smaller plates then moved a cake next to it. Ryker left a couple of the low lights on and turned off the larger, harsher one then did the same.

The atmosphere in the cabin had turned almost romantic with the change in lighting.

“What if we turned on another movie?” she asked as she sat criss-cross near the end of the bed by the table.

Ryker grabbed the remote and turned on the telly, finding the HEA TV app before settling in with his own plate of dessert.

Amalia used her spoon to cut into the cake and watched as the chocolate oozed out and mixed with the gelato. Getting some of all three parts of the dessert on her spoon, she closed her eyes as she tasted it. “This is amazing,” she murmured as she went back for more.

Next to her, Ryker chuckled. “It looks like it.” He pressed another button on the remote. “Any preference on the movie?”

She shook her head. “Something that doesn't sound horrible, I guess.” A thought occurred to her. “Do we have the MyBingeFlix app? ThatMarsshow is supposed to be really good, but I haven't watched it yet.”

Ryker maneuvered the on-screen menu until the title card for Management on Mars appeared.

The first episode started a moment later. Ryker pointed his spoon at the screen. “I’ve met Eli a couple of times. He’s a good guy.”

“Really?”

“His wife is from a small town in the States. I’ve been there a couple of times and met him in passing.” He took a bigger bite of his dessert than she had.

Amalia thought about it as she scooped up some more. “I think I know someone from that area, actually.” Didn’t his wife live in Trumanville? That’s where her long-lost half-sister, Ginny, had been raised.

She and Ginny had never really had any in-depth conversations, so she had no idea if her sister knew the celebrity or not.

Though already quite funny, the first couple of episodes of the program clearly showed the cast and everyone else trying to find their footing. By the time the second episode ended, Amalia felt like she’d eaten her weight in dessert. Three of the cakes, with the corresponding amounts of gelato, were more than she’d eaten in one sitting in her life.

Amalia flopped backward onto the bed and groaned as the credits rolled before going to the next episode.

“Are you all right?”

She groaned again. “Just ate too much. I should have stopped sooner, but it was so good.”

He chuckled. “I understand. I probably shouldn’t have eaten quite as much as I did either.” Ryker cleaned up the dessert trays and moved the table back to the original spot.

While he did, Amalia tried to convince herself to move back against the headboard but couldn’t make herself do it.

“Need help?” The barely-concealed mirth in Ryker’s voice made her smile.

She looked over to see his outstretched hand. Reaching out she grasped it, and tried to pull herself up.

But instead...

Instead, somehow, she pulled him down.

Ryker landed half on top of her and looked down at her much as he had the night they danced.

Like he wanted to kiss her.

8

Against his better judgment, Ryker dipped his head farther and gently kissed her.

Her lips clung to his as they both froze.

But then her hand grasped the side of his shirt, and the kiss took on a life of its own.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Alternately, soft and gentle then more intense, Ryker remained aware of where they were and who he was kissing and why he shouldn't be... but continued anyway.

Far too soon - while also not soon enough - the kiss came to an end. Ryker looked down into those incredible green eyes. "I probably shouldn't have done that." His voice came out almost as a whisper.

"I probably shouldn't have either." Her hand brushed his hair back at his temple. "But that was..." She blew out a breath.

"Exactly." Ryker let himself flop onto his back away from where she lay. "I'm sorry."

Amalia took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. "Don't. It probably shouldn't have happened, but I won't apologize for it either. We'll count it as a momentary lapse in judgment and a lovely thing that just sort of happened, but probably shouldn't have. It will be a nice memory once you're rid of me."

"Rid of you? It's an honor to help you stay safe." Ryker hoped she didn't notice his wince as he rolled away from her. He probably shouldn't have put it quite that way. "It's no trouble at all." The conversation reminded him that he needed to check his official email sometime soon, but given the issues with communications, and the lack of any coded message sent to his personal phone or email, he had to assume there were still potential issues.

He propped himself up on his elbows. "Do you want to watch a couple more episodes?"

The look on her face tore at him but she quickly masked it. She had to think he was rejecting her. He didn't want her to think that, but really had no choice. It would be better that way.

"Sure." She pushed herself into a seated position and moved back until she sat against the headboard. "I'm enjoying it."

Ryker grabbed the remote and situated himself a reasonable distance away from her with his legs stretched out in front of him. He moved the pillows around until he was more comfortable, but also managed to build a slight wall between them. His arm rested on the pillow that separated him from the princess.

As he hit play, he felt her hand slip into his. Common sense told Ryker he should disentangle himself, but the part of him that was attracted to her, that wondered if - in another life - they could have made a relationship work, chose to curl his fingers around hers.

As the show went on, they made little comments to each other and laughed at the same parts.

Between episodes, they took turns doing their evening ablutions. When he returned from brushing his teeth and splashing some water on his face, Ryker found the "pillow barrier" had vanished. Without it, he made sure to leave plenty of room between himself and the princess.

The princess.

He had to keep their differences in status at the forefront of his mind.

Princess Amalia was the oldest biological child of the Crown Princess of Øyanord and her husband. Because of her older half-sister, she wouldn't inherit the throne, but

she was still quite important in her country.

And he was simply a member of a royal protection agency, tasked with protecting the eldest sibling of his king.

Making out with such a high-ranking member of another royal family could lead to accusations of treason.

No. He wouldn't degrade that connection with the princess to simply "making out." It meant more than that to him. He had to believe it did to her as well.

By the time another episode of Management on Mars ended, the princess had fallen asleep.

Holding his hand.

Head resting on his shoulder.

Ryker didn't quite know how that happened, but he didn't think he could move without waking her.

Against his better judgment, he let himself fall asleep right next to the princess.

When he woke, it remained dark outside. He felt an unfamiliar weight on his chest and across his abdomen.

He blinked his eyes open to see dark blonde hair on his shoulder and a slender arm across his stomach.

Great.

At some point over the course of the night, she'd rolled over and snuggled into his side, one leg over the top of his.

His arm had wrapped around her shoulder of its own volition, holding her to him.

Ryker closed his eyes again and tried to think. It wasn't as easy as it should have been, not with her so close.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Maybe he was wrong about the potential issues being so close to her. It couldn't be a legal thing, could it?

Then it hit him.

There was something in his contract about being a member of the protective service and getting so close to a member of another royal family.

He couldn't focus enough to remember exactly what it said, but he hoped the unusual circumstances would play a role in any inquiry that might take place.

There wasn't anything he could do about it at the moment, so he turned his head enough to press a kiss to the princess's hairline then closed his eyes. Daylight hadn't broken yet which meant it couldn't be time to get up. He should. He should find a way to slip away from the princess without waking her and find another place to sleep for the rest of the night.

But after a couple of false starts, Ryker decided it wasn't possible.

The princess's safety had to be his top priority. His professional, and more importantly his personal, reputation depended on it. If that meant acting as a couple would? So be it. He'd accept any consequences that might be forthcoming.

Because Ryker knew one thing for certain.

No matter what it might do to his reputation, or job prospects, he'd do whatever necessary to keep Amalia safe.

* * *

When Amalia awoke, the first thing she noticed was a sense of loss. Of being alone.

But she'd always woken up alone.

So what made this day different?

She blinked her eyes open to see Ryker standing at the door talking softly to whoever was on the other side.

He glanced over at her then nodded and opened the door farther, letting the person on the other side walk through.

Amalia glanced down, glad she still wore something comfortable and not actual sleep wear. She pushed herself into a seated position before looking to see who the other person was.

Her eyes went wide as Yvette came into view.

"Good morning, Johanne." The name already seemed unfamiliar.

"Good morning, Yvette." Amalia shifted until she sat criss-cross with her hands resting in her lap. "Thank you for not saying anything yesterday."

Ryker closed the door behind their guest.

"Nicky and I still haven't said anything. We decided you needed the chance to come clean yourself, and we couldn't come talk to you last night." The other princess sat in the rocking chair. "But everyone is quite worried about you. The assumption is that you ran off rather than being kidnapped because there hasn't been any sort of

demands in the last few days. Your family, your team, they're all beside themselves."

Amalia nodded. "I know. I just needed some time away, to be Amalia, and not..." She glanced at Ryker who didn't seem surprised by any of this conversation - or the fact that a princess had come to see her. Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you?" she asked him.

The look on his face changed to one she'd seen thousands of times before as he bowed slightly at the waist. "I am Ryker Drasil, protection officer for Her Royal Highness Princess Genevieve of Eyjania."

Amalia blinked, staring at him. "You've known all along?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The sudden veneer of formality and loss of familiarity stung Amalia in a way she couldn't have anticipated - or define. "Why didn't you say anything? Or call in the troops?"

"I didn't know how to get in touch with your team, and I'd received word that communications with my superiors may have been compromised. I sent a coded email, but we don't have a code name for you, ma'am. While my superiors knew I was unavoidably detained with a situation of some seriousness, they likely wouldn't have known you were involved. The only way they might have would be if your team had reached out to the others for assistance."

"They didn't," Yvette told them. "I believe only the Ravenzarians and Øyanordians know you're gone." Amalia's friend's eyes softened. "You need to tell them where you are. Heads are going to roll for this, you know. That's not fair to them."

Properly chastised, Amalia went back to staring at her hands. "I know. I'll do my best

to mitigate it for them. It wasn't anyone's fault but my own. I used subterfuge and their trust in me to get out of the building. I'm safe. That's all that really matters."

She could see Ryker's lips thin as he tried to keep himself from saying something. Amalia even knew what he wasn't saying.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

A man had been on the ferry and the dock. He wanted to get to her for some reason. That could have gone very, very badly if not for Ryker.

At least she knew why he seemed so observant and why he hadn't asked about her lack of funds.

"You can go back to Pagosa with us," Yvette told her gently. "Otherwise, we'll have to tell them where you are. We can't justify keeping it to ourselves if there's not a valid reason beyond just needing some time away."

Amalia nodded. "I know. I'll go back with you. Just give me a little bit of time to wake up and get dressed?"

Yvette stood. "Of course. Nicky and I didn't say anything to our teams either. I doubt they realize you're here, so they can't say anything. But I won't put them in a position to compromise their integrity either."

"I won't ask you to. Where would you like us to meet you?" It barely registered that she'd included Ryker in the statement.

A minute later, Yvette left and Ryker started to follow her out the door.

"Ryker?" The thought that he would leave too never crossed her mind.

He turned back. "Yes, ma'am?" Was that sadness around his eyes?

"You will go with me, won't you?" She always knew she'd have to face the music at

some point, but now the thought of doing it alone scared her.

Ryker hesitated for a second then nodded. “Of course, ma’am.”

He started out the door again, but Amalia stopped him once more.

“Can’t things stay the same? At least a little while longer. Can’t I just be Amalia until we actually get where we’re going? Can’t we just be Amalia and Ryker? None of this ma’am nonsense.”

This time his hesitation lasted even longer. “I’ll do my best. I’ll be waiting outside.”

He didn’t give her a chance to call him back, to ask him to eat breakfast with her at the little table. To...

To what?

Ask him to hold her again? She did remember waking up in his arms at least once overnight.

Ask him to kiss her again? Wasn’t that what she’d wanted when she woke up feeling safer than she ever had before?

With a sigh, she managed to get herself out of the bed to shower and dress. After drawing it out as long as she thought she could get away with, she packed her few belongings, including the hat that was likely the only reason she hadn’t been identified before getting on the yacht, and headed for the door.

Ryker waited on the small porch, leaning against the railing with his forearms holding his weight as he stared into the distance.

“I think I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” she told him.

He nodded. “If you’ll wait on the cart, I’ll get our luggage secured, and we can go.”

As he disappeared through the door, Amalia stared after him at the place where, for a brief period of time, she’d felt more like herself than she ever had before.

With a sigh, she started down the stairs.

Time to face reality.

9

The way the interactions between himself and Princess Amalia changed saddened Ryker, though he’d known all along it would have to happen sooner rather than later.

Neither of them spoke on the drive to the main building. Ryker could tell he held himself differently, more formally, than he had before. The princess also seemed to be more... princess-like.

He slowed to a stop near the front door of the building. Princess Yvette and Prince Nicklaus waited outside for them.

Princess Amalia took the prince’s hand as he offered it to help her out of the electric cart. The wave of jealousy that swept over Ryker felt unfamiliar and disconcerting.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

The time had come to return to his place in the hierarchy of things. He'd completed his job of making certain the princess survived her excursion safely.

He remained behind as she entered the building with her arm intertwined with Princess Yvette's and Prince Nicklaus following them.

Ryker recognized the man walking up to him as Tony, Queen Christiana's head of security.

"Ryker Drasil?"

"Yes, sir."

They shook hands and Tony led him to a different door.

Time for the debrief to begin.

"We'll be leaving for the mainland momentarily," Tony told him. "Queen Christiana as well as the princess's parents will want to speak with you."

Ryker simply nodded as they went straight through the building and climbed into another vehicle. Tony drove them toward the dock.

"Will we all be taking a boat back to the mainland?" he asked.

Tony looked over. "That's the plan."

“Princess Amalia isn’t fond of being out on the water.” That was an understatement if he’d ever made one.

“Who?”

“Princess Johanne,” Ryker corrected. “She’s gone by one of her other names for the last few days.”

“I see. You arrived here on a yacht.”

Ryker nodded. “But only because I essentially forced her to. Not really,” he quickly corrected. “I saw something that concerned me and asked her to trust me. It wasn’t easy for her, and she never fully relaxed during the whole trip over, but she did walk up the gangplank of her own free will.”

Tony frowned. “I don’t remember hearing or seeing anything about an aversion to being on the water in our preparations for her visit.”

“Was she supposed to be during her visit?”

“No.”

“I would imagine her security team wouldn’t say anything unless it became necessary.” That’s how Ryker would have handled it if Princess Genevieve hadn’t wanted anyone to know. He suspected Tony would be the same for any of his protectees, especially if it wasn’t already a publicly known aversion.

Tony simply nodded as he pulled to a stop near the edge of the dock. He climbed out, motioning for Ryker to stay put, then pulled his phone out of his pocket. A few minutes later, he waved Ryker over.

“We’ll be leaving now. A helicopter will be dispatched for their royal highnesses shortly.”

Ryker hesitated then followed Tony down to the yacht that waited for them. He didn’t feel right leaving Princess Amalia behind, even though he knew she would be safe.

This time the trip didn’t take nearly as long, given that Biansola was significantly closer to the northern island of Corsisnos than the southern one of Ichnusia.

The drive to the palace in Pagosa didn’t take long either. Ryker was taken to an underground entrance and straight to security headquarters.

Tony led him to a conference room and motioned for him to take a seat.

“All right, Mr. Drasil. Can you please tell us exactly how you ended up with a princess of Øyanord in your care?”

Ryker leaned forward in his chair, knitting his fingers together and resting his weight on his forearms. He launched into the story of how he saw her on the ferry and the allegedly homeless man who wanted to talk to her.

Tony and the security men from Øyanord took notes as Ryker described the man as he appeared on the ferry and later on the dock. He went into detail about the behaviors he found concerning and why he hadn’t contacted anyone.

The men in the room were well-trained to remain passive even in the face of the most startling information, so they didn’t give much of anything away in their facial expressions.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

But Ryker was an expert in body-language. He had to be. Nothing in their demeanor - how they held their bodies, how they gripped their pens, the looks they exchanged - told him he would feel negative repercussions from how things went down.

After over an hour and a half, the inquisition came to an end. Ryker hadn't given them every little detail about his time with the princess. He hadn't mentioned the kiss or the fact they'd fallen asleep together the night before. Of all the things that might get him in trouble, those two were the most likely. It seemed unlikely this was the group of people who would be the most upset about those two items.

Once finished, Ryker went to a secure room where he waited for a video chat with Justin.

"Is it still morning there?" Justin's voice came through the speakers a few seconds before his face appeared on the monitor.

Ryker checked his watch. "Barely."

"Well, good morning then." His boss leaned back in his desk chair. "How are things?"

"Fine, I think. I just left a meeting with security personnel from Ravenzario and Øyanord. They didn't give any indications that I should be concerned."

Justin's face remained serious. "Let's start with what happened. Pretend I have no idea why you sent such an informal, irreverent email to Tiny."

He didn't already know? Ryker launched into his story again, going into more detail than the first time to hopefully eliminate most of the questions later. Justin interrupted a few times, asking for clarification, but otherwise simply listened.

Justin tapped his pen against the desk. "From what you've said, given the communications issues, you absolutely did the right thing. The only possible difference I might be able suggest would be going to a police station or finding the local branch of their investigative agency."

"If I'd seen the man while we were out and about, I might have. Given our proximity to the yacht when I did, with its extra security, that seemed the most prudent decision. As soon as Prince Nicklaus and Princess Yvette walked into yesterday's lunch, I knew it would only be a matter of time before the teams arrived. Honestly, I expected them last night."

"Why didn't you go to security at the Baicampo property yesterday?" Justin had a way of looking right through you, even from across a computer screen.

Ryker had been turning the question over in his mind. "I didn't want to upset the princess. I truly believed security, or at least Princess Yvette, would be arriving at the cabin at any moment. Letting it take the natural course seemed like the right move."

What he didn't tell his boss?

That the best kiss of his life wouldn't have happened if he'd gone straight to security.

And that would be the greatest loss of all.

* * *

As Amalia climbed out of the helicopter, she found herself searching for Ryker

without realizing that's what she was doing.

They landed at a secondary location then were taken by SUV to the palace. Surely, he would be waiting for her there.

Once inside, she was taken to a large room with a fireplace big enough to live in and quickly found herself alone.

She looked around and wondered why she'd been left without anyone to accompany her. They clearly knew she wasn't a security risk. She wasn't even certain where her actual phone was at the moment. The throwaway she'd bought had also disappeared, probably in the suitcase or purse Ryker had purchased before they left on the excursion.

Which reminded her, she needed to make certain he was repaid every bit of what he spent - and then some. Make sure he was compensated for any lost wages and travel arrangements.

The door opened and her parents rushed through with her mother reaching Amalia first. Amalia found herself in a tight hug with her father's arms around both of them.

Her mother's tears brought tears to Amalia's eyes as well. She'd known she was all right, but, though the concern her parents would have gone through had occurred to her, she hadn't really thought it would be quite this bad. She'd thought they'd realize she left just to get a little space but clearly not.

"You're really all right?" her mother whispered, pulling back enough to look Amalia in her eyes and reaching up to brush a piece of Amalia's hair back.

"I'm fine, Mum. I promise. I just needed to get away for a little bit. That's all." She moved away from her mum and reached out to give her father a hug.

He held her tightly. “We were worried, princess.”

Her father had always called her that. Always reminded her it had nothing to do with her lineage, but that she would have been his princess no matter what - and that she would always be a princess because she was a child of the King of Kings. It had nothing to do with her mother or grandfather, but her Heavenly Father.

“I’m sorry, Papa. I just needed some time.”

“If you just need time like that again, let us know. We’ll arrange for some time away from everything and everyone.” He kissed the top of her head. “But just sneaking off? That’s dangerous, princess.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“I know, Papa.” The three of them sat down on one of the sofas. “I understand better now why it could have been quite dangerous to leave without taking a security team with me, but that other King, the one you always tell me I belong to, He was looking out for me.”

“What do you mean?” Her mother asked the question.

“The first real person I met was this man named Ryker. He sat next to me on the ferry for the last quarter of it or so and made certain this homeless man didn’t bother me. Immediately, I felt safe with him.” She shook her head. “I couldn’t explain it, but I knew - Iknew- that he was safe. And earlier today, when Yvette came to the cabin to talk to me, I found out why. He’s a protection officer for Genevieve. We haven’t really spoken since then, but it’s quite possible I’ve seen him or even met him in passing before when she’s been in Øyanord. That could be why I felt so safe with him.”

“It could be,” her mother said slowly. “I supposed that’s preferable to just trusting someone without good reason.”

“He treated you well?” Her father sounded more concerned. “He treated you with respect?”

“Yes, Papa. He was a perfect gentleman.” Her father might not agree that the kiss was something a gentleman would do, so she skipped over that part. “He made sure we had a place to go and a group to go with. He bought me luggage and clothes, because I didn’t think far enough ahead. And he always put himself between me and any perceived, potential danger - like any member of security would in an undercover

scenario.”

“Did he keep receipts so we can reimburse him?” Her mother looked a bit pensive.

