



Praise Me: Princess

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Description: Commander Conrad Larsen isn't interested in babysitting some timid princess, but the queen has demanded a qualified bodyguard for the girl and as a decorated war hero, Conrad comes highly qualified. What he's not qualified for? Defending his heart against the soft-spoken, traumatized angel that seeks safety in his arms. His defenses drop in the company of such sweetness and grace, but princesses don't marry bodyguards, do they?

He'll see about that.

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one

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Greta

Being the princess of Leidenstein is simply magical.

For one, I'm heir to the throne, which means someday the glorious kingdom will be all mine. I'll be queen of a place that I cannot see. Or touch. Or experience. But at least I'll have a crown of jewels so heavy, it will probably give me scoliosis.

Two, as the princess of a country being besieged by rebels from the north, I'm considered a target. So much so that I never go outside of the walls of Leidenstein Palace without a convoy of armed guards.

And I haven't left the palace grounds at all since the incident.

My steps pause on the way down the endless stone corridor, my vision blurring until I have to hold the wall so I don't trip, my heart speeding up at the reminder of what happened last year. I'd always dreamed of leaving the palace, seeing Leidenstein for myself. I'd spent the first seventeen years of my life fantasizing about broad waterways and buildings that kiss the sky and people in coffee shops. Instead, I saw in the inside of a burlap bag and darkness. Sounds that still screech in my ears in the middle of the night.

The inside of the palace is not so bad, I suppose.

Once my heartrate is under control again, I recommence my walk to the grand parlor downstairs where I am scheduled for a meeting with my mother, the queen.

“Are you sure about this outfit, Olga?” I ask the woman beside me.

“Oh, yes, princess. That shade of blue is very becoming on you.”

I trace the bodice of my dress with my fingertips, still unsure if the strapless midi dress with the flared skirt is the right choice for an audience with my mother. It's summertime and overly warm, especially for my homeland, but that's not why I wore it. I suppose lately I've been feeling a little trapped and this is my way of peeking out of my cage just a tiny bit. Safely. And maybe, just maybe, I want my mother to find me interesting.

Even if it's for being a little rebellious with my wardrobe.

Most eighteen-year-old girls wouldn't be fretting about her clothing choice for a meeting with her mother, but most girls aren't following in the footsteps of Queen Ingrid. Cool, iconic, she fought in the army, became an expert swordswoman and always has a plan.

Meanwhile, my hobby is watching ASMR videos on the web to decrease anxiety.

I need work.

Me and Olga stop outside the double doors leading to the parlor, waiting for permission from her suited assistant to enter. Finally, we're given the nod and Olga opens the door, stepping back to allow me to precede her. There my mother sits, impeccable in a black pantsuit and pearl earrings, a serene expression, surrounded by doting assistants who've slowly become mirror images of the almighty Ingrid, their hair coiffed in the same French twist, eyes cool as they watch me approach.

“Good morning, Mother.”

A genteel smile. “Greta.” She tilts her head as I take a seat across a gleaming gold and cream marble table, decorated with vases holding plumes of ostrich feathers. “I’d forgotten what lovely shoulders you have. Thank you for taking this opportunity to remind us all.”

The temperature of my skin spikes. “It was a gift from Princess Kate over a year ago. Every time I saw it in my closet, I felt guilty for not wearing it.”

“It’s a dress, Greta.”

My face is hot. I can feel the sympathy radiating from Olga. “Yes, of course, Mother. I’m only making a joke.”

“Ah.” She folds her hands, right over left. “I’ve been kept informed of your visits with the sick children that come to visit us from the hospital. Very good work you’re doing, indeed.” She studies me for a long moment. “How would you feel about going to them next time, instead of having them transported here?”

It takes only seconds for my heart to climb into my mouth, my ears crackling like someone is balling up parchment paper beside them. I open my mouth to answer, but no sound comes out. I can only see the men with rifles storming toward me in the road, can only feel the pain of a fist connecting with my temple, my knees scraping on rocks as I’m dragged. The smell. The screeching. The desperate hunger. The cold. The fear.

“Greta?”

I exhale shakily in response to being prompted. My mother wants me to leave the palace to visit the children’s hospital and I should say yes. After all, there are some

children too sick to leave the premises and I would very much like to meet them, too, but the very idea of being vulnerable to another kidnapping or attack renders me terrified.

“I don’t know, Mother,” I whisper, finally, unable to control my shaking.

“Maybe...the horse ranch would be a better start? It’s a little less transient.”

In addition to my work with the children’s hospital, one of my chosen causes is animal rescue. Most of my week is dedicated to fielding requests from citizens of Leidenstein about animals that need to be rehomed. Over the course of the last five years, with the help of my mother, we’ve managed to open three animal rescue centers throughout the country—and my personal favorite is the horse ranch, only about ten miles to the north. But that’s ten miles closer to the rebel camp.

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We're going to starve you to death and hang your withered body in the streets.

"Maybe I'll start visiting again next month," I manage, my fingers clutched together tightly in my lap. "Once the temperatures aren't quite so extreme."

Queen Ingrid sighs—and I know I've disappointed her already. After a grand total of five minutes in her presence. Even after the kidnapping, she doesn't understand my fears. Because if it was her, she'd lift her chin, walk straight up to her demons and slay them.

I don't even like weapons.

I never did, but even less so now.

"Greta, you need to start living normally again. You can't remain in the palace walls forever. The longer you let your anxiety rule, the more extreme it's going to become."

I'm nodding along with her, even though I'm shaking. "Yes, I know you're right."

"We'll be traveling to Quilton soon. I need you to conquer your PTSD by then."

"Why are we traveling to Quilton?"

"Because their king has proposed you marry his son, Kristof, the prince."

The air goes out of my lungs. "What?"

Ingrid smiles, but I think my near shout has embarrassed her, judging by her white knuckles. “You are eighteen. We are a prosperous nation. Of course, there has been an offer for your hand—and it’s one that would benefit Leidenstein greatly as we continue to battle the rebels.”

I still haven’t caught my breath. “I...me?Married?”

“If you and the prince are a good match, yes. We have to meet him in order to find out, though, don’t we?”

“When is this trip?”

“In one week.” Can she not tell I’m about to faint? Not only am I going to leave the palace in one week for a prolonged trip, but I’m going to meet a potential husband? What is going on? “In the interest of facing your fears and healing you in time for our trip, you will go outside the palace this week. Start living your life again.”

I stare back at her in shock. Disbelief. “Just...go?Outside?By myself?”

“Goodness, Greta, I’m not letting you go alone.” She nods at one of her assistants who scurries behind me to open the parlor door. “I’ve hired you the best bodyguard possible. He’s been instructed to stay by your side and see to your safety. Given how highly he comes recommended by my trusted army advisors, I trust him implicitly.” She inclines her head. “May I introduce Conrad Larsen. Your new bodyguard.”

I twist around in my seat only to be greeted by the most hostile-looking man I’ve ever seen in my life. The top of his head nearly brushes the doorframe on his way into the room, his brown hair slicked back mercilessly, green eyes hard, irritable. He’s stoic, that square jaw set in stone. But his eyes hold pure disgust.

Somehow, I know it’s all for me.

two

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Dear God,take me anywhere but here.

As I'm escorted into the lavish parlor with domed ceilings and rich, luxurious furnishings, I can see only the barracks and battlefields where I've slept on and off for a decade. These royals have been sleeping in peace, while I've toiled to afford them that right. I've given my service to the palace. Paid in blood. I owe them nothing, but here I am by order of Queen Ingrid to come babysit her pathetic daughter.

Kill me now.

I won't even look at my new charge. My resentment won't let me.

Just when I thought I was a free man, I've been dragged back into servitude. My grandfather left me his farm when he passed away and all I've ever wanted was to tend the land and animals. Wake up to the quiet and live in solitude, not being forced to interact with anyone, especially some spoiled brat who is too scared to set foot in the real world.

"Commander Conrad Larsen, your highness," drone the man who led me into the room. "He has been secured in the guest quarters of the southern wing."

"Thank you, Hans. That will be all."

Queen Ingrid rises from her desk, scrutinizing me with an amused half-smile. "Your valiant reputation precedes you, Commander. It's an honor to welcome you to the palace."

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“Yeah. Wow.” The sarcasm is dripping off me and I genuinely don’t give a fuck. “I’m so thrilled to be here.”

To her credit, the queen only looks more amused, rather than insulted. She’s known for being unflappable and fair, but I can’t help but disagree, considering I’ve been commissioned for this job against my will.

“May I introduce my daughter, Greta,” the queen says, sweeping a hand in the direction of the girl sitting across from her.

Still, I refuse to look.

This pampered princess can wither into a pile of dust for all I care.

“Great,” I respond dryly. “What are my orders, your highness? Am I to commence babysitting duty now or in the morning?”

A flicker of censure passes across her features. “You sound less than pleased with your new post, commander.”

“What tipped you off?”

“You’ll watch how you speak to the queen,” blusters one of her assistants.

I stare the little fucker down until he goes back to scribbling on a clipboard. This is not my scene. Where I come from, respect is earned, not passed on through birthright, the way it has been to these royals. “I didn’t ask for this post, your highness. It was

tied around my neck like an anvil.”

“I don’t wish to be an anvil, Mother,” comes a hushed voice.

It’s from the princess.

My vision sort of glitches around the edges, something causing my pulse to skip around in confusion. I’ve never used the word “sweet” to describe anything but candy. But it would be a lie to describe her voice as anything but that. Sweet. It’s light and earnest, totally different from the nasally whine I was expecting. I haven’t had the opportunity to watch much television for the last decade, but as I recall, Princess Greta rarely appeared on camera as a child, and when she did, due to someone with royal blood being married or some other such occasion, she kept her head down and let her mother do the talking.

Probably doesn’t have a single thought in her head, that’s why.

Don’t look at her.

Maybe this is illogical, but as soon as I set my eyes on Greta, I’ve acknowledged this job and I don’t want to do that until absolutely necessary. The queen has stripped me of my free will, but I can control this one thing, as small as it is.

“You are not an anvil, Greta,” says the queen.

“Yes, she is,” I respond, spawning gasps around the room.

“Mother, please. I will go outside the gates alone. I promise.” The more she speaks, the more it becomes painful not to look at her. “Please, let him go.”

Surprise draws my gaze down, despite my iron will, but she’s facing the queen,

leaving me a view of only her hair and shoulders.

But my God, those shoulders.

They are soft, delicate slopes that lead to a graceful neck, her hair in a gathering of heavy golden curls on top of her head. Exquisite. There's another word I've never used. That's what she is.

Resolutely, I rip my eyes off the princess and go about ignoring the continuous ripple in my chest. What is causing my heart to beat so strangely?

"That's very brave of you, Greta, and I don't doubt you would try, but as I mentioned, we'll be traveling soon to make your potential betrothal, and we won't have time for stopping to catch our breath. Best to begin improving yourself now."

I'm highly stuck on the word "betrothal."

Who is the princess marrying?

Why does this news make me resent her even more than I already do?

"I don't wish to have the commander here if he doesn't choose to be," says the princess. "Can you not give me a few days to...improve myself?"

"I've given you enough time. It's been a full year since the incident, dear."

"What incident?" I ask, not liking the ridiculous softening inside my rib cage. The more the princess speaks up on behalf of my freedom, the harder she makes it for me to hate her guts. Also, hearing from her own mouth that she needs to "improve herself" means she can't be as self-consumed as I'd expected. "What happened a year ago?"

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Suddenly, the princess shoots to her feet. “I’d rather not say,” she blurts, her voice ever so slightly uneven. In a way that makes my head ache with the desire to consume the sight of her. No. Not yet. “Mother, if I succeed in leaving the palace tomorrow and suffer no ill effects, would you please grant the commander his leave?”

The queen purses her lips. “I’ll consider it, yes.”

“Thank you,” murmurs Greta, bowing her head. “May I be excused?”

“Yes, you may.”

Every muscle in my body begins to coil because she is turning away from the desk now to face me. Each one of her soft footfalls on the rug unbalances the scales inside of me, my heart heavy and burdensome with its oddly rapid pumping. Whereas before I was determined not to look at Greta out of spite, now I’m terrified to set eyes on her face. Somehow, I know looking at her is going to be a major problem.

When she stops in front of me, I keep my attention trained on a spot in the distance, using every last ounce of strength I possess to ignore her.

I last approximately six seconds.

I can’t put into words what it’s like to see her face in person for the first time, now that she’s a woman. Only that there are emotions that have been shelved inside of my chest without my knowledge and now everything on those shelves tumbles down. It’s almost offensive how beautiful she is with her deep blonde hair and porcelain skin, a mouth that must put shameful thoughts in men’s heads. Even mine, if I allowed

myself, which I will not. Her mouth has nothing to do with me.

Nor do her eyes.

Her...enchanted blue eyes that look up at me now with apology.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, snapping my inner shelves in half, every cell in my body straining in her direction. “I’ll try my best to have you free by tomorrow, Commander Larsen.”

“Good,” I bite off, in defense against whatever she’s doing to me. “The earlier the better,” I add, half gratified, half loathing myself when she flinches.

“Yes,” she says softly, casting her eyes down at the ground. “Thank you for coming, even if it will only be for a short time.”

I grunt.

I don’t know what else to say.

She’s not a nightmare, like I was expecting—and now, I wish she was.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, I suppose.” She rubs those succulent lips together, the action firming up my cock in a way I know is bad. Real bad.

“Tomorrow?” I hear myself say. “Who guards the princess when I’m not?”

“No one,” says the queen, breezily. “She’s safe enough within the palace walls. The incident occurred only when she left—”

“Can we please not talk about the incident?” Greta interjects.

The queen stops talking.

What is this incident they keep referring to?

“As ridiculous as I find this assignment, her safety is on my head now. As such, she’ll be secure at all times. Starting now.” My pride forces me to add, “My responsibility ends when this absurd exercise is over.”

The princess is very still, eyes downcast, her cheeks blazing with color.

But I won’t allow myself to regret being harsh.

Men are losing their lives up north to keep the rebels at bay and she’s scared to take a simple walk? She’s a chore. A beautiful and...unexpected one, but nothing more.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Greta says.

“There’s no excusing yourself from my presence, princess. Where you go, I go, for the moment.”

She nods. Regroups. “Then I’m due at my French lessons.”

My sweeping gesture is nothing short of mocking. “After you, oh brave and mighty princess.”

