



Six Types of Apology (Another Arranged Marriage #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Prince Orion of Tyrion built a life based on hard work and honest principles. Busy working on a mine project that could seriously benefit the people of Tyrion, Orions world was turned upside down when he learned he was to be married in just two days, to a man hed never spoken to. A man who would expect Prince Orion to travel with him, seriously hampering his chances of getting his mine project underway.

Crown Prince Vincent of Faast led a charmed life. Everywhere he went, people clamored to attract and hold his attention, always agreeing with him no matter what he said. So, in keeping with Crown Prince Vincents personality, when he decided to get married, it would be to the one man who barely glanced in his direction.

The problem was that old habits are often so ingrained a person can make a mistake without realizing it until it was too late. When Vincent does that, and Orion leaves, Vincent has to consider if his marriage was a huge mistake. When tragedy strikes those tenuous bonds are tested even further. Will these two princes finally get their Happy Ever After, or are there times when its easier to say goodbye.

Six Types of Apology is an MM romance based in Lisa Olivers fantasy world. It can be read as a standalone, although if you want to read about other couples mentioned briefly in this story, you can find their stories below.

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“He did what?” Prince Orion of Tyrion stared at the queen in disbelief. Only ten minutes before he’d been in his morning room, enjoying a quiet beverage and chatting about the various tasks he needed to do that day with his private aide, John. Just another day in other words. And then suddenly his footman was at the door with a message for him, announcing his mother wanted to see him in her private chambers immediately. That message alone was enough to raise eyebrows. The queen was not known for rising before lunch.

But Orion was nothing if not dutiful and hurried to his mother’s private chamber. He’d barely had time to sit down before she announced her bombshell. “Mother, you can’t be serious. You’re telling me I’m getting married in two days, and I’m only hearing about it now? And what’s worse, my marriage contract was won in a card game? How could Father do such a thing?”

Maybe I’m not awake yet. Perhaps this is all a nightmare. But the smell of his mother’s favorite jasmine tea dispelled that hope. Orion was fairly sure people couldn’t smell anything when they were dreaming.

“Your father was simply having fun at the tables.” His mother couldn’t even look at him, choosing to focus on her delicate china cup. “You know he does that every now and then, dear. Ruling the country is extremely stressful for him. He has to relax sometimes.”

Orion had been raised to be respectful, but he couldn’t resist a snort, which he quickly masked as a cough, covering his mouth with his hand as he did so. His mother was a gentle woman and didn’t appreciate any unruly noises or displays of emotion.

His father, on the other hand was a man ruled by his excesses. Fortunately, Orion's older brother Onyx had a sensible head on his shoulders and was pretty much running the country while their father "relaxed" out of the public eye.

"I'm aware Father enjoys his cards." Orion tried to keep his voice calm. "There is nothing wrong with harmless pursuits among friends. However, I've always believed his wagers were cash amounts the treasury could well afford – not something that involved my personal autonomy, for example."

"You are well past marrying age." The queen had her disapproving look down to a fine art.

"I'm only twenty-seven," Orion protested. "I cause no bother to Father, you, or anyone else in the royal household. I maintain my own staff and business ventures. Aside from that, Father has already forged the alliances he wanted with Elembaum to the east of us when Onyx wed his princess and brought her home, and Olivia is wonderfully happy as the Crown Princess of Carntan to the west of us. Father made it plain to me after Olivia's wedding three years ago, that as the youngest son, I wasn't expected to marry. He even asked me if I wanted to go into the military. I don't understand how this could happen."

"It was a simple enough mistake. Your father genuinely believed he held the winning hand." Queen Mary's nose turned up in that way that implied she felt the whole process of playing anything was beneath her, but since Orion was a teenager he realized the only reason his parents' marriage lasted so long was because she turned a blind eye to her husband's many faults.

"And that's understandable. I'm sure Father is very skilled at cards." He plays them often enough. "But even when Father lost the hand, the winner would surely have enough class to know that a marriage contract is never discussed over a gaming table, especially when it concerns a member of the royal family. No one with any society

ranking would be so crass as to insist on the wager being met.”

Orion had a horrible thought. “Has Father betrothed me to a child bride?” Although, thinking about it, that wouldn’t be so bad. Orion could afford to maintain a child bride, as they typically lived with their own family, sometimes well into adulthood. It would be years before anything in his own life had to change. Orion had given marriage a thought, occasionally, but he led a busy life and didn’t feel it would be fair to a bride to marry anyone when he wouldn’t have time to get to know her. He hadn’t met anyone in recent years that made him change his mind.

“The person is neither a child, nor a bride.” Queen Mary sniffed. “Honestly, I seriously thought about having words with your father when he told me...”

“Wait. Wait.” Orion put up his hand. “I know you don’t appreciate being interrupted, Mother, and I sincerely apologize, but I truly believe I must have misheard you. Are you telling me Father has arranged a marriage for me with an adult man? Who? Father doesn’t even agree with those practices. When King Mintyn of Marinkaw married Prince Syrius, he had a fit, venting extensively about how royal blood lines had to be maintained and that couldn’t happen between spouses of the same gender. He didn’t even go to the Marinkaw games, and I know he was invited. Onyx had to go in his place.”

“Many male princes from around the southern region have married other men.” There was nothing in Queen Mary’s tone to suggest her opinion on the matter. “The King of Gunkermal is married to a man, as well as the Crown Prince of Balenborn, King Mintyn as you mentioned, and the new Crown Princes of Westland and Gunkermal married each other. It’s become quite the trend.”

“I’m the last person to worry about following trends.” Orion inhaled, and let his breath out slowly and softly. It would never do to show his mother he was upset. This will be fine. I can deal with this. I just need specifics. “Very well. I trust the person I

am contracted to marry is agreeable to my remaining here and continuing my business ventures and the life I've built for myself. I am assuming this is a local society family member I am expected to marry?"

At least, Orion reasoned to himself, it was likely the person would be lower ranked than himself, in which case it was highly possible they could come to a companionship agreement that would suit them both. He couldn't think who it might be, or even who might be interested in him in that way. He rarely socialized in his position as prince, and while he was friendly for the most part, Orion was usually too distracted with more important matters than to spend time gossiping with society families.

Still, it was Orion's nature to take a situation and work darn hard to ensure that situation went to his advantage - quietly and calmly, because that was how he'd been raised. He was sure a marriage situation would be no different.

But Queen Mary was shaking her head again, a gentle frown gracing her perfect features. "No, I don't think that will be possible for you to stay here, dear. I'm sure your father did try to negotiate for your wedding to be held at a later time, to give you the chance to adjust to the idea, but Prince Vincent was most insistent that as he was leaving the country in two days, he expected you to travel with him."

"Prince Vincent?" Orion shoved his hand in his pocket so his mother would not see the fist he was making. "Are you telling me I'm contracted to marry Crown Prince Vincent of Faast?"

"Didn't I mention it? Yes, that's him. Such a personable gentleman. So you see your father couldn't refuse, between losing the hand he was playing, and the fact the person was higher ranked than you are. It would have been a huge offense to refuse his very generous offer to elevate your social status."

I doubt elevating my social status was Vincent's motivation for wanting to marry me, although Orion couldn't know that for sure. It wasn't as though he had anything to do with the man on his infrequent visits. If anything, Orion was surprised the crown prince even knew his name.

The queen put her cup aside and fluffed out her skirts. "Clearly you can see, under the circumstances, maintaining your businesses here, or indeed remaining here, will not be possible. Prince Vincent is looking forward to his new husband traveling with him."

Orion wasn't sure what was affecting him more – the fact his heart was in his boots, or the lump that had suddenly taken root in his stomach. "I can't tie everything up that I have going on in two days," he said, hating that there was a pleading tone in his voice.

"I'm sure Onyx will help with anything you can't get done in time. In the meantime, the tailor has been instructed to attend to you at two bells to fit you for your robes. I have a dozen things to do. Prince Vincent has agreed to a small wedding, but there are still some standards we need to observe."

Orion licked his lips and tried to swallow. "Mother, has the marriage contract already been signed?"

"Yes, dear. Your father was very thorough about that, isn't that good of him? He and Prince Vincent sat up until all hours last night hashing out the details, and the signed copies were sent off to the World Council by special messenger first thing this morning."

"May I see a copy of what's been agreed on my behalf, please?" The piss off clause. It's my only hope. Every marriage contract has a piss-off clause. If I invoke it before the man leaves the country, then I won't have to go anywhere with him at all.

“Of course, dear, I’m sure there’s a copy of it at your father’s office. Just send your man to get it.” In other words, don’t go and bother Father in his office, because it won’t do any good, likely because the man wouldn’t likely be there. But Orion nodded, made his excuses and left. There wasn’t anything to be gained by trying to persuade a woman who never changed her mind about anything. Leaning on the back of the door, once he’d made his way back to his own suite, he groaned. “Why did it have to be Crown Prince Vincent of Faast? Why him?”

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“You did it then.”

“I did indeed.” Crown Prince Vincent of Faast grinned at Morgan, his personal valet, as the man handed him his morning coffee. “It was a wonderful end to a successful and fun evening. Admittedly, it helped that King Oscar is a terrible card player, but the killer hand I got clinched the deal. I knew it would only be a matter of time before I got what I wanted.”

“I still fail to see why you’d want to marry Prince Orion in the first place.” Morgan turned away, picking up and folding the clothes Vincent had dropped on the floor when he’d got into the room in the early hours of the morning. “It’s not like you’ve ever spent any time with him, despite our many visits here.”

“Ah, but that’s the best reason right there.” Vincent beamed. Nothing was going to ruin his mood. “Tell me. Why doesn’t Orion fawn all over me or want to get to know me?”

“You mean like every other person you come across who is blinded by your charm, looks, and breeding?”

Vincent could see Morgan’s lips twitching. The man had been with him a long time and knew him so well. “Exactly. Everyone knows I am the prince of charm and a delight to be around. Yet Orion barely acknowledges my existence. Why is that?”

“I’m sure I can’t presume to know what Prince Orion might be thinking.” Morgan moved on from tidying the clothes, to straightening Vincent’s medals and jewelry on the dresser. “He has a reputation as being a very serious man who doesn’t appear to

enjoy the odd occasions when he attends social functions.”

“Don’t you ever get the urge to just ruffle his serious feathers?” Hugging his cup close to his chest, it made Vincent’s grin widen just thinking about it.

“It would hardly be seemly for me to be thinking about Prince Orion in any way at all.” Morgan turned from the dresser. “But why marriage, sir? Couldn’t you have talked to him and perhaps asked him why he appears so serious all the time? You didn’t have to marry him to find that out. In fact, there’s no guarantee you will find out, even once you are married.”

“Spouses talk to each other, even if they don’t do much else, and we both know how attractive others find me. I can’t help it. I can’t see him remaining aloof for long.” Vincent was being perfectly blunt – it was the way he’d been born. Great genetics and an active lifestyle meant he attracted a wide variety of people who always liked being around him.

“Courting him might have helped ease him into the idea of being with you, as opposed to basically winning him in a card game.”

“Oh, courting him. Good idea.” Vincent snapped his fingers. “I need to send him gifts, which means we get to go shopping. I’ve not done this type of shopping before. What items would make him want to be with me, do you think?”

“You buy gifts for your flavor of the week all the time,” Morgan reminded him.

“True, but I didn’t marry any of them.” Vincent sighed happily. “Just think, in two days my reign of being a playboy prince will be over, and I’ll be able to settle down with just one special person.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for that? You’ve enjoyed a very active and varied social

life, with many close companions for years. Is that type of behavior allowed within the confines of your marriage contract?"

"No. That's the beauty of it all. There will be nothing like that going on anymore." Vincent smirked. "Face it. I'm not getting any younger and, to be honest, it's tiring having to be on my best behavior all the time. I'm hoping once I'm married that will stop the numerous requests I get for private engagements."

"Because heaven forbid someone knows the only reason you can see the floor in your room is because you have me to pick up after you." Morgan shook his head. "So is this the last great courting session?"

"Yes." Vincent nodded happily. "And that's an excellent way to put it. So we need gifts and lots of them. I need to be sure my new fiancé will be suitably impressed."

"Sir, marriage is a very serious step, and one that you won't be able to get out of if it doesn't work. Did you have a backup plan in case Prince Orion doesn't enjoy being in your company?"

"I've never needed one before. Why start now?" Getting up, Vincent put his mug on the coffee table and stretched. "Let's go for a wander among the locals and see what sorts of items might impress a serious prince that needs to loosen up and enjoy life a bit more."

"Just don't go buying him a pack of cards, sir," Morgan said, going to the closet to collect Vincent's coat for him. "Somehow, I don't think Prince Orion would appreciate your humor."

"He had to get married one day." Vincent held out his arms and shrugged on his coat. "It might just as well be with me. Everyone knows I'm a catch." And the awesome thing was, that if Orion didn't already know that it wouldn't take him long to find out

how wonderful Vincent could be.

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“There’s no piss-off clause, and he’s included a solid fidelity clause that applies to both of us. How could Father do this to me?” As soon as Orion had read over the surprisingly brief marriage contract, he knew he needed help and his older brother, Onyx, was the first person that came to mind. “I expected this thing to be pages long. You know, a million clauses that would give me a loophole so I can get out of this, but there’s nothing here.” He slapped the single piece of paper on Onyx’s desk. “It’s almost an insult on how basic this is.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, this looks exactly as it appears – a marriage contract hashed out between two drunks who seriously don’t know any better.” Onyx sighed. “The only problem is that’s it’s already signed, and a copy lodged with the World Council.”

“But my signature’s not on it.” Orion tapped the paper. “Prince Vincent’s is, and so is Father’s, but surely if I went to the council and explained that I wasn’t even consulted...” He trailed off as his brother shook his head.

“Technically, and this is simply within the parameters of World Council policies regarding these matters, what Father did was perfectly acceptable. You are his youngest son, and you live under his roof, implying to the council that you’re still under his rule, which again is also true. He had every right to sign the contract on your behalf as he is our king.”

Orion and Onyx shared a long look. The ‘in name only’ was understood between them even if the words were never spoken out loud. If it wasn’t for Onyx, Tyrion would have fallen to rack and ruin years ago.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Orion groaned as he slumped in the nearest

chair. “I mean, all right, I had to marry someday, maybe. But I thought I’d end up with a society wife who was happy enough to live in the castle and leave me to keep running my businesses. Mother said I have to be prepared to travel with Prince Vincent within two days. Two days!”

“What’s the situation with the mine right now?” Onyx looked understandably worried. Orion and Onyx had been working on a small mining project up in the hills of Tyrion, previously believed to be completely useless for anything. But then a random find one day of a small crystal in a cave by one of the locals led to geological surveys and the setting up of Tyrion’s first ever mining complex. If it proved fruitful, it could seriously reduce the need for Tyrion to purchase the magical crystals they needed from Marinkaw.

“Ryan sent me a report yesterday and claims they have located a small seam of what looks like the magical crystal. I’m still waiting for our magic users to determine how effective the crystals might be, but all indications are that the mine could be productive within six months.” Orion shook his head. “So much work has gone into this and now...”

“Getting a positive result from that mine would help the country’s finances, as well.” Onyx opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle and two glasses. “Father’s man is doing as much as he can to keep him from gambling away the castle, but he’s limited to what he can do.”

“Father wouldn’t gamble away the castle – he wants his bed to crawl into when he’s done making a fool of himself in front of friends,” Orion said bitterly. “But he doesn’t think anything’s wrong with signing away his son’s life over a freaking game of cards. If it had been with anyone else, someone local for example, then it might not have been too bad, but Prince Vincent?”

“Apparently the wager was Vincent’s suggestion.”

Orion met eyes so like his own. He and Onyx looked very similar, although Onyx was two inches taller and looked tired. They shared the same dark hair, gray eyes, and sharply defined features. Although Onyx wore the responsibility of his position hard, so while he was only six years older than Orion, he looked at least ten years his senior and that was being kind.

“What do you mean, this was Prince Vincent’s suggestion? He and I don’t even know each other. We’ve never spoken, not once in the times he’s visited Father. I didn’t even realize he knew of my existence.”

Onyx shrugged and poured them both a drink. “You know Peter keeps me informed on Father’s nights out – he’s been amazing in doing that. Well, according to him, he was at the game, and when Father had lost all of the coin he had on him, he should’ve just folded his hand.”

“It’s what a gentleman would do.”

“Exactly,” Onyx said grimly, “and we all know how much of a gentleman Father can be when he’s had a few wines and determined to win at all costs. He did not want to fold. It was Vincent who suggested Father could continue playing that hand, if he wagered something else. When Father was looking around to see what he could afford to lose, Vincent said he’d been thinking of getting married and would Father agree to throwing in a marriage contract with you as part of the deal.”

“Do I want to know what Father would’ve won if he’d had the winning hand – just more coin I suppose.” Orion wasn’t sure his situation could get any worse.

“Pretty much.”

Orion looked at his brother closely. “You don’t want me to complain to the World Council about this, do you?”

“I hate to say it, but I’d rather you didn’t.” Onyx pushed over one of the glasses. “If the World Council comes here, then they’re going to see that Father’s not competent. It would be a huge scandal. I’m not so much worried about myself, but...”

“It would impact Mother, your lovely wife, and Olivia and her marriage, too, most likely.” Orion took a sip of his drink and nodded. “I do understand. I just don’t understand why Prince Vincent chose me. From all accounts, the man can have anyone he wants just by holding out his hand and smiling at them. Honestly, if we’d had any contact at all, I’d believe he was doing this to mess with me, but he doesn’t know anything about me.”

“He’s definitely been around the block a few times,” Onyx agreed. “It seems like every week he’s courting someone new.”

“That’s what I mean. Why marry me when he doesn’t have to?”

“He’s probably feeling his age, or maybe, and you know this isn’t meant as an insult, but it’s possible he thought you would be an agreeable husband who wasn’t going to cramp his style.”

“That document” - Orion pointed angrily at the copy of his marriage contract - “has no provision for a piss-off clause, and there’s a solid fidelity clause that applies to both of us. He so much as looks at another person the wrong way and I can sue him for breach of contract. Hmm, there’s a thought. What would that be worth to me?”

“Probably a sizable estate, and financial compensation for life. Face it, you could do a lot worse. No matter what happens, even if he was unfaithful, he’d have to look after you and you’d always hold the rank of Crown Prince Consort, and eventually King Consort of Faast. It’s not like he can divorce you, even if you sue him for breach of contract.”

Orion took a large swig of his drink and smirked. Who cared if it wasn't even lunch time yet. He was feeling reckless. "And his scandalous misbehavior can hardly reflect on the country of Tyrion. Perhaps Crown Prince Vincent should've put more thought into his actions. My dear fiancé might have no choice but to be unfaithful, if he's keen to remain as physically active, shall we say, as is reported about him. It takes a lot more to impress me than a killer smile and perfect teeth."

Putting down his glass, he added, "We'll have to arrange a solid messenger system as I have no idea where this prince thinks he's dragging me off to after the wedding. But I'll keep running the project as best I can, and if the goddess is smiling on me, then I'll be back here well before the six months is up and can oversee the next stage of the mine expansion."

Onyx chuckled. "And if by chance the crown prince manages to woo your heart, and you remain his loyal consort?"

"If the man truly wants to win my heart, then he'd better be prepared to roll up his sleeves and work in the mine alongside me. That is the only thing that would impress me."

"I almost feel sorry for Vincent. From everything I've heard, the only thing he's interested in is traveling and hosting parties when he's home. I'm sure he has no idea men like us even exist." Onyx raised his glass. "To working princes."

"To working princes," Orion agreed. He wasn't going to change that, and there was nothing in the marriage contract he was now bound by that meant he had to.

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As much as Vincent would've loved to have started to get to know Orion before the wedding, he appreciated Orion probably did him a favor by not being available. "It all adds to the mystery of the day," he said to Morgan, his grin showing his teeth.

Originally he'd sent Morgan to Orion's suite with the delightful gifts he'd spent a pleasant afternoon selecting, along with an invitation to join him for a late supper. Vincent got a handwritten note in reply.

Dear Crown Prince Vincent,

Thank you for your kind attentions and various gifts. While I am sure the invitation to have supper with you would lead to a purely delightful evening in your company, unfortunately, I must regretfully decline.

There are numerous matters I must attend to before we are to be wed. I am sure, as a responsible crown prince with commitments of your own, you will understand.

I remain committed to joining you at our wedding service on Tuesday at eleven bells.

Your affianced,

Orion

"He thinks I'm a responsible prince." Vincent had stabbed the elegantly written prose with glee. "He did write this himself, didn't he? This is Orion's handwriting?"

"I watched him pen the reply myself, sir." Morgan's lips twitched.

“And the gifts? Did he say anything about the gifts?” Vincent loved giving gifts to people he was fond of. They always seemed so happy, and he was often showered with affection when he went on a shopping spree.

“He did appear to be very busy, but he did put the gifts on a table in his sitting room and assured me he would attend to them shortly.”

“Hmm. That’s disappointing he didn’t open them right then and there, but still. Maybe he was overwhelmed by my generosity. And busy?” Vincent slapped his head, lightly of course, because he didn’t want to leave a mark on his perfect features. “How silly of me to be inconsiderate. He is bound to feel he needs to enhance his appearance in every way possible to take up his position as my consort. What was he doing? Getting his hair done? His nails? Or was the tailor with him? That would be an appointment I would enjoy sitting in on.”