Amalia shrugged. “I have no idea, but I’d trust whatever number he tells us when we ask. He may have the statements to work from.” She knew he hadn’t separated their purchases, but he should be reimbursed for the things he bought for himself as well. He wouldn’t have purchased them if he hadn’t been with her.

The door opened again, this time letting in Tony, Christiana’s head of security. “Your Royal Highnesses, if you would come with me, please.” He bowed slightly as he spoke.

Amalia’s parents held her hands as they followed him, as though they were unwilling to let her go. Before long, they were seated around a conference table in the executive suite.

Christiana sat at the head of the table. “Amalia, would you please tell us exactly where you were and what happened?”

Once again, Amalia told her story, omitting only the attraction to Ryker and the kiss - and that they’d slept in the same bed the evening before.

“That all fits very nicely with Mr. Drasil’s account of the last few days.” Tony closed his notepad. “We will be looking into the person who was following you. Until we know who that was and what his intentions were, we won’t know if you were ever truly in danger or if he might have had something else in mind.”

Everyone pushed back from the table. Maybe now she’d have a chance to see Ryker, to thank him.

Instead, she was taken immediately to the garrison and climbed in an SUV. Amalia wanted to protest, to ask when she could see him, but the looks on everyone's faces told her it would be far better to go along with what they wanted.

Kind of like when Ryker told her she needed to get on the yacht.

Before she knew what was happening, she'd boarded a plane and taken off. Conversations she'd overheard told her they flew toward Øyanord and home.

But as Amalia stared out the window at the clouds below, only one thought ran through her mind.

When could she see Ryker?

10

Asubdued Ryker made it to his office a couple of days after his return to Eyjania. He had been removed from Princess Genevieve's detail until an investigation had been completed, though Justin saw no reason to think any issues would arise.

The princess didn't have any trips out of the palace planned in the next few days, so he wouldn't have been doing much anyway. He focused his attention on planning for one of her upcoming overseas ventures. This one would be to Montevero and Mevendia, on behalf of the king. With Queen Eliana's pregnancy progressing, the king would prefer not to be so far away at the moment.

Princess Genevieve would be taking her family with her. Her two young children would travel often with her and Prince Levi. The toddler princess was already on her way to being a world traveler, but it would be the first trip for the infant prince.

The king would likely have gone by himself for a trip like this, though he frequently

took his entire family with him. His two princesses were already seasoned travelers. Ryker hadn't heard if the third child would be a prince or princess. He wasn't certain the king and queen knew yet either.

Most likely the baby's gender would be a surprise to everyone.

He looked through the list of official stops she'd be making. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. They were all stops one member of the family or another had made multiple times in the last few years. The family would stay at the palace in both countries, so there wouldn't be any security issues there.

The princess had often left without telling her team, but they eventually discovered she'd been sneaking off to see Levi Prescott, who she'd later married. They didn't worry about that anymore.

Her former head of security, Merrick, had been promoted to Justin's office, third in command of security for the entire family. The new head of security for the princess, Samuel Saddois, had been part of the team for several years.

On one hand, Ryker had felt a bit slighted he was barely considered for the position when Merrick left, but at the same time, he preferred his current job. Merrick's former job came with plenty of responsibility, but Ryker wasn't certain he was ready for all of that. There had also always been something about Saddois that never sat quite right with Ryker. He'd always chalked it up to personality conflicts, but as long as it didn't interfere with the princess's safety, he did his best to get along.

Jotting down notes on one of the venues that had been remodeled since the last time one of their protectees had visited, Ryker forced himself to focus and not wonder what another princess was doing with her time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

A knock on his door made him look up. “Good morning, Samuel.”

Samuel took a seat across Ryker’s desk from him. “How are you, Drasil?”

Ryker gave half a shrug. “I’m fine. Glad the princess is home safely.”

“Was there a real danger to Princess Johanne?” Samuel watched him carefully.

He gave a singular nod. “I believe there was. The man in question never got close to her that I’m aware of, but he definitely watched her more closely than someone should have.”

“Did anything inappropriate happen?”

Ryker’s eyes narrowed. “What exactly are you insinuating?”

Saddois gave the same half-shrug Ryker had. “I’m not insinuating anything, but she’s a beautiful woman.”

“And I’m fully capable of seeing her as a person, first and foremost. Then second, as someone who needed protecting.”

“Someone from the country where we get many tourists?” Something in Saddois tone irritated Ryker, though he couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

“I would have done something similar on the ferry no matter who the drunk guy was bothering. I would have noticed and done what I could. Everything that came later

likely would have been unnecessary.”

Saddois gave Ryker a look he couldn't decipher then stood. “I'm sure anything that needs to come out will come out in the investigation.”

Ryker just watched as Saddois left then got back to work. Another hour passed before a notification popped up. He secured his paperwork then locked his office before going to the executive conference room near the king's office.

When he entered, he bowed to the king where he sat at the end of the table.

“Please, join us.” King Benjamin motioned to the chair to one side of him. Across the table sat Chamberlain, the king's chief of staff, and Justin, as head of security.

Ryker waited a couple of seconds for the king to start speaking but when the king didn't, he decided to say something. “What can I do for you, sir?”

The king tilted his head toward the other end of the table. “Someone else wanted to speak with you.”

Turning to look, Ryker found the meeting being video conferenced, and on the screen appeared the king of Øyanord, Princess Amalia's grandfather.

“Good morning, sir.” Ryker tipped his head toward the other king. “How may I serve you today?”

The other king inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Good day, Mr. Drasil. My wife, my daughter, my son-in-law, and I would like to convey our heartfelt gratitude for your assistance to and protection of my granddaughter in Ravenzario.”

Ryker bowed his head again. “It was my pleasure, sir. I'm glad I was in the right

place at the right time.”

“We will, of course, repay you for your actions. Please see that someone Benjamin designates gets the figures for what you need to be reimbursed. Be certain to include any lost wages or expenses due to the change in your travel arrangements, as well as your own clothing and other supplies that you purchased when you didn’t have your luggage.”

“Yes, sir.” The actual amount wasn’t that much in the scheme of things, far less than any ransom demand would have been but being reimbursed still struck Ryker as wrong on some level.

King Benjamin answered before Ryker could. “Chamberlain will send that information as soon as Mr. Drasil can get it to him. I have instructed my team to be certain there is no lost wages for Mr. Drasil. He was fulfilling his duties as we would expect him to under the circumstances.”

The other king nodded his agreement. “Then there is a matter of non-monetary rewards. You provided a great service to Øyanord, Mr. Drasil. Insofar as it would not conflict with the laws and regulations of your home country, we would like to bestow upon you the Order of the Dragon for service above and beyond the call of duty.”

Ryker blinked. “That is truly unnecessary, sir, but insofar as it is possible within the legalities and regulations of my country, I would be honored.”

* * *

The meeting between her grandfather and Ryker had been over for more than two hours before Amalia learned it would be happening.

So much for her chance to be there and convey her thanks as herself.

She'd only known Ryker for a few days. Why should she miss him? And even if she should miss him, should she miss himthismuch?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

There had been no contact between the two of them since she entered the building with Nicklaus and Yvette.

Finding herself quite restless, Amalia left her quarters and wandered through the corridors of the palace, barely noticing anyone else or where her feet were taking her.

“Your Royal Highness? Princess Johan... Princess Amalia?”

A voice finally cut through the fog.

Amalia blinked and looked up. “Zoey.” Her assistant? In the middle of...

She looked around. The executive suite of offices holding the offices of her parents and grandparents.

Amalia would never have an office here.

Not with Ginny still taking her spot as heir.

To be fair, Ginny had never actually said she wouldn’t step down, just that she wouldn’t make an official decision until more time had passed.

Leaving Amalia in limbo.

“Princess Amalia?”

Right. Her assistant. “Yes, Zoey?”

“The king would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience - as soon as someone could find you.” Through the slight censure in her voice, Zoey looked relieved to have passed on the message.

“Thank you.”

She was only a few steps from her grandfather’s outer office. Once inside, his assistant waved her on.

Giving a nod of thanks, Amalia pushed open the ornate door.

Her grandfather stood behind his desk as she dipped into a curtsy. “Good morning, Grandfather.”

He chuckled as he moved out into the open area and reached an arm for her. “It’s afternoon, love.”

She blinked. “It is?”

“Barely. Where have you been?”

Winning at the reprimand he didn’t have to spell out, Amalia accepted his hug. “Then good afternoon.”

With his arm still around her, they walked toward the seating area next to the windows overlooking the city. “I spoke with Mr. Drasil this morning.”

“I heard. How is he?”

“He looked well. If it is legal in his country, we will give him all of the accolades we can, given his service to the crown.”

They both took a seat. “That seems like a good idea.” Amalia wasn’t quite certain how she should respond. “He saved my life. I’m certain of it.”

“Maybe not your life, but saved you from something nefarious, I’m certain.” Her grandfather poured from his favorite tea kettle into his favorite tea cup, giving her his second favorite. “At minimum, we would like to knight him as a member of the Order of the Dragon.”

Amalia nodded as she accepted the cup of tea. The Order of the Dragon was the highest honor Øyanord could bestow on someone who was not a member of the Øyanordian military.

“It’s possible we’ll offer some other honors as well. Certainly, there will be no restrictions on his visits to Øyanord. Benjamin has his people looking into the legalities.” He took a sip of his tea. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing well. I’ve been resting most of the time, but I couldn’t sit still any longer. I went for a walk and wound up just outside your office when Zoey caught up with me.”

“When will you be ready to resume your schedule?” From the way he stared out the window, Amalia knew he had more on his mind.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“I would imagine I could resume tomorrow, although I don’t believe I have anything on my schedule until Monday.” He would suggest something else in a moment.

Setting his cup back down, he looked over at Amalia. “I would appreciate it if you would consider an excursion tomorrow.”

Which meant one had already been planned. “That sounds like a lovely idea. Do you have any suggestions for where I might go?”

He waved a hand. “I trust you to pick somewhere suitable.”

The choice had likely already been made - or she’d be presented with two or three options, all acceptable, but one would stand out as the “right” choice.

“There will also have to be another discussion soon.” His kind tone brought tears to Amalia’s eyes. “Your actions were quite unacceptable.”

One of the tears escaped. “I know. I just needed to be Amalia for a time. No expectations. No schedule. Just me.”

“No security, either. We’ve seen the potential of what could happen. If you need time away...”

Amalia nodded. “I’ll discuss it with you and Mum, and we’ll find a reasonable solution to allow me some time out of the spotlight.”

“Precisely.” Her grandfather stood and moved to look out the window, his hands

clasped behind him.

He had something else on his mind, but Amalia knew he wouldn't be rushed.

"Have you spoken with Ginny since you returned?"

She hadn't expected him to ask about her sister. "No, but I haven't left the premises, and she hasn't been on them." Amalia didn't know where Ginny had been, but it wasn't at the palace.

"I didn't ask if you'd seen her."

Another subtle rebuke. "I will contact her this afternoon." Surely a text would suffice as contact enough.

From the way he didn't move, Amalia knew there had to be more coming.

She waited.

"I had a meeting with your mother while you were in Ravenzario, before your disappearance."

Patience wasn't one of Amalia's virtues, and she wished he'd just tell her, but also knew he wouldn't be rushed.

"It is time for Ginny's lessons to increase, almost to the exclusion of all else."

Amalia blinked but didn't speak.

"That will require you to take on some of her engagements over the next few months."

Her grandfather didn't make requests. Her schedule had just become much busier.

But something more remained.

"This kind of behavior cannot continue, Amalia." He offset the stern tone with the use of the name she'd come to prefer.

"Yes, sir."

"You know I can remove you from the line of succession should the need arise."

Also not a question. He could remove any of them, though Parliament and the Council could override his actions. It hadn't been done in at least two centuries and had never been overturned.

Where could he be going with this?

"Next Friday, at a joint session of Parliament and the Council, your mother will be removed."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Amalia stared at his back and blinked several times.

What?

11

Sleeping in one of the rooms set aside for security personnel to crash when needed gave Ryker the chance to avoid thinking too much. As long as he remained in the palace, he could work out or focus on work until he couldn't keep his eyes open, crash hard, then wake up and do it all over again.

He didn't see Saddois again for a couple of days.

Ryker's plan to keep his head down and his nose clean until the investigation finished seemed like a good one. But Saddois decided to get on his last nerve as often as possible.

From finding a slight fault with one of his notations on the Montevero plans - one that Ryker would have found when he went over it again and again before officially submitting them - to assigning Ryker the busy work normally given to newbies.

But Ryker did it without complaining. He didn't want to give anyone reason to doubt his loyalty.

If it continued after the investigation concluded, he'd probably go to Merrick.

Collapsing onto the bed, he stared at the ceiling.

How was Amalia? He felt certain she would face repercussions from her adventure, but how bad would they be? Would she be forced to abdicate her role in the family? Or would it be more like a conversation with her parents or grandfather where they would express their disappointment in her choices?

Given how hard he'd worked, even thoughts of Amalia didn't keep him awake long. He woke after dawn, something that wasn't too difficult given the time of year and latitude, dressed quickly and returned to his office.

As soon as he walked in the door, something seemed a bit off, though he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was.

He stopped and scanned the room quickly. Nothing jumped out at him. So he slowed down and looked the room over again.

Something still niggled at the back of his mind, but he still couldn't be certain what.

His third sweep through the room was done at a much slower pace. His eyes scanned up and down methodically working his way around the office.

One of the chairs across from his desk had been moved. Not much. Just enough that the leg wasn't quite in the indent of the rug. That alone shouldn't be enough to set his radar off. It happened. Cleaning staff came in regularly, always accompanied by a member of the security team when they entered secure offices. It wasn't the first time a chair hadn't been replaced exactly right.

Continuing his scan, he noticed his desk wasn't... right.

Nothing he could put his finger on yet. He'd look more closely when he entered the room all the way.

He noticed a couple of other things that could be explained by the cleaning crew.

And yet... that didn't seem right somehow.

“What is it?”

Ryker didn't turn at the quiet words.

Thor.

The former head of security for the family became a duke when he married the king's mother. He was no longer officially a protection officer, but he continued to be a valuable asset when necessary.

“Something's off,” he told the duke.

Thor didn't argue with him, likely doing his own sweep as Ryker continued his assessment.

Finally, Ryker spoke again. “It's nothing I can put my finger on yet. The furniture is off a little bit, but that happens when the cleaners come in.” He moved farther inside, looking around his desk as he did. Because so much of what he did could be considered classified, Ryker rarely left anything unsecured. Going to a meeting in the palace? Maybe, but he always locked his door behind him.

He'd never been one of those people who needed everything lined up just so, but he still kept his desk neat.

He still sensed something off, but had no idea what it could be.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Finally, he sighed and shrugged. “I can’t figure it out.”

Thor had begun his own visual sweep of the room. Ryker moved out of his way to let him move around at will. Thor went even farther into the office than Ryker had and then turned, brows furrowed and arms crossed.

“You’re right. Someone was in here.”

“What makes you say that?” Ryker wondered what he’d missed.

Thor nodded toward the other side of the desk where Ryker hadn’t yet ventured. “The waste basket hasn’t been emptied. If the cleaners had been here, it would have, but things are just a little bit off and the trash is still there.” He walked toward Ryker and motioned toward the door. “Let’s get a team in here to double check everything.”

Thor moved off to the side. As Ryker locked the door behind him, Saddois walked up.

“I need some of the paperwork from your office on next week’s events.” It wasn’t a request. Rather it should be seen as a demand to be complied with immediately. Everything Saddois asked had to be done right now or else. Ryker knew what papers he meant, and they could easily wait a few days - or not at all.

“I will get them to you as soon as I can, sir.” Ryker couldn’t explain why he didn’t want to tell Saddois more, except that he didn’t like the man. “Personality conflict” couldn’t explain all of his reticence.

“Now, Drasil.” His voice held an attempt at command, but it didn’t quite work.

Ryker straightened until his stance resembled being at attention. “With all due respect, sir, no.”

Saddois took a step closer until there could be no doubt that he intentionally entered Ryker’s personal space. “Now, Drasil.” His voice lowered to a growl.

“Saddois.” The duke’s voice rang with the authority Saddois could never hope to imitate.

“You are no longer in charge, sir.” Saddois’s voice dripped with false respect.

The duke moved closer as Ryker moved out of the way. “Would you like to try that again?” This time his voice had lowered until it could barely be heard, but anyone - even Saddois - knew better than to mess with.

“You are no longer in charge, sir.” At least this time the respect - and even fear - seemed almost real.

Justin walked up with a team of men behind him. “What’s going on here?”

Saddois continued to eye Thor then took a step back. “Nothing, sir.”

With a tilt of his head, the duke gave Justin unofficial permission to go around him and into the office.

“You are dismissed, Saddois.” Thor didn’t break eye contact.

Deciding that it would be better for him to acquiesce, Saddois glared at Ryker as he walked away.

Turning toward Justin, the duke nodded. “Let’s see if we can find out what happened.”

* * *

As much as she wanted to, Amalia couldn’t convince herself to look forward to this lunch.

She knew Ginny wasn’t the enemy, wasn’t a bad person, just a victim of circumstance as much as Amalia - if not more.

Amalia’s half-sister had grown up in the States and had everything she’d ever known taken from her with the revelation that her family wasn’t her biological family - but that she’d really been born to the Crown Princess of Øyanord and was the daughter of one of the most notorious criminals in the North Sargasso Sea in centuries.

Ginny had been hidden away to keep Isaiah of Eyjania from getting to her. Those in the know believed him to be deceased, but no one could say with absolute certainty.

The lunch would be on neutral territory, not even in a neutral room at the palace where Amalia had grown up. Instead, they would arrive separately at a bistro not far from the palace, wave to anyone who might be waiting to see them, then have a private meal where no one should be able to hear them - or read their lips.

Amalia drove herself, though her team stayed right behind her in their own vehicle. Most of the time, someone drove for her, but this was considered an unofficial event, and she’d chosen to drive herself. To have a few minutes alone. More alone than she ever felt.

But not lonely.

When alone in her quarters in the palace, she often felt lonely.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

In her auto, it was just quiet.

The noise of the outside world often snuck through, but rarely did she find herself as the intended target of the noise. Occasionally, someone would recognize her and honk to get her attention so they could wave.

Her car glided to a stop in front of the building. A valet opened her door and helped her out.

“Thank you,” Amalia murmured.

He gave her a small bow. “It is my pleasure, Your Royal Highness.”

Someone else held the door to the building, letting her in. She thanked them. Inside, the maître d' greeted her with a bow of his own.

“Your dining companion has not arrived yet,” he told her. “Would you prefer to be shown to your table now or when they arrive?”

“Now is fine, thank you.”

As much as she might want a glass of wine, she wouldn't. Not for lunch, and not when she would be driving.

The alcove had windows that overlooked the ocean below. She could handle the water from this distance. Ryker had been the only reason she could manage not to completely freak out on that yacht. She suspected he'd said something to make

certain she hadn't been asked to return the same way. The length of time they had to wait for the helicopter, combined with a slight look of surprise when Yvette had been informed of the delay, made her think he'd been looking out for her.

Between the greenery and water features nearby, the private alcoves were designed so someone could talk comfortably without being seen or overheard.

The waiter delivered a glass of water and asked if she needed anything else. Amalia shook her head and thanked him, sipping on her drink as she watched the waves crashing.

Amalia heard Ginny just a few seconds before she came into view.

She should stand, greet her sister with a small hug and cheek kiss, but Amalia couldn't bring herself to. As Ginny took her seat, Amalia finally turned and gave her a small smile.

"How are you?" Ginny asked without preamble. "I don't know everything that happened, but I understand the need to get away from the fishbowl. Your parents were frantic, but I think I get it. I haven't been here as long as you have, and I know I'm not a fan."

The compassion in her sister's voice caught Amalia just a bit off-guard. "But you haven't been a part of this your entire life. I learned to deal with it a long time ago."

"That doesn't mean you don't need a break," Ginny told her gently. "We all need time away from our normal lives from time to time, but I think having your every move watched makes it even more necessary."

Amalia simply nodded.

“Want to tell me what you got to do?” Ginny sighed. “All I have any more are lessons. I understand why, but sometimes I’d love to just go somewhere or do something not designed to prepare me in some way for taking over someday - if I choose to.”