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It was too far. I know it as soon as I step over the line, ridiculing her.

The pain and embarrassment in her eyes haunts me for the rest of the day.

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Greta

I've been looked upon with loathing and hatred before, but never in my own home.

Commander Larsen has shadowed me since our initial meeting this morning, following me from my French lesson to fencing—which was particularly humiliating, as I am a horrific swordfighter—and he's stared at me in brooding silence the whole time. By the time I returned to my rooms to bathe and put on my bedclothes, I felt as though I hadn't taken a deep breath the entire afternoon.

I'm not sure what disquiets me more.

His biblical plague of a frown.

Or the softening of his expression that I notice occasionally.

And I could have sworn I heard him growling when my fencing partner put the tip of his sabre to my neck. It must have been a trick of the acoustics, because the man clearly detests me. I don't blame him, either. He was brought here beneath the thumb

of my mother when he deserves to live his life in peace, his service to the army completed. There might even be a future Mrs. Larsen out there waiting for her beloved to return, while he's being forced to chaperone me while I overcome my fear of the outside world.

I'm going to be brave tomorrow.

I'm going to surmount my terror, if for no other reason to set him loose.

Even if I must crawl through the castle gates, I'll do this for someone who has surely sacrificed so much for Leidenstein.

Finished letting my hair down, I draw up the neckline of my nightgown, though it immediately slips back down to leave my shoulder bare. I exit the bathroom and walk out into my bedroom, my steps slowing when the door comes into view. Commander Larsen is on the other side even now, guarding me. He plans to stay there all night, despite my assurances that he doesn't need to do so.

Hopefully he doesn't question my nighttime routine.

Squaring my shoulders, I cross to the other side of the room, bracing my back against my heavy dresser and pushing the piece of furniture in front of the door, wincing when the wood makes a loud scraping sound on the floor of my bedroom.

A sharp rap on the door almost causes me to slip onto my butt. "What the hell is going on in there?"

"Nothing," I call. "Just rearranging some furniture."

A small pause. "At ten o'clock at night?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s just something I do from time to time. When I get tired of the way things look.”

“Oh, you get bored with all your luxuries.” He snorts. “Sorry, I can’t relate. I was only discharged two weeks ago. I haven’t even had a chance to buy a mattress yet.”

No one has ever hated anyone more than this man hates me. Not even the rebels. “I really can’t apologize enough for the delay in starting your new life. I promise I’m going to get you out of here tomorrow.” I get back in position, speaking through my gritted teeth while continuing to move the dresser in place in front of the door, as I do every night, to keep possible intruders out. If only it kept the nightmares away. “I actually really like my furniture. I didn’t mean to imply I was sick of it.”

“You just don’t like its location.”

“Correct.”

“You like it in front of the door, instead.”

“How can you tell it’s in front of the door?”

“Shadows, princess.”

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“Oh,” I say, out of breath. “Then yes, I guess I like it there.”

His sigh almost blows the door down. “Are you blocking the door to keep me out?”

“It’s not far-fetched to think you might strangle me while I’m sleeping, considering the continual anger you’ve been directing at me since this morning, but no...” I hesitate. “Well, I guess since the cat is already out of the bag and you know that I’m a coward, there’s no use in lying. I put the dresser in front of my bed every night to feel more secure.”

Silence. “Does it work?”

“Not really.”

“Then knock it off.” I stick my tongue out at the door, then immediately feel guilty for it. He gave ten years of service to my country! I’m gearing myself up to explain that it’s just a safety crutch when the knob turns and the door begins to open, easily sliding the dresser along with it. “This isn’t stopping anyone from coming in, prin—” He stops speaking abruptly when he sees me, his eyes tracking down to my bare shoulder, along with the hair that is now loose down to my hips, a lump lifting and plummeting in his throat. “Uh. The dresser? It’s not exactly serving a purpose.”

I’m not sure where the warm shiver comes from. Maybe because I’ve never had a man in my bedroom before or maybe because Commander Larsen is undeniably handsome and robust, but suddenly there are hot prickles all the way down my spine. “I-I, yes, I see what you mean. I acknowledge it’s not an ideal barricade.”

“Furthermore, this might slow me down if I need to reach you.” He shoves the dresser two feet to the right, away from the door. “We don’t want that.”

“No.”

He shakes his head at me. “Did you steal that nightgown from a Victorian schoolmarm or something?”

“Did I...what?” I cross my arms over my middle. “This was a gift from the Grand Duke of Luxembourg.”

His brows slash downward. “Why is a duke buying you a nightgown?”

“It is a little creepy, isn’t it?” I breathe, battling a smile.

For a very brief bubble of time, the commander looks like he’s about to laugh, but the moment pops and vanishes before it starts. “Don’t put furniture in front of the door,” he snaps. Then, slightly less harsh, “Nothing gets through me. Not bullets, not acts of nature, not shrapnel or blades. I’m a wall between you and danger. You can sleep soundly.” I must look doubtful, because he raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“Maybe you should let the intruders in, commander,” I whisper, dramatically. “If I die, you can go home.”

A line pops in his jaw. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

I’m suddenly so exhausted with his animosity, I take a few steps and plonk my butt down on the edge of the bed, my limbs hanging loose at my sides. “Would you mind terribly if I just go to sleep?”

Oddly enough, he now appears like he wants to stay. Or maybe he regrets being so

harsh, now that I've been drained of my energy. He rakes a frustrated hand through his hair, opens his mouth to say something, but stomps out before his words ever materialize.

I stare at the rattling door a moment, then do what I do every night since the incident. I take out my dagger from beneath my pillow, wrap myself in a blanket and go to sleep in the closet.

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Conrad

There is no reason for me to feel like this much of a bastard.

Joking around or having conversations with my charge is not in the job description. Neither is spending any significant amount of time in her bedroom. I only went in there because it baffled me that she would be moving furniture at such an odd hour and I wanted to know why. I didn't expect to be so fucking impacted by the sight of her in a nightgown.

Might as well admit it, my rude treatment of her is partially in defense of her beauty.

My God, she is spectacular.

Standing before Greta, her long hair unpinned and her face clean of makeup, I nearly slipped into a trance, words deserting me, my body reacting almost violently to the softness and delicacy of her. My body can't even comprehend what flesh that perfect would feel like beneath me. She's a woman unlike any that I've encountered while stationed in hundreds of ports.

There's something about her that makes me feel...necessary.

Like being here isn't a mistake. Even if I am highly annoyed about it.

Greta looks at me in a way I don't understand. As if she sees something inside of me. Something she needs. But I can't even begin to define what that something is. Nor am I in a position to give it to her. I'm her bodyguard. She's the fuckingprincess. And apparently, she's about to become engaged.

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All of that equates to a big hell no.

Even if I could define what she sees in me, even if I had all the freedom in the world, I wouldn't pursue some pampered princess, would I?

I scoff at the very idea, the sound echoing along the stone corridor.

Stop thinking about her in that stupid nightgown then.

Stop thinking about how...

...how I'd bend her over onto all fours in that thing, eat her little pussy from behind until my face is wet. But I'd want her on her back to fuck, at least the first time. Yeah, I would. I'd want those big blue eyes to widen in shock as I seat myself and pin her so hard to the bed with that first thrust, she whines for me to take it out, in, out, in...her spoiled, royal body shaking with the excitement of finally being handled properly by a man. A fucking solidier. Not some prince with a manicure.

Has she evenmetthis guy she's supposedly marrying?

I'm staring a hole in the door and I don't even remember turning to face it. I'm raising my fist to knock, no idea why, when a bloodcurdling scream drains the blood straight out of my body. A scream that comes from inside Greta's bedroom, right on the other side of the door. I'm numb, but I'm moving, chilled down to my fingertips, but those fingertips are curled around the butt of my gun, finger on the trigger, ready to take out whoever made the bad decision to come after the girl I'm protecting.

But there's no one.

The room is totally still, dark except for moonlight.

Was she taken?

No. No, impossible. We're three floors off the ground and there's no means of scaling the wall of the palace. I secured the grounds myself, before meeting with the queen this morning. Greta should be in her bed. What the living fuck is going on?

"Greta," I bark, the blood flowing back into my veins with a hot vengeance, pulse pounding in my temple, everything moving in fast motion as I lunge for the bathroom, sweeping in with my gun, prepared to find the princess held captive by some ghoul—or worse, a rebel—but once again, there's nothing. Empty. "Greta!"

There's a whimper. A faint one.

I heard it—and it's enough to have me throwing open doors like a man possessed. Toiletry cabinets, the frosted shower door, her closet.

There.

At first, she's just an outline, but as my eyes adjust to the light, I see the princess is huddled on the floor wrapped in a blanket, a dagger clutched in a death grip. Her eyes are luminous, looking right at me but not seeing anything, and the utter terror on her face rips my heart sideways.

"They're going to come back," she whispers. "Close the door or they're going to come back with the bat. Please."

"Bat," I choke out, shoving my gun into the back waistband of my pants and

dropping down on my knees. My hands hover above her face, useless. Do I wake her up? Is that dangerous? I don't know, but I can't leave her in the scary headspace where she's living right now. "Baby, you're safe. You're home at the palace and I'm right here."

"They told me next time they're going to break the bones in my face instead of my leg," she pants, recoiling.

The anger that grips me is deadly. I've encountered plenty of PTSD in my military career. Enough to know whatever the princess has been through, it was fucking bad. I'm not even touching her skin and I can feel the chill radiating from the surface. "Greta." I take her face in my hands, stunned by the smooth texture. Is she even real? "You're having a nightmare. It's just a nightmare."

"The nightmare is real."

"No." I sit down beside her in the closet, carefully removing the dagger from her hand before pulling her into my lap. Slowly, putting my arms around her and tucking her head beneath my chin, natural as can be. No lie, my eyes cross over the firm weight of her bottom in my lap, her rose water scent, the way she just seems to lock into a place I didn't know I had. Just click. "The nightmare is not real, but if it is, when the bad guys come back, I'm going to slaughter them all. None of them are going to lay a finger on you, princess."

"Really?" she whispers.

"Yes. You are safe with me. What did I tell you earlier?"

She's quiet for several beats. "Nothing gets through you."

"That's right." She's starting to calm down, her body relaxing into me, but I want to

be positive she's reassured. I want to completely drive out the fear. Thus, I find myself unbuttoning my shirt down to my navel. Then I pick up her hand and guide her fingers inside the opening of my shirt, taking her on a tour of my scars, which are many. "Not bullets, not acts of nature..." I slide her palm down to my right abdomen where one of the worst puckers lives. "Not shrapnel or blades. I'm a wall between you and danger."

"You don't even like me," she yawns.

My throat muscles are strained in an instant, my heart suspiciously sensitive. "You're not as bad as I thought," I manage, hoarsely.

"That's nice," she murmurs, her eyes closing, head lolling against my shoulder. "You can go now. I'm fine."

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I drop my chin more securely atop her head. “Go to sleep.”

A moment passes where I sense she wants to protest sleeping in my arms. Hell, I want to protest it as much as I want...need it to happen. But her argument dies in its inception, and she snuggles into me, some of the blanket falling away from her thighs.

That’s when I see the rebel brand seared into her hip.

And my carefully constructed resentment shatters like a fist through glass.

I will never leave her side again.

five

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Greta

I wokeup in my bed this morning for the first time in a year.

I’m...rested.

I didn’t jolt awake and reach for my dagger, as I usually do.

All because I fell asleep in the arms of my bodyguard. Highly unusual behavior. Not befitting of a princess whatsoever. But it was my best sleep in recent memory.

Don't get used to it.

Come hell or high water, the commander is leaving today. I'm not going to keep him at the palace against his will. I won't be any more of a burden on him than I already have been. Resolved to make my mother believe I'm recovered enough to dismiss Conrad, I walk through the great hall of the palace, the nape of my neck warm and tingly, thanks to the man himself walking directly behind me.

A glance over my shoulder confirms he's surly as ever, giving disgusted once-overs to everyone we pass on the way out the door, into the fresh air, where two SUVs are waiting to bring us on an excursion outside of the palace. To the horse ranch. Up until now, I was relatively calm, but seeing how many people are lined up and waiting, watching me approach with an air of skepticism, makes my legs feel like jelly.

"Really, this didn't need to be such a production," I say, my voice sounding embarrassingly thin. "I'm sure you all have much better things to do with your day than watch me tend to the horses."

"We're more than happy to be accompanying you on your transition back to the real world, princess," says Rolf the footman, beaming at me as he opens the door to the idling vehicle and comes forward to guide me toward it.

Conrad steps between me and the Rolf before he can get within three feet. "The princess doesn't require your assistance." He rests a hand on the small of my back, shuffling me closer to him and I look up to find him frowning at the gathered group. "Why are there so many of you coming with us? This isn't a fucking birthday party."

Several members of staff flinch over his choice of language. "Well," says Rolf, his face pinkening slightly. "We have our medical response team in case an emergency should arise, additional guards, the official palace social media documentarians...which mean we obviously require hair and makeup—"

“No,” Conrad clips.

Rolf backs up a pace. “No?”

“You heard me.” He lowers his voice. “This is going to be hard enough for her without an audience. She needs security. And I suppose the medical response team. But nothing more. Everyone else can go practice lipstick somewhere else.”

“But, sir—”

“Commander,” Conrad corrects him, urging me forward. “I’ll ride with Greta. Everyone else can go in the other car.”

I hold my composure until we’re seated in the middle row of the SUV, seatbelts engaged, then a breath of laughter bursts out of me. “Apparently you’re not the least bit interested in making friends.”

“I don’t need friends.” He tests my seatbelt, then grunts at the driver to let him know we’re ready to go. “Friends are obligations. Obligations are annoying.”

Message received. He’s reminding me I need to succeed today, so he can go home.

As the vehicle rolls forward, bringing us toward the gates to leave the palace, my fingers clutch and twist in my lap, my mind bombarded with visions of rebels converging on me, enflamed hatred in their eyes. “You d-didn’t have friends in the service?”

I’m heartened when his features go slightly softer. “I consider them brothers, but yes.” He raises an eyebrow at me. “And they know I don’t like obligations. If there’s a party, they don’t invite me. They accept my antisocial nature.”

“Were you always like this?” My tone of voice has risen to an unnatural pitch, my chest growing tight. So tight. We’re almost on the other side of the gate.

“No.”

I can feel him looking at me. The entire right side of my face is warm.

