



# The Prince's Secret Twins

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** After tirelessly fixing everything for a year, Crown Prince Joran Al-Sintra returns craving only one thing: his lover, Tila Ayad. He's had enough of being apart from her; he needs her beside him. But upon reaching her doorstep, he's greeted not by her familiar presence but by the aftermath of a whirlwind—her once pristine home is now a chaotic mess. To his delight and surprise, he discovers that amidst the chaos, Tila has given birth to twins.

Tila, exhausted from a harrowing pregnancy and sleep-deprived nights, resists when Joran barges back into her life. Despite her doubts and fatigue, she can't resist the fiery passion that still smolders between them. With just one touch, Joran reignites her desire, making her forget her determination to keep him at bay.

Yet, as their passion reignites, Tila wrestles with trust. Will Joran stay this time, or will he disappear again, leaving her heartbroken once more? Amidst the flames of desire, they must confront their fears and uncertainties to find if their love can withstand the storm.

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

## Chapter 1

The sharp crack of the slap shattered the air, tearing Joran Al-Sintra, Crown Prince of Lativa, from his thoughts. He staggered back in surprise, even though the slap didn't hurt. It was the raw, unexpected force of the reaction that left him reeling in disbelief. The woman before him, dark eyes blazing with an unspoken fury, seemed like a tempest barely contained.

Perplexed, Joran scooped Tila into his arms and carried her into the quaint house she had inherited from her grandmother. As he turned to shut the door, his attention was caught by the chaos of her once-pristine garden. What had previously been a picturesque haven for berries and nuts now resembled more of a tangled jungle. The blackberry canes, once elegantly arching over the sidewalk, seemed to have taken on a life of their own, while the hazelnut bushes appeared to have had a run-in with a particularly mischievous squirrel. Even the fig trees, usually standing with a semblance of order, now looked as though they were plotting their escape. Whatever had happened in Tila's life, it had turned her yard into a wild, unruly kingdom.

And his woman had also transformed into someone he didn't recognize. Joran's stomach clenched at the additional evidence that something was wrong. Someone had hurt Tila. Clenching his jaw tightly, he kicked the door shut and carried his woman into her small den.

That's where he found more evidence that something was seriously wrong.

Amidst the disarray, piles of laundry towered like precarious skyscrapers, each heap teetering between the realms of cleanliness and questionable hygiene. A laundry

basket in the corner raised suspicions, resembling more of a makeshift bassinet, while blankets strewn across the floor played host to a chaotic congregation of baby toys, as if a tiny rebellion had taken place in the midst of the domestic chaos. It was a scene straight out of a sitcom, where order had long since surrendered to the whims of entropy—and perhaps a mischievous infant or two.

The realization struck Joran like a bolt of lightning. Was Tila babysitting someone's child? It would certainly explain the scattered toys and laundry chaos. After all, Tila was known for her boundless generosity and willingness to lend a helping hand to anyone in need. Her heart overflowed with love for anyone she encountered, making it entirely plausible that she had opened her home to care for another's little one.

Before the upheaval in Lativa nearly eleven months ago, Joran had contemplated having a serious conversation with Tila. He felt the urge to caution her against being so overly generous, to warn her about the dangers of letting others take advantage of her kindness. Tila's eagerness to help knew no bounds, but Joran understood all too well that the world could be a harsh and unforgiving place. It was rife with individuals looking to exploit the unsuspecting, especially someone as altruistic as Tila, living alone in her own sanctuary.

With Tila cradled in his arms like a confused, overwhelmed kitten, Joran lowered himself onto the worn grey sofa, trying his best to navigate the precarious landscape of laundry mountains on either side. Settling Tila in his lap, he tightened his embrace, hoping to offer some semblance of comfort. But instead of calming her, his attempts seemed to amplify her sobs. It was a scene straight out of a melodramatic soap opera, with Joran playing the role of the bewildered hero, lost amidst a sea of chaotic laundry and overwhelming, unexplainable emotions.

Despite her current disheveled state, looking like she'd wrestled with a tornado and lost, Joran was still highly aware of his inexplicable attraction to Tila. It was a puzzle he'd never managed to solve. From the very first moment he'd laid eyes on her, there

was an undeniable pull, a magnetic force drawing him to her, like a moth to a flame. He vividly remembered that surreal night when he'd found her conversing with her plants at midnight, a sight that had simultaneously bewildered and captivated him. While he and his special forces team were busy with covert operations, Tila was engaged in her own nocturnal rituals, oblivious to the chaos of the outside world.

During those adrenaline-fueled nights, when danger lurked around every corner, it was Tila who had become his sanctuary. She'd had a knack for taming the wild beast within him, soothing his restless soul with her gentle presence. Despite the dire risks in coming back, Joran had found himself irresistibly drawn back to her side, crossing borders and braving dangers, all for the chance to bask in her exhilarating aura one more time. It was as if she held the secret to his sanity, or perhaps just the key to his heart—though Joran suspected it was probably both.

And amidst the chaos of his mind, tangled with worries about his older brother Khal, it had been Tila who had occupied his thoughts more than his next breath over the past several months. It was a perplexing sensation, feeling like he'd been missing a limb without Tila in his life. While grappling with Khal's troubles over the past several months and navigating the complexities of his own life, Joran hadn't been able to shake the absurd longing he'd felt for Tila, a longing that seemed to defy all reason and logic.

"It's okay, love," Joran soothed, rubbing a hand over her back, trying to calm Tila so that he could ask her what was wrong.

As he murmured words of comfort, Joran surveyed the scene, taking in the tumult that had overtaken Tila's once-orderly life. To his right, a towering stack of unopened mail stood like a monument to procrastination, threatening to topple at any moment. Some envelopes had already surrendered to gravity, scattering across the floor like confetti from a mailman's parade gone awry.

Joran couldn't reconcile the chaos surrounding him with the image of the responsible Tila he knew. After all, she was a small business owner who catered to her clients' needs and requests with meticulous care. As a website developer, he understood the dedication and self-control that was required for remote work, yet Tila had managed to grow her business from scratch solely through word of mouth. It was a testament to her skill and reputation, each satisfied client becoming a beacon of praise for her talents.

But now, as he sat amidst the disarray of her home, it seemed like a glitch in the matrix. How could someone so organized and successful let things spiral so badly out of control like this?

The tension coiled tighter around Joran's chest as he grappled with the nagging question: What had happened to Tila? He couldn't shake the gnawing guilt that clawed at him, a reminder of his prolonged absence. He knew he had stayed away for far too long, but each attempt to steal a moment for a visit had been thwarted by some pressing matter, as if fate conspired to keep him away.

And it wasn't just a matter of dropping by for a casual visit. Tila didn't reside in Lativa; she lived across the border in Uftar, a country secretly governed by Prince Amit el Sandir —a formidable figure who commanded both respect and wariness. While Uftar wasn't openly hostile toward Joran's government, it certainly wasn't rolling out the welcome mat either. Joran couldn't afford to underestimate the complexities of crossing into Uftar, where every step carried the weight of political tension and potential danger.

Secretly, Joran harbored a grudging respect for Crown Prince Amit. The man had taken on his responsibilities around the same time Joran's father had tragically passed away, leaving Joran's older brother, Khal, in charge of Lativa. It had been a delicate dance of diplomacy and power dynamics, one that Joran and his brothers navigated with caution and a healthy dose of admiration for their Uftar adversary.

As Joran kneaded the tension from Tila's shoulders, he couldn't shake the sense of bewilderment that clung to him like a stubborn shadow. Here he was, tasked with making crucial military decisions for his brother, yet he found himself utterly perplexed when it came to unraveling the mystery of Tila's distress. What was he supposed to do now? His midnight visits to her place had come to an abrupt halt when he'd taken on the responsibility of aiding his brother. It was a sacrifice he had made willingly, but now he grappled with the consequences.

But amidst the constant rush of his duties, Joran couldn't ignore the undeniable pull he felt towards Tila. He couldn't bear the thought of not seeing her again, and he hated her current state of distress. She'd been his anchor in a stormy sea of uncertainty, his rock when the world seemed to crumble around him. Leaving her now, when she needed him most, was simply out of the question. After all, how could he abandon his woman when she was obviously in such turmoil? It was a conundrum that left him feeling torn between duty and desire, uncertainty clouding his every thought.

"It's okay, love," he whispered, then kissed the top of her head. "Everything is going to be okay. Everything is fine." He looked at the pile of mail again and noticed the bank statement. Unopened. The bank statement was the account that Joran had set up for Tila. Looking around at the mess of her home, it was obvious that she hadn't been spending the money he'd set up for her.

Her soft, sweet body shifted against him, pulling his focus away from the mail. He looked down at her, his heart aching at the puffy, swollen eyes. "Not...okay," she whispered, then hiccupped and wiped her tears with one hand while the other remained fisted against his dark shirt. "Never okay again." Those words, muttered in a hushed, tender voice, made his stomach clench even tighter.

Without warning, his beautiful, sweet, vibrant Tila began to relax. The torrent of sobs gradually subsided, and her head gently lolled against his shoulder. Joran felt a

glimmer of hope that perhaps the worst was over, but as he looked down at her, he realized she had fallen asleep.

It was a moment of bittersweet relief. On one hand, the cessation of tears signaled a respite from her distress. On the other hand, the sight of her peaceful, sleeping form stirred an unexpected mixture of emotions within him. He couldn't help but marvel at her vulnerability, even in sleep, and the tenderness of the moment tugged at his heart.

As he watched over her, Joran's resolve solidified. No matter the challenges he faced or the sacrifices he had to make, he knew he couldn't bear to let Tila face her demons alone. She was his anchor, his sanctuary. He'd had to be away from her for too long. It didn't matter that she hadn't answered any of his text messages. He couldn't leave her again. And now he was going to ensure her well-being, even if it meant navigating whatever the hell was going on in her life.

Still confused despite his resolve, Joran looked around, trying to find clues as to what had happened to his lovely Tila.

After several moments of looking around, Joran gently carried her into the bedroom. As soon as he entered the familiar room, he paused, shocked by additional evidence of whatever trauma she'd endured. Whatever had happened, maybe it was the reason she'd stopped communicating with him.

Amidst the chaos of Tila's disheveled bedroom, one thing immediately stood out: her obsession with a perfectly made bed. If Tila wasn't in it, the bed was made. His Tila made a point of always having her bed made. However, the bed was currently a mess! The sheets were tangled while the soft, cotton blanket trailed onto the floor. There were towels on the floor and only one pillow perched precariously on top of the bed. Three other pillows were...nowhere to be found.

Where once her grandmother's hand-stitched quilts adorned the walls like cherished

trophies, they now lay in disarray, in haphazard piles on the floor and the rumpled bed, as if staging a protest against their mistreatment. And more laundry! The clothes seemed to have declared a mutiny, taking up residence on the hardwood floors like an invasive species.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

And then there was the velvet chair—an unlikely survivor amidst the wreckage of Tila's bedroom. Tila had told Joran the story about how she'd rescued it from the side of the road, a Cinderella story in the world of furniture. With her DIY skills on full display, she had transformed it from rags to riches, albeit with a few rough edges still lingering in the form of unfinished upholstery hidden on the back of the chair. But Tila had laughed off any criticism, her eyes sparkling with pride and amusement at her own handiwork. After all, who needed perfection when one had personality?

Laying her gently down on the bed, Joran plucked one of the quilts from the tangled mess on the floor and carefully laid it over her, tucking her bare feet tenderly under the blanket and kissing her forehead.

Once he'd straightened up, Joran looked down at Tila, noting how pale she was. She sighed in her sleep, then tucked her small hands under her cheek.

Joran stared at her for a long moment, remembering the way she'd slept with that cheek against his shoulder so many nights in the past.

Well, sleeping was a bit of a stretch. She'd rested in between bouts of making love with him. They'd been voracious for each other from the beginning and that need had never waned. In fact, the better he'd gotten to know Tila, the more his desire had grown.

Stepping out of the bedroom, he pulled the door nearly closed, then he went in search of answers.

Before Joran could take another step, a faint, unfamiliar sound emanated from the

second bedroom, sending a shiver of alarm down his spine. He scanned the room, his mind racing to identify the source of the noise. Could there be an intruder? The thought ignited a surge of adrenaline, heightening his senses and sharpening his focus.

Instinctively, he reached for the pistol holstered at his side, tensing in anticipation. He contemplated calling for his guards, but the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins drowned out any rational thought. He relished the familiar thrill of danger, the electrifying sensation of being on high alert. It was a feeling he had sorely missed—the surge of adrenaline, the heightened awareness, the exhilarating dance with danger.

Every fiber of his being was primed for action, his eyes darting from shadow to shadow, scanning for any sign of threat. In that moment, Joran was a predator, his instincts honed to a razor's edge, ready to confront whatever danger lurked in the darkness.

He heard the sound again. It was definitely coming from the second bedroom. Whoever was in there, the sounds didn't seem...human. At least, those weren't sounds that he'd ever heard from a human he'd ever met. It was more of a squeak or a squawk. A wild animal? Tila's home had been her sanctuary and she'd worked hard to maintain the residence. But obviously her world had changed dramatically. The Tila he'd known would never let her home become this messy.

With stealthy precision, Joran approached the door to the second bedroom, each step a calculated maneuver in the shadowy game of cat and mouse. As he gently nudged the door open, his muscles tensed, poised for a potential battle. In that tense moment, he found himself teetering on the edge of anticipation, almost craving the rush of violence.

It was a familiar sensation, one he understood all too well. Joran was no stranger to

the art of combat, adept at navigating the labyrinth of physical confrontation. In the face of danger, he found solace in the clarity of battle. Not that his bodyguards would allow it. Not anymore.

In a strange twist of fate, the prospect of a physical skirmish held a certain allure—a welcome distraction from the bewildering chaos of Tila's unexpectedly disheveled home and the enigma of her distress. Amidst the clutter and confusion, the prospect of a straightforward brawl offered a brief respite, a temporary escape from the tangled web of emotions that had ensnared him.

With a nudge, the door swung open with eerie silence, revealing the dimly lit room cloaked in shadows. Joran's heart hammered against his ribs as he scanned the room, trying to pierce the darkness. But what he saw didn't quite compute—the room was furnished with not one, but two beds, a bizarre juxtaposition that added to the surreal horror unfolding before him. He struggled to reconcile the potential threat with the incongruous setting, a blend of fear and absurdity churning in his gut.

That's when he heard it again—the strange squawk followed by a barely noticeable movement. His gaze dropped lower and there it was—a sight that nearly sent him stumbling backward in disbelief.

A tiny bundle squirmed in the crib, barely visible in the dim light. Joran blinked, trying to process what he was seeing. Holy hell, was that...a baby?!

The absurdity of the situation threatened to overwhelm him, a bizarre mix of horror and humor playing out in the cramped confines of Tila's bedroom. Here he was, a trained warrior, caught off guard by the most unexpected of adversaries—a squirming bundle of innocence amidst the chaos of the cruel, unforgiving world.

Joran stared at the tiny bundle in the crib, struggling to comprehend the surreal scene unfolding before him. Had that baby really made the sound? Or was there some other

threat still hiding amidst the shadows? His grip tightened around his firearm in a futile attempt to regain control in the face of the inexplicable.

But as he scanned the room in a desperate bid to assess the threat, his gaze landed on the second crib. Within it was another baby, peacefully slumbering, oblivious to the world around them. The juxtaposition of the two infants—one awake and wiggling, the other asleep and serene—was both unsettling and strangely comical.

Joran stared. Two babies, seemingly conjured out of thin air, had materialized in Tila's house. It was like a twisted nightmare, one that he couldn't wake up from no matter how hard he pinched himself.

Glancing over his shoulder at the closed bedroom door, a realization dawned on him. The pieces of the puzzle were slowly falling into place. Tila wasn't just a victim of chaos—she was babysitting someone's kids for extra cash. The absurdity of it all threatened to tip him over the edge into hysterical laughter, but the horror of the moment kept him rooted in stunned silence.

## Chapter 2

Joran glanced at Tila's half closed door. Through the narrow opening, he saw she was still fast asleep. The dark circles under her eyes told him that she hadn't been sleeping well.

Walking to her front door, he jerked it open and peered outside. He gestured to two of his guards, who immediately came forward.

"I need help," he announced quietly.

Both men straightened, exchanging puzzled glances as they peered into the dimly lit interior of the house. "What's going on?" one of them ventured, his voice tinged with

confusion.

Joran, still reeling from the baby revelation, couldn't resist the urge to blurt out the absurdity of the situation. "Babies," he declared, his voice colored with the solemnity of a seasoned commander facing down an imminent threat.

He marched back towards the second bedroom, expecting his guards to follow him. But to his irritation, he turned to find them still frozen in the doorway, their expressions a comical mix of disbelief and dread. It was as if he had just announced the impending arrival of a stampede of rabid monkeys.

"Get in here!" he hissed, attempting to inject some semblance of authority into his voice while still maintaining a hushed tone to avoid waking Tila.

But his orders fell on deaf ears—or rather, terrified ones. The guards exchanged hesitant glances, then shook their heads in unison. "Not a chance, Boss!" one of them protested, taking a cautious step backwards, followed by his equally reluctant companion.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

Joran could only watch in exasperation as his supposedly fearless guards retreated like scared rabbits, leaving him to face the bizarre baby situation alone. It was a far cry from the bravado he had come to expect from his elite team, and he couldn't help but feel a pang of amusement at their terror. After all, who knew that two tiny humans could strike such fear into the hearts of trained soldiers?

“The house isn't contaminated,” he hissed, then glanced nervously at Tila's doorway and listened. Her soft breathing continued. So did the odd sounds coming from one of the babies. “It's just an infant!”

The men shook their heads again, both visibly terrified.

"I need help.Now!" Joran barked, attempting to suppress the rising tide of panic threatening to turn him into a blubbering mess. The last thing he needed was to dissolve into a puddle of nerves while trying to soothe a tiny tyrant. He couldn't quite grasp why he felt so compelled to protect Tila from the crying baby, but one thing was certain: he was determined to do whatever it took to keep from waking her up.

Reluctantly, the two guards shuffled into the house, their movements akin to a pair of reluctant penguins trying to navigate a landmine. They made a valiant effort to silence the cacophony of clunking weapons against the doorframe, their faces a mix of terror and resignation as they reluctantly closed the front door behind them.

As the trio made their way deeper into the home, it was an almost comical sight to behold. Joran shed his tactical vest in a desperate bid to appear less intimidating to the tiny baby-dictator, but his guards remained clad in their fortress of black cargo pants and snug-fitting tee shirts, their muscles straining against the fabric. Their

bulletproof vests were adorned with an arsenal of gadgets and gizmos, like a walking Swiss army knife. And let's not forget the pistols—each man was armed to the teeth with enough firepower to take down a small army of teddy bears.

“What does it need?” Joran demanded in a low hiss.

The three stared down at the squirming infant, their expressions a hilarious mix of horror and terror. After a prolonged silence that bordered on ridiculous, they collectively shrugged, as if to say, “Well, this is certainly a new pickle.”

“Uh... Boss,” one of the guards finally ventured, his voice tinged with a touch of incredulity, “we do just about everything possible to avoid this kind of situation.” He shot a sheepish glance at his colleague, who nodded vigorously in agreement, their discomfort palpable.

It was a moment that begged for a laugh track, as if the universe itself couldn't resist adding a dash of absurdity to an already comical situation. After all, when trained soldiers found themselves at a loss for how to handle a squirming bundle of joy, you knew you were in for a wild ride.

Joran rolled his eyes. “I get that. But Tila is exhausted. You saw her earlier. She’s out of her mind.”

One of the guards burst into a grin, his thumbs tucked onto his pistol belt. “Does that mean I get to slap you when I’m tired?” Edin asked hopefully.

Algar dropped his head so his chin pressed against his chest in a pathetic attempt to smother his snort of laughter.

Joran rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “Try it and find out,” he growled.

They turned their attention back to the infant. The wiggles were becoming more frantic. The tiny body was wearing some sort of outfit that covered it from neck to toe. Joran wasn't even sure how to get the thing off.

"Maybe it's hungry," Edin suggested.

Joran nodded. "That's possible." They all stared at the infant for another long moment, no one moving. Joran knew that this was the time for leadership so he then turned to the man. "Go make a bottle."

Edin's eyes widened. "A what?"

"A bottle!" Joran snapped, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the doorway. "I'm sure there are supplies in the kitchen."

The man made a choking sound, then shook his head. "I don't know how to make a bottle!" the guard hissed.

Joran rolled his eyes and turned to face the man. "You figured out how to booby-trap a doorway last year with a paperclip and a pack of gum. I'm pretty sure that you can figure out how to make a bottle for a baby."

Edin stared at Joran for a long, horrified moment, then huffed. He shifted on his feet, still unsure. Finally, he turned and left the room, grumbling about never wanting to learn how to make a bottle.

"And be quiet about it!" Joran hissed after him.

Then he turned and stared down at the wiggly baby again. "Okay, so now what?" he asked his other friend and bodyguard.



Algar shrugged. They stared at the infant again. Finally, Algar suggested, “Maybe you should...pick it up?”

Joran suspected that the guard was right. But how? Joran knew that he was a big guy. Joran stood at six feet, threeinches tall. Plus, his hands were accustomed to beating people up and holding weapons. He’d been well trained in defeating an enemy and figuring out military strategy. Those skills wouldn’t help him in this situation. He wasn’t sure how to pick up a tiny human being without crushing it.

That’s when he thought about Tila. She was small. Well, not exactly small, but she was smaller than he was. And her breasts were soft and tender. His body tightened at the memories of just how soft and tender. Gently. And with his mouth and...okay, he wasn’t going to do that with a baby. Gross. But he could lift the infant with the same gentleness with which he would use to touch Tila. He was always tender with her.

Bending down, he saw the startled expression in the infant’s eyes and knew that the tiny thing was about to scream.

“It’s okay, little one,” he crooned softly. He remembered reading something about how a baby’s neck wasn’t strong so he put one hand under the baby’s head and the other under his bottom.

Before he could fully comprehend the absurdity of the situation, Joran found himself cradling the baby against his chest, like a bewildered new parent thrust into the deep end of childcare without so much as a floatie. The infant, too startled to cry, stared up at him with wide eyes, as if trying to decide whether to burst into tears or laughter at the sight of this imposing figure trying his hand at baby whispering.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

Desperate to maintain some semblance of control, Joran began bouncing awkwardly, as if auditioning for the role of a malfunctioning jack-in-the-box. He hoped the rhythmic motion would soothe the tiny being before it realized it should be utterly terrified of him. At the same time, he was desperately trying to hide his own rising sense of panic. After all, if this little maneuver figured out that he was just as terrified, all hell would break loose—quite literally, considering the potential for diaper explosions.

It was a scene straight out of a slapstick comedy, with Joran playing the role of the reluctant babysitter in a mismatched buddy comedy. And as he bounced and whispered soft, pointless reassurances in a desperate bid to keep the peace, Joran couldn't help but wonder if this tiny tyrant would be the one to finally crack his steely exterior.

He walked out into the den area, stepping over piles of clothes, mail, toys, and blankets. At certain points, Joran just kicked the items out of the way while continuing to bounce the infant in his arms. Baby and Joran stared at each other and he had to admit that the tiny human fascinated him. Those big, dark eyes stared up at him and there was a flop of dark hair on the baby's head.

"I think he's fussy because he needs a clean diaper," Algar grunted, his tone a comical blend of resignation and determination as he rummaged through the scattered items on the floor. With the precision of a seasoned detective unearthing a crucial clue, he straightened up triumphantly, brandishing a clean diaper. He offered the diaper to Joran, a gesture laden with expectation and apprehension.

Joran's eyes widened in horror at the sight of the diaper in his guard's outstretched

hand, his brain short-circuiting with the sheer absurdity of the situation. "I don't know how to change a baby's diaper!" he blurted in a hushed voice, as if confessing to a crime he hadn't realized he'd committed.