A wave of sympathy washed over Amalia. “I’ve had those lessons. Fortunately, mine were spread out over a significantly greater period of time.” She didn’t know if Ginny knew about their grandfather’s pronouncement about Mum’s position.

“We’ve never really talked about that.”

Amalia didn’t know if she wanted to broach that subject, but it looked like Ginny wanted to. “No, we haven’t.”

“I don’t know how to navigate this. I don’t know how to be your sister like I want to be. I don’t know if I’m capable of running a country someday. I don’t know how I feel about it. I know I need to make the decision based on my abilities and comfort level alone, but I also know I don’t want you to resent me.”

Amalia swirled the water in her glass. “I’ve always known you existed. Always knew you’d likely be back someday and those lessons were for just in case, not because anyone truly expected it to be me.”

“Still. Until I actually reappeared, it had to be planned for. There had to be a part of you that believed I was a myth and not real.”

How could the sister she barely knew understand her so well?

“I know it won’t be easy, but I hope we can make a relationship out of this someday.”

Tears filled Amalia’s eyes, but she blinked them back, smiling at Ginny as she did.

“A year ago, I didn’t think I would ever be able to say this, but I hope we can, too.”

* * *

Two days later, Ryker still didn’t know what had happened in his office. He suspected Justin, and maybe the duke, knew more than Ryker had been told, but that didn’t overly surprise him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

The summons to the king's office did, at least a little bit.

As did the need to wait in the outer office. He'd been told it was a matter of some urgency, but wouldn't that mean he should walk right in?

Fifteen minutes later, a signal sent him through the doors.

The king spoke to someone on the phone and held up a finger before motioning toward the chairs across from his desk.

Ryker didn't feel comfortable sitting while the king continued to pace. He couldn't hear what was being said, but something clearly upset the king.

A few minutes later, the king took his seat and nodded toward the chairs again. This time Ryker bowed and took a seat. "How may I serve you, sir?"

"Something has come to my attention." The king sighed. "But first I need to ask you some questions. Thor will be here momentarily to observe. Until then, I'd love to hear about your holiday - before it went awry."

Ryker blinked. The king wanted to hear about his trip? "Nothing impressive, sir. I spent some time in all three of the Belles Montagnes countries. I went hiking and did a few group excursions, like white water rafting and kayaking. Took some time to visit a couple of museums. Just did whatever I felt like at the time. I had certain reservations, like for the ferry and my return flight, but beyond those, I did whatever I wanted."

“What did you do in Ravenzario while you were there?” King Benjamin sounded far more interested than Ryker would have expected.

“I spent some time in the water. I went SCUBA diving a couple of times in different places, went on a parasailing excursion, and a couple more hikes. It was relaxing simply because I didn’t have to be on the lookout every moment for anything that could possibly go wrong.” He shrugged. “I still did, but I didn’t have to.”

“I understand.” The former head of security walked into the room. “I’m still on far more than my wife would prefer, though she does appreciate it when something goes even the slightest bit wrong.”

The tone in the room immediately turned more somber than it had been a moment earlier.

The king leaned back in his chair and blew out a breath. “I need to ask you some questions about the last portion of your trip.”

“Yes, sir.”

The king glanced at his step-father. “I know you’ve told the story a few times, but could you please relate it to me?”

Ryker told his story again, answering questions as they were asked.

“Did you have to present identification when you paid for the excursion?” The king wouldn’t look him quite in the eyes.

“I did,” he confirmed.

“And the princess?”

With a wince, Ryker shook his head. “I might have told the man that we were newlyweds and her wallet had been stolen. She wouldn’t be able to get new identification until we reached Pagosa, but we didn’t want to waste a couple of days and would rather take care of it when we returned for our flight home.”

The king and duke exchanged a look.

“Did you introduce the princess as your wife, or was that the only time you mentioned it?” The question came from the duke.

“I mentioned it several times, though I don’t believe the princess ever heard me.”

“Did she know about it?” The king made a note on a piece of paper.

Ryker thought back over the few days they were together. “I can’t say for certain, but we never discussed it. I believe she would have said something if she were aware.”

“I see.” He made another notation then glanced at the duke again. “I have no doubt of your honor or chivalry, Mr. Drasil. Please believe that as I ask the next questions.”

A little more fear stirred inside Ryker. “Yes, sir.”

“Did you at, at any time, for any purpose, share a bed with the princess?” Once again, the king wouldn’t look directly at him.

Ryker couldn’t lie. “Yes, sir. We watched a couple of movies while sitting on our own sides and once we both fell asleep while doing so.”

The king nodded, his face unreadable as he made another note or two. “Did you engage in any nonconsensual... amorous activities?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Absolutely not, sir.” Though Ryker believed the king knew the answer already, he couldn’t keep the indignation out of his voice, even as thoughts of the very mutual kiss they shared flew through his mind.

“I had to ask, Mr. Drasil.” One more notation.

Glancing between the two of them, Ryker took the opportunity to ask a question of his own. “May I ask what this is about, sir?”

“A strange confluence of legalities among the three countries involved.” The king made one more note before closing the cover on the pad of paper. “If it was only one, or possibly two, depending on which two, we might be able to make an argument, but it appears that it’s all three.”

“What legalities?”

The king leaned back in his chair, fiddling with his pen as he did. “There’s been a push in a number of countries to clean up the law books.”

“In what sense?”

“Many countries, including ours, have old laws on the books,” the duke told him. “Ridiculous ones dating back decades, if not centuries. In Great Britain, you can’t wear a suit of armor to Parliament. That law dates back to the 1300s. You’re also not allowed to die there. In Spain, it’s illegal to build sandcastles. In China, you can’t reincarnate without permission, and you can’t wrestle bears in South Africa. The States are full of them, like wearing a fake mustache in church is illegal in Alabama

because it would disrupt the service. In Minnesota, you can't throw an octopus. Things like that."

"What does that have to do with me and the princess?" Dread once more filled his chest.

"There are old marriage laws in all three countries. If any one of them didn't have it or it didn't apply, we could make an argument that it wasn't fully legal, but instead..." The king finally looked Ryker in the eye. "You and the princess appear to be legally married."

12

Over the last couple of days, Amalia had spent more time with her half-sister than she had in the last year - outside of the boating incident.

This time, a message from their grandfather interrupted the meal. Ginny stayed behind to finish the meal while Amalia headed for the king's office.

Once there, she was asked to wait in the outer reception area for an extended period of time. Why couldn't she have finished her lunch first?

After an interminable amount of time, the door opened to let one of her grandfather's top aides out. He bowed his head toward her. "Your Royal Highness, please join us."

She went into the office and curtsied to her grandfather before looking to see who else was in the room. Several men she didn't recognize stood near the conference table as did King Benjamin.

Then she saw him and froze.

Ryker?

He didn't just bow his head but bowed from at waist without saying anything. His face seemed guarded, almost a mask.

They all took seats around the conference table with her grandfather at the head of the table and King Benjamin on the other end. Amalia, her grandfather's assistant, and someone she thought might be one of his lawyers sat near her grandfather. Ryker, along with two other Eyjanians, sat on the other side. Another man, this one with a lapel pin of the Ravenzarian map, sat with them.

Her grandfather opened his notebook. "This was not how we expected to meet Mr. Drasil when we offered the Order of the Dragon. The decisions made today will not change that honor, but may change every other aspect of your lives."

What could he be talking about? Amalia looked down the table to see Ryker staring at his hands. Did he already know what her grandfather meant?

"What do you mean?" she asked when no one offered any more information.

"You are aware of the push to update the legal codes, especially of laws that simply don't make any sense?" Her grandfather looked like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders.

"Of course, Grandfather." Her eyes flicked back to Ryker. "Is that what this is all about?"

"It's about a confluence of laws in our three countries." King Benjamin took up the explanation. "In Ravenzario, a couple who registers in writing as married is legally wed."

Had Ryker done that?

“In Eyjania, telling people you’re married three or more times means you are legally wed.” King Benjamin went on.

“And here in Øyanord...” Her grandfather sighed. “Even being on the same bed for completely innocent reasons can be construed to require marriage. If you sleep on the same bed, there is no flexibility in the interpretation.”

Her grandfather’s lawyer spoke next. “Were you aware that Mr. Drasil registered as a married couple and mentioned it several times to different people?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Amalia searched her memory. “I’m not certain. It doesn’t surprise me, but at the same time, I don’t specifically remember him telling me that or hearing him mention it to others. I do remember the guide for our tour saying something more than once about us. I didn’t think correcting him would be beneficial regardless of what Ry... Mr. Drasil had told him.”

“You are not disputing any of the things Mr. Drasil has said, but you are not absolutely certain on those two counts?” the lawyer clarified.

“That is correct.” She blinked as it coalesced in her head. “Wait. Does that mean Ryker and I have to get married?” Amalia looked at her grandfather. “After everything with Mum, you’d force me to get married? Mr. Drasil was nothing but a gentleman and I enjoyed his company, but marriage? Grandfather?”

“Yes and no, Granddaughter.” Her grandfather’s gentle voice. “It means that in Ravenzario and Eyjania, you are already married and, here in Øyanord, you should be required to. If either of the other two conditions weren’t met, we could likely make an argument that they should be invalid since you are a member of the Øyanordian royal family. With all three of them...” He sighed. “I’m afraid it’s a bit more difficult.”

“If the laws are being rewritten anyway, why does it matter? There’s no actual paperwork that says we’re married.”

“That’s not how it works, Amalia.” Her grandfather looked like he wanted to tell her they’d work something out, but he didn’t.

“Gentlemen, could you please excuse us for a moment?” Ryker stood, something

rarely done before the monarch stood. “I believe the two of us most affected by all of this should have a chance to discuss it.”

“Of course.”

Everyone else at the table stood as Amalia did. But where would they have the discussion? Amalia moved away as Ryker followed her. Her mind raced as she tried to think of a good place, close by, where they could have a few moments to themselves.

Her eyes landed on the door to the balcony, and she started for it with Ryker joining her. He reached the door a step before she did and opened the door for her to walk through.

Ryker closed the door behind them as Amalia stood at the railing looking over the sea beyond.

“You have my sincerest apologies, Your Royal Highness.”

The formality in his voice made her tear up. She shook her head as she tried to make certain her voice wouldn’t tremble. “You did what was necessary.” It trembled anyway.

“I’m not sure how hard I tried to find a way around it.” He still didn’t stand next to her. “It was the first thing that occurred to me. I should have tried harder to find a different way or even just not told him we were married.”

Amalia shook her head. “No. You did what you believed to be necessary at the time. You didn’t have much time to think or consider options, and I understand why you didn’t tell me you knew who I was. I appreciate you and everything you did to keep me safe more than you know.”

“It was a privilege, Your Highness.” He finally came to her side. “There’s one real question we have to answer.”

The use of her title made Amalia sad. “What’s that?”

“Whether you want to be married to me?”

* * *

Waiting for the princess’s response, Ryker found it hard to breathe.

He’d been living in a fog since he’d been told the same things the princess just learned and had no idea what would happen next.

“Since it seems you’ve known about this longer than I have, do you know what the other options are?” Her voice sounded guarded.

“Not much longer, only as long as it took for us to discuss it all in King Benjamin’s office then fly here. All in all, it’s been less than five hours.” The sea beyond the exterior gardens glistened in the distance.

“I see.”

From his view of her profile, he could see tears streaking down her cheeks.

With a sigh, Ryker leaned against the balustrade surrounding the balcony, using his forearms to hold his weight. “Do you have any thoughts?” he asked, still uncertain as to what his answer to the same question would be.

“I had a lovely time with you, Ryker. At least, outside of the being chased by an unknown villain and having to get on that yacht.” She reached up to swipe at her

tears. “We shared a lovely kiss, but I have serious doubts that it’s enough to base a marriage on.”

“I agree.”

“So what do we do? What options were you given?”

He still hadn’t looked her in the eye since his arrival. Either he’d been avoiding her or she’d been avoiding him the whole time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“We didn’t discuss any options, other to come here and talk to you and your grandfather.” He reached over and covered her hand with his. “There are no options off the table as far as I’m concerned. If you don’t want to be married, we’ll find a way out of it. If you do, then we’ll figure it out from there.”

She finally turned to face him. “Why do we have to decide right now? Can’t we have some time to think it over, talk it through, get to know each other better now that we’re not hiding our identities?”

Ryker rested his hand against her cheek, his thumb brushing away the remnants of tears. “I think that sounds like a good idea.”

Before he realized what they were doing, the princess was in his arms. They stood there, her cheek resting against his shoulder, for long minutes. Ryker turned his head just a bit to press a kiss against the spot where her hairline met her forehead.

“I think it’s time to go back in,” she told him, stepping away from him. “Together?”

“Together,” he confirmed, but he didn’t take her hand or have any other physical contact with her as they returned to the conference table.

“Have you reached a decision?” the king of Øyanord asked.

The princess answered for both of them. “We have. Our decision is the same as Regina’s for the time being.”

Regina? Her half-sister?

All of the others looked confused until she went on.

“We are not going to make a decision at this time. We are going to take some time to get to know each other, have a chance to completely understand the different options, and then - and only then - will we make a decision.”

Ryker admired her backbone, though he suspected she quaked just a bit underneath.

Her grandfather gave a single nod. “Very well. Because of the matter we discussed the other day, you may not have much time, but we can grant you some.”

“That’s good. Because we’re not giving you a decision right now. We haven’t made one.” She nodded to the gathered men then curtsied toward her grandfather. “We will take our leave now and be in contact when appropriate.”

As she started to walk off, Ryker bowed in the direction of both kings then followed her.

“Mr. Drasil.” King Benjamin’s voice stopped Ryker.

He turned. “Yes, sir?”

“Is this a mutual decision?”

Ryker nodded. “Yes, sir.” Then he left without being officially dismissed.

Following the princess as she walked down hallways, through a few rooms, and finally up four flights of the back stairs, Ryker didn’t say a word.

When she closed another door behind them, Ryker realized they’d reached their destination. Turning away from the living area, he saw Princess Amalia leaning

against the wall with her head back against it.

“Are you all right?” He wanted to move closer to her, but didn’t want to make her uncomfortable.

“Annoyed and frustrated, with it all, but not with you.” She pushed away and led him toward another balcony. This one also held a table and chairs. She pulled one out then went to the other and sat in it, her feet coming up to rest against one of the balusters.

He took that to mean he should sit in the other chair.

“It’s annoying.”

Ryker waited for her to clarify.

“I understand why the balustrade is where it is for safety reasons, but when you’re sitting in a chair, it’s right at eye level and hard to see over which ruins a perfectly lovely view.” She slumped down even farther. “Sorry. It’s always annoyed me, but I’ve never really had anyone to complain to.”

“I get it.” He sat up as straight as he could. “I guess I’m tall enough that if I try, I can see over it.” Barely.

Princess Amalia didn’t move. “Tell me about yourself, Ryker. Who are you, really?”

He leaned forward with his arms on his knees. “I’m everything I told you in Ravenzario. The only thing I wasn’t completely honest about was my job. I didn’t contradict you when you thought security meant cyber security. That’s all.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“I see. Tell me about your job then. You didn’t want to talk about it in Ravenzario, which makes sense now, but there’s no reason not to talk about it anymore.”

“Even given your status and what I presume your security clearance is here in Øyanord, I cannot tell you things considered classified in Eyjania,” he started. “But in short, I am a member of Princess Genevieve’s security detail. I do the same kinds of things your security detail does. I protect her, and to a lesser extent her family, from all kinds of danger when I’m with her.”

“Why to a lesser extent? Don’t they need protecting?” She gave him a glance out of the corner of her eye.

“They have their own teams. We work together. If they’re in one place, protecting the princess would generally mean also protecting her family.” He hoped she could understand that.

“Would you die to protect her?”

Where could she be going with this line of questioning? “I swore an oath that I would, and I meant every word. My first priority is to get her out of danger. If that can’t be done, my sworn duty is to do everything in my power, up to and including death, to keep that danger from getting to her.”

She stared for a moment before going on. “What about me? If it had come down to it, would you have done that for me on the ferry?”

The answer rolled out before he made a conscious decision on what to say. “In a

heartbeat.”

13

Struggling to keep the tears from filling her eyes again, Amalia leaned to one side and dug a hair band out of her pocket then tied her hair back as a way to avoid dealing with the topic at hand for a minute or two.

Not nearly long enough.

Maybe a change of subject? “You shaved.” That should do it.

“I generally don’t shave much on holiday, but do the rest of the time.” He didn’t give any indication that her abrupt change in conversational direction bothered him at all.

“Huh.” Brilliant response, Amalia.

“It generally feels neater, I guess.” He leaned back and propped one ankle on the other knee. “I’ve never really thought about why.”

“Are you required to for your job?” Hadn’t she seen some of their officers with beards before? “King Benjamin has a beard. It’s always neat.”

“No, I’m not, and yes, it is. I’m not sure where I got that idea from. Maybe something I overheard as a child?” His brow furrowed as he sank deep into thought, his gaze downward. She could almost see him searching through his memories, kind of like that kid’s movie she’d watched years earlier where the emotions went through a giant library full of memories stored in marble-like objects.

His head came up a bit. “I don’t know why I have that idea firmly implanted.”

“Would you grow one if I wanted you to?”

She could see him blink then turn to look at her. “Would that be a condition of this whole thing?”

“No. Just wondering.” Amalia did like his look better with the beard, but it wouldn’t sway her decision one way or the other.

She didn’t know what to say next without going back to the conversation she wanted to avoid, but her stomach reminded her of something. “I haven’t had lunch. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.” He grinned at her. The grin that had started causing her stomach to do flips from almost the first time she saw him. “How do we do that in this place? Is there a kitchen in there?” Ryker tilted his head toward the door.

“There is. There’s no food in it.” She shrugged. “Cooking isn’t something I’m any good at. Remember that old Christmas movie where they go to cut into the turkey, and it makes a kind of noise and is so dried out it’s empty? Or in that 1990s sitcom in New York when they go to the roof to watch a parade balloon and when they get back the apartment is filled with smoke and all of the potatoes are ruined?” Amalia hated to admit this to anyone, much less the man who might - or might not - be her husband.

“I remember both,” he said, caution filling his voice.

“That’s me. My parents and the palace cleaning and kitchen staffs all got together to forbid me from trying to make anything requiring electricity, even in a microwave. Did you know that American breakfast pastry can burn?” She snapped her fingers as she tried to remember what they were called. “The rectangle ones with a jelly inside and frosting on top. I managed to burn those and smell up the apartment for days. It

was supposed to be three seconds. I set it for three minutes, though I stopped it before that. The frozen pancakes I obliterated were worse.”

Ryker chuckled. “Impressive. I’ve never known anyone who could do all of that, but I don’t blame them for putting a stop to your attempts.” They went through the door back into the living area. “So how do we get food? Go to one of the kitchens?”

She nodded and pulled out her phone. “We could. Or we could order something and have it sent up. If it’s all the same to you, I don’t particularly feel like being out and about.”

A minute later, she’d entered her choices into the app on her phone. It would submit it to one of the kitchens. A little while afterward, a knock on the door would tell her it had arrived.

Amalia handed her phone to Ryker. “There are some options listed there, or you can ask for almost anything that they normally have on hand. If you wanted lobster, for instance, they might not have any. But if you wanted something with potatoes, you’d probably be all right.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

After choosing his own meal, Ryker handed it back. Amalia noticed he'd only chosen from the options given and didn't ask for something else like she had.

What she'd asked for was one of her favorite dishes and though it wasn't on the menu per se, she knew they always had the necessary ingredients in stock.

Once the order had been submitted, Amalia decided Ryker should see the rest of her apartment.

Pointing to one of the doors, she started the other direction. "That's the kitchen. I'll show you the rest."

They walked around the entire apartment. It wasn't overly large as royal apartments went, but definitely not small either.

She hadn't done it on purpose, but the last room on the tour was her bedroom.

"Are you sure you don't mind if I come into your personal space?" Ryker asked, stopping at the threshold.

Amalia shook her head. "No. We've shared closer quarters before." Like in the cabin on Biansola.

Where they'd shared a magical kiss and she'd fallen asleep next to him.

"But they weren't your quarters." Despite his seeming reticence, Ryker entered the room.

She moved farther in. “If we go through with this, it will become our quarters.”

He looked around, hands clasped behind his back. “This is where we would live?”

“Most likely. There are other alternatives, but this is my preferred one.”