He sighs, reaching over to take hold of my chin, so I’m looking up at him and not at the approaching exit. “You want to hear a story?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“I’m going to tell you why I’m antisocial and you’re going to focus on me and not what’s happening outside the car, Greta.” His fingers splay on the side of my face, ever so slightly brushing my hairline. “What do we say when you’re scared?”

“Nothing gets through you. Not bullets, not acts of nature.” In need of comfort, I turn my face into his palm and swear I hear his intake of breath. “Not shrapnel or blades.”

“Nothing.”

I nod, knowing full well I shouldn’t be rubbing my cheek against his calloused hand, but it feels too nice, too reassuring to stop. “Tell me the story.”

“Story. Right.” He seems fascinated by my mouth. I knew red lipstick was a bold choice to visit the horses. I thought the boldness of the color might make me braver. He’s probably wondering if I did my makeup in the dark. “I was raised by a single mother and she loved parties. She was a good sort. A big talker. Loved to laugh. She was always the last to leave a celebration and that meant I was the last to leave, too. Parties were too loud for my taste, too messy.” He shook his head, as if to banish the

concept of parties forever. “Most of the time, she didn’t drink so much that she couldn’t see us home, but one time when I was thirteen, she did. It was a New Year’s Eve party and she drank her weight in champagne. She couldn’t drive in that condition, so we walked home in the pitch-black countryside and she was singing so loud that neither one of us heard the river. Both of us fell straight into an icy cold current and got carried a full mile before I could grab a branch and pull us out. The whole time we were being carried down the stream and I was struggling to keep my mother above water, I vowed I would never attend another party as long as I lived. I just wanted to be home. Alone. In the quiet. And that never changed.”

I must be positively gaping at him. “Is that really a true story?”

“I don’t tell lies to my princess.”

There’s a suspicious tug between my legs in response to him calling me his princess. The kind of tug I’ve never felt before. It’s followed by a hot, liquid squeeze.

Oh my.

How silly to focus on his phrasing. I’m everyone’s princess, technically.

That’s all he meant.

“Where is your mother now?”

“Still in the countryside. Still likes to party.” He rolls his eyes, but there’s a layer of fondness there. “I suppose I’m due to visit.”

“You’ll be able to go see her soon. Very soon.” I glance outside the window and see rolling hills, the city in the distance, and realization dawns, but I try not to make a big deal out of the fact that I’ve officially left the palace. “Look at me, I’m outside the

palace walls. You're one step closer to—"

An explosion rents the air and I'm tackled sideways onto the seat, Conrad on top of me, his hard body pinning me while his breath rages raggedly in my ear. I'm freezing cold in a split second, shivering like I'm the one being carried down an icy river, my legs wrapping around his hips, my shaking hands creeping up around the wide breadth of his back to pull him closer. As close as possible.

"The other SUV backfired," he says, dropping his face into my neck, his immense relief evident in the way he shudders. "False alarm, princess. I'm sorry." I hear him swallow and sense an internal struggle taking place, before he nuzzles the crook of my neck. "You're okay, baby. Shhh. Just a loud noise."

I'm desperate to ground myself, for the world to stop spinning too fast. "Can you tell me another story?"

He shifts slightly on top of me, in order to look me in the eye, our foreheads pressing together and...I gulp over the rugged muscle that rides over my softness when he moves. In places where I've never experienced a man's body in such an intimate fashion. His hips are large and thick, opening my legs inappropriately, his chest crushing my breasts, but not in an unpleasant way. No, that liquid melt is happening again between my legs and it reddens my skin, makes me feel swollen and achy in odd places.

"A story," he repeats, his breath hot on my mouth, enough to moisten my lips. "Have you heard the one about the princess's bodyguard?"

"No," I whisper, trapped in his gaze. "Tell me."

His chest begins to move faster, both of us sucking in a breath when our lips brush once, twice. "He came to the palace hell-bent on hating the princess, but he couldn't

do it. She's too sweet. And he doesn't even like sweet things, but he..." His lips twist over mine now. Not a kiss. A writhe. "He wonders about all the places she's sweet."

I gasp at his forwardness but do nothing to stop or chastise him.

I can't. I like it too much.

My mother would have a seizure if she could see me spread out for my bodyguard on the seat of the SUV, his hips pressed in tight between my thighs, our mouths tangled in the beginning stages of a kiss...and now Conrad's hand is dragging down the valley of my side to take my knee in its grip, slowly draw it higher, allowing his lower body to grow heavier, pressurizing a whimper out of me. But I whimper for an entirely different reason when his thumb brushes lightly over my brand. He doesn't break our intense eye contact while he circles the painful mark.

"Who thefuckdid this to you, Greta?"

"You know who."

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“I want names. I want locations.” He searches my eyes and I’m taken aback by the rage I see in his, though it’s tempered by...affection? For me? “What happened, baby?”

The pressure he’s applying to the juncture of my thighs combined with that rasp of baby is making me feel funny. Heavy and uncomfortable...in an enjoyable way? Does that even make sense? “About a year ago, I traveled north for a summit. The rebels were ready to negotiate an armistice. Or so they said. My mother thought it was time I represent the palace, but...I let her down. I didn’t recognize soon enough that we’d been duped. It was a trap. They intercepted our convoy as we crossed the border.” I’m breathing so hard, his mouth just above mine. Focusing on his vengeful eyes is all I can do. “They kept me for two weeks, demanding my mother set their prisoners free. She couldn’t. Not without jeopardizing our troops. Not right away. And...”

“They hurt you.”

I nod.

“Badly enough that you sleep in a closet with a fucking dagger.” His voice is anguished, his face dropping into the crook of my neck, rubbing there. “And I was horrible to you. I am the worst kind of bastard. One who judges without having the facts.”

My fingers find purchase in his hair, stroking, razing his scalp with my nails. “It’s okay. The details weren’t made public. You would have no way of knowing—”

“It’s not okay,” he growls, rolling his puckered forehead against mine. “Were you raped, princess?”

“No. No.”

He makes a sound that I can’t describe. It’s excess frustration and a downpour of relief, all at the same time. “I won’t rest until I’ve spat on their graves.” His mouth roams over mine, but it’s still not a kiss. It’s a reassuring touch. It’s our lips becoming acquainted, even if their acquaintance can only be brief. It’s comfort and neither one of us can help it, our breaths accelerating, my legs growing anxious around his hips. And God, when those hips shift upward, to the right and I feel something thick and large and stiff tuck my against the seam of my pants, I cry out behind my teeth. “I won’t rest until the nightmares are banished from your head.”

“That’s not your job, Commander,” I assure him, gasping when he moves again, the friction shooting static all the way down to my toes. “Your obligation to me will be fulfilled soon. Today. I promise.”

His eyes pinch shut. “I’m going to regret all that obligation talk, aren’t I?”

What does he mean? Why would he regret being truthful?

“I’m going to set you free of your obligation to me soon, but...” I arch my back a little, wanting to make the most of the moment before it comes to an end. There’s no other option. We have to stop. “My life is nothingbutobligations.”

He reaches beneath me to cradle my backside, lifting and yanking me against his groin, his powerful body shuddering above me. “You don’t need to think about anything but this right now,” he rasps.

“If you were obligated to get married to a prince in a couple weeks’ time, would you

be able to forget about it for a second?” I ask, squeaking when he pins me hard to the seat, his face a mask of denial.

“Married to...?” he bellows, the reality of the situation returning to him in a rush, him visibly remembering what lies ahead for me. “Nothing is set in stone. You could very easily hate him. I already fucking do.”

“If it’s not him,” I point out, “it’ll eventually be someone else.”

His stare is haunted. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Why would my impending engagement bother him? He’s leaving. That’s all he’s wanted since he arrived. “You’re confusing me, Commander,” I whisper. “You hated me yesterday, now you seem almost angry that I’m going to be engaged soon.”

“Almost? Almost angry, Greta?”

“What do you want from me?” I explode.

“Right now?” His mouth is suddenly pressed firm to mine, parting my lips, his breath moist and minty, his palm keeping my backside in place while he rocks into the notch of my hips and the stirrings of a kiss. “I want to know what it’s like to kiss a brave girl who lived through kidnapping. Torture. Then left the palace today because she’s selfless and wanted to do a kindness for someone else. I want to know what it’s like to kiss the most beautiful girl I’ve ever fucking seen. Sound all right with you?”

I wet my lips, overcome, tears swimming in my eyes over the praise. The way he’s noticed me, made note of my actions, appreciated them. “I’ve never kissed anyone.”

He groans brokenly, slanting his mouth—

There's a knock on the door of the SUV. "We've arrived at the ranch, princess," calls the chauffeur through the window. "I'll wait for the Commander's order before I open the door."

The physical pain represented on Conrad's face almost alarms me. Based on the famished way he's staring at my mouth, at first I think he's going to kiss me, despite the interruption or the fact that we've arrived. Instead, he bites off a curse and sits up, raking both hands down his face. Taking several moments to gather himself.

"Stay beside me the whole time, Greta."

"I will," I say, sitting up in kind of a daze, my body still thrumming.

My thoughts are so scattered by what just took place—and the change in Conrad's attitude toward me—I haven't had time for nerves. They creep in now, however, when I look out the window and see the ranch I've not visited for a year, the stables looking different, new faces staring back at me. New, different, scary.

So many places the rebels could be hiding.

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“Nothing gets through me,” he says in my ear. “Nothing.”

My pulse slows before it can spike.

And I wonder what exactly I’m going to do without him when he leaves.

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Conrad

If I didn’t know better,I’d think I was having a fucking heart attack.

She reminds me of her intention to marry a prince while I’m on top of her, seconds from kissing her mouth for the first time? Jealousy is causing my blood to pump at a rate that rivals the speed of sound, along with the need to kill. I can’t be blamed when her mouth is a masterpiece up close. An honest to God masterpiece. It’s the softest thing I’ve ever felt against my lips and I could have lain there on her pliant body, teasing and testing it for hours. Days.Weeks.

And it’s more than her mouth.

More than her luscious body.

Her perseverance and self-sacrifice and honesty has untied something in my chest.

I'm almost disoriented by the flood of emotions she unleashes in me.

For the first time in a long time, I'm uncertain of what to do. What the future holds. I am the highest ranking of soldier, but I am not a prince. Not a royal. At the moment, I'm a glorified bodyguard, and that ranks far below princess, for god's sakes.

She's the futurequeen.

On top of that, I've been rude to her since making her acquaintance. Rude is my default. I don't know how to be anything other than an asshole. Still, she's making me want to...try and be a little nicer? See if I can make her...smile? Be happy?

What the fuck are you trying to do? Woo a princess?

The thought of it—and the potential of failure being so high—is making me sweat.

“Are you all right, Commander?” Greta asks when I lift her out of the SUV by the waist, settling her in front of me. “You seemed upset.”

“I'm not upset,” I snap.

“Oh.” Her eyes are drawn to the perspiration at my hairline. “Are you sure?”

This is her first time leaving the palace grounds since her kidnapping—and torture—and she's worried aboutme. “Did you think I'd be able to lie on top of you for so long without...reacting?”

She blinks up at me innocently. “Reacting?”

The princess is a goddamn virgin.

Of course she is. As though I need another reason to feel viciously protective of her.

“Never mind me, Greta,” I say, forcing my voice to soften, despite the aching dick in my pants. Despite the sudden awareness that I like her very much and she’s not available to me. “How are you?”

“A little nervous.”

“Yeah?”

“A lot nervous.”

“Okay, we’re going to work on that.” Without thinking, I smooth back these little curls at her temple, humbled by the way she leans into my touch. “What would you normally do at the ranch?”

She breathes deeply and lets it out. “Well. I’d start with a ride around the paddock to exercise my horse, then I’d brush her down and feed her. Sometimes, after that, I bring a picnic out into the pasture and enjoy the sunshine.”

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“A picnic,” I repeat, not sure if I’ve ever said that word out loud.

“Yes, a picnic.” She looks at my mouth, her cheeks flushing pink, then looks away just as fast, as if embarrassed for slipping. “You could join me, if you wanted.”

And there I am, suddenly eager for a picnic. “I guess.”

“Youguess?” The rapid cooling of her expression tells me that was the wrong thing to say. “Never mind,” she says, sniffing, and then she’s sailing past me toward the barn. Thank God I’m fast. I turn with her on a heel, keeping her shielded on the way to the large, red and white structure, scanning the immediate area, looking for glints of sunlight on reflective surfaces in the distance. Possible snipers.

Anything that could be a threat to my princess.

“I want to do the picnic,” I say in a low rush.

“That’s not what you said.”

“Come on, Greta. It takes a man a minute to get used to the idea of doing something outside of his comfort zone.” We’ve entered the barn now and the protection allows me some relief, but I don’t let my guard down, my gaze sweeping the rafters, the individual stalls as we pass, my fingertips on the small of her back, in case I need to move her out of harm’s way at a moment’s notice. “What are we going to do on this picnic?”

“Eat and chat.”

“I can do that.” I clear my throat. “I’d like to eat and chat with you.”

She shrugs daintily. “I’ll think about it.”

There is no way to quell the growl that climbs my throat. “We’re going to have a very hard time if you get yourself in a huff every time I don’t say the right thing. I usually say whatever the fuck I want, Greta. In the space of twenty-four hours, you’ve got me wanting to say whatever makes you happy with me. You know how fucking scary that is?”

At the entrance to one of the stalls, she turns to me with an expression of awe. “Being annoyed with you has caused me to forget my fears, Commander.”

“Great,” I say dryly. “Are we doing this picnic or not?”

She shrugs, giving me a prim, teasing look on her way into the stall. “I guess.”

Christ. I’ve never needed to fuck so badly in my life. I’m turned on by the abrupt detours in our conversation. Her calling me out when I didn’t give her the response she deserved. Add backbone to her ever-growing list of qualities. I want this woman in ways that I’ve never wanted anything. Not even my own freedom.

Stepping into the stall doorway, I watch her coo to a gray horse with white splotches on his flanks and I become almost too absorbed by her voice and gentleness with the creature that I don’t notice the man approaching the stall right away, but I wheel around to face him, hand on my gun, when he appears to my right.

“Who are you?” I bark.

“I’m Huck,” he says, steps slowing, probably out of fear. Of me. Good. “I train the horses.”

“Hello, Huck,” calls the princess, before looking at me. “I’ve known him for years. Don’t worry, he’s not a threat.”