Algar shrugged and shook the clean diaper. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law. Therefore, you currently own that baby and it definitely needs a clean, dry diaper."

Joran knew that Algar was right, still, he really didn't want to do it. He'd heard horror stories of dirty diapers.

Again, Algar waved the diaper impatiently as Joran glared at him. But in the end, he took the diaper.

"Any tips?" Joran demanded, settling the infant onto the only space on the sofa that wasn't piled high with clean or dirty laundry.

"Look it up on the internet," Edin called from the kitchen as he busily fixed a bottle.

Algar did just that, smiling triumphantly when he found a video. It took over twenty minutes, and four torn diapers, but eventually Joran got a clean diaper on the...boy. Yep, this was a little guy with very strong, impatient legs. When the diaper was finally securely in place, Joran stood up, triumphant.

Only to have Edin shove a bottle into his hands. "It's ready."

Joran grumbled, but in truth, he found he wasn't ready to give up the little man. He was so adorable. And hungry! Joran watched with fascination as the little infant reached for the bottle eagerly,. As soon as Joran scooped the infant back into his arms, his tiny mouth wrapped around the tip and started sucking, staring up at Joran the whole time. The infant finished most of the little bottle quickly, his eyes fluttering as he drained the foul smelling stuff.

Joran was still holding the infant, the baby suckling every few moments to get the last drops of milk, when sounds started coming from the second bedroom again.

Algar sighed and, with a swift rip, released the Velcro bands on his vest, carefully setting it against the wall. “I got this one.” He turned to Edin. “Can you fix another bottle?”

Edin nodded and headed back into the kitchen. Joran half listened to the sounds, impressed when Algar found another diaper and started changing the second baby. He followed the video instructions carefully and it only took him five minutes start to finish. He looked up at Joran with a smirk.

“Think you’re an expert?”

Algar stood with the baby in his arms, then knocked a pile of laundry onto the floor. “I did it faster than you,” he said as he offered the second boy the bottle.

“Fine. You can handle all of the diapers while Tila sleeps.”

Algar’s smirk of triumph vanished. He stared at the small boy in Joran’s arms, then at the one in his arms. “No way, Boss. That’s not fair.”

Edin grunted and nudged a pile of laundry. “Why is there so much stuff everywhere?” he demanded. A moment later, he removed his vest and set it on the floor next to Algar’s. “I can’t handle this kind of chaos,” he said, then hefted a pile of laundry into his arms, sniffing suspiciously. “I think these are dirty.” He looked around. “Some piles are clean though.”

A moment later, he disappeared. Several minutes later, the sound of a washing machine churning preceded Edin’s return. “There was a load in the washing machine already and a dry load in the dryer.” And with that, he dumped everything on the

kitchen table and started sorting and folding. Most of the clothes were infant sized outfits, but some of Tila's clothes were mixed in. He hummed quietly as he folded the clothes. When he finished, he headed into the kitchen and started washing the dishes. He left the bottles on the counter, but figured out where the other dishes were stored.

"Boss," Edin called out softly, "are you sure that Tila is only watching these babies for someone else?" he asked as he returned to the den.

Joran reluctantly looked up from the now sleeping infant in his arms. "Of course she's only babysitting. These aren't her babies."

The man shifted slightly, his hands fisted on his hips as he looked around. "Are you sure?"

Joran rolled his eyes. "Tila wasn't seeing anyone last year. I'm sure of it."

Edin rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, but before he could say anything more, the buzzer on the dryer sounded. He hurried out of the room and the sound stopped.

Joran looked over his shoulder at the still-mostly closed door. No sound came from Tila's room.

Still, Joran looked around, wondering why the house was such a mess. In his mind, the babies couldn't be Tila's, because she would have told him if she'd started seeing someone else.

Of course, he hadn't had time to really speak to her other than the occasional short text message over the past several months. Now that he thought about it, Tila had been oddly quiet lately.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

In fact, now that he really considered it, he'd been so busy with trying to reorganize the military and take over the defense issues in order to ease some of his older brother's, Khal, burden, that he hadn't texted Tila in...well, months! Even in the beginning, she'd been pretty quiet, ignoring his phone calls and text messages.

He'd thought about her, of course. All the damn time! Plus, the dreams he'd had about her had made him ache to hold her. But the past six months or so had been absolute chaos. With Khal marrying Tasha and punishing the bastard who had tried to take her away, plus the military and his new responsibilities...!

Joran grinned, thinking about the abused face of Senator King at that last campaign rally. The man had tried to pretend that his bruised face was because he'd been attacked while trying to protect a woman. But the police were questioned and there was no report made about an attack.

Then the videos came out. Oh, that had been brilliant timing! Tasha was safely away from the vile man. So, the videos of King and another man talking about illegal activities, including one conversation about a murder, had been the perfect retribution. The police immediately looked into the conversation and connected the clues, tracing the conversation back to a specific murder. King was currently in prison, thanks to Tasha's recordings. The other man on the video had been a contract killer. Khal had sent two of his guards to find the man. He'd been secretly imprisoned and would remain in prison for the rest of his life.

So, in reality, it had been about nine months since he'd last seen Tila. Seven months since she'd last responded to a text message from him, and...!

“Boss,” Algar hissed, looking around with a stunned, thoughtful look, “are these your babies?”

Joran was suddenly wondering the same thing. Could these be his sons? Had Tila given birth over the past...how long had it been?

He looked around at the messy space. The toys, the cribs, the laundry everywhere...!

All three men came to the same, stunned realization.

“Let’s not panic until Tila wakes up,” Edin whispered. “But I’ll head outside and...?”

Joran nodded, his arms tightening slightly around the baby in his arms. “Yeah,” he rasped, numbly nodding. “Get more security in here. If these...are my children, then...!”

Edin slipped out of the house as silently as possible.

Joran and his men weren’t supposed to be here! As crown prince, if he were discovered in a foreign country, the danger was high. The Uftar government wasn’t openly hostile to Lativa, but the bastard ruling the country wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of the situation if Joran, or his babies, were captured here.

They needed to get out! They needed to get back across the border as quickly and quietly as possible. Joran needed to get Tila and his babies back to Lativa, into the palace, as soon as possible.

Edin came back inside, standing alertly by the chair. “More guards are on the way. But we should...!”

“I know,” Joran interrupted. He stood up and handed the baby to Edin. “I’ll talk to

her. Start getting ready to leave.”

Edin started moving. He set the sleeping infant down on the sofa, adding a pillow to keep the baby on the couch.

Joran went into the bedroom and stared down at Tila. She looked so beautiful and so clearly exhausted. She hadn't moved since he'd set her in the bed. Her hands were still cradling her cheek and those dark lashes lay against her pale skin.

Which made his job even more painful. But it had to be done.

Kneeling beside the bed, he shook Tila's shoulder gently.

When her lashes fluttered open, Joran's heart stopped as a dreamy smile broke over her lovely face. “Am I dreaming?” she whispered, reaching out to touch his cheek. “I must be dreaming.”

“Tila, love,” he started off, holding her hand in his own. “Are the babies my children?”

“Yes. They're cute, aren't they?”

Then her eyes fluttered shut again.

Joran pulled back, stunned by her confirmation. He had a child? Correction, two children? Two babies. Two sons!

He remained kneeling by her bedside for several long moments, too shocked to move. So, it was a surprise when Tila jerked upright, nearly screaming as she stared first at him, then around at her messy room.



“Rafi!” she gasped and swung her legs over the side of the bed. “Laith!” Then she ran out of the room. “My babies!”

Joran followed her with his eyes at first, but when his brain was able to process, he jumped up and followed her. He ran into her, literally, as Tila came back out of the second bedroom.

“My babies are gone!” she gasped.

“They’re fine, Tila,” he assured her. “You don’t remember greeting me at the door?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

She blinked and looked around, trying to shove him out of the way. But he was several inches over six feet and packed with muscle compared to her five feet, five inches of soft curves.

“My babies! I have to find my babies!” she gasped, still trying to push him out of the way.

That’s when Edin and Algar stood up, a tiny, sleeping bundle in each of their arms. “They have been fed and changed,” Algar assured her.

Tila ran to them, running her hands over their fleece covered bodies. “My babies,” she whispered, needing to touch both of them, but it was also obvious that she wasn’t sure which one to pick up first.

“Tila,” Joran snapped, pulling her attention back to him. “Calm down. The boys are fine.”

She spun around, her hair flying around her before settling back around her shoulders. Sort of. She’d pulled her hair into a band to keep it out of her face, but the band was losing the battle. At this point, only a small lump of hair was caught while the rest of it fluttered freely.

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down!” she hissed. “I’ve been caring for our babies ever since you walked out of my life, Joran! Laith and Rafi were nurtured in my body and I’ve done my best to care for them since they were born! Alone, I might add! Because you left me!”

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Tila,” he assured her, moving closer, aching to take her into his arms. “I didn’t know that you were pregnant, love.”

“Don’t you call me ‘love’ you bastard!” she yelled, then glanced nervously over at her infant sons. When they didn’t wake up, she glared up at Joran but lowered her voice. “Don’t you ever call me ‘love’! You don’t have that right! Not anymore. You walked out of my life one day and I don’t hear from you for months! You don’t reply to my text messages, you don’t answer my calls! You just...abandon me, alone and terrified for the entire pregnancy!”

“I didn’t know you were pregnant, Tila,” Joran repeated in what he thought was a very soothing tone.

It wasn’t, according to Tila. “You would have known, if you’d bothered to answer my phone calls!”

Joran shook his head. “Tila, I didn’t get any calls from you. I haven’t received a text message from you in months.”

“Liar!” she snapped. “I texted and called, left voice mails pleading with you to call me back.” She jerked the band from her hair, then impatiently gathered her curls and re-banded everything so that her hair was out of her eyes again.

### Chapter 3

Tila felt as if her world was falling apart. Joran had returned and she was so tired! One baby was difficult enough, but she had two babies and they seemed to need to eat every five minutes. Her life had become a constant rotation of feeding, burping, soothing, changing dirty diapers, and trying to convince herself she wasn’t losing her

mind. The fluctuating hormones didn't help either. One moment, she was laughing at their adorable expressions, the next, she was sobbing because their hair wasn't fluffy enough.

"Tila, if these children are mine, then we need to get you to safety."

The warning brought her eyes back to Joran's and her heart ached. He was so damn handsome and alive and strong and...everything she wasn't. He was even clean! She'd bet a whole month of baby formula money that he'd had a shower within the last twenty-four hours. Tila wasn't sure if she'd had a shower in the past week. In fact, she wasn't even sure what day it was!

"Safety?" She blinked, trying to make sense of what he was saying, but her breasts ached. She hadn't nursed her sons last night. Had they slept through the night? No, that was impossible. They were only two months old. They wouldn't sleep through the night for another several months according to the baby books.

The books she wanted to burn for imparting that bit of information. She was so tired and...!

Tila glanced down at the tee shirt she'd donned...she wasn't sure when she'd pulled this ugly, stretched-out-of-shape tee shirt on. In fact, she had to glance towards a window to see if it was night or day.

Night.

"What time is it?" she asked, curling her shoulders inwards and crossing her arms over her chest. Her milk was leaking since the boys hadn't woken up to nurse. And dear heaven, her breasts ached. They were so full of milk, she would need to pump and that was such a humiliating, bovine experience.

Edin started to turn away. “Maybe we should—”

“Give me my baby!” Tila replied, grabbing the tiny infant out of the big man’s arms.

Algar kept bouncing the baby in his arms. “Should I continue to hold this one?”

Tila looked down at the boy in his arms. “That’s Laith and he prefers to sleep in his crib.” She bounced the other baby in her arms. “This one is Rafi and he gets irritated if I put him in his crib.”

“He was in the crib earlier.”

“Was he the first to wake up?” she asked.

“Yes, but—”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

“That’s Rafi,” she sighed, looking down at her son. “He’s impatient and demanding.”

“Laith isn’t?” Joran asked, fascinated. She smiled, remembering how excited she’d been at the news that she was pregnant. For a brief moment, Tila felt the urge to tell him everything, every little detail of their emerging personalities. She wanted to tell him how excited she’d been at the discovery that she was giving birth to twins and the terror she’d felt as soon as the high had subsided. She wanted to tell him so much!

Then she remembered that he had left her. He’d ignored all of her communications.

He’d abandoned her when she’d needed him most.

Turning her back on Joran so she couldn’t see how handsome he was, or remember the way she’d held onto his strong, powerful shoulders when he’d done that thing with his mouth and...oh dear heaven!

Shaking off those memories, she sighed, and banished those delicious, long-ago memories. Instead, she looked down at her precious son. “Yes, this is Laith. And he’s my son. Not yours.” She sniffed and blinked back more tears. “Go away. We’re fine.”

“Tila,” Joran began, and she could feel the warmth of his body against her back. He wasn’t touching her, but she could still feel him, could smell him and...oh, he smelled good! Unlike her. She reeked of body odor and baby puke and...who even knew what else!

Turning, she settled Laith in his arms. “Here, I need a shower.”

“Tila,” he started to say, even as he protectively pulled the small infant against his massive chest. “We need to talk.”

She held up a hand, stopping whatever he was about to say. She noticed the first man walk behind Joran and disappear into the small bedroom. Moments later, he reappeared without Rafi in his arms. Then the two strangers politely disappeared through her front door. They looked relieved as well as concerned and she didn’t understand the last part. Especially when one of them, she didn’t know their names, pulled his radio off the vests they both grabbed and muttered something into the microphone. She couldn’t hear what was said as the door shut behind him. But Tila thought she’d heard something along the lines of, “must hurry” before the two men disappeared.

When they were alone, Tila didn’t wait for Joran to speak. Instead, she walked to her bathroom and closed the door. For good measure, she locked it behind her. She knew that it wouldn’t keep Joran out, but it was a silent, angry message.

With a flick of her wrist, she turned on the shower. While she waited for the water to warm up, she took off her clothes, then stood in front of her tiny mirror. Her body had changed dramatically since the birth of her baby boys. Her breasts were bigger, as was the rest of her. She still hadn’t lost the pregnancy weight so her stomach was saggy. Her thighs were fine, but there were ugly, silver lines running along the skin on her shapeless stomach and thighs indicating where her body had stretched to support her pregnancy.

But it was her face that really bothered her. The pregnancy weight would come off, or it wouldn’t. She wasn’t overly concerned about her weight. No, what really pained her was how haggard she looked. Since this was the first time she’d looked in the mirror in quite a while, Tila was shocked at how tired she seemed. Her hair hadn’t been washed in...she wasn’t sure how long. The last two times she’d showered, shampoo hadn’t been a priority. Just getting clean before her baby boys protested had

been her only goal.

Now that Joran was outside the bathroom, she stepped under the water, reveling in the silence. Ever since giving birth, Tila had taken showers with her babies in their car seats right outside her shower. They'd screamed their outrage that they'd been left alone, so she'd hurried through the process.

Now, lingering under the warm water, knowing that her tiny boys were protected and Joran would care for them if they woke again, she sighed with happiness. Oh, it felt so good to feel the water on her skin and not hear the shrill cries of Rafi or Laith. However, even as she enjoyed the sensation of them not being right outside her shower, Tila missed them. For the past two months, every moment of her day had been spent caring for her infant sons. So even five minutes alone meant that she'd missed five minutes of their lives.

She dumped shampoo into her hand, then lathered up her hair. Conditioner next and she contemplated shaving her legs. She didn't want to seem vain, but before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed her razor.

"I'm not doing this for him," she muttered, bending down and stretching muscles that hadn't been stretched for a long time as she scraped away the hair that had been growing on her legs. Before the babies had been born, Tila hadn't been able to reach her legs, or see around her pregnant belly. Now that she could, her mangled pride shuddered at the sight.

Twenty minutes later, she stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. Unfortunately, she hadn't thought to grab clothes before coming into the bathroom. That meant she needed to step out of the locked bathroom wearing only a towel.

Feeling better after her one hour of sleep plus a long, rejuvenating shower, Tila pulled the door open and...froze.



Joran was sitting on her bed, his back propped up against the headboard and his long, strong legs stretched out. He'd made her bed and Tila almost cried at the beauty of it.

"You need to get out," she told him, turning away from him. She tightened the towel around her body and pulled the closet door open. She contemplated her options, but the leggings she'd preferred pre-pregnancy were still too tight to be comfortable. In fact, none of her clothes fit her properly. Turning away from the closet, she walked over to the pile of clean laundry, fishing out a pair of ugly sweatpants.

Before Joran's arrival, she had loved these sweatpants. They were comfortable and warm, didn't cut into her belly and added a thick layer of protection against leaks from her sons' diapers.

Joran's deep, masculine voice surprised her when he asked, "Why? I've seen every part of you before."

She glared at him, then stomped back into the bathroom. She started to pull off the towel, but then realized she didn't have panties, bra, or a top. Leaning her head against the door, she fought back a sob of frustration. Before the thought could finish forming, a knock sounded on the door.

Before she could answer, the door opened slightly. A strong hand with one of her ugly nursing bras, a huge sweatshirt, and a pair of white cotton panties dangled from his fingers.

She grabbed the clothing and pushed the door closed.

Tila wasn't going to weaken just because the man had realized her problem. No, she was going to be strong. She wouldn't allow this man to just waltz back into her life. He'd abandoned her and their babies.

As she dressed, ignoring how much she hated the maternity bra and the panties, Tila told herself that she and Joran could have a calm, rational conversation about sharing custody. It would tear her apart to not have her baby boys with her every night, but it was the right thing to do. Not for Joran. If it were up to her, Joran could rot in hell. No, sharing custody was the right thing to do because her sons deserved to have a strong father figure in their lives.

When she was dressed, Tila stepped out of the bathroom.

Joran was standing next to her bed, his big, strong arms crossed over his massive chest. She longed to be enfolded by those arms. Tila remembered how good it felt to be in Joran's arms, to feel him holding her as she fell asleep, knowing that he was there to hold and protect her.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

“We can work out an arrangement,” she began, starting the conversation. She sniffed back the tears and walked over to her dresser, grabbing a brush.

“What sort of arrangement did you have in mind?” he asked, his tone as smooth as dark chocolate.

She closed her eyes, then remembered he could see her reflection in the mirror. “How about if you get our boys on the weekends and I’ll take them during the week?” she offered hopefully. “That way, you can work and they won’t interrupt you.”

Please, please, please don’t take my babies for longer than a weekend, she chanted mentally. Not for longer! Tila didn’t think she could stand being away from her babies for longer than a couple of days. Well, hours. Okay, she’d missed them during the twenty minute shower.

“How about if you marry me and we’ll raise them together?”

Marriage? Tila spun around, the hairbrush pointed towards him like a weapon. “Don’t you dare!” When she spotted a dark eyebrow lifting in silent inquiry, Tila had to think fast, trying to come up with a reason to reject his suggestion other than her hatred for how he’d abandoned her.

“A marriage between us wouldn’t last.” She sniffed and turned around, brutally pulling the brush through her hair. However, her hormones were still working overtime and, with every stroke of her brush, more hair came off, tangled in her hairbrush.

Rationally, she knew that she wasn't going bald. The pregnancy hormones had given her extra thick hair and now, as the hormones normalized, her hair would return to what it was before.

But she wasn't rational. The pregnancy hormones were still overwhelming, so the sight of the long strands of hair in her brush made her burst into tears.

Immediately, she felt strong arms wrap around her and Tila pressed her face against that strong, familiar chest.

For several moments, Tila allowed herself the luxury of crying, reveling in his soothing words and the soft caress of his hands against her back. Thankfully, the emotions left her just as quickly as they arrived. So after only three or four minutes, she pulled away and sighed, wiped her tears, and...she was back. Her sanity returned.

"Thank you for that," she whispered and started brushing her hair again, more slowly this time. She didn't laugh at the confusion in Joran's eyes. But it was hilarious.

"We were talking about a custody arrangement," she continued.

Joran ran a hand through his hair and stepped back. After several more confused and wary glances in her direction, he shook his head. "No, we were discussing marriage."

Tila tamped down on the traitorous flare of joy. Marriage was out of the question. She could never trust Joran again. He'd left her without a word and she'd gone through a terrifying pregnancy and birth all alone.

"Well, then the answer is no. I won't marry you." She glanced at him in the mirror again, still brushing, painstakingly working out the tangles that had built up over the past ...however long it had been since she'd had time to brush her hair. "So...custody arrangements. Are you okay with having the boys on the weekends? You'll need to

get car seats for them. I'll text you the names of the car seats I have so that we have the same brand. You'll need to install them in your vehicles." She looked at him again. "How many vehicles do you have?"

"A few," he replied. Tila could tell he wasn't telling her the truth.

Spinning around, she glared at him. "You don't have to lie to me, Joran. If you don't have a vehicle, then I'll lend you mine. I traded my roadster in for a minivan several months ago."

His surprise sparkled in his eyes and Tila felt a small thrill of retribution. "You don't have the roadster that you drove the last time I saw you?"

"Nope," she snapped, remembering how much she'd enjoyed driving her little red roadster with a slight pang. It had been so exciting, so liberating. She'd driven that little car all over town, down country roads and along highways. Yeah, she might have acquired more than one speeding ticket because of her...exhilarating...driving tendencies, but that was all in the past now.

"Why did you trade it in?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because a woman pregnant with twins can't fit in a roadster, Joran," she replied flatly. She sniffed as she continued brushing her hair. "The minivan is much more practical. Also, it's easier to get the car seats in and out of." She glanced at him through the mirror. "You should consider a minivan. It's much better for the boys."

She fought down a snicker at his grimace. She luxuriated in brushing her hair without either son...! She spoke too soon. A loud squeal rent the air.

Without a word, Tila put the brush down and stepped across the hallway to the tiny

second bedroom where she'd barely managed to fit two cribs. If it hadn't been for Ahmed across the street, she never would have figured out how to put them together. She'd heavily relied on the help of everyone in her community to prepare for her sons' arrival.

"That's unfortunate," he replied softly. "I remember how much you loved that car."

Tila swallowed back the sudden ache of memory. She wasn't sure if the pain was caused by the tenderness in his eyes, because she knew he truly understood, or because her hormones were still all over the place.

"My neighbors seemed to applaud with delight when I got the minivan," she told him wistfully, looking out at the sky that was starting to lighten. Morning was coming. Time insisted on passing, even when she wanted it to stand still, to give her a moment to breathe...and rest.

Blinking, she glanced at Joran and sighed. "Look Joran, I've had maybe one hour's sleep in the past..." she looked around but she had no idea where her cell phone was. "I don't even know how long. Every part of my body aches." She thought about her breasts that literally throbbed now. "I need to...do something. Would you give me some privacy?"

Joran stood up and moved to stand in front of her, placing warm hands on her shoulders. "What's wrong, love?" he asked softly.

A tear slid down her cheek and she pulled her eyes away from his, staring at his chest. "I slept through the boys' lastfeeding," she whispered. "Now I need to..." she closed her eyes, too embarrassed to explain in detail. "I need to fix that."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

He stood there for another moment, then sighed, sliding his warm hands down her upper arms. “Fine. I’ll leave for a few moments. But I’ll be right outside, okay?”

“Fine,” she said with a sniffle.

### Chapter 4

Joran stepped out of the bedroom and looked around. Her den was still a mess, but it wasn’t as bad as it had been earlier. There were stacks of neatly folded laundry on the table and the kitchen was tidied up. The dryer gave a muffled buzz, indicating that the clothes Edin had put into the dryer were ready.

With a sigh, he opened the dryer and pulled out a load of clothes, carried them to the kitchen table and began folding them. Since these were clean, he sorted them into different stacks, tiny outfits in one and Tila’s sweatpants in another. The whole time, he wondered what had gone wrong. Tila said that she’d texted and called him, but Joran was certain that he hadn’t received any calls from her. He would have jumped at the chance to speak with her. In fact, he’d been heartbroken that she hadn’t called or responded to his messages.

Tonight had been a last resort to find out what had gone wrong. The last time he’d visited her, she’d literally leapt into his arms and they’d spent the rest of the night making love, talking, laughing, catching up, and then making love again.