“He was working at his desk, sir.” Morgan shifted from one foot to the other and then asked, “Do you have any idea what Prince Orion does every day? Have you inquired about his daily activities at all?”

Vincent snorted. “I did ask his father what sort of hobbies Orion enjoyed. I was hoping if I knew a few of his interests in advance then that would help us move through the ‘getting to know you’ side of things a bit faster. But I’m sure you noticed King Oscar wasn’t very forthcoming about that sort of thing. I did wonder if he even cares what his sons do all day.”

“Which would be an astute and accurate observation on your part,” Morgan agreed.

“True, but when you think about it, Orion is probably going to be doing the same thing every other prince we know will be doing. I imagine he’s an excellent dancer, and he likely rides a horse like a dream. It’s logical to assume he spends a lot of time with friends, socializing like we do. Oh, wouldn’t it be fun if he played cards? I’m

sure he must do as his father seems to do little else. I wonder if he plays a musical instrument. That could be fun, too.” Glancing up at Morgan’s expression, Vincent frowned. “Why do I think you already know what my intended does all day?”

“Perhaps because you know your mother pays me a minor fortune to look out for you, and it’s only natural when I informed our queen that you had decided to win your intended in a card game that she wanted to know who you’d decided to commit yourself to.”

“You did mention that Orion is a prince, didn’t you? It’s not like I won some random person in a card game in a pirate bar. The wager with King Oscar was more like a friendly negotiation that simply occurred while we were playing cards.” While Vincent loved his mother dearly and the feeling was mutual, he sometimes wondered if Morgan was strictly fair with the information that got passed on back to the Faast royal family.

“I informed Queen Julia that your intended was a male of royal blood. The male side of things did surprise her given your propensity for enjoying the company of both genders. She wondered how you planned to have children.”

“I do not want children.” Vincent shuddered. “I’ll admit, I haven’t had a lot to do with them, but the ones I have seen – ugh. They remind me of those wooden puppets with the horrible faces.”

“Do you mean marionettes, sir?”

“Yes. That’s the word. Scary things they are. They only move when they’re being tugged on by strings. Although, the ones that move with magical or mechanical methods are worse. You think they’re just a doll sitting on a shelf somewhere and then bam, they move for no reason. And they all have spooky faces. Nope. Those children I met were just the same. They just stare at you with their big eyes, and they

barely move, and even when their parents are prodding them, they don't talk to you or anything. That's just scary."

"You are expected to name an heir at some point," Morgan said. "It's part of being a crown prince."

"I think the Crown Princes of Balenborn, Westland, and Gunkermal, not to mention King Mintyn of Marinkaw will all disagree with you. They set the precedent I was happy to follow. Besides. I have four sisters. I'm sure one of them will have children eventually and that's my heir problem solved." Vincent shook his finger at his longtime friend. "You've distracted me with this talk about children. What do you know about Orion's daily activities? Is it something juicy?"

"Not unless you consider working for a living a juicy activity, sir." Morgan shook his head. "By all accounts, the reason Prince Orion was unable to dine with you, or indeed spend any time at all with you before the wedding, was because he'd been instructed to wind up his extensive business affairs before he started traveling with you."

"Working? The poor man was working for a living? See." Vincent pointed his finger at Morgan. "It is just as well I came along when I did and saw the potential in him. If anyone has a chance of showing Orion how to have a good time, it's me."

"We'll just hope that's how Prince Orion views his situation, too, shall we sir?"

"You just wait and see. No one knows more about having fun in life than me."

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“Crown Prince Vincent’s aide, Morgan, has shared a provisional list of social engagements planned for after the wedding, sir.” John placed the list on Orion’s desk. It was the morning of the wedding and Orion was rushing through a huge to-do list, trying to ensure that all the hard work he’d put in for months, especially in relation to the mine project, would not go to waste.

“Where is it being held?” Orion finished off his last set of instructions for Ryan at the mine and sealed them in an envelope ready for the messenger. He was already dressed in his pants and fine undershirt. He just needed to slip on his robe and boots.

“Which engagement are you referring to, sir?” John huffed. “The crown prince is apparently planning to travel overland through Carntan, and then onto Monce, and Scythe, before ending up in Faast. There are parties planned at each of the castles, some of them expected to continue over two to three days.”

Orion wrinkled his nose. “That sounds exhausting. Still, at least there’ll be some breaks if we’re traveling by horse. Not even my talented fiancé can move from one country to the next in one day. It’ll be nice to stop in at Carntan. I can visit with my sister, so that’s something to look forward to.”

“I’m worried about your wardrobe, sir.” Orion looked up to see John chewing his bottom lip. “I’m not sure you have enough robes or finery to attend so many social occasions without access to a laundry, and it’s too late to get anything from the tailor now.”

Orion smiled. John was an older man who had been serving Orion for ten years. While he often bemoaned the state of Orion’s wardrobe and the fact Orion barely

socialized, he was genuinely concerned about Orion's image. "I'm sorry I haven't been helpful on personal matters these past two days. This business with the mines..."

"No. No, sir. You should never apologize to me. I know how much this wedding business has caused so many problems with everything else." John shook his head. "I just feel it would be wise to spend a bit of time thinking about clothes over the next week or so, at least until we get to Faast and can find another tailor."

"One will hope, once people realize how boring I am, that my need to attend social events will die down. But that doesn't solve our immediate problem." Orion thought for a moment. "I don't suppose any of the gifts from my fiancé included clothes?" He hadn't even had time to look at them, although John had opened them for him.

"Yes, sir. There are three rather beautifully done waistcoats," John said. "I recognize the work. Martha, who has a stall at the local markets, makes them. I believe they'll fit you very nicely. She has used gems, jeweled threads, and panels of colorful material."

"Ah, yes, I remember seeing her work when I've been in town, and many social climbing young men seem to like them. Not something I usually wear." Orion grinned. "But I do remember her style as being unique and thereby socially acceptable, shall we say? How about, as the new crown prince consort, we start a new clothing trend? If we pair those waistcoats, which I would obviously want to wear as a tribute to my new husband's thoughtfulness, with black pants and black or white shirts..."

"Which you wear all the time anyway." John was nodding, looking a lot happier. "Sir, if I could be so bold, would you allow me to send a message to Martha, or even pop down and see her if you can spare me, and ask her if she has another three in different colors she can send directly? I'm sure she would likely have them, and she'd

be thrilled if she knew you were wearing them on your travels.”

“That’s a great idea.” Orion nodded. “Obviously, don’t pressure her if she doesn’t have any readymade, but that would save having to borrow clothes from my brother that just won’t fit. The waistcoats are unique, and best of all, I can just wear black or white everything else. Clothing issue solved.”

“Temporarily,” John warned. “Sir, the servants have said Crown Prince Vincent does nothing but socialize. Sooner or later you’re going to need some new clothes.”

“We’ll see how things go first, shall we.” Orion wasn’t going to commit to any expenditure he didn’t have to. If he had his way, he’d be wearing his work gear before too long. “Did you mention my fiancé wants to travel to Monce?”

John nodded. “Yes sir. He plans to stay there for three days and two nights so the royal family there can meet his new husband.”

“Hmm. I wonder if I can convince the crown prince to make a short detour between Monce and Scythe.” Orion pulled his large map of the Northern Quadrants out from under some other papers. “Monce and Scythe are along Tyrion’s back borders. It’s only a day’s ride out of our way to call on the mines, if my fiancé was amenable. Or I could suggest he go on without me from Monce and wait for me in Scythe. I can’t see why he’d object to me doing that.”

“I think it might be prudent for you to explain to the crown prince what you’re doing first, don’t you, sir? Who knows. He might be interested.”

Orion met John’s eyes squarely. “Do you really think he will be, after what you’ve heard about him among the staff since he arrived?”

John dithered for so long, Orion wasn’t sure he was going to answer, but then he said,

“He might change once he’s married.”

“And pigs might develop wings and fly one day, but we won’t hold our breath waiting for that to happen.” There was a sharp knock at the door and Orion nodded toward it. “That will be Onyx. Go and let him in, then make a quick trip to the markets for those waistcoats. By the time you’re done, I’ll be a married man, and well...we’ll see what happens after that.”

“Yes, sir.” John bowed and hurried to the door, letting Onyx in and slipping out into the hallway closing the door behind him.

“You’re looking smart.” Onyx was wearing the dark blue robes favored by the royal family. Orion’s were the same color. The king had decided that it was too tedious to walk his son down the aisle, so he and the queen would be waiting on a special stage set up for them, giving them a good view of the ceremony. Onyx would stand with him.

“You’re looking busy.” Onyx indicated the mess on Orion’s desk. “Is there anything I can do?”

Shaking his head, Orion gathered the papers, including the map, putting them into a leather travel case. “I’ve left instructions for Ryan,” he patted the envelope on the desk. “I’ve told him to send a message to me directly if there are any issues. John tells me my fiancé is planning to show me off at Carntan, Monce, and Scythe before we get to Faast. I’m hopeful I can get a chance to call into the mine somewhere along the way, but if not, I’ll have to arrange for a trip after we’ve settled in Faast. Maybe. Who knows. In case you haven’t guessed, I’m winging things here.”

“I wish you didn’t have to go through any of this at all.” Onyx shook his head. “I sat next to your intended at dinner last night, and honestly all the man talked about was himself. There was no mention of you, or any questions about you... You’d think

he'd show some interest in the man he decided he was going to marry."

"What can you do? What can either one of us do for that matter?" Coming out from behind his desk, Orion hugged his brother hard. "It might not be a bad thing, Vincent being self-absorbed, I mean. He might not even notice if I'm not there, and that could be handy if I'm needed at the mine."

"Don't count on it," Onyx warned hugging him back. "That man loves an audience. He's going to expect his husband to be the most attentive of all."

"Then maybe he should've discussed things with me before he decided to win me in a card game." Inhaling sharply, Orion let out his breath slowly as he heard the bells chime. "Let's get this done. I promise I won't bring disrepute to you or Tyrion. All you have to do is make sure Father doesn't do that all by himself."

"That's a full-time job in itself." Onyx sighed. "Get your robe and boots on. The last thing we want is to be late."

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“The royal family don't seem very close, do they?” Vincent commented in a low undertone to Morgan who was waiting with him. He was dressed in his finest clothes, all done in tasteful shades of lavender with black and gold trim. His dark hair was fashionably curled and hung down his back. His facial hair was closely trimmed for the occasion and Morgan had shined his boots so well he could almost see his reflection in them. They were standing on an ornately decorated stage, waiting for his groom to arrive.

Most of the royal family were already arranged in special seating, designed to ensure the focus of the room was on them. Vincent didn't care. He had been around enough royals to know that many families had unusual quirks, although he worked to keep a frown off his face as King Oscar roared with laughter over something one of his attendants said. From what Vincent could see, no one in the room, with the exception of himself and Morgan, seemed to care about, or have any interest in, the reason why they were all in attendance.

“It does look a little suspect,” Morgan said just as quietly. “I did some asking around among the staff arranging this event. Gossip claims the king actually refused to walk his son down the aisle or present him to you.”

“Maybe he's finally realized how that would look.” Vincent kept looking back at the door. “Although, technically, I could've insisted he accompany his son. Most winnings from a wager are handed over personally.”

“Sir, I must insist you do not mention that comment or sentiments like it to your groom, ever, ” Morgan hissed. “Can you kindly remember you didn't win Prince Orion. He's a person in his own right. In about twenty minutes he'll be your equal

and your responsibility for the rest of your natural lives.”

“I would never be so crass.” Vincent picked at a tiny loose thread on his cuff. “King Oscar’s behavior’s annoying me, that’s all. Orion’s his son and the king’s acting like he’s not important in any way.”

“You could be right about that,” Morgan said, nodding slightly. It’s not like many people were watching them, but for someone usually so sociable, Vincent was beginning to wish the whole thing was already over.

“Did you ever find out why the king is neglecting his duties this particular day?” he asked.

“You mean aside from the general gossip that concedes that the only reason Tyrion is still functioning is because of Crown Prince Onyx, and that the king is the biggest waste of space in the known world?” A head shake this time, and then Morgan leaned into him and murmured. “Apparently the walk down the aisle would be too taxing for the king – too arduous a task especially if he wasn’t the focus of the proceedings. His manservant, Peter, told me with a completely straight face that his majesty has to save his strength for more important kingly matters.”

“You know, the more I think about it,” Vincent said, still keeping his voice low because he wasn’t stupid. He might look and act like the charming carefree prince around town, but he did have a brain in his head. “The way I see it, I’m actually saving Orion from a fate worse than death. The callous disregard of the majority of his family members makes no sense to me.”

“At least you know your mother, Queen Julia, will make Prince Orion feel comfortable,” Morgan agreed, “Especially once we get to Faast.”

“But?” Vincent prompted because it was clear Morgan was worried about something

and Vincent would rather know about it before the wedding ceremony.

“I can’t help worrying we’re actually dragging Prince Orion away from something important by insisting he travel with you so soon after the wedding,” Morgan admitted. “No one will say what he’s been doing, but he’s been frantically busy this past two days and well into the night, so I’ve heard. Far beyond tying up any social loose ends.”

“All we can hope is that he will want to get to know me quick enough, to the point where he feels he can confide in me. Who knows. Maybe we can help. Despite my press, there is more to me than a pretty face and good genetics.” Vincent looked back toward the door as the horns blared for what had to have been the sixth time since he’d entered the room. Apparently the horns were signals for any time anyone of any social prominence entered the room, but no. Thank goodness. This time it was Prince Orion standing at the door, accompanied by his brother Crown Prince Onyx.

A couple of things immediately struck Vincent as he watched the brothers stride down the aisle toward him. First, both men looked incredibly solemn, as if they were going to war as opposed to a wedding ceremony. But the other thing that Vincent thought was unusual was the way the society families, apparently invited to share in the happy event, noticed the brothers arriving and then went back to chatting among themselves.

How very rude of them.

Vincent made sure he was smiling, and attentive as Onyx and Orion stepped up onto the stage. Onyx nodded to Vincent, equal to equal, which Vincent responded to. But Orion bowed low. That wasn’t an unusual greeting. It was the perfectly appropriate level of respect Vincent’s position demanded, but considering they were to be husbands together in a very short while, Vincent found the action uncomfortable.

As soon as Orion straightened, Vincent moved forward, taking Orion's hand and air kissing him on either side of his serious face.

"It is a great pleasure to formally meet you at last," he said, making sure he sounded completely sincere. "I do look forward to getting to know you once the formalities are taken care of."

"You honor me, Crown Prince Vincent." Orion nodded again and seemed reluctant to meet Vincent's eyes. Vincent was going to say something, but then the king clicked his fingers loudly and declared, "let's get this over and done with," and the moment was definitely lost.

An older man in a long, ornate, blue robe covered in golden runes shuffled across the stage and came to stand in front of them, looking between them and the king. "Let the wedding ceremony between Crown Prince Vincent of Faast and Prince Orion of Tyrion begin," he said in a shaky voice.

The man found his stride, ranting on for about five minutes about World Council protocols relating to marriage and the examples solid marriages made to those less fortunate than the people attending the wedding. The king seemed to be having a great old time, yelling "here, here," every few minutes, causing the crowd to all clap politely.

Onyx's face was like thunder by the time the vows were supposed to be said. Orion promised to honor and protect his husband as policy dictated.

Noticing the king hadn't even bothered to stop talking to one of his attendants while his son was pledging his life to someone who was basically a complete stranger, Vincent was furious on his fiancé's behalf.

When it came time for him to repeat his vows, Vincent said in a loud voice no one

could ignore, “I pledge my heart, mind, and body to the man who has the courage to stand here in this company and pledge himself to me this morning. From this moment on, it is my intention that my husband will stand beside me as an equal in all things. Let all those present rise and show their respect to the Crown Prince Consort of Faast.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then, with a worried glance at where the king and queen remained seated, the entire congregation stood and then bowed or curtsied in accordance with their preference.

“You didn’t have to force them to do that,” Orion said softly as the minister in the blue robe proclaimed them married. “The opinions of the many have never concerned me.”

“It concerned me. You are deserving of great respect, and it was the very least I could do.” Vincent kissed his new husband on the cheek and turned to face the crowd with Orion’s hand firmly in his. Let the games begin.

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Orion was troubled, but for once it wasn't about the state of Tyrion or the mine project. No. It was Crown Prince Vincent who had, in a few simple phrases and gestures, blown out a number of pre-conceptions Orion had harbored about the man. And he'd only been with him for five minutes.

It had to be said, because Orion was brutally honest with himself, that the man was devastatingly handsome – the type of man who automatically turned heads wherever he went. If someone imagined what the heir to a royal family would look like, it would be Vincent's picture under the description. Admittedly, Orion had not been a fan of the lavender ensemble the man was wearing, but the cut of his clothes was fine and apparently the man underneath was, too. So there was that. Having only ever seen the prince from a distance before, Orion could admit to being intrigued by the man close up.

But clothes did not make the man, at least in Orion's opinion. If he just had Vincent's good looks to contend with, Orion would suffer his way through the luncheon his mother had arranged as his wedding reception before making his excuses. It would've given him time to tick a few more things off his to-do list before Vincent was ready to leave.

But Vincent didn't just rattle off his vows and then start socializing with the numerous society members who were in attendance, as Orion had anticipated he would. No, the man held his hand. He made the crowd bow to Orion – bow to him! Orion had never commanded that type of respect, and even Onyx struggled to do so in social situations where his father was a dominating presence.

Onyx was already fuming at the way the king had behaved during the wedding

ceremony. It was one thing to arrange Orion's marriage over a game of cards – a losing hand no less - but to basically hijack the ceremony and pay no attention to the seriousness of the vow exchange was intolerably bad behavior, unless it was being done by the King of Tyrion.

But now Orion was seated at the long family table, preparing to suffer through the luncheon, already wishing it was over. Vincent was seated on one side of him, his man Morgan next to Vincent on the other side. Onyx was on Orion's other side with his wife, Evangaline, beside him, something Orion was grateful for. His brother and sister-in-law provided a buffer between him and his parents.

His father immediately started dominating the discussion around the table in an overly loud voice suggesting he was already well past his liquor limit. Orion was toying with his food and almost missed it when Vincent leaned in and whispered, "I feel I owe you an apology."

Peering into eyes which were so blue it was as if they were enhanced, Orion frowned. "I'm sorry, sir. Are you regretting our marriage already? Why would you need to apologize to me for anything?"

"We're married now. I've already proclaimed to your whole court that you are now my equal in every way. Please call me Vincent, or Vince, or babe, or whatever other term of endearment you might prefer to use for a significant person in your life."

Vincent did have a devastating smile and very straight teeth. Orion's mouth tilted up at the edges in reply. "I don't have a history of significant others, Vincent, but I appreciate the sentiment. That doesn't explain why you feel the need to apologize."

Vincent glanced over his shoulder and then back at Orion. "Being brutally blunt, and you'll notice that's something I am as a rule, if I'd known your father was going to be so intolerably rude at what is supposed to be your big day, I would've suggested we

held the wedding in Faast...and his invitation would've gotten lost in the mail."

"That's not something you need to apologize for. The king is best described as...a personality." Honestly, Orion couldn't think of an adequate word that would still allow him to be honest. "I'm surprised you never noticed in the numerous games of cards you played with him and his friends." Then he winced. The issue of card games was something he would likely struggle with for a while, given he was now married because of one game he hadn't even had a hand in.

What was surprising was that Vincent seemed to notice his discomfort. "Ah, yes. The card games. A different environment entirely, as I am sure you would agree. I promise we will discuss my behavior concerning that time when we can enjoy some privacy. You should know, this marriage wasn't a whim of mine decided over a glass of whiskey. However..."

Vincent was diverted as someone called his name and turned around in his seat. A couple had come around the table and were lingering by the prince's shoulder. Orion knew they were fairly high up among the social elite of Tyrion, although he'd never had any interactions with them. He fiddled with a bit of lettuce, and then pushed his plate aside, reaching for his wine glass. Orion wasn't the type to overdo his liquor intake – he only had to look at his father to swear off it for life – but he had learned a half a glass of wine made him look sociable and helped take the edge off his nerves.

"I honestly didn't know you were in the market for a spouse," the female side of the couple gushed, her fingers resting on Vincent's arm. "You're such a dark horse. There are going to be so many people devastated to hear you've tied yourself down with the one person."

The one insignificant prince who wouldn't know a good time if it bit him, you mean. Orion's slowly let out a long breath.

“I’m both honored and pleased my crown prince consort agreed to join his life with mine,” Vincent said smoothly.

“The crown prince is not the type of man to let a little thing like a piece of paper and a few vows stop his numerous activities.” The man was using that voice that suggested he and likely Vincent as well, were sharing an inside joke. “That’s why wedding contracts are all signed well in advance of any ceremony. Isn’t that right, sire? So that both people know what to expect from each other going forward. Personally, I’m more interested in what benefits you felt your relationship with Tyrion will mean to the society families here. The king hasn’t been very forthcoming about that. Are you increasing trade? Or...?”

“Excuse me?” Vincent pushed back his chair and stood up. “Do you seriously expect me to continue a conversation with you, after you’ve basically just said that you expect me to be unfaithful to the man I married not half an hour ago?” Orion noticed Morgan had stood up, too. “I demand an apology.”