There’s a growl rumbling in my throat as the young man scoots past me, doffing his hat as soon as he sees Greta. “Princess.” He executes a sweeping bow. “It’s been too long. Ghost has missed you terribly, as have I.”

“I have missed you, as well,” she says cheerfully, coming forward to kiss his cheek.

Wringing his hat in his hands, Huck’s face turns the color of a tomato.

He would die for her. There’s no doubt.

I’ve seen more than enough.

“The princess will begin her ride now,” I say, moving in between them, looking Huck in the eye when I say, “She and I are going on a picnic afterward.”

Suck on that.

If I’m not mistaken, Greta is trying not to laugh as I escort her to the paddock, watching her mount the horse and give it a rub on the neck, before setting into a canter around the perimeter of the enclosure. I’m doing my best to remain locked in on her surroundings, but Jesus, I’m quickly distracted by the way her body moves atop the horse.

Her hips give a rolling thrust forward, her butt lifting off the saddle in a rhythm that has my shirt sticking to my body by her third revolution around the paddock. I don’t know what thickens my cock faster, the fact that she rides the horse much in the same way she’d ride a man, with tight, little bounces, or the way her tits are being jostled up and down inside of her blouse. It’s borderline inappropriate.

And I'm not the only one who notices.

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Huck is mooning at her from the entrance to the barn, breathing far too quickly for my liking. A few members of the security team are in the same predicament as me, trying mightily to focus on their job, but finding it impossible when there's a young beauty for the ages mimicking a vigorous fuck not twentyyards away, her hips pumping and pumping, her hair coming loose of its braid, strands being carried in the wind around her flushed, exerted face, her enjoyment clear.

It's everything I can do not to press my stiff cock up against the wooden post in front of me and allow it some friction.

Goddamn. She's magnificent.

And now she's riding faster, hips bucking, ass slapping up and down on the saddle.

Someone groans nearby, however, and my anger, my possessiveness breaks my trance. Mark my words, this is the final time she rides with other men present.

"Picnic time," I shout.

seven

. . .

Greta

That was a quick ride.

To be honest, I'm grateful Conrad cut it short, because while it felt great to be out in the open like that, I started to feel less and less secure without him standing by my side.

Don't get used to him. He's leaving today.

Trying not to let the disappointment show on my face, I watch Conrad accept the picnic basket from the chauffeur and we set off walking, his heat close to my back...and once again, like magic, the panic of being in the outside world dissolves.

He's the trick. He's the remedy.

Or maybe there's something about the way he's tough with me that makes me think I am tough and I can handle difficult things, like fear. Or bad dreams. I'm not sure what magic he wields, but it's effective and I'm not confident in my ability to recreate the confidence he gives me once he's left the employ of the palace.

We continue on over a gentle hill that slopes back down into a smattering of trees, bringing us out of sight from those remaining behind at the ranch. I glance over at Conrad and try not to laugh, but the commander could not look less suited for carrying a frilly picnic basket if he tried.

"What?" he grunts.

"Nothing. You just look like you stole someone's lunch."

"Two days ago, that would have been more likely than me going on a picnic." He continues his wary scan of our surroundings. "Where do you want to do this?"

Why have I been battling a smile around this man all day? He's still so mean, but he seems strangely inclined to please me now. I don't understand it at all. Why would he

care about our rapport when I'll be bidding him goodbye in a matter of hours? "There's a small pond just this way," I respond, starting to skip ahead, though I slow down and remain within his reaching distance as soon as I hear his growl.

When did that growl become so comforting?

"I don't like Huck," he announces out of nowhere.

"Why not?" I exclaim. "He's never been anything but sweet to me."

"I'll bet he has." I glance back over my shoulder to find the commander glowering at me. "You want a sweet man?"

I swallow hard, facing forward again. "It doesn't really matter what I want, does it? It's more important for me to make a good match than have what I want."

"If given the choice, though, you would marry for love."

"I've never allowed myself to consider a love match. There isn't much point in getting my hopes up over something that is so unlikely." I stop at the spot I'd envisioned for the picnic and take the blanket from beneath Conrad's arm, unfolding and spreading it on the soft, green earth. "What are the odds my soulmate is a prince? Staggeringly low." I shrug. "Although I guess you never know. Maybe it'll be love at first sight."

Why does the commander look like he wants to throw the picnic basket like a shotput into the surrounding trees? "It won't be," he bites off.

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

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“Ohhh,” I draw out, taking a seat on the blanket. “Okay, then.”

He continues to frown at me for almost a full five seconds, before jerking his chin at the spot beside me. “What am I supposed to do here? Sit crisscross applesauce like I’m in kindergarten?”

“Yes. Or you can lie on your side. Like this.” I demonstrate, lying down and turning onto my right side, tucking my stacked hands beneath my cheek.

Conrad makes a muffled sound and sets down the basket, lowering himself to the ground, his gaze traveling over the swell of my hip and down the length of my thigh. With his eyes returning to settle on my face, he stretches out onto his left side, facing me with his head propped on a fist. “How’s this?”

“You’re doing marvelously, Commander.”

He hums, studying me closely. “Let’s say you end up hitting it off with this prince.” His tone could not be sourer. “What then?”

“Then we marry, and I set about learning how to be a wife.” I fidget with a loose string on the blanket. “I know very little about that role. I’ve never even watched my mother be a wife, as my father died young.”

“Does the idea of being a wife scare you?”

“Certain things.”

“Such as?”

I chew my lip a moment. “This is such a silly reason to be nervous, but imagine having to buy gifts for someone every single Valentine’s Day and birthday and Christmas. That’s three gifts a year! How does one keep coming up with ideas?”

“This is why they invented gift cards.”

“That’s not very romantic,” I say, wrinkling my nose.

“Noted,” he mutters under his breath. “What else scares you about being a wife?”

“Well...” I hedge. “The obvious stuff. Wedding night. Intimacy.”

“You’ve never been intimate with a man,” he states.

“You didn’t have to sound so positive of that fact.”

Conrad gives me a level look. “In the car, when I told you I couldn’t lie on you without reacting, you had no idea what I meant.”

Don’t look at his penis.

Too late. I looked right at it.

“That gave me away, did it?” I ask, sounding more than a little breathless.

“Afraid so.” He seems to be judging the distance between us and deeming it too far, his body scooting an entire foot closer to mine on the blanket, the fronts of our bodies nearly touching, and my sex contracts in response. “You wouldn’t be able to lie on top of me without reacting, either, Princess.”

My skin grows hot to the touch. “A woman’s reaction is far less obvious,” I say, lowering my voice as if we’re sharing secrets. “How would you know I’m reacting?”

“I’d know.”

Change the subject. “How?” I whisper.

Keeping his gaze locked with mine, the commander rolls onto his back—a thick machine of a man covered in dappled sunlight. “It’s better to show you.” He reaches over to delve his fingers into my loosely braided hair. “Practice being a wife with me, Greta.”

A warm breeze rolls over me, but instead of cooling my body, it’s like blowing on a fire. The flames are fanned. I know very well that my relationship with the commander is unconventional. It has been since last night when I slept in his arms. The indiscretions only started to pile up when I wrapped my legs around him in the back of the SUV and felt his hunger against the seam of my riding pants. I should redraw the lines of propriety...but I don’t want to. No, I ache to leave them blurred.

“A wife would lay on top of her husband?”

“You would if you were my wife,” he says, the pitch of his voice deepening, those long fingers massaging my scalp firmly. “Or you would lie beneath me. No clothes on. And you wouldn’t lie still, either, Princess. You’d be moving. I’d be moving.” His hand drags out of my hair, fingertips traveling down my arm, leaving goosebumps behind. Stopping at my hip. Squeezing. “Come here, baby.”

I’m not sure who moves first or how I move, only that I’m brought up against his powerful body, an exhale shivering out of me at the full contact, his right hand hooking beneath my knee to draw it up, up and over his hip, my face burying in his shoulder as I slide into a straddle on top of my bodyguard, his palms splaying and

riding up the outside of my thighs. Up and down, up and down, while I try not to moan over the might of his body, how perfectly he's been constructed of muscle and flesh.

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“What would a wife do now?” I whisper, lifting my head to find his pupils have expanded, his face drawn as if exerted. Strained.

And his face isn’t the only part of him that’s strained.

His zipper could burst from the burden of what’s behind it.

That ridge is pressed so firmly to my mound, teasing my flesh open, wetting it between at least four layers of clothing. Oh my God, I want to move. Grind. A foreign instinct that I know nothing about but feels so right. So inevitable.

“If you were my wife, I’d rip those tight riding pants down the middle and make you ride me like you just rode that horse.” His head digs back into the earth, his huge hands coming to settle on my backside, clutching it in two rough grips. “Fuck. I’m going to ask you to do it, anyway.”

“Ride you like a horse?” I gasp.

“Yes, Greta.” He urges my hips to punch, roll. “Just like you did in the paddock.”

I’m relieved this request is something I understand. Something I know how to do. Have mastered. Granted, I’m being asked to go cantering on a man, not a horse, but if my riding technique will give him pleasure, I want nothing more than to employ it.

Sitting up eagerly, I plant my hands on his shoulders, as if they are reins, and start to bounce, my sex clapping down gently on that growing bulge, my knees pushing me up into a lift and bucking forward, back down, press, up again, hips tucking forward.

“Don’t stop,” he rasps, lifting his unsteady hands to unbutton my blouse all the way to my belly button, tugging down my white bra so it hardly cups my breasts any longer, leaving my breasts jiggling in the muted sunlight, my breath sawing in and out in time with the commander’s groans, his length growing impossibly thicker underneath me with every gallop of my lower body, his chest lifting, falling, faster,faster.

“Good girl. Oh fuck, you are such a good little princess, aren’t you?” His tightens his hold on my bottom, pressing down, grinding the juncture of my thighs on his distended inches, a new, tingling sensation taking hold of me, making me gasp. “Keep riding me like that horse, but don’t lift your hips this time. Keep them low and work me rough with that virgin pussy...baby,oh baby, that’s it, just like that. Just like riding. That’s what Ifucking need. Faster now. That body already knew how to fuck, it just needed to be on top of a man.”

I’m soaking through the seam of my pants and I don’t know how much moisture is considered too much, too forward to be polite, but I’m beginning to care less and less because now that I’m down and grinding, the way I’ve wanted to since the beginning, there’s a wonderful spot that evokes a throaty moan from my throat. I rub and rub and rub that part of me on Conrad’s thickness, hips rotating and canting up and back, whimpers filling the spring pasture air, some unknown feeling capturing me on all sides, but not confining me. It makes no sense, but I want it, I want it.

“Conrad,” I choke out.

“Go on, baby,” he grits, his hands reaching up to cup my face, stroke his thumbs along my cheekbones. A gentle touch, even though his eyes are wild. “Let your body do what it needs to do.”

“Is it going to hurt?”

“No. Nothing hurts my Greta anymore.” His neck muscles are so stark, so strained as he begins to shudder. “Please, baby, you’re making me come.”

I’m making him come.

I’m giving this beautiful, heroic soldier pleasure.

The thrill of that combined with the quickening between my legs has me combusting, my energy skyrocketing and needing somewhere to go. Needing, needing. And I don’t second-guess my urges, I just fall forward and find his mouth with my own, kissing him like it’s the first and last time, sobbing into frenzied tastes of his mouth, his hands in my hair holding me close while he loves me back with his tongue, his hips thrusting up against me like he’s about to die, and thunder cracks all at once, both of us crying out, dampness gushing into my panties that I’m still raking against him without shame, his shaft at its hardest, throbbing, jerking, his face a mask of pleasure as the seed leaves him and drenches his fly, something I never thought in a million years I could find so sexy.

So satisfying.

But I don’t have a moment to revel in what my body has achieved, what the commander’s has achieved, because I’m pinned on my back with Conrad’s left forearm while his right hand unfastens my pants, his chest heaving, heaving.

“Daddy’s licking it up,” he growls. “Don’t try and stop me.”

Daddy?

With that confusing and...oddly endearing and arousing word hanging in the atmosphere, I can’t do anything but lie there, gasping for air, while my pants and underwear are jerked down to my knees and Conrad presses his face tight to flesh that

I've never shown to anyone, moaning, touching me with shaking fingertips, my eyes going wide in shock as he leans in and laps at me worshipfully. He consumes all of me hungrily, noisily, dragging his tongue through every crease, before moving to my inner thighs where I'm also wet. Licking there, too.

When he's apparently found enough of what he's looking for, Conrad prowls above me, obscuring my view of the blue sky, his eyes radiating so much intensity, I cease to breathe. "I've fought in more battles than I can count, but I've never fought for anything more worthy of guarding with my life than you, princess."

"Thank you," I whisper, shaken to my core. Suddenly feeling as though I want to burst into tears. "I'll remember your words long after you're gone, Commander."

Why is he looking at me like I'm crazy?

"Let's eat, Greta," he says, slipping my panties and riding pants back into place, but not before planting several kisses in places I've never been kissed before. "We should be getting back to the palace soon. I need to speak with the queen."

"To discuss your release," I attempt to say briskly, but I sound like a child whose best friend just moved away. "I understand."

"I don't think you do."

“Don’t I?”

He pulls me into his lap, kisses the crown of my head and hands me a sandwich.
“Eat.”

This is the weirdest day of my life.

eight

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Conrad

If she thinks I’m leaving, she’s not paying attention.

Does she think I could kiss that mouth and never kiss it again?

Does she think I would have a picnic with just anyone?

I mean, it was unexpectedly nice, eating lunch surrounded by nature and all of that, but what made it memorable...was Greta. Every second I spend with her is like history being made in real time, every syllable she speaks, every look she gives me, every touch, burns itself into the pages of the book that make up my life. My fabric.

This is my woman.

If I wasn’t sure before, my body would have confirmed it when she climbed on top of

me and ownership swelled up and clocked me like a fist, my blood on fucking fire as soon as she started to move on my cock, shy at first, then with more and more abandon until all hell broke loose. Inside of me, between us, everywhere, her hips moving like they were hand-crafted by the devil to drive me insane, while the rest of her was designed by God.

A short time later after our picnic, we've arrived back at the palace and my thoughts are still barely coherent. All I can think about is how I'm going to have her tight and tender pussy tonight, even if it means being put to death by firing squad afterwards.

I will find a way inside of her.

I will spend myself there.