Algar stepped into the house, clearly worried. “Boss, we have a problem.”

Joran looked up from his folding. “What’s up?” He was instantly alert, ready for the

next threat.

“Someone just called the police about a group of men hanging around a single mother’s home.” He grimaced. “That’s us, Boss.”

Joran rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “Right!” Now what was he supposed to do? He couldn’t kidnap...?

Or could he?

He looked around. The babies were still asleep, but he had no idea how much longer they would remain so. And Tila was doing...something in the bedroom that she clearly didn’t want him witnessing. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what was going on in there.

“We could get them over the border, Boss,” Algar assured him, looking determined and grim. “We could have all three of them back at the...your home in less than four hours.”

Joran considered the possibility for a full second. But before he could make a decision, Edin spoke up. “Four minutes before the local police arrive, Boss.”

Four minutes. That wasn’t enough time to explain what needed to happen to Tila and get his sons safely out of the house.

“We’ll come back tonight,” he decided. “We’ll organize the resources to get them safely over the border and back home.”

Edin and Algar nodded, no expression on their features other than acceptance. A moment later, they disappeared, giving Joran the privacy to speak with Tila alone.



Joran's jaw tightened as he considered his options. He didn't have much time. He and his men couldn't be caught here in Uftar. The repercussions of the local authorities discovering his presence could be catastrophic. He had to leave and come back, even though every cell in his body was screaming for him to protect his family and get them to safety.

He tapped lightly on the bedroom door. When he heard her call out, he entered and walked over to where she was sitting on the bed. Kneeling down, he took her hands in his. "Tila, I have to leave, but I'll be back. Do you understand?"

She blinked, looking so exhausted, but still beautiful. "No," she sighed, her shoulders slumped.

"I don't have time to explain, but I need you to trust me."

She laughed, a brittle sound. "Right. Trust."

Joran knew that he had less than two minutes. So instead of explaining again, he stood up and, cupping her face, gave her a quick, hard kiss. "Later!" he whispered, and then he hurried out.

## Chapter 5

Tila's lips still tingled as she held Laith over her shoulder and patted his back, trying to ease whatever was bothering him. She'd been pumping milk into that damn machine until she'd heard him cry for her. For several moments before he called, Tila had enjoyed watching the sun shimmer as it rose over the horizon. She'd been watching several police cruisers as they drove slowly through the neighborhood, obviously watching for someone. But Joran and his friends were long gone. He'd disappeared into the darkness. A part of her was proud of the fact that her former lover was so stealthy. Another part of her was confused about how he could move so

quickly.

Now, the world was waking up. She saw several of her neighbors get into their cars and leave for work. A woman down the street watered her flowers. Tila looked around at her yard, noticed the mess, and sighed. She'd slept for maybe an hour over the past forty-eight and she felt like a walking zombie. So no, she wasn't going to worry about her garden. Not today, at least.

Tila was still patting and swaying at the window as two police cars stopped at the curb in front of her home. The officers got out of their vehicles, looking around with one hand on their weapons. Two of them walked around the house while a third officer went to her front door.

That's when Laith decided to throw up on her shoulder.

The doorbell rang and Tila sighed, wishing that she'd remembered to put a burp cloth over her shoulder. It would be really nice to answer the door without baby barf all over her tee shirt.

And this had been a clean one!

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

“Good morning, Officer,” she sighed as she pulled the door open, cradling a happy Laith in her arms. He cooed and looked adorable, waving his tiny hands and feet now that his belly felt better.

The officer took a step back, probably because of the baby barf smell. It really was bad, she thought, shaking her head to get the wisps of hair out of her eyes.

“Ma’am,” the officer said, touching the brim of his baseball-style cap. “Someone called in earlier this morning to say there were strange men lurking around your house.”

“Hm,” was all she could say, still swaying back and forth. By this point, she wasn’t sure if the swaying was more to sooth herself or Laith.

“Are you okay, ma’am?”

Tila laughed. It sounded a bit hysterical even to her own ears. “Sure!” She grinned because there was nothing more she could say. “You?”

The man looked startled. “Would you mind if we looked around inside? Just to be sure you are safe?”

A year ago, Tila would have told the officer to go away. Someone entering her home would have been a serious violation of her privacy. But she had twin babies now. Her body had literally been torn apart delivering them. The things she’d gone through meant that she had no more illusions of privacy.

Plus, the sooner she let them in to do their job, the sooner they could go away.

“Help yourself,” she said, flipping Laith over so that his belly was resting against her arm. He preferred this position and it gave her shoulders a break.

Tila stepped back to let him enter, still swaying. She heard Rafi’s indignant squawks from the den behind her and she went to check on him. He was lying in a bouncy baby chair that had toys dangling from an arch stretched over the top.

The officer walked through her tiny house, peering into each bedroom, the kitchen, and the small utility room. She might have smiled at the officer’s shock at the amount of laundry that was piled everywhere, but she didn’t have the energy for laughter.

She’d been surprised to discover the laundry had been folded though. That was a sweet gift. She couldn’t picture Joran folding tiny baby clothes, but who else would have done it?

Tila appreciated the effort, whoever had done it. Folding laundry seemed to come last on her priority list, lately.

The officer nodded, then touched the brim of his hat again. “Everything seems...” he looked around again and this time, Tila did laugh.

“I’m fine, officer,” she told him, still bouncing and patting. “Thank you for your concern.”

The man smiled faintly, but she could still see the wariness in his eyes. “Call if you have any problems.” And then he left as quickly as he could.

Tila was just about to close the door when someone else pulled up. This person had an unfamiliar logo on their delivery van and Tila lingered in the open doorway,

curious.

The driver nodded to the officer, then yanked open the door to the van and removed a box.

When he stood in front of her, Tila wasn't sure what she was seeing.

"I have a food delivery for Tila Ayad?" the man explained, hefting the box carefully.

"Food?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes, ma'am. The order was for three prepared meals, as well as cut up fruit and vegetables." He lifted the box a few inches higher.

Tila shook her head. "I didn't order any food delivery."

The man hesitated, then looked at the delivery note taped to the top of the box. "The only delivery information I have is from someone with the initial 'J'." He stood there, still holding the box and looking confused.

Joran, Tila thought and tried to ignore the unexpected burst of happiness. "That's my ex-boyfriend," she said with a nod. "If you just—"

"I have orders to put the food into the fridge, ma'am." He eyed the baby in her arms. "I'm happy to help."

She nodded and stepped back to allow him into her home.

The man stacked several containers in her fridge, then set two plastic platters on the counter. He didn't look around after that. He simply grabbed his delivery box and, after nodding politely to her, returned to his delivery van and drove away.

Tila stood in the doorway, still patting and swaying. Joran. That was a very sweet offering, but she was still mad at him. No, furious. He'd walked out of her life so many months ago, then showed up at her door last night without warning.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

Tila smiled faintly at the memory of slapping him. She shouldn't have done that, but boy had it felt good! Violence was never the answer, but...!

That's when she remembered the way she'd burst into tears. And his strong arms around her, holding her. She didn't remember much after that, but she vividly remembered how good it had felt to be held.

And then that kiss. The hard kiss of promise.

Right before he'd walked out. Again.

Tila sighed and was just about to close the door when a third vehicle pulled up to the curb, this one with a logo she recognized. A cleaning crew? Tila nearly sobbed with excitement and relief. She hadn't had the time to properly clean since the boys were born, although the piles of dirty dishes that had been in the sink had been mysteriously cleaned and put away.

"Good morning, Ma'am," one of the cleaning crew said in greeting. "We were sent by a man named 'J' to clean your house. The order was for an emergency cleaning?"

The last part was a question and Tila nearly cried. "Yes, thank you."

The team of five smiled and nodded as they moved into the house, each person carried a mop and a tote filled with cleaning supplies.

The ladies cooed in delight when they caught sight of Rafi in his chair and Tila's heart warmed with pride.

“I’ll just pop them into their stroller and take them out for a walk, so we’re out of your way,” she told the ladies.

They all nodded, already busy with various tasks. While Tila struggled to get the double stroller out of the closet, someone had already stripped her bed and was heading for the washing machine with her sheets. Tila’s eyes filled because she couldn’t remember the last time she’d had time to wash her sheets. It definitely hadn’t been in the past two months! And she’d been so heavy and off-balance during the last few months of her pregnancy...!

More tears flowed when one of the ladies helped her with the stroller. Within moments, the annoying contraption was open and locked in position. Tila sighed with relief as she settled Laith into one of the seats and belted him in. Rafi was next and Tila was just about to push them out through the front door when one of the ladies rushed out of her bedroom, waving a clean shirt.

“Ma’am, if you give me your shirt, I will wash it too. This one is clean.”

Tila suddenly remembered Laith throwing up on her just before the police officer arrived. She glanced down at the yellowish stain on her shoulder. At this point, she was eager to be free of the stained shirt, so she pulled the dirty one over her head and accepted the clean one. The maternity bra covered more of her than a bathing suit. Besides, this woman seemed to...know. She understood.

She shoved her bare feet into her sneakers and stepped out of the house, strolling towards the park. Thankfully, the weather was mild today. The summer heat often got into the triple digits, but right now, the sunshine offered a gentle warmth on her shoulders as she happily pushed her babies down the sidewalk. Laith was asleep, but Rafi was wide-awake and, probably getting hungry. Still, she lifted her face to the sunshine, feeling an unaccustomed sense of freedom now that she was out of the house for the first time in...far too long.



“Goodness, dear! What are you doing out and about?” Fatima Bindi said by way of a greeting.

Tila smiled at the older woman in her long skirt and head covering.

“Good morning, Fatima. How are you?”

Fatima smiled, but the expression was more like a grimace. “I’m doing quite well, thank you.” Her grin turned genuine as she looked down at the boys. “And how are you two doing today? Are you helping your momma?” she asked, using a baby voice and pouting her lips. “Are you being good?”

She straightened up after tickling each boys’ foot. “They look wonderful, Tila,” she announced with an approving nod. “But are you sure they should be out in this sunshine? Babies are so sensitive..”

Tila frowned, looking around. “I just...I thought we could use some fresh air while the cleaning crew is at my house.”

Fatima looked behind Tila, her features turning disapproving when she noticed the cleaning van in her driveway. “Goodness, Tila. You shouldn’t have strangers in your home! What are you thinking? They could be stealing you blind!”

Tila laughed, shaking her head. “If they find something of value in my house, then they are free to take it, as long as the house gets cleaned.” But her insecurities went into high gear. Was she doing something wrong by leaving the cleaning ladies in her house, alone?

“Dear, I know that you felt it was fine to run out and do whatever you wanted when you were single. But you’re a mother now!” Fatima scolded. “You have to think of your babies now.”

Tila sighed. The older woman's disapproving tone nearly broke her. But then she remembered the last visit to the pediatrician's office. Her boys were happy and healthy. Both had surpassed the average on the growth charts. That might be due more to their father's genetics than her mothering skills, but she'd take anything she could get as affirmation for her efforts.

So, instead of giving in to the guilt and insecurities, she straightened her shoulders, and met the older woman's eyes. "I appreciate your depths of experience, since you have a son, Fatima. But I think that my twins could use a bit of fresh air and sunshine. So, you have a lovely day and I'll see you later." With that, she pushed the stroller faster, continuing towards the park. There were a few trees that she could park the stroller under so she and her babies would be in the shade. However, Tila was convinced that something that felt this good couldn't be bad. Besides, both of her sons were awake now, and neither was crying, demanding food, needed a diaper change, or throwing up.

In her mind, this outing was a monumental success. She should get outside with her babies more often.

"Good morning, Tila!" one of the other mothers at the park with her kids called out, waving to her.

Tila beamed in return. "Good morning!" she replied, eager to be around other mothers who were doing the same thing as herself.

Four mothers rushed over, cooing about Laith and Rafi. "Oh, they're adorable!" one gushed. "I barely survived one baby. I have no idea how you're managing with two!" another teased. "How much laundry are you doing every day?" another asked teasingly. And so it went. All four mothers gave her advice, which was reassuring. However, there was one mother who looked sad as she stared down at the twins. Silently, the woman walked away, perching on a bench off to the side of the

playground.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:36 am*

“That’s Ophelia Drazir,” one of the other mothers whispered. “She had a miscarriage recently,” another added in an undertone. “She has a daughter, but they were hoping for a boy this time.”

Tila nodded in understanding. When she’d first discovered that she was pregnant, Tila had been devastated. Motherhood hadn’t been on her radar. She’d been having too much fun with her career and Joran as an intense lover, plus all of the fun activities she and her friends would get up to.

But as soon as she’d accepted her pregnancy, the need to protect her baby – she hadn’t known she was carrying twins at the time – had been intense. The bond between mother and fetus, for her, had been instantaneous. So, Tila could understand the heartache of losing a pregnancy.

Shifting the stroller back and forth to keep her boys settled, she smiled gently at the woman. Thankfully, the conversation with the other mothers continued and the awkward moment ended. After only thirty minutes, her boys started to get cranky.

Tila sighed and stood up. “I’d better head home. I suspect that one, or both, of these little guys is hungry.”

The mothers all urged Tila to come out to the playground more often. As she returned to her house, Tila made a mental note to get out of the house every day. She was still exhausted and every part of her body ached, but she felt better now that she’d gotten a bit of sunshine as well as connecting with other mothers.

“Tila, what’s going on at your house?” Hamza, Fatima’s thirty year old son asked,

rushing up to her. The man was about forty pounds overweight and bent at the waist, bracing his hands on his thighs as he fought to catch his breath. “There are...people...,” gasp, “ at your house!”

Tila didn’t like him. He was nosy and more than a little creepy. He worked in his mother’s basement, doing some sort of tech work, but Tila suspected that he spent most of his time playing video games. Plus, he seemed to know far too much about what was going on at her house.

She tried to smile politely, but she had to back up a step since Hamza absolutely reeked of body odor. Had she smelled that bad before her shower? Goodness, she hoped not!

“It’s okay, Hamza,” she told the man, trying to sound soothing and in control. Tila didn’t need Hamza telling Fatima about how frazzled the new mom was. “The ladies are cleaning. Nothing to be afraid of,” she soothed.

He straightened, his face scrunched up in confusion. “But...you’re a woman!”

Tila blinked, not sure where he was going with that comment. “Yes,” she agreed, maintaining her soothing tone. “I’m aware.”

Hamza flushed and fisted his hands on his hips. “My mother says that the sign of a good woman is when she can keep a house clean, have dinner on the table, and raise children with good manners.” He gestured behind him towards her house. “You are a woman. You should be in there, cleaning things up yourself.”

Tila couldn’t stop herself from rolling her eyes. “Thank you for your unasked-for opinion, Hamza. If you’ll excuse me, I need to be on my way.” Tila gritted her teeth and pushed her stroller around him and continued towards her home, thinking darkly that a visit from Joran would straighten Hamza out.

Unfortunately, tears formed in her eyes before she could stop them. Joran was gone. Again. He'd said he'd be back, but could she trust him?

No, she couldn't put her faith in a man who had abandoned her so brutally when she'd needed him most. Tila noticed the men and women were coming out of her house, mops and buckets in tow. Joran had done this. Plus, he'd sent her food, actual, real food instead of whatever convenient junk food was in her cabinets.

That was something, she told herself. Still, she didn't understand his late night meetings. Before she'd gotten pregnant, Tila had enjoyed the excitement of never knowing when Joran would show up. It had kept her on her toes and added spice to her days.

Now, not knowing if Joran would show up or not left her...angry. And resentful.

## Chapter 6

Joran paced across his office, running his hands through his hair in frustration. He needed to get back to Tila and his sons! He needed to bring them here to the palace, where he could protect them. He'd had food delivered and arranged for a cleaning service to do a deep clean of her house, but that was nothing. It wasn't enough. He needed to be there, helping her. Who was going to hold the babies while she ate? How was she going to get some proper sleep? With two babies on different schedules, Tila needed another set of hands. She needed to sleep more than an hour at a time. She needed a full night's rest.

He couldn't give her that from here! Damn those midnight raids to get information! He was done with them! He was a father now and his future wife needed him to help and protect her and their sons!

"What's wrong?"

The deep voice of his younger brother startled him. Joran spun around, glaring as Raj walked into his office and flopped into one of the leather chairs, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

“What do you want?” Joran growled.

Raj’s eyebrows lifted at the harsh response. “I want to know what’s wrong with you. You’re acting like a caged animal.”

Joran knew that he needed to tell his brothers the truth. And yet, it felt a bit...wrong...to explain anything. Still, he had to warn his brothers. He just...wanted to be with his babies and Tila.

And yet, he needed to prepare his brothers for what was to come. “I have two sons.”

Raj’s feet dropped to the floor with a thud. A long, shocked silence followed.

Joran stared at his brother as Raj shook his head and pulled his phone from his pocket. A moment later, he said, “You need to come into Joran’s office. It’s an emergency.”

Then he ended the call.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Joran's eyebrows shot up. "Who did you—"

"What's wrong?" Khal, their oldest brother and ruler of Lativa, demanded as he burst into Joran's office. His eyes moved from Raj to Joran, then back again. "Are you okay?"

"Tell him," Raj ordered, leaning his elbows on his knees as he waited for Joran to say the words again.

Joran sighed, then turned to face his older brother. "I have two sons," he told Khal.

His older brother had gotten married a few months ago to the lovely woman who had been his assistant. Tasha had tried to remain in that role after their marriage, but the requirements of being Khal's wife were too demanding for her to fulfill both positions.

Tasha was an absolute delight. She had brought the brothers and their half-sister together into a family. Khal had been in love with Tasha for a while, his affection for her evident in every glance and gesture. Raj and Joran had grown to adore her just as deeply, not only for her infectious personality, but also for the joy and contentment she brought to Khal's life.

But Tasha's impact extended well beyond the realm of romance. It had been her unwavering support and compassion that had helped the brothers navigate the complexities of changing family dynamics. With her gentle guidance, they had welcomed Marianna, their younger half-sister, into their midst. Marianna had been adrift, teetering on the edge of a dangerous path following her mother's passing. Yet,



under Tasha's influence, Marianna had blossomed into a beautiful, vibrant college student.

Now, Marianna was a force to be reckoned with—a fierce intellect and a fiery spirit wrapped up in a package of undeniable charm. She tormented her peers and her professors, fearlessly challenging the status quo and questioning everything she learned. And amidst the chaos of academia, Tasha remained a steadfast beacon of support, her nurturing presence continuing to guide the siblings through life's twists and turns.

But this...was a wrinkle in their family structure.

“Sons...as inplural?” Khal demanded. He’d been a grouchy bastard for years until Tasha came into his life. She’d smoothed out his rough edges. With Joran taking over the military and defense issues and Raj the financial challenges involved in running a country, Khal’s burdens had been greatly eased.

But every once in a while, he reverted back to his grizzly bear attitude.

Like when one of his brothers announced something outrageous.

“Sons,” Joran confirmed. “Twin boys.” He couldn’t keep the pride out of his tone because...hell, because he was damn proud! He had sons! “And they are adorable.” He grinned, shaking his head as he thought of them.

“Where are they?”

Okay, this was where it got a bit tricky. Joran sighed and glanced at his brother. “In Uftar.”

Khal stared at Joran for a long moment, then shook his head, muttering curses under

his breath. When he was finished, he met Joran's eyes. "Is this some fling you had during your wild days?"

Joran didn't like his past referred to in that way "I didn't have wild days," he argued. "I used to ease my intellectual boredom by challenging my mind and body using extreme activities."

"Right," Khal snapped. "So...were the twins created during that time?"

Joran clenched his jaw. "My sons," he emphasized, "were created after I met the woman I'm going to marry." He glared at Khal for a long, tense moment. "If I hadn't been trying to help you and Tasha with that idiot senator and then fixing several serious issues within the military and our border security, then I would already have Tila here in the palace. I would have married her and my sons would already know their uncles and aunts."

Raj grunted. "We should have Marianna and Tasha here for this conversation." When Khal turned a long glare his direction, Raj glared right back. "You and I both know that Tasha and Marianna will be seriously angry if they find out we didn't include them in this conversation. They will assume that we were keeping them out of the loop because we wanted to protect them because they are women."

Khal sighed heavily. Slowly, he nodded in defeat. "They'd be correct."

Raj grinned. "And that would put you in the dog house."

Joran almost laughed out loud at his older brother's pained expression. They all knew Raj was right. Tasha and Marianna didn't like being left out of anything. And a family matter this important would really upset them.

"You're right. We should hold off on this conversation until dinner when they can be

part of it.”

Joran was already shaking his head before Khal finished his statement. “I won’t be here for dinner.”

Khal had just turned away from his brothers, but at Joran’s announcement, he turned back, scowling. “Why the hell not?”

Joran wasn’t intimidated. Not even a little. “Because I’m heading back to Uftar to collect my future wife and my sons.” The absolute conviction of his tone filled the room as he waited for his brothers to argue.

There was silence. A moment later, Khal nodded his approval, then turned and left Joran’s office.

Raj stood up, fisted his hands on his hips and asked, “What can I do to help?”

Chapter 7

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Silently, Joran moved through the quiet, dark neighborhood, his attention fixed on the one house with lights still on. It was just past midnight, and he knew that he should be searching the shadows for danger, but he couldn't seem to take his mind off Tila and his babies. They were in danger, he knew. He couldn't identify what that danger was, but he'd felt it in his gut as soon as they'd parked their vehicles a mile away.

So, now he was doing what he'd vowed never to do while out on one of these missions; he was allowing his team to guard his back. His mental distraction told him that he should be more careful, but he couldn't stop the increasing awareness that something wasn't right.

Back at the palace, he knew that Raj, Marianna, Khal, and Tasha were helping to get everything set up and ready. It was a monumental task to prepare the palace for a baby and doubly difficult to get it ready for twins.

The night air was cold, but there was no dampness. The arid nature of this region meant that even sweat evaporated quickly. Looking around, Joran felt the expected adrenaline spike as his senses alerted him to danger.

Nearing Tila's home, he searched the area, trying to understand what bothered him so much. Something was definitely wrong, but nothing moved. The shadows were still, the birds silent, and the trees tranquil.

Tila's small home was set back from the road, like most of the homes in the area. It was an older neighborhood, the homes built perhaps a hundred years ago. So, the yards were larger, the landscaping more mature.

Nothing moved, so what was bothering him? What was making his muscles twitch? Lifting a hand, he gave the silent signal for his team to stop. Immediately, everyone crouched low, twisting around so that their field of vision created a three hundred and sixty degree view of the area.

Nothing moved. Everything was silent. The only light came from the moon and Tila's windows.

He saw the curtains move inside Tila's home and knew that she was still awake. Had she slept since that hour last night...uh...early this morning? Probably not, he thought with grim determination. He wanted to protect Tila not just from outside dangers, but also from her need to do this all alone. Raising twins alone was possible, but it was killing her. Had she eaten the food he'd had delivered? After his assistant had found the food delivery service, he'd made the call himself, describing Tila's favorite foods, as well as things he remembered she disliked. He'd demanded that the delivery service describe their meal options and he'd personally chosen what would be sent to her.

Focus, Joran mentally admonished. He couldn't think about what Tila ate for the past eighteen hours. Once he got her back to his home, he'd ensure that his staff fed her whatever her beautiful heart desired. And he'd make sure that she slept for more than an hour at a time. He'd personally take care of his sons, so that she could sleep, if that would give her the reassurance that would allow her to relax enough to do so.

Damn, he'd been dreaming about having her in his home while his team waited silently for his signal. He wasn't focusing. It was time to get this over with.

He moved his gaze over the area one more time, then lifted his arm, giving the hand signal for the next step in the mission. Immediately, his team moved into position. He tapped the radio button that sent the signal to the team waiting with the vehicles.

When he saw his men were in their assigned positions, only then did Joran move in.

## Chapter 8

Tila heard the stealthy sounds and turned, suddenly feeling her heart pound frantically against her ribs. Nothing. Had she only imagined the soft noise? She stood very still, watching, rubbing Laith's back as she watched, waiting.