Ryker stopped next to one of the comfortable chairs near the fireplace and leaned against it, crossing his arms over his chest. “I know how housing in a royal family often works. At some point, it’s likely you will no longer live in the palace, by choice or not. What do conditions have to be for you to be forced to leave these quarters?”

Amalia looked him straight in the eye. “Either Ginny’s child has become monarch or she chooses not to accept the role, and I become queen.”

* * *

Before Ryker could reply to the princess’s announcement that she could still one day be queen, a knock sounded on the outer door.

“That’s our meal.” Princess Amalia turned and walked quickly toward the main living area of her apartment.

Having worked in a palace for most of his adult life, Ryker didn’t find himself overly impressed. Yes, he’d like to go back through and wander around the halls and study the different pieces of artwork and so on, but similarities to the palace in Akushla definitely existed. He suspected most palaces in the western world did. He’d been in many of them.

A minute later, he followed the princess as she pushed the cart near the door to the balcony.

“Do you mind eating outside?” she asked as she picked up the tray covered by an oblong silver dome.

“Not at all.” He followed her out onto the deck.

She set the tray on the table before glancing up. “Would you grab the other tray?”

Turning around quickly, Ryker wondered why it hadn’t occurred to him. A moment later, they had both fixed their drinks then sat on either side of the table.

Ryker let her take the lead in their conversation. As a result, they talked about unimportant things.

The weather.

Twenty-four-hour sunlight.

Twenty-four-hour darkness.

Favorite types of music.

Favorite desserts.

Least favorite food.

He learned a lot more about her than she probably realized. In telling stories about why she liked something or why she lacked a fondness for something else, he began to see more of the real Amalia underneath the princess facade.

By the time they finished eating, they'd lapsed into silence.

"Too bad there's no sunset." The princess sighed as she put her dishes back on the tray and stood.

Ryker followed suit. Once inside, with the door closed, she put the cart outside the main entrance and leaned back against the door.

"Now what?" she asked him. "How do we decide something like this? If it was only legal in one or even two of the countries, we could probably pretend it never happened."

"But it's all three countries."

"Exactly." She pushed off the door and walked back toward the rest of the apartment.

Trailing behind her, Ryker wondered what was going through her head.

She went into her suite. This time, the princess finished showing him around. He glanced in closets filled with clothes of all kinds, including ball gowns.

Still not as much as Princess Genevieve, but his protectee - former protectee? - was a bit of a fashionista.

“You don’t seem surprised by the amount of clothes.” She turned to study him with those incredible green eyes.

He grinned. “You forget who I work for.”

A clouded expression crossed her face then disappeared before he could be certain. “Right. Genevieve does like her sparkles.”

“Definitely.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Could you give me fashion advice if I needed it? Help me decide between one dress or another for reasons beyond ‘it looks nice’ or something?”

Ryker winced a little bit. “Maybe? I could probably give advice based on practicality, like recommending a dress with a fuller skirt for a time when there’s going to be a lot of stairs or not to wear something with a train when it’s raining. Things of that nature, probably.” He shook his head. “Why to wear one designer and not another? Or what color to wear so you don’t clash with the decor? That’s unlikely.”

She stared at him for another few seconds and nodded before walking to the last door they hadn’t gone through yet.

When he walked through, what Ryker saw stopped him short.

It held an ornate crib and other items clearly meant for a baby. For half a second, he wondered if the princess needed to tell him something, but then his analytical side kicked in. It didn’t take long for him to scan the room and realize it had to have been

decorated quite some time ago.

The dust in the room didn't match the age of the furnishings, most of which appeared to be brand new. The rest were probably heirlooms or at least antiques.

His gaze came to rest on the princess as she watched him carefully. Ryker waited for her to explain when she decided it was time.

"This was for Ginny," she finally told him.

"Your sister?" He didn't know why he framed it as a question. She knew he knew the identity of the lost princess.

"Half-sister," Princess Amalia corrected. "My father adopted her. We've had some good talks this weekend, but biologically, she's my half-sister. My mum had this room made up during her pregnancy. They didn't decide that she would need to be raised elsewhere until shortly before Ginny's birth."

The princess walked over to a small table and picked up a picture frame. Ryker couldn't see the picture.

Finally, she turned it around. A very young, very pregnant, Princess Betlinde stood in nearly the same spot Princess Amalia did.

But a somber look graced the other princess's face.

"I've been told this picture was taken not long after they made the decision to send Ginny away. Mum knew her oldest child would never use this room. Instead, she closed the door, and no one came in for a long time. I know it's been cleaned, but I don't know how long it's been since the last time. Not since I moved in."

He continued to wait for her to go on.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“I’m not sure Mum remembers it’s here. It’s been a quarter of a century. If she did, it seems likely she either would have had it redone or ensured I moved somewhere else.”

Princess Amalia set the photo back down, took a couple of steps, and picked up a stuffed animal. Ryker couldn’t tell what kind.

She held it close to her torso as she looked down at the face and brushed the fur back off its forehead.

“I always knew Ginny existed,” Princess Amalia told him as she continued to stare at the animal. “I always knew I came second. Not just in the line, but to my mother.”

Ryker blinked. What did that mean?

This time the princess looked up, tears sparkling in her eyes. “I always knew I’d be asked to make sacrifices. I never thought it would be my choice of life partner, but I always knew I’d never measure up to the idealized version of her oldest child. I knew she’d never love me as much as she loved the daughter she sent away.”

Before he realized he’d made the decision to move, Ryker wrapped his arms around Amalia and let her cry.

Before dinner rolled around, Amalia had pulled herself back together. Ryker said he would wear the same slacks, but would manage to change into a different button-

down shirt - one that didn't have her mascara all over it.

She had changed into her favorite pair of slacks, stilettos, and a new shirt - one she knew made the green in her eyes pop.

Zoey had helped with Amalia's hair, even though stylist wasn't included in the assistant's job description.

"Mr. Drasil has returned, ma'am." Zoey smiled at Amalia. "He looks as nervous as a teenager on a first date."

It seemed like a first date to Amalia, though they'd be with her family. The first real time they'd spend together once their identities had been revealed, at least without the immediate emotional trauma from finding out about the legalities of their relationship.

Exiting the hall from her bedroom, Amalia found him staring at a piece of artwork hanging from a wall. He must have heard her walk in because he turned immediately.

"You look lovely, Your Royal Highness." The lack of snarkiness in his voice made her think he wasn't trying to be condescending.

"Please, call me Amalia."

He winced. "I'm not sure that's going to be possible."

She didn't know why the idea stung a little bit. "You did in Ravenzario."

"Only when I couldn't avoid it." He looked straight at her. "I work for a family of your contemporaries. Even though you've given me permission, it's inappropriate. Even now, I'm not sure I'll be able to convince myself to drop the title, at least not

for a while.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “So even if we are married, you will continue to call me Princess Amalia? For how long?”

“I’ll do my best to lose the formality as much as I can, at least when we’re not in a setting where it wouldn’t be appropriate until everything has gone public.”

With a sigh, Amalia nodded. “That’s the best I’m going to get out of you, isn’t it?”

“Yep.” He grinned in a way that should probably be illegal. While not overly smoldering or arrogant, it exuded confidence and made her stomach do slow flips.

“Very well.” She started for the door with Ryker following closely behind.

He fell in step beside her as they walked through the wide hallways. This time, she took him through the main portion of the building rather than sticking to the back ways. They still didn’t see many people, though she stopped to talk for a minute with several of the staff members she knew. Nothing of real importance. Just checking on one’s daughter who Amalia knew had been ill. Another’s mum had passed not too long before. The third had gone on holiday recently.

She didn’t have nearly long enough to talk with any of them, just enough to get a quick update that the daughter was feeling better, the family was getting back to normal after the passing of their matriarch, and Islas del Sargasso had been lovely.

Even with the short stops, they arrived at the dining room five minutes before they had been told. Ginny and her husband, Ollie, already waited. Standing off to one side, they each held a drink of some kind.

A staff member handed Amalia and Ryker beverages almost as soon as they walked

through the door. Before she could even take a sip, a concerned Ginny appeared at her side.

“Is everything all right?” her half-sister asked.

Amalia nodded. “Some things need to be worked out, but nothing’s really wrong.” She turned and held a hand toward Ryker. “Ginny, I’d like you to meet Ryker Drasil. He assisted me in Ravenzario and became my friend along the way. Ryker, this is my older half- and adopted sister, Ginny and her husband, Ollie from New Sargasso.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Ryker shook hands with both of them. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Ginny spoke first. “Thank you for helping Joh... Amalia when she needed it most.”

Amalia winced a little bit. Most people were adjusting to her use of a new name fairly easily, though there were often slips like the one Ginny just made.

“It was my pleasure, I assure you.” Ryker smiled at Amalia. “I’m very glad I was in the right place at the right time.”

“We are, too,” Ginny told him.

The rest of the family walked in before they could say anything else. Amalia’s younger brother and sister, along with their parents and grandmother greeted them all in turn.

She introduced Ryker to all of them as they waited for her grandfather to join them. From the knowing looks, Amalia suspected her parents and grandmother knew about the legal situation, though no one said anything about it directly.

There were a few questions about the things they’d done in Ravenzario, but only surface level ones.

When her grandfather arrived, they all moved to their chairs around the table.

Servers brought in the meal. Amalia found that her late lunch meant most of her meal

would likely go to waste. Ryker appeared to have no such problems.

Conversation around the dinner table remained light. It didn't seem that her younger siblings knew anything about her disappearance or Ryker's role in anything. They accepted him as her friend. Eventually, her younger brother and sister left while the rest of them gathered in a sitting room for dessert and coffee.

Even as the small talk continued, Amalia could feel the mood in the room change. She suspected Ryker could as well from his continual shifting of his body. Most others likely wouldn't notice it but given their proximity, she could feel the bouncing of his knee on the ball of his foot and the constant shifting of his cup in his hands.

As even that part of the evening began to wind down, her grandfather cleared his throat.

"I've talked to each of you individually about this." He turned and nodded their way. "Except for you, Mr. Drasil. To my great sorrow, I will need to appear before Parliament and the Council in the next few weeks and legally remove Betlinde as my heir."

* * *

Of all the people in the room, Ryker wondered why he had been included.

The current crown princess stared at her hands, clearly accepting but not happy about the decision.

"You never said why," Ginny told the king. "I mean, I'm sure it has something to do with me, but what exactly?"

The king took in a deep breath. "You're aware of who your biological father is, and it

is now nearly certain that he had a role in the issue with the visas a few years ago. Given the deep feelings of resentment that continue to surround the tourism industry, it seems prudent. We all know, and likely most of the country suspects at this point, that Isaiah was at minimum emotionally manipulative. However, he remains the culprit of the greatest economic disaster in well over a century. The royal wedding of the lost princess certainly helped, and it's rebounding but..."

"But I will never have their trust." Princess Betlinde finished the sentence for her father. "I'm not happy about it. I've worked hard for over two decades to prove that I love my country and will always do what's best for her people. Unfortunately, my father is correct. It is best for her people for me to step aside graciously."

"Which means you'll also need a definitive answer from me." Ginny, nearly the spitting image of their mother, looked sober.

"Yes," the king confirmed then looked at Ryker and Amalia. "It also means the two of you will need to make some very big decisions, very quickly."

As he nodded, he realized that Amalia now squeezed his hand. Ryker had no idea who had reached for who, but it seemed a sign that they were in this together.

The king stood with the rest of them following suit. "I know all of you have lots of thoughts and questions, but for now, I think it best that we all retire to our quarters and meet again in a couple of days."

He left holding his wife's hand. The other two couples quickly went through different doors. Ryker barely realized when Amalia led him through a small side door he hadn't seen earlier. Once again, they went a back way to her apartment. He'd always been good with directions and thought he'd have no problem retracing any of the routes they'd taken so far.

Once back inside with the door closed behind them, Amalia headed straight for the only room she hadn't shown him.

The kitchen.

Wondering what she could be looking for, Ryker followed.

"I don't have any real food in here," she told him again. "I do have some drinks though." She held up a pod. "I prefer the non-instant version, but for now instant will have to do."

"Coffee?" He moved to stand next to her.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

She shook her head. “Hot chocolate. Do you want some?”

“It sounds good.” He reached over her head for another mug. “Princess Genevieve likes the instant stuff sometimes, too. If we weren’t on the go somewhere, she always insists we have some as well.”

“I don’t know her very well, but I like her.” Amalia put the single serve pod into the machine, set her mug underneath it, and pressed the button. She turned around and leaned back with her hands braced against the counter. “You know, if things go the way I suspect they will, you’ll have to start calling her Genevieve or even Gen. Same with Benjamin. If Ginny steps down, I’ll be his counterpart someday.”

Ryker shook his head. “That is highly unlikely. I might be able to stay with sir or ma’am, but first names? Nicknames? Probably not.” He grinned. “Give it a couple of decades and maybe we can revisit the conversation.”

She held his gaze as the machine started to gurgle. “Do you plan to be here in a couple of decades?”

As he leaned back against the counter where he stood, Ryker turned that over in his mind. “I...” He blew out a breath. “I don’t know. It’s been less than twenty-four hours since I found out I’d even see you again, outside of some official function where I was part of the protection team. The idea of making a life with you isn’t something I’d considered until the flight here.”

“But it’s not something you’re ready to run from?” She continued to look him straight in the eyes.

The color of her shirt made her eyes appear even more green than usual. He didn't wither under her gaze, but reached out and took her hand. "No. I'm not ready to run. I don't know about making a lifetime commitment in less than a full day since we found out we might have inadvertently made one already, but I want to explore whatever is going on between us."

"Whatever made you kiss me in Ravenzario?"

Ryker didn't know how to answer that. Did she regret it? Had he misconstrued her consent?

"I kissed you back, you know," she went on. "I'd been wondering what it would be like for days by then."

That lifted the new worry off Ryker's shoulders as he nodded slowly. "Knowing what I know now, I can admit there's been chemistry between us since I first sat next to you on that ferry. There wouldn't be any point in admitting it if our lives hadn't taken such a drastic turn today."

Amalia moved to stand in front of him, her free hand coming to rest on his cheek. "Do you think it could have been a fluke?"

He wasn't sure he followed her train of thought. "The kiss?"

She nodded and stepped a little closer. "Yes. The kiss."

Ryker searched her face, trying to make sure he read her expression correctly. The stilettos she wore made her much closer to his height, though he still had several inches on her. He could see her face, her eyes, much closer than normal. He wanted to kiss her again, but only if she truly wanted the same thing. It couldn't be because she feared they'd been trapped into a relationship and she needed to see if she could

tolerate his kiss.

Before he could make up his mind, she shifted forward.

And kissed him.

15

When daylight lasted all night, wishing for a sunset was the most Amalia could do.

With her mug of hot chocolate in hand, she went out onto the balcony, leaning against the balustrade with the weight on her forearms. Ryker stood next to her, close enough for their upper arms to be in contact. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Mum will no longer be Grandfather’s heir.” She stared at the horizon.

“No, she won’t. Your sister will be, I suppose.”

Amalia lifted her head to shake it. “I don’t think so. I don’t know for certain, but some of the things she said when we spent time together this weekend and the look on her face when Grandfather said it...” She sighed. “I’m fairly certain she won’t.”

“You won’t ask her?” He lifted his mug to his mouth to take a sip.

She gave another shake of her head. “If she comes to me, I’ll gladly talk to her about it and do my best to give her impartial advice, but I don’t think she will. We’ve had a good weekend, but we don’t have a close relationship.”

“So you think there’s a strong possibility that you’ll be the next queen?” Ryker’s voice sounded gentle, concerned about her.

“I think so.” Amalia stared at one of the mini marshmallows bobbing in her chocolate. The gravity of the decision her sister had to make wasn’t lost on Amalia. “There’s no way to know for certain until Ginny tells us her decision, but...”

“Right.”

She took a sip. “Does that change your thinking?”

“About what?” He turned and leaned his hip against the balustrade.

“Us.”

“Ah. That. The thing we’ve mostly been avoiding all day.”

“Exactly.”

He reached out and brushed a piece of her hair back off her face then let his hand drop until it rested on the back of her hip. “What do I think about being prince consort someday? Does that affect my thinking on what to do about our relationship?”

Amalia nodded.

Ryker sighed. He brushed his thumb against her side as he turned back to face the water. “It’s definitely something to consider. Does it matter to you?”

“Some.” How to tell him they had to stay married and have a big church wedding?
“But if we are in a legal marriage, and it seems we are, then we’d have to get annulled or divorced.”

“Right. Makes sense.”

“But if I’ve been married and am not anymore for any reason except being widowed, there’s a very real chance I could be forced out as my grandfather’s heir.”

She'd been told that for years. Never in a threatening way. More in a "this is part of the history and government and how things work in your country" kind of way.

Ryker took time to think before he commented. Far too much time in Amalia's opinion.

"That changes things some," he finally admitted.

To force him into something he didn't want, or make him aware of the consequences if he went his own way?

"I would have been inclined to try dating, or at least spending time together, before making an official decision. There's no way to know for certain right now how that would have gone, but I think it would have taken something very big to change my first instinct."

Her heart thudded in her chest. "Your first instinct?"

Once again, he turned to look at her. "That I enjoyed spending time with you, and barring a significant conflict, we should try to make it work."

Amalia searched his eyes. She couldn't quite define their color. Did they change based on what he wore? Or his mood? They definitely had some green and brown, but it seemed like more than that.

Most of all, she noticed kindness and compassion.

"You want to be married? You're willing to take on everything my life involves now and likely will in the future?" Hope began to bloom inside.

Ryker turned and set his mug on the table before taking hers and doing the same.

Before she realized it, she found herself in his arms. Her hands rested on his shoulders as she stared up into those eyes.

Did they look gold?

“There’s no problem with chemistry between us. The kiss in Ravenzario and again a few minutes ago proved that.”

Was he going to kiss her again? The last one had been interrupted all too soon by the sound of the hot chocolate percolating.

“Yes, it did.”

Before she could find out his intentions, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

With a groan, Ryker took a step back and pulled it out. “I’m sorry. Only something quite important would break through my do not disturb settings.”

Amalia nodded, noting he hadn’t used her name since she told him to drop the formality. While he talked quietly, she went toward the other end of the balcony. Other doors led onto it, including one from her bedroom.

And from her sister’s nursery.

Would she ever tell anyone about it? Would she and Ryker someday quietly disassemble it for their own child?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

She could feel her face heat at the thought.

Staring at the doors leading to the nursery, Amalia didn't know what to think, to feel.

Ryker slid his arms around her waist and pulled her back into his chest. "What are you thinking?"

Amalia rested her arms on top of his. "I'm thinking about the future."

He rested his chin next to her temple. "A future with me in it?"

This time, Amalia took her time to respond. "I don't know that I can see a future without you in it."

She could feel his chuckle vibrating in his chest as much as she could hear it.

"I am happy to hear that."

"You'll have to move here. I don't know if you'd have to renounce your citizenship or if you can be a dual citizen. Your children won't be Drasils."

Another chuckle. "You mean our children?"

Amalia nodded.

He used gentle pressure on her hips to turn her to face him. The look on his face had turned serious. "As long as I get to stay married to their mother, I can live with that."

And then he kissed her.

* * *

It had been a conscious choice for Ryker to spend the night in Amalia's apartment.

The choice to fall asleep together wasn't quite as deliberate, but more a choice of omission.

His go bag had been sent to her quarters, at her request, so he could change out of the clothes he'd spent the day in. Athletic shorts and a t-shirt had seemed like a safe enough choice when they weren't planning to leave the apartment for a while.

Had it been in the back of Amalia's mind? She had suggested they watch a movie in the most comfortable place in the apartment knowing it would be her room? From the tour earlier, Ryker could concede that it appeared to be.

Sleeping together on her bed - on top of the covers - hadn't been part of the plan.

But what happened, happened.

When he woke, the room was as darkened as he'd ever seen a room in one of the lands of the midnight sun. She'd pressed a button to pull heavy curtains closed over the windows, but the lights inside and then the glow from the screen that appeared from the ceiling kept him from realizing just how dark it became.

As he slid off the bed, he used his phone for enough light to find his way. A moment later, he found the switch in the bathroom. When he emerged, the princ... - no Amalia - slept on.

He had to get used to calling her by her name, a change that wouldn't come easily.

Slipping out of the room, he made himself a cup of coffee before going onto the balcony. Leaning against the balustrade, he sipped it as he stared over the ocean beyond.