The girl didn't even flinch when I called myself her Daddy and I don't even know where that sentiment came from, only that I was compelled to establish who I want to be to Greta. Her comforter, her lover, her protector, the only important man in her life. Her first thought in the morning, her final one at night.

And I have no idea how I'm going to pull any of this off.

I hold the door for Greta on our way in through the palace side door, just off the extensive gardens. She looks up at me as she passes, her chin up, smile brave, but there's wistfulness in her eyes, because she still believes I'd actually be a big enough idiot to leave. I could probably just tell her now that it will take an act of God for me to leave her side, but I can't bring myself to say the words. I'm feeling rather dramatic about Greta, and if she exhibits any kind of happiness that I'm staying, I might confess out loud that I've fallen for her.

I'm trying to figure out what to do about my feelings first.

Our world is not constructed in a way that allows a princess to marry her bodyguard. What if her association with me causes her to be banished? Or publicly shamed? I wouldn't be able to live with myself. For now, all I know is that death would be a preferable fate to leaving Greta behind, so I will remain. And hope like hell a solution presents itself.

"Do you hear the music?" Greta asks, stopping in front of me.

Closing my eyes, I lean down to inhale the rose water scent from the top of her head. What did she say? Music? I listen...and yes, I hear the faint strains of a violin. "Yes. Is there a concert taking place in the palace today?"

"No, I don't think so. At least, I wasn't informed of one." She blinks her big, melancholy eyes up at me. "I'll go investigate. Do you want to come with me, or—"

"Where you go, I go, princess."

She frowns. "But—"

"Lead the way." She remains confused for a few more seconds before we're walking toward the great hall, me shaking my head at her back. Two thousand square feet and several twists and turns later, we walk side by side into the great hall, Greta throwing herself into my arms when a loud cheer goes up, echoing off the ceilings. There are at least two hundred people in the room, each and every one of them holding a champagne flute aloft. "To Greta!" sings Queen Ingrid, who sweeps forward in a silver pant suit. "I knew you could do it, my dear. I'm ever so proud."

Greta stares back at her mother from inside the circle of my arms, though I'm so busy scanning for potential threats, I barely register the exchange of glances. "This is all because I left the palace grounds today?"

“Yes! And it was reported back to me that you went riding and took a nice lunch in the sunshine. You are cured, Greta. Isn’t that wonderful?”

When the princess opens her mouth to speak, she appears ready to deny that she’s cured fully, but she looks at me sharply and closes her mouth. “Um. Yes. Yes, I’m fully cured and should have no problem traveling next week, Mother.” With an audible swallow, she untangles herself from my embrace, my core temperature dropping dramatically the second we’re no longer touching. “Commander Larsen has been of great service, but he should be free to go. Without delay.”

Queen Ingrid studies me. “Yes, of course,” she murmurs. “Thank you for you—”

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“Might we have a word alone, your highness?” I interrupt, her dismissal causing panic to invade my chest. Don’t send me away from her.

“Yes, of course, Commander.” The queen accepts another glass of champagne off a passing tray. “Give us a moment, Greta.”

“Stay where I can see you, Princess.”

“Oh, um. Okay.” No sooner has Greta stepped away from our circle is she absorbed by another, a group of men and woman who have clearly been reveling for a while, their laughter loud, their proximity to the princess far too forward for my liking.

“I’ll make this quick,” I say, desperate to return to my post at the princess’s side. “Queen Ingrid, I shall continue my service to the princess. Beyond today.”

“Shall you?” She rears back slightly to scrutinize me. “Would you care to explain this unexpected change of heart?”

I start to speak, but I stop on a dime, because I’m about to lie to the queen. I’m about to tell her I think Greta needs more time broadening her boundaries before she’s ready to travel. I don’t want to make Greta seem any less brave, though, and furthermore, that’s not why I’m staying. I’m staying because I doubt my ability to breathe without Greta.

Seconds tick by.

I pride myself on being an honest man. Do I tell her the truth?

“You’ve realized what an honor it is to serve the crown in this capacity, is that it?”
Ingrid slides in smoothly, an eyebrow arched.

“Yes,” I manage, clearing my throat. Not a total lie. Serving Greta is an honor. One I didn’t recognize as such right away, but I do now. To protect my princess, who has been through such torture at the hands of the rebels, is a sacred privilege. “Yes, I am honored, Queen, and I would like to remain as her guard. Indefinitely.”

Silence passes between us. I can see the cogs turning behind her eyes.

Perhaps my feelings are written all over my face.

But to my relief she says, “Very well.” She tilts her head. “And you will travel with us next week to meet her potential new husband, as well?”

My throat burns as if it has been doused in gasoline and set on fire. “Yes, Queen,” I say hoarsely. “Where she goes, I will go.”

“Such a switch from yesterday’s hostility,” she muses. “How very interesting—”

Before she can say more, one of her assistants dashes up and declares one of her political strategists requires an audience. Relieved beyond belief that I’ve been granted permission to stay, I release a shuddering breath and go to find the princess.

But she’s gone.

Greta is gone.

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Greta

I climb the stairs of the tower overlooking the sea, hastily brushing away the tears in my eyes. The tower is where I come when I'm craving solitude, usually so I can have a crying jag in peace—and I definitely feel one coming on now. Future queens of an entire country aren't supposed to cry out in the open. I should be embodying confidence and strength at all times. That's what my mother has always told me.

Well, I've been strong enough for one day. I left the palace grounds and I managed to bid farewell to the only person who's ever made me feel safe. It's sad, really, how I'm reacting, when I've only known him such a short while. Still, his touch lingers on my skin and his vow circles my mind.

Nothing gets through me.

Nothing gets through me.

I reach the top of the tower and drop heavily onto my waiting pallet of cushions and blankets, staring out the stone window toward the tumultuous sea. The moon is full tonight, allowing me to see every ripple and whitecap. The stars are clear. I pull my knees up to my chest and count them, hoping to distract myself from the sadness crowding my chest. Tomorrow, I will put up my chin and know I did the right thing by helping the commander leave sooner than later, but tonight? All I can do is mourn the loss of his presence—

“Princess,” growls the very man I'm mourning, his gait heavy as he ascends the spiral staircase leading up to the top floor of the tower. “I told you to stay where I can see you.”

My heart summersaults approximately five times. He's still here? He followed me? Why? “But...I...”

His boots scrape to a stop at the edge of my pallet, my neck craned all the way back, so I can keep my gaze on his irritated face. “How am I going to protect you if you’re running off when my back is turned?”

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“I don’t understand. How can you protect me when you’re not here?”

“I’m staying, Princess.” I’m still trying to process that statement when he kneels down in front of me, cupping the side of my face. “I’m not leaving you. I wanted to make sure the queen agreed to my full-time protection of you before I made any promises.”

“Really?” I whisper.

To my horror, a tear slips free, splashing down onto his thumb. “No, baby. Don’t tell me you’re up here crying over me leaving.” All it takes is a slight nod from me, pain burdens his face. “No.” He tilts my face up and kisses away the tear. “Nothing gets through me, Greta. Not bullets, not acts of nature, not shrapnel or blades.” He pauses, his lips brushing side to side over mine. “But you did. You cut right through me.”

I tremble in the wake of that vow, my pulse chugging loud and noisily. “Does that mean you like me now?”

He smirks. “‘Like’ is a mild word to describe what I’m feeling.” He guides my face forward, laying his mouth over mine at an angle and kissing me long, slow, his tongue licking into me in a breathless rhythm that makes the ocean sounds recede, leaving it in the background while my heart booms faster, drowning it out. “I’m here to service you in every way, Princess,” he rasps in between kisses, both of us already beginning to run short of breath. “If you lie back on that cushion, I’ll fuck you with my tongue until me leaving is only a distant memory.”

I moan into his mouth, my hands roaming over the brawn of his chest, drugged by the skill of his lips, the hunger being exuded from his rugged frame. And I know I want

more with him. I know his mouth between my legs will give my body pleasure, but my soul wants to give everything. Wants to offer itself fully for his consumption. “I would rather feel you move inside me, Commander,” I whisper, kissing his chin while I unfasten his pants, my palm skating down over his stretched zipper. “I don’t want to be a virgin when the sun comes up tomorrow.”

His groan echoes around the stone room, his body pushing mine back onto the pallet. I fall there, beneath him, being kissed like I’m the most desirable woman in the world—and I am that to him. He tells me with every hungry stroke of his tongue, the way he unbuttons my shirt as if the sight of my breasts will grant him eternal happiness. And I swear, that’s exactly what his expression becomes when he pushes apart my blouse and unsnaps the front closure of my bra, exposing my breasts to the balmy evening air, exhaling rockily as he frames them in his hands, kneading them. “What of your plans to be married, Princess?” he asks thickly, something black and dangerous snapping in his gaze. “Listen very carefully. You will not fuck me now and marry another man later. I won’t allow it.”

Can’t he see I don’t want that, either? “How will you stop it?”

“Death.” The commander falls forward, rubbing his face in the valley between my breasts, suckling my right nipple and then the left. “He will not see it coming. Nor will the next one. Or the one after that.”

His drawing of my nipples is causing my sex to pulse in the most deliciously uncomfortable way, his mouth tasting me like I’m a delicacy, reveling and kissing and sucking. “You would kill to keep me unwed?”

Conrad laughs darkly, his open mouth creating a wet path up my throat to devour my mouth. “I would paint the streets red with blood to be the only one with the freedom to come in and out of your bedroom. To be the only one who kisses away your tears. Or holds you during a nightmare. Guards you.” Looking me in the eye, he unsnaps

my riding pants and lowers the zipper, plunging his hand inside and taking rough hold of my sex through my panties, causing me to gasp. “This already belongs to your Daddy, but once I’ve been inside of it? Princess, every man in this realm and beyond has a deadly new enemy. Are you still offering to spread your thighs for me?”

I don’t understand why referring to himself as Daddy makes me feel even safer, more coveted. Sweet and cherished. I only know I never want it to stop. That he unearthed and understands a part of me I didn’t even know was there. I’ve never been on the business end of someone’s possessiveness before and to have it be this undefeatable hero? I am vibrating from head to toe in my need to be owned. To be his and no one else’s.

“Yes,” I whisper, threading my fingers through his hair and stamping kisses on his jaw, his cheeks and mouth. “I want to spread my thighs for you. Just you.”

Before I even finish speaking, his shaking hands are jerking down the waistband of my pants, lowering them to my knees, so I can kick them fully off.

We moan into a kiss when my legs fall wide open, nothing but panties left as a barrier to what he wants. What I want to give.

“You think I could have left you?” Conrad asks while planting his hips between my thighs, his expression pained, passionate. “I was lost the moment I saw your face. Somehow, I knew as soon as I looked, it would be over. And I was right.”

“No,” I whisper, winding my legs around his hips. “It’s just starting.”

Conrad

My God. She defies description. I’m going to lose my composure just looking down at her soft, gorgeous body, open to me, her slit wetting her thin, white panties, her tits

uncovered and aroused, nipples wet and rosy from my mouth.

I told her the score, warned her what kind of jealous man she's signing up for...

And she only seemed to grow more eager, more excited.

This is a woman I was prepared to hate on sight and she's become my motivation, my mission, my obsession overnight. It's a good lesson. The best things in life truly do come when you're least expecting them. And there's nothing that could even come close to topping Greta or the way she's looking up at me with so much trust, offering me her innocence, her eyes still a little red from crying over me.

"Are you on birth control, baby?" I ask, tucking a finger in the edge of her panties and yanking them left, so I can see the mouthwatering split of her cunt, my shaft aching at the blessed sight of my princess's wet flesh. "Or are we making an heir tonight?"

"I take the pill at my mother's request...although I didn't think I'd need it, so I might have been less than diligent. Still, I shouldn't get pregnant."

Want to bet?

"The feral half of me wishes you would." Jesus, the word "pregnant" on her lips is enough to make me push a hand down into my trousers to give my cock a tight pull. I can't remember another time where I was this hard. Or been this poised to come when I haven't even started fucking yet. Maybe because this is so much more than fucking. Or a means to release.

She's going to steal my heart and soul while I'm inside of her.

As far as I'm concerned, that's an even exchange for the gift of her virginity.

“How fond are you of these panties, princess?”

“I have others.”

I rip them from her body, because I can't bear for her to close her thighs to me long enough to take them off properly. And there's her wet, virgin cunt presented before me now, her nervous thighs trembling on either side of my waist, but remaining obediently open, because dear God, she's such a good girl. “It's an honor to guard this body.” I fist my cock and bring it out, rubbing the sensitive head against her clit. “It's going to be an even greater honor to get you off.”

“L-like you did earlier?”

“Better.” I press into her entrance, kissing her mouth to muffle her whimper. “There's nothing between us this time. No clothes. No doubts about what this is.” I firm my hips and drill them forward slowly, pinning her wrists overhead and rocking deep, my balls straining with pressure when she screams, my kiss capturing the sound as much as possible, but I'm moaning, too. I'm moaning and trying to blink my vision back to normalcy because she's blackout tight, her untried pussy only fitting the upper half of my cock, but goddamn, that's more than enough. The Holy fucking Grail is what she's got between her legs. It's the kind of moist grip that I could never replicate with my hand, her muscles rippling rhythmically, her hips lifting to take me deeper, even though there's no more room, but she struggles to make some anyway.

“You're so big,” she whispers.

“Stop,” I say, raggedly.

“Am I doing it right?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

“I want more...” Her voice drops to a hush. “Daddy.”

Oh fuck. My hips buck of their own accord, my spine twisting at the base, urgency like I’ve never known coming over me, my knees digging into the stone floor of the tower room, hips lifting and dropping, her pussy squish, squish, squishing with every pump of my upper inches into her ripe, flushed body, the force of my drives raking her up and down the pallet, her expression glazing over with pleasure at every new joining of our flesh, titties shaking around like a feast for my eyes. Thank God we’re near the thunderclap of waves or I fear the whole kingdom would hear me repeatedly entering the princess with firm slaps, not to mention her urgent little mewls of my name.

“Can you get more in if I do this?”

“I said, there’s no more room, baby—” I shudder hotly when she rests her ankles on my shoulder and she does, miracle of miracles, bury another two inches of me in her pussy. “OH GOD! Oh God. Don’t fucking move.”