“Of course, it’s much too soon to discuss such matters, even in jest.” The woman laughed nervously. “You have to excuse my husband. This wedding was such a surprise, and honestly there is no one here who could even work out why you were marrying at all. You’ve always enjoyed the company of so many close companions , so you can understand why we’d be curious.”

“It wasn’t idle curiosity. It was you being rude to the extreme.” Orion really didn’t need to listen to any more of the conversation, especially when his father hadn’t even bothered to notice and was leaning his elbows on the table half asleep. He stood up, and moved to the other side of the couple.

“As a newly married man the last thing I needed to be reminded of was my husband’s constant close companions , and yet you saw fit to not only remark on them and their apparent heartbreak, but to suggest that practice of keeping companions will

continue. You could be right. I wouldn't know. I guess time will tell. But you wanted to know how my husband came to marry me, so I'll tell you. It was because your king had the losing hand in a card game. The marriage contract was part of the wager. Shocking, I know. Now, if you'll excuse me. This conversation has given me a headache."

Ignoring the king and queen completely – Orion really didn't want to think of them as his parents at that moment – he left the great hall, moving at pace to get back to his suite as quickly as possible. He sighed with relief seeing John wasn't there, although his bags were packed and were waiting with a large trunk by the door.

Moving through into his bedroom, Orion tugged off his robe. John had left a change of clothes on the bed for him. He immediately felt better in his more familiar garb of a dark shirt that went with the pants he was already wearing. Sinking down on the edge of the bed, Orion rubbed his face with his hands as his brain went on a merry dance without him, pinging from one point to another with no fixed purpose.

You knew Vincent was always paired with one person or another in the society gossip pages.

He's always had partners of all genders and never hidden that.

Society families in this country behave the way they do because of the example the king sets for them.

Did my father even notice my leaving? Orion shook his head at that one. The children of the Tyrion royal family learned to be self-sufficient from an early age as their parents spent far too much time coping with each other to ever worry about them.

He signed the marriage contract – he even wrote it. He being Vincent, because the king was not known for his policy decisions or his ability to read a contract. Or the

pictures on a card face apparently.

The issue was that Orion really wasn't sure what he should do. He refused to go back to the farce of the wedding reception. At least having the first dance was off the table – Tyrion royal families didn't dance at lunch times. His father would likely drink until he came close to falling off his chair, which everyone would find 'oh, so, amusing', and Onyx and Peter would come up with an "urgent matter" that required the king's attention so they could get him to bed for his afternoon nap.

My bags are packed. I should just head out to the mine, and my husband can continue his itinerary without me. Which would be a shame, in a way. Orion could admit that. From the small amount of time he'd spent with Vincent, the crown prince had proven he could be an interesting person to get to know. And I totally wrecked that possibility by bringing up the king's losing hand at cards. Oh well.

A loud banging on his door had him looking up as John came running into his bedroom, his face red and his hair askew. "Sir, thank goodness you're here and changed already. We have to go, now. The footmen are gathering your belongings and taking them downstairs."

"My goodness, man. Take a breath." Orion stood, looking at his valet in concern. "What's happened?"

"Your husband..." John rested his hands on his knees as he panted, before straightening again. "Your husband publicly called out the king on his rude behavior at the wedding and King Oscar has banned the man from his court. Your brother is working to get the king to his rooms, but in the meantime he asked if I could let you know as at least twenty people heard the king order Crown Prince Vincent to leave, so it might be an idea to do so for now."

"At the wedding reception? What on earth...? I should find Onyx..."

But John was shaking his head. “Your brother said he would be in touch later, but Crown Prince...Crown Prince Vincent sent word he would be eternally grateful if you could accompany him as his husband. Our crown prince supported his request.”

Orion looked around his room. He could hear the men moving his bags and trunk in the outer area. “It looks like my immediate decisions have been made for me. Grab a drink, John, and take the time to wash your face and fix your hair. It sounds like we’re traveling this afternoon.”

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“The way your brother was treated was intolerable, and you know it.” Vincent rarely let his temper go, but seeing how upset his new husband was because of the rudeness of others – and the king did nothing at all... He was furious on his new husband’s behalf. As the king had been spirited away to his quarters, the only person Vincent could vent to was Onyx. He supposed he should be grateful that Onyx suggested his office for their meeting. Morgan was already busy collecting his things so they could leave the damn country of Tyrion behind them.

“You know darn well that this type of insult to a royal family member from a visiting country is the sort of thing the World Court would jump on. When I make my complaint...”

“Please don’t.” Onyx held up his hand, before reaching into his desk drawer and pulling out drinks. “Look, I’m asking you respectfully, as an equally ranked family member right now, to please just let this go.”

“Let it go?” Vincent flung his hand at the door behind him. “My husband felt compelled to leave his own wedding reception, upset at the crudeness of your guests. And when I complained to the king, he’s the one who got upset with me. Laughing and cackling about how he’d secured a significant political merger over a game of cards. All while your audience applauded him.”

“In fairness, the rudeness you both experienced from the Sullivans was due to your past behavior, not my brother’s.” Onyx pushed over a glass half filled with whiskey. “Sit down for goodness’ sake. Your looming and flinging your arms around isn’t helping anything.”

“That still doesn’t excuse the behavior of your king toward a visiting member of a royal family from another country. Countries have gone to war over less.” Vincent sat, but only because he knew it would take Morgan a while to collect his things. “I have every right to go to the World Council. My husband deserves no less, and you know it.”

“Orion will fully understand why you wouldn’t. Things are...difficult here.” Onyx ran his hand over his face with a sigh. “As I’m sure you’ve already guessed. I will explain, but first I need you to tell me why the hell you wanted my brother as a husband in the first place. That was not something you just decided on a whim, no matter how much you’ve tried to pass it off as one. You already knew how bad King Oscar is at playing cards – it’s not like you haven’t gambled with him before. So what was all this business about securing my brother that way in the first place? Orion was mortified by your actions and those of his father.”

Vincent winced. “It was never my intention to humiliate Orion. But, yes, I’ve been here before and every time I tried to engage your king in a serious conversation about Orion, he suggested a game. For all I knew, all of Tyrion’s business negotiations were conducted over the card table.”

“If my father had his way, they probably would be. I do my best to intervene where I can.” Onyx pointed his glass in Vincent’s direction. “That still doesn’t explain your desire to marry my brother. In all the years you’ve visited here, you two have never exchanged a single word. So why him?”

“Honestly, man to man, crown prince to crown prince?”

Onyx nodded. “Whatever you say in here won’t leave this room, unless it’s particularly disgusting or hurtful to my brother in which case I will tell him.”

“It’s nothing like that. Look.” Vincent glanced around the room. It was clean,

functional, but there were very few of the trappings evident, like the ones he had in his own office at Faast. “I have a reputation. Can’t deny it. I’ve enjoyed the company of various society family sons and daughters and a couple of royals. But in every one of those cases, those people...” He struggled to explain. “Orion has never once fawned over me like I was someone special.”

“I doubt that sort of behavior is in his nature. Was this marriage business a form of spite then? Because he didn’t give you the attention you thought you deserved?”

Vincent shook his head. “Nothing like that, no. None of my previous relationships lasted very long, as I’m sure you’ve also heard. My companions were all pleasant. They all hoped to gain something from being seen with me, which is perfectly natural and normal. I lavished gifts on them, because that was expected, but anytime I tried to talk to any one of them concerning a serious matter, they all just agreed with me, shutting down the conversation before it even started. Do you know how frustrating or boring that can be?”

“Sucks to be you.” But Onyx was grinning and when he lifted his glass in salute, Vincent did the same. “So the reason you wanted to marry my brother was because in all the countries you visit on a regular basis, he was the one person who didn’t make a fuss or try to attract your attention?”

“That about sums it up, yes.” Vincent took a sip from his glass. “Plus, I think he’s a very handsome man.”

“And it didn’t cross your mind that perhaps my brother just didn’t like you?”

Vincent had to think for a moment and then he shook his head. “No. He struck me as a man who would only come to that conclusion if he had spent time with me, and then didn’t like who he perceived me to be.”

“That’s remarkably astute and accurate and now I can see why you didn’t push to spend time with him before the vows were exchanged. You’ll probably have to work a bit of your charm for my brother to get past the whole ‘won him in a card game’ anecdote. That did not do you any favors in my brother’s eyes or mine. However, you were honest with me, and it’s only fair I respond in kind.”

Thank goodness. Vincent would be happy if the whole idea of “winning” his husband in a card game could be forgotten, especially if it upset Orion so much. “Is the king often like this? Behaving badly in public?”

“He hasn’t reached the drooling in his meal stage yet, but it’s likely to happen in the not to distant future. The king imbibes far more than is healthy for him, and genuinely doesn’t care about this country or the people who live here.”

“Then why the fa?ade? Why not let me call in the World Council and have him removed? You’re clearly already doing his job as it is.”

“You think you’re telling me anything new?” Onyx laughed, although there was no humor in it. “My dear, long suffering wife tells me exactly the same thing at least once a week. But think about what it would do to the Tyrion royal family name if the king were carted off to a psychiatric hospital. What it would do to my mother, or my sister in Carntan. Olivia is the crown princess there and having her father considered a lunatic or an unruly drunk would be hugely damaging to her reputation and by extension the Carntan royal family. That’s without considering the hundreds of people here in Tyrion who look to the royal family to set an example.

“As the situation stands, the king hasn’t actually hurt anyone physically, he hasn’t gambled the castle away, and while he doesn’t care about the people, I do all I can to keep them safe. His valet, Peter, is on my side. He alerts me if the king’s behavior gets too much, dependent on the company he is keeping at that time, and that’s when I intervene, claiming he has to deal with a matter of state. That’s usually enough to

get him away from the public eye and from there it doesn't take a lot to convince him he probably needs a nap because being a king is apparently so tiring for him."

"It sounds like you're dealing with an overgrown toddler." Vincent understood how important family reputation was and didn't envy Onyx's position. "There's not a lot I can do to help with that, seeing as I've been banished from the court. But if there is anything, you just have to send me a message and I'll do what I can." Then he had another thought and added, "Is this business with the king and the way he is why Orion's been so busy in the past two days?"

"No, Orion has been working on a project that could benefit this country in a life changing way for the entire population, if it comes through. Forgive me for saying so, but this wedding was a hiccup we hadn't accounted for. But that is on him to determine whether he shares the details of that project with you. I also hope, if he discusses it with you, that you will prove as helpful as you've offered to be here." Onyx stood as there was a quiet knock on the door and Vincent understood the dismissal for what it was and got up as well, putting his glass on the desk. "Be kind to him, please."

"I don't even know if he'll accompany me," Vincent admitted as Morgan poked his head around the door.

"Sires, my apologies for interrupting, but Crown Prince Consort Orion is waiting in the carriage for you, and everything else is packed up ready for us to leave."

"There's your answer." Onyx nodded. "One thing Orion is known for is keeping his promises. And please, don't concern yourself about the banishment. The king will have forgotten it by the time he wakes up from his nap. He'll probably be wondering why you're not around to play cards with this evening. That's just the way things are at the moment."

“A situation that can’t be easy for anyone.” Reaching over, Vincent shook Onyx’s hand. “I’m just a messenger away if you need me for anything.”

“Welcome to the family,” Onyx said as Vincent followed Morgan out of the room.

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“That has to have been a first.” Vincent burst into the carriage causing a flurry of activity. “Yes, you two can sit up top for a bit. I’m not about to apologize to my new husband with an audience. Thank you, go, go, go,” he added as Morgan and John left the carriage and went to sit up with the driver.

“Now.” Vincent sat down, still in a rush, taking Orion’s hand as the carriage lurched and got underway. “I’m sorry. I’ll probably say that a lot, but I am sorry for the farce of our wedding reception. Are you feeling all right? I’m so grateful that you decided to accompany me. I swear this is all new for me. I’ve never been banished from a court before.” His laughter filled the carriage space.

“I’m still not sure what happened.” Orion wasn’t going to object to Vincent holding his hand. He quite liked the fact the man seemed to want to touch him, even if the feeling was foreign to him. It wasn’t unpleasant. “I know the Sullivans were intolerably rude, but surely I’m the one who should be apologizing to you. I should never have said what I did, and in public. I would’ve understood completely if you’d left me behind and sought an annulment from the World Council.”

“You had every right to say what you did. If there’s one thing you will learn in this marriage with me is that I will support your right to say whatever you feel, whenever you want, and to hell with what anyone else says.”

Says the man who’s lived with rank and privilege his whole life. But Vincent was apparently on a roll.

“What happened was, after you left I complained to the king about those annoying people. They were insulting to you and me both, but you most of all. Why couldn’t

they see that you were the one person out of so many others I wanted to commit myself to, that I was happy to pledge to be faithful too, even if our relationship is only ever platonic? Didn't those fools understand how important that made you to me?"

"It's not surprising they didn't know why you married me." Orion felt he had to point out. "I still don't know that either."

"We'll get to that. We'll get to that." Vincent patted his held hand with the other one, glancing out the window. "Isn't this lovely? Not how I thought this afternoon would go, but I'm glad I'm here with you. The king, and I know I need to be a tiny bit respectful here, because he is your father, but King Oscar waved off my concerns, loudly proclaiming to everyone else – all those people who came to our wedding – that he had scooped the opportunity of a lifetime by securing a deal with Faast over a card game. He was relegating your importance to that of a poker chip. I was furious on your behalf."

Oh dear. "I could see where that would be an insult to you as well," Orion said cautiously. "Are you planning to complain to the World Council about all this at all?"

"I was this close." Vincent held up his free hand showing a tiny gap between his thumb and first finger. "This close. But some man randomly appeared and whispered in your father's ear so he was carted off, and then Onyx grabbed me when I was asking Morgan how I could find you...and after a discussion in your brother's office, I told him somethings, he told me somethings, and I agreed not to complain to the World Council at this time."

He was looking in Orion's direction. "Should I have pushed harder to defend your honor and reputation? Because it's not too late to do that."

"No, but I sincerely appreciate the offer." Orion shook his head, finding it easier to

look out of the carriage window. An attentive Vincent was almost overwhelming. Orion didn't think he'd ever met anyone who was so charismatic.

“Apparently you and your brother have dealt with similar situations in the past.”

“Onyx is doing the best he can in difficult circumstances.” Orion felt a pang at leaving his brother behind. As the heir, it wasn't as though Onyx could just go off and live a quiet life with his lovely wife, the way they dreamed of doing. “I'm genuinely sorry that you were subjected to such insulting behavior by the king and the Sullivans. But you have to know, the word is out now. Gossip spreading about our wedding is inevitable, and it's not going to take long before everywhere you go, those same people are going to know you won your husband in a card game.”

There was that hand pat again. Orion wasn't sure if Vincent was even aware of what his hands were doing.

“People who care about us won't be rude enough to mention it, and for those people who don't care about us, then why would we care about their opinions of us.”

He really doesn't get it! Turning to face his new husband, Orion glared at him. “You might not care about that sort of thing, but I do. You're the gifted one, oh so charming, who can talk anyone around to their way of thinking maybe, but this impacts me, too. Those people will be rude and treat me as if I was, as you called it earlier, a poker chip, and personally I could do without that sort of negative attention.”

Orion expected a rude retort in return, or possibly for Vincent to just wave off his concerns. He did not expect his new husband would beam at him as if he was the biggest holiday treat.

“I was right. I was right. Remind me to tell Morgan. He didn't believe me, but I was

right. This, my wonderful new husband, this interaction is why I wanted to marry you.”

By the goddess, he’s demented. “You wanted to marry me so people could refer to me as a poker chip for the rest of our days?”

“No, no, no, you lovely man. I will slay anyone who calls you that to your face.”

“Please don’t. That could get messy and I’m sure the World Council wouldn’t approve of your actions.” Because with Vincent smiling the way he was, Orion could actually see the man doing it – running a sword through anyone who upset him. “What did you mean about why you wanted to marry me?”

“Because you don’t fawn over me, you delightful man. You talk back to me. You tell me when you’re upset with me. In my whole life, only two people – just two people – have ever done that for me. One of them is my mother and the other one is Morgan, and that was only after he’d been with me for years. That is why I wanted to marry you.”

“You don’t know me at all,” Orion said cautiously, because frankly that was the most ridiculous reason he’d heard of anyone wanting to marry. But then he hadn’t lived the way Vincent had, and it was possible there was some truth behind Vincent’s intent, even if he wasn’t articulating it very well. “I do not want to spend wedded life with a man who would purposefully upset me just so I would argue with them.”

“I know my recent actions might suggest I would do that, and I’m sorry I gave you that impression. Did you see what I did there? I apologized again and I never apologize. With you, I’ve done it at least twice already.” Vincent seriously looked as though Orion had given him a present. “But no, you’re not afraid of talking back to me or sharing your opinion. You don’t just stare at me like I’ve hung the moon and treat everything I say as though it’s a prophecy.”

“People seriously treat you that way?” Or do you have an overactive imagination?

But Vincent was nodding. “You’ll see for yourself when we stop for the night. Doesn’t matter who the people are, they all do it. There was this one time, when I was so bored with everything people were talking about around me. I think I was in Monce at the time. So I just randomly stated that I thought the gremlins who lived in the border mountains were starting a clothing line exclusively for society and royal family members.”

Orion frowned. “There’s no such thing as a gremlin and nobody lives in the border mountains. The lands are frozen up there year round causing any magical crystals to break before they can be used. Unless a person wanted to subsist on goat meat cooked over open fires, there’s nothing up there worth having.”

“I know.” Vincent almost doubled over in laughter. “But when I said it, you know with my serious face on, one person said that they’d heard something similar, nodding with that self-important air of a person in the know. Then someone else piped up and asked me how they could get in touch with the gremlins. A third person then asked me if the jacket I was wearing was part of the gremlin’s collection. I’m not joking. The company I was keeping was so keen on seeking my approval they bent over backward trying to show support for mythical gremlins and their new clothing line.”

“That genuinely happened?” Orion started to laugh. “You promise you’re not joking with me?”

“The story is true, and that’s not the first time it’s happened. I’ve had people agreeing with me that it’s a pleasant day when our noses are so red they’re about to fall off. You’re not going to be that way with me, are you?”

“Not in private, no. I will share my opinions with you, whether you agree with them

or not. But I won't disrespect you in public. I wouldn't do that to you."

"Don't be a yes man." Suddenly both Orion's hands were being held, and he was aware again of Vincent's charisma. "I made you my equal from the moment our vows were said. Stand by me and speak your truth, no matter who is talking to us. I wanted to marry you because in you I saw someone who could look past who I was or how I looked and just treat me like another person. That's all I've ever wanted."

It would be so easy to scoff, make a joke, or even mention yet again, that Vincent really didn't know Orion at all. But Orion hadn't lived Vincent's life. For all he knew everyone around the man had always wanted to agree with him no matter what ridiculous things the prince might say. He did know society family members in Tyrion fawned over the crown prince – there was plenty of gossip around about that - so there was an element of truth to what Vincent was saying.

"I promise I won't look at you as though you've hung the moon," he said with another chuckle. "Unless you have done, in which case, I'll pat you on the back and say, 'well done.' Will that work?"

"Brilliant." Vincent flashed those perfect teeth. "Now tell me, seeing as we've got a way to go this afternoon, have you ever read anything by Jonas Moore? I was reading his book on the formation of policies within the World Council the other day..."

Orion had read the book, and while he hadn't imagined spending his first day married discussing politics with his husband, it was an unusually pleasurable way to spend an afternoon.

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Three days' worth of traveling later and Vincent was confident his decision to marry the quiet, but handsome, Prince Orion of Tyrion was the right one. Orion was intelligent, which Vincent had guessed, and yet he had a quiet sense of humor as well that made their afternoon chats in the carriage interesting, and often left them both laughing with each other.

Mornings Orion said, he'd prefer to ride a horse for part of the way, and as Vincent wasn't a fan of sitting in the carriage with just Morgan for company, he rode as well. Vincent usually rode on his many trips, but it wasn't as easy to talk to Orion when they were on the backs of separate horses, but Vincent saw what Orion was doing for what it was. A compromise. And that was a gift all by itself.

If Vincent was going to make one complaint, and it was only a tiny one, it was because at the end of the day, including their wedding day, Orion would excuse himself and go to his own room, leaving Vincent to sleep alone. The first night, when he'd grumbled to Morgan about it, Morgan reminded him that Vincent had said himself, that if his marriage to Orion remained platonic, he would still be happy and remain faithful to him.

Muttering something about how a rider should at least try riding the horse before condemning him to a solitary stable, Vincent slept alone that night, and the next, and the next. Orion turning up to join him for breakfast each morning, looking refreshed and rested, didn't help with Vincent's issues.

But Vincent was confident that things might change in Carntan. Orion had already spoken fondly about seeing his sister, Olivia, again. Apparently they hadn't seen each other since Olivia traveled to Carntan to get married. Vincent was friendly with her

too, since she'd married Crown Prince Jaxon. Jaxon and he had been friends since well before Jaxon got married, and initially Vincent didn't understand why his friend had gone that route.

But if anything, Jaxon seemed extremely happy with his choice of bride, even confiding to Vincent one night over a few whiskeys too many, that he adored his wife with his entire body, heart, and soul. Vincent was hopeful if Orion saw the affectionate closeness Jaxon and Olivia enjoyed together, he might get some ideas of his own – at least, that's what he confided to Morgan, who just smiled and nodded before going back to pressing Vincent's shirt.