When he finished, he returned the mug to the kitchen and went to check on Amalia.

She slept on.

With the light from the bathroom, he could make out a few of her features. Much of her dark blonde hair had fallen out of the messy bun she'd pulled it back in the night before.

The worry and concern had disappeared from her face as she slept.

Ryker feared that if he watched her sleep much longer, she'd wake up and find it a bit creepy rather than contemplative. Instead of waiting for that to happen, he sat in one of the chairs near the fireplace and scrolled through the messages on his phone. They still hadn't discovered what caused the communications breach. They also had no idea what happened in his office - or if they did, no one was talking.

He sent a quick message asking for an update, but bypassed Saddois. Ryker didn't trust the man. Not at the moment.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Ryker?” The prince... Amalia’s sleepy voice cut through the quiet.

“I’m over here,” he replied softly as he stood.

“What time is it?”

He checked his phone. “Still early. Our first meeting of the day isn’t for another ninety minutes.”

She pushed herself into a seated position and yawned as she pulled her hair back into another ponytail. “Good.” Yawning again, she reached for her phone. “I think we need to order breakfast.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“I’m hungry and on a day like today, you never know what’s going to happen or if lunch will be when it’s supposed to be.” She tapped on her phone a few times then handed it over. “That’s what I’m ordering. Pick whatever you’d like.”

He looked over her order then tripled it. It sounded good but didn’t seem like nearly enough to him.

After he handed it back, she looked at it and laughed. “I’m only going to order two, trust me.”

Ryker nodded her direction. “I do.”

“Good.” After submitting the order, Amalia stood, swaying just a bit as she yawned again. “I know we spent a few days together, but that was under unusual circumstances. Generally speaking, I don’t wake up quickly, and I can be cranky the first bit.”

Ryker chuckled as she moved past him toward the bathroom. “Noted.”

To his surprise, when she emerged, Amalia already looked put together for the day. Definitely not a match for his athletic wear.

“If I get dressed for the day immediately, it helps with the waking up thing,” she told him. “Plus, I’m less inclined to loaf around if I’m already in my work clothes, such as they are.”

“Makes sense.” Ryker hadn’t ever had that problem, but he could see how it would help.

About the time they walked into the living area, a knock sounded on the door. He headed that direction while Amalia headed for the kitchen, muttering something about coffee.

Ryker chuckled as he opened the door.

A staff member pushed the cart into the apartment. “Your breakfast... sir.” The young woman looked confused but wasn’t about to ask who Ryker was or why he looked rumpled in the princess’s apartment.

“Thank you, Susan.” Amalia emerged from the kitchen. “We appreciate your timeliness.”

Susan dipped into a curtsy. “My pleasure, ma’am. If there’s anything else you need,

please let us know.”

“We will.” Amalia smiled at the woman as she left, closing the door behind her. “Susan has an official title, though I’m not sure what it is. I’m also certain she does more than what I’m aware of, but she’s the one who delivers anything I need to this apartment most of the time. Each of the apartments have staff members who are cleared to do things like bring a meal.” She pushed the cart toward the kitchen and then through it to another room Ryker had missed the day before.

“That’s interesting.” He motioned for Amalia to take a seat at the table in a nook with bay windows overlooking both the city and the coastline. “In Eyjania, there are a number of people with the clearance to do that sort of thing, but to the best of my knowledge, none are assigned to specific apartments or family members. I don’t know how they decide who does those things. A rotation? Whoever’s free?” He shrugged. “It never really occurred to me.”

He set one of the silver-domed plates in front of Amalia and the other in front of a seat for himself. When he lifted the domes, Ryker laughed.

She’d been right.

The serving sizes weren’t anything like he expected.

A double order would have been too much.

“Told you.”

Ryker looked over to see her smirking at him. “Yes, you did.” He took his seat and tried to decide what to eat first.

When he looked up at Amalia, she winked at him. “Dig in.”

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Waving as she walked toward the door of the same restaurant where she'd had lunch with her sister, Amalia hoped her nerves didn't show on her face.

Ryker walked next to her, his hand on her lower back, clearly more intimate than a mere friend would do.

In a moment they were at the same table she'd shared with Ginny.

"How are you?" Amalia reached for her glass of water.

"I survived. It's not my first time through a line like that." Ryker sounded more nervous than his words let on.

She took a sip then set her glass back down. "But it is the first time you were the subject of interest rather than a protection officer." The attempt to hide her smirk failed. "But I did notice that you looked more like the protection officer you've been for so long rather than the date of a princess."

"From talking to King Benjamin's former head of security who became his stepfather, I doubt I'll ever stop being a protection agent at some level." He seemed to make a concerted effort to relax but wasn't fully successful.

"I appreciate the attempt."

The waiter chose that moment to approach the table. After bowing their direction, he guided them in their choice of meals.

As they waited for their first course, Amalia wanted to keep the conversation light. The likelihood of being overheard wasn't great, but she saw no reason to take the chance.

"Tell me about your childhood." That seemed safe enough.

Ryker stared out the window for a moment. "It was normal enough. My mum passed about the time I turned twenty-one. My father loved her very deeply and had a difficult time dealing with her death. They were both Trekkies - they absolutely loved Star Trek."

"That's how you got your name, right?"

"It is," he nodded.

His words from the ferry came back to her. "And your pets did, too."

A grin crossed his face. "Our dogs all had the same name. Scotty Tiberius McCoy, but they went by Spock. We had three over the years. The cats all had names of female crew members like Uhura and Captain Janeway."

"I looked them up after we talked about it before. I did see the first movie of the most recent reboot, but that's it."

"We can fix that." He fiddled with his glass. "I went to work as a protection officer not long before my mum died. Worked my way up to Princess Genevieve's primary detail. Now, here I am."

The waiter returned with their first course.

"What about you?" he asked as they began to eat. "I know a little bit about how you

grew up knowing about your sister, but what about the rest of your childhood?”

Amalia didn't quite know how to answer that. “I know I had an incredibly privileged upbringing. We had good times, lots of them, but always this specter of my mother's first child hung over everything. Someone would mention how not all of their children were in attendance at an event or lament about another missed birthday or Christmas. Sometimes, the press or the public would say such things, but more often a member of the family did. Even my younger siblings would, but her disappearance and potential reappearance didn't affect them as much as it did me. I don't know that any of those kinds of things ever occurred to them.”

“The realities of succession didn't affect them?”

“Not really.” She pushed the plate away from her slightly, her appetite having disappeared for the moment. “My parents didn't see a reason for them to be overly concerned with those kinds of things. They understood on a surface level, but not the way I had to.”

Ryker stopped eating when she did.

“They knew we lived in a palace, that Grandfather was the king and mum would be queen someday. They thought I'd be queen, but also knew we had an older sister. Understanding the implications of what all of that meant didn't come until they were much older.” She wanted to slump back into her seat, but even if they couldn't be overheard, they would likely be seen.

His hand covered hers. “And sometimes you wished your life could be as carefree as theirs seemed to be?” he asked gently.

She nodded, squeezing her eyes shut to hold back her reaction to the unexpectedly emotional conversation. Blowing out a breath, she collected herself. “I'm all right,

but I wouldn't mind turning the conversation to something lighter. I didn't expect this to turn so serious."

"Of course." He grinned. "Where do snowmen keep their savings?"

Amalia grinned. "In a snow bank."

Ryker clutched a hand to his chest. "You already know my best joke?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

That made her laugh. “I know a few. When you visit with little ones regularly, you get to know the good jokes.”

“What do you call an octopus that can camouflage?” His eyes twinkled.

She should know this. “Uh... octo-liar?”

“Nope.” He leaned closer. “Mock-topus.”

Amalia laughed so hard she almost snorted. “That’s good,” she finally managed to get out.

“I read it online once.”

She couldn’t stop laughing. “It’s not this funny.”

Ryker chuckled. “Then why are you laughing so hard?”

The tears started to roll down her cheeks. “I don’t know. Pressure release?”

Before he could answer, two waiters returned. One took their dishes and the other set their next course down.

He bowed again. “Enjoy, ma’am, sir. Please let me know if I can be of service in any way.”

As soon as Ryker thanked him, they were alone again.

They managed a normal conversation for the rest of the meal. Nothing serious. Nothing worthy of maniacal laughter either.

After deciding against dessert, Amalia signed the check and then held his hand as they walked out of the restaurant.

Even larger crowds waited and watched as they walked to the auto waiting for them. Amalia smiled and waved. As well as she could tell, Ryker smiled but didn't really wave. The tension radiated off him again, a testament to his background and protective nature, though he tried to appear relaxed.

Once they pulled away from the curb, his attention went to driving. His hands gripped the steering wheel as they worked their way through the rush hour traffic.

Amalia tucked her hand into the inside of his elbow. "Relax. We're not alone. There's no danger to us here."

He loosened his grip enough to take her hand. "I'm sorry. It's going to take a while for me to get used to letting someone else worry about security."

She linked her fingers with his. "You'll probably always have that side of you, but at some point, you have to trust the team."

"I know, and I do." He did something unexpected. Bringing her hand up, he kissed the back of it. "I'll get better. I promise. Since we're in this for the long haul, I'll learn."

The traffic lightened as they wound through the streets. The decision had been made. They'd spoken briefly with her grandfather before leaving the palace for the late lunch.

To be seen by the press and the people.

Their first foray into public as a couple, even if it wasn't an official appearance.

As they neared the palace, Ryker seemed to relax a bit more.

But as they sat two stoplights away from the actual turn onto palace grounds, he tensed.

Even more than he had been before.

His grip on her hand tightened until it hurt.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to remain calm.

His face had set in an unreadable mask. "He's here."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

With his mouth set in a grim line, Ryker didn't let go of Amalia's hand. With his other thumb, he pressed a button on the steering wheel telling it to call the head of Amalia's protection team.

"He's here," he told them without preamble. "Sidewalk, far corner. Black shorts, grey shirt, neon cap."

"On it, sir," came the disembodied voice. "Get the princess inside by any means necessary." The line disconnected.

"What does that mean?" Amalia's voice sounded anxious but not scared.

"It means I get you through the gate no matter what happens." His eyes darted, taking everything in. From the outer wall of the palace on one side to the traffic on the other.

Did the man have an accomplice? Did someone else wait on the sidewalk?

The light turned green. Ryker wouldn't stop until they were through the gate, even if he had to use the shoulder or the sidewalk. At least here the traffic lights were only a short distance apart.

He drove forward, holding his breath until they weren't stopped at the next light, and he could turn into the drive, though he went much faster than he normally would have.

Someone must have warned those at the gate. It stood open with guards ready to defend if necessary.

Once through, the tension in Ryker's shoulders began to dissipate, just a little bit.

He didn't stop until the auto made it into the enclosed garrison and the door closed behind them.

"It was really him, wasn't it?" Now Amalia's voice trembled.

Ryker nodded as staff members opened both of their doors. He hurried around to the other side and wrapped his arm around Amalia, pulling her close to his side as they were rushed through the door by members of security and into the lower levels of the palace.

They were taken to a secure location, though Ryker didn't know for certain where in the palace they were.

"This is a safe room," Amalia told him, turning so her arms wrapped around his waist. "One of the places we can go if there's a threat."

With both arms around her, Ryker held her close. They had safe rooms in the Eyjanian palace. Everything you could imagine about a palace.

Hidden doorways. Secret passageways. Bolt holes. Safe rooms. Even a safe apartment as it were, with enough room for the entire royal family, though, with the addition of spouses and the next generation, they would be a bit cramped these days.

He'd been in them. Stood guard for Princess Genevieve when a truck ran through the palace gate and triggered an alarm. But this felt different.

This time, officially Ryker had become a protectee, though he would protect Amalia with everything in him should the need arise.

But it wouldn't.

They were safe in the palace. There were any number of locked doors and passageways and armed guards between them and the man Ryker had spotted.

"I've got you, love." He held Amalia even more tightly as she trembled.

After a moment, she took a deep breath and moved away from him. "I'm all right. Just a bit of a shock."

"I know you are." He looked around at a living area without windows. Taking her hand, he walked to a chaise lounge big enough for both of them.

She snuggled into his side as they waited. "Someone will come tell us what's going on as soon as they can," she told him.

Ryker kissed the side of her head. "I know. I'm usually the one out there."

"I know you are, but I'm glad you're here with me." She took a deep breath. "So what did you think of lunch?"

"Delicious."

They quickly lapsed into silence until someone entered about ten minutes later.

He stood then helped Amalia to her feet as the king's head of security entered.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Did they get him?” Ryker couldn’t read the expression on the man’s face. That didn’t bode well.

“No, sir. He disappeared before they could get him. We do have him on video, though. The palace has security cameras covering the entire area. We have people tracking him forward and backward trying to see where he went as well as where he came from.”

The door opened again letting the king and queen in, followed closely by Amalia’s parents.

As quickly as she could be, Amalia was in her mum’s arms with her father holding both of them.

Despite what Amalia had told him about how she felt like she always came second to her half-sister, the Crown Princess clearly loved her second daughter very much.

“Any ideas?” the head of security asked Ryker.

With a shake of his head, Ryker crossed his arms over his chest. “No. I just happened to see him standing there. If he’d been turned a bit farther the other way, I don’t know that I would have realized it was him.”

“We’re trying to find out how he made it into the country without being noticed. We distributed his photo to all entry points. He should have been caught.”

Ryker frowned. “Unless he has help. He could have been brought in by boat or

smuggled in on a freight plane.”

“It’s possible,” the other man conceded. “We’re looking into it, but there’s no indication that he has connections in the palace. He must have connections somewhere, but we don’t know who it could be.”

He could feel his brows pull together as he tried to think. “Could a member of your team be working with him?”

Before the other man could answer, Ryker held up a hand. “I understand your protest, but in my country...”

“I know. Isaiah Quatremaine’s impact hasn’t been definitively weeded out.” The man sighed. “I hate the idea that someone could have passed through the vetting processes without being influenced by someone like Isaiah. It would mean our whole team is potentially compromised.”

“Call Thor Sørensen. He can advise you on how to deal with all of it.” Before Ryker could go on, their attention was drawn to the royal family.

“Thank you.” The king appeared to address both of them. “But now it’s time to get to work.”

* * *

Zoey talked about...something, but Amalia couldn’t focus on the topic at hand.

She hadn’t gotten a good look at the man on the sidewalk, but it disconcerted her just the same.

“Ma’am?”

Amalia looked at her assistant. "I'm sorry. I'm not able to concentrate very well. Give me the brief version?"

Zoey nodded. "The public is wondering who you were with at the cafe. Clearly, you are romantically involved with him, and seriously, since you've never been seen in public with a man before."

"Well, that is what we wanted them to think." She did her best to keep her mind where it needed to be. "What other speculation is out there?"

"Wondering where you met, when the engagement will be announced, and if it has anything to do with the rumored upcoming appearance of the king in front of a joint session of the Council and Parliament." Zoey made a note on her tablet.

That made Amalia frown. "Since when has that news been public?"

"It's not. It's rumored. I've not heard where the rumors started. To the best of my knowledge, the information didn't come from the palace." Zoey used her digital pencil to write on the tablet. "It's more likely that it came from Parliament."

"I didn't know it had been announced to them either." Amalia stood and walked to the side table to make herself another cup of tea.

"It may not have been. Sometimes, there's no way to know where these things come from."

Amalia knew that as well as Zoey did. "Is there anything about what the joint session is for?"

"Not that I've seen."

“That’s good.” When her phone buzzed, Amalia picked it up to see a text from Ginny asking when they could meet. “Is there anything else we need to discuss right now?” She didn’t think she could sit still or focus like she needed to.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Not for the moment. We can continue later.” Zoey folded the cover over her tablet.

“Thank you. I’m sorry I’m not as attentive as I should be.” Amalia texted her sister.

“It’s understandable, ma’am. I’ll be in my office if you need me.” Zoey left the room as Amalia thanked her.

A minute later, Ginny walked in without knocking, a sure sign that something had to be on her mind.

While Amalia made a cup of tea for her sister, Ginny walked to the sitting area without saying a word.

After handing over the tea, Amalia took a seat and waited for Ginny to speak.

“You and Ryker are going to remain together, aren’t you?” Ginny stared into the tea cup.

“That’s our current plan,” Amalia confirmed.

“Ollie and I are going to the North Shore for a couple of days. Would you guys like to join us?” Ginny still didn’t look up.

Rather than push her sister for more details, Amalia simply agreed. “Let me double check with Ryker, but I don’t see why not.”

“Thanks.” Ginny set the still-full cup of tea on the small table in the center of the

seating area. "I'll text you the details." She left without saying anything else.

The door hadn't quite swung all the way shut and when it reopened, letting Ryker in. "Is she all right?" he asked, looking after Ginny as he did.

"There's something on her mind."

Ryker took the seat Ginny had vacated. "Do you know what it is?"

Amalia shook her head. "I suspect it has something to do with Grandfather, but she didn't say. She did invite us to join her and Ollie at the family's home on the north shore. I wonder if she wants to talk about her decision."

"Do you think she's made one?"

"I don't know. She could want to tell me before it's announced or she could need someone to talk through it all with. I really couldn't begin to guess which one it will be." She picked up the cup of tea her sister hadn't touched and took a long sip.

"When do we leave?"

"I'm not sure yet. I do have a few things I need to get done first, though. Could you let the team know we'll be going with them?" She walked toward her desk as Ryker stood.

"I will. Do we need to pack?"

The question seemed innocent enough, but Amalia wondered if there might be something more behind it.

"My lady's maid resigned her post a few weeks ago due to health issues and hasn't

been replaced yet so Zoey will take care of my things. You might need to handle your own until you hire an assistant or valet or both.” She frowned. “I’m a bit surprised Grandfather hasn’t assigned one to you for the time being.”

Ryker shrugged. “He said something about it, but that’s as far as it got. I don’t think anyone has been assigned to me. I also don’t have many clothes here at the moment. What kind of things do I need?”

Amalia frowned as she saw an email that had popped up. “Could you get with Zoey on that? I’ve got to take care of this.” She sat down and reached for her mouse.

“Yep. I’ll see what I can find out about the trip and let you know.”

“Thanks.” Amalia knew she sounded distracted again. At least this time it wasn’t because of the creep who’d followed them.

An hour later, a message popped up from Zoey who let her know she and Ryker would be leaving in time to have dinner at the North Shore. She didn’t say if Ginny and Ollie would be there for dinner as well or if they’d be arriving later.

Glancing at her watch, she wrapped up what she’d been working on and closed down her computer. She’d take her tablet with her, but had no plans to work while they were gone. She wanted to spend the time with her sister, her brother-in-law, and her husband.

It was the first time Amalia had really thought about Ryker exactly that way.

With only a moment’s reflection, she decided she liked it.

* * *

As they drovenorth out of the capital city, Ryker wondered if he'd ever get used to sitting in the back seat and not being in control of the auto.

This drive, unlike one of the routes between Lake Akushla and the city of Akushla, seemed to be completely safe - not one switchback in sight.

Amalia appeared completely at ease, despite the incident after their brunch. She'd leaned her seat back and closed her eyes. He knew she hadn't slept nearly long enough the night before.

No matter how hard he tried, Ryker wasn't able to do the same. Instead, he watched the road and the scenery as they travelled for nearly two hours.

About the time they pulled through a large metal gate, Amalia raised the back of her seat with a yawn.

"Feel better?" he asked, reaching for her hand.

She nodded. "A little more rested anyway. Tonight should be a lot better. It's always so peaceful out here."

Looking around, Ryker could see that. The house wasn't as big as the Quatremaine's home on Lake Akushla, but definitely much larger than any home he'd ever lived in until he moved to the palace. His parents had been middle class, but comfortable. Their house had been immaculate but homey at the same time.

The auto glided to a stop in front of the stairs. A staff member, presumably one from the house, opened the door for them. Ryker exited then turned to help Amalia onto the cobbled drive. She thanked the man by name then led the way up the staircase and into the house.

Inside, the home seemed as unpretentious as any royal home Ryker had ever been to. It reminded him more of the home Prince Darius and Princess Esther shared in the States than it did a royal home.

“We’re this way,” Amalia told him, heading up the stairs to the right.

No marble graced this floor. No impressive chandelier hung from the ceiling. Instead, what looked to be vinyl plank covered the floor. Interesting.