“I...” Her eyes widen with enjoyment, her walls squeezing me with so much hot pressure, I have to stop pumping to gather my control before I blow. “I love watching you react to me,” she whispers, tightening up again, on purpose, making me grit my teeth and shake through a curse. “I love how you can’t hide anything when I open my thighs for you. Whether it’s on my back like this or I’m riding on you like a horse—”

I slap a hand over her mouth to keep her from saying any more, because my demise is imminent and I’m so horny, I’m going to lose sight of her pleasure. And I can’t allow that, so I reach between us and stroke her slick little button, growling into the evening air when she gasps and quickens, her body somehow accepting another two inches of me and then, son of a bitch, I’m fully seated. I’m pushing my whole cock into her and

she's looking up at me in wonder and relief, on the cusp of pleasure.

"Motherfucker, this little girl is sweet and ripe," I say, dragging my hand off her mouth and taking hold of her throat, triumph bursting in my sternum when she sobs as if she'd been waiting for a more intense show of dominance. I squeeze with increasing pressure, watching her pupils expand, her pussy getting slicker by the second. "Little girl wants to please her man, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"There's no greater pleasure in this world than your body, baby." I'm lost now, driving into her on the pallet, waves crashing in my ears, my hips going for broke. So close, I'm so close, and she's only getting more perfect by the second, driving me insane with her mewls and constricted muscles and smooth, wet flesh. "Take your pleasure from mine."

"I'm trying," she gasps. "It feels so good. I...it's right there..."

"What do you need to come?"

"I don't know." She wets her lips. "I need more...Daddy."

Responsibility swells inside of me and I react before my thoughts even form. With great difficulty, I pull out of her tightness and flip her over, reentering her from the back with a savage pump, reaching forward to grip her chin in my hand, holding her face steady while I speak in her ear, my cock rifling in and out of her from behind. Jesus, she's even tighter from the back and my head is alive with static, my balls on the verge of erupting every time they slap off the underside of her mound. "Did you wear those riding pants to tease your Daddy today? Huh? You've had me hard since the fucking sun came up." I bite the side of her neck. "Showing off your pussy like it's a trophy that every man would love to win. But I'm the only one who'll ever

know that the princess begs on her hands and knees like a peasant when Daddy unzips his pants.”

Damn. That does the trick.

She tenses up, her cunt pulling and rippling while her sides puff in and out, strangled cries filling the small, circular room. As soon as she hits her peak, I throw back my head and cease to hold back, my entire body jolting and flexing with every rope of seed she milks out of me, her pussy stroking me like a fist as she spasms, ownership of her flesh blazing in my bloodstream. Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, mine.

I have no idea how we end up entwined on the pallet, but I know the way she snuggles into me for safety and warmth gives me more purpose than I’ve ever had in my life.

More...love. Yes, love.

I’m in love with Greta, Princess of Leidenstein.

And I need to find a way to keep her.

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Greta

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Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 5:47 am

I hardly remember life before Conrad anymore.

I'm lying on my bed facing the ceiling, my body still flushed and slightly damp from my bath, hair in a messy top knot. Not a stitch of clothing to shield me from the view of the commander as he paces beside the bed. Slowly. He's decided to dress me this morning, but he's taking his time finding an outfit, and time honestly means nothing now, so who cares? I'm wrapped in a meandering fog day in and day out, every inch of me so sensitized, I can barely carry on a conversation because I'm just thinking of the next time he'll be inside of me.

The pulses in my neck, wrists and chest flutter madly, my chest rising and falling on anxious breaths just listening to his footsteps. They go from one side of the bed to the other, his sharp and reverent eyes examining my flesh. And I don't feel a hint of self-consciousness or worry that he doesn't like what he sees, because he praises me every moment we're alone. Pressing me into dark corners of the palace and groaning into my ear.

As soon as your appointments are finished for today, I'm going to sink into that little princess cunt and rattle your fucking teeth, I'm going to ride it so hard.

Or...

Daddy wants you from behind, baby. My patience is waning.

Or...

I would die for you, princess. Over and over. You only have to ask.

Before the commander arrived, I was insecure and afraid of my own shadow, plagued by memories of the incident. Now, I'm too exhausted from our nocturnal activities to dream. I'm not nervous about walking into a room full of impatient advisors or leaving the palace grounds. He's the wind at my back, the safety net beneath me, the stars above. And I am all those things to him. My heart beats with that truth, and right now, it's accelerating, because Conrad is trailing a finger downward between my breasts, over the dip of my navel, his hand splaying on my bare hip.

"You'll wear blue today," he says. "That dark blue silky blouse, tucked into a skirt. And a pair of black stockings that almost reach your pussy. The thinnest, barely there panties you own, so I can reach under your skirt in between meetings and feel it purring in my hand."

"Yes, Daddy."

His fingertip ghosts over the mound between my legs, making my stomach hollow, expand and hollow once again. "Have I mentioned that every single part of you is perfect?"

I nod, swallowing, tears melting into my eyes and moisture gathering between my legs. It's as though he controls my entire body, right down to my nervous system, my tear ducts and sex organs and bloodstream all belong to him to command at will, beating his name, pounding with abandon. "Yes, you've told me," I whisper.

"You're going to be told again, Princess," he says gruffly, wetting his mouth while looking me over, his gaze moving over my thighs and pussy and breasts. "Because I am overwhelmed by your beauty. By your feel. And if I'm going to be kept in this state of admiration all goddamn day, you're going to hear about it. Let's start with your pretty little toes and work our way up."

"Okay."

“Okay, you say, so casually...” He picks up my bare right foot and brings it to his mouth, his eyes closing on a shudder as he kisses my arch, then my toes, one by one. “Painted so innocently with pink, but they dig into my ass with such savagery when you’re getting fucked on your back, don’t they?”

He bites two of my smaller toes and I whimper. “I had no idea. I can’t...I can’t think—”

“When I’m practically assaulting you with the erection you’ve given me all day?”

“Y-yes.”

“Moving on to these legs.” He takes several deep, bracing breaths, swiping a few beads of sweat from his upper lip. “You cross them so demurely while performing your palace duties. One might think you don’t even know how to spread them for a man.” He settles a possessive hand on my knee and presses my thigh wide, exposing my most private flesh, which I’m sure is wickedly wet. “But I know the truth. You drop them open like a good girl when it’s time for me to eat.”

My hips lift involuntarily at those words, a sob wrenching from my throat.

It’s true.

I’ve found his mouth to be the closest I’ll ever get to heaven on earth.

I’m shameless about asking for his tongue. That rough way he creates friction against my clit while his long middle finger twists in and out of me. My God, it is divine.

“Look at all that pretty juice,” he rumbles, gripping my other knee and holding it open, my thighs well and truly spread for his attention now. “I’m supposed to be getting you dressed, little princess, but you can’t stop making my cock hard, can

you?”

“No,” I murmur, haltingly. “Not when you’re talking to me like this.”

“Sorry, baby, I could talk about your pussy all fucking day.” He pries my knees wider, his pupils blanketing his irises while he peruses me. “Explain how it gets tinier every time I fuck it, Greta. Maybe you’re swollen because I can’t resist long enough to give you a break. Or maybe I just get harder and thicker every time I’m offered your pretty, royal cunt, because I come away more obsessed every. Single. Time. But Jesus Christ, baby, it’s like fucking a virgin three times a day. You’re murdering me with that tight little thing.”

I’m squirming in the bed sheets now, a fine sheen of perspiration coating my freshly washed skin, my breasts heaving up and down, insatiable need rippling through my lower body in a way I know that is visible to him. He sees everything.

“We’re going to address your tits next,” growls the commander. “How they pout and jiggle every time you walk. How they bounce like you’re being railed every time you ride a horse. Do you know why I make your security team turn their backs while you ride now? Because they’re all thinking of taking turns with you in the field.” He leans down without warning and licks his tongue over the stiff peak of my left nipple, making me cry out, my nerve endings on the highest of alerts. “I was about to have a mutiny on my hands, all because of these barely legal tits. Fuck, I love them. I’m infatuated with them, but they only bounce for your Daddy, little girl, do you understand?”

“Yes,” I wail, reaching for Conrad, only to have him pin my wrists on either side of my head. “Please. Please. I can’t take any more.”

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“I haven’t even gotten started on your hips. How they buck and wiggle and drive me insane. Or your perky ass that slides right into my lap, like it was built to fit.” His voice drops to an unsteady rasp. “And my God, your face. I don’t even have words for it. Hell is a place where I can’t envision your eyes. Or your mouth. That would be the ultimate punishment. And son of a bitch, hell is what I deserve for what I’m about to do.” He reaches between our bodies and jerks down his zipper, rising up on his knees and positioning himself in a kneel above my head, his long, heavy shaft gripped in a fist. “Blame your succulent fucking mouth for the fact that you’re going to be late this morning. I need to get my dick inside of it, baby.” He groans brokenly, beating himself off with tight strokes. “You did this. You addicted me.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, my expression contrite as possible, my fingers playing with my stiff nipples and making him pant. “You better stuff it in and teach me a lesson.”

With an animal growl, he does exactly that, planting himself between my lips and slowly pumping forward, stretching my mouth wide, salt splashing against the back of my throat, his pleasure so immense that his legs shake, trembling the bed, and after only a week together, I already know from experience that the commander is on edge right now and will come fast, probably cursing and praising my existence in the same breath. And he speeds toward his peak now, choking on his own breath, his hips thrusting unevenly, the thickness of him spearing in and out of my mouth, his grunts echoing off the walls, his balls knocking against the underside of my chin.

“Princess. Princess.Princess,”he heaves. “I want three fingers in your cunt when I finish. Sink them in, now. Pump the way I’m pumping in your throat.”

Eagerly, I do as I’m told, barely able to fit three digits, gasping as the sensitivity he

created heightens, along with the pleasure of giving my Daddy what he needs, and my muscles stiffen at the same time as the commander's big body, release pulsing through me while warm male essence blasts the rear of my throat, his giant, hairy thighs flexing against my cheeks, squeezing, his cock fucking into me one final time, his explosions decreasing, decreasing, along with his tension, along with the hoarse calls of my name, until finally Conrad falls to the mattress beside me, breathing incredibly hard, but still managing to reach over and tuck me tight to his chest, his mouth whispering over my temples and cheeks, praising me, and I bask in it.

I bask in him. Our connection.

My love.

I hold onto it, vowing never to let it go.

Or let anyone rip it away...

eleven

...

Conrad

It takes every iota of willpower in my body to appear unmoved while observing Greta waltz on the other side of the room. This is the hour of her dance instruction, and the rate at which my heart pounds cannot be safe. Fucking besotted is what I am. She's wearing an actual ballgown and heels in order to learn the steps while dressed in the heavy fabric, her hair pinned in a crown of curls on top of her head. I don't know what to do with myself when she looks this beautiful. Problem is, she looks this beautiful all the goddamn time.

Morning.

Noon.

Night.

My sweat glands work overtime now, my skin uncomfortably tight as the princess is twirled by the female instructor, her movements graceful and delicate. The afternoon light streams in through the windows of the room, burnishing the crown of her head like a halo. Her chin is raised, proudly, her shoulders on display, the way she's liked having them recently. If her instructor noticed the love marks left by my mouth, she said nothing about them. Or perhaps she chalked them up to heat rash.

I'm dealing with my own heat rash now, forced to tug the collar of my shirt to allow some air to cool my hot neck...and then Greta smiles at me, and nothing short of jumping in an icy lake could lower my temperature now. God, she's extraordinary in everything she does. Riding, dancing, shooting. Caring for the animals at her sanctuaries, which we've been visiting more and more now that she's comfortable leaving the palace grounds.

As if that isn't enough, she fucks like a horny fairy tale.

I might be in charge between the sheets—or wherever I happen to get ten minutes alone with her—but I'm irrevocably wrapped around her pinkie finger. She slips deeper into the role of my little girl every time we're intimate. Last night, she sat on my lap in her nightgown and shyly asked me to teach her how to kiss, her tongue teasing and hesitant, her hips gradually starting to rock in my lap. We made out for hours, Greta gasping and blushing every time I tried to lift the hem of her nightgown higher than her knees, telling me that her pussy felt funny, but she's too good of a girl to let me see it.

By the time she quit playing games, all I could do was whip my cock out and come on the innocent white cotton, grunting like a bull in heat. She made up for her teasing this morning, however, letting me rail her face down over the bathroom sink, her harsh breaths fogging up the mirror, crying for Daddy through her teeth.

I'd be shocked if she isn't pregnant by now.

Christ, that possibility makes my pulse slam violently in my temples, my stomach muscles hardening with pride. With hope.

A week ago, I had no use for the royals.

Now, I can't fucking exist without the princess. I will suffocate without her—it's as simple as that. She's vital to my survival. I'm vital to hers, too. She tells me so with every touch, every smile, every spreading of her thighs. Every whisper in the dark. Every secret she tells me. Every time she clings to me in sleep.

I'm in down and desperate love with Princess Greta.

"Commander, do you dance at all?"

I'm so deep in a fog of Greta's making, I don't comprehend the instructor's question at first. "I'm sorry, what? Do I dance?"

Greta giggles at my utter incredulity. "I believe someone has finally succeeded in rendering the commander speechless."

"I only thought it might help to dance with someone taller. With sturdier shoulders." The instructor clasps her hands together beneath her chin. "After all, you'll be dancing with a prince soon."

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A snake coils dangerously in my chest, rattling its tail. It's easy when we're alone to pretend the real world isn't preparing an attempt to tear us apart, but the inevitable trip to meet Greta's potential match is always smoldering in the back of my head, scorching my temper whenever I think about her marriage to another man.

Hearing it spoken about out loud is insufferable.

My instinct is to take Greta and run. Start a life with her somewhere far beyond the palace walls. Never allow another man within ten feet of her as long as I live. But the more I consider that plan, the more I see it for what it is. A selfish fantasy. Wishing to take her away from this safe, leisurely life, one which leads to her becoming queen someday.

Maybe she wouldn't want to run away from that. With me.

Maybe she wants to marry a prince, not a bodyguard.

I'm afraid to ask her and find out.

I'm also very sure that I will kill this prince if she goes through with a wedding, which could lead to me being put to death, in which case I won't be able to be with her, either.

What the hell do I do?

Ignoring the fire raging out of control in my esophagus, I cross the floor in Greta's direction. "I'll dance with the princess." I take Greta in my arms, lowering my voice

so only she can hear it. “I’ll do anything for the princess.”

“Perfect,” says the instructor behind me. “His height makes your posture even more perfect, Princess. Now.” She begins to clap a beat. “Lead the way, Commander.”