A moment later, a shadow moved past her window. Normally, this would be cause to call the police emergency line. But in her heart, she knew the shadow was Joran coming back to her.

Tila tried to ignore the excited thud of her heart. He was going to emotionally hurt her again. He'd popped in and out of her life too many times to think he would suddenly change.

Tila refused to be a naive fool anymore. Tonight, she would stand her ground! She would simply tell Joran to leave her and her babies alone. She couldn't do this crazy is-he-isn't-he going to show up thing anymore. She had far more important things to do.

All day, she'd mourned the loss of Joran, because she knew she'd have to tell him to stay out of her life. And in her heart, Tila knew this was no way to live. Even now, as she waited, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. A man, a father, who flitted into her life only in the darkness of the night was not a healthy relationship. She should have stopped this madness long before she'd gotten pregnant. But at the time, it had been exciting.

However, it wasn't exciting anymore. True, her heart was racing, but her heart wasn't in charge. Not tonight. Her mind was in control and it was past time to move on. She couldn't keep waiting for Joran. Not anymore. Never again. This was the end.

So, she didn't scream with alarm when a black-clad leg poked through her window. It was a little startling when the leg jerked back out of her window though. She stopped bouncing Laith in her arms and stared. He was asleep again and she should be too. She'd quickly learned that sleeping whenever both boys were asleep was her only path to survival.

There were some unexpected grunts from outside. Had Joran fallen? Was he struggling to get up? There was a fig tree right outside that window. Had Joran damaged it? Fig trees didn't have strong branches. The limbs were pretty spindly compared to most other trees. But they could poke and make life uncomfortable. She knew that from experience. Tila had snuck out through that window more than once during her younger years.

The fig leaves shook and there were more grunts and odd sounds. What in the world was going on out there?

She took a step closer, craning her neck to peer out the window. But it was Joran's face that came into view. Tila forced her shoulders to relax as Joran pulled himself through the window. Why he hadn't just come in through the front door? But when he stepped into the small bedroom where her sons usually slept, Tila felt a wave of anger. He could have woken up Rafi or Laith! What was he thinking, coming through that particular window? Joran had absolutely no respect or understanding of how much effort it took to get her sons to sleep!

She tried unsuccessfully to tamp it down. When Joran towered over her, she opened her mouth to rebuke him, but his mouth covered hers in a powerful, demanding kiss.

Tila melted, pressing closer, but Laith was still in her arms and Tila couldn't get as close as she wanted.

Then Joran pulled away and Tila moaned wistfully, needing to keep the kiss going.

She'd missed his kisses. No one kissed like Joran. He put his entire soul into kissing her, tasting her, making her want him. Her thoughts had been so consumed over the past few months with babies, that she'd nearly forgotten about the desire that Joran could always stoke within her.

"We need to go."

Tila froze, confused. She blinked several times, staring up at him as she tried to interpret his words. But they didn't make any sense. "Go? Go where?"

Joran sighed heavily, then reached out to lightly grip her upper arms. But Tila knew better than to let him touch her. Not again. She'd vowed to tell him to go away, but she'd kissed him back as soon as he'd touched her.



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

So no. No. No touching. She pulled back, shaking her head.

He looked confused for a moment, but thankfully, dropped his hands. "Tila, you and the babies aren't safe here."

"Of course we are."

If she'd blinked, Tila would have missed the look of concern in his dark eyes. But he hid the expression quickly.

"You're not safe, love. You need to come with me. I'll keep you and the babies safe. But we need to leave. Now."

Leave her home? Was he crazy?

"Nope," she replied firmly, even shaking her head. "Not gonna happen, Joran. I'm done." She would have sliced the air with her hand, but she was still holding Laith. "We're done. We're no longer going to..."

Her words trailed off as another black-clad leg came through the window. A stranger emerged and looked around. The man was heavily armed, just like the guys last night. A third man climbed through the window. The tiny room was now crowded with large men, plus her and Laith. Rafi was somehow still sleeping in his crib, oblivious to the terror surrounding him.

"Joran, what's going on?" she demanded, pulling Laith closer.

Joran nudged her out of the small room, but Tila didn't want to leave Rafi alone with heavily armed strangers. She kept looking back over her shoulder, but Joran kept her moving until they reached the narrow hallway.

"Tila, I'm not just a regular soldier," he said in a soft, firm, voice.

"You're not?" she asked, her attention flitting from Joran's serious expression to the men who seemed to be...! "What are you doing!? You can't just take that stuff!" They were shoving diapers and clothes into a small black pack as they ignored her protests. The men grabbed more diapers and wipes, then climbed back out the window.

"Honey," Joran said, pulling her attention back to him.

Tila ignored Joran, pulling at him, trying to see around him. "Make them stop! Diapers are expensive! Why are they taking them?"

"Tila!" he snapped, his tone harder now. She stared up at him. "We need to leave immediately. I'm the Crown Prince of Lativa, love. You and our sons are in danger here. I need to get all of you to a safer place. Do you understand?"

Prince? He was a prince? Of Lativa? Okay, she'd known that Joran didn't live in her town. She would have seen him at the store or the coffee shop. Everyone knew everyone in her tiny little town. But she'd assumed that he was at least a member of the Uftar military!

"You're...what?" she asked, still confused.

He gripped her upper arms and this time, she didn't pull away. "I'm Crown Prince Joran Al-Sintra of Lativa, Tila. You and our sons are in danger. I need to get you to safety."

No. Absolutely not! She hadn't had a wild affair with a prince!

He bent down so that their eyes were at the same level. "Tila, we need to move quickly. I have a car waiting outside. There are car seats already installed. We need to get out of here, right now. You and our sons are in danger." He paused, letting his words sink in. "If you won't help me, I will have to carry you. But I need you to hold one baby while I carry the other out to the vehicle. Can you do that?"

Tila considered for a long moment. "We're not in danger. We can't be."

"You are," he insisted. "Just now, a strange man was trying to break into your home. We stopped him. We have him tied up and will call the police for questioning. Will you trust me?"

She didn't. Trust him, that is. But she'd seen the leg come through the window, heard the strange grunts. She understood the scuffle outside the window moments before Joran had come through.

So instead of arguing, she reacted on pure instinct. Tightening her hold on Laith, she nodded. "Get Rafi!" she hissed, already moving towards her bedroom. "I just need—"

"Don't pack anything, we don't have time. We need to move fast. Just put some shoes on and go to the front door. Don't turn on any lights." The lights in the hallway and the babies' room went out. The house was suddenly very dark.

"Joran, you're scaring me," she told him, hugging Laith to her chest. She watched as Joran gently lifted Rafi into his arms. Miraculously, the tiny boy continued to sleep, his little mouth forming a moue as if he were dreaming about his next meal.

Joran cradled their son against his broad chest and the image startled Tila. The only people she'd seen holding her sons were herself and the nurses right after delivery.

Seeing Joran holding Rafi made her want to cry.

“Tila!” Joran urged, jerking her out of her daze. “We have to move, honey.”

Tila heard the urgency in his tone and reacted automatically. She hugged Laith to her chest as she rushed over to the front door. She kicked her slippers off and shoved her bare feet into her sneakers. Then she turned, glanced around her newly cleaned home and wondered if she’d ever see it again. Something deep within her whispered the answer was no and that saddened her.

“Tila, love, you need to hurry,” Joran urged. She found him standing in the open doorway, cradling their son. Tila moved towards him, then paused briefly when she found a large SUV idling in her driveway. For some reason, the fact that the dome light didn’t come on when the door opened bothered her.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

She found a car seat and lowered Laith into it, strapped him in carefully, then moved to sit down beside him. Rafi was already secured and Joran sat next to him. The vehicle was so large, there was enough room for both car seats, as well as herself and Joran, in the wide backseat. As soon as the door closed, the driver reversed out of her short driveway.

Tila wondered if her neighbors might be peering out through their windows, witnessing this clandestine departure. Her lips twitched slightly at the thought. Her neighborhood was clean and basically crime-free. But it was also filled with gossips. She'd been the target of their gossip ever since her first visit with her grandmother, years ago. Tila hadn't adhered to their persnickety standards of behavior. Never had, and never would, she told herself as she watched the houses speed past.

Finally, the houses grew further apart until there were just large expanses of darkness. The driver finally turned on the headlights, and Tila was fairly certain that the SUV was going well over the speed limits.

"What's going on, Joran?" she finally asked. There was a long silence as the tension hung thickly in the air.

He looked at her, then down at the two sleeping boys. "I told you who I am."

She snorted. "You're not a prince, Joran. You just told me that story to get me out of the house."

The driver's head jerked around and she caught his startled gaze before he returned his attention back to the road.

She shivered, not from the chilly night air, but because she was starting to worry that she'd made a horrific mistake. Had she just walked out of her home in the middle of the night with her precious babies because a man told her to? Dear heaven, had she just allowed her babies and herself to be kidnapped?

"Tila," Joran's voice interrupted her growing panic. He reached across their sleeping children, offering his hand.

Tila ignored the reassurance, knowing that any touch right now would further zap her brain cells.

"Who are you, really?" she hissed. "What the hell is going on?"

He sighed, holding her gaze. "I really am Prince Joran Al-Sintra of Lativa. If you don't believe me, then look me up online."

She stared at him for a long moment, then her head nearly exploded. "I don't have my cell phone!" In the rush to get out of the house, she only had her sneakers and the clothes she was wearing. Even her sons' diapers had been taken away!

"Joran, I need you to..." She stopped when he flipped his phone around, showing her a picture. It was of him. He wasn't smiling, and looked very stern and he wore a formal military uniform. She didn't recognize the medals on his chest, but she definitely recognized the flag behind him. Tila wasn't a very political person. She rarely listened to the news, preferring to focus her energy on her work and on living every day to the fullest.

So, it was a shock to find the man she'd had a wild affair with staring at her from what looked to be an official Lativa website. She swallowed hard, but couldn't dislodge the lump of panic in her throat. Joran touched the screen and another picture appeared. This one was more familiar, even for someone like her who wasn't up to

date on politics. It was Sheik Khal Al-Sintra, current ruler of Lativa. He looked incredibly grumpy in that picture, and terrifying, if she was being completely honest. When Joran ran his finger over the screen again, a wedding picture appeared. The groom was Sheik Al-Sintra and his lovely wife, Tessa or...no, Tasha. She remembered when that wedding announcement had been all over the internet a few months ago. But it was the man standing beside the ruler that made her gasp. It was Joran and he looked so incredibly handsome!

“This is my older brother,” he explained. “And this is my younger brother.” He grimaced. “I used to be the middle child, but a little over a year ago, we discovered that my father’s second wife had a daughter.” He flipped to another picture. “This is Marianna. Technically, she’s my half-sister, but we don’t call her that. She’s ours and we’re keeping her.” He looked at the picture with pride.

That expression of pride was what convinced her that Joran was who he said he was. That he was a prince. No, a freaking crown prince! Didn’t that mean that he was next in line to be ruler?

The implications of that terrified her. “Are you...?” she stopped when her voice cracked and she tried again. “Are you going to take my boys from me?”

She felt Joran’s shock even in the darkness.

“What?” he snapped. “Why would you ask something like that?” he demanded. “Why would you even think it?”

Tila looked away, staring out at the inky blackness. “Because you’re a very powerful man, Joran. I’m just...” she looked down at her hands in her lap. She pressed her lips together. “I’m just a web designer. I have no power. I don’t have the money to fight you if you want custody.” She looked down at her adorable, sleeping twins. “But I can’t live without them!” She sniffed, fighting back sudden tears. “They are so much

to handle and I know I haven't slept enough for...I don't actually know how long but—"

"Tila!" he interrupted, stopping her. "I would never take our sons from you. We're heading back to Lativa. Once we're there, we'll get married. The boys will have everything they could possibly want. They'll have tutors and nannies. You'll be able to get a full night's sleep, not just tonight, but every night. You'll never want for anything ever again." He reached over the boys, touching her shoulder. "Tila, you can stop working and just enjoy yourself."

That startled her. "Why would I want to stop working?" she asked, baffled. "I love my job."

He shrugged. "Then you can keep working. It doesn't matter to me. My point is you can do whatever you want. I'll support you and the boys in proper style."

Tila swallowed hard, shaking her head. "You can't promise me that."

"Yes, I can," he countered, grinning. "Everything, Tila. You can have everything."

What about his love? Tila was stunned by that unexpected thought. She hadn't ever thought about falling in love with Joran. He'd been her secret lover, the man who had come to her in the night, made wild, passionate love with her, then slipped away before the sun peeked over the horizon. He'd been her secret. But that didn't mean that she loved him. Nor did he know her well enough to love her.

And suddenly, that was incredibly important to Tila. She'd never thought about falling in love before. But now, faced with her babies and their uncertain future and the unbelievable promises he was making, she realized all she truly wanted was his love.



## Chapter 9

Joran watched as Tila explored his private suite. It had a large living area, a dining room, sitting area, and an enormous bedroom. Over the past twenty-four hours, the palace staff had miraculously built a connection to the neighboring suite, so there was an additional bedroom for the boys, as well as a playroom filled with toys.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Apparently, a team of potential nannies had been brought to the city. They were currently staying in a nearby hotel, ready for interviews with Tila. His staff had scurried to conduct phone interviews, flying in any candidate that met their strict requirements. He'd hire two nannies immediately, one for each of their sons, so that Tila could have some time to herself. Eventually, he'd hire more so that there were night and day nannies.

But at the moment, he wondered what Tila thought about their living quarters.

"What do you think?" he asked, waiting anxiously behind her.

### Chapter 10

Tila turned to face the man who she'd thought she knew. But she hadn't known, hadn't even suspected, that the man whose company she'd enjoyed for so many months, was actually a prince. A wealthy, powerful prince with unlimited wealth and the ability to transform a living space in less than twenty-four hours.

And here she stood in ugly, baggy sweatpants and a tee shirt that was probably stained with baby barf, if not worse things. She'd taken a shower when Joran had been in her home last time, but that had been....she wasn't sure because she didn't know what time it was. Had she remembered deodorant? Tila didn't want to lift her arm to check. Another shower would be lovely, but she didn't dare ask for it.

"This is...lovely," she finally replied, realizing Joran was waiting for her reaction. "Umm...where are Laith and Rafi?" she asked.

The large men with guns had whisked her babies away and she didn't see them here.

"They are in their cribs, right through that door."

Tila nodded. She'd nursed Rafi on the flight here while Joran had fed Laith a bottle. The boys had been changed and settled into their car seats and, amazingly, both had slept for several hours. They should be waking up any time now though. The sun was creeping higher, brightening the sky and the bed in the other room, which looked mighty tempting!

"Thank you," she whispered, wanting to go to her sons. She wanted to hold them and tell them they were safe.

"Talk to me, Tila," Joran urged. "I can change anything you don't like."

Tila turned to face him, not sure what to say. She opened her mouth, then closed it. When she looked around, she wasn't sure what she liked or disliked. In reality, she was so tired that her mind was absolute mush.

"Would you mind if I just...rested for a bit?" she asked. "If I could just sleep for an hour, that would definitely help."

Joran smiled, then gestured towards the room with the bed. "Sleep as long as you'd like," he assured her. He put a hand to the small of her back, leading her into the bedroom. "There's a bathroom through there," he told her, gesturing towards another door. "And there are clothes in here for you." He opened a third door, revealing a walk-in closet that was larger than her entire house.

Tila didn't want to look at clothes. She felt self-conscious in her sweat pants and stained tee shirt. She smoothed a hand down over her front and looked at the floor. "Sleep," was the only word she could utter.

“When you need me, just...” he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “There are guards outside the door.” When she looked at him with panic in her eyes, he lifted both hands, palms out. “Not to keep you in, Tila,” he assured her soothingly. “The guards are here for your protection. They will stop everyone from coming to greet you.” Again, he gestured towards the bed. “Sleep. I know you’re exhausted. Take all the time you need and I’ll be around when you are ready to talk.”

Tila nodded slowly. Once she didn’t feel like a zombie, she could ask questions and figure out what she wanted to do.

She watched as Joran left the room, pulling the door closed behind him. She was submerged in a room that was lit only by the dim shadows of a night-light hidden somewhere on the left wall. Tila crawled into the bed and pulled the comforter over herself. Tears burned, but she wiped them away, furious with herself for giving in to them. Tears wouldn’t solve anything and she buried her face in the pillow. She didn’t wake for a long time.

## Chapter 11

Joran lifted one of his sons into his arms. He finally knew their names; Rafi and Laith. But he had no idea which one was which.

“Are you going to tell me your name?” he asked playfully, lifting the baby in the air.

“Rafi and Laith, eh?” Khal asked, cracking a smile as he scooped up the other twin.

Both babies looked as if they were considering screaming. They were used to their mother caring for them and these new faces were obviously unfamiliar. But they didn’t start crying. They just...took it all in.

“I think that one is Rafi,” Tasha replied, leaning against her husband’s arm and

gazing down at the adorable baby boy.

“Why?” Marianna asked, peering over Joran’s shoulder at the baby in his arms. “They look exactly alike.”

Raj took a long swallow of his coffee as he leaned back in the leather chair. “Are they identical or fraternal twins?” he asked.

Joran shot a baffled glance at his younger brother. “No idea,” he replied, then focused back on the tiny bundle in his arms. “Don’t much care either.”

“Going to be important to the line of succession,” Marianna pointed out.

Tasha and Khal glanced at each other, sharing a secret, knowing smile. Raj caught the look and sat up straighter. “What aren’t you telling us?” he demanded, a slow smile growing on his handsome features.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Tasha beamed, stroking the baby's fluffy, dark hair. "We might be expecting," she told the group.

"Mightbe?" Marianna asked, her eyes eager. "Am I going to be an aunt again?"

"You could be," Khal replied, bouncing the baby in his arms when it looked like the infant was going to object. "We're waiting a few more weeks before we take a test."

Raj was grinning openly now. "Because of the insanity that will ensue if you announce Tasha could be carrying the next ruler of our country?"

Tasha cringed, her hand covering her stomach protectively. "Don't say things like that," she hissed, then smiled at the infant again. "I'm only five days late. And we're not going to burden our child with responsibilities that they may or may not want."

Khal glanced at his brothers over his wife's head, silently alerting Raj and Joran that an argument had already been had over the line of succession. Obviously, that was a contentious discussion.

Joran lifted his son higher, tickling his stomach. "You're not intimidated by us, are you?" he soothed.

That's when an unexpected thud came from the next room. Tila jerked open the bedroom door, practically falling into the living area. She was bleary eyed from sleep.

Joran immediately shoved the baby into Marianna's arms and stood up.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, hurrying over to Tila.

She shoved a hand through her messy hair, looking around. It wasn’t until she spotted her tiny sons that she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Nothing,” she whispered, still trying to come down off of the wash of terror when her babies hadn’t been beside her when she woke. “I just...I was confused when I woke up.” She looked around, embarrassed by all of the attention. Even her babies were staring at her.

“Rafi and Laith are fine,” Joran assured her. “They have been with me the entire time you’ve been sleeping.”

She looked up at him, obviously working to calm herself. “How long did I sleep?”

He glanced at his watch. “About five hours.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t think I’ve slept that long since I brought them home from the hospital.” She stepped forward, then stopped, looking down at her wrinkled sweatpants and tee-shirt, then around at the other people in the room. Everyone was still staring at her, but what she noticed were the beautiful, sophisticated clothes they wore while Tila was painfully aware of the baby barf that had dried on her shoulder. “I should...!” She pointed behind her in the general direction of the bathroom. “I should get cleaned up.”

“Why don’t you take a long, hot shower? There are clothes in the dressing room to the right of the bathroom.” He kissed the top of her head. “Take your time. We won’t go anywhere.”

Tila bit her lip, not sure. But in the end, she felt too dirty and dingy to do anything other than shower. “Fine. I’ll...just be a few minutes.”

## Chapter 12

Tila walked back into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. With her eyes closed, she prayed that her nerves would calm down. If she kept jerking awake like this, she was going to have a heart attack at the ripe old age of twenty-nine.

She hurried into the shower and found extravagant toiletries that she'd only read about online. They were expensive and luxurious. After toweling off, she padded barefoot into the dressing room to find an enormous room with only a few outfits folded up on the central drawer system. There were hanging rods along three of the four walls and a floor to ceiling drawer system. But in the center was a counter with a polished wood top and more drawers underneath. On the counter was a stack of large, soft tunic-like sweaters and tops in rich fabrics she would never be able to afford. She chose a soft, green silk top and paired it with comfortable black leggings. The top buttoned up the front, so she could nurse her babies, and the soft material draped beautifully, hiding the soft bulge of her post-partum belly. She found a pair of ballet flats that perfectly matched the top and pulled them on, glorying in the comfortable soles. Boy, money really could buy happiness!

She didn't bother with makeup or doing anything with her hair other than pulling it all into a band, piling it on top of her head. When she looked in the mirror, Tila was shocked at how much better she looked. There were still dark circles under her eyes, but five hours of sleep had alleviated her grey, sickly pallor. She looked, and felt, much better than she had in...far too long.

Food, she thought. Yes, she needed something to eat. And something to drink! Plus, she needed to nurse her babies. Her breasts were pretty full after a five and a half hour break from nursing. That was the longest she'd ever gone without nursing! It felt both glorious and painful.

When she opened the door this time, she found only Joran in the room with her sons



on either side of him. They both seemed to be asleep. How was that possible? And unfortunately, that also meant that she would have to pump in order to alleviate the pressure in her breasts.

Again.

Darn it, she hated pumping! It was made even more embarrassing when she knew that Joran would figure out what she was doing. Was there anything less sexy than pumping breast milk?

Okay, there were probably thousands of situations that were less sexy. Giving birth probably topped the list. Being pregnant was pretty sexy during the middle months. Not so much when she'd been throwing up every five minutes during the first few months. And the last three months, she'd been as big as a whale. Nope, those months definitely hadn't been sexy.

"What are you thinking?" his deep voice asked. "Actually, just a moment," he corrected, then led her away from their sons so they wouldn't wake them up.

Tila sighed as a shiver went down her spine, not surprised to discover that his voice still had power over her. He looked so amazingly handsome. She wanted to rush into his arms and beg him to...what? What did she want? The past several days had been so overwhelming, she wasn't sure what she wanted anymore.

Except a tiny voice in the back of her mind yelled, "Him!" She wanted Joran.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

“I need to...” she whispered, but wasn’t exactly sure what she needed to do. Her life had revolved around her sons for so long, so she turned to go check on them.

But an arm wrapped around her waist, stopping her.

“Tila,” he said, his deep voice close to her ear, “come with me. You need to understand how safe you and our sons are here.”

Tila pulled away and leaned her head back so she could see his eyes. “What?”

“Come with me.” He released her waist and took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers.

He done that so often in the past, but it felt different somehow now. She wasn’t quite sure why or how, but his touch hummed under her skin, and she wondered if he could make her glow just by holding her hand.

“What do you want to show me?” she asked again, wary now. All of the memories that she’d suppressed for so long rushed back with his touch.

“Eventually, you are going to have to learn to trust me, Tila,” he warned with a smile in his tone. He tugged at her hand gently. “This way.”

He led her to her sons, and there were two large men standing next to the bassinets.

“This is Jon and Sven,” Joran explained, gesturing to each man in turn. “They are the personal bodyguards for Laith and Rafi. They are the only two right now, but my

guards have all volunteered to add extra hours until additional bodyguards can be hired and trained. It's going to take a few months because guarding infants and children require different skills than guarding an adult."

"Guards?"

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, smiling faintly as she leaned into his side without noticing she did so. "Yes, Tila. They will be guarded twenty-four hours a day. They will never be left alone until they are older and can speak for themselves. Then other arrangements will be made."

"But...why?"

"Because Prince Rafi and Prince Laith," he paused, letting her grasp that she'd given birth to princes before he continued, "have the power to influence world events. If anything were to happen to them..." he paused, clenching his jaw tightly for a moment. "Well, nothing will happen to them. I won't allow it."