It never failed to fascinate Vincent how a traveler could always tell what country they were in by the scenery around them. Tyrion was land of hills, with a range of mountains over the back border that formed a formidable physical barrier to countries to the north of them. In contrast, Carntan was a land of rolling grasslands. Most of their industry revolved around farming and food production and as they rode through, Vincent could see nothing but greenery and yellow flowers for the most part.

Carntan castle was set into the side of a hill, the sandy yellow stones glowing in the sunlight. Like many castles in the north, Carntan had high walls that surrounded the living quarters and the court area as well as the large courtyard. Jaxon and Olivia were already waiting for them on the steps as their horses and carriages rolled up.

"It's unusual to see the crown prince and his wife waiting for my arrival," Vincent noted to Orion, who'd been quiet the closer they'd gotten to the castle. "Usually I don't see them until dinner."

"I think you'll find they're not waiting for you, for a change." Orion smirked as he opened his own door, hopping out of the carriage as soon as it came to a stop. Vincent had barely gotten out of the carriage before Orion had sprinted up the steps and grabbed his sister in a huge hug.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Olivia was laughing and crying all in the one go. “I can’t believe you married Vincent. Congratulations, Vincent,” she called over Orion’s shoulder. “Come with me. Quick. Quick. I’ve heard so many stories. You have to tell me what’s been going on. How’re Onyx and Evangaline? We’ll see you two later, bye.”

Before Vincent had a chance to say a word, Olivia and Orion disappeared. “I wasn’t expecting that,” he said to Jaxon, who was watching his wife disappear into the shadows of the castle entranceway. He took Jaxon’s hand, air kissing on either side of the man’s face as was customary among equal ranks, and then Jaxon shoulder bumped him, which was the more common way Jaxon greeted his friends. “Should I be concerned that your wife has run off with my husband?”

“Idiot.” Jaxon took his arm as they went inside, leaving orders for his footmen to assist Morgan and John take care of their things and get Vincent’s drivers and guards settled. “Olivia’s been worried sick about what’s been going on at Tyrion. Is it as bad as we’ve heard?”

“Depends on what you’ve heard. King Oscar banished me from the Tyrion Court on our wedding day.” Vincent followed Jaxon into a small sitting room, glad there was some coffee already on the table along with some small sandwiches. Lunch had been a few hours before.

“Olivia didn’t hear that, but she did hear that you won my brother-in-law in a card game. Vincent, what were you thinking? Couldn’t you have married any one of a hundred people who’d say yes the moment you asked?”

Orion was right in saying that’s all anyone is going to talk about. Sipping a large mug of coffee, Vincent explained to Jaxon about King Oscar’s gambling and drinking and how the marriage contract between him and Orion had been written up. “I’d been considering marrying Orion for months – following your excellent example - but it

wasn't like I could ever have a serious conversation with King Oscar about it."

"I've heard similar stories for months. Olivia wants to visit Onyx and Evangaline, and her mother, but I keep putting it off." Jaxon glanced at the door as if he was worried his wife was listening in. "Faast is farther away so you might not have heard, but apparently King Oscar's ramblings when he's drunk are getting more difficult for Onyx to hide, and there have been a couple of times King Oscar has promised things to individual society families - promises that would've caused so much division among other ranking families it could cause a revolt."

"I wanted to complain to the World Council about the king's treatment of me, but Onyx talked me out of it. He cited you and Olivia's reputation as one of the reasons he didn't want me to do it."

"Onyx is trying so damn hard to keep everyone happy, he's going to worry himself into an early grave," Jaxon said grimly. "Has Orion mentioned anything to you about a secret project him and Onyx have been working on?"

"Not yet." Vincent shook his head. "At the moment, according to Morgan, I should be grateful Orion is talking to me at all, given the whole card game fiasco. I genuinely thought I was doing the right thing. Do you know what this project is?"

Jaxon shook his head. "Olivia doesn't know either, but a bundle of messages arrived from Tyrion yesterday for Orion, so if it's project related he might confide in us sometime tomorrow. We've got your celebratory reception tonight. I have to ask, have you prepared Orion for what is likely to happen at the reception tonight. A number of your old acquaintances will be here."

"Is that going to be a problem? It will be nice for Orion to make some new friends, wouldn't it?"

“You think your new husband is going to want to be friends with people who can tell him about the birthmark you have on your butt cheek?”

“Why would that even come up? Orion hasn’t seen my butt cheek. He sleeps in a separate room from me at the moment. We’ve only been married three days.” Vincent was still thinking about the secret project that people seemed to know existed, but no one knew what it was.

“Oh, dear.” Vincent looked up to see Jaxon shaking his head. “If I were you, I’d ensure that you make a huge point of showing everyone how important Orion is to you at this reception tonight. In case someone takes it into their heads to let him know they were a darn sight more intimate with you than he is.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Once they see how happy Orion makes me, my friends will be happy for us, too.” Won’t they? Vincent wasn’t so sure when Jaxon laughed.

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Orion was grateful to have some time to himself before the reception the Carntan royal family was holding for him and Vincent that evening. Talking to his sister was always exhausting. She was a bundle of beautiful energy and Orion had been so pleased to see that her marriage hadn't changed that. It was clear she and Jaxon were in a true love match, and from the things she said, Jaxon cared deeply for her and respected her opinions. Before he started getting dressed, Orion sent John to find a messenger so he could get word to Onyx. All it said was "Olivia is being Olivia," an inside joke Onyx and Evangaline would understand and take comfort from.

It wasn't so easy coping with Olivia's constant demands for information from home. Orion and Onyx had done their best over recent years to hide the decline of their father from her, and those protective instincts still held true. He kept his answers brief – that their mother was fine, Onyx and Evangaline sent their love - and then quickly launched into a brief outline of what happened on his wedding day.

"Tell me." Olivia had grabbed both of his hands, as Vincent was prone to do sometimes. "You have to tell me, I'm just dying to know. What's Vincent like in private? Tell me. Tell me. Does he break wind, or scratch his butt, or pick at his face when no one's looking?"

Orion had to laugh. "I don't spend a lot of time with my husband without someone else around, and why would he pick at his face? He has flawless skin."

"You're right. I know that." Olivia sighed. "Vincent is just so well put together, sometimes a girl has to dream that a person has flaws, don't you think? I mean, I am so lucky that Jaxon accepts me so readily and is wonderful to me in every way, but if I look at someone like Vincent who is just... Vincent. Flaws would make him appear

more human somehow. Surely you feel the same way about him?”

Orion had been saved from answering as John had come to let him know it was time to get ready for the reception. He assumed he had John to thank for ensuring he had a room of his own as well, something he thought about as he quickly washed up and started to put on the clothes John had left out for him.

There was no denying that Vincent stirred feelings in Orion he rarely felt, but three days of talking about politics, policies, and sharing humorous stories did not a relationship make. Orion had gone into his marriage not believing he'd have any feelings about Vincent at all, but his sister had been right. Vincent did have a way about him, and while Orion was the last person to fawn over another, he couldn't deny Vincent had an impact on him. Vincent's attention was almost addictive, and Orion wasn't immune. But something still held him back, even if he wasn't sure what that something was.

“Tonight's the test,” he reminded himself quietly as he buttoned up one of the beautiful waistcoats Vincent had bought him as a wedding gift. It was unlikely Vincent would even realize it was one of his gifts, but if he did, then Orion wearing it was a show of his appreciation.

The truth was, and Orion would only admit that to himself and never mention it to another soul, he was nervous. The past three days had been mostly just him and Vincent. Yes, there had been staff and guards around. That was normal for a traveling crown prince and his consort.

But Vincent's reputation for being a player on the party scene was established lore, Orion wasn't convinced his ability to hold an intelligent conversation was enough to keep his husband interested among a sea of people who all agreed with Vincent's every word.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Nodding at his reflection, Orion ran his hand over his hair one last time and went out to the small sitting room just as there was a knock on the door. Before he got to it, the door opened and Vincent came in, a big smile on his face.

“You’re wearing one of my betrothal gifts tonight.” Vincent palmed his own chest. “I’m honored, I truly am. I knew the color would suit you.”

“It is one of the most beautiful pieces I have in my wardrobe, thank you.” Orion felt his cheeks heat at the praise. “You’re looking very handsome yourself.”

Vincent twirled. His outfit was similar to the pants and robe he wore to get married in, but this time the color combination was a deep purple and black that did suit him. “I’m glad you like it. Are you excited about this evening?” He held out his arm for Orion to take. “We’ve not talked much about what you enjoy socially. Do you dance?”

“I know how to.” Orion slid his hand in the crook of Vincent’s elbow. “I’m not sure how good a partner I might be.”

“Just let me lead,” Vincent said with his trademark grin. “I won’t let you embarrass yourself.”

That’s not what I meant. But like ninety-nine percent of what Orion thought, he kept that to himself. He was sure his husband would have no shortage of dancing partners at the coming event.

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Vincent was almost giddy with excitement, although he made sure to keep that under wraps as he escorted his husband downstairs to the great hall where the reception was

being held. He and Orion bowed to the King and Queen of Carntan, and then took their places next to Jaxon and Olivia at the end of the receiving line. Olivia was looking particularly pretty in a pale blue gown and flowers in her hair. Hmm. Orion would look good in that color too, Vincent thought, noting how similar the siblings' coloring was.

Both of them had the same shade of dark hair, although Olivia's was longer and styled up on her head, while Orion's was a lot more natural. But the shape and coloring of their eyes and their complexion were very similar. I must get him some shirts in pale blue. That would bring out the color of his gray eyes.

Working the crowd and being on the receiving line, were actions Vincent had been used to since he was twelve years old. There was a standard protocol everyone the world over respected. Equals air kissed each other, society family members bowed or curtsied in front of royalty. Reception guests were expected to show their respect to the royal family and the move on into the great hall where tables were laid out and ushers showed various families to different chairs. Seating was determined according to the society family status with higher ranked families seated closer to the royal table and fanned out from there according to family rank determined by the World Council.

Of course, Vincent wasn't that kind of prince – one who adhered to protocol every minute of every day. By the time he'd become an adult, he'd realized that if he was ever going to be able to enjoy intimate company with others, it was likely only going to happen with someone who wasn't a royal.

In a word, royal family members were prudes...for understandable reasons. Royals set the examples society families and others lived to emulate, and so their behavior was consistently held to a higher standard than others. But Vincent had always held that life was for living and he just didn't have it in him to be the aloof sort of presence most society family members expected from their royal family members. Because of his position as the heir to a country, it's not like anyone was going to

disapprove of his behavior, with the exception of his mother and she adored him.

It did cross his mind, after the sixth person he'd enjoyed private company with, just danced up onto the receiving stage and air kissed him, both sides, before dancing off again, that his new husband might get the wrong idea. Orion was standing between him and Olivia, and he appeared happy to share random comments with his sister, although he never said anything directly to Vincent himself.

Things must be fine, Vincent decided, as he smiled at yet another person he knew more intimately than others.

“Crown Prince Vincent, it's just so wonderful to see you again.” Lady Violet from Rinsing, a small town on the outskirts of the capital gushed at him, stepping forward, her full bosom straining to escape her tightly corseted top. “I do hope you'll be staying in Carntan for a few days. You've been missed so much.” Instead of air kissing on either side of him, she actually kissed both of Vincent's cheeks, grinning widely and ducking off before he could object. “We'll talk later and make a time to meet up.” She laughed as she headed into the great hall.

Oops. Vincent glanced at Orion. He was saying something to Jaxon. Vincent thought he heard something about a horse, but he couldn't be sure because at that moment, the lord of the household stepped forward and announced the meal was about to start. He probably didn't notice, thank goodness. I'm sure everything will be fine.

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“Could I speak to you in private for a few moments?” Orion leaned over his sister to speak to Jaxon. It was about two hours into the reception and nearly every one of Orion’s fears about his husband had been realized. Yes, Vincent introduced him to the myriad of people who seemed to consider themselves his husband’s friends, if the effusive way they greeted him was any indication. But Orion didn’t need to be a seer to know all those people had written him off as unimportant from the moment the “nice to meet you” had been said.

Now, after watching Vincent laughing and dancing with first one partner and then the other for more than an hour, Orion’s sadness had blossomed into quiet resignation. It didn’t take him long to decide that if Vincent could treat him as so unimportant in their first social outing together – their wedding reception truly didn’t count – then Orion needed to focus on more important things.

Vincent would be fine. Clearly he always was. His attention to Orion during the three days they were traveling was likely because no one else of Vincent’s status had been around. The moment he was among friends, Orion was forgotten. The mine project on the other hand, required Orion’s input and dealing with that was better for him mentally than watching Vincent make a mockery of their wedding vows.

“It will only take a moment,” Orion added.

Jaxon took a quick look at the dance floor. Vincent cut a very distinguished figure among the dancers, holding his partner close and laughing at something she’d said. “We can go to my office,” he said, dropping a kiss on Olivia’s head as he got up. “I’ll be back soon, my sweet. Try not to cause a riot while I’m gone.”

“It was one time, and it wasn’t a riot.” Olivia was grinning at her husband though, as she looked between him and Orion.

“I just need to ask your husband a favor,” Orion said, giving her a quick hug as he stood up, too. “Please let the king and queen know how much I appreciated their hospitality.”

“Don’t be a stranger, all right?” Olivia pleaded, but she glanced at the dance floor as well. “The man’s an idiot.”

“He’s a crown prince,” Orion said, “And while he might think the whole world revolves around him, I think differently. Have fun.”

He quickly followed Jaxon through the castle into his brother-in-law’s office. Jaxon offered him a seat, and when they both had drinks in hand, he said, “I don’t know the name of a good divorce lawyer, in case you were wondering. But I can check over your marriage contract and give advice on your options if it helps.”

Orion shook his head and managed to smile. “Considering I’m sure my marriage contract was drafted by two drunks, because it certainly reads that way, there are no loopholes that can be used to my advantage. The crown prince is being the crown prince he’s always been, although if any of his flirtations go further than a public space, I might have the cause for a case with the World Council. He did agree to be faithful. However,” he added as Jaxon’s mouth dropped open in shock, “I didn’t want to talk about Vincent. You are aware I received some messages from Tyrion. They were waiting for me when I arrived.”

“Is everything all right at home?” Jaxon leaned forward. That was something Orion appreciated about his brother-in-law. The man paid attention.

“Onyx is holding his own at the castle for now, but he and I have been working on a

project which could result in considerable benefits to the people of Tyrion.”

Deciding he had no choice but to trust his brother-in-law, Orion quickly outlined the finding of the crystal samples, the possibility of the mine and what the geological surveys had shown. “We can’t get any investors in, obviously. Onyx and I are funding this ourselves, because as you likely know from your own experiences, if the king’s advisers get wind of this, they will throw up one barrier after another, stalling the project. Speed is of the essence here.”

Jaxon whistled. “This could be huge for Tyrion and for surrounding countries as well. King Mintyn is fair in his pricing of the crystals he mines, but because we all live so much farther away than the countries to the south, the transport hubs increase their prices every year, it seems. If this project becomes a viable mine...”

“Exactly.” Orion nodded. “But that’s not guaranteed at the moment which is another reason Onyx and I can’t seek outside investment. I have no doubt society families would happily put up the funds, but what if the project is a flop? Then, when Onyx becomes king, he could be put in the unenviable position of having to deal with investors that believed the crown owed them favors because of the money they’d lost. We can’t do that.”

“If it’s a question of money...” Jaxon started to say but Orion quickly shook his head.

“No, Jaxon, although thank you. Onyx would have my head if I approached you for something like that and genuinely we have the financial situation well in hand. Admittedly, we’re on a tight budget and that does hamper our progress somewhat. But I have sold off a few of my other business ventures, ones I started back when I was a young adult, and Onyx and I have our allowance from the treasury. This gives us enough money to pay for Ryan’s salary as the mine overseer, some basic equipment, and four laborers. The geologists were friends of Onyx’s who agreed to do the surveys as part of their research for a thesis they plan to publish in three years’

time.”

“Ah, that’s a good idea, using those geologists. That would give you two time to get the mine up and running, if it proves viable.” Jaxon took a swig from his glass and said, “What do you need from me?”

“Two horses and provisions for two people for a week?” Orion sighed. “You know I had messages from the mine project waiting for me when I arrived. Ryan has found the possibility that another seam might have formed, but it runs counter to where we believe the existing one is. He’s a good man, and he fully understands the constraints with what we’re doing, in both finances and resources, but he refuses point blank to make a decision on whether or not we should be exploring the second option without me seeing the area for myself.”

“Consider it done. I’ll send my man down to the stables to organize the horses for you and provisions from the kitchen. When do you want to leave?”

“Tonight.” Orion registered his brother-in-law’s unasked question. “You saw the same thing I did tonight. I cannot live with the shame of appearing at breakfast tomorrow with half the castle knowing my husband broke his wedding vows in the first week.”

“You don’t know that he’s actually going to be unfaithful,” Jaxon said slowly. “I admit his behavior tonight looks bad...”

“He was unfaithful to me at the receiving line,” Orion said bluntly. “He allowed a kiss, two kisses if you want to be specific about it, from a person he is not married to but who he has clearly been intimate with. The same person who claimed a dance from him the moment your parents retired for the night. A first dance that should’ve been mine as protocol dictates.”

“Lady Violet can be very forward at times,” Jaxon said, but Orion knew that argument was weak.

“A woman’s forward actions does not excuse Vincent’s behavior. He was looking so far down that woman’s chest, he almost fell into her cleavage. He humiliated me, Jaxon, again. I won’t stay and allow him to continue to do that. I have more pride, and right now, I have more important matters to attend to than trying to straighten out a husband who can’t see anything wrong with the way he behaves as a married man.”

“I’m sorry.” Jaxon stood up. “Vincent and I have been friends a long time, but I totally agree with your assessment of the situation. I’ll get your horses organized now. Safe travels and remember to send word to your sister when you can. She worries about you and Onyx both.”

“You do an incredible job of keeping Olivia happy, something both Onyx and I are grateful for. It’s a shame Vincent didn’t learn anything useful from you about married behavior.”

“I believe Vincent will hear about that over breakfast.” Jaxon grinned. “Some of the things I love about your sister is her vibrant personality and her ability to speak up for those she cares about.”

I would pay to hear what she has to say about my husband, Orion thought as he left the room. But the time for mooning over his husband was over. He had people who were counting on him, and he wasn’t about to let them down. In time, he hoped, his wedding to Vincent would be nothing more than an annoying blip in his memory, because as far as he was concerned their marriage was over.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

It took Vincent close to three hours to realize that his husband might not be happy with him. It had been a fun few hours, for Vincent at least. As soon as dinner was finished, the king and queen left, and that was the signal for people to start to mingle. He was just about to ask Orion to dance with him, because Jaxon was dancing with Olivia and he thought that was only proper, but then Lady Violet came up and asked him, and Vincent felt it would be rude to refuse.

He thought the same thing when he was asked by Lady Rose, Lord Collins, the list went on. Vincent had a reputation as a graceful dancer and there were many people who wanted to be seen in his arms. Lady Violet in particular came back for him four times, and Vincent was at the point of saying something about how that would look when she said, “Oh, thank goodness. I thought that boring man would never leave.”

“Boring man?” Vincent glanced around the dance floor, but he couldn’t see anyone leaving.

“That insipid prince you married.” Lady Violet shook out her curls. “Honestly, your highness, did the man trap you when you were drunk? You can tell me. You know we’re good friends.”

“I’m not sure I’d put it like that.” Vincent tried to see past the other dancers toward the royal table, but Lady Violet was tugging him in the opposite direction. “What is wrong with my husband?”

He found himself in an intimate corner hidden from the other guests by the band. “Lady Violet, answer my question.” There were at least six alarm bells ringing in his head.

“Really, your highness? You want to talk about him now, when I’ve finally got you alone?” Lady Violet’s lips pouted. “Fine if you must know. It is common gossip that the King of Tyrion is a lush who spends all his time drinking and gambling. His son, Crown Prince Onyx is staid and boring and doesn’t know the first thing about having fun, and the one you married, Orion...”

“Crown Prince Consort Orion,” Vincent corrected quickly.

“Yes, well we’ve all seen what sort of a consort your husband is. Your highness, he’s absolutely no fun either. There’s talk...and I shudder to repeat it, but it has to be said, but there are rumors going around that your husband works for a living. Actually works.”

“What if he does?” That wasn’t the first time Vincent had heard the same rumor that evening, but no one could actually tell him what it was his husband was supposed to be working at. He had already realized he probably should’ve thought to ask Orion about that himself – at least that way he’d have facts to come to his husband’s defense - but in the three days they’d spent together, he’d never thought to bring that topic of conversation up.

“Your highness, surely you can understand how badly that will reflect on your reputation? Any royal family that is reduced to working to keep body and soul together...”

“You don’t know that’s what he’s doing. You don’t know anything about him at all.” Even as he said the words, Vincent realized he didn’t either. All we’ve talked about so far is me. “Please excuse me, I have to...”

“Don’t go.” Lady Violet gripped his arm. “It’s all over the castle that you two have separate rooms. Your husband is not going to notice if you’re back late tonight. I have a carriage, and there’re no prying eyes at my townhouse...” Her look was sly.

“As you well know. You’ve been there before.”

“Yes. Yes, I have.” Vincent shrugged off Lady Violet’s hand. “But I won’t be engaging in those types of behaviors with anyone but my husband again. You said we were friends, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Of course, we are. You and I have shared many intimacies in the past.”