Ryker followed her until they reached a suite on the third floor. Set on the rear of the house, the windows overlooked the plateau leading to a cliff. From the angle, he couldn’t tell how steep or high the cliff might be, but the water beyond told him it was likely tall.

“This is a great view,” he told Amalia as he took it in.

“It’s my favorite.” Was that a yawn?

Ryker turned in time to see her flop back onto the bed and cover her eyes with her arm. He chuckled to himself.

“A few years ago, Grandfather let me choose what room I wanted to be mine when we came up here. I think it’s kind of a rite of passage as you become an adult. When I was younger, I stayed near Mum and Papa and my siblings.” She rolled onto her side, pulling her knees up onto the bed. “Ginny and Ollie have a room on this floor as well, but I don’t remember where. I think it’s on the other end. I don’t know why she chose

it. Maybe because it was close, but not too close? This is where Ginny and Ollie came on their honeymoon about a year ago.” She sounded adorable when she rambled.

Choosing a comfortable chair, Ryker moved it closer to the bed. After toeing his shoes off, he sat with his feet propped up on the edge of the mattress. “How often do you come up here?”

“A few times a year.” She punctuated her words with another yawn. “Holidays mostly. We usually spend Christmas here. Christmas Eve is spent serving meals or working with a particularly relevant charity. Then we drive up here after Christmas Eve service and eat a late meal. If the Aurora Borealis are out, we go watch for a bit then go to bed. The next morning, the staff has the day off so we take care of everything ourselves. We open stockings, have a big brunch, then open gifts before spending the day playing games or watching movies or just spending time together.”

“That sounds very nice.” Would he be here for the next Christmas gathering? It had been quite some time since he’d had an actual Christmas with family.

She moved up the bed until her head lay on one of the pillows. “It is. We stay in our pajamas all day, even my grandfather, unless he happens to have a meeting or something unexpected. Before supper, we watch his Christmas Day address as a family, then make something quick and easy to eat.”

Even as she finished speaking, Ryker could tell she had started drifting. Rather than respond to her, he looked around and found a blanket laying over the back of another chair. After covering her with it, he went onto the balcony to stare at the view.

It bothered him that the man he’d seen remained on the loose. Despite their rapid response, the security team personnel hadn’t been able to find him. What were the security protocols for this home? He needed to look into them.

No.

He needed to trust the team tasked with their safety. If they ever came to him and asked his opinion, he'd give it. Or if he saw something that needed changing, he'd bring it to their attention in an appropriate manner.

Yes, he'd spent all of his adult life to date as a member of a protection detail, but he knew how he'd feel if someone he didn't know started second guessing him all of the time.

A noise below made him look down in time to see Princess Regina and her husband emerge from the house. He watched as they walked toward the cliff, though he didn't think they'd get too close.

Turning along a path he couldn't quite see, they continued toward the edge until Ryker stood up straighter and contemplated calling after them.

And then...

They disappeared.

17

When she opened her eyes, Amalia knew she'd been sleeping. She didn't know for how long.

And it took a few seconds for her to realize she was at the North Shore home.

Blinking, she sat up, the blanket falling off of her. Ryker must have covered her up with it.

Where had he gone?

She looked around to see an empty room. After finding her phone, she saw a message from him that he'd gone to check out the area around the house.

After giving herself a few minutes to wake up, Amalia went to find him and see if her sister and brother-in-law had arrived yet.

As she walked, Amalia pulled her hair back into a fresh ponytail. On the main floor, she turned toward the doors leading to the plateau behind the house. Nearing them, she could hear voices outside.

The laughter that rang out belonged to Ryker. It gave her a bit of a start to realize she knew what his laugh sounded like. Despite everything, they hadn't known each other that long.

When she walked out the door, she found Ryker and Ollie doing something to the outdoor kitchen while Ginny sat at the bar with an amused look on her face.

“They haven’t blown us up yet,” Ginny reassured her. “But allegedly they’re going to make us dinner.”

Amalia quirked an eyebrow. “They are? Ollie can do that?”

“Hey!” The earl in question protested but not too much. He’d been raised as privileged as Amalia, if not more so. He’d seldom done anything for himself because of how entitled his parents continued to be.

“It would probably go better if I worked with Ryker, but they insisted.” Ginny shrugged. “I can sit around like a lady of leisure. That works for me.”

With a laugh, Amalia slid onto the bar stool next to her sister. Ginny had been raised in a fairly rural area of the States and knew how to do all kinds of things Amalia and Ollie didn’t.

Eventually, they were able to get the smoker turned on properly, and Ryker put some sausages and burgers in.

“They won’t take long,” he assured them as he washed his hands.

“Do you want to look around while we wait?” Ollie asked. “I know we interrupted your exploration earlier.”

Ryker chuckled. “My exploration was limited to seeing why you both disappeared and if you were in trouble.”

Amalia didn’t understand and looked between all three of them. “You disappeared?”

“We went down the trail on the cliff,” Ginny explained.

“Ah.” It wasn’t the first time the uninitiated had freaked out at least a little bit when someone suddenly left their field of view.

She hopped down from her seat. “I haven’t been out there in a long time. Who’s coming?”

All three of them joined her with Ryker taking her hand. “I didn’t actually make it all the way over there,” he told her. “They came back before I could.”

“I forgot my phone,” Ollie explained. “And I’m expecting an important call.”

Hand-in-hand they walked toward the cliff’s edge. What couldn’t be seen from the balcony was the moderate descent leading to a railing across most of the length. The path leading to a lookout a bit farther down also couldn’t be seen.

Amalia showed Ryker where the path started then followed him down the narrow trail.

“This is incredible,” he told them when he took the last turn leading to the lookout.

As far as the eye could see water led to the northern horizon. A moment later, a whale breached in the distance with a splash large enough to make Amalia shudder.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Are you all right?” Ryker wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they stood next to the railing.

“I told you about last summer,” she said quietly, not wanting to alert Ginny to her ongoing fears.

“Right.” Ryker wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer to his side.

It bothered Amalia that it bothered her so much. She’d always loved watching the whales swim and play. She’d loved being on the ocean, even if swimming couldn’t happen in the water around her homeland. Not without a dry suit. Even in the summer, water temperatures remained too cool to be unprotected.

She and Ginny had experienced that the hard way. A shudder ran through her as she remembered how cold she’d been the year before.

Amalia blinked. Could that be it? She looked up at Ryker and spoke softly enough her sister couldn’t hear. “Do you know if they looked into the captain from last year - or at least the organization he was part of? Could the stalker have been part of that?”

“I’m sure they have, but they haven’t told me specifically.” He rubbed his hand up and down her arm. “They’re on the job. They know what they’re doing.”

“I know.” She leaned her head against him. “I kind of wish they’d utilize your experience more.”

He chuckled. “I feel the same way, but I have to keep reminding myself that it’s not my job at the moment. If anything were to happen, I’d protect you in a heartbeat, but it’s not my job to keep threats away anymore.”

An alarm went off on his phone. “That’s our signal to head back.”

It took about thirty minutes before they were actually ready to eat, but they decided the wind was a bit too much to sit out back.

When they took their seats around the table inside, Amalia could tell her sister’s nerves were getting the better of her.

She and Ryker did their best to keep the conversation going and not delve into anything serious. They didn’t need to talk to each other about it, just knew it needed to be done.

As they finished eating, Ginny took a deep breath. Ollie reached over and took her hand.

After another deep breath, she spoke. “I’ve made a decision about my place in the hierarchy, and I wanted you to be the first to know.”

Amalia blinked. Even though she’d suspected that to be the reason for the invitation, it still surprised her.

All that remained was to find out what decision Ginny had come to.

* * *

Ryker watched Amalia trying to hide her apprehension as she waited for Ginny to tell them what decision she had come to. He reached over and covered her hand with his

own.

Ginny took a deep breath and looked at her husband. “I’ve spent the last year trying to learn everything I can about Øyanord, to understand my heritage as an Øyanordian and the heir. I’ve learned so much.” She stared at the table for a moment before looking up at Amalia, tears glistening in her eyes. “I’m growing to love the people and the country, but there’s no way I’ll be ready to take over for Grandfather in the next decade.”

Amalia tightened the grip on his hand but didn’t speak.

“When Grandfather goes in front of the joint session to make the announcement about Mother, I will abdicate my position in the hierarchy. You have spent your life learning to lead our people. It’s only right, for many reasons, that you be the one to wear the crown.” One tear after another flowed down Ginny’s cheeks. “It does make me somewhat sad, but most of what I feel is relief.”

The grip Amalia had on his hand increased until Ryker feared the circulation would be cut off. “Are you certain? That’s a huge decision to make. You don’t need to make it yet. Grandfather isn’t stepping down, and he’s in excellent health. It can wait.”

Ginny shook her head. “I’ve discussed it at length with Grandfather and Mother over the last year. Once Grandfather made the announcement about Mum, we decided that it would be best to make it at the same time.” She wiped her cheeks. “It’s the right decision. It’s the one I expected all along, but I did go into it with an open mind.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” Amalia pressed her sister. “You can’t change your mind if you step down now. If your announcement is that you’re still considering and learning, no one would fault you.”

Ryker couldn’t be certain, but he suspected Amalia just wanted to be certain her sister

had no regrets later.

“I know, but this is the right decision.” She looked over at her husband. “Ollie and I have discussed itad nauseumbesides praying about it. Mum and Dad have, too. So have Bekah and Josiah and everyone else who understands what’s going on.”

It took a second for Ryker to remember that Ginny likely referred to the parents who raised her asmum and dadand that her adopted sister had married Prince Josiah of Eyjania.

A smile and look of peace covered Ginny’s face. “It’s the right choice, Amalia. I know it is. The peace just saying it out loud is incredible.” She reached over and squeezed Amalia’ free hand. “And you will be an amazing queen. You are the right choice for the people of Øyanord.”

With a deep breath, Amalia glanced at Ryker. The peace on her face equaled her sister’s. “I will be honored to serve when the time comes.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Ginny stood with Ollie following suit. “If you don’t mind, I think I’d like to go up to my quarters now. It’s been a long few days.”

Ryker stood as they left the kitchen area then sat next to Amalia again.

“Wow.” She blew out a breath. “That’s a lot to absorb. I knew she might decide that way. I knew she wanted to make the announcement at the joint session, but to hear Ginny actually say, out loud, that she’s going to resign her position in the line of succession...” She sucked in another breath and blew it out. “It’s a lot of responsibility.”

He leaned over and kissed her temple. “You will be ready when the time comes. Now you know what you’re working toward rather than being in limbo.”

She nodded and leaned her head against his shoulder. “It’s still overwhelming.”

“That’s probably good. It means you understand the gravity of the job you’ll be asked to do one of these days.” He stood and went toward the refrigerator. “I think this calls for a celebration, though. Gelato?”

To his surprise, she shook her head. “I understand why you want to, but I don’t think I want to celebrate. It means I’ll have an awesome responsibility but only after my grandfather has passed or is quite ill - and only because of my mum’s relationship with Ginny’s biological father. You probably know more about him than I do.”

Ryker nodded, but didn’t say anything as she stood, and headed back to their shared room.

She walked straight to the balcony and rested her weight against the balustrade. In the distance, another whale breached, followed by several more.

He watched for her reaction. “It doesn’t bother you from a distance?”

Amalia shook her head but didn’t say anything.

Standing behind her, he wrapped his arms around her. She straightened and covered his arms with hers.

“I don’t know what I feel,” she finally told him. “Growing up, I thought this was what I wanted, that it was my birthright, even though Ginny is older. I knew she’d likely come home, but I still thought I should be queen.”

They stood, silent, while she continued to contemplate. “I told you I never thought I measured up to the ideal of Ginny, and that’s true, but I’ve been thinking about it a lot for the last few years and even more the last year. I absolutely felt that way - and still do sometimes, like the other day. I’m no longer sure Mum ever considered me second best. I know she missed Ginny deeply, but the older I get, the more perspective I get, the more I think I wasn’t fair to her.”

She leaned her head against his chest. “Does that make any sense at all?”

“I think so.” How could he word this so she knew he wasn’t attempting to discount her? “Feelings are valid, even if you later come to realize they were based on incorrect information. When you realize the truth isn’t quite what you thought, reevaluating may be necessary. It doesn’t change what you felt all of those years, but it could change how you feel and react in the future. Sometimes, you could still react as though your original information is true, and that’s all right.”

“That’s what happened in the nursery. Now that I’ve realized the reality, I need to be

cognizant of that and do my best to act on what I know now.” She sighed. “I probably need to talk to my mum and apologize for some of my behavior. I have a feeling she’ll be mortified that I ever thought I was less than.”

Amalia shifted until she could turn and rest her hands on his chest. “Thank you, Ryker. I’m not entirely certain I understand myself, but you do.” One hand moved to the side of his face. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

She lowered her arms and slid them around his waist, her cheek against his chest.

“But the real question we need to ask now is if you are really sure you can live with being the husband of a queen.”

* * *

Even as Amalia stared, Ryker squeezed her hand. “You don’t have to do this.”

Amalia nodded. “Yes.” She sucked in a breath. “Yes, I do. If I’m going to be queen one day, I have to be able to spend time on the water. We won’t go far. And if I need to come back, we will.”

“If you’re absolutely sure.” He still sounded wary, and she didn’t blame him.

After her reaction on the yacht to Biansola, he had every reason to question her.

“I am. I have to do this.”

This time, the ship was fully staffed and her full protection staff, plus Ryker, were with her. The year before it had been only Ginny and the captain - easily the second biggest mistake of her life, after hiding from her protection team in Ravenzario.

Maybe the first.

They could be tied for the worst decisions she'd ever made.

Depending on how this turned out, it could be third on the list.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Whenever you’re ready, Your Royal Highness.” The captain waited near the gang plank.

Amalia nodded and walked toward him. She hesitated for only a few seconds before taking the first step, then the second.

Then the one that took her onto the deck itself.

She waited to see if the fear would overtake her again.

It hadn’t gone away, but it didn’t control her like it had before.

She moved to an area where passengers typically weren’t allowed. The captain made a space available for her to sit where she could be inside but also see the shoreline and anything else that came along.

Ryker stayed next to her the whole time.

In a few moments, they’d pulled away from the dock and headed for the open water.

“How are you?” Ryker watched her rather than the view.

“Better than I expected.” She stood to lean closer to the window. “Is that a walrus? I haven’t seen one in years.” They weren’t close enough to see it well, but no other animal made sense.

Walruses made Øyanord their home, as did polar bears, reindeer, seals, puffins, and

far more sled dogs than expected for a nation their size. Those weren't wild, of course, and it reminded Amalia that she needed to visit the kennels at the palace more often. Puppies should be born anytime, and she loved playing with them.

Maybe she and Ryker could adopt one of the dogs not suitable for being a sled dog.

Blinking, she realized they'd picked up speed. Not much, but definitely faster. She looked over at the captain to realize he'd been watching her and using nonverbal communication with Ryker to see if it would be okay.

It surprised her how okay she felt.

She turned to Ryker before she could change her mind. "I want to go outside."

"Are you sure?"

Amalia nodded. "I am."

Together, they went through one of the doors onto the deck. Amalia held on tight to the rail, but the feeling of the wind in her hair and the taste of the salt on the breeze fed her soul in a way she hadn't expected and certainly hadn't felt in Ravenzario.

These were the waters of her homeland.

She closed her eyes and reveled in the sensations.

"One day, I want to go kayaking out here," she told Ryker, eyes still closed. "Maybe not right here, but in the waters around Øyanord. I've done a little kayaking but not enough to be comfortable in the open water."

Ryker moved to stand behind her, the warmth from his presence comforting as his

hands gripped the rail on the either side of hers. “I’ve done some kayaking. I’d love to go with you.”

“That sounds like a plan.” She relaxed her hold and leaned the back of her head against his chest.

They stayed on the water for several hours with Amalia nearly giddy that, somehow, that trip to Biansola had helped her overcome the fear that had had paralyzed her for a year.

Or maybe Ryker had something to do with it.

His calming presence in Ravenzario and now here could well be part of the calm she felt.

Once they were back on solid ground, they went to Amalia’s favorite local cafe for dinner. Fortunately, there was kind of an unwritten understanding with the locals. They didn’t bother the royal family, and, in return, the royal family supported a number of local causes.

They did get more stares than usual, likely because she had never brought a date to the North Shore. They saw Ryker as a bit of an oddity.

When they finished their meal, they returned to the house, but neither wanted to go inside just yet.

They wandered down to the lookout at the cliff.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

After just a few minutes, Ryker surprised her. “I need to tell you something, Amalia.”

She blinked, all kinds of thoughts running through her head. Could he be about to tell her he’d be returning to Eyjania permanently? Something else?

His hands came to rest on the sides of her hips. The soft look in his beautiful hazel eyes gave her hope.

“I want to stay here with you. I want to make this work. We talked about it some, but the longer I’m in Øyanord, the more certain I am this is where I belong. With you. These people. Supporting you however you need me to, not just now but someday when the weight of the country will sit on your shoulders.”

Her hands rested on his upper arms. “I’d like that. This feels right. There’s a peace I never would have expected.”

“Exactly.”

Before she realized what he was doing, Ryker had dropped to one knee, holding a small box. “Princess Johanne Betlinde Amalia, will you do me the honor of being my wife, of marrying me for real?”

Amalia gasped, covering her mouth with her hands as he opened the box to reveal her favorite ring from her grandfather’s vault. “Yes. Of course!”

She held out her hand for him to slide the ring on her finger.

He stood and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off the ground as she held onto his neck and laughed before kissing him.

A minute later, hand-in-hand, they walked back up to the plateau and started for the house. Ryker's phone buzzed.

"I've got to take this." He gave her another quick kiss then walked toward the house as he answered the call.

Amalia motioned that she was going to go back to the lookout to wait for him. He nodded.

She went back down the path and leaned against the top of the plexiglass barrier. With a happy sigh, she looked at the ring Ryker had just placed on her finger.

When Ginny asked her to come to the North Shore, she never could have imagined this outcome. A boat ride with no fear like there used to be.

A proposal.

And the news that she'd one day be queen.

If it had happened a couple of years earlier, she would have reacted much differently, like it was her due. Now, she knew how much responsibility it would be.

She started to think about turning around and going back up to wait for Ryker, but...

A hand covered her mouth and something hard shoved into her ribs.

The warm breath on her ear nauseated her, but the voice that growled in it made her freeze.

“Don’t move, Your Royal Highness. You and I have a lot to discuss.”

18

Something uneasy settled over Ryker as he spoke with Thor. He’d need to talk to Justin before long as well, tendering his official resignation.

Leaving Samuel Saddois in charge of Princess Genevieve’s safety bothered him in a way he didn’t understand.

But this feeling seemed like... more. Something else.

“I need to go, sir.” Ryker interrupted his former boss. “I’ll talk to you soon.” He hung up before the other man had a chance to respond.

Turning, he scanned the area for Amalia, frowning when he didn’t see her.

“Amalia!”

Could she have gone back to the lookout?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Picking the pace up to a trot, he told his phone to call Thor back. He really needed to get the Øyanordian teams in his phone.

He spoke over Thor when he answered. “Call security at the North Shore. Hurry.”

Then hung up again.

Thor would understand when he found out - even if it turned out to be nothing.

It wouldn't be nothing.

Not when his gut churned like this.

It hadn't been like this since the incident in Sargasso a few years earlier. The one where dozens of royals were held hostage at an island resort.

He moved faster.

Then he saw her.

And him.

The man from Ravenzario.

Ryker skidded to a stop on the loose rocks.

One of the man's arms wrapped around her shoulders. She held onto it, digging her

nails in from the look of things.

The other clearly held some sort of weapon against her ribs.

Ryker held his hands up wishing he had a weapon of some sort, but also glad he didn't.

It would put Amalia in more danger.

"Don't come any closer!" The man seemed to press his weapon harder into Amalia.

Ryker raised his hands higher. "I'm not. I'm not armed." He looked straight at Amalia. "Are you all right?"

She managed a slight nod. "Yes."

"I don't want to hurt her!"

Ryker breathed a small sigh of relief. "That makes two of us. What do you want?"

"I want her. She's going to come with me." He started to move sideways. "And you won't come after us."

Not a chance in...

"We're going away. Far away."

"You're going to come back, right?" Ryker needed to keep him talking and get him away from the edge of the cliff. He moved sideways, hoping the other man would move as well. He could circle around and push them back toward the house.