Both guards stepped forward and bowed. "I will guard your babies with my life, Ms. Ayad. Nothing will happen to them on my watch."

"Nor mine, Ms. Ayad," the second guard agreed.

Tila eyed the guards for a moment. They weren't as tall as Joran, but they looked like they had the muscles and experience to protect her babies from practically anything.

"Thank you," she replied, not sure what the appropriate response was to someone who vowed that they would die to protect her sons. She didn't want anyone to die, much less be hurt.

"Also," Joran said, pulling her attention back to him, "I have hired two nannies

already. I have six nannies that are waiting to be interviewed. You can hire all of them or none. They will work with you, at our direction. They will take care of our sons when we have work or official obligations, and will disappear when we want time alone with our children.”

“Nannies?” she parroted, unable to fathom the idea of having a nanny. This really was an entirely different world, she thought.

“Yes, multiple nannies. I’d suggest that we hire night and day nannies. In fact, we should hire enough nannies for three shifts, plus weekend shifts. It’s not fair to ask a person to work overtime consistently. Everyone needs a work-life balance.”

Tila couldn’t imagine being able to afford hiring three shifts of people to care for her children. She’d been doing it alone for the past two months. Eleven, if she counted the months she’d been pregnant.

“Surely we only need one,” she said to him. “I just need an extra set of hands.”

“You need at least three. One for every eight hour shift. And even two during the daylight hours.”

She scowled at him. “I can take care of my sons during the evenings when I’m not working, Joran.”

“You’d think so, right?” he asked, tucking her hand onto his elbow. “And yet, you’ve gotten maybe twenty hours of sleep a week, and I know I’m being generous there, since the babies were born.” He led her towards a table. “Am I right?”

It felt as if he were taking her children away from her. “I can handle it, Joran.”

He stopped and looked down at her, understanding blooming in his eyes. “Tila, do

you think hiring a nanny means I don't think you are a good mother?"

She tried to match his stare, but she felt her lower lip quiver. "Isn't that what this is all about?"

"Not even slightly," he told her, leaning in to look her in the eyes. "You have done an amazing job with our sons, Tila." He kissed her and it was such a surprise, she didn't have time to pull away. "You've done more than most mothers could have done. Our boys are healthy, happy, and thriving. All because of you."

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

She thought so, but then why was he so adamant about hiring extra help?

“Here’s the thing, love,” he continued, guiding her over to the table. He paused to pull out a chair for her, then waited until she was seated before he sat down opposite her, “you’ve had to do it all on your own for two months. Longer, actually. I don’t discount having to get through a pregnancy alone and I wish you’d let me know that you were pregnant. I never would have left you alone all this time.”

“I did!” she asserted firmly, irritated that he didn’t believe her.

His dark eyes darkened for a moment, but then his gaze cleared. “Suffice it to say, I didn’t get the messages.”

“That’s not because I didn’t send them,” she insisted, refusing to back down. She could hear the disbelief in his tone and refused to stand for that. “Get me my phone, Joran. I’ll show you the messages I sent to you. I’ll show you every message I sent, pleading with you to acknowledge my messages.”

He stared at her for a long moment. Tila glared right back at him, and he lifted a hand. Immediately, a guard appeared by the table.

“Talk to Gino,” Joran commanded. “Tell him to check the text messages and phone calls from Ms. Ayed’s phone. I want to know where the messages she sent to me went.”

The man nodded in acknowledgement, then stepped back and slipped from the room.

“Wow!” she whispered, watching the door where the man had disappeared. “Can you do that with anyone in the palace?”

“You can too,” he told her, then nodded towards someone behind her. A moment later, a servant arrived with a platter. He set it down in the middle of the table, then lifted the dome and walked away.

“What would you like to drink?” he asked.

“I can’t have wine or beer,” she told him as another waiter started forward with a bottle of wine.

Immediately, Joran waved the servant away. “Will water suffice?”

“You can have wine, Joran. I just can’t because I’m nursing.”

He’d started to serve himself some of the creamy looking chicken and rice dish in front of them, but paused, his hand frozen with the serving spoon halted. “Tila, you’ve sacrificed everything over the past months. I can do without wine until you are able to enjoy it with me.”

Tila didn’t have a response to that, but she felt something warm and fuzzy low in her belly. Lowering her lashes, she stared at her empty plate. A moment later, Joran put a heaping portion of the chicken and rice with a creamy curry sauce on the plate. She was startled by the amount and laughed. She actually laughed for the first time in months.

“I can’t eat all this,” she protested.

“Try,” he ordered and piled twice that amount onto his plate. “You need some proper nutrition.”

“I need to lose weight,” she grumbled, picking up her fork.

“You donotneed to lose weight,” he told her firmly. “You need to heal after your pregnancy. And since you are nursing, you need as much nutrition as possible.”

She tried to ignore the warmth she felt at his words, but it was nearly impossible. She’d felt so discouraged about her inability to lose the post-pregnancy weight. So the glow of...happiness? Appreciation? Whatever, was intense and she was gratified.

When she took the first bite, she closed her eyes, amazed at the burst of flavors. “Oh, this is delicious!” she sighed.

“You haven’t had creative foods for a while, have you?”

She shrugged. “I used to love to cook, but now...I haven’t had time.”

“You haven’t had time for anything, I’m guessing. They are a handful.” He looked over to where they continued to sleep peacefully in their small bassinets.

“How long have they been asleep?” she asked, stuffing another bite into her mouth. She wanted to eat as much as she could before they woke up. She knew from experience that there wouldn’t be much time once they were awake and demanding attention.

“They fell asleep right before you stepped out.”

For the next thirty minutes, they chatted about the boys’ schedule, foods she wanted to try and cook, his role in the Lativa government, and anything other than what might happen next. It was nice, and terrifying, Tila thought. Whatwasgoing to happen now? How was she going to get through the next five minutes? Five hours? Five days?!



## Chapter 13

They were gone!! The babies were gone! All the carefully crafted plans were obliterated! The empty house was infuriating! Where had those infants disappeared to? It was like they'd just vanished off the face of the world!

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

But not forgotten. There had to be a way to find them. Location was everything. It was time to find those darling baby boys and rescue them, bring them back where they belonged. Tila Ayed didn't deserve them. She didn't understand how special they were. She wasn't a good mother to them. She wasn't prepared for the sacrifices that were required from every parent.

She needed to learn. Tila needed to know how much one must sacrifice to raise healthy boys. Children were the backbone of a country's future. It was time to teach her the error of her ways.

### Chapter 14

Five days later, Tila was ready to scream. She slept beside Joran every night, but they didn't touch. At least not at the beginning of the night. She generally woke up in his arms in the morning, but they never spoke of it.

They talked about Laith and Rafi, spending hours playing with them. She taught Joran how to tell their sons apart, recognizing the slight differences between them. They talked about security measures, hired three nannies, two for the day shifts and one for the night.

Tila was losing weight because she now got at least five hours of uninterrupted sleep every night, ate nutritious meals, and even had time to work out with Joran in the morning. Of course, he worked out like a maniac while she walked on the treadmill and did a few weight workouts as she slowly regained strength in her limbs.

But she and Joran never really talked. Oh, they discussed the weather, their sons'

progress, their cute faces or the palace staff. But they never spoke about themselves, about the future, about why she was here or what would happen in the near or distant future.

The twins were thriving though. Tila kept telling herself that their health and happiness was the only thing that mattered.

But lying in bed next to Joran every night, waking up in his arms, feeling his body's reaction to their closeness...feeling her own body's less obvious reaction to him holding her like he never wanted to let her go, like every breath she took was important to him...that was hard. No, that was very close to hell!

Was this some sort of divine punishment for something she'd done in the past? Yes, she'd lived her life on the edge for a long time. She'd loved every moment. She'd considered every day, every breath, to be a beautiful gift, one that she'd wanted to offer to anyone who crossed her path through kindness and happiness.

Had she missed someone who needed help? Had she hurt someone without realizing?

"What's wrong?" Joran asked as he entered their suite that night. They were getting ready to have dinner with his brothers and sisters.

"Nothing," she replied, smiling to the nanny who had just handed over a freshly bathed and adorably dressed Laith. Rafi was squirming on his back on the floor by her feet, his arms and legs reaching eagerly for a snuggle, his tummy full from a recent bottle.

Joran scooped Rafi into his arms, blowing raspberries into the little man's tummy. The boy was just starting to smile and it was a delight to see those expressions grow and change with every new experience.

But it was driving her crazy, spending time with Joran, not being able to touch him and not knowing what was going to happen. What did he want from her? What did she want from him?

Love. The word popped into her mind immediately and wouldn't seem to go away, no matter how much she tried to tell herself that Joran wasn't the kind to fall in love. He was the kind of man who was passionate in bed, a great father, but beyond that, he didn't seem to want anything more from her.

"Something is bothering you," he contradicted, turning Laith around so that his back was against Joran's chest.

Tila decided to just...put it out there. "I want my own bedroom," she blurted, snapping the buttons on Rafi's tiny outfit.

There was a stunned, painful silence. Then Joran replied with a simple, "No." Joran turned away, carrying Laith to the window, whispering something into her son's ear.

"No?" she echoed, standing up and lifting Rafi into her arms. "Just no? No discussion? Nothing but an adamant no?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Did you misunderstand?"

She ground her teeth together in frustration. "Joran, you can't just tell me no. I can't stand sleeping next to you every night and...!"

Joran spun around, his eyes heating up. "And?" he demanded, still holding Laith. The little man was kicking gleefully, oblivious to the growing tension between his parents.

"And...!" she stopped, not wanting to admit how much it bothered her when he held

her close, but didn't seem to want anything more. The snuggling was nice. Very nice. She'd realized over the past five days that they hadn't done much snuggling while they been together before. There hadn't been time. They had been very aware of the limited time they had together. Joran always had to leave and there were only hours, not days, to spend getting to know one another.

"Nothing," she grumbled, kissing Rafi and rubbing his belly. "We're late for dinner."

The next hour was both painful and delightful. Tila enjoyed getting to know Tasha and Marianna. Raj was a teasing charmer, who adored his tiny nephews. Khal and Raj bickered over holding the babies, but always backed away whenever Tasha or Marianna wanted to hold one. It was adorable how such large, powerful men could coo and tickle tiny babies.

But too soon, dinner ended. She and Joran returned to their private suite in silence, each carrying a sleeping baby. As soon as they entered their suite, the nanny took over, gently getting the twins tucked in for the night.

And then Tila was alone with Joran. The awkward silence seemed to stretch on forever.

## Chapter 15

Joran watched Tila, his body aching to hold her, to reassure her that he could make this right between them. But how could he fix this? He'd left Tila at a time when she'd desperately needed him. How could she ever learn to trust him again?

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he asked, automatically moving towards the bar in their private suite. That was another thing, he mentally grumbled as he reached for the bottle of scotch. Tila still acted like a guest here, instead of someone who was prepared to live with him forever.

“Thank you, but I...” She gestured towards the sleeping babies.

“Right,” Joran sighed, feeling defeated. He clutched at the bottle, not because he wanted it anymore. But because he didn’t know what else to do.

“Joran, this...!”

He swung around before she could tell him that their living situation wasn’t working. He didn’t want to hear it. He’d already lost her once to his familial and royal obligations. He’d ached to feel her in his arms every night for all the months they’d been apart.

So no! He didn’t want to hear her state the obvious, that this tense living situation wasn’t healthy. Not for her, not for him, and certainly not for the twins.

“Marry me,” he blurted out.

Swallowing hard, he tried to hide his shock. He’d wanted to propose to Tila even before the shift in defense responsibilities from Khal to himself. Hell, he even had a ring! It had been in his pocket for the past several days, waiting for the right moment to ask her to spend the rest of her life with a man who had let her down.

Still, the horror dawning on her beautiful features wasn't the reaction he'd been hoping for.

"Joran," Tila started to say, but he shook his head and lifted a hand, stopping the inevitable rejection.

"I've asked for marriage before, but you haven't agreed. However, before you say no again, let me explain the benefits of marriage to me."

"Joran, we're strangers now," she said, her tone pleading with him to understand her point.

He paused, then shook his head. "You're right, we are strangers." He moved closer, careful to keep his voice low. "However, I remember what it was like between us," he stepped even closer, noting the softness in her stubborn chin. "I remember the way you used to squeal with excitement when I knocked on your door." He took another step toward her. "I remember how we were kissing each other and stripping off clothes before I could even close the door." He took her hands in his, lifting them to his lips. Carefully, he kissed her knuckles. "I remember the way you used to moan and sigh and breathe my name when I touched you, when I was inside of you." He sucked her finger into his mouth and immediately proved his point when she gasped and her body melted. All of the stubbornness was gone from her now.

"Joran, you can't—"

He didn't want to hear what he couldn't do. He wanted her to know what he could do. So instead of waiting for her to list all of the ways he'd failed her, Joran was determined to remind her of all of the ways that he'd been good for her.

He kissed her then, his mouth moving over hers as he felt her lips tremble. When he deepened the kiss, she angled her head backwards so that she could accept his kiss,

and demand more. He gave it to her. Hell, he'd give her everything!

While he continued to kiss her, his hands explored her body, reacquainting himself with her new curves. She'd both lost and gained weight in different places over the past two weeks and Joran was fascinated by every inch of her. She was heavier than she'd been before, but he liked the extra weight. Correction, he loved the additional curves. She was softer, her breasts larger, and her hips more lush. The soft, round globes of her butt cheeks fit into his hands perfectly and he wanted to tear off her clothes so that he could see every inch of her amazing body.

"You feel so damn good, Tila!" he groaned, cupping her breasts and letting his thumb drift over the tips.

She whimpered with the movement as her knees failed her. Joran loved that reaction. Easily, he caught her in his arms, pulling her against him.

"We should stop," she whispered, her eyes closed, but she shuddered and slid her hand up his chest, brushing against his nipple before continuing upward, to wrap her soft, sweet fingers around the back of his neck. He felt her thumb caress that spot underneath his earlobe and his hands tightened, digging into her hips.

She knew what that did to him! Joran blinked, trying to remember what they'd been discussing. But she caressed that spot again and all thoughts evaporated from his mind. He lifted her into his arms, shivering slightly as her legs wrapped around his waist. Urgently, he carried her into the bedroom and laid her down on the soft bed. When he gazed down at her now, her gorgeous dark hair spread out over the comforter, he was entranced.

This bed had been so sterile, so cold ever since she'd arrived. But tonight, he was going to change that. He was going to make love to his woman in this bed and ensure that she felt so much pleasure, she wouldn't ever want to leave him.



With that goal in mind, he unbuttoned her pink, cashmere cardigan, never so grateful for her need to nurse. The buttons released easily and he carefully, jubilantly, spread the sweater open so that he could stare down at...the ugliest bra he'd ever seen.

"Don't say anything," Tila hissed, pulling the sweater closed again. She even tried to scoot away from him.

Joran laughed, genuinely enchanted by her embarrassment. "Love, don't pull away from me," he urged, grabbing her hands and gently prying them away from the cashmere. "I love the fact that you care for our sons this way. They are growing because you nurse them with your body." He kissed the tip of one breast that was pressing against the faux lace material. He'd watched Tila fiddle with the clasps several times over the past couple of weeks before she nursed their sons, but for the life of him, Joran couldn't see what she did.

So, he relied on the old ways. Rolling over, he shifted her so that she was straddling his abdomen within seconds. With determined hands, he pushed the cardigan off her shoulders, then sat up so that he could reach behind her, releasing the traditional bra clasp. The bra dropped from her body and Joran was able to feast his eyes on her glorious breasts.

"I'm fatter than I used to be," Tila whispered, closing her arms, trying to hide herself from him.

Joran shook his head, grabbing her wrists to gently pull her arms wide. "You're stunning," he told her, honestly amazed at how lovely she was now. "You're even more beautiful." And with that, he couldn't hold back. He leaned closer, kissing one taut nipple, testing to see if his touch hurt her. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

She laughed, her hands resting gently on his shoulders. "Hurt?"

One hand cupped her left breast while he focused on the right one. “Nursing our sons,” he clarified, his thoughts more than slightly foggy with the lust that was becoming painful now. “Does it hurt when they nurse?”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

“It did at the beginning but not anymore.”

“Good,” he said, then lifted her breast so that he could tease that nipple. He knew from the past that she loved it when he teased her breasts. And just as in the past, Tila moaned, wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him in closer.

“More,” she ordered, her fingers tangling in his short hair.

Joran couldn't respond. Not with her fingers tugging at his hair like that. He loved it. He needed her to keep doing that, so he moved to her other nipple, teasing the tip with lips and tongue then stroking his thumb over the tip. He kept alternating between his wet tongue and his demanding thumb until she was shifting her hips against his erection.

“I need your shirt gone,” she whispered, her warm, soft breath tickling his ear. “Now!”

Joran kept his mouth on her nipple while he reached down and literally ripped his dress shirt off, tossing it away. His movements made her breasts bounce appealingly and he didn't release her nipple. When his hands were free again, he reached down, pulling her hips more tightly against his shaft, eliciting a gasp from his woman.

“More!” she demanded, her hips already rolling against him urgently.

Joran reached up, sliding his fingers up her back. He knew what she was doing. In the past, Joran had stopped her from finding her pleasure in this way, just to drive her wild. But tonight, he wanted to please and pleasure her in every possible way. So, he

not only let her shift against him, he helped her, reaching down. Her leggings were in the way, but the stretchy material was no match for his searching fingers.

Okay, maybe it was, he thought with a growl. The material was too tight. The leggings had to go.

“Wha...?” Tila gasped when he set her on her feet. She stood in front of him on shaky legs, her hands fluttering as she tried to make sense of what he was doing.

Joran didn’t have the mental capacity to explain. Instead, he simply tugged the leggings down without mercy. When they were gone, he lifted her back up and lay back on the mattress with Tila’s legs spread out around him. He pulled her hips down, causing her to spread her knees wide. With his hands keeping her imprisoned, he lapped at that nub, sucking and teasing it.

## Chapter 16

Tila was shocked by this new position. He’d never been so brazen before. When she felt his tongue flick against that swollen nub, she was so surprised, that it took her a moment to react. But only a moment. Quickly, his magical tongue and those damn thumbs of his explored her in that naughty, delicious way and all she could do was moan as he pulled her closer. And closer! Tila vaguely wondered if she might suffocate him, but she was past caring. She rolled her hips against his mouth, showing him what she needed and...!

“Joran!” she gasped, her hips writhing against his mouth while her first orgasm exploded within her. Her body felt as if she were melting and throbbing as the pleasure washed over her in waves. It was too much and she tried to pull away, to catch her breath. But Joran wasn’t done. He gave her one more lick and she shuddered, needing to...what? She’d already climaxed!

“Joran,” she whimpered.

Thankfully, he released her, but only so that he could roll her over. Then he was looming over her, his hips caught in the embrace of her legs, but not pressing against her at the moment. Still, seeing him like this, his hair tousled because of what he’d been doing to her was...breathtakingly sexy!

He pulled away and Tila watched as he stood up. With swift, determined movements, he released the belt and stripped out of his remaining clothes. Watching him, seeing every beautiful part of him revealed to her eager eyes, made her forget her self-consciousness of her changed body. This was Joran and he was...utterly magnificent! Those rippling muscles had always been such a delight to touch. Her fingers itched to touch him, to feel every inch of him pressed against her.

He paused to grab a condom out of a drawer, then hurried back to her, his body tall and strong and definitely ready for her.

She reached out, wanting to touch him. But he grabbed her wrist and came down over her, pinning her arms over her head. “If you touch me now, I won’t last, Tila,” he murmured. Then he kissed his way down her neck, finding every one of those places that made her sigh and moan.

He pulled away only long enough to open the condom and roll it down over his impressive shaft. Then he was there again, but her wrists weren’t pinned over her head this time. Instead, he placed her hands on his head. “Touch me, Tila. Pull my hair.” He kissed her, gently at first, but when she started sliding her fingers over his hair, the kiss deepened. She knew he didn’t just like it when she tugged at his hair, he loved everything about her fingers in his hair. Tila didn’t think about the nights he’d rested his head on her breasts while she ran her fingers through his silky locks. The man literally purred when someone touched his hair. Correction, he purred when she touched his hair. Tila didn’t want to think about Joran being in another woman’s

arms.

But she couldn't help it. He'd been away from her for so long and she'd spent so many nights terrorized by the thought of him with other women. So, she yanked at his hair, which made him groan, and that fed the fires of her desire. She did it again, needing to hear that sound again. Every time she tugged, he groaned, until he thrust into her.

Then froze!

"Tila!" he moaned, not moving as he looked down at her. "Did I hurt you?"

Tila almost laughed at the possibility. "No," she whispered, frustrated that he wasn't fully inside of her yet. She needed all of him, needed him to fill her up and do that thrusting-wiggle thing that never failed to drive her wild. "But I'm going to be very angry if you don't," she tugged at his hair again, "move so that we can—"

She gasped as he thrust into her. It wasn't the rough thrusts that he'd done to her in the past. This was a gentle slide, then a hesitation. She tugged again and he pulled out, then moved into her once more. Again and again, she tugged and he thrust. It was the rhythm that worked for them in the past and it wasn't failing them now. Over and over, they shifted against each other, moving in the ways that they'd figured out over a year ago. But it was better now, hotter, faster, and more overwhelming. Maybe their nearly frantic pace was because they'd been separated for so long. Or maybe it was caused by all of the latent feelings they were both pretending weren't there, simmering just below the surface.

Whatever, it worked and Tila was soon spiraling into her second climax, her body clinging to Joran as she tried, and failed, to control the tidal wave of sizzling sensations. Joran continued to thrust for several more moments, then he froze, groaning, as his body tightened with his own climax.

Then it was over. He fell on top of her while Tila wrapped her arms around him, closing her eyes at the beauty of what they'd just shared. We've still got it, she thought with a burst of happiness.

## Chapter 17

Tila woke at midnight, hearing Laith's cry. With a moan, she slipped out of Joran's arms, not wanting to disturb him. He'd been up with their sons every night, right along with her. She'd nurse whichever boy had woken first, while he gave the other a bottle. He had become an expert at changing diapers too. He was fast and efficient, never allowing either little devil to spray him after that first time.

She grabbed his dress shirt from the floor and tried to button it up, but the buttons were gone. Tila smiled as she pulled the sides closed and searched for her panties. But when they weren't to be found, she rushed over to the closet and grabbed a clean pair, slipping them on quickly. She didn't need to worry about Laith's continued cries because the night nanny would have changed his diaper already, soothing the little demon until Tila came to feed him.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

So, it was with a smile when Tila walked into the nursery, the lights already dim. “Thank you, Elia,” she said to the night nanny. She smiled, but before she could respond, Rafi woke up, his demanding cries drawing a chuckle from Elia. “So needy!” she teased softly as she moved over to lift the little guy into her arms. She soothed and cuddled the boy while efficiently changing his diaper, whispering softly to him while Tila settled into one of the rocking chairs. She lifted the overstuffed pillow, laying it on her lap so Laith could nurse more easily.

Laith was nursing hungrily when Joran entered the nursery. He looked amazing in a soft pair of jeans and...nothing else. Tila’s breath caught in her throat as she watched him walk over to the changing table.

Elia blushed, and quickly stepped back, leaving the nursery as Joran took a wiggling, excited Rafi into his arms. Elia always popped a bottle of formula into the warming machine before she changed diapers, so it was at the perfect temperature for Joran as he walked over to the second rocking chair and sat down, stuffing the other pillow onto his lap as he settled Rafi into a comfortable feeding position.

The whole time Tila watched, alternating between embarrassment and fascination. Last night had been...mind-blowing. But had they made a mistake? Maybe they should have resolved their personal relationship before they’d reentered a sexual one.

“Stop,” he said softly, running a thumb over Rafi’s head to soothe the little man.

“Stop what?” she asked, her stomach tightening with dread at his words.

“Stop overthinking.” He smiled at her, his dark eyes bright even in the dim light. “It



was perfect. As always, Tila.”