“I’m not talking about intimacies,” Vincent said firmly. “I’m talking about the concepts of friendship. Where two people can enjoy each other’s company, with their clothes on, converse, support each other’s decisions, and be supportive of each other during major life events. That kind of friendship.”

“Your highness, I would like to assume I am one of your greatest friends in that regard, then. It’s because of that friendship that I believe I can tell you frankly that your marrying Crown Prince Consort Orion was a huge mistake. As your friend, it is surely my right to ask you, were you sober when you signed the papers?”

“I drafted the papers myself, and yes, I was perfectly sober when I did it. The marriage contract was my idea.”

Lady Violet’s eyes widened to what must’ve surely been the point of pain. “My goodness, your highness. Why would you do such a thing? There are so many more interesting people you already know who would have made an admirable consort to someone in your position. The crown prince consort is so different. Did you see that waistcoat he was wearing tonight instead of a robe? He doesn’t even know how to dress properly for a royal function.”

That statement hurt, and as his anger at a previous companion grew, Vincent reminded himself he couldn’t afford to be banished from two courts in the space of a week. His mother would not be impressed. “I purchased that waistcoat for my

husband as part of my betrothal gifts for him. I believed the colors would suit him, and he wore it this evening as his way of showing his appreciation for that gift. You could say he wore it to showcase his differences. I married my husband because of those differences - because he could hold an intelligent conversation to the point of challenging me intellectually – a trait I wanted in my life partner. He is amusing, he holds himself to a high moral standard...”

Vincent looked around at where they were and knew exactly how that would look to anyone who saw them disappear. “A moral standard I have failed at this evening, something I will be apologizing for – to my husband,” he added as Lady Violet looked as though she was going to say something. “I pledged to be faithful to him, and I intend to keep that vow.”

“You broke that vow the moment you didn’t stop me kissing you in the receiving line.” Lady Violet actually giggled as though that was funny. “While he was standing right next to you. How are you going to maintain your vows when he’s left you like he did this evening? We both know he won’t be waiting in bed for you tonight.”

No, he won’t be. Vincent knew that the same as he knew that somewhere during the course of the evening, he reverted to habit and lost touch of the one person who was coming to mean something to him. “This conversation is over,” he said stiffly. “It has been very enlightening. It’s clearly time I made new friends.”

Spinning on his heel, Vincent stalked away, conscious of the eyes on him as he went back into public view. Ignoring them he went directly to the royal table where Jaxon was just assisting Olivia out of her seat. “Where’s Orion?”

“Don’t talk to me.” Olivia put up her hand, refusing to even look at him. “If I’m forced to say anything to you right now, I will forget I am a lady. You will present yourself at my breakfast room at eight bells tomorrow morning and you’d better be bathed and not smelling of anyone’s perfume. You have humiliated my brother this

evening beyond repair, and it will take me a long time to forget that.”

“Jaxon?” Vincent appealed to his old friend, but Jaxon was shaking his head.

“You stink of Lady Violet’s scent, Vincent. I suggest you do as the crown princess has suggested. We’ll see you in the morning.”

The pair left, and Vincent followed them out of the hall, making his way to the suite of rooms prepared for him. He paused as he went past the rooms Orion was using. Should I? Shouldn’t I? He lifted his hand to knock, but he hesitated again, lifting the material of his robe and sniffing.

Wrinkling his nose Vincent realized he’d been dancing a lot closer to some of his partners than he probably should have. That cologne is very strong. It wasn’t anything Vincent had ever noticed before when he’d had a night out at an event, but then the people he’d ended the night with hadn’t cared about it either. Orion will care.

Letting out a long sigh, Vincent lingered for a moment and then went on to his own suite. Morgan was waiting for him, and he didn’t look happy either.

“I know, I know.” Going across to a chair, Vincent slumped into it and kicked off his shoes as Morgan closed the door. “My old habits got the best of me, and I spent far too much time dancing and having fun with people who weren’t my husband. I’ve clearly got some apologizing to do to my husband in the morning. Do you know what time he retired for the evening? I’m figuring I need to get up early so I can catch him and apologize to him before we join Jaxon and Olivia for breakfast. Hopefully she won’t be as cross with me if she sees I’ve made up with her brother.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible sir.” Morgan came over, holding out an envelope. Vincent frowned as he recognized the handwriting on the outside of it as his husband’s. “The crown prince consort left the castle this evening. He refused to take

any guards, and is only accompanied by his man, John. All John would tell me was that they weren't heading back to the Tyrion castle, but unfortunately that means we have no idea of his current whereabouts or his destination."

"Orion left me?" Vincent clutched the envelope to his chest – a chest that was suddenly very sore, as if someone had punched him. "If he was unhappy, why didn't he talk to me about it?"

"When would he have done that, sir?" Morgan collected his shoes and went to put them away. "Would that have been while you were snuggling with Lady Violet on the dance floor, or when you disappeared with her and were gone for more than twenty minutes?"

"We were just talking." Vincent wanted to sink into the floor. "Nothing improper happened."

"Sire, I must protest." Morgan spun around and Vincent realized his personal valet was furious with him. "You allowed that woman to kiss you, physically kiss you on both cheeks in front of the king and queen, not to mention your husband and his sister and brother-in-law. You didn't object. You didn't insist she leave, which is the least you would do to someone who had behaved so disgracefully in front of the royal family and your husband. Something any other royal family member would've done if someone had breached their personal space in such a manner."

When Morgan put it like that, it did sound bad. Vincent had genuinely not considered doing anything like that. As a single man, he'd never worried when people got into his personal space.

"The fact that your consort accompanied you to dinner was a miracle in itself. He had every right to leave you standing there, but he didn't, and I can only assume that is because his sister was one of the hosts. But then to compound your disgraceful

behavior you didn't even share the first dance with your husband, which is a tradition for all royal family members. You chose to dance with Lady Violet instead. Sire, I can barely speak with how angry I am on your husband's behalf. Don't you understand what you've done?"

"This was my first official event as a married person." Vincent felt sick to his stomach. "I didn't know about the first dance protocol, and no one has ever objected to my friendly behavior before."

"You weren't married before, sire. Don't you understand how badly you humiliated your husband? You not only completely ignored him in public, but you spent the entire night blatantly dancing with people who have been more intimate with you than your husband will ever have a chance to be. That is all anyone can talk about downstairs."

"You should hear them, sir, talking about how Crown Prince Vincent from Faast is so bored with his husband, after only three days wed, he can't even be bothered to keep up appearances anymore. They are laughing at Orion and nothing he did tonight deserved that. In short, sire, your behavior tonight was totally disgraceful, especially when it was you who pushed for the wedding in the first place. Your mother is furious with you."

"You told her already? You didn't even give me a chance to explain my side of the story?" Vincent felt like he was being punched with one accusation after another.

"Queen Julia contacted me! Faast and Carntan share a crystal radio service. Some anonymous person, likely one of your acquaintances who you were entertaining this evening, was very quick to send a message to the Queen of Faast, expressing their discomfort at attending an event where your disgraceful behavior was allowed to go unchecked. She got out of bed to send a reply because she was so upset at your behavior. She is demanding you give the King and Queen of Carntan a formal

apology, and in her words, ‘Fix your mess.’”

“How did this happen?” Vincent groaned as his reality started sinking in. “Everyone loves me. No one ever complains about my behavior. My friends all think I am witty, amusing, a delightful dancer, and...”

“And single, sire. You were single then,” Morgan interrupted firmly. “I am not suggesting for a moment that all royal family marriages are as solid as the one Crown Prince Jaxon and Crown Princess Olivia enjoy, but every single royal family couple keep their differences out of the public eye, showing a united front.

“If affairs are had, they are done discreetly and never in such a way as to cause embarrassment to a spouse, and that’s only in situations where the marriage contract didn’t come with a fidelity clause, which yours did. Sire, you forgot your husband was even in the room before dessert was finished.”

“I was so sure he would have fun with me.”

“He might have done,” Morgan said drily, “if you’d bothered to give him any attention at all. One of the footmen mentioned that they heard your husband tell Crown Prince Jaxon he was worried you would fall down Lady Violet’s cleavage you were so attentive to it.”

“Oh, goddess of steel and magic. Can this evening get any worse?”

“I suggest you read the note from your husband before you make that assessment.”

And apparently, yes, Crown Prince Vincent’s night could get worse. The note was brief and to the point.

Dear Crown Prince Vincent,

It is a shame that when I vowed to you in one of our first conversations to never embarrass you in public, I never considered asking you to conduct yourself to the same standard.

Brutal lesson learned. One I won't forget.

Orion.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Crown Prince Vincent was not feeling up to par as he presented himself at Crown Princess Olivia's breakfast room, as requested, a few moments before eight bells. He had two of his guards out since first light, trying to find out where Orion might have gone. They reported that the prince and his valet had spent the night at the Carntan Inn on the outskirts of town, but he had left before the guards had tracked him down. No one at the inn had any idea where he was going or even what direction he'd gone.

After a sleepless night, Vincent had also spent more than an hour drafting and redrafting a formal apology to the King and Queen of Carntan. He had spent most of his time with Jaxon and society family members during previous visits, but his mother's message made it quite clear his appalling behavior had reflected badly on the country of Faast as a whole, and it was up to him to make amends.

Neither the king nor queen were available for a private audience - which was disconcerting in itself as Vincent had never been denied an audience with anyone before - but Vincent applied his best penmanship to the letter he'd crafted with Morgan's help. That would have to do. Vincent asked Morgan to send a copy to his mother as well by the fastest means possible so she could see that he was doing his best.

At least it was Jaxon who opened the door, and although his expression was grim, he indicated a chair at the table where an extra place setting had been laid. "You might as well eat," he said.

"I'm not sure I can." Vincent entered the room bowing at Olivia. He didn't dare greet her as an equal, she was likely to slap his face if he got close to her. "Thank you for seeing me," he added as he slid into the chair.

“If your new husband had been anyone else except my brother I wouldn’t have bothered. I would’ve done the same thing my father apparently did and banished you from this court.” Olivia was in fine form. “As a newly married man, whose nuptials were being celebrated by this court, your behavior during the reception dinner was reprehensible. If you’d been married to anyone else and behaved the same way, I would have banished you and got your spouse a decent lawyer. However, you married my brother. Why?”

Vincent, who was in the process of pouring himself a cup of coffee, looked at Jaxon. “I told you why I married Orion yesterday.”

“You explained how you came to organize the marriage contract, and that you’d been thinking about it for months, but you never actually said why it was Orion you were interested in.”

Jaxon clearly wasn’t going to be any help. Vincent explained, for what felt like the hundredth time what attracted him to Orion and why he felt the need to marry him.

“And you never thought to discuss those reasons with Orion?” Olivia asked.

“Not before the wedding, but I did once he agreed to travel with me on our wedding day.” Vincent was getting a little tired of explaining his past actions. They weren’t going to bring him any closer to finding his husband now. “My situation was no different to countless others who get married every year. I was the ranking prince. It was my place to negotiate the marriage contract with King Oscar, seeing as Orion was living under his roof, and I did that.”

“Vincent has got a point, sweetness,” Jaxon said quietly. “We didn’t get much chance to get to know each other before we exchanged our vows.”

“Agreed.” Olivia smiled. “But if you had done one tenth of what Vincent did last

night to me, I would've removed your equipment with a rusty knife and fed those worthless bits to the castle pigs." She was laughing, and while Vincent was shocked to hear such words from a lady, Jaxon was chuckling along and patting his wife's hand.

"I would totally deserve it, sweetness, but then I'm not that silly. I've been proud of you since the day you agreed to marry me."

"Hey, I'm proud of Orion. I introduced him to my friends after we'd eaten dinner and people were mingling."

"When was that? In the five minutes before you started dancing with one partner after another. None of those partners being the husband you apparently were proud of."

Vincent sighed. "Talking about my behavior last night is not helping me find my husband now."

"I'll be honest. I'm surprised you'd even want to." Olivia clearly had the same blunt speaking methods as her brother. "Orion left because you humiliated him – you made it plain to everyone at the reception last night you had no intention of keeping your marriage vows. So I am failing to see why you want to find him now."

"When he turns up here again, and I hope that will be soon, I fully intend to help him petition the World Court, who will insist that you maintain my brother in a lifestyle he is entitled to. But I doubt that means he will live in Faast, even if he is now the crown prince consort. If you learn to keep your affairs discreet and private, I see no reason why you ever have to see him again."

Vincent tried to swallow around the lump in his throat. "I married Orion because I wanted to leave that life behind me. I made one little mistake..."

Olivia's glare had him quickly amending his words. "I made a gargantuan mistake, one I am genuinely sorry for. I will pay penance for my errors for the rest of my life if that's what it takes. But, regardless of what you thought you saw, or what people are saying, I was genuine in my desire to marry Orion, and I want our marriage to be as successful as the one you enjoy with my friend."

"We are pretty successful, sweetness," Jaxon said with a fond look at his wife. "You know, I was almost as bad in my behaviors as Vincent was before you smiled in my direction..."

"Not after we married, you weren't." But Olivia was smiling too.

"That's because you spoke up and told me what you wanted in a marriage, one of the many happy memories I have of our early courting. To be fair, Orion doesn't seem to have done that on his own behalf."

"And you know there's a reason for that." Olivia's smile dropped. "What have you learned about my brother in the three days it took you to travel from Tyrion to Carntan, Vincent?"

"Not as much as I'd like. I realized that after I got told he left the castle last night," Vincent admitted. "I mean, we talked every afternoon when he agreed to travel in the carriage with me, but the mornings we were both riding and there were people around so it's not like we could discuss personal issues. But see, I learned from that. I learned he was prepared to compromise on things, which I felt was a valuable and rare skill to have. He rides beautifully. He has the knack of asking questions designed to make the listener feel important. I admit I probably confessed my whole life history in those few afternoons."

"Monopolizing the conversation, I imagine." Olivia shook her head.

“No. All right. Probably most of the time. But we did have some really interesting conversations about World Council policies and politics. Your brother is extremely intelligent and not afraid to voice his opinion, so why didn’t he tell me he thought I was treating him badly?” But even as he said the words, Vincent already knew the answer. It was as clear as the handwriting on the note his husband had left him the night before.

“He shouldn’t have had to tell you, because you should never have behaved badly in the first place,” Jaxon said. “Orion has a lot of other issues to deal with right now. Your dismissal of him didn’t help.”

“The secret project business?” Vincent perked up. “Does this mean you know where he’s gone?”

“Wait, wait,” Olivia said, but she was talking to her husband. “We won’t go disclosing any details yet. I need to know my brother will be safe with this man.”

“Olivia!” Jaxon and Vincent both spoke at the same time. Vincent was shocked.

“I would never hurt your brother,” Vincent added quickly. “Aside from last night, but that was never my intention, and I’m entitled to one mistake, surely to goodness. I got swept up by the events of the evening and just have to learn to do better that’s all. I’m coming to harbor intense feelings for your brother.”

“That could mean anything from wanting to kill him to wanting to suffocate him in a romantic bubble,” Olivia said tartly. “You don’t understand. Orion has been taught his whole life that he has no value. As children, we pretty much raised ourselves, although the staff at the castle were amazing. But when it came to having parents who were proud of us, or who praised our achievements, or made us feel positive about ourselves, all of that was lacking in our upbringing.”

“Olivia’s right,” Jaxon added. “When she and I got married her father sent her here with barely a maid and two guards to protect her on her travels. He never wanted to come to the wedding, although my parents invited him and the queen personally. To say I was shocked about that was an understatement, and when Olivia told me what her brothers were going through, I was deeply concerned. Onyx and I have messaged each other since, and I know both of the boys care about Olivia, but the lack of caring from their parents was and is concerning.”

“So what you’re saying is that the situation last night made things worse for Orion, not better.” Vincent got a sinking feeling in his stomach, and it had nothing to do with not eating breakfast.

“You effectively won your husband in a card game from a man who has never shown Orion any form of caring his whole life.” Jaxon reached for his wife’s hand. “Orion has created his own life, running various businesses since he was eighteen, working alongside Onyx to try and better the lives of the people of Tyrion.

“He’s a prince anyone would be proud of, in word and deed, and yet his father never even asked him to attend functions at the castle, because he wasn’t considered important. He was ignored by his own parents. When you said that King Oscar insulted you on your wedding day, claiming he’d won a strategic alliance with a neighboring country over a card game, I guarantee he never remotely cared that his son was the wager. He was basically gambling with an item he would’ve happily given away for nothing.”

“I truly have made things worse.” Vincent thought for a moment. It would be really easy to do what Olivia suggested. He could accept his marriage was a mistake. Without Orion around the gossip would die down eventually. His mother would be disappointed in him, but Vincent had never doubted the support that woman had given him his whole life. In essence he could move on, and his life would go on the way it always had. Just without Orion, or any other spouse for that matter, because of

course, he'd still be married. Would that be such a bad thing?

But then Vincent remembered why he'd wanted to marry Orion in the first place. He wanted to settle down. To prove he was more than the party boy everyone assumed he was. He wanted to do something worthwhile, to be someone who people came to for advice instead of party favors. He wanted to be the man Orion deserved.

“Please tell me where Orion has gone. I need to find a way to make this right, and I can only do that if I know where he is.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Five days after fleeing the castle at Carntan, it couldn't be more obvious that Orion and John were a world away from society living. They were at the makeshift camp that had been thrown up, once the possibility of a mine project was first realized, and to describe the facilities as rustic was an understatement.

"No one is going to blame you if you head back to the castle, least of all me," Orion said as he pulled on his hiking boots, wincing as the back of one of them caught on a blister he'd developed on his heel.

John, who was cooking breakfast over a small camp stove, barely glanced at him, intent on not burning the eggs. "Sir, you don't become any less royal simply because you're wearing dungarees and work shirts. A crown prince consort should, at the very least, travel with no less than a personal valet and two to four guards.

"As you refused the service of the crown prince's guards back in Carntan, it's up to me to maintain the standards as best I can. Someone has to watch out for your health and well-being. You should take that boot off, sir," he added as Orion stood up and tested his sore foot. "Your heel will need some type of covering before you wear them again, to prevent your blisters worsening."

"You are right." Orion sat back down with a sigh and bent down to undo his laces again. "This place feels a world away from days spent in warm offices with plush rugs on the floor. My feet are still adapting."

"We could always bring a rug up here, if you're planning on spending more time here in the immediate future." John deftly spooned out two servings of the eggs, which smelled incredible. All the exercise Orion had been doing, both with traveling and

since arriving at the camp had definitely sparked Orion's appetite.

"I doubt anyone would miss me if I did, aside from Onyx and Olivia." Glancing around the single room cabin, Orion chuckled. "It might take more than a rug to bring this place up to any standard considered suitable for a royal personage."

"It's sturdier than a tent." John sniffed. "At least one has a roof over one's head when they're performing their private ablutions in the morning."

"I must admit I wouldn't mind a full bath," Orion plucked at his shirt, sniffed it and grimaced. "And I do get your point about requiring regular use of a laundry service. The men here all take their dirty washing home on weekends. We may have to consider doing something similar if we're here for an extended stay."

"Come and eat your eggs, sir." John held out his chair for him, and Orion hobbled over, one boot on, one boot off. It wasn't until they were both eating when John asked, "Have you given any thought to where you might live going forward? Where your home might be?"

"Good question." Orion pointed to the plate. "I don't know where you learned to cook eggs like this, but these are tasty, thank you."

"It is easier to cook for us in here than it is to impose on the workers' private down time. That didn't answer my question, sir."

Putting down his fork, Orion looked at the one man who would literally follow him anywhere. John wasn't getting any younger, and the frantic traveling they'd done in recent days, camping out under the stars, and cooking over a fire had not done his personal valet any favors.

"I'm sorry, John. I realize this situation is not ideal, and has not been fair to you

either. As I said just before, if you feel the need to return to the Tyrion castle, I know Onyx would find a good position for you there, if you wanted one.”

“And I’ve already said I’m not leaving your service, sir. But you do have your long term future to think about. Technically you are a part of the Faast royal family now. Do you believe the situation with the Crown Prince of Faast is totally hopeless?”

“He’s not here, so what does that tell you?” Orion picked up his fork again. “Honestly, about the only thing that would convince me to even speak to the Crown Prince of Faast again is if I saw him grab a pickax and offer to help us without being asked. And after he’d done that, he’d still need to offer me six types of apologies for his disgraceful behavior.”

“Six types of apologies, sir?” John grinned. “That’s the closest I think I’ve heard you come to making a royal decree in all the time I’ve known you.”

“I’m not sure there are six ways a person can apologize,” Orion admitted. “But one way six times would work, too.” Spooning the last of his eggs into his mouth, Orion swallowed and added, “Thank you for breakfast, but let’s get this foot of mine wrapped. Ryan and the others will be waiting.”

“You do need to consider more than your immediate future, sir,” John said, but he finished his own meal and picked up the plates taking them over to the bowl that served as a sink. Then he went to his bag and pulled out a small pouch that Orion recognized as the first aid kit John never went anywhere without.

“Are there precedents for my situation, do you think, John?” Orion pushed back his chair and lifted his foot as his aide came over. “I don’t want to cause any problems for Onyx by going back to Tyrion, but I’ve never even been to Faast. I doubt I would be welcome there.”