It’s a good thing I’ve been watching these lessons for a full week or I would have no fucking clue how to proceed here. But not being capable of tearing my eyes off Greta has paid off, because I lead her in a sweeping box step, our hands clasped tightly, my left one meant to be resting in the center of her back, but I slip my fingertips inside of her dress, instead, watching her pupils dilate in response.

“I did not see this coming,” Greta laughs breathlessly. “You’re quite good. Did you learn as a child?”

“This is my first time.”

“Impossible.”

“I might not be an expert at dancing, Princess,” I say against her temple, “but I know how to anticipate your body. How it moves. How to keep it close.”

“I see,” she murmurs, her chest rising and falling a little faster now against mine. “You’re an expert on my body.”

“Do you dare disagree?”

“Oh, no. I agree. Thoroughly.”

Holding her like this in the sunlight, out in the open, is flooding me with warmth. With the kind of contentment that I didn’t know was possible. Almost, at least. There is a prince waiting in the wings to take her away from me. “If we were just two people

who met at a fancy ball,” I rasp, “what would you say to me?”

She purses her lips. “I’d say, thank you for your service, Commander. And then I would inquire about your hobbies, obviously.”

“Obviously.” I smirk against the side of her face, inhaling her perfect scent. “And I would say, chasing around an adorable princess. Hunting the palace for dark shadows where I can get a fix of her mouth.”

Her breath catches. “Is my mouth so addictive?”

“A life without your mouth is a life of poverty.”

“I suppose I should continue to donate to your cause, then,” she breathes, pressing closer, in a way I know will not be considered appropriate in front of the instructor, but I don’t have the willpower to keep us the correct distance apart. All I can do is fit her hips to mine and let her witness the results of her flirting—aka my stiff and heavy inches. “Would you please excuse us a moment, Millie?” she asks the instructor, who walks out of the room without a word. “Conrad?”

My name spoken in Greta’s voice is like a choir of angels. “Yes, Princess.”

“I don’t want to marry a prince,” she whispers, her fingertips digging into my shoulder. “I don’t want to meet him at all.”

My heart booms so severely, I miss a step, hope turning my legs weaker than I’ve ever felt them. “I know why I don’t want you to meet the prince, Greta. But why don’t you want to meet him?”

“You go first.”

“I’ve told you before.” I slide my hand up into her hair, gripping a section of her curls until she gasps. “Your marriage to another man will render me insane.”

“Yes. And...I think our reasons are very similar,” she gasps. “I don’t want to meet the prince because my heart already belongs to a soldier.”

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Purpose and glory and determination harden inside of me like stone, but there's still a terrible echo of worry in the back of my mind. Her happiness and safety are my first priorities and yet... "You do belong to me, Princess. Allof you." I choke on the rest. "But as you said, I'm only a soldier. I can't give you this kind of life—"

"I don't care." She shakes her head. "All I need is you."

Her arms are around my neck now and I can't keep myself from sweeping her off the floor, rocking her in my embrace, absorbing the goodness of her. Reeling from the joy and relief of knowing I mean as much to her as she does to me. "I am sick with love for you, Greta. If you don't need this life, I will steal you from these walls tonight. But please be sure, because once you're committed to me, I will die before letting you go."

"Don't. Don't ever let me go." Her mouth is open against my throat. "I love you, too. I feel like I could drown from it."

"We leave tonight," I vow, gathering her tight to my body, wondering if she can possibly feel an ounce of the happiness coursing through my veins. "We start our life together tonight. Me and my princess."

"Yes—"

Trumpets sound in the corridor. They can only mean one thing.

The arrival of the queen.

Greta kisses my throat, squeezing my hand before putting distance in between us. It's everything I can do not to yank her back and make her tell me again—over and over—that she loves me and wants to spend her life with me. That she has deemed me worthy of her. But I hold on to my composure, standing at Greta's side as her mother sweeps into the room with a pinched expression.

I know that look from the battlefield. It means danger. And somehow, I know our plans are about to be ruined.

“Mother, what's wrong?” Greta asks, midway through her curtsy.

“It's the rebels. They've bested us in the north.” It's a rarity to see the queen so overwrought. “They're moving south now. Though we're doing our best to hold them, I fear our army will not be enough for long.” She squares her shoulders, takes a deep breath. “It's now more important than ever that we form an alliance with Prince Kristof's family. His father the king is very sick, which puts him in charge. Once you're married, the prince will be obligated to lend us his forces.”

It's a wonder I'm able to remain standing, my grief is so swift and severe.

Greta doesn't look at me, but she pales, blinking rapidly to waylay her tears and I can all but hear the lid seal shut on my coffin. She's going to marry the prince. The choice has been taken from us. She cannot run away with me, nor can I kill him as a last resort.

The safety of the country depends on it. She would never turn her back and allow lives to be lost. At the cost of my own sanity, I couldn't ask her to live with that guilt, even if I'm being sentenced to a life of misery at the very same time.

“We must travel at once. Within the hour,” the queen adds, looking at me. “Will you accompany us, Commander?”

“Where she goes, I go,” I say, automatically—and as the words leave my mouth, I know a truer statement has never been made. No matter how this ends, they will have to pry the princess out of my cold dead hands.

twelve

. . .

Greta

The journey to Quilton is short. Too short.

We travel west in a convoy of SUVs and I don’t have a single free second to communicate with Conrad, which puts me in a state of distress by the time we reach Quilton Palace. He guards me closely, but his expression is closed off, distant. I have no idea what he’s thinking, but I suspect he’s reached the same conclusion as me.

There is no way out of this.

I have to marry the prince to save Leidenstein.

There will be no running away from this responsibility. Maybe I was silly to believe I could shirk my duties as princess and wed for love. Maybe my happiness was always going to come second to the safety of the kingdom and I was unwilling to accept it.

I have no choice but to accept it now.

The Quilton palace is in the middle of a bustling metropolis, unlike Leidenstein. Their local law enforcement closes down the streets and we travel through the maze of buildings with a police escort, my mother tense in the seat in front of me. Before we left Leidenstein, I was besieged by stylists and cosmetologists, my hair fashioned in

tumbling curls and topped with a tiara, my gown a simple and respectful dove gray, the material soft against my crossed bare thighs that are sensitive due to Conrad sitting so close to me. And he moves even closer as we cross deeper into the city, his arm flexed behind me on the seat, his body shielding me protectively, eyes scanning the streets outside for threats.

I look up at him and try to communicate something, anything. That I love him no matter what happens. That I'm sorry we won't be able to run away together. That I'm scared. That I wish we were alone so our bodies could be joined one last time before I'm betrothed to another man. He only makes eye contact with me for the briefest of moments, but the utter madness there sends an arctic chill down my spine.

I face forward again, my heart pounding with extreme trepidation.

This day will not end well.

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As soon as we arrive, we are heralded by trumpets, then ushered inside by a group of staff in impeccable suits. Conrad does not leave his post beside me, his hand, as always, reassuring and protective on the small of my back. We're brought to a room with a long table that hails from a bygone century that sits in a room gilded with gold fixtures, frescos adorning the walls, a harpist playing gently in the corner.

The prince walks into the room without preamble and everything inside of me shrinks, revulsion roiling in my belly. He's not repulsive by any means. In fact, he's perfectly ordinary looking, a similar age to me, his smile somewhat blithe. He's inoffensive at first glance. Harmless. But he's not the commander who is currently gripping the back of my chair so tightly, the wood groans in his fist.

Everyone, save the queen, stands to welcome the prince, and after a swift bow to my mother, he approaches me with widening eyes.

"Princess Greta." Kristof reaches for my hand, and I have no option but to give it, allowing him to kiss the air above my knuckles. "Your beauty was greatly underexaggerated it seems. I'm humbled at the sight of such...magnificence."

It is not customary or appropriate to kiss my hand twice. Nonetheless, the prince bends down once more with his eyes glued to my face and this time, his lips actually make contact with my knuckles. But only for the briefest of seconds, because Conrad hauls me back, his arm banded around my midsection, his chest vibrating at my back.

"You will follow etiquette to the letter with my princess," Conrad bites off.

The whole room goes silent. Still as death.

I'm preparing to plead for Conrad's life to be spared when the prince shocks everyone by tossing back his head and laughing. "I believe I've just been scolded by a guard. How very humorous."

Okay, now he's repulsive.

"He's a decorated commander," I say. "A hero. He will be treated as such."

Kristof sobers. "Quite right, Princess Greta." The prince studies the man looming behind me, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, and I can only imagine the forbidding expression on Conrad's face. "His devotion to you is obvious."

"Good," Conrad grits out.

The prince opens his mouth to further address the situation with my bodyguard, but the queen interrupts. "I do believe it's time to discuss an alliance between our two countries through marriage. Will the king, your father, be joining us?"

"No," says the prince succinctly. "He has taken a turn for the worse, unfortunately. But no matter." He sniffs, swaggering his way to the head of the table and falling into the ornate chair waiting for him. "I'm more than equipped to discuss the matter of my own matrimony."

"I didn't mean to imply otherwise," Queen Ingrid says smoothly, folding her hands. "Unfortunately, time is a luxury we do not have."

"So I hear." The prince doesn't bother to hide the lust on his face when he looks at me, and I have to bite down on the impulse to turn and throw myself into Conrad's arms. "I don't need time to recognize what I want. If there are no objections, I will wed the princess tomorrow. The sooner we get working on an heir—"

“I object.”

Those two words from Conrad freeze my blood. “Conrad, no,” I whisper, turning around and finding nothing short of murder in his eyes. Directed at the prince.

“Send me north, Queen,” Conrad says, his chest hollowing and lifting with passion. “When I left my command, we were on the verge of extinguishing the uprising. There is a breakdown in command now, but I can reestablish the upper hand. Send me back. I will have the situation under control within a month.” He closes his eyes. “Please. She deserves better than this.”

“Hey,” whines the prince.

“Interesting.” The queen appears thoughtful, yet serious as she observes me and Conrad. “Does she deserve...youperhaps, Commander?”

“No. She deserves far better,” he rasps.

“There is no one better!” I shout.

And then I kick over a chair.

I don’t know what happens inside of me, but I shed my usual demure demeanor, and I pick up a glass of water and throw it at the nearest wall, shattering it into a thousand pieces, satisfaction blooming like a rose in my chest. “I’ll decide what I deserve!”

“I’d like to marry her even more now,” remarks Kristof with a weird giggle.

“You’d be wise to shut the fuck up,” growls Conrad.

A collective gasp from the palace staff. “You can’t speak to a prince like that!”

“I serve only Princess Greta.” Conrad’s fingers brush mine and it’s the only encouragement I need to smash my face between his pecs and wrap my arms around his thick waist. And if the staffers were gasping before, they’re on the verge of fainting now. It has been several hours since I’ve had physical contact with the commander, so when he runs a hand down my hair, I whimper and snuggle closer, my whole body tingling. “I will serve her the rest of my days if you allow it, Queen. Hell, maybe even if you don’t.”

“But you’ve just volunteered to be sent back to the front lines, Commander?” Ingrid says quietly, calmly. “There is no guarantee you’ll return.”

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While I despair over the possibility that my love could be harmed in battle, he bands an arm across my shoulders, kissing my temple hard. “If I die, I will return from the dead to be with her. Six feet of soil and a wooden box couldn’t stop me.”

“People from Leidenstein are strange,” whispers the prince.

I look back over my shoulder and see my mother appears indecisive...but not surprised. “You knew about us?”

“The walls of the palace tend to echo, and you haven’t exactly been quiet in the evenings. Or mornings. Or afternoons.” She gives us a dry look. “I must say, Commander, I approve of the way my daughter has flourished in your presence. Never did I expect to see her kick a chair. Or shatter a glass, let alone leave the palace with such confidence. She is braver now than before you arrived.”

“She has always been brave,” he says, kissing the top of my head. “She just needed the safety to let it show.”

Ingrid hums, studying us. “I find myself disinclined to wed my daughter to a prince who is clearly lacking in maturity...”

“Hey!”

“You are positive that you can turn the tide up north?”

“I will exhaust myself in the service of Leidenstein, Queen.”

She sighs. “Very well.”

Conrad releases a rocky exhale, relief washing over his features.

I am far from relieved, however.

“No,” I whisper, holding him tighter. “You’ve served enough. You shouldn’t have to go back and give more of your time. Your life.”

“I am gaining a life by going back, Princess. A life with you.”

“Please, no. No. I can’t stand it,” I whisper shakily. “I don’t want you in harm’s way.”

Conrad scoops me up into his arms. “I will leave for the front lines in an hour, Queen. Right now, the princess needs to be reassured.”

With that, the commander turns and marches out of the room.

“Oh sure, just use any available guest suites,” complains Kristof with a heavy dose of sarcasm. “Well, this certainly didn’t go as planned.”

No, it didn’t.

It went much, much worse, if you ask me.

Conrad disagrees. Vehemently.

And as he closes us in a dark room at the end of a long, marble-floored corridor, my body pressed back roughly to the door, his feasting mouth tells me exactly how much.

thirteen

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Conrad

Of all the bullets I've dodged in my lifetime, this one came the closest to killing me.

One month of service. That's all? Only four measly weeks and I will have this woman as my reward? I would have agreed to serve the rest of my life if only to stop her marrying that clown. That motherfucker who had the nerve to covet what is mine.

Mine.

One month and that claim will be official.

I am kissing the princess now, her tight body sandwiched between me and the door, her thighs circling my hips, tiara askew. We haven't fucked since this morning, so she's extra whiny in between thorough pillages of her sweet, young mouth, and without laying a finger on her, I know she's soaked straight through her panties.

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I'm going to give her what she needs, but fucking isn't the only thing on my mind. I don't like the tears in her eyes. I don't like seeing her fear for my safety.

We aren't leaving this room until she has her bravery back. Until she's confident.

"Don't go," she sobs against my mouth. "There has to be another way."

"There is no other way, baby," I gather her skirt up around her hips, massaging her outer thighs, then up to her hips, squeezing, before slipping around to her taut ass, gripping and kneading it, memorizing every inch of her I can for the dark, lonely nights to come. "I would serve forever knowing you're waiting for me."

"No." She rains kisses all over my face. "What if you get hurt?"

I consume her with a French kiss while dropping a hand to unfasten my pants, lowering my zipper to allow my cock to jut out, my sensitive head punching the seam of little cunt, causing her to cry out. "What do we say when you're scared, Greta?"