She sighed, nodding because her body was still humming with happiness. What they’d done together had been incredible. She didn’t have words for how her body felt right now, other than happy. And confused.

Okay, so she had two words.

“We should...figure out what’s going to happen with us,” she countered, pulling her eyes away so that she could look down at Laith. He was still feeding hungrily, his dark eyes staring up at her while one fist clenched against her breast.

“We should enjoy whatever comes our way, Tila,” he countered. “And if we want to enjoy each other, then what’s the harm?”

She listened to him and tried to be as casual. But she’d never enjoyed another man the way she did Joran. It was as if the man had some sort of magical connection to her heart. The fact that he was reducing their moments together to just a...mutual itch, well, that hurt.

Looking down at their son to hide her expression, she tried to come to terms with the fact that Joran wasn’t as emotionally connected to her as she was to him.

“Right. It was just...sex.” She forced herself to smile, then shifted Laith to her other breast.

## Chapter 18

Joran watched Tila’s body language and could tell that he’d said something wrong. He wasn’t sure what though. They’d wanted each other. There wasn’t anything wrong with enjoying each other’s bodies. There should be no shame around sex.

In the past, he would have said that Tila thought that way as well. She'd always been just as voraciously needy as he'd been when they'd come together. Last night had been no exception, other than that they knew each other's bodies and needs now. They didn't need to experiment as they'd done in the past.

Not that he wasn't eager to learn more ways to pleasure her. Especially with her new, curvier body! Hell, even now, he wanted to take her into his arms and make love to her all over again. Every time she breathed his name, he wanted to climax.

Why the hell didn't she understand that they were perfect for each other?

He didn't understand, but Joran was determined to prove it to her. They were meant to be together. Until he had a ring on her finger, he refused to relent. Tila was his woman! He would drench her in every kind of pleasure he could devise.

## Chapter 19

The bitch didn't deserve those twin babies! That woman, wherever she was, shouldn't have taken them away! Tila seemed to get everything she wanted while the rest of the world had to struggle, to beg and scrape and claw to get their needs met. It wasn't fair that she had everything while the rest of them, had to make do with crumbs.

No more! Crumbs were not enough! It was time to embrace the pleasures that life offered! Those babies needed a better home. They needed to be with someone who would love them more completely than that bitch ever could!

But where was she now?

## Chapter 20

Tila woke up feeling warm and safe. But as soon as she opened her eyes, she

remembered that she wasn't. Safe, that is. Even with Joran's arm wrapped around her waist, she knew that nothing had been settled between them.

They might have had sex last night, but nothing was resolved.

Slipping out of his arms, she stepped into the shower. In the past, she would have rolled over and snuggled with Joran until he woke up. He would kiss her and the magic would start all over again. It usually took them an hour or more to get out of bed in the morning. Of course, that was only on the mornings that he'd still been with her.

Now she understood why he'd so often left during the night. Yeah, there had been the occasional long weekend in his arms. But they'd never gone out for dinner. At the time, Tila hadn't minded not going out. She'd lived in a small town and there weren't many restaurants. Plus, she'd wanted Joran all to herself, always painfully aware of the passing of time and that Joran would eventually have to leave again.

Still, she felt a niggles of frustration. Why hadn't they ever gone out to dinner? Had he been ashamed of her?

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

She rinsed the shampoo out of her hair and reached for the conditioner, but a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist. Tila yelped, then spun around to find Joran surveying her nakedness, a serious expression in his eyes.

“I need to hurry,” she whispered, backing up because she knew that expression. And even if she hadn’t, the erection pressing against her belly would have clued her in.

The man never seemed to get enough sex!

Hmm...that wasn’t fair. In the past, she’d wanted him just as much. In fact, most of the time, Tila had been the one to initiate sex between them, always aware that he would have to leave too soon.

“Good morning,” he grumbled, sliding his hands down her arms. She was braced to reject him, so Tila was confused when he didn’t try to pull her into his arms. And the sparkling diamond ring he slipped onto her finger was even more confusing. “We’re engaged.” Then he stepped around her in the massive shower space and ducked his head under the warm spray.

“We’re...what?”

“Engaged,” he repeated, shaking his head to dislodge the water from his eyes. Without blinking, he reached for the shampoo, then handed her the conditioner.

Tila couldn’t take the bottle of expensive conditioner. She was too busy staring at the diamond ring. It wasn’t just a single solitaire. No, Joran had to be different! He had to go out of his way to find a ring that looked exactly like a snowflake. There was a

large, center stone surrounded by dozens of smaller stones.

Snowflake. The man had found a ring in the shape of a snowflake. She remembered the night she'd snuggled in his arms out in her backyard. She'd started a fire in the small pit she'd built and they'd sipped wine and talked. She'd told him about her desire to see snow someday. He'd laughed and told her how cold it was, that the icy drops got under one's clothing and felt like a knife against the skin. She'd said she didn't care and that her dream home would be on a snow covered mountain somewhere.

He'd remembered that conversation. How the hell had he found a ring in the shape of a snowflake?

Looking up, she wasn't aware of the tears in her eyes until he said, "If you don't like it, I'll find you something different. I can get you a more traditional solitaire."

Immediately, Tila curled her fingers into a fist so that he couldn't reclaim it. "I love it," she whispered.

He smiled and bent down to kiss her. She lifted her face, kissing him back as if to seal their engagement. But he hadn't actually asked her to marry him. Wait. Yes, he had. No. Actually, he'd ordered her to marry him. She hadn't had time to answer him.

She turned with a sigh, taking the conditioner. But for a long moment, she simply stood in the warm mist, clutching the bottle against her chest, her thoughts reeling with questions, flashbacks, memories, and...more questions.

"Tila?" Joran's deep, worried voice interrupted her chaotic thoughts.

"I'm fine," she replied, then squeezed some conditioner onto her hand and spread it through her hair. But she couldn't seem to put her finger on what the problem was.

Rinsing her hair, she stepped around Joran, trying not to touch him. Even a small brush of their bodies against each other might spark another round of sex. Tila needed to think and sex would muddle her thoughts.

“What are you doing today?” she asked.

She heard him sigh as she wrapped herself up in a large, fluffy towel.

“I have meetings with my generals this afternoon and I’m having dinner with them later.” He hesitated, looking down at her. “Would you...like to join us for dinner?” he asked.

Tila didn’t understand the hesitation in his voice. Was the pause because he didn’t want her to meet his generals? Or was it because he didn’t...? She wasn’t sure.

Deciding that she couldn’t back down, that she wanted to know more about this man and what he did, she turned to face him, clutching the towel around her. “Yes. I’d love to join you and the generals for dinner.” She added a tight smile, because she still couldn’t read his features. “What time?”

“We should be done with our meetings by six. So, drinks around then, and dinner after?”

Tila nodded. “That’s fine. I’ll make sure the evening nanny knows we’ll be unavailable during those hours.”

With that, she left the bathroom. She slipped into her own dressing room and stopped, not sure what she’d just agreed to. Dinner with generals? Of a foreign country?

Okay, so they weren’t really “foreign” since they were generals of Joran’s country. Since she lived in this gilded...prison? Cage? She didn’t feel trapped. In fact, other

than her feelings for Joran, which were a boggle, she was really starting to relax. All of her meals were prepared for her, she was getting sleep while the nannies took care of her babies, plus Joran's help, to ease the parenting burden. She never cleaned anything and all of their laundry was mysteriously taken away and returned cleaned and folded. So overall, Tila was pretty happy after the hellish few months after Laith and Rafi's birth when she'd been doing it all on her own.

Still, she wanted...what?

She wanted Joran to love her. Even if it was a fraction of the emotions she felt for him, it would be enough.

But could he ever feel something more than just desire for her? She wanted him to love her, but was Joran capable of love? He hadn't seemed to be overly concerned when he'd returned to her door almost a year after he'd abandoned her. There had been no communication with him during that time period. Nothing to explain his absence.

Granted, she hadn't known then that he was the crown prince of the neighboring country. That was kind of a big issue, she supposed.

However, her tender, wounded heart didn't agree. She now knew that she'd loved him a year ago which was why it had been extremely difficult to get through her pregnancy knowing that she'd never see him again. It had taken months to accept that Joran wasn't coming back to her.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Tila chose another comfortable cardigan from the shelf that was stacked with sweaters in every color and fabric. This was becoming her uniform; a cardigan and leggings with a comfortable pair of slip on shoes. The outfit allowed her to move easily, pick up her tiny sons, sit on the floor with them and...and she needed to work.

Wow! Where had that thought come from? She hadn't thought about work since that painful morning when she'd gone into labor.

For a moment, she stood in her dressing room, contemplating the idea of going back to work. Did she really want that? Was she ready to spend that much time away from her babies?

The answer came without hesitation. Yes. Yes, she definitely wanted to go back to work. Tila accepted that she needed the intellectual stimulation of her job. Tila designed websites and she hadn't had time to check her email since the babies were born. She'd scheduled an "out of office" message so that her clients knew that she wasn't available. But now, the thought of diving back into the creative and technical world of web building made her feel almost giddy with excitement.

Would she have any clients now that she was ready to get back to work?

"You okay?"

Tila jerked around to find Joran standing in the doorway to her dressing room. Thankfully, she'd finished dressing. But she wished that she'd lost the last ten pounds from her pregnancy.



Sliding hands down over her outer thighs self-consciously, she looked at the magnificent man who had made her scream his name last night. Would he ever come to love her the way she loved him?

“Tila?” he prompted.

Tila jumped, then shook her head. “What?”

“Are you okay?” he repeated.

Was she? No. Not really. Despite being surrounded by all of this previously unimaginable wealth and luxury, Tila was not okay. She should be okay. By everyone else’s standards, Tila should grab onto whatever crumbs Joran was willing to give her.

She rubbed her thumb over the snowflake diamond ring. He’d remembered her hope of seeing snow. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he had feelings for her that she just didn’t understand. Their relationship had been so intensely sexual before. But she’d never understood the man.

“I’m fine,” she told him, straightening her shoulders. “I’m perfectly fine.” Or she would be, Tila vowed. Eventually, she’d figure out if crumbs of affection were enough for her. Would they be able to build a future for themselves with whatever feelings he had for her?

She rubbed the ring again. She wanted to get back to work and...she wanted to know what made him smile, what made him laugh. She wanted to know what he hated about this life and what he loved.

She wanted to understand the man who had made her so happy before. Before sex got in the way of them knowing each other.

“I’m fine,” she assured him when he continued to look at her suspiciously. She was...but not really. She was going to be fine. Somehow. Some way, she would figure out how to be fine.

Because she knew that she couldn’t live without Joran. Even if she didn’t want to be in a relationship with the man, they had two wonderful sons that they’d need to share with each other.

So, she’d have to figure out how to be fine with...him.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

Yes, she was starving. But instead of saying so, she shook her head. “I need to feed the boys,” she told him. “Why don’t you go on ahead and I’ll have breakfast later?”

He hesitated, but after a moment, he nodded. “Okay, but you will eat something later?”

Tila thought about those last ten pounds. She wanted to have her old body back. She wanted to drive him wild with desire like she used to. But she didn’t want him to know how she’d had to starve herself to get that body.

So instead, she smiled and nodded. “Of course,” she assured him.

He still looked doubtful and Tila desperately wanted to walk up to him and...she didn’t wait. If she was going to have the life she wanted, she needed to grasp it with both hands. So instead of waiting, she moved closer and put her hands on his chest. “Kiss me before you leave, Joran,” she whispered. “Give me something to remind me of you.”

He didn’t hold back. With a groan, Joran pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He

was holding back, she would feel it in his touch, but Tila kissed him back, giving Joran all of the love she felt in her heart.

A moment later, he pulled back, breathing hard. Tila wondered if he might pull her clothes off and take her back to bed. She wanted that. If sex was all they had connecting them, she would deal with that.

Instead, the morning nanny stepped into the room with Laith in her arms. “I apologize for interrupting, Your Highness,” the woman said with a nervous smile, “but Prince Laith is demanding to be fed.”

Tila glanced up at Joran and nearly smirked at the irritation on his handsome features. “I’ll go take care of Laith,” she said. “Enjoy your meetings this morning.” Oooh, that was rotten of her, but Tila didn’t feel very kind today. She was confused and insecure, so a bit of rottenness was warranted.

## Chapter 21

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Joran stomped into his first meeting of the morning, wondering why he was so angry. He was an hour into the meeting before he realized why he was pissed off. Tila hadn't yet agreed to marry him.

What was holding her back? He didn't think he was too much of an ogre. Some might even consider him to be a prime catch! So, what the hell? Why hadn't Tila jumped at the offer of marriage?

Of course, Tila had always been different. From the first moment he'd met her, she'd been slightly outrageous. He'd spotted her coming out of one of the government agency buildings that he and his team were trying to infiltrate. He'd watched her come out, her silk skirt fluttering around her slender legs with her hair flying out around her – and she'd danced down the stairs instead of walking sedately like the other pedestrians. He'd been immediately smitten.

He'd discovered who she was and, despite his team's advice against it, he'd gone to meet her. It took three meetings, picnics in isolated parks, countless gifts sent to her home, and numerous text messages before he'd coaxed her into bed with him.

From the moment he'd spotted her on the stairs, there had never been any other woman for him.

Perhaps there were other women in the palace or in the meetings he'd attended over the past year, that had tried to entice him. But Joran hadn't noticed.

“Your Highness?” General Istal prompted.

Joran jerked out of his contemplation of Tila and their past. Looking at the expectant faces around the conference room table, Joran realized that everyone was waiting on a decision from him.

Unfortunately, he had no idea what had been discussed. He glanced over at his assistant, who nodded slightly, indicating that he should just say yes. But something warned him that he needed to read up on the subject before he made a decision. “I’ll review this information and will get my decision to everyone soon.”

Joran stood up before anyone could argue with him. Not that they would, he thought as he turned and walked out of the meeting.

His assistant followed immediately behind Joran, talking about his next meeting. But Joran stopped in the middle of the hallway. “Where are Tasha and Marianna?” he asked.

His assistant, a short, efficient man by the name of Jamal, blinked in surprise. “I...uh...believe that they are in Her Highness, Queen Tasha’s, study.”

Joran thought about entering his sister-in-law’s private domain. Prior to marrying Khal, Tasha had been his assistant, and a damn good one. But now that she had other responsibilities as his wife, Tasha had moved to her own office with her own personal assistant.

Thinking about asking Tasha for advice regarding Tila didn’t feel right. He doubted that Tila would appreciate their personal problems being discussed with others. Still, he needed a woman’s perspective.

## Chapter 22

Tila snuggled with Rafi while Laith was having “tummy time” on the floor by her

feet. One of the day nannies was down on the floor with him, offering him various toys.

Having time to think wasn't necessarily a good thing. She wanted to talk to someone about what was going on between herself and Joran, but Tila didn't have any close friends here at the palace.

"Good morning!" a soft, feminine voice called out.

Tila turned to find a beautiful woman...well, a teenage girl...stepping into the nursery. Immediately, Tila's mood brightened. "Good morning Marianna," Tila replied, smiling warmly. "How are you? How's university life?"

Marianna shrugged. At seventeen, Joran's half-sister was already in her first year of university. "It's fine. Not really very hard though," she said and stopped several feet away. "Could I help in any way?" she asked, looking down at Laith on the floor.

The nanny immediately stood up, looking to Tila for confirmation. "Should I come back in an hour?"

Tila smiled gratefully. "That would be wonderful. Thank you."

Marianna still hesitated. "Please," Tila urged. "Come on in. These little guys love visitors, but watch your hair. They are stronger and more determined than they look."

Marianna laughed but she moved closer, bending down to gently lift Laith into her arms. "Goodness, you're a big boy!" she teased, sitting down with Laith in her arms as she perched on the edge of the rocking chair. "How are you doing? How's life here in this..." she looked around as if trying to define her home. "Prison?" she teased. "Sorry," she cringed. "I need to stop saying things like that, shouldn't I?"

Tila smiled. "You don't like living here?"

Marianna smiled down at the baby in her arms, making faces at him while wiggling one of the colorful toys. "I came here about a year ago after my mother died." She made another face, causing Laith to wiggle with delight. "It was...difficult," she continued. Finally, she looked over at Tila. "Khal, Joran, and Raj are my half-brothers. They are a bit intimidating, aren't they?"

"They are," she agreed with a nod. "Do you get along with them?"

"I do," she replied, but Tila heard the hesitation in her voice. "At least, we're trying." She was silent for a long moment, then she blurted out, "I need to pick a major pretty soon." She grimaced, then made another face and wiggled the toy that Laith was trying to stuff into his mouth. "It's weird trying to decide what direction my life will go when I'm not even old enough to vote."

Tila chuckled, nodding her head. "I remember trying to decide what I wanted to study, and you're right. It's a bit overwhelming." She handed Marianna another toy and grabbed one for Rafi. "Do you enjoy the classes you're currently taking?"

"They're fine," she replied, looking sad. "I thought they would be more interesting. I graduated high school early because I was bored and wanted something more challenging." She sighed. "So far, university classes haven't done that yet."

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

“The mandatory freshman classes are a bit...tedious, from what I remember.”

Marianna looked at Tila and grinned. “You don’t look old enough to have those fond memories.”

“Oh, I’m twenty-nine, so it wasn’t too long ago that I attended university. But it’s been long enough that I am able to reminisce about the easy-going lifestyle.”

“Yeah, that’s not something I’m going to experience.” Marianna glanced over her shoulder at the bodyguards that always hovered nearby. “You get used to them,” she told Tila.

For the next hour, Tila relaxed and chatted with Marianna, enjoying her company. They laughed at Laith and Rafi’s expressions and Tila slowly relaxed, enjoying the company of another woman. It gave her a bit of hope that the future here in this intimidating place wouldn’t be as bleak.

## Chapter 23

“Who is coming to speak with me?” Khal demanded, his body tensing with anger. Immediately, Tasha put a hand on Khal’s arm and the man relaxed. Slightly.

His new assistant bowed slightly, nervous in the face of Khal’s temper. “Crown Prince Amit el Sandir of...”

“I know where the bastard lives!” Khal snapped, cutting his assistant off. “Lativa and Uftar don’t have diplomatic relations currently.”



“Maybe this is Prince el Sandir’s way of starting relations,” Tasha offered, her soft voice soothing her husband. “Sending his son here to talk to you is a pretty major deal.”

He glared thoughtfully at her for a moment. Then he shook his head. “No, someone from his embassy would have reached out to me prior to his son’s arrival if they were trying to negotiate some sort of treaty.” Khal turned back to his assistant. “What time is Prince Amit arriving?”

His assistant was noticeably trembling. “In two hours, Your Highness,” he said with another bow.

“Fine,” Khal snapped. “Reach out to the Uftar embassy and find out what he wants. His visit has to be significant.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the terrified man replied, then turned to rush out of the dining room.

Joran and Raj chuckled in the silence. “He’s not going to last,” Joran muttered, referring to the timid assistant. He turned to Tila. “Tasha used to be my brother’s assistant and she never would have put up with his foul moods.”

Raj snorted. “Tasha had been the reason for most of his foul moods for a while,” he replied, then popped a cashew into his mouth. “And we enjoyed the spectacle,” he added, winking playfully at his sister-in-law. “It was fun watching my big, bad brother being twisted into knots.”

Joran grunted. “You’ve had a few grumpy moods lately,” he said to Raj. “Care to explain why?”

Raj froze, his normally charming smile disappearing. For a moment, everyone saw

the flash of pain. But it was quickly hidden and his smile reappeared, although there was a stiffness to it now.

“Nothing to explain,” he said and took a sip of his drink. “Just working a lot lately.”

Joran glanced over at Khal and Tasha. Yep, they’d both noticed it as well. He’d have a private word with Raj later. Something was definitely wrong.

Tasha changed the subject even as she rubbed her husband’s arm, obviously trying to soothe the grumpy bear. “I’ll reach out to find out why Crown Prince Amit is coming,” she told him and started to rise.

Khal put a hand to her shoulder. “You will stay and enjoy your lunch,” he told her. “You are my wife. Not my assistant. If that idiot,” he jerked his head towards the closed door where his current assistant had just disappeared through, “can’t handle the job, then I’ll find someone who can.” He caressed her hand with his thumb. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Joran and Raj snorted at that because everyone knew that Tasha always worried. She was a worrier and a fixer.

Joran reached out, putting his hand on the back of Tila’s chair. She stiffened when she felt his hand touch her hair, but tried to pretend that his touch didn’t bother her.

“Last year, while Tasha was Khal’s assistant, we discovered that our lovely sister-in-law was running from someone.”

“Hiding from him, to be completely correct,” Raj explained.

“It’s all over and done with,” Tasha replied. “The man is in jail. Everything was resolved.”

Khal moved his hand to cover hers where it still rested on his forearm. “It was a mess that would have been resolved sooner if someone,” he obviously meant his wife, “had mentioned that there was a problem and not tried to handle it all on her own.”

She looked at him with a silent message that Tila didn’t understand. “If I hadn’t tried to handle it myself,” she replied back softly, “then I wouldn’t have accidentally burst into the interview room. I wouldn’t have become your assistant and I wouldn’t be here now.”

Tila watched them, her heart aching because she could feel the love between the two of them. The way their eyes lingered, the way they silently communicated. She glanced wistfully at Joran, wondering if he could ever love her that deeply.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

When she caught his eyes, there was something there, but she couldn't quite interpret his gaze. They stared at each other for a long moment, but she didn't understand.

Looking away, she tried not to think about Joran loving her. She tried to convince herself that lust was enough.

It would have to be, she thought, rubbing the pad of her thumb over the snowflake ring. It looked so pretty on her finger and she wanted to keep it forever. But what if...?

The waiters brought the first course, interrupting her thoughts. Then Khal turned the subject to what could only be described as an interrogation. "What's going on with the new aircraft?"

"I don't like the terms of the contract," Joran replied, taking a sip of his ice water. Khal and Joran got into a back and forth over the minute terms of the conversation, with Joran answering his brother's questions.

Finally, Joran got fed up. "If you want the job back, I'd be happy to throw everything back on your desk." He stabbed a potato. "But if you could back off, I guarantee that the planes will be delivered on time and within budget."

The two men glared at each other for a long moment. Finally, Khal sighed and nodded. "You're right. You took over the job last year and you've turned the military around. I know that you've traveled to the border check points and interviewed hundreds of defense employees, implementing many changes for the better." He lifted his eyes to his brother. "You've done a great job. I'm sorry if I implied

otherwise.”

Joran nodded sharply, then jerked his chin towards Raj. “But feel free to question our baby brother’s choices all you want.”

Raj snorted and rolled his eyes. He pointed his fork towards his oldest brother. “If you start in on me, then I’m going to raise the interest rates on the banks and tell them that it’s your new policy. You’ll have fifty appointments with every top banker and several of the minor ones as well, asking for ‘five minutes of your time’ to discuss your new economic policy.”

Khal chuckled and lifted his hands, palms out in defeat. “I concede!” he said with a laugh. “When you took over the economy, a huge burden was lifted from my shoulders. I admit that you understand the intricacies of financial issues much better than I ever did.”

“You’re lying, but I don’t care,” Raj replied. “I enjoy the intellectual challenge of managing the economic pulse of our nation.” He grinned, winked at Tila, then drained his glass of wine. “However, I have meetings this afternoon.” Raj wiped his mouth with the napkin and stood up. “I enjoyed our lunch,” he said. “We should do it more often, especially when Marianna is around.”

“Agree,” Khal replied. “Why don’t we keep a day open for a family lunch or dinner?” he suggested.

The two brothers nodded, and Joran looked to Tila, silently asking if she was okay with the plan while Khal looked to Tasha for her approval.

Tila shrugged, not sure she had any say in the matter. It wasn’t as if she was a member of the family, she thought with a pang. But she nodded, offering a one shouldered shrug as well.

“When’s the wedding?” Raj asked, moving towards the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder at Joran. “That’s a lovely engagement ring, by the way.”