“The moment you married the crown prince the royal family of Faast took on the responsibility of ensuring that you are housed and cared for.” John worked quickly, putting a form of topical ointment on Orion’s blister, which was quite large, and then binding it securely with some strips of a gauze-type material. The ointment must have had some magical properties, because the sting from the blister immediately started to ease.

“It would be a bit of a hike traveling from Faast to here every few months though. Grab me my boot, would you please?”

Taking it, Orion slid his foot into it and laced them up. Standing, he said firmly, “My focus today is to try and find that second crystal seam Ryan has found indications for. If necessary, we might be able to take a small house locally to here for a few months and reconsider our options after that. I do appreciate what you’re saying though.

“While the Faast royal family has a responsibility toward me, I also now carry responsibilities in my new position. Unfortunately, my brief time with the crown prince didn’t give me any indication of what those responsibilities might look like beyond attending social functions. So perhaps a discreet message sent to the queen of Faast wouldn’t be out of place in this situation? We could draft something up over the weekend, perhaps?”

“I think that would be an excellent suggestion, sir.” John looked visibly relieved, and Orion realized that while he preferred not to think about his husband at all, as the humiliation he’d suffered at the hands of that man was still too raw, he did have responsibilities and a duty of care to the people who still looked up to him.

“I’ll leave you to take care of things here for me then,” he said, forcing a smile. “I’m off for another day with a pickax and shovel. Wish me luck. I have a good feeling about today.”

“Good luck sir, and sir, as it is the end of the week and the men will be going back to their own homes for two days, did you want to stay here, or should we find alternative accommodations for a few days as well? Perhaps somewhere with a bath?”

“And somewhere where we can get a hot meal without you having to cook. I agree. That inn on the border is only an hour’s ride from here – the place we stayed as we traveled here from Carntan. We’ll make our way back there later this afternoon.”

“Excellent idea, sir.” John nodded and Orion left him to do his chores as he went outside to where Ryan was waiting for him.

“Is today the day, do you think, Ryan?” he asked, joining the man in front of the fire. It was a chilly morning, with the mist still rising from the hills around them.

“I believe we’re close, sir.” Ryan agreed. He was a big man, not prone to speaking much, but he was a hard and honest worker and Orion trusted his expertise. “We’ll know one way or the other by this afternoon.”

“That’s exciting.” Orion chuckled. “I’m seriously looking forward to a bath tonight as a celebration.”

“Aye, the utilities are a little sparse for comfort, but we have enough here to get the job done.”

“If this mission today pans out, hopefully those conditions can improve. Let’s get moving.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Although Orion called the makeshift camp and the project it was attached to a mine, the term was a bit of a misnomer. A mine implied dug out shafts or large pits in the ground, but there was nothing like that in the Tyrion mountains. Instead, the mountains were filled with a series of caves, many of them going miles deep into the mountaintops, interconnected at often surprising points, but exposing the core of the mountain itself. The caves were caused over centuries of erosion, weather events, and the natural movements of the earth.

It was in one of those caves not far from the camp where one of the first natural crystals were found. Since then, Ryan and his crew had sourced more than a hundred individual samples all from the same cave system. The geologists, thrilled with the finds, confirmed each of the samples likely came from the same seam, and logic dictated that seam ran back into the mountain.

Orion thought about the implications of the project as he followed Ryan into the mine, his pickax in hand. Compared to bordering countries, Tyrion was relatively poor. Most of the land was covered in mountains, with only a few valley areas where people could grow crops and farm animals for food. Understandably, those same valleys were where most people lived, close to those necessities.

Tyrion did have a small port, but King Oscar didn't see the need for a navy, so the opportunities afforded by access to the sea were limited to those hardy souls who didn't mind making their own boats – heading out in often treacherous conditions to secure fish for their families and to sell at local markets in the town around the castle.

If we had more readily available access to magical crystals, that would be a huge saving to the country overall, not to mention the employment opportunities the

magical crystals would create in all areas of the population.

“The main seam heads off in that direction,” Ryan said, stopping and pointing to where the cave system disappeared off to the right. “But a couple of the men were exploring this other side,” he pointed to the left of where they were, “and they found four crystal samples in the one cave.”

“Is it possible it’s the same seam, exposed from a different angle?” Orion looked from one side to the other. There was no way, from where they were standing, to know how far apart the two finds were.

Taking off his cap, Ryan ran his hand through his bushy black hair. “Anything’s possible, sir, but if that were the case then we’d have found the motherload of crystal seams. With what those geologist fellas mapped out with their fancy equipment, a seam that wide could go back miles into the mountains. It would be a huge find.”

Orion felt a surge of excitement. “Then we have to check it out. If you think about it, we already know we have a seam. We just have no idea how far back it stretches. If you’ve found another part of the same thing, or even a second one, that surely doubles the chances this could be a viable proposition.”

“We’ll head down that way then, sir.” Ryan held up his crystal lamp. “This should hold a while longer, although it won’t last forever.”

“Just think, Ryan, soon we might have our own crystals that can be powered up and used all throughout the country and possibly even as an export option.” Orion’s excitement grew as they headed down the way Ryan had indicated.

The caves were quite tall. There were very few instances where Orion or Ryan had to duck, and there were some areas where the caves soared high above Orion’s head. Trailing his fingers along the dark walls, Orion’s smile widened as he saw the

occasional glimpses of sparkles.

“Here, look at this,” he said, pointing upward. They’d just come through one of the narrower openings and the roof of the cave they were in shot up to a point. “See how some of that rock has recently fallen away? Does that look like exposed crystal to you?”

“Yes, sir, it does.” Ryan peered up. The glinting line in the rock was about three feet above their head. Then he glanced around, likely looking for something to stand on. “We need to come back with some ramps so we can reach it. There were a couple stacked up at the entrance to the caves.”

“You go ahead and grab them.” Orion winced as he shook out his foot which was starting to sting again. “The ointment on my blister must be wearing off. I’ll sit here and wait for you to come back. Go on, man,” he added as Ryan hesitated. “You’re not going to be longer than ten minutes and I’ll be fine.” Glancing around the cave, he chuckled. “I doubt anything else is going to be lurking in these cave walls. Clearly no one’s been here for a while.”

“If you’re sure, sir...” Ryan was clearly still undecided.

“I’m sure.” Orion brushed off a flat piece of rock that was sticking out from the wall and sat down. “Far better for me to sit here like an entitled royal, waiting for you to return with our equipment, than for me to be hobbling out to the cave entrance and then back again. If I walk much more on this foot, John is going to be very disappointed in me.”

“If you say so, sir. I’ll leave the lamp for your highness.” And this time Ryan had the hint of a smile on his face as he left the lamp on the ground and disappeared out of the cave.

Alone time. Utter bliss. Leaning his back against the wall of the cave, Orion closed his eyes. As a prince, being around people for ninety-nine percent of the time was normal. Orion was always expected to have at least John with him, no matter where he went. Apparently, crown prince consorts required even more protections. Orion quietly snickered as he remembered how appalled Vincent's valet, Morgan, had been, catching him on his way out of the castle. He had been horrified that Orion refused to take any guards with him. According to Morgan, that type of refusal just wasn't the sort of thing a consort should say.

The joke is on him. Inhaling sharply, Orion focused on letting that same breath out slowly. There had been more than a hundred times since he'd left Carntan where he wondered if he'd done the wrong thing or over reacted by leaving Vincent without even talking to him. But in a world where appearances meant everything, Orion knew that while he could never change his husband's behavior, he also didn't have to accept it. Think about something else, he reminded himself quickly. Vincent would never know how much his callous behavior had hurt Orion, and Orion planned to keep things that way.

Look at this outcrop. Opening his eyes, Orion patted the rock he was sitting on. It was honestly as if someone had chipped out a bench seat from the stone wall. The edges were all smooth, as though they'd been exposed for some time. Looking up he could see there were a number of sharp edges on the walls as if the whole thing had moved recently. There were fallen rocks and piles of stone chips at various places around the cave.

I wonder what caused that, but even as he thought it, Orion felt the wall behind him tremble, and a loud rumbling sound bounced around the cave. He jumped up, ignoring the pull on his heel, his only focus to get out of the cave. But as he moved toward the entrance, the rumbling got louder, and a stone clipped the side of his head. As Orion fell to the ground, he had just enough time to roll under the seat as rocks started raining down around him.

Looks like I won't be a problem for Vincent anymore was the last thing he thought as the rock seat he'd been sitting on broke off from the wall and fell with a thud across his back.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

“What in the name of the goddess of magic and steam is this place?” Vincent rode into the camp, where he’d been assured that his husband would be. But all he could see was a collection of rickety huts, a fire pit and a trail leading to some caves tucked up around the corner, on the opposite side from where he rode in.

“Your message from Crown Prince Onyx expressly stated that this was not the sort of environment you’d enjoy,” Morgan warned in a low voice. “Your husband is here for work, not socializing or partying, but genuine work that could benefit the people he was raised to feel responsible for.”

“That’s all very well and good, but if he’s supposedly here working, then where is he?” Swinging his leg over his horse, Vincent dismounted, letting his reins drop to the ground. His horse was well trained and wouldn’t wander. “You there,” he pointed to two of his guards, “find water for the horses, while you two, he indicated the other two guards, “fan out and find out where...”

“Crown Prince Vincent? Crown Prince Vincent?”

Looking up, Vincent’s eyes widened. Stumbling down the trail was his husband’s man, John. But gone was the prissy man who walked as if he had a broom handle up his behind, always soberly and yet immaculately dressed. Now, as the man hurried toward him, Vincent could see his clothes were covered in dust and grime, and his shirt was torn.

"Forgive my appearance, your highness." John bowed low. "I have no idea why you're here, but it's a godsend that you've arrived when you did. I need your guards. I need them to come with me now."

There was no denying the urgency in John's words. "What's happened?" Vincent waved at his guards to follow them as he followed John back up the short hill. "Is someone injured? Have you been attacked?" That wouldn't be unheard of in such a remote area.

But John was shaking his head. "It's Crown Prince Consort Orion. He was in the caves, waiting for Ryan to come back with some ramps. They were checking out a crystal seam, you see. The earth moved. I know you won't believe me, but the earth moved, and the cave the prince was in collapsed. We're digging frantically, but we need more hands. I heard voices, so I had to come..."

"By the goddess." Vincent started to run, and as he rounded the corner, he could see the cave entrance proper. Urgent voices were coming from one side, and he moved automatically in that direction. Passing through a number of caves that were littered with debris, it didn't take long before the scale of the problem was clear. More rock walls, and where an entrance would likely be to another cave was nothing but a mass of rocks and rubble.

"Are you Ryan? Was anyone else in there?" Vincent grabbed the biggest man by the shoulder, forcing him to stop.

"No one else. Just the prince." Vincent was shocked to see tears in the man's eyes. "We've been calling out. John thought he heard a groan. But there's just so much rock to move."

"Guards, take over from these men, they need a break," Vincent ordered. "Dig as if your lives depend on it. Morgan, see to it these workers have water and break out some rations from the cart. Ryan, think man. Is there another way in. Someway with less rock between this cave and the one my husband is in." If he dies this will all be my fault.

Ryan was thinking, he didn't just say no, which was a blessing because Vincent was thinking he was going to have to call in heavy machinery to move the rock mess he could see. And they didn't have time for that. Not when Vincent's future was lying under the rubble.

"The cave," Ryan huffed, wiping a streak of sweat from his brow. "It had a pointed roof – really unusual in the caves around here. But I'm sure... I'm sure...." Suddenly he broke into a run out of the cave and back toward the entrance.

"Keep digging," Vincent yelled as he ran after Ryan. Instead of heading back down to where the huts were, Ryan ran around the cave and started to climb up the rocky outcrop the entrance was in.

"I thought I saw light," Ryan said as he climbed, hands and feet moving quickly. "At the very top of the cave, there was light."

"Like a crack you mean? One that came from outside?" Vincent wasn't as agile, but he could move when he had to.

"Yes, your highness. And that means..." Ryan was standing on a short outcrop. "When the hill moved...yes...yes..." He ran over to where there appeared to be an indent in the land. On his knees, Ryan started tugging at the grass, pulling out clumps by hand.

"Wouldn't this be faster with a shovel?" But Vincent was on his knees as well, pulling at the clods of soil. He could see where there was a definite crack in the land and there was a hole. It was only small, but it was definitely a hole.

"You wouldn't know, prancing around at your parties and laughing with the rich folk who wouldn't understand a day's work if it bit them," Ryan said bitterly. "I owe that man down there my life. All of us here do. What Prince Orion and Crown Prince

Onyx are trying to do, trying to create employment opportunities, giving their people hope... I owe him everything.”

“My apologies.” Vincent kept digging, ignoring how cruddy the dirt felt under his fingernails. “I just merely felt that with the proper equipment this would be faster.”

“There are four shovels in this camp, and they’re all being used.” Reaching into his pocket, Ryan pulled out a huge knife and started plunging into dirt that wasn’t as loose. “The princes pay our salaries from their own allowances because the treasury is too busy trying to stop the king from gambling away any money the country has left. Everyone knows about it, but no one can say anything about it, because if they do, they get banished, as you found out for yourself.”

Gossip spreads fast. Vincent stopped for a moment, stripping off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves before he started scooping out the dirt Ryan was dislodging.

“He’s a good man, your husband,” Ryan said grimly, his face red with the strain. “You can have me hang for speaking out of turn if that’s your wish, but Prince Orion is one of the best people I’ve ever met. He treats us all as equals. Rolls up his sleeves and works with us side by side. This mine could be operational in six months, if the seam is a true one.”

“But is it though?” Vincent didn’t want to pour water on the poor man’s parade, but everyone knew Marinkaw was the only country in the known world where the crystals needed to store and use magic could be mined.

“Look for yourself.” Ryan sat back, revealing the wider hole that had been made.

Leaning on his hands, Vincent peered down the dark hole. For a moment all he could see was darkness. But then, as his eyes adjusted he could see a glow coming from the wall. “The movement in the mountain revealed the crystals,” he said in a hushed

voice, but then reality slapped him around the head, and he looked farther down ignoring the tempting gleam of the crystals.

“There,” he pointed down the hole which was totally stupid because two people couldn’t look down at the small opening at the same time. “I can see a leg. My husband is down there. I need a rope and a horse. A long rope. If you don’t have one get my man, Morgan, to give you one from the cart we brought with us.”

“What’s the rope for?” But Ryan was already on his feet.

“I’m going to dig out this hole a bit wider while you go and get the things I need. Then you’re going to hold that horse, we’ll attach the rope to it, and you’re going to lower me down that hole so I can collect my husband, and you can pull us both out again. Right?”

“He could be badly hurt.”

“We won’t know that until we get him out, now move it.” Vincent bent over, hauling at the dirt, his hands stinging as they caught on small roots and stones. A thousand recriminations rang through his head.

If only I’d been the man Orion could confide in.

If only I hadn’t acted like a complete ass.

If only I’d taken the time to get to know the man who inspired such devotion in others.

If only... If only... If only... Vincent kept digging.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Admittedly, in Vincent's head the rescue should've gone a lot simpler than it actually had. The idea was sound. In Vincent's head it was perfect, in fact.

He would gracefully descend down the hole, looking like a slightly dusty dashing hero. He'd land gently on the floor, and by some miracle, Orion would sense his presence and wake up instantly, flying into his arms where they would share a passionate embrace before the men would haul them up again.

The reality was very different. For one thing, it wasn't easy for Vincent to get his bulk through the narrow hole, so descending gracefully wasn't an option. He glared at Morgan when the man had the cheek to suggest that he allow one of the workers to go down instead.

"I can do it. My husband needs me." Vincent decided he would just have to ignore the dust and mud that clung to his clothes. He was sure Orion wouldn't mind once he was saved.

But then the descent didn't go smoothly either. For some reason Vincent imagined it would be a gentle lowering of his royal person to a soft landing below. But that required a cooperative horse and calm men, who were anything but calm. Vincent was jerked and jolted as he dangled high above the cave floor. Why hadn't I factored in how high up I'd be hanging. Never having been anywhere where his adaptation to heights had been tested, Vincent felt decidedly queasy as he was being jerked around on the end of a rope.

And that was without the dust. Dust had never entered Vincent's mind when it came to how he pictured the rescue would go, although in hindsight, it should've done. The

mountain had moved, rocks had fallen, there was going to be dust. It swirled around Vincent's face as the rope jerked him about yet again, causing him to cough and splutter.

"Your highness are you all right?" Morgan sounded concerned. "Pull him up, pull him up."

"Let me down, let me down," Vincent managed to call out, but of course the men had already started to pull him up which was a huge jerk on his spine, and then they let him down again, and Vincent clung to the rope, sure he was going to fall to his certain death. "Carefully," he yelled at the ceiling.

All of this meant that by the time Vincent's boots finally hit the ground, he was ready for his hero act to be over. Turns out, it had only just begun. For one thing, Vincent had to catch his breath and rub the bruises he was sure were forming around his middle where the rope was tied.

Then there was the little matter of Orion, who did not miraculously recover from his mere presence and indeed didn't seem capable of getting up at all. He wasn't even conscious. Scrabbling over the fallen debris to where he'd seen his husband's leg, Vincent's stomach churned as he realized an entire rock shelf had fallen on his husband's back and Orion's face was smushed into the dust.

Crouching down, Vincent would love to say he'd simply gripped the shelf in both hands and casually tossed it aside. But the truth of it was the shelf was heavy and Vincent struggled to get enough of a grip on it to move it.

"Your highness." Morgan was yelling at him again. "What's the hold up? Do you need assistance? Is the consort still breathing?"

I probably should've checked that first. Vincent wasn't sure how he'd be able to tell.

It wasn't like he could put his face next to his husband's and feel the breath, and nor could he see if Orion's chest was rising because of that damn rock. Finally he remembered seeing someone putting their hand on the side of a person's neck, to feel their pulse. Vincent wasn't sure what a pulse felt like either, but he felt a flutter under his fingers when he touched Orion's neck and the skin was warm.

"He's breathing." And that's when the impact of his words hit Vincent like a punch to the gut. "He's alive," and he felt as if that had to be said because in that moment, Vincent realized Orion could just as well have died from the impact of that rock slab. "I just have to get him free," he added, hearing the cheers of the men on the ground above him.

Nothing worth having is ever easy. Vincent remembered his late father saying something like that years before. But as his life had always been easy, the words hadn't made sense. Grunting under the weight of the slab, making sure he wasn't leveraging the rock onto yet another part of Orion's body, Vincent strained every muscle he had, moving the rock inch by inch, holding it off Orion's body as best he could. When he finally got it so that it was tipping on one end, Vincent threw the full force of his weight behind forcing it the other way. It toppled with a crash, causing even more dust, but at least Orion's body was no longer covered with it.

"It really would help if you woke up right now," Vincent muttered under his breath. He couldn't see any blood. There didn't seem to be any bones visibly broken. Orion had dirt on his face and a bruise over his eye, and as Vincent ran his hands over Orion's head he could feel an egg shaped lump. The most sensible decision would be to order some planks sent down, make up a form of stretcher and have Orion lifted out that way.

But that wasn't possible. Any stretcher wide enough to fit Orion comfortably wasn't going to fit through the hole. Vincent had to do some serious scrunching to get himself through the hole in the first place.

“Morgan,” he called up to the ceiling. “Have you got any healing crystals on standby?”

There was a moment’s hesitation and then Morgan called back, “We should have enough to stabilize your husband once he’s free from the cave, your highness. Is he badly hurt?”

“I have no idea, but staying down here is not an option.” Glancing over to where the rocks had covered the doorway to the cave, Vincent discounted that as an option, too. The rocks were likely several feet deep and moving them by hand so Orion could be carried out on a stretcher would take far too long. “I’m bringing him up. Stand by.”

That wasn’t easy either. Orion was lying on his front which meant he had to be rolled before Vincent could support his head and neck, as well as his lower half. Vincent did his best, but he was sure they would both be wearing new bruises before the mission ended. Once he had Orion securely in his arms, Vincent staggered back to where he was directly under the hole in the ceiling. “Pull us up and do it carefully.”

Vincent’s heart lurched as his body was jolted off the ground once more, but as they slowly ascended, Vincent did something he’d never done before. He prayed to any deity that would listen for Orion to be all right.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Orion woke with a groan, the ache in his head feeling as though he'd been hit by a hammer. Still half asleep, Orion reached for his head, only to find his arm wouldn't move. His eyes flying open, they landed on a man he didn't know and his heart began to pound.

"Do I know you?" Now his eyes were open Orion could see he was lying in a bed, in a room he wasn't familiar with, completely restrained.

"I'm Mortrin, the head royal healer from the Monce Court, your highness," the man said gently. "I'll remove these restraints now you're finally awake. You'll have to forgive their use. Your body was subject to numerous injuries when Crown Prince Vincent called us in, and we couldn't risk you moving involuntarily while you were unconscious and interrupting the healing process."

"I must've misheard. Did you say Crown Prince Vincent?" Orion rubbed the faint marks around his wrist as soon as they were free. Mortrin clearly knew his way around restraints as he was free of them in less than a minute. "Are you sure I'm not still asleep, or unconscious, or whatever that was?"

"I'll call in your valet, John. He can explain things to you better than me. I insisted that he rest these past few hours. He's been through a great deal of stress, so that rest was necessary. But he can explain how you came to be in our care. Please try not to get too agitated, your healing has still got a long way to go." Bowing deeply, Mortrin appeared to glide as he left the room and seconds later, John came rushing in, brushing down his unruly hair with his hand.