He shook his head. “No. We’ll go home. To our home. The one we’ll live in together. Where we’ll grow old. Where we’ll raise our children.”

Amalia’s eyes went wide, fear shining through them.

“You’re in love with her?” Ryker struggled to keep the anger out of his voice.

“Johanne and I have always been meant for each other. I’ve known that since we were kids. I knew. So did she.”

Amalia clawed at his arm where it wrapped around her.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Hold still,” he growled, jerking her a bit.

Ryker balled his hands into fists and forced himself to stay away. He did move farther to his right, pushing them away from the cliff.

“You and Johanne are in love?” Clearly, he hadn’t read the papers where they discussed her name change.

Or didn’t believe them until she told him otherwise?

“Yes. Since nursery school.”

Okay. That helped. Maybe.

Could she have known him then? They would have been children but most people had memories from before they started primary school.

“Where did you go to nursery school?” Ryker needed to keep the man’s attention on him and not the security team he could see making their way toward the trio.

“Capitol City Primary School.”

The look on Amalia’s face to him she hadn’t attended the same school.

“Were you in class together?” Keep him talking.

He scoffed. “No. Her mother and grandfather, the king, wouldn’t put her in a school

with regular people. They sent her to a fancy school. My cousin went there. His dad had money. Lots of it.”

“I see.” A few more steps as they moved far enough away from the cliff that Ryker started to breathe a sigh of relief about that danger.

“But I knew when we met at a carnival. My cousin told me about Johanne. That’s when I knew we’d always be together. She’s just forgotten.” He looked at Amalia.

The look in his eyes as he talked scared Ryker enough he gave a slight shake of his head and motioned with his hand to the security team while the man wasn’t looking at him.

“I remember.” Amalia spoke the first words since Ryker saw them. “I remember that carnival. I think I wore a pink dress. It was inside the cafeteria.”

“That’s right.” His voice held a bit of surprise, but it looked like his tight hold relaxed the smallest bit. “We played a game.”

Amalia’s eyes shifted back and forth like she was reliving the carnival. “Which game was your favorite?”

She didn’t remember him - or at least didn’t know who he was.

“The one we played.”

“Which one was that?” Ryker asked the question. “Were you any good at it?”

His hold tightened again. “Of course, I was. I knocked all of the bottles down every time.”

If it was a nursery school carnival, it couldn't have been that hard, but Ryker didn't press the issue.

"You won a fish, didn't you?" Amalia looked relieved Ryker had gotten the answer for her.

"I won three," he told her proudly.

"I remember." She didn't, but at least she could fake it.

His face turned angry again. "I tried to give one to you, but they wouldn't let you take it."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Some men. I don't know who they were. They were mad you were talking to me, even though we knew then we'd be together."

Probably her security team. It wouldn't surprise Ryker to find out this guy had given off somewhat creepy vibes even as a child.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“All three of them died that day.”

“I’m so sorry.” The sympathy in Amalia’s voice sounded more sincere than Ryker would have managed. “How did they die?”

He glared some more. “The bags broke when I threw them because the men made me mad. It’s their fault.”

Yep. Creepy vibes would have set the alarms off for her team even at that age. Gaslighting that young... impressive. But not the good kind.

The man turned just enough he must have caught a glimpse of someone moving out of the corner of his eye.

His hold tightened on Amalia again. “Those men made me lose you once. I won’t let them take you away from me again.” His right hand moved slightly, and Amalia gasped as the weapon, whatever it was, hurt her.

“We leave together or not at all.”

The fear on Amalia’s face turned to terror.

How could Ryker get her out of this?

* * *

Tendrils of fear worked their way further through Amalia’s heart and mind.

She had no recollection of this man. She barely remembered the carnival he mentioned. Did many people remember things in detail from when they were five?

There had been games and food, but... that's all.

That this man, whatever his name might be, had thought they belonged together crept her out on levels she couldn't begin to understand.

The knife he held had pricked through her clothes and into the skin of her side. It hurt, but not enough to think she'd been truly injured. Just a small puncture.

For now.

Her protection team could be seen slowly closing in around them as the man pulled her backwards a bit farther.

Should she stumble? Trip and throw him off balance?

Would that work?

Or would she end up with the knife through her ribs?

"What's your name?" Ryker tried to keep the man talking.

"Tell him," he growled into her ear.

How to get out of that?

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times and swallowed hard.

"You're scaring her." Ryker moved slightly closer. He'd already made the man move

her away from the cliff. She'd known he was good at his chosen profession, but he'd proven it again. "Why don't you let her go and tell us?"

"Dexter. My name is Dexter, but if I let her go, you'll make her stay. She doesn't want to stay with you. She wants to stay with me, but you'll make her."

The knife came out from her side. Amalia felt a tiny bit of tension leave her body, knowing it wasn't there any longer.

They moved back again. Maybe she could trip now. It would be harder for him to get to her with the knife.

Ryker's eyes shifted from her to Dexter and back again. Could he tell what she was thinking?

She looked down at the ground then back again several times, but his slight frown told her he wasn't okay with her plan. She'd wait.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Ryker had to have a plan of his own. He wouldn't let Dexter leave with her. None of them would.

Some of Ginny and Ollie's teams had joined hers and Ryker's. At least ten members of their protection teams were visible. There had to be more she couldn't see.

"Where is your home?" Ryker asked. "What kind of home? Does it have a view of the ocean? She loves the ocean, you know."

Dexter shifted, clearly uneasy with the question. "It's near the water." His defensive tone told her it didn't have an ocean view.

He'd also loosened his hold just slightly.

"He's right." She managed to croak out the words. "I need a view of the ocean to be happy. A view of the ocean and a big bathroom. A jetted tub with marble and travertine and..."

What were the other kinds of material fancy enough for a palace bathroom? Or anything else in the palace?

"Art!" That was something. "I need artwork. Like Picasso and Van Gogh, but real ones and not prints."

"First edition Shakespeare." Ryker jumped in. "And a Gutenberg Bible."

Were those even a thing anymore? Did they still exist outside of maybe a few

museums?

Didn't matter.

"He's right." Amalia felt his hold let go a bit more. "I need those things."

Was it lying if your life was in danger? She liked the nicer things in life, but she didn't need them like she implied.

"It doesn't have any of those things." His voice took on a slightly frantic tone. His hold tightened again. "But as long as we have each other, we can be happy."

"I won't really be happy." She closed her eyes and made herself say it. "You've known all along that I want to be with you, but I need those kinds of things, too. I'm a princess, after all. My sister is older than I am. She's the heir to the throne." Officially. For now. "I'll want to travel all over the world. Only private planes, of course. The best resorts. Even if I could learn to be happy in a tiny house with no view, I have to have the art and books and trips."

Dexter hesitated. "We'll be able to. We can travel until you have the children to raise."

Amalia stared straight at Ryker and hoped he understood why she said what she did. "I won't raise my own children like that." Did her attempt at disdain work? "That's what nannies are for."

His grip loosened again "What?"

"I'm a princess, Dexter. Princesses don't change diapers or wake up in the middle of the night to feed a screaming infant or take them to play dates."

Ryker had been easing closer and farther to one side as Amalia kept Dexter's attention, using her body to sort of shift the direction they were facing away from Ryker as Dexter kept shuffling backward. Just a bit more and Ryker would be out of their line of sight.

Then he'd save her. She just had to keep doing her part.

"I understand why you want us to be together. It's been obvious since that day at the carnival, but I'm still a princess and expect to live my life as one. That means a palace or at the very least a palatial mansion with ocean views out every window. Housekeepers. Chefs. Dozens of staff members. Nannies. If I could figure out a way to use a surrogate, I'd do that, too. I really don't want to subject my body to the trauma of growing a whole person and giving birth." She gave an exaggerated shudder, causing him to lose more of his grip. "No. Thank. You."

It was time. She prayed Ryker was ready.

Shoving her elbow into his side, the one where he didn't hold the knife, Amalia twisted sideways and managed to get out of his grasp only to fall to the ground instead of running like she'd planned.

Dexter grabbed at her but fell, landing on top of her and pressing her into the ground below.

Just as suddenly, his weight was gone, and she could hear sounds of fighting above her.

She pulled herself across the grass in an army crawl, trying to get away from the sound.

A yell of pain scared her enough that she rolled to the side and scrambled to her feet.

The protection teams had formed a sort of scrum around Dexter as the screaming continued.

She knew that voice.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Ryker!” Amalia wanted to run toward them, but couldn’t know for certain Dexter had been fully restrained yet.

A second later, they practically carried Dexter off leaving a couple with Ryker as he lay on the ground.

“Ryker!” Amalia ran the few steps between them and dropped to her knees at his side, not caring about the blood beginning to soak the ground.

“Move back, ma’am.”

One of Ginny’s protection officers shouldered her out of the way as he attended to Ryker.

Hands pulled at her as she tried to get out of the way. She found herself with Ginny and Ollie’s arms around her.

“What happened?” Tears ran down her cheeks as she looked at her sister then her brother-in-law and back again. “What happened to Ryker? He’s bleeding.”

An SUV bounced over the ground as quickly as the driver likely dared. Help was coming.

“Is he going to be all right?” She collapsed against Ginny. “Please tell me he’s going to be all right.”

“He’s got the best people in Øyaord with him right now, Amalia. They’re taking good

care of him.”

Amalia turned her head into her sister and prayed she was right.

* * *

Everything hurt.

Ryker couldn't focus on anything but the pain in his leg.

And his head.

Something else tried to push its way to the front.

Amalia.

He opened his eyes and blinked before squeezing them shut. He tried to speak.

Cotton balls.

His mouth felt like it had been filled with cotton balls.

“Here.” A quiet voice he didn't recognize came from nearby. “Take a sip.”

Ryker did as instructed. Just enough to wet the inside of his mouth. “Amalia?” he managed to get out. “How's Amalia? Is she okay?”

“She's fine. The doctor wanted her to get some rest.”

He managed to get one eye open a little bit. Then the other.

It surprised him to realize he wasn't in the hospital. "Where am I?"

"The royal family's suite at the hospital."

That explained the decor.

Managing to turn his head just a bit, Ryker started when he realized who sat next to him. "Your Majesty!" He started to sit up, but Queen Mother Eliana easily held him down with one hand.

"I told your wife I'd stay with you while she gets some rest. You've been through quite an ordeal." She gave him another sip of water from the straw. "We were on our way to Øyanord with Benjamin and Gen for a tourism meeting."

"Thank you for sitting with me." He tried to push up to sit. "Could you raise my head?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

She reached for the remote. “Just a little bit. Dr. Lincoln wants you to wait until he comes back. I already hit the button to let them know you’re awake.”

His head rose, just a little bit, but enough for the moment. “Can you tell me what happened? It’s a little fuzzy.”

She shook her head and gave him another bit of water. “They want to talk to you without tainting your memory.”

Ryker let his eyes close again. “I understand.”

He remembered proposing to Amalia, something he’d been thinking about since they day after he arrived. His hesitation came because they still hadn’t known each other more than a few days, not even two weeks counting the time in Ravenzario and back in Øyanord.

Then... a call from... someone. Thor? Had he told Ryker they were coming to Øyanord? And Princess Genevieve?

He’d been on her security team for years. It had the potential to be quite awkward. Her reaction and attitude would determine that.

Knowing her as well as he did, she’d likely breeze in to whatever room he happened to be in at the time, command attention by her mere presence, then proceed to make some joke or snarky comment meant to make him laugh.

“Benjamin and Genevieve will be by to see you shortly, unless they expect to move

you to the palace soon. Then they'll see you there. Thor is doing what Thor does." He could almost hear the amused eye roll.

"Talking with the security teams." It didn't even need to be a question. Thor had always been - and would always be - a protector at the core.

"Exactly."

Before they could say anything else, the door opened to let several people in. The newcomers included a couple of doctors and nurses, along with... Was that the King of Øyanord?

"Good morning, Your Royal Highness."

Ryker managed to control his response when he realized the doctor spoke to him and not one of the other people in the room. "Morning."

He knew they considered him married to Amalia, but didn't the king have to do something special to give him an actual title?

Maybe the doctor used it regardless of the official legalities - and those could be different in Øyanord than Eyjania.

"How are you feeling?"

Right. The doctor had already asked that once. "Everything hurts, but I'll live."

Dr. Lincoln chuckled. "That's the plan." He sat down on the doctor stool and rolled to Ryker's side. After listening to his heart and lungs, he took a peek at the leg. "Everything looks and sounds about like we'd expect. Do you remember what happened?"

Ryker closed his eyes and tried to think. “He had a knife. I think that’s about all I can remember at the moment.”

The doctor made a note. “It’s not uncommon to lose the moments immediately prior to a head injury. You may remember in time, possibly as we reduce your medication, or you may never remember. Yes, he had a knife. You were fortunate to be stabbed in the leg. Right now, we would expect for you to regain full range of motion and mobility rather quickly. You’re young, in good shape, and were attended to immediately.”

He patted Ryker’s arm. “You can sit up and move as much as you’re comfortable with, but don’t push it. Get some rest. That’s what you really need right now. I can kick any or all of these big wigs out if you want me to.” Dr. Lincoln winked at him. “They might be royalty, but I’m the doc.”

Ryker’s laughter quickly turned to whimpers. “I’m good for now, but if something changes, and I need a few less titles in here I’ll let you know.”

Dr. Lincoln grinned. “Very well.” He gave a glare to the rest of those in the room. “But he does need his rest so this needs to be brief.”

Queen Eliana spoke from them all. “We’ll be careful not to tire him out and let him rest.”

The doctor and his entourage left the room. Ryker found himself alone with a king and a queen mother from his two countries.

Would he need dual citizenship? Would Øyanord allow him to if he became prince consort?

Queen Eliana smiled at him. “I’ll be back shortly. Ryker, you’ve served our family

faithfully for years, helping keep Genevieve safe, even when she didn't really want you to. Please let us know what we can do for you."

Ryker nodded. "I will, ma'am."

As she left, the king took a seat on the stool the doctor had used. "Now that they're all gone, how are you really feeling?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

“Everything hurts, but overall I feel all right.” He pushed the button to raise the head of the bed a little more.

“I’m glad.” He sighed. “You protected my granddaughter again. I don’t know how to thank you. If you hadn’t been there...” The king choked up. “I’m glad you were.”

“I am, too, sir.”

The door opened again. Ryker turned his head but before he could process who stood there, Amalia was in his arms.

19

When she laid her head on Ryker’s chest, Amalia knew she should move. She shouldn’t have done this in the first place, not without talking to him first.

But as the tears of relief flowed down her cheeks, she didn’t care. Not as long as he wasn’t in pain.

Was he?

She tried to pull away, but even in his weakened state, Ryker had his arms around her and held her close.

“Are you all right, Amalia mín?” His soft voice carried the concern she knew it would.

“I’m fine.” She couldn’t stop the hiccup. “You’re the one...”

He laughed, just enough to whimper. He was in pain.

This time he let her move away.

“I’m fine.” He reached out the hand that didn’t have tubes attached and brushed little bits of hair back. “I promise.”

“He stabbed you,” she whispered. “I saw the blood.”

Ryker gave a weak smile as he took her hand. “Most of that came from my head. Head wounds bleed a lot, but it was minor. The leg is the worst of it. I’ll be sore, but I’m fine.” His brows pulled together. “What about you? Are you really all right? He didn’t hurt you?”

Amalia shook her head. “The knife broke the skin on my side, but I didn’t even need stitches. Just a little glue.”

Her side ached and she’d need a good massage before long to work the tension out of her neck and shoulders. The headache hadn’t let up, despite taking some medicine the doctor gave her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t protect you better.” He kissed the back of her hand. “He shouldn’t have been able to get to you in the first place.”

“No!” She squeezed his hand. “It’s not your fault. I don’t know how he got there. I’m not sure anyone knows yet. You’re the one who made sure we moved away from the edge of the cliff. I don’t think he noticed, but you moved around and pushed us back toward the house. You kept his attention so I could get away.”

“Ma’am?”

She turned to see Thor standing near the door. “Yes?”

He looked apologetic. “I understand, but need you to please not mention specifics until we’ve had a chance to discuss it with the prince. We need his memory as untainted as possible.”

Ryker groaned. “Prince? You’ve been my boss for years.”

With a chuckle, Thor moved farther into the room. “I understand the difficulty of adjusting to the titles and everything. You’ll likely never get used to it, but it will get easier to hide your discomfort with it.”

“If you say so.”

“And my phone is always on if you need to talk to someone who understands.” He reached the end of the hospital bed. “Or if you need anything else.”

Ryker nodded. “I know. I appreciate that.”

“I don’t remember giving you permission to get married, much less injured.”

The new voice sounded more angry than annoyed.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Amalia looked over to see one of the twin princesses from Eyjania. She didn't know them well enough to tell them apart, but this had to be Genevieve, right?

Ryker replied with a groan as he shifted a bit. "I don't remember you having permission to do either a couple of years ago, but you did it anyway."

The anger on her face melted away as she laughed. "Touché. I'm glad you're going to be all right, even if I will have to break in another new team member."

Amalia relaxed a little bit. The older princess had always seemed so glamorous and unknowable, even for her as the heir presumptive.

"Amalia, have you met Her Royal Highness, Princess Genevieve of Eyjania?" Ryker shifted in his bed again. "Ma'am, I think this is my wife, Her Royal Highness, Princess Amalia of Øyanord." He held up his other hand as the Eyjanian princess started to say something. "I said think because I really have no idea about the legalities of all of these obscure laws and what they mean for us. If she's not my wife already, then she's my fiancée."

A glower returned to the princess's face. "You know you don't have to call me ma'am and all that anymore, right? If the rumors are true, you'll outrank me before long."

Amalia exchanged a glance with Ryker before responding. "What rumors?"

"That for reasons I'm not quite clear on, your mother is going to be removed from the line of succession and the thought is that your sister won't take her place as the heir."

She'll take herself out of the line because, given the totality of the circumstances, you'll do a better job than she could."

The princess sat in one of the hospital chairs and propped her feet up on some of the mechanisms underneath the bed and shrugged. "At least, that's what I hear. If it's true, you'll be married to the heir apparent and eventually prince consort. That outranks me by a lot. I'm just..." She looked up and ticked something off on her fingers. "Number three. For now. It'll be four sooner than you think."

"I heard."

What had he heard? Was Queen Katrín expecting another child? Amalia didn't remember hearing about an announcement.

"See? Way higher on the list than me. No more ma'am or any of that nonsense."

Ryker kept a straight face. "I make no promises, ma'am."

"Smart aleck." Princess Genevieve rolled her eyes.

He broke into a grin. "I learned from the best, ma'am."

This time she threw her head back and laughed. "Yes, you did. But I expect you to heal quickly and make all of this legal and official. Then I can tell everyone I knew the future prince consort before anyone else did. I'll totally use it to increase my cool factor."

"You don't need anything to increase your cool factor. You've always been the cool princess. Just ask your sister." Ryker closed his eyes and seemed to deflate.

The other princess popped up out of her chair. "That's my cue to let you get some

rest.” She squeezed his free hand. “I mean it.”

He didn’t open his eyes but did nod. “I know.”

Princess Genevieve started for the door, but stopped to rest her hand on Amalia’s shoulder. “If you ever need any tips on how to deal with this bloke, let me know.” The look in her eyes softened. “You’ve got one of the best.”

She left before Amalia could reply.

And they were alone.

Amalia stood and leaned over to kiss Ryker’s cheek as she briefly tightened her hold on his hand.

He didn’t let it go, but also didn’t open his eyes. “Stay. Please.”

“Are you certain?” She didn’t want to leave, but didn’t want to stay if being there would make it harder for him to rest.

“I don’t want you to go anywhere.” He managed to look at her. “Ever.”

* * *

Sleeping came easier with Amalia’s hand in his.

It still didn’t come easily or deeply. He would probably need better pain medication for that, but even though they were in a secure location, Ryker didn’t like the idea that he’d be less aware of what went on around him.

He wouldn’t even be able to respond with anything but a vicious press of the call

button, but that didn't matter.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

Time didn't have any meaning with his eyes closed. Even when he opened them, the continual daylight outside didn't give him a frame of reference. It seemed like no time had passed at all and an eternity at the same time before Dr. Lincoln returned.

They talked for a few minutes, then the doctor surprised Ryker. "I'm okay with you being moved to the palace as long as you follow instructions."