Tila quickly covered her snowflake ring protectively even as she glanced at Khal, wondering if he was going to admonish Joran for proposing without his permission. But the big, terrifying man simply stared back at her as if waiting for an answer.

During the tense silence, Tila wasn’t sure what to say. She and Joran hadn’t discussed a date. Good grief, she wasn’t even sure if she’d agreed to the marriage proposal. But the way she curled her fingers around the ring told everyone her answer. They all chuckled and Raj walked out of the room, calling back over his shoulder, “Tell my assistant the date and I’ll be there.”

Khal sighed as he looked across the table at his brother. “You need to set a date,” he told him, then looked at Tila. “The boys need to be protected.”

Tila stiffened as her eyes narrowed on the man. “Are you saying that my children won’t be protected if I don’t marry Joran?”

“Our sons will never be left unprotected, Tila,” Joran assured her, shooting a hard glare at his brother.

Khal shook his head and leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. The boys need your name in order to be assured their rightful place in the line of succession. We all remember what happened when our great uncle died suddenly. The country was in chaos and there was speculation of a coup.” He looked at Tila, his eyes not releasing hers as he continued. “It took years for my father, and then me and my brothers to regain control of the country. Yes, I was in charge, but many people were creating dissent in order to gain power.” He let those words sink in. “A year ago, Joran took control of the military of Lativa, as well as the defense of the country. He worked long hours, and I know he went through hell

trying to fix the problems he discovered.”

“Is that...?”

“It was fine,” Joran assured her.

“It wasn’t fine,” Khal countered. “I’d been trying to do everything. So, when Joran stepped in, I realized just how bad everything really was.” He shifted his gaze towards Joran. “I’d tried to pretend that everything was fine but it wasn’t and you damn well know it. If you hadn’t taken over when you did, Joran, there would have been a civil war.”

“You would have suppressed the factions,” Joran said with finality.

Khal shook his head. “No, Joran. I wasn’t even aware there were problems in the military. I wasn’t aware that those traitorous factions existed. You discovered the problems, rooted out the traitors, and reorganized the military and our country’s defense. Don’t belittle what you did, Joran. It was...,” he sighed and looked down at the table. A moment later, he looked back at his brother. “You saved this country.”

“I didn’t,” Joran snapped. He looked self-conscious for a moment, then his expression hardened. “You’re an excellent ruler, Khal. I merely stepped in to tweak a few things.”

Khal rolled his eyes, then looked at Tila. “Don’t let him convince you of that,” he asserted adamantly. “Joran’s intervention literally saved this country. And now I want your sons to be recognized.” He leaned back. “I won’t have anyone voice concerns about the legitimacy of their right to rule this country if anything happens to—”

Tila gasped and shook her head. “Don’t finish that sentence,” she whispered, then looked over to Tasha. She looked pale as well. “Nothing’s going to happen to your

husband,” she assured her. Tasha had accepted Tila as well as her sons as soon as Joran had brought them into the palace. Tasha was a beautiful, wonderful person, both inside and out.

There was a movement at the doorway and Tila turned, noticing Marianna standing there. She had a stricken look on her lovely features as she looked in. Before Khal could ask her to come in, the younger woman stepped back and lifted a hand.



*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

“Sorry to interrupt,” their sister said in a soft, halting voice. “One of my classes was canceled, so I...” she took a step back, still eyeing everyone. “I’ll just...,” and she took another step back.

“Marianna!” Khal called out.

But before he could say anything more, she turned and ran from the room, disappearing down the long hallway.

There was a long, painful silence after that. Khal looked at his wife and Tasha nodded. “Yeah, she’s upset about not being included.” She folded her linen napkin into a neat square and placed it on her plate, then stood up. “I’ll go find her and talk to her.”

Khal nodded sharply, then watched as his wife left the dining room. Tasha moved with dignity, her shoulders back and her head held high. The navy blue sheath dress she wore moved with her figure as she hurried to catch up with the winsome teenager that was on the cusp of womanhood.

Tila sighed, trying to figure out all of the complicated personalities and palace protocols. Prior to meeting Joran, she’d lived life without worrying about the future much. She worked hard at her job and put money away towards any possible emergencies as well as a bit towards her retirement, but she hadn’t considered world peace or civil wars.

Khal and, apparently, Joran, had to consider all of these issues when planning out their days. And that’s when Khal’s words registered.

“A year ago” he’d said. Joran had taken over the responsibility of the military and country’s defense a year ago! That must have been right after the last time he’d left her!

If that was the case, then Joran hadn’t abandoned her! She looked at him, her heart pounding against her ribs as she watched Joran and Khal discuss something. She didn’t understand the technical terms they were using so she ignored the conversation. Plus, she was too overwhelmed by the possibility that Joran hadn’t deserted her when she’d needed him most. Maybe he’d been overwhelmed as well! Maybe, he’d wanted to come back to her.

It wouldn’t excuse him not sending her a message. He should have done that. A phone call, a text message...anything would have helped her get through those long, lonely, terrifying nights.

The men suddenly stood up, startling Tila out of her thoughts. She looked up at Joran who immediately bent low and kissed her. She was startled by the open show of affection and, to be honest, slightly self-conscious as she glanced over at Joran’s older brother. But Khal was already leaving the dining room. He glanced back at them and Tila only saw approval on his tough, grumpy features.

Sighing, she looked back at Joran. He was pulling away, but that little peck wasn’t enough. She grabbed a fistful of his dress shirt and pulled him back down for a longer, more satisfying kiss.

When he pulled away this time, his eyes lingered on her lips before he looked into her eyes. “What was that for?” he asked, his voice rough with desire.

Tila smiled. “Because I wanted to kiss you,” she whispered back at him.

He gave her a crooked smile that warmed her heart. “Feel free to do that anytime.”

Then he straightened up. “I have another meeting. What are you up to for the rest of the afternoon?”

“I’m going to log into my email,” she said, startling even herself. “I want to catch up on work issues now that we have the nannies to help out.”

Joran hesitated. “Tila, you know you don’t have to work. I will take care of you, no matter what.”

Tila rolled her eyes and stood up, moving closer to him. She felt warmed when his arm automatically wrapped around her waist, pulling her in even closer.

“Joran, I appreciate the offer, but I enjoy my work. I like helping my clients with websites and I’m good at my job.”

He grunted. “As long as you are happy,” he kissed the top of her head. Then he turned and walked out of the dining room, leaving Tila alone.

It was a strange experience, she thought as she looked around at the empty plates and coffee cups. She was alone! Completely...nope. The guards at the doorway shifted, reminding her that she wasn’t completely alone. Tila suspected that there were servants hovering behind the doorway to the kitchen as well.

She wondered if she would ever be alone again. Was this her life now? Looking around at the lavish red and gold décor of the dining room, Tila sighed. It wasn’t a horrible existence. Plus, the small cottage that she’d inherited from her grandmother had been cramped after she’d brought the boys home.

She noticed the two bodyguards standing outside the doorway. One kept peering inside and Tila wondered if she should be doing something other than just sitting in an empty dining room. Perhaps she should get out of here so the wait staff could clear

up the table?

This servant-issue dilemma would take some getting used to.

But as Tila walked back to the suite she'd been sharing with Joran for the past two weeks, her mind drifted back to his brother's comments about how Joran had avoided a civil war. Had it really been that dire here in Lativa? As a citizen of a different country, Tila hadn't been aware of the problems. Of course, she'd been oblivious to so many concerns during the past year. Becoming pregnant and learning that she was going to give birth to twins had taken over most of her processing capacity.

Maybe Joran had been equally overwhelmed. Maybe she'd been unfair to him when he hadn't called or texted.

When she walked into their suite, she saw both of the day nannies sitting beside a pair of bassinets. Smiling, she walked over to her baby boys, amazed at how sweet and innocent they looked when they were blissfully asleep.

"I'll take over for a while," she told the nannies. Immediately, the two women stood up and left the suite. Tila sat down between her boys, thinking back to the days when she'd been alone with them in her small cottage. Goodness, life seemed more like a whirlwind lately!

## Chapter 24

"The guy is here," Raj announced, hurrying into Khal's office.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Khal's eyes narrowed on his brother and he leaned back in his oversized leather chair. "Why the hell is he early?" he asked, his thumb and forefinger pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I don't know. We don't know much about Sheik Hamsa's son. Crown Prince Amit is a bit of a mystery."

Khal's expression didn't change. "And mysteries are bad. I suspect Prince Amit is even more dangerous than his father. The man's young, but shrewd and not ruled by his emotions, which Hamsa occasionally is prone to do."

"I agree," Raj replied, sitting down in the chair in front of his brother's desk. "However, Amit is also the reason that Uftar is doing so well economically. In fact, I'd like to work with several of the companies in Uftar." There was a small pause, then Raj continued, "Are you ready to suggest additional economic ties with the country even if you're not quite ready to have formal diplomatic relations?"

Khal hesitated briefly before he nodded. "Yeah, I'd like to figure out how to smooth over the tensions between our countries. Joran says there is trouble brewing on the border in several spots. If we could start to ease the tensions, maybe the troubles would ease up, and we could allocate resources elsewhere instead of having to post additional troops in those hot spots."

"Plus, if we could ease the tensions, there could be more cross border trade and that would eventually form financial ties that would bind everyone together. Nothing unites like a mutual financial benefit," Raj added, always one to see the financial aspects of an action. His mind worked like a calculator doing high powered economic

deals. Some actually doubted if the man had the capability for emotion, but they would be wrong. Raj was capable of emotions, he just buried them deep inside, unwilling to show them to the world. Only his mistresses were privy to his emotions, although even he would admit that those lovely ladies only saw pleasure, mild irritation, and boredom. There was one woman that...! Raj quickly dismissed her from his mind.

“Do you think you can negotiate with Prince Amit?”

Focusing on the current conversation, Raj leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’d love to try,” he replied.

Khal nodded. “Fine. Let me know when he arrives. We’ll talk to him and feel him out. But we should figure out why he’s here first. This is an unprecedented visit. It wasn’t arranged ahead of time either, which concerns me. Usually, visits like this are arranged well in advance, all of the visual and social details worked out carefully so that the optics are beneficial to both parties.”

“Agree,” Raj replied, standing. “We’ll proceed carefully.” Then he turned and walked towards the door. But when his hand rested on the handle, he paused. “Have you spoken to Marianna after she found us having lunch together?”

“No,” he replied, frowning. “I couldn’t find her but I know she’s upset though.”

“Yeah,” Raj replied, shifting his shoulders again. “We should have asked her join us for lunch today even though we thought she was in class. When she saw us together in the dining room, she looked hurt. I suspect that she’s going to try to isolate herself again, thinking that we still don’t consider her part of our family.”

“I thought we were done with that nonsense,” Khal snapped, then sighed with frustration, tossing the report back onto his desk. “But I’ll be the first to admit that I

haven't been as attentive as I should be."

"I haven't either. I wonder if she's feeling left out again."

"Nonsense," Khal argued. "I've repeatedly told her that she's part of the family."

"I have too." Raj paused, then sighed. "Maybe I'm wrong and she's just got a lot going on with her new classes." He pulled the door open. "I'll check in with her after this visit from Amit."

"Good plan," Khal replied, then pulled the report forward again.

## Chapter 25

Marianna walked out to the stables, trying to hide the hurt welling up inside of her after she'd been omitted yet again from a family conversation. It hurt, but she knew that her brothers shared a bond that she'd never be able to achieve with them.

Walking down the long, central area of the stables, she paused to peer into the stalls of some of the magnificent horses. They were eating oats and enjoying their time away from the intense sunshine. She didn't know how to ride the enormous beasts, but wanted to learn. There weren't a whole lot of places to ride horses in the heart of Paris, where she'd lived with her mother before coming to Lativa.

Goodness, she missed her mother. This palace was beautiful, and Marianna would be the first to admit that she loved the sunshine in Lativa. Right now, Paris would be grey, cold, and dreary as the winter months pressed down with its heavy clouds. Here in Lativa, the temperatures were mild, and on the warm side. One needed a sweater during the evenings and a warm coat overnight, but it wasn't anywhere as depressing as the gloom back home.

Home. That was the crux of the issue, wasn't it? Marianna wondered how long it would take before Lativa felt like home. Back in Paris, she's been just another high school student. But before she could finish high school, her mother had been taken from her. Her mother's unexpected passing had ignited a chain of events that had culminated in a life that often felt lonely, confusing and miserable.

Sighing, Marianna leaned her chin on the top of the fence post, watching the more adventurous horses frolic in the pasture. They all seemed to be standing close together. Like they couldn't stand to be separated. What would that be like? Back in Paris, Marianna had been part of a close group of friends. Here in Lativa, she was a princess. Bodyguards surrounded her wherever she went. No one approached her before or after classes because she had strong, intimidating men following her everywhere.

Even here at the palace, everyone was busy with their jobs. For a while, her brothers and sister-in-law had gotten together for dinners, just as a family. That had been nice. But now...everyone was so busy. Raj was out saving the economy, working with struggling companies and helping them to expand. He was focused on the job growth and increasing the median income of every family in the country. Joran was always gone, traveling with the military or the border guards or meeting with foreign diplomats. His job was to ensure the safety of everyone. And Khal...well, he was in charge of everything. The man didn't have five minutes to spare and Marianna didn't want to become just another burden to her oldest brother.

Tasha was sweet, but even her sister-in-law had interviews and was now heading up several charities. Marianna smiled as she thought of her tiny, new nephews. Rafi and Laith were adorable and so snuggly! She could spend hours sitting with them, playing and pretending to chat with them.

Something was off with Tila though. Her future sister-in-law was...sad. Yes, that was the right word. Marianna wondered if Tila needed a friend, but every overture that



she made towards the lonely, confused newcomer to the palace had been met with nothing but polite smiles.

Apparently, not even Tila needed a new friend.

After a year of living here in Lativa, she was sick of being sad and lonely. It was time to do something about it.

“You like horses?” a deep, raspy masculine voice asked, startling her.

Marianna jerked her chin away from the fence post and turned to face the intruder. He was dressed casually in a dark suit with a yellow tie, a slight shadow of stubble on his cheek and jawline. The man was tall, maybe even taller than Khal, and Marianna didn’t like the feeling of standing next to this man. There was also the sense that the man was just...raw. Powerful, yes. But her sense of the man was different. Khal, Raj and Joran were all powerful men. This man...he was more than powerful, he was...formidable.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Which was similar to powerful, and yet, also different. She couldn't really define why this man was different. She just could tell that he was.

However, he was talking to her, which was more than her siblings had time to do. So Marianna's lonely, desperate soul was torn between telling the terrifying man to go away and desperately hoping that he might stay for a moment to talk with her.

Since he was admiring the horses, she decided that he wasn't a threat.

Correction, he was terribly threatening, but she ignored the threat. She glanced at her guards, reassured that they were close by. Plus, if her guards weren't pushing the guy away, he must not be a threat. Maybe a palace employee?

He slipped a pair of sunglasses on and Marianna adjusted the straw hat on her head. She wished she'd thought of grabbing her sunglasses. The sun wasn't as bright as it would be during the summer months, but it was still intense.

"I love horses," she replied, which was true.

"Which is yours?"

She sighed and turned away from the handsome man. He couldn't be the stable master, as she'd started to suspect. If this man worked in the stables, he would know the answer to that question.

"I don't know how to ride," she admitted and even she heard the longing in her tone. But because the man next to her was so tall and dynamic, she didn't want him to

think of her as pathetic. "I'll figure it out," Marianna replied in a stronger voice. She didn't look at him as she said that. He was a bit too...well, everything.

"Why don't you just get on a horse and try it out?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, I'll arrange to have lessons. I don't think any of the horses in the stables would appreciate me just...getting on their backs." She squinched up her nose. "That would be rude."

He laughed and Marianna felt something strange in the sound. His laughter seemed...rusty. As if he didn't laugh very often.

"I think you have the wrong impression about horses. Once you find a horse that you connect with, they enjoy going out for a ride with you. And horses are more patient and intelligent than you might think."

She sighed longingly as she looked out at the beautiful animals. "I don't really understand horses," she admitted.

"What do you want to know about them?"

Marianna swiveled her head, stealing a glance at the man. He really was handsome, she thought. Turning back to look at the grazing animals, she considered his question. And before she could think better of it, she blurted out the first question that popped into her mind. "What happens when a new horse is introduced to the stables? How do the other horses learn to like the newcomer?"

There was a long silence after that question and Marianna had to hold very still, not wanting this stranger, this handsome man, to realize how important the question was to her.

“A new horse should stay in his or her own pasture for a couple of weeks. There shouldn’t be any physical contact between the new horse and the herd.”

Well that was an interesting comment! “Why?”

“Because the herd needs to smell the new horse, to become familiar with them. Once they’ve all scented the new animal, only then should the new horse be allowed to enter the pasture with the other horses.”

“And what happens next? Do they all become friends? Do they just...accept the new horse? Or does the new arrival need to do something, say something, in order to be accepted?”

The man flashed a smile that Marianna caught out of the corner of her eye, but she pretended not to notice. “The king or queen of the herd will establish dominance over the new horse, or there will be a battle for the lead position. But eventually, the new horse is accepted into the herd. The newcomer will find a close friend and the herd protects the new horse from any perceived danger.”

A new man stepped closer and, startled, Marianna looked around. She suddenly realized that there were several more bodyguards nearby, as well as another strange man whispering in the tall man’s ear.

Finally, the tall guy, the man she’d thought was a stable hand, turned to fully face her. He reached out and, for some unknown reason, Marianna lifted her hand. The man raised her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers. There was a low growl from one of her guards, but Marianna was too focused on the man’s lips on her skin and the intensity of his gaze to react.

“It has been a too-brief pleasure, Princess,” and then he bowed and turned away.

Marianna watched, unable to pull her eyes away from the man. He was too handsome and too...who the hell was he?

Obviously, he was an important visitor to the palace, but she hadn't been told of any diplomats arriving today. So, who was he?

## Chapter 26

Khal stood beside Joran and Raj as they watched the pompous ass walk into the salon. Khal had chosen this room on the advice of his wife—Tasha had urged a smaller, more private setting for their initial meeting with the crown prince. But that hadn't stopped the three brothers from standing like sentries, unconsciously bracing themselves for anything the man might do.

“His Highness, Crown Prince Amit el Sandir of Uftar,” the butler announced before stepping back.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Khal watched as the man strode into the center of the room, radiating confidence, unbothered by the formidable trio facing him. But then the prince's gaze shifted—to the left.

Khal followed it.

His breath hitched as he caught sight of Tasha, looking stunning in a petal-pink dress with a playful flounce at the hem, her dark hair twisted elegantly into something that made her look every inch the queen she would have been in another time. Damn, she was gorgeous.

Then he spotted Tila, walking gracefully beside her. The blue silk of her dress fluttered like water around her slender legs, a delicate contrast to her usual sharp wit and no-nonsense demeanor. She looked effortlessly lovely, composed—

And then Marianna stepped in.

Khal felt the shock hit him like a punch to the gut.

His baby sister. In red.

It wasn't the demure cut of the dress that stunned him. It was the color. Red was bold. Confident. Stunning. It wasn't the shade of rebellion, like the streaks of electric blue and neongreen she'd once dyed her hair. It wasn't the careless defiance of torn jeans and combat boots she had stomped around in during her most difficult years.

No. This was different.

This was a statement.

And she looked breathtaking.

For a moment, Khal couldn't move, couldn't breathe, his mind struggling to reconcile the image before him with the little sister who had once scowled at every diplomatic function, arms crossed, daring anyone to correct her.

He felt his jaw tighten, his protective instincts surging forward, his fury rising for no logical reason.

Why the hell was she wearing that color?

Not now. Not for a first meeting with a foreign prince. She should know better! A soft blue, a pale pink, even an elegant ivory would have been more appropriate—something quiet, something safe! But red?

Red was a challenge. Red was power. Red was danger.

Something deep inside him growled at the thought of any man—especially this prince—looking at Marianna and seeing what Khal was only just now realizing.

She wasn't a rebellious girl anymore.

She was becoming a woman.

Khal clenched his fists, struggling to suppress the instinctive, irrational urge to drag a cloak over her shoulders, to make her less... visible.

But he could already hear Tasha's laughter in his head, the teasing glint in her eyes as she'd remind him, in no uncertain terms, that Marianna was not a child anymore.

Still, his protective rage coiled in his gut.

He shuddered, already contemplating what his wife might say if he dared to point out that red was entirely inappropriate.

Then again... maybe he would say it.

Just to enjoy the punishment Tasha would undoubtedly inflict.

Because if there was one thing Khal had learned about his wife, it was that she had very creative ways of expressing her disapproval.

And at least that, he could enjoy.

## Chapter 27

Joran couldn't hide his surprise when he saw Tila step into the salon. He hadn't mentioned this meeting with the crown prince, not wanting her to worry. She was from Uftar, after all. Technically, this bastard was her future ruler.

Plus, the man was handsome. Tila looked stunning in a vibrant blue dress, the fabric fluttering gracefully around her legs. Joran enjoyed the way the dress moved, how it highlighted her curves. Curves that he didn't want disappearing, no matter how hard she tried to shed them. He knew she was trying to lose more weight. He'd have to beg her to stop.



Then Joran's gaze landed on Marianna.

Red.

Why the hell was his seventeen-year-old sister wearing red? Had she not thought about the political implications of such a bold color? Red was powerful, defiant—meant to draw attention. And it was working.

Joran's unease deepened when he noticed Marianna's expression—a flash of shock, recognition, and something else. She was staring at the prince as if she knew him. That wasn't possible. Was it?

Joran's sharp gaze flicked to Prince Amit, and sure enough, the man seemed to have eyes only for Marianna. His posture remained composed, but there was a peculiar intensity in the way he studied her. Was it because of the dress? The cut was demure enough, but the color... That was like waving a flag in front of a charging bull. And Amit definitely looked like he was ready to charge.

Joran shifted his stance, the instinct to step between them almost overwhelming. His little sister was seventeen. And this man—what was he? Thirty? No. That wasn't right. Joran mentally flipped through the information he knew about the prince. Twenty-five.

Still too damn old.

Khal, ever the composed one, cut through the tension. "You demanded this meeting," he said, his voice flat. "How can we help you?"

Amit gave Marianna one last glance before stepping forward. “It has come to our attention that three citizens of Uftar were kidnapped and brought to Lativa.” His tone remained polite, but there was a blade-sharp edge beneath the civility. “After an extensive investigation, we discovered that there were actually two attempts that evening.”

He paused, looking directly at Joran. “One attempt was made by a bumbling idiot of a neighbor. However, that man described in great detail how an elite group of men prevented him from entering a woman’s home.” Amit’s voice held weight, each word carefully measured. “We were able to track that elite force here—to Lativa.”

Then he turned to Khal, his expression unreadable. “I am here to demand their return.” A pause, deliberate. “Immediately.”

The single word rang with undeniable menace.

Joran’s fury ignited, white-hot and explosive. “You’re not taking my fiancée or my sons!” he snarled, stepping forward, muscles coiled, fists clenched.

Amit’s gaze flicked to Joran’s tense hands, his dark brows lifting as if mildly intrigued.

“Interesting,” he murmured, almost as if he were mentally taking notes, cataloging their reactions. Then, as if this was all mere negotiation, he continued smoothly, his voice light, unbothered.

“Fine. We’ll trade.”

The room froze.

His gaze shifted back to Marianna. Pinning her in place.

“I’ll take her in exchange.”

The sharp inhale of collective gasps filled the air.

Crown Prince Amit had just suggested trading Tila and her babies... for Marianna.

The reaction was immediate.

“Get the hell out of here, you bastard!” Raj snapped, lunging forward. But before he could get closer, Joran shoved him aside, ready to tear into the prince himself.

“Stop!” Khal’s voice cracked through the room like a whip.

Everything halted.

Raj and Joran were bristling, poised to strike. But Amit? He stood completely still. Calm. Too calm.

His focus never left Marianna.

Marianna, who looked... afraid.