"Oh, your highness, thank goodness you're awake." John collapsed to his knees by

the bed, taking his hand, his face streaked with tears. “We’ve all been so worried.”

“John, please.” Orion had never seen his staunch aide ever be that upset. “Get up and take a proper seat. You’ll have me thinking I’m dying or something equally as dire. What happened? Where are we and how did we get here?” Orion was still struggling to remember, but his brain felt foggy from the pain he was in.

“There was an earth tremor at the mine. Do you remember that?” John at least did get up and perched on the edge of the chair that was situated next to the bed.

“Vaguely. Ryan had gone to get some ramps so we could check out a possible seam, I think.” Orion had a horrible thought. “Is Ryan all right? The other workers at the mine? Were they caught in the rockfall?”

“No, your highness. You were the only one trapped. The men were digging you out. The entranceway to the cave you were in was completely filled with debris and as you can imagine they were frantic, not knowing if you were alive or dead.”

“Knocked out, I think.” Orion rubbed his head again. “I got hit by a rock, on my head...and fell...and then...I think I rolled under the seat I was on, and that broke away from the rock wall, too? At least I think it did.”

“Your husband found you under that rock slab. It was him that got you out. Ryan found another way into the cave from the topside of the mountain, but it was Crown Prince Vincent who insisted on being lowered down to pull you out.”

“Vincent?” Orion said faintly. “John, what was he even doing at the mine? Did someone call him? Was he handy at the time, or...” There was no reality Orion could see where his husband would be the one to come and save him.

“I’ve got to admit, I’m not strictly sure.” John was rubbing his head. “I got word to

Crown Prince Onyx after you were rescued, and he said your husband had contacted him a few days before, determined to make amends for his atrocious behavior in Carntan. He'd come to the mine to assist you in any way possible as a means of apologizing. In fairness, he arrived at the perfect time. It would've taken a lot longer to get you out without the help of him and his men."

Orion let out a long breath. "Remind me to send him a heartfelt note of thanks as soon as I'm free from this bed. So where are we again?"

"The inn that sits on the border of Monce and Tyrion, and sir, you should prepare yourself to deliver the thanks in person." John looked down at his hands, and then met Orion's eyes. "Crown Prince Vincent transported you here personally, he contacted the Monce Court because they were closer than the Tyrion castle to gain access to a royal healer. He's been staying here, the five days you've been unconscious, riding out to the mine the past three days to work with Ryan. Sir, he's brought in safety equipment, given Ryan a budget to hire more miners, and has even upgraded the cabins where they have all been staying. He's..."

"Why?" The word flew from Orion's mouth unbidden, but that was all he could think as he listened to his personal aide list all that Vincent had done. "Is he taking over the mine on behalf of the Faast royal family? Is he going to take away the work Onyx and I, Ryan and all the others have done since this project started?"

"Sir, please, you're not to get agitated." John's hands landed on his and Orion realized he was flailing them about. "I know it's difficult to believe, especially in light of what your husband had done in Carntan, but he's trying to help you. Your back was broken in three places. If Crown Prince Vincent hadn't saved you when he had and got the prompt medical attention you needed, you might have never walked again, and that's assuming you'd have lived. Sir, I promise you, I'm not saying this lightly. If I hadn't seen evidence of it myself, I would never have mentioned it, but your husband cares about you. He's fixing the mine because he hopes that by doing

that, you'll consider speaking to him again."

"What evidence?" Orion wasn't sure he could believe what he was hearing. But he trusted John would never lie to him.

"You should've seen him when he got you out of the mine. Jacket off, mud on his shirt and face, his nails chipped and cracked because he was digging in the dirt with his bare hands..."

"My husband told you he did that?"

"I was there, sir. I saw it with my own eyes. He insisted, fought with Morgan about having to be the one to be lowered down the hole in the cave roof to get to you. Even when he barely fit in the hole that he helped dig."

"Did he get stuck?" That struck Orion as truly funny, a crown prince getting caught in a hole, but then the whole idea of Vincent being anywhere near the mine was weird enough.

John nodded. "He had to do a bit of wiggling to get in that hole. And there's more." John leaned closer. "Morgan told me, in the strictest confidence, that when Crown Prince Vincent was being lowered into the hole, being suspended by nothing but a rope, he found out he's scared of heights."

"Oh no." Orion quickly put his hand over his mouth and tried not to laugh. His head was still really painful, and he probably shouldn't be thinking any Vincent had done was funny.

"You can laugh, sir, but at the time it was no laughing matter. Crown Prince Vincent spent the first two days sitting where I am now, sleeping in the chair, refusing to eat unless someone bought something for him, determined not to leave your side. It was

your brother Onyx that pointed out to him that he'd be more useful to you if he helped out at the mine instead of getting under the healer's feet all the time."

Orion suddenly remembered why they were in that cave in the first place. "The rockfall. Did it expose a crystal seam?"

"It did, your highness." John's eyes gleamed as he nodded. "It was there, just as Ryan thought it was, and it does meet up with the other seam, which you had suggested. Sir, Crown Prince Vincent has called in more geologists, all working on a strictly confidential basis, but their early reports suggest that whole mountain range, from one side of Tyrion to the other, could be full of crystal seams."

A dream come true . "I have to get to the mine. I have to see. Help me get out of this bed." Orion gripped John's hands, hoping to leverage himself upright. But John gently pushed him back.

"Sir, don't. Did you forget already? Your back was broken in three places. Three places! The healers have worked their magic, and I understand the breaks are healed. Now you're awake, they can conduct further tests to make sure there's no residual nerve damage or loss of use in any of your limbs. But it will be at least another week before they let you out of bed. The mine will still be there when you return, sir, but for now you have to heal. I must insist. Your brother gave me the authority to do so."

Orion knew when he was beaten. "Fine, but can Morgan give me a detailed report when he returns? I will rest a lot easier if I am kept updated on what is going on."

"Crown Prince Vincent would probably be thrilled to hear you're finally awake. Wouldn't it be a nice gesture to at least share a meal with him this evening?"

Eyeing his personal aide, Orion felt as if he was being gently manipulated. But John only had his best interests in mind. "If I can sit up," he said firmly. "I am not sharing

a meal with Crown Prince Vincent if I have to lie flat on my back and have to be spoon fed something.”

“I’ll call in Mortrin and his team and let him know your request,” John said with a smile as he stood up. “You gave us all quite a scare your highness. I’m truly thankful you’re awake.”

“Me too, John. Me too.”

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The innkeeper they'd been staying with gave Vincent the good news as soon as he arrived that evening. "My husband's awake and wants to see me?" Vincent looked down at his dusty clothing and then shrugged. Orion was the last person to care about the state of his clothing. "Please let the lovely people in the kitchen know I will be dining in my husband's room as usual this evening." Even if Orion didn't want to talk to him personally, he would want to hear about the mine improvements and Vincent had a lot to tell him.

"Sir, don't you think you should at least wash and change your clothes first?" Morgan protested as Vincent made his way upstairs.

"Nope, this is honest dirt, formed by honest dust and honest work. Besides I have a present for Orion and you know how I am about presents. I do hope he likes it." Vincent clutched his backpack to his chest. I'd settle for him being happy to see me.

Vincent had a lot of time to think while he'd sat by Orion's bedside and then later as he worked at the mine. It was understandable that Orion's brother and sister would care about his husband. Vincent's four sisters thought he hung the moon and stars. But as he took the time to listen to other people, from Ryan and the other workers at the mine, to John who had been with Orion the longest... even the innkeeper where they were staying had kind words to say about his husband.

They hadn't spoken about Orion's looks or the fact he was a prince. Instead, these same people felt strongly about Orion despite his royal position. They admired his integrity, his honesty, his dedication and loyalty, and the fact he was always ready to pitch in and physically help with anything that needed doing. Vincent learned more about his husband in five days than he'd likely have ever done if he'd been left to

work it out on his own.

But something had changed when Vincent rescued Orion. People seemed inclined to want to help him put things right. They clearly knew what a fool he'd been, there were still a few digs about his card playing and his choice of dance partners, but those same people were simply teasing him. Regular people teasing him. Vincent had never enjoyed anything so much. He genuinely felt a part of something bigger than himself for a change, and it was a good feeling.

There was one thing, though, that Vincent couldn't ignore. That nagging tiny voice in the back of his head that kept reminding him that Orion could disappear just as quickly again, once he could get out of bed. He had the power to banish Vincent from the mine, from Orion's life, and if Orion decided to do that there was nothing Vincent could do to salvage the situation. He'd already decided if that happened, he would move back to Faast and stay there. Whatever happened, his days of partying were over. But, willingly or not, Orion had given Vincent a reason to belong, a purpose, and Vincent wasn't going to let that go without a fight...or a kiss.

Tapping on the door, Vincent let himself into Orion's room, his smile widening automatically when he saw Orion was indeed sitting up, propped up by pillows. He was wearing a soft shirt and his hair was clean. Most importantly he was awake, alone, and while his skin was so pale and his smile hesitant, it was a start.

"I'm so very glad to see your eyes are open." Closing the door softly behind him, Vincent came closer to the bed, perching on the chair he'd spent so much time in over the past five days. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been kicked by a horse in a dozen places," Orion admitted. "I understand I have you to thank for my rescue and recovery. Thank you. Genuinely, thank you."

"I am truly glad I was in the right place at the right time." Vincent couldn't stop

smiling. Orion was smiling at him, and he could see now how precious that was. Watching Orion lay lifeless on the bed for days, with only the slow rise and fall of his chest giving any indication he was alive, was something Vincent wasn't going to forget. "As you've likely heard, I've been out at the mine, just trying to assist you in any way I can, and, well...I bought you a present. Did you want to see it?"

"A present from the mine?" Orion chuckled softly. "What is it? The rock that hit me on the head?"

"Hmm, you're surprisingly close." Vincent reached into his bag, and carefully pulled out the cloth covered item. "I didn't have a chance to wrap it properly." He put it on Orion's lap. "But it's only an old shirt. It was all I had to hand."

"I think you're the only person in my life who has given me gifts." Orion stroked the cloth and then gently started to unwrap the present. He glanced up and likely couldn't miss Vincent's anticipation. "You seem to like seeing people open them."

Vincent nodded. "Until I met you, it seemed I had never been very useful, but seeing the joy I can bring someone special, by giving them a gift, always made me feel good inside."

Orion nodded, not directly addressing Vincent's admission, but the sheer delight on his face when the gift was revealed was everything Vincent had hoped for. "It beautiful." Orion held up the huge crystal sending shafts of refracted light bouncing around the room. "It's extremely heavy, which I didn't expect, but my goodness. I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful. This is from the mine?"

"From the very cave where you were hurt. I brought in some mechanical diggers to clear the debris and open the cave back up again. Being lowered into the cave was not an experience I believe anybody needed to experience after doing it myself."

Vincent shuddered. “But...but...the rockfall exposed a huge seam. The geologists I called in, after getting recommendations from Onyx, they were almost having kittens they were so excited. Your mine is going to be a success. I promise. The crystals are there and now, if you don’t mind my help, Ryan believes it can be fully operational in three months.”

“Three months, not six?” Orion put the crystal down onto his lap again. “How did you do that?”

Shrugging, Vincent said, “It really wasn’t me. When I went back out to the mine, I had a long sit down with Ryan – a very intelligent man who speaks so highly of you. Originally I was just going to talk to him about the cleanup and get that underway, but after speaking to him, I realized that all that was missing to get the mine actually open was more finances. Which I could and wanted to help with. Nothing’s different,” he added quickly because he couldn’t tell what his husband was thinking. “The mine is going to be run exactly as you had organized in the first place. I just didn’t think, especially after what happened to you, that you’d risk any of the men’s lives who worked there, without adequate safety precautions and equipment.”

“That was the main cause of the delay.” Orion blinked rapidly. “Onyx and I were struggling with limited resources. But we never intended for anyone to actually start mining the crystals until all of the safety precautions, mechanics, magical alarms, and equipment were put in place first.”

“I wanted to help.”

“And you have, more than you can ever know.” Orion was watching him closely and Vincent wondered what was going on in his husband’s mind. “Humor me for a moment, can you? Could you list off the things you’ve done in the past five days while I’ve been keeping this bed company?”

Lucky bed. But Vincent quickly shut that thought down. “All right, although I am unsure why. Most importantly, in my mind, I rescued you from the mine.”

“One.” Orion held up a finger.

“I got you a healer from the Monce Court.”

“Two.” Another finger came up.

“I sat by your bed for two days because I was so worried about you.”

“Three.” Orion nodded and a third finger came up.

“I went out to the mine and listened to Ryan, so I would know what sort of help was needed.”

“Four. Keep going. I know that’s not all you’ve done.” Orion was now holding up four fingers.

“I arranged for the mechanical diggers to remove the debris, organized for carpenters and other trades to come in and improve the living quarters, gave Ryan an extra allowance to employ more staff, and called in the geologists who confirmed the mine was going to be viable.”

“Five.” Orion smiled. “And what else?”

Vincent cast his eyes down at his dirty clothes, and then he spotted the crystal again.

“I brought you a gift, and I got dirty through honest hard work.”

“Six. Six types of apology, and you rolled up your sleeves and helped me with the mine.” Orion crooked his finger at him. “Come closer.”

“What? Why?” Am I going to get slapped for my trouble.

“Are you always this suspicious? I need you to come closer. The healer was adamant I wasn’t supposed to move around. So move closer please.”

Leaning forward, Vincent braced himself. Even with everything he’d done, a slap would still be justified. He felt the softest brush of lips against his cheek, before it was just as quickly gone. Stunned he sat back, touching his cheek where Orion had kissed him.

“Thank you,” Orion said quietly. “You’re forgiven for Carntan. It won’t be mentioned between us again.”

“You mean it? We can be married married for real?”

“We already are.” Orion laughed. “Clearly you need some sustenance if you’ve forgotten we exchanged wedding vows, and the marriage contract is filed with the World Council. But that’s understandable, you have been working all day. Will you call John and let him know we’re ready for dinner, please?”

“Yes.” Standing up, Vincent risked a quick kiss on Orion’s hair. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

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It was another week before Orion was considered healed enough to leave his room. A long and frustrating week at times – Orion had never been the type to laze around all day, but Mortrin was adamant. “Healing is a process and while magic is an invaluable tool, your body has gone through a major trauma and has to be allowed to heal at its own pace.”

Knowing nothing about human biology or how the body systems worked, it was shocking for Orion to realize that the breaks in his spine could have rendered him immobile for the rest of his life. It made him all the more determined to get out of bed, even if it was just to prove to himself he could.

The very next morning, after sharing breakfast with Vincent and his husband had left for the mine, Orion had his first attempt at standing up. He was barely upright before the shaking in his legs forced him to sit back on the bed again. “Why is this happening to me?” he said, rubbing his thighs. His muscles wouldn’t stop trembling.

“Some parts of the body’s nervous system takes longer to heal than others,” Mortrin explained. Orion had been forced to lie back down so his legs could get another dose of magical crystal power and creams.

It got better. Orion found out the human body was incredible in that regard. By the third day after he regained consciousness, Orion could stand without feeling as though he was going to fall flat on his face. “My left leg doesn’t seem to want to work right,” he grumbled as he tried to take a step. That resulted in yet another dose of magical healing to his left hip – which took hours – and more creams.

Orion did what he could to speed the process up, but he was pushed back time and

time again when his body was a lot slower to respond to his commands than he was used to. “Maybe your body hasn’t realized you’re a crown prince consort and should be obeyed in all things,” Mortrin responded drily to one of Orion’s many complaints. It was in that moment that Orion learned another valuable lesson - that no matter the title a person might hold in life, it was the body that ruled how that person might live.

Vincent, to Orion’s surprise, was the only shining light in those monotonous days. He bounced in like an overgrown puppy at the end of each day, covered in dust and so pleased with himself. He told stories about what the men were doing, and proudly showed off the blisters and callouses on his hands. More importantly to Orion, he shared every detail about what was going on and asked Orion’s advice on the next steps every single time.

They talked well into the night every night, even when Orion suggested Vincent needed his sleep. But Vincent would just launch into another story, usually about how badly the men thought he was at handling a pickax, and it would be Orion, who was already in bed, who would fall asleep to the sound of his husband’s voice. He was extremely surprised to find Vincent sprawled across the end of his bed when he woke up that first morning.

“I just like being near you,” Vincent explained when he finally opened his eyes. “You should ask for a bigger bed.” Realizing Vincent had “moved in” to his room, Orion did, although he had a quiet chuckle at the embarrassment on Vincent’s face when Mortrin sternly lectured the crown prince on how there would be absolutely no activities of “that nature” while Orion was healing. There was something comforting about the weight of Vincent’s arm around his middle while they slept.

But finally Mortrin declared he could go out. Orion could walk for about ten minutes before he had to sit down again, and navigating stairs were still difficult. Mortrin had vetoed Orion riding a horse for a while longer, so Vincent applied his crown princely powers and the men at the mine arranged for the trail leading to it to be widened to

take the royal carriage.

Orion had been in two minds when he'd heard what Vincent had done. On the one hand, fixing up a track seemed like a ridiculous waste of resources when there was so much more needed to be done for the mine operation itself. But he kept his complaints to a minimum because his need to see what was happening there himself was bordering on obsessive.

"The track needed to be widened anyway to allow for transportation of the crystals once they've been freed from the rocks," Vincent explained, apparently not put out by Orion's concerns. "Doing this makes the mine a lot more accessible."

And it was. Orion and Vincent were alone, with the exception of four guards on horseback and the carriage driver of course. Morgan and John had been told to take the day off. So it was just the two of them in the carriage as they approached the mine. Orion leaned out the window, eager to see the project again and when the carriage rounded the corner, he gasped. "Vincent!"

"What? What?" Vincent leaned into him trying to look out the same window. "Didn't you like the sign? Your brother ordered it. I thought it was very appropriate."

Considering Orion hadn't even noticed the sign, he had to look at that first. "Orion's Mine Project 1" was done in simple white lettering on a dark wooden board. Orion squinted to read the lettering underneath as the carriage got closer. "The Founding Mine of the Orion Crystal Mining Project, founded and managed by Crown Prince Consort Orion of Faast, as ordered by Crown Prince Onyx of Tyrion."

"All the new mines are going to be called Orion's Crystal Mine Project, too. Just with different numbers on as the operation expands," Vincent said excitedly. "Onyx and I have been exchanging messages almost every day and we both agreed this was always your project. So he organized a whole new department in the Tyrion Court,

with you as the ruling authority. That department will handle supplies, ordering, and when you come to distribute and export the crystals, your new department will handle all of that.”

“Does the king know about this?” Orion could hardly believe his eyes. All the work, and the hoping, the dreaming...it was all coming true right in front of him.

“Bah, the king is telling people it was his idea, but no one is listening to him. This is yours, Orion. You created the excitement among the people that made this happen. Please tell me you’re happy about it.”

There was a spark of insecurity in Vincent’s request, one Orion couldn’t ignore, especially when his husband was usually so confident. Turning to his husband, he said, “We made this happen, Vincent. All this,” he pointed to the hustle and bustle of the revamped mine, “was something we did together. I might have had the initial idea, but you’re just as responsible for bringing my vision to life. This makes me extremely happy, more than I could ever put into words.”

Vincent’s bright eyes glowed. “I feel a moment like this should be celebrated with a kiss, but I believe Mortrin would banish me from the bedroom if I did that. But come on, let’s see what you think of the new improvements. Wait there, I’ll come around and help you down these steps.”

Disappearing from the carriage with the same energy he did everything else, Orion could only smile as his husband reappeared around his side of the carriage, opening the door with a wrench on the handle. “Take it carefully,” Vincent warned. “Honestly, the workers here would take my head off if you so much as get a scratch while you’re here. They’re so protective of you.”

Orion didn’t think that was likely, but he carefully stepped out of the carriage, taking Vincent’s arm as they walked slowly through the compound. There were more huts,

with the old and new ones shining under a pale sun with a fresh coat of paint. There was a new ablution block and where the firepit had been was a new large grill.

“One of the new hires only works part time in the mine itself. He was training to be a chef, but couldn’t find work so he came up here when he heard Ryan was hiring. Ryan suggested putting in a grill so that he could cook for everyone. As he pointed out, men are more productive when they know they have a decent meal waiting for them when they’ve finished.”

“That is an excellent idea.” Orion was still struggling to take everything in. It wasn’t only the new buildings, it was the machinery he could see and the new tools complete with a tool shed. “How did you get so much done in a little over a week? It’s unbelievable what you’ve achieved so quickly.”

Vincent looked embarrassed. “It was basically money and throwing my weight around as a crown prince,” he admitted quietly. “Ryan always had the ideas. You know that,” he went on quickly. “Most of the contacts were his, and a lot of the equipment and things were readily available to a cash buyer. The transportation was a bit of an issue, especially bringing in the huts, which were premade, but see – we widened the track, and everything just fell into place.”

“It’s all incredible,” Orion said as they slowly headed to the caves. “You’re incredible. I’m blown away by what you can achieve when you put your wonderful mind and your energies into something productive.”

“We make a good team.” Vincent gripped his elbow a little firmer. “But look, here we are, and you’ve been seen.”