Ryker sat up a bit straighter. "Absolutely."

"Good man."

The doctor went over restrictions and everything else with him and Amalia. Ryker knew others would be given the same instructions.

After being transferred to a wheelchair, Ryker was taken to a side entrance where he wouldn't be seen. The ride didn't last overly long, but every bump caused him to wince and even stifle a small scream once.

Once taken inside, a member of the staff - one he hadn't met yet - wheeled him to the elevator. Amalia stayed right next to him the whole time.

He didn't know who made the determination as to where he'd be taken, but they wheeled him straight to Amalia's room. Though he'd been staying in her apartment, he hadn't been sleeping in her room after that first night.

It seemed likely that no one else knew that.

Or maybe it was because she had an adjustable bed frame which would allow him to rest more comfortably.

After a couple of people helped him get settled, Amalia made sure they left but also ordered some food through her phone.

She moved one of the chairs closer to the side of the bed and sat down, pulling a blanket around her. “How are you feeling?”

“More worn out than I should just because I changed locations,” he admitted. “I felt better before we left, but I am glad to be here. I think it’ll be good in the long run.”

Amalia nodded, but didn’t really look at him.

“What is it?” Were those fresh tears? Why? He was going to be fine so they couldn’t be for him.

The fingers of one hand reached out from behind the blanket he now realized had become a protective barrier. “I was so scared. It would have been all my fault.”

He wanted to reach for her, but she stayed too far away. “It couldn’t be your fault. I know I don’t remember much yet, but I do know that.”

“If I hadn’t slipped away in Ravenzario...”

“He would have found you some other time, some other way. Queen Elizabeth even had someone get into her bedroom at Buckingham Palace in the 1980s. Even the best laid plans sometimes go awry. We do everything in our power to make sure they don’t, but have to be prepared for when they do. That’s what happened here.”

She looked at him just long enough for him to catch her eye and hold it.

“Come here, love,” he said softly. It wasn’t the first time he’d used the term of endearment, but he didn’t remember making a conscious choice to do so.

Amalia shook her head and retreated farther behind the blanket.

“Please.” He started to re-situate himself so he could get to her.

She glared at him through her tears. “Don’t get up.”

Ryker raised an eyebrow at her. “Then come here.”

Huffing, she went around to the other side of the bed and climbed on, sitting with her legs criss-crossed in front of her.

It meant he could reach under the blanket still around her shoulders and find her knee. He would have preferred her hand, but he couldn’t reach that far.

Instead, he settled for resting his hand on her bent knee. “None of this was your fault. It couldn’t be. He’s clearly deranged and has likely been stalking you on some level for years. It may not have become anything more than regularly doing a web search or showing up at some place he knew you’d be. Taking it personal probably would have happened eventually with or without me.”

As he spoke, she sat up a bit straighter. “You remember?”

Ryker blinked and searched his mind. “I guess I am remembering more.” He wouldn’t have been able to tell her that a couple of hours earlier. “I don’t think I remember everything, but there’s definitely more coming to me.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

As she relaxed, he was able to take her hand and pull on it until she lay on the bed next to him, her head resting on his chest on the good side. His injured leg had been left closer to the edge to make it easier for people to get to, he supposed.

With the arm wrapped around her shoulder, he pulled her slightly closer, enough that he could rest his cheek against her head. "I'm glad I was there to help you." He leaned back enough to look at her.

She moved until he could see her eyes. "What?"

"Do you really have original artwork by Van Gogh and Picasso?"

A grin crossed her face. "I don't. There's some in the palace. I just came up with the most outlandish things that I could think of. You jumped right in with Shakespeare and Guttenberg. I tried not to choose things remotely within the realm of reality. A trip to Mars crossed my mind, but that seemed a bit too much even for what we were doing."

"Good point."

They stayed where they were long enough Ryker dozed off. When his head snapped back up as he startled awake, Amalia stood at the door.

"He's sleeping," she told whoever waited on the other side.

"I'm awake," he said just loud enough to be heard.

She turned back to look at him. “Are you sure you’re up for a little company?”

He nodded. “For a few minutes.” It might be longer, but that gave them an out if they wanted to use it.

When he realized Princess Betlinde and Prince Erik were walking in, he tried to sit up a bit straighter.

And when King Benjamin followed them, he tried even harder.

They all looked so serious. What could this be about?

20

As she let her parents and King Benjamin in, Amalia could see the tension in Ryker increase. Why would that happen?

“How are you?” King Benjamin asked the first question.

“I’ve been better,” Ryker admitted. “But it could easily have been so much worse.”

Her mum turned to the other king. “This is the second time one of your men has saved the life of one of my daughters. While I wish neither one had been necessary, I am grateful, nonetheless.”

The king gave a nod. “I am, as well. I can hardly take credit, though. Thor secreted Regina away long before I became king. Now, the reality is that I have little to do with most personnel decisions.”

“I understand, but the ones you do have a say in - like your head of security - has to be someone who makes good decisions. In that sense, you are responsible.”

He seemed to acquiesce but didn't say anything more on the matter.

"Is there anything you need, Ryker?" Her father asked the question. "We owe you so much, but what can we do on a practical level?"

Ryker looked at Amalia, and she could tell he didn't know how to respond.

She jumped in. "I ordered some food for us. Nothing that has to be eaten right away so Ryker can eat as much as he wants when he's ready. It seems that, at the moment, the doctor wants him to rest more than anything."

"We'll let you momentarily." Her father and the king moved closer to the bed to talk to Ryker, though Amalia couldn't hear what they said.

Ryker seemed to be a bit uncomfortable, though she didn't think it had to do with her father or King Benjamin. Could it be that he still wore scrubs given to him at the hospital? They were clean but a bit small.

Amalia slipped through the door into the closet and wondered what he would like to wear. Most of his things were in the room he'd been using, but she thought there might be a few things in hers.

She dug through a drawer and found a pair of pajama pants and a shirt he'd worn in Ravenzario. Would the pants fit over whatever bandages he had on his thigh?

They could find out later, but maybe she could get her father and the king to leave shortly. Her mum would go with them.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

She walked back into the bedroom to see her mum standing on the other side, her face ashen.

“Are you all right, Mum? You look like you’ve seen a gho...” She stopped mid-thought and knew exactly where her mother had been.

“Lind?” Her father finally saw Mum. “What is it?”

Her mum tried to speak but it could several tries to get the words out. “Regina,” she finally managed to croak.

“What about her?” Amalia’s father looked between her and her mum. “She and Oliver are fine. They’re still at the North Shore.”

Her mum shook her head. “Her nursery...”

Amalia stepped in. “I think what Mum means is that the nursery she’d prepared for Ginny is still there, completely intact.”

As her mum nodded, Amalia could see the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“What are you talking about?” Her father started toward the door.

As she glanced at Ryker, she could see the Eyjanian king give him a nod then quietly leave the room. Good. This was clearly a family matter.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Her mum was frozen in place. “Why didn’t you tell me or

your father or someone that it was still there?”

Amalia set Ryker's clothes on the side of the bed. “Because you obviously didn't know it was there. You'd never lived in this apartment, at least as far back as I can remember. I didn't want to bring up painful memories, and then I didn't know how. I don't think anyone really realizes it's still there. Except me.”

Before she realized what was happening, her mother had wrapped her arms around her and held on tight.

“Oh, my sweet Amalia, always protecting those you love,” she whispered. “In one fashion or another, you always do.”

She'd never thought of her decision that way, but she supposed it might be one reason.

A long moment later, her mother loosened her hold. “I'll make certain it's taken care of. I'm certain you and Ryker will want to do something with it. Whether it's a cozy place to sit and read or, someday, a nursery, it's up to you to choose what happens next.”

“Thank you, Mum.” She suspected there would be a longer discussion later, when emotions weren't running quite so high, and they couldn't still count the hours since the encounter with the stalker.

Her father ushered her mum to the door and closed it behind them as they left.

And she found herself alone again with Ryker. Dozing off next to him had felt right. They needed to find out exactly what their legalities were and make some decisions.

Amalia knew what she wanted that decision to be.

To get married, if they weren't already, as quickly as possible and have the public ceremony as soon as they could reasonably plan it.

"That wasn't how I expected that meeting to go." Ryker used the button to lower the head of the bed a bit more.

"I don't think any of us could." She went back to the chair and sat down. "How are you? Too much?"

"Maybe a bit," he admitted. He nodded toward the clothes. "I appreciate you bringing those."

"I thought that might be why you looked uncomfortable."

Ryker shook his head. "No. I need to..." He glanced at the door on the other side.

Amalia's eyes went wide as she realized what he meant. "I can call someone to help you."

He shook his head. "Can you just help me through the door? I can take it from there."

Her doubt must have crossed her face, but he reassured her it would be fine. How could he know when he hadn't put any weight on the leg yet?

To her surprise he carefully moved to the other side of the bed, the one closer to the door he needed to get through. With his arm around her shoulders, Amalia took on much of his weight as they slowly moved toward the door.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

He closed it most of the way behind him. Amalia moved as far across the room as she could to give him some privacy. They might - or might not - already be legally married, but they didn't know each other that well yet.

To her surprise, he made it back to the bed on his own, without asking her for any help at all.

She hurried to his side and did help him get situated. "Better?" She couldn't quite look at him as she asked.

"Much. Thank you." He pulled the blankets up over his legs.

Amalia started to go back to her chair, but he grabbed her hand.

"Wait."

* * *

At his urging, Amalia went around and sat on the other side of the bed again, this time leaving the blanket aside.

"We need to talk."

Her green eyes closed. "I know."

"I know I proposed. I know you said yes, but we haven't really talked much about the logistics or what that will look like." He slid her hand into his, twining their fingers

together. “Are we already legally married? That probably needs to be the first question. Once we answer that, we can make other decisions.”

She nodded and opened her eyes. “You need to be certain you can live with all that being a member of a royal family entails. Even before this incident, you knew better than most what that can be like. You’ll be the prince consort. That can be difficult for some people, men in particular it seems.”

She tilted her head in thought, her nose wrinkling in a cute way he could get used to.

“In general, I think men are better about it than they were a generation or two ago, but it can still be an issue.” She looked at their joined hands. “I don’t think you would be one of those who would have difficulty with that. At least not beyond having to share your spouse with the country, which means sometimes I’m unavailable the way I would be in a different situation. It might mean spending special occasions apart when necessary.”

“I understand that. At least in theory.” He rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. “It can be challenging, but so can any marriage. Special occasions can be celebrated a few days before or after if necessary.”

“My grandfather missed his twenty-fifth anniversary with my grandmother because he had a summit to attend. He didn’t pick the date. They had planned for her to accompany him, but at the last minute she couldn’t. I forget why, but something unavoidable. They both hated it.”

He let go of her hand and crooked a finger under her chin. “Hey. Look at me.”

She blinked the sheen out of her eyes.

“It won’t always be easy, but I will always do my best to support you in whatever

fashion that takes. Sometimes it will mean fading into the background. Others it might mean taking point while you're unable to do something. It could mean any number of things." Now his thumb brushed across her chin.

And then her lower lip.

Unfortunately, it would be quite difficult to lean up to kiss her at the moment.

"I'm in this for the long haul," he told her. "If you'll have me, this is where I want to be. I've made my decision and nothing is going to change it."

She moved away from him, causing momentary apprehension that dissipated when she situated herself at his side much as she had been earlier. "That is what I want too. I want this. I want us."

Ryker's arm had already gone around her shoulders but now it tightened. They laid there long enough he dozed off again.

This time when he woke, his leg hurt, but the weight on his shoulder told him Amalia slept next to him.

"Amalia?" He didn't want her to move, but needed to get some medication.

She looked adorable when she woke up. "Are you all right?"

"Could you get me something to drink?" He hated needing to ask, but doing for himself didn't seem like the best plan just yet. Something besides the pain in his leg gnawed at him, but he couldn't define exactly what it might be.

"Of course." She disappeared for a moment then returned pushing a food cart. "I would imagine having something on your stomach would be helpful."

As soon as she said it, he realized one of the other feelings had to be hunger, but he didn't want to eat in bed. "Can you help me out to the balcony? I think I'd like to sit in the sun for a bit."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

A frown crossed her face. “If you don’t think it’ll be too much for you.”

This had the potential to turn into an argument of sorts, so Ryker decided to forestall it by working to stand up by himself. Before he could make it all the way to his feet, she’d come to his side to help.

“Not fair, Ryker.” She sounded more annoyed than he expected. “You don’t get to make unilateral decisions.”

But she didn’t try to stop him. It took longer than he would have preferred, but he made it onto the balcony. Amalia helped him into a chair then propped his leg on an ottoman before frowning. He wanted to ask her what was wrong, but before he could, she’d managed to move another chair over and put his leg on that so it didn’t angle down so much.

Ryker leaned his head back and closed his eyes, soaking in the sun. “Thank you. This is what I needed.”

“I bet you need these, too.”

He looked over to see her holding some tablets and a glass of water. “Thank you.”

She sat in the other chair and made sure they could both reach the cart of food.

“I’m sorry.” He needed her to know he could admit when he made a mistake. “I shouldn’t have just forced the issue.”

“And I should trust you to know your own limitations better,” she grudgingly admitted.

He leaned to the side to reach around the cart and take her hand. “We’ll both have to get better. This is a new relationship. Even if we do know it’s what we want, it’s going to take time.”

“I know.”

The silence that ensued seemed comfortable and not strained like he’d feared. It didn’t take overly long before he decided he’d had enough.

“Can you help me back in?” Ryker typically wasn’t one to ask for assistance, but he also knew how far he could push things - and he had reached his limit.

By the time they made it back to the bed, he felt like he’d run a marathon.

“You’re pushing yourself too hard, aren’t you?” Amalia helped him swing his legs back up.

Ryker nodded as he leaned his head back. “I am, but sitting outside was good for me.” He managed a smile, though his eyes remained closed. “You know what else would be good for me?” Did his tone sound teasing? He meant it to.

“What’s that?” The wariness in her voice told him he’d achieved his goal.

“If you’d come over here with me.”

She didn’t answer but in seconds she stretched out next to him, her hand in his as she rested her head on his shoulder.

This was what he hadn't known he wanted. He'd been happy with his life in Eyjania. Working as a member of the protection team fulfilled his life in most ways. He'd wanted a family - someday.

He'd found it in the most unexpected fashion.

On holiday.

With a runaway princess.

EPILOGUE

Sitting through a joint session of Parliament and the Council wasn't exactly Amalia's idea of a good time, but she'd have to get used to it sooner than she ever could have expected.

They weren't planning a wedding for the heir to the throne.

No.

Though it had been determined they were legally married, she and Ryker had chosen to continue as though they were engaged.

Which meant she'd moved to another room until he was well enough to do so.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

One day, soon, she'd be next to him again - but not soon enough. He'd surprised her with one of the sled dog puppy dropouts to keep her company until then. She'd named him after Ryker's other dogs - Scotty Tiberius McCoy IV. They called him Sulu.

He likely wouldn't rejoin her in the same room they'd been in, because by the time the official wedding took place, Amalia would have been queen for months - and with the new title came new quarters.

Their time at the North Shore had been cut short by the stalker, but what Amalia hadn't known was that her parents and grandparents would have joined them later that evening for a discussion about the future.

Where her grandfather would be stepping down as king for medical reasons.

Amalia still didn't know exactly what medical reasons, but clearly enough that he needed to pass on the responsibilities of the office to his heir.

Her.

This joint session wouldn't just make her mother's removal from the line of succession and Ginny voluntarily removing herself official, but her grandfather would announce his intention to step down in a few weeks.

The whole thing remained surreal.

Ryker had been at her side throughout it all, even as he worked hard on his own

recovery. Though not back to full strength just yet, he could walk unassisted.

Her mother sat in the seat reserved for the heir with Ginny next to her and then Amalia. Her father, Ollie, and Ryker sat behind them.

Her grandmother sat next to her grandfather at the front of the room.

And then he stood.

The chairman of the council announced the king's intention to speak to the joint session and asked for objections.

There were none.

Even as her grandfather spoke, Amalia knew she'd never remember what he said.

A few minutes later, her mother stood, affirmed that she wouldn't challenge her removal as her father's heir, then moved to a spot along the back of the seating area with Amalia's father next to her.

Then came Ginny's turn. She moved to the microphone and glanced at Amalia before starting.

"A little over a year ago, my life turned upside down with the knowledge that the parents who raised me were, in fact, not my biological parents."

They were in the gallery somewhere along with her adoptive siblings.

"I came to Øyanord to discover who I should have been and learned who I was. In the last year, I have studied Øyanordian history and government and have been given many opportunities to know her people. I have come to love them all. Deeply."

Ginny took a deep breath. “Because of the deep love and respect I have for my homeland and her people, I am renouncing my position in the line of succession. The people deserve someone who understands them on a level I will never be able to.” She looked at Amalia and smiled. “My sister, Princess Johanne Betlinde Amalia will be an incredible queen in service to the people she’s loved since birth. Thank you for your love and acceptance. I look forward to serving my grandfather, and later my sister, in whatever capacity they need to serve the people. Thank you.”

With that, Ginny and Ollie went to stand next to their parents.

And now Amalia needed to speak.

“Though the announcements that we have just heard come with great sorrow, they also come with great sacrifice. To stand before this esteemed body and the people and choose a more difficult path is beyond what most people will ever be called upon to do. To admit someone else is better fit for a calling takes bravery and courage. Though I believe whole heartedly that either one could have, one day, fulfilled the role as queen with great dignity and effectiveness, I applaud their recognition that capability isn’t the only thing to consider.”

From where she stood, Amalia couldn’t see either one of them, but she could see the pride on her grandparents’ faces.

“It is with great honor and understanding of those sacrifices that I accept the mantle for which they were both born. I will, to the end of my days, serve my God, my country, and my king to the best of my ability. When my beloved grandfather is no longer king, I will continue to serve my God and my country until I am no longer able to do so.”

She took a deep breath as the stress began to bleed away. “Thank you.”

Applause came from around the room. Not overly enthusiastic but not only scattered either. Amalia took the seat her mother had vacated as Ryker moved to the one behind.

Her grandfather returned to his microphone. “I have never been more proud of my daughter and granddaughters. They are amazing women who will continue to serve the people of Øyanord for years to come.”

He looked at his notes. “With those announcements comes one more. Earlier this morning, I submitted paperwork to the Chairman of the Council and the Prime Minister. In that paperwork, I shared my intentions to hand responsibility over to my granddaughter far sooner than any of us would have planned. Six weeks from today, we will return to this room, and she will become Queen Amalia I.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:11 pm

The whispers that began a moment earlier gained momentum as he finished the pronouncement.

He said a few other things followed by a couple of other people and then she and her family left before the rest of the room emptied.

Vehicles whisked them back to the palace with few words being spoken between any of them. When they arrived, she didn't know where they were going but followed her grandparents.

It wasn't lost on her that her parents as well as Ginny and Ollie had taken places behind her.

In just a few moments, they reached her grandfather's office.

The one that would be hers in less the two months.

The enormity of it all threatened to overwhelm her. Ryker pulled her to the side and took her hands.

"I have a proposal for you." He sounded nervous. "Your parents and grandparents know, and we have their approval."

She blinked. "For what?"

"For your grandfather to marry us legally right now."

Amalia stared at him. “What?”

“The lawyers all decided we’ve probably been legally married since sometime before we left Ravenzario, but since there’s no paperwork, they thought it would be best to have a legal ceremony.” The earnest look on his face didn’t detract from the love she could see there. “We’d planned to use the big wedding in a few months, but, if you’ll have me, I’d like to marry you now. To be legally by your side as you take on the greatest challenge you’ll ever face.”

She searched his eyes, to be certain.

He meant every word.

Amalia nodded. “Yes,” she whispered. “I want to be your wife.”

To have a few weeks together before the responsibilities of being queen rested on her shoulders.

How could she say no?

In mere moments, they stood in front of the windows in her grandfather’s office with her family around them and spoke the time-honored vows.

The dinner and celebration in her grandfather’s quarters lasted hours.

And later, as she lay with her eyes closed listening to and feeling her husband breathe, Amalia knew the most reckless decision she’d ever made had served a greater purpose. It led to the most valuable title change she would ever have, even greater than when she became queen.

She’d gone from runaway princess to beloved wife.

And she wouldn't have it any other way.

* * *