"Nothing gets through you," she whispers through swollen lips, her eyelids dropping to half-mast when I jerk aside the material of her underwear. "Not bullets, not acts of nature, not shrapnel or blades."

"That's right." I mash our foreheads together, looking her in the eye while I pump my cock home between her smooth, welcoming thighs, my balls already hard as fucking rocks. "Daddy is going to come home to you." I pull out halfway, driving myself back in while we both shudder, the hinges rattling to my left. "Daddy is going to come home from war to his little girl and her pretty, wet pussy. No one and nothing

will stop him.”

“I love my Daddy,” she murmurs haltingly, because I’m thumping her harder now, her sexy ass smacking off the door. “I love him so much.”

“I can tell, baby. That little flex of muscle when I’m balls deep tells me everything I need to know.” Ah Jesus, herecomes the groaning. I physically can’t stop myself from baying like a mating lion once she’s warmed up and taking all of me, her tightness stretched to capacity, suctioned around me like nobody’s business. I can do nothing but pin her to the door and pound my hard meat into her clenched fuck hole, her sexy catches of breath serenading my ear, her tits overflowing her neckline and shaking around. “While I’m gone, you keep these legs sealed up like a tomb. There will be no horseback riding until I’m home.” I bury my cock as deep as it will go and capture her chin, forcing it up. “I don’t even want a saddle in my place.” I thrust three times. “Nothing touches you here but me. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” she breathes, clenching around me, her legs restless, her back arched. “Yes, I promise. I promise. Do it harder!”

My hand slides from her chin down to her throat, clasping the delicate stem. “I’m warning you in advance, I’m going to come home from war and raid your body like a demon. You’re going to get my cock up, down and sideways before I’ve even taken off my muddy boots.” I’m shaking the door with violent fucks of my hips now, impaling my flushed and moaning princess to the door. “I might still kill him for touching your hand, Greta. So help me God. These hands are mine to warm in sleep, mine to top with a ring. They are the hands that will hold my children. No one else should ever touch them.”

“No one but you.”

“Who will guard you while I’m gone?” I bemoan into her neck, my voice cracking.

She lays kisses on my mouth, my cheeks, my chin, sweet to me even though I'm pummeling her like an out-of-control bastard. "I promise to keep myself safe," she hiccups. "As long as you keep yourself safe, too."

"I will," I vow, slamming up between her legs now, panting, driven into a frenzy by how she tightens up like the devil, but her voice grows more angelic, that combination pushing me to my limit. "Take my seed, little girl. Grow it for me while I'm gone."

She looks up at me through her lashes. "Better give me a lot, Daddy."

Every muscle in my body is seized by a spasm and I frantically rub her clit with the licked pad of my thumb, her head falling backwards, our orgasms colliding, the door shaking loud enough to be heard back in Leidenstein, my roar muffled by her sweet neck, the soft innocence of her cunt twisting around me, ruining me, forcing me to acknowledge what I'll be missing for a month, while also making me twice as determined to return to paradise while wave after wave of relief inundates me.

When our fevers cool and she's full of my come, the excess dripping down her inner thighs, I press my lips to her forehead. "Tell me you believe in me. That nothing in this world or any other will keep me from returning to marry my princess."

She looks up at me like I'm the only man in existence.

For her, that's exactly what I am.

"I believe in you, Commander," she whispers, her fingers busy twisting the lapels of my shirt. "Come home, so I can call you my husband."

Another spray of bliss catches me off guard and I fall against her, shuddering, my joy over being referred to as husband pooling on the floor while she gasps in delight, cooing into my neck and praising her Daddy's stamina and size.

“Fuck a month,” I pant, shaken. “I’ll be back in two weeks.”

Greta

I’m taking a bath when there’s a knock at my bedroom door.

“Princess Greta.”

I recognize the voice of one my mother’s assistants, but there’s something different in his tone of voice. Something that has me rising from the bath, water and suds sluicing down my torso and legs. It sounds almost like...gravity. Excitement.

“Yes?” I call, quickly reaching for a towel.

“The commander has returned.”

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My eyes fill with hot tears, a pressure descending on my chest. I let out a gulping sob and leap from the tub, drying off with haphazard hands and donning a royal blue silk robe. I'm shaking so severely, I can barely function, my heart bursting with relief and joy. We've been getting updates on the progress in the north and Conrad's presence has indeed made all the difference, our forces pushing the rebels back to the northern border, the threat diminished in a matter of weeks.

I've missed him in a way that should be examined by science. I have been a helium-filled balloon with no string, bobbing aimlessly, trying not to think of him being wounded or worse, forced to sedate myself on several occasions, the crushing fear of him not returning became so difficult to control. My soul misses him. My body aches and grows wet at night without relief, his scent on my sheets the only thing anchoring me to reality.

Now, I run barefoot down the hallway in nothing but my robe, my hair coming loose from the bun I'd fashioned on the top of my head, gasping sobs issuing from some deep, dark, lonely well inside of me. I reach the stairs and bolt down them at a breakneck pace, turning on a dime at the bottom, bypassing my horrified mother to get outside.

Get to Conrad as fast as possible, by any means necessary.

There he is, limping and disheveled, just after climbing from a military vehicle. He's grown a beard and there's an air of weariness about him, but it vanishes as soon as he sees me. His heart leaps into his eyes and he stalks haltingly in my direction, opening his arms. "Greta," he whispers, then his voice lifts to a shout. "Greta."

I throw myself into his arms, clinging to him like a second skin, legs around his waist. His face buries in my neck, inhaling my scent with a desperation that only makes me hold him tighter. “You’re back. You’re back. You came back to me.”

“Of course I did.” His kisses race up the side of my neck, his hands burrowing in my hair to tilt my head, making room for his mouth. “I don’t break promises to my princess.”

“No, you don’t. That’s only one of the reasons I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby. And you dared to grow more beautiful while I was slaying the men who put a brand on your precious skin?” He growls against my ear before lowering his voice to a rasping whisper. “As soon as I get a few things straightened out, I’m going to tie you to your fancy princess bed and eat your tight pussy until the horrors of war fade from my mind and there’s only you, my perfect girl.”

“I won’t let you think of them,” I whisper, nuzzling his nose with mine, sipping at his mouth. “And I won’t hear of my pleasure coming first. I’m going to bathe you and feed you and ride your cock all night, because that’s what a hero deserves.” We groan into a kiss that leaves me trembling in his arms. “That’s what my husband deserves.”

He hisses through his teeth, followed by a choked sound, color suffusing his face. “You know what that title does to me, Greta.”

“Do I?” I say innocently, biting my lip.

With that, Conrad is marching toward the entrance of the palace, and I know I’m minutes from being ravaged like a virgin sacrifice on my back. I guess the hero’s treatment will have to wait, now that I’ve provoked him. How terrible.

Before Conrad can carry me inside, he calls to my mother. “Get a priest here by

tonight. I've kept my vow to you, now I'm keeping the princess."

She salutes him. "That was the plan all along, you know," she sings to Conrad's retreating back. "Thank you for following it."

Conrad and I trade a look of shock on the way up the stairs, soaking in the revelation that my mother orchestrated our meeting...and quite possibly never intended for me to marry the prince. "I'll never question the queen again," Conrad vows.

"Me either, apparently."

And that's the last time we speak for hours, except to moan and whimper and grunt, because our mouths are occupied, locked in kisses that taste like eternity, while my future husband expends himself vigorously on top of me, my knees tucked under my armpits, the bed scraping up and back on the stone floor, causing lights to flicker throughout the palace.

"Don't ever leave me again," I whisper against his sweaty chest many hours later.

His hand splays on the back of my head, pressing my ear tighter to his rioting heart. "Never, my princess."

epilogue

...

Conrad

Five Years Later

I often joke that I'm married to two women.

One is a prim and proper princess.

The other milks cows in ripped jeans with dirt streaks on her cheeks.

After I was given the divine honor of marrying my Greta five years ago, her belly started to swell with my son almost immediately. I was a beast during those nine months, snarling at everyone who dared to tax my girl in the slightest. But as time went on and she gave birth to Conrad Jr., I realized having a child made her a fiercer warrior than myself.

Thus, when we started spending more and more time at my farm, I relented in allowing her to take on some chores, such as feeding the animals, helping me plant crops and harvest them during the appropriate season. Oftentimes, she performed these tasks with our son strapped to her back and I would sit and marvel at the phenomenon I married.

My awe of Greta increases daily, as does my love. My devotion.

My hunger.

I stand on the porch of our farmhouse now as the sunset paints the sky red, watching her through the window, watching her buns flex in the tight red panties she's wearing, her cropped sweatshirt showing off the small of her back and a single shoulder, that sexy indentation of her lower spine. Sometimes, like now, I need to get myself under control before returning home or she ends up with rug burns on her knees.

I take a deep breath and adjust my heavy cock, wondering how she'll want it tonight. The kids are with their grandmother at the palace and there's no holding back when we're alone. I almost fucked her right here on the porch this morning because she kissed me goodbye a little too long and got my dick worked up. It's been throbbing for her all day.

Unable to stop myself, I press my forehead to the glass and go back to watching my gorgeous wife, my hand twitching with the need to wrap all that golden hair around my fist, to feel her skin against mine, make her breathing pattern change. Scatter. I love her in gowns and frippery, but my God, I am obsessed with her in casual clothes, especially when she's wearing so little of them, letting me see what's mine.

Letting me see the fingertip bruises on her backside.

She bends over now to put something in the oven, and I press my bulge to the window frame, jerking my hips in agitation. I can't always allow my obsession to show at the palace like this, especially during televised or high attendance events—and the freedom I have tonight only fuels my need for Greta, knowing she screams twice as loud when we fuck at the farm.

We split time between the palace and the farm these days, enjoying a life of luxury on one end, hard work on the other. It helps us both keep things in perspective and gives our sons—there are two of them now—a chance to escape the confines of royalty every so often. There are still guards stationed all over the farm with binoculars and rifles, but so be it. All part of being married to a princess.

And my God, she's my princess in more ways than one. She's more comfortable now voicing her opinion, making herself heard in royal proceedings. She walks with her chin higher, her confidence shining from within. Sometimes I can barely maintain my balance carrying all the pride I feel in her.

She's also my princess in the bedroom.

Obedient, eager to satisfy, uninhibited while somehow being...sweet.

So sweet.

Inside, Greta strips off her sweatshirt and I see she's in a ruffly, red strapless bra that matches her panties and I can't hold on any longer. With my briefs full of lead, I cross the porch and jerk open the door, ducking into the farmhouse.

Greta turns with a gasp, backing up against the counter, as if I'm an intruder, her tits heaving up and down with alarm, barely contained within that flimsy bra.

My wife is in the mood for games, I see.

Christ, she keeps me on my toes. So adventurous. So exciting.

Her playfulness only infatuates me more. More and more with no end in sight.

"Please don't hurt me," she gasps, picking up a knife from the counter.

Oh God, my cock is stiff as iron. She's asking for a rough round of lovemaking tonight and I'm all too willing to provide her with exactly what she wants. "Use that knife to cut off the bra, princess. Show me those royal tits and I might consider letting you go."

"But...but that's quite improper, sir."

I raise an eyebrow. "Shall I come over there and do it for you?"

"No," she whimpers, biting her lip. Sliding the sharp edge of the knife between her skin and the see-through material, she slits the band holding it together, her firm breasts bouncing out, her delicious nipples puckered with lust. "Can I go now, sir?"

I unzip my pants slowly, deliberately, watching her eyes fill with mock concern, her butt rattling the cupboards in an attempt to get further away, but there's nowhere to go. "I'm still not sure if I should let you go free, Princess. I'm thinking." I hum for a moment. "Cut those cock tease panties off and I'll consider it."

"I don't mean to tease," she whimpers.

"Nonetheless, that's what you did. That's what you do when you make your pussy look so nice and inviting, isn't it?" I drop my voice. "Cut the panties off."

"But—"

"Now."

The light catches the moisture on her inner thighs, letting me know she's seriously turned on, and that clue keeps me in character, my aim, as always, to satisfy Greta. My angelic, brave and relentlessly sex-hungry wife.

Greta slits the panties at the leg hole, and they drop to her ankles.

The guttural sound I make isn't an act. "She's even more inviting when she's bare."

"Please, sir...I've never..."

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“You’ve never what? Had a man?”

She bows her head, cheeks enflamed.

“That might have to change tonight, Princess.” I reach into my jeans and wrap a hand around my cock, bringing it out into the open. “After all, look what you’ve done.”

“But—”

“Hold out your hand,” I say firmly, closing the distance in between us with slow, measured strides, continuing forward until I’m breathing against the crown of her head, my hips carrying forward until my inches slide into her waiting palm. “Hold it tight and stroke it, nice and easy.” I cup her right tit in my hand, kneading the high mound in my palm and listening to her whimper. “If you do a good job, maybe I’ll let you go.”

She blinks up at me, throat working with a swallow as she begins to pump my cock. “Y-you’re never going to let me go, are you?”

“You don’t really want me to, do you?” I drop a hand to the space between her legs and give my wife’s cunt a few light slaps, before plunging two fingers deep, holding them there and speaking hoarsely into the hair above her ear. “You dressed like this because you need something, don’t you?”

Christ, she’s soaked. “I...I...”

“Were you trying to attract a Daddy in your little red panty set?”

She bites her lip shyly.

“There’s my answer,” I rasp. And with my cheek pressed to the overhead cabinet, teeth bared like an animal, I drag her up and position her ass high against the lower cabinets, thrusting myself home into my wife’s hot, slippery pussy, slamming her butt up against the wood. “Admit out loud that you dressed up to tempt me...and I’ll gladly be your Daddy, baby.” I move my hips in a circle, my jaw slackening over the feel of her. “I’d thank God every day for pussy this tight.”

She leans in and whispers in my ear like she’s telling a secret, her tone solemn. “I wanted a Daddy,” she confides, her thighs opening another two inches.

“You’ve got one,” I grunt, burying myself in her over and over and over, her knees lifting and opening to let me sink deeper, my name eventually chanted on her lips like a prayer, begging me to claim her harder. “This claim doesn’t get any deeper, Greta,” I choke out, feeling her orgasm surround me, her cunt pulsing, pulsing, pulsing while she thrashes between me and the cabinets. “You’re mine for life.”

“And the next one,” she gasps into my neck, stroking my shoulders and laying adoring kisses on my jaw. “And the one after that...and the one after that...”