Joran’s gut twisted. His sister was staring at Khal now, silently pleading for him to not agree.

Khal’s expression hardened. “Get out,” he ordered. “Don’t you ever set foot in this country again.”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Amit barely reacted. His eyes remained on Marianna, watching. Waiting.

“And our citizens?” he asked, as if Khal’s command was a mere formality. His tone softened just a fraction, but the steel was still there. “I want assurances that the woman and her children will be treated well.”

Joran’s anger didn’t abate, but something in Amit’s wording made him pause.

“She will be treated with absolute respect and my sons will be raised to be strong, confident men,” Joran said, his voice dangerously low. “And we’d never give Marianna to you! She’s our sister! Not some bargaining chip to be traded.”

Amit finally looked away from Marianna, his gaze shifting to Joran. There was something satisfied in his expression.

“I see.”

The words were soft. Intentional.

Amit straightened, adjusted his cuffs, then glanced at Khal. His next words weren’t directed at anyone in particular, but they carried purpose.

“I’ll take my leave.”

He turned, striding from the room with the same deliberate ease he had walked in with, leaving only silence behind him.

Joran exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “What the hell just happened?”

Khal didn’t answer immediately. His gaze had shifted to Marianna, who still looked shaken. That wasn’t right. Had she really thought they would let her go?

Joran and Raj had reacted without hesitation. Had Marianna expected them not to?

Amit’s words echoed in Khal’s mind—not the demand, not the mockery.

I see.

A slow, unsettling realization settled over him.

The prince had never come here to take anyone.

He had come here to prove something.

And Marianna, standing separate from her brothers, alone even in a room full of family, had just learned that for herself.

Khal stepped forward, watching Amit leave, before he turned to the women. “Marianna, I’m so sorry!” he walked over to her and pulled her into his arms. “You shouldn’t have had to see that, ya helwa.” He sighed and kissed the top of her head. “I promise you’ll never have to deal with that man again.”

“I’m fine,” she assured Khal, but there was an odd expression in her eyes. “Thank you,” she said, pulling back and looking up into his features. “Thanks for not selling me off in exchange for Tila and the twins.”

He laughed, shaking his head, stunned by the audacity of the man. “Never!” And he hugged her again, his arms gentle.

The sound of a baby crying broke up the moment and everyone turned to the still-open doorway.

“Why is Rafi out in the hallway instead of in our suite?” Tila demanded, and everyone froze!

## Chapter 28

The doorway was so close—just a few feet away! So close to freedom, to the life she was meant to have.

Ophelia’s breath came in frantic gasps, her heart hammering against her ribs. She clutched the baby tighter, willing him to stay quiet. Please, please, just a little longer. She tried bouncing him, jostling him gently as she ran. She had no idea if this was Rafi or Laith, but it didn’t matter. He was hers now. She had done everything right to get here.

For the past week, she had woven herself into the palace fabric like a well-placed thread. She had been hired on as part of the cleaning crew, smiling at the guards, laughing at their jokes, asking about their families. She’d worked extra shifts, covered for others, learned their routines. She had memorized their names, their schedules, their habits. She’d made sure she was seen as reliable, friendly, trustworthy.

And it had worked.

They had welcomed her. Trusted her. Let their guard down.

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

And now—this was her moment!

She pushed harder, her legs burning, her breath hitching. If she ran fast enough, she could make it. The guards hadn't noticed yet. She could see the sunshine. The promise of escape.

But then the baby wailed, a sudden, piercing cry that shattered the illusion of safety.

Ophelia flinched, panic gripping her chest. No, no, no! She tried bouncing him again, her mind whirling, careening between thought and impulse. She had to hush him—had to quiet him! Just a little longer, sweet boy. Just until we're free.

It wasn't fair. That woman had two! While she—she had suffered, she had lost, she had been robbed of what should have been hers! I had a daughter, but I need a son. My husband needs a son!

The miscarriage had taken her baby. And he had been a boy. He had to have been a boy.

She deserved this child. This was fate correcting itself.

Ophelia ran, her vision narrowing to the doorway, the golden spill of sunlight beckoning her. Just a few more steps. She barely heard the shouts behind her, barely registered the growing commotion.

All she heard was the baby's cry, and in her mind—the child she had lost, the boy she should have had, the future she was stealing back.

If she could just—get—out!

There was a dark shadow off to the side, but Ophelia ignored the tall man, assuming he was just another guard. She'd already maneuvered around too many guards to count in order to get to this point. She could dodge this one too. He might be bigger than the others, but Ophelia told herself that she had desperation and hope on her side. She had right on her side. It was her right to have a baby boy! She could do this! Just a few more steps and...!

The big man stepped in front of her. He was huge! Taller and bulkier than most of the guards. But Ophelia refused to be stopped. Not when she was so close to success! So she pulled the bloody knife out from the folds of the baby blanket, holding the boy with one arm while she slashed through the air with the knife in her other hand.

“Stay away!” she screamed. “This is my baby now! You can't have him!”

“I can't let you steal that baby,” the man warned her.

Ophelia's mind raced, trying to find a way out of this horrible place. She needed to get her infant son to safety! “I will! You can't stop me! He's mine! All mine! She doesn't deserve two when I don't have any! I need a baby boy!”

Ophelia blinked back tears. The doors were so close, she just had to get this man out of the way and she'd be free with her tiny baby boy!

There was a flash of blood, but Ophelia didn't stop, didn't even pause. She needed to get away! She needed to feed her baby son and put him into the cradle she'd already purchased for him! Ophelia knew that, as soon as she presented a baby boy to her husband, everything would be back to normal. He would love her again because he would now have a son to carry on the family name. And she would have provided that son to him! Everything would be better!



But that bastard with the red slash across his chest stepped in front of her again. Ophelia reached out to cut him again, but he gripped her wrist and...!

“Ow!” she gasped, her wrist twisted to the point where she could no longer hold the knife. “Stay away from me, you bastard!” she hissed, trying to back away. Unfortunately, he still had hold of her wrist and he didn’t let go no matter how hard she tried to free her hand.

“You’re hurting me!” Ophelia gasped, still fighting. She didn’t have a weapon anymore, but it didn’t matter.

“Give them the baby, and I’ll release your wrist,” the man in the dark suit and yellow, silk tie demanded, his jaw clenching in fury.

Ophelia looked behind her and saw two other tall men in beautiful suits, as well as several more guards, all heavily armed and ready to harm her or her baby boy. None were pointing their weapons and she knew that was only because they couldn’t risk hitting the baby. She cradled the boy closer, hearing his screams of anger in her ears. But her mind translated those screams into the baby telling her to hurry, to get him away where he would be safe.

Ophelia tried one more time to get away, but the man anticipated her move and tightened his grip on her wrist. She gasped and bent down, stumbling to her knees to try and ease the pain, but he didn’t relent. A second later, Ophelia felt another person reach out and pluck “her son” from her arms. Only then did the man release her wrist.

Ophelia cradled her wrist, sobbing as “her” infant son was carried away. That’s when she saw Tila, that bitch from the playground.

Her fury was uncontrollable now. “You have two sons!” Ophelia screamed, still holding her wrist but the pain in her heart was worse. “You have two! I just wanted

one! Why couldn't you let me have just one boy?" She was screaming so hard that her throat hurt and she watched through her tears as that horrible man gave the baby to the bitch. The woman Ophelia hated more than life cradled the tiny bundle closer. Some man, a big guy with broad shoulders moved so that he was blocking her view of her son and Ophelia couldn't handle being even visually separated from the little boy. "He's mine! I caught him so I get to take him with me!" she shrieked, hysterical now.

Someone was pulling her arms behind her back but Ophelia didn't feel anything because the pain in her chest was too intense. She stumbled when someone pulled her back, but she couldn't walk away. Not with the boy so close to her. Her dreams were centered around that small baby. "I have his crib all ready for him! I just want one boy! Just one!"

And then a door closed, blocking her view. There was no baby in her arms, no baby to take home to love and cherish. Everything was gone.

## Chapter 29

"Are you okay?" Joran demanded, blocking Tila's view of the hysterical woman. The palace guards had already taken the woman away, but there was still a deafening silence as everyone tried to figure out what had just happened.

"I'm fine," Tila replied, peering around Joran's broad shoulders. "That man," she said, nodding her head towards the stranger. "He saved our baby!" she whispered. "He literally stopped that woman from stealing our baby!"

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Joran twisted around to see Crown Prince Amit stepping into a black SUV. There was a flash of red, indicating that the man had been wounded, but the man's guards were racing around the SUV, obviously in a hurry to get him to safety.

Joran gritted his teeth, furious that he was going to have to call the man and thank him. It irked him that the bastard had insulted Marianna one moment, then put himself in danger the next to save his infant son.

Breathing a heavy sigh, Joran pulled Tila and Rafi into his arms. "Let's go find Laith. I know he doesn't like being away from Rafi."

Tila gasped and tilted her head back to look up at Joran. "The nannies!"

Everyone froze for a long moment, then they leapt into action. The guards were on the radio, demanding information on the well-being of the nannies who had been watching the tiny princes. When there was no response from the guards that had been assigned to the nursery, everyone moved faster.

When Tila and Joran turned the corner leading to their private suite, they saw the two guards lying on the ground, blood pooling on the floor around them.

"Are they...?" Tila demanded, stepping forward even as Joran reached out to pull her back.

Another palace guard bent down, checking for a pulse. "This one's alive!" he said out loud.

“This one too! But his pulse is weak.”

More guards rushed into the nursery while someone called for medical help. The palace medical staff ran down the hallway, bags in hand. The doctor and nurse were trying to stop the bleeding of the guards while another guard popped his head out into the hallway. “Prince Laith is fine, but crying loudly. The nannies had both been knocked out with a blow to their heads. They’ll need medical attention as well.”

Tila hugged Rafi closer, burying her face against Joran’s chest. His arms wrapped around her, holding her securely as they watched the doctor and nurses work to help the men who had protected their infant sons.

The paramedics arrived and took the two guards away. Another set of paramedics arrived on their heels to take the two day nannies to the hospital. The nannies insisted they were fine, even as they cringed at any noise and both were holding the backs of their heads.

Finally, Tila was able to enter the nursery and Joran scooped up Laith, holding him close and cooing to him. He snuggled the small boy against his chest, patting his diapered bottom in an attempt to soothe the little man’s fury. Tila held Rafi closer to Laith, which seemed to calm the boys even more. Slowly, they both settled down, but their red faces warned everyone that any further inconvenience would set them off again.

“You’re okay,” Tila soothed, bouncing Rafi in her arms as Joran continued patting Laith’s bottom. Slowly, their anger eased. Both parents turned to find that the rest of their family were there, standing sentry as they watched the new parents soothe the infants.

“They’re okay?” Khal demanded, his arm around Tasha while Raj held Marianna close. Everyone looked worried until Joran nodded.

“They’re fine,” he said. “That crazy woman didn’t harm them.”

“The guards?” Tila asked.

Khal shook his head. “I haven’t received word, but they should be arriving at the hospital right about now. I’ll have updates within five minutes on both the nannies and the guards.”

“Good,” she said, still bouncing Rafi in her arms. “I really hope that they are okay.”

The palace doctor stepped into the room and all heads turned in her direction. “None of their wounds were life threatening,” she announced to everyone’s relief. “The stab wounds were deep, but I suspect, because of the limited amount of bleeding, that no internal organs were punctured, and no arteries were cut. I’ll head over to the hospital to get more information and will report back very soon.”

Tila noticed that Khal’s gaze lingered on the empty doorway after the doctor left, but she had no idea what that meant. And before she could think about it, Khal directed the palace guards to new assignments. Everyone left the nursery silently, leaving Tila and Joran alone with their infant sons.

## Chapter 30

“Yes,” Tila said, breaking the silence. The colorful nursery, with its soft pastels and cheerful décor, wasn’t exactly the most romantic place for this moment, but it would have to do.

Joran’s brows furrowed as he turned to look at her, still bouncing Laith gently in his arms. “Yes?”

She met his gaze, love shining in her eyes. “Yes, I want to marry you, Joran.”

His expression shifted from confusion to something raw and unguarded. He turned fully to face her, his grip on Laith tightening for just a second, as if grounding himself. “You...?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice softer but steady. “I understand now.”

Joran tilted his head slightly, searching her face. “What do you understand?”

“That you didn’t reach out over the past few months because you were just as overwhelmed as I was. You had new responsibilities, a sister you’d never known, and an entire country that needed you. I get it now.”

Joran shook his head immediately. “No, Tila, don’t make excuses for me. I should have called. I sent text messages, trying to let you know I’d be back, but I should have done more. I should have told you what was happening.” He sighed, stepping closer, his free hand reaching toward her. “The only explanation I have is that maybe I texted the wrong number.” His head dipped, pressing a light, apologetic kiss to her lips. “I should have followed up.”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

“Yes,” she agreed, cutting off his self-recrimination. “You should have. And I’m telling you right now—I won’t let you shut me out like that again.” She stepped closer, mock-glaring up at him. “So be warned, Joran. In the future, you are going to explain things to me.”

He let out a short laugh, but his expression sobered just as quickly. His gaze swept the nursery, the bassinets, the remnants of a terrifying past few days. “But, Tila, I... I let you down. Again. I let someone steal one of our sons.” His voice cracked slightly, the weight of it pressing on him.

“No,” she argued, shifting Rafi in her arms. “Our sons are here. They are safe. We’ll put new security measures in place, and we’ll make sure it never happens again.” She reached up, cupping his face gently. “We have our family. And I want you as my husband.”

She moved closer, pressing her palm to his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart. “Joran, I want you by my side as we raise these boys. As we build our life together.”

His hands curled around her waist, but he hesitated. “You know you don’t have to marry me, Tila. I will protect you and the boys for the rest of my life, no matter what.”

Her lips parted, hesitation flickering in her expression for the first time. “I want you, Joran,” she said, her voice almost tentative. “As long as you still want me.”

His reaction was instant. “Yes!” he said, the vehemence in his voice leaving no room for doubt. “Hell yes!”

He moved in, but the babies nestled in their arms created an impossible barrier between them. With an impatient huff, Joran carefully laid Laith down in the bassinet, then turned to Tila, taking Rafi from her and placing him in the other.

The moment the boys were settled, he reached for her, pulling her into his arms like he'd been starved for the feel of her. His lips crashed down onto hers, full of love, full of everything he hadn't been able to say before.

"Yes," he murmured against her lips, kissing her again. "Hell yes! I love you, Tila, and I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life proving to you just how much."

Tila smiled, breathless. "I love you too, Joran."

She barely got the words out before he kissed her again.

## Epilogue

Tila's breath hitched as Khal's words settled in the air like a heavy weight. It's up to you.

She had never expected this. Never expected to hold such power over another person's fate.

The woman had tried to steal her son. She'd finagled a job at the palace, infiltrated the staff, violated everyone's trust and risked countless lives, not to mention, nearly shattered her world. By all logic, Tila should want vengeance.

But did she?

Her stomach churned, her emotions an uneasy storm—anger, sorrow, fear, and



something else she couldn't quite name. A week ago, she would have demanded justice in its purest form. Punishment. Consequences. Retribution. But now, sitting at this long, imposing table, with Khal watching her with his unreadable expression and Joran's firm, steady hand on her shoulder, her emotions twisted into something far more complicated.

Ophelia had been desperate.

Tila exhaled slowly, straightening her shoulders. "She's not well, Khal," she said carefully, choosing her words with intention. "Ophelia clearly has mental health challenges. She doesn't need a prison sentence—she needs help to get through... whatever she's struggling with."

She saw the flicker of something in Khal's gaze—not disagreement, but consideration. Still, his expression remained stony, his hands in his pockets as if waiting for her to continue.

Tila rubbed her forehead, trying to sort through her own tangled thoughts. Khal might have been terrifying to most people, but she had come to know better. He cared. Not just about duty, or justice, or law—but about doing what was right.

And, despite everything, she couldn't shake the feeling that sending Ophelia to prison wasn't right.

"She's disturbed, Tila," Khal said, his voice gruff.

"Yes, but why?" Tila countered. The question burned inside her, demanding an answer. "What made her so desperate to have a son that she was willing to get a job at a fortress, to risk death, in order to steal a baby that wasn't hers?"

She looked at both men, searching their faces, willing them to understand.

“Something happened in her life to convince her that the only path to happiness was having a son,” she pressed. “Something so powerful, so consuming, that it made her believe it was worth risking everything.”

Joran shifted beside her, his hand tightening slightly on her shoulder. He wasn’t arguing, but she could feel the tension in his body—the silent war between his rage and his reason.

Khal leaned back in his chair, watching her intently. Then, after a long moment, he sighed.

“You’re right.”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Tila blinked.

“The guards and nannies said the same thing,” Khal continued, his voice quieter now, thoughtful. “The woman was sobbing as she held Rafi, rocking back and forth, muttering about needing to get ‘her’ son home to his bassinet.” He shook his head. “She wasn’t thinking rationally.”

He nodded once, decisively. “I’ll recommend that she be treated in a high-security mental health facility.”

Tila’s shoulders sagged with relief. It was the right call.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling slightly. “I knew you wouldn’t send her off to prison where her mental health would only decline further.”

Khal said nothing, but there was a glint in his eyes—something approving, something amused.

And for the first time, Tila realized that maybe, just maybe, Khal had been testing her all along.

His mouth twisted slightly, then he shook his head. “Sometimes, facing one’s demons is even more of a nightmare than prison.”

“I hope not. She’s a very confused woman.” Tila inhaled, then let the air out slowly. “I know she lost a baby several months ago. I didn’t know her well. Just in passing in the grocery store. But I never realized she had any challenges until the day I met her

in the park a while ago.”

He nodded. “That’s what her other neighbors told us.”

Tila’s eyebrows went up. “You interviewed my old neighbors?”

He grimaced and shot her an amused glare. “You never heard that.”

She laughed and relaxed. “See? This is why I tell everyone that you’re actually a softy underneath that grouchy exterior,” she teased and stood up. “I have to finish up a few ideas for my newest client.” And she headed for the doorway.

“You’re still working?”

She paused halfway to the door, turning back to her brother-in-law. “Of course. I love my job, but now I work under a pseudonym and the security team built a firewall around my business.”

Khal stood up as well, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “You know you don’t have to work, right?”

Tila rolled her eyes. “Would you be able to sit around and do nothing, Khal?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Tasha relaxes,” he asserted firmly. “She used to be my assistant.”

Tila walked over to the doorway, resting her hand on the handle as she paused to say, “From what I’ve heard from the staff members, your wife works harder now than she ever did as your assistant.”

She walked out when she saw his jaw drop, enjoying the fact that the big guy could

be shocked. Walking back to the nursery, she was prepared to send the nannies home. They'd come back to work too early. Both of the day nannies had serious concussions, but both asserted that they were fine.

However, it wasn't much of a surprise to walk into the nursery to find the nannies gone and Rafi and Laith on the floor with Joran. Her sons were developing adorable personalities. And it was fascinating to watch. It was equally fascinating to watch Joran, a big, huge man with muscles and a toughness that was hard to match, sitting on the floor making silly sounds with whimsical toys. She enjoyed listening to the hilarious stories that Joran made up about the "animal" toys. For a man who worked with weapons and military politics, border problems and arrogant diplomats, it was adorable to see her handsome husband making up silly stories to please his infant children.

Rafi and Laith clearly adored these stories. They stared at the animals, entranced by their father's voice as he told a story about...two odd looking animals falling in love and...what in the world was he teaching their sons?

"Joran!" Tila gasped, laughing as she stepped into the room. "You can't say those things to babies!"

All three turned their heads, watching as Tila hurried into the room. Rafi beamed as if he knew exactly what his father was saying and loved it. Laith scowled, as if he wanted his mother to go away because she'd interrupted a rather...uh...racy...story about the polka dot giraffe and a green and blue striped lion.

"What? They need to learn about these things eventually."

Tila lowered herself to the floor and picked Rafi up, cuddling the little guy in her lap. Joran pulled Laith onto his lap, kissing the top of his dark head.

“They can learn about the birds and the bees when they are older,” she told him firmly.

She laughed and leaned in, kissing the man she loved with all her heart.

“I fired my assistant,” Joran said, his voice tight with controlled anger.

Tila frowned, caught off guard. That was the last thing she expected him to say. “You fired... but why?”

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:37 am*

Joran exhaled slowly, his jaw clenching. He picked up a purple lion, making it dance absently in front of Laith. The baby reached for it, but Joran barely noticed. His movements were stiff, his energy radiating frustration.

“Because he deleted your text messages,” he admitted, his voice rough. “He didn’t put your calls through.”

Tila’s stomach twisted.

Joran turned to her, his eyes dark with fury—not at her, but at himself. “All those months ago, I thought you had given up on me. I thought you didn’t want to talk to me. But it wasn’t you. It was him.” His jaw flexed, his fists clenching. “My own damn assistant decided you weren’t important enough. So he deleted everything. Every message. Every missed call.”

Tila stared at him, her mouth falling open in shock. “He... deleted everything?” She shook her head, as if trying to make sense of something completely impossible. “How do you know?”

Joran’s grip tightened on the toy in his hand before he shoved it toward Rafi, more out of habit than intent. The baby grasped at it, but Joran didn’t react.

“The palace security team did a full investigation into my phone records,” he ground out. “They didn’t even know what they were looking for at first, but eventually... they found it. Your messages. Your voicemails. All of it.” He raked a hand through his hair, his frustration rolling off him in waves. “It was all there, buried. And I didn’t see it. I let that bastard keep us apart.”

His voice dropped lower, raw and edged with self-recrimination. “I should have known. I should have realized something was wrong. I should have found you.” His jaw flexed, his nostrils flaring as his hands curled into fists. “I would have burned down the damn world to get to you if I had known.”

Tila’s breath caught at the intensity in his eyes.

Joran took a step toward her, his presence towering, overwhelming. “I’m sorry, Tila,” he said, voice thick with an emotion that was almost too much for him to contain. “I should have fought harder. I should have figured it out. I should have never let you believe, even for a second, that I didn’t want you.”

His hand cupped the side of her face, his grip firm, possessive, as his thumb brushed along her cheek. His gaze burned into hers, fierce and unyielding. “That will never happen again,” he vowed. “No one will ever keep you from me. Not a damn soul.”

Tila could barely breathe, the intensity of his words wrapping around her like a promise. A claim.

The pain in his voice was real. The regret, the fury at himself—it wasn’t just an apology. It was a vow.

She leaned forward, kissing him. “You would have been there,” she finished for him. “I know that now. I know you better, Joran. I have complete confidence that you would have come to me if you’d gotten the messages.”

He reached out, steadying the baby boy on his lap while pulling her closer for a deeper kiss. “I love you,” he grumbled. “You and the boys are everything to me.”

“And you’re everything to me as well, Joran. I love you!”

Joran grunted, nodding his agreement. “What did you say to Khal?” he asked, leaning



back against the cushions behind him.

“Exactly what we discussed last night. That the woman, Ophelia, is mentally ill and needs support, not punishment.”

“Good,” he said with a firm nod. “Not that I would condone anyone stealing our children, but that woman’s mutterings were indicative of a serious mental health issue.”

She smiled over at him as he snuggled Laith in his arms. “Any chance you might want to do this all over again?” she asked.

He stilled, looking over at her. “More children?” he asked, needing clarification.

She looked at her boys that were growing bigger every day. She loved them and, she loved Joran. Looking at him, she nodded, smiling with a secret smile. “Yeah. I’d like a little girl, if that’s possible.”

Joran froze for a moment, then he called out for the nannies, both of whom rushed into the nursery. Joran was handing Laith to one, then gave Rafi to the other nanny.

“What’s wrong, Your Highness?” the first nanny asked, cuddling Laith against her body securely.

“Not a thing,” he said, grabbing Tila’s hand and tugging her to her feet. “Just working on your job security,” he assured the nanny and carried a laughing Tila out of the nursery and down the hallway to their bedroom, where he proceeded to start the process of creating their daughter. Much to Tila’s delight.