The next twenty minutes or so was bedlam. One of the men yelled, “The prince is here,” and Orion was greeted with cheers and well wishes, the likes of which he’d never seen. Ryan came over, clutching his cap in his hand, looking so emotional

Orion was compelled to hold out his hand.

Shaking it, Ryan just kept mumbling, “I can’t believe it. I was so sure you were dead when we pulled you from that hole. I’m so glad to see you on your feet. So glad to see you.”

“I’m recovering,” Orion admitted. “It’s a slow process, but you’ve all been working seriously hard in the meantime. I’m so proud of all of you. Please, show me what’s going on. What have I missed.”

There were old hands to greet, every one of the work-hardened men showing clear emotion at seeing him upright and talking again. New hires were introduced, mumbling and nodding at him, but clearly they were used to Vincent, and it wasn’t long before they were laughing and joking as they showed Orion the exposed seam that glistened even without lamps.

Orion had a quiet attack of nerves as he first entered the caves, the memories of the fall still front and center in his mind. But Vincent was there, holding him steady, a solid presence as they slowly walked around. By the time he got back to the carriage, his back aching and his legs shaking under the strain, Orion was about ready to cry.

It was all so overwhelming. His mine project was operational, and that was largely thanks to Vincent. But the trip had highlighted his limitations as well. Limitations that had to be addressed, if only as a fairness to his husband.

“I asked the kitchen to prepare us a picnic,” Vincent said as they were heading away from the mine. He pulled a large basket from under the seat facing them. “I didn’t bring a blanket because we’re already sitting on seats, but can I interest you in a meat pasty, or a sandwich?”

“Thank you. Look, forgive me if I’m speaking out of turn, but how long will this

last?” Orion accepted a pasty and a napkin, but sat with them resting in his hands. “I mean, what you’ve done for the mine or for me is so amazingly wonderful and I’ll never be able to thank you enough. But you saw how I was back there, having to use your arm for support and barely being able to walk for more than twenty minutes. What will happen to us when you’re ready to head off to your social circuit again? I worry that I’m not going to be able to keep up. Please be honest with me. I need to know.”

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Vincent had been expecting the question, or at least a variant of that concern. Mortrin and Morgan had both warned him separately that after what Orion had gone through, he was going to fret against the limitations the time it took to heal was giving him. Onyx had been equally blunt, sending Vincent a long message once he learned what Vincent was doing, warning him that Orion didn't believe in his own value, and that Vincent was going to have to be patient if he genuinely wanted their marriage to last.

"I've always been a pasty man myself, but they're not as easy to eat on the move." He chuckled as the carriage wobbled against a rut in the road, causing him to drop crumbs on his shirt. "As you can see. But as to your question, I have some thoughts on that, but I'd first like to hear your concerns."

"I would've thought that was obvious." Orion sighed, his body slumped against the back of the carriage seat. "I'm worn out. Exhausted. One carriage trip, where all I have to do is sit here, and then a brief walk around, and I'm ready to collapse into bed and have an afternoon nap. I know Mortrin keeps saying that the body takes time to heal, but I can't stop thinking about the itinerary John told me about on our wedding day. You had events planned in Monce, Scythe, and Faast – all of which I assume have been postponed for now. But those people will still want to see you. I'm just not sure I can accompany you and I'm not sure where that leaves us going forward."

"I do think we need to attend at least one event in the near future. But that's in Faast. The rest of them I have already canceled, not simply postponed. My mother will want to present you to the court as my husband soon after we arrive there, and I do think that's a good idea. Now hear me out," he added as Orion was clearly going to object.

"That event is important to my mother, and for you, too, in your role as the crown

prince consort. My heart rejoiced when you forgave me for my blunders at Carntan, and I know we said we wouldn't speak of it again, but you need to see with your own eyes that I have changed, and I would never behave so badly toward you again. The people we will rule one day need to see how important you are to me. Because you are. In case I hadn't mentioned it before."

That got Vincent a small smile. "You're fast becoming important to me as well," Orion said slowly. "Which is why I feel we have to discuss this honestly and logically. Your previous behaviors aside, there is still the little matter of me never likely to be interesting to your friends, or even being able to dance with you for very long. Being sociable and attending one event after another is a huge part of your life. I don't fit in that world, Vincent. I never have, and to be brutally honest, even if I didn't have the physical limitations I'm experiencing right now, I'm not sure I want that sort of life."

Vincent took a mouthful of his pasty, and thought about how to frame his answer. Orion was perfectly correct in one respect. Parties and socializing was basically all Vincent had ever done... until Orion's accident. Swallowing and reaching for a bottle of water, he said, "Would you believe me if I said that the only reason I attended so many events was because that was the only way I knew how to fit in with others?"

"You don't have any reason to lie to me about something like that, and I do believe you. But I think you need to explain yourself a bit more." Orion was nibbling on his pasty.

"I like being around people." Taking a swig from the bottle, Vincent went to pass it to Orion who shook his head, so he capped it and put it back in the basket. "You're right about that side of things. Being raised as the heir to a country, I learned that my only value came from being seen, making friends, networking, and generally showing people from royal and society families that I was a friendly, amiable person. I wasn't always successful," he added as Orion coughed. "But that was my role. That was how

I fit in. That was what I was told a crown prince was supposed to do.”

“You’re proving my point.” Orion waved in the direction of the mine. “Crown princes don’t work. Just having my name on that sign back there is going to scream to anyone who reads it that I’m a working prince, and that’s looked down on by so many people of rank. In turn, that’s going to reflect badly on you and your reputation.”

“Only if we let it,” Vincent said. “One of the first things my dance partners at that event we no longer discuss said about you was that you worked for a living. No one could tell me what you did, or how they knew, but they talked about it in the same tone as they might mention you running naked down the street on the night of a full moon.”

“You’re doing a very good job in proving my point yet again. I’m sure you were equally concerned and horrified about it.”

“Hmm. In the spirit of honesty, I thought by marrying me, I would be saving you from a working life.” Vincent laughed. It sounded ridiculous to him now, when he had callouses and one of his blisters on his thumb was stinging. “I never knew, until you gave me the opportunity to see for myself, how satisfying and invigorating having something meaningful to do can be. I want to do it again.”

“Open another mine, you mean?” Orion frowned. “I’m not sure we’re ready to do that just yet. We need to see how successful this one mine can be first.”

“Not another mine as such, no. Not yet. But what if we found another project – a community project in Faast perhaps. Something like what you’ve done with the mine, where we can help build something or create a business perhaps providing opportunities for the people who will call us king and consort one day.”

Orion's frown deepened. "But then your people will see you working. Your society friends, your family, everyone who is important to you."

Vincent was good at picking up cues – all right, most of the time he was good at picking up cues from others. No one was perfect, but Orion sounded cautiously optimistic despite the furrows in his brow, and Vincent could work with that. "Wouldn't that be a good thing? If you think about it, I know your brother works every minute of every day, even if he doesn't get any recognition for it."

Vincent fought to keep his opinions of King Oscar to himself. Orion would see for himself soon enough that his mother, Queen Julia, was nothing like that man, and her gender had nothing to do with it. She was a queen who cared about everyone, when King Oscar only cared about himself. "We could set our own trend, showing through example how good works benefit the community and improve the lives of the people we will rule one day. By actually working, even if we didn't have to, can't you see how some society family members, for example, might want to join in?"

"Honestly?" Orion's eyebrow quirked in the most delightful way. "I think you're giving society family members, those who you dance and play around with, too much credit. But that could be me being unfair," Orion added quickly. "I don't know those people."

"No, you don't, and it's possible you still wouldn't like them even if you spent time with them." Vincent had been in that situation more than once. "It's equally possible that they truly believe that their only worth is to stand around and gossip about others in a misguided attempt to prove something to themselves. I don't know. However, you and I have an ace card up our sleeves." Vincent grinned at his husband.

"You're talking about cheating now? Is that how we ended up married in the first place?"

“No, you wonderfully delightful man.” Vincent took Orion’s napkin from his hands, throwing it in the basket, so he could hold those hands in his own. “I won that game fair and square. But the ace I’m talking about, the edge if you want to call it that, is that ultimately you and I are crown prince and crown prince consort. A mouthful, I know, but we can set our own trends and given our positions, we don’t have to care about how other people view us.

“Those men at the mines, the ones working for you before the accident. They didn’t care that you were a prince. They genuinely believe that you’re a decent person, and once they saw I was prepared to roll up my sleeves and show I could work too, their impressions of me improved as well.”

“I thought you were the one loved by everyone. But that approval from the men at the mine really meant something to you, didn’t it?”

Vincent could see they weren’t far from the inn and knew he had to speak quickly. Not even Morgan knew how much that approval meant to him.

“Those men, with their roughened hands and their blunt way of speaking, their approval meant more than any compliments I used to get from those people I used to consider friends. I learned something so profound, working for just that short time.

“I felt I had value, something useful to offer. You gave me that opportunity. You showed me there was another way of living – one with a lot more purpose. You keep telling me how grateful you are for what I did at the mine, but it’s me who should be thanking you for trusting me with your project in the first place.”

That was a stretch. Vincent and Orion both knew it. Vincent started working at the mine while Orion was unconscious, but he could’ve told Vincent to stop when he woke up. “Don’t you see,” he said, staring into Orion’s intriguing gray eyes, “those evenings spent planning and finding solutions to problems, sharing achievements and

laughing about those random silly things that happen in a day. I've never had that with anyone else but you, and I want more times like that with you."

For the longest time Orion didn't say anything, just meeting his gaze steadily. The carriage was going to pull up at the inn any minute, and Vincent mentally willed his husband to say something. Anything.

"I'm not sure how long it will take me to heal completely," Orion said at last. "I'm also not strictly sure it's fair of me to insist or even suggest you change the habits and behaviors you've lived with your whole life, just because of me. In fact, I know it's not."

"Your sister insisted on the same changes from Jaxon and they're both perfectly happy. And these are changes I want for myself as well." Come on, Orion. Say yes.

"That still doesn't change the fact that if we attend an event, I will have to spend most of my time sitting down watching you have fun with others. At the moment it wouldn't be possible for me to enjoy more than one dance with you, if I could manage even that."

"You're getting healthier every day."

"But even at full health, I can't and won't spend all my time around people who don't care that I exist. I know I'm worth more than that."

"I know that now, too, and I won't let you down again. Don't you want to work with me even if it means attending a couple of events a year as the Crown Prince Consort of Faast? Imagine what we could achieve together, what we could do for the people of Faast like you have done for Tyrion. Please, Orion. Take a chance on me. You've shown me I can be different. Let me prove to you that I am."

It took another minute. A minute in which the carriage had indeed pulled to a stop outside the inn, but Orion finally nodded. “If I can walk back into a cave that’s already fallen on me once, I can attend another function with you as your crown prince consort. There’s going to be a lot of gossip about us after last time. I hope you’re prepared for that, but I sincerely hope that attendance will be successful as I’d dearly love to explore possibilities regarding a project in Faast. I believe I would enjoy working on other community projects with you.”

“That’s a yes. Thank you.” Vincent wanted to grab his husband and hug the stuffing out of him. But he couldn’t ignore the tired lines around Orion’s mouth. “We should get you inside.”

“I fear I’m going to need your help getting up the stairs.” Orion sighed. “My legs have jellified, and my lower back is aching. But that’s my reality for now. It was a lovely morning. Thank you. Thank you for all that you’ve done.”

“We’re just getting started. You wait and see. We’re going to have so much fun, you and I.”

“I need a nap just thinking about it.” But Orion was chuckling as Vincent bounded out of the carriage and hurried around to get Orion’s door.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

It was another month before Orion crossed over the border between Scythe and Faast, giving him his first view of Vincent's hometown. A month of what felt like endless travel. Unfortunately the slow speed was because of Orion, so it wasn't as though he could grumble about it.

Even traveling by carriage required him to have a break between each full day of traveling and that was without the stops they had to make first to Carntan, because Olivia insisted she needed to confirm he was still alive, and then to the Monce royal court to drop off Mortrin. By the time they'd reached there, Mortrin told Orion he could ride for an hour every day, but no more. Apparently the ache in his back and the shaky feeling in his legs after he'd been standing for too long would pass, but he couldn't give Orion a definitive timeline for when that might happen. "It'll just get easier," he said when Orion tried to push him on it.

There were no events planned. Orion knew that Olivia wouldn't host one for him and Vincent after the last episode, but he'd worried about Monce. That was another city he'd never visited, but Crown Prince Serron greeted them warmly, inviting them to dine with him privately the night they stayed at the castle. He was extremely interested in the crystal mine and asked to be updated once Tyrion had crystals ready for export. He and Vincent laughed a lot over the tales Vincent told about his own work experiences, but Orion didn't feel excluded.

At Scythe it was the king and queen who invited them to dine with them, and that was another fun night. Vincent suffered through a lot of teasing about his previous behaviors, but Orion could tell that was all in good fun. The queen, a beautiful woman with bright red hair and a loud laugh, insisted that Orion get checked by their own head healer – a man who apparently knew Mortrin and approved of his methods.

He prescribed a potion for Orion to take on those nights when the shakes in his legs got too bad, but assured him it was simply an elixir of magically enhanced herbs that would help relax him. Orion had no clue what was in it, but that night was the first decent sleep he'd had since they'd been on the road.

"I am so looking forward to being able to sleep in the same bed for more than one night once we're home," Vincent said happily as the castle turrets came into view.

Orion, who'd been thinking along similar lines was surprised. "I thought you liked being out and about on your adventures."

"Don't tell anyone, but I think I'm getting old." Vincent laughed. "I do need to ask, before we get to the castle, will you mind if the assumption is made that you share a bed with me?"

"I thought that's what we had been doing." Orion didn't see the point in the question. "Every night, if we haven't been assigned a room together, you still seem to find your way into mine regardless. Why are you asking?"

"Phew, thank goodness. It's just that I got a message from my mother yesterday. She asked me about our sleeping arrangements a while ago after hearing about your injuries, and I told her we'd be happy to share my suite. But she reminded me in her most recent message that a gentleman should always have a space to call his own, separate from his spouse. I think she was worried I might snore too loudly, and she wants you to be comfortable."

"You do snore." Orion snorted. "I imagine I do as well. Has that bothered you? You've never mentioned it."

"You don't snore, you snuffle." Vincent burst out laughing again, probably because Orion was glaring at him. "You do. It's sweet. It's like you get a hair or a piece of

dust on your nose while you're sleeping and you wrinkle it up and rub it on the pillow, or me if I'm closer. I love it."

"I do not snuffle, and I'm sure if I had a hair on my nose or something, it would be because you put it there." Orion shook his head. "Clearly we need to start working on another project, because you seem to spend too much time watching me sleep."

"I like to make sure you're still breathing." Vincent shrugged. "Anyhow, I'll inform my mother that we will need a larger study that we can use for planning and projecting, but I already have a suite of rooms with a reading nook and a sitting room, plus the bedroom, a bathroom, and a dressing room. I'm happy to share if you're comfortable with it."

"Can I ask your mother for my own bathroom?" It was Orion's turn to laugh at Vincent's shocked expression. "What? You asked and besides I like to bathe in private. It's a great time to think."

"My bathtub is big enough for both of us." Vincent still looked miffed, which made Orion laugh all the more. "I know you might not be ready for that side of things yet..."

Considering Vincent hadn't even seen him naked, Orion definitely wasn't ready for that side of things just yet.

"...but you will get more comfortable with me in time, won't you?"

"I'm getting more comfortable with you every day." Orion laid his hand on Vincent's shoulder. "I know what you're indirectly asking about, and I truly appreciate your patience on that side of things. It's not that I'm uncomfortable with you at all. I'd just dearly love to get through a whole day without my back hurting before we add more activities to our evenings. By the time we get to bed at night, I ache everywhere."

“I wouldn’t be hurting your back if we were bathing together.” Vincent pouted.

“Yes, well, I’ll determine that for myself when I see your bathroom. Knowing you, if I was bathing alone in our shared bathroom, there would be a good chance you’d be outside the door, whining like a puppy to come in or panting like one.”

“I’m not a dog.” But Vincent laughed. It was becoming a running joke between them after Orion mentioned once he had the energy of a hunting hound. “Oh, we should get a dog. If we’re not traveling as much anymore, we could get our own dog, and it could come with us when we’re in town, or when we go on our travels. The men at the mine would love him. He could have his own bed, and a collar and...”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Putting his hand over Vincent’s mouth, Orion shook his head. “Can we just get settled into what will be a new home for me first? Please. You’ve been traveling for months. I’ve been traveling this past month. Before that we spent more than a month at the inn. I need to feel like I’m home. I want to unpack my trunk, see my books on a bookshelf, hang clothes in a closet instead of pulling them out of a bag. I’ve not even met your mother or seen the rooms we’ll be living in yet, and you’re talking about getting a dog.” He moved his hand to see Vincent’s smile.

“Too soon? You’re a bit of a homebody, aren’t you.”

“It’s not just me, it’s John, too. He’s got to find his place in a new castle. I know Morgan will help him, I’m thrilled they’ve become such good friends, but I want to see Morgan and John complain because you just drop your clothes all over the floor. I want to know that I’m going to be sitting at the same table having breakfast each morning. Yes, with you, and maybe even sharing a warm bath with you in an evening. Believe it or not, before you burst into my life, I used to love having a quiet but busy routine.”

“Is there anything else you’d enjoy doing?”

Orion knew exactly what his husband was talking about. Vincent was not a subtle man. He'd often felt the result of Vincent's 'interest' against his butt in the morning. It was promising he was slowly starting to feel similar feelings of interest in the necessary physical areas in the mornings as well, and hoped they could explore their relationship further in the future. But for now...

"Yes, I want to spend my evenings making out with you on a couch. I want us to sit together, reading books or arguing over them. I want to kiss you behind closed doors where I don't have to worry about a healer coming in and claiming I'm not ready for that ...and he's right. I know I'm not ready for that , yet. Even if the mind is willing, my body needs more time. But yes, I want to spend time in your arms, in private, in peace and quiet, exploring each other and just enjoying being with you." He eyed his husband sideways. "Of course, if that's too boring for you, I can always beat your butt at cards. I could do with the winnings. I'll probably need a new robe for the event your mother is planning."

"One time. One time you won," Vincent protested.

"That one time was the only time we played," Orion teased back. He leaned on his husband's shoulder. "Does that sound so horribly boring to you?"

"It sounds perfect to me. Welcome home."

The carriage clattered across the cobblestones of the Faast castle courtyard and came to a stop in front of the stone stairs leading up to the castle entrance. More stairs. Orion mentally groaned, but fixing a smile on his face, he waited until Vincent helped him out of the carriage. It was time to meet his mother-in-law.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

“Vincent, what on earth have you done to yourself?”

“Nothing I’m sure you haven’t wished for me to wake up and do at least a dozen times a day since I was born.” Out of the public eye, Vincent hugged his mother close, enjoying the way she wrapped her arms around him and held him just as tightly. They’d had the formal meet and greet a few hours before, where Vincent had proudly introduced his husband to his mother and sisters. But once Orion had been installed in Vincent’s suite, he’d gone back downstairs to have the sort of chat with a mother that any newly married man might have with a woman who’d always loved him absolutely.

Seated on a love seat in his mother’s private sitting room, he grinned at her. They looked a lot alike in coloring, both with dark hair, and his brilliant blue eyes came from her, too. “Isn’t he cute? Isn’t my husband just the sweetest, most intelligent man you could ever hope I would meet?”

“He’s not what I expected, that’s for sure. Indeed, when Morgan messaged me and informed me about your impending wedding, I wondered what sort of trouble you’d gone and got yourself into. Prince Orion is a very special and lovely surprise.” His mother laid her hand on Vincent’s arm. “You’ve not been a good boy, though, have you?”

“Mother, I’m thirty-four and admittedly, I might have made one huge blunder at Carntan, but I fixed that. You know I did. Morgan has been sending you updates. Orion and I are very happy together.”

“Did a cave roof have to fall onto his head for that to happen?” But his mother was

smiling. “Seriously, should we get him checked out for possible brain damage?”

“He’s had the best of healers working on him for over a month, Mother. He struggles sometimes with the physical limitations, but he’s moving about more and more each day.”

“But what about you, my son?” The queen patted his hand. “I heard you rescued him personally. It was you who found him in that horrific state, wasn’t it?”

Vincent nodded, staring down at his hands, thinking back to the worst day in his life. “It was hard, Mother. I thought he’d died. If he had, it would’ve been my fault because of my thoughtless behavior in Carntan. I’m doing all I can to make amends even though he forgave me ages ago. He said those actual words and I know he means them. But there’s a little part of me waiting for him to tell me to leave him. It’s what I deserve.”

“Oh, Vincent. Listen to what you’re saying. You’re all grown-up.”

“Did you miss the part when I said I’m thirty-four?” Only a mother could remind a grown man he used to be their little boy and still make him feel like one.

“Age doesn’t make you an adult, my wonderful son. You’ve fallen in love. You finally have someone who you can love and care for, that’s what I mean. You love your husband.”

“That’s what this is?” Vincent shook his head at his mother who was watching him closely. “It can’t be. I’ve been in love before, and it never felt like this.”

“That wasn’t love.” His mother laughed. “That was you lapping up the adoration from people who were looking to increase their social standing by being seen with you. You charmed them, had your way with them, paid them off with pretty gifts, and

never thought about them again.”

“Are you sure?” Vincent thought about people he’d been with in the past. He definitely believed he’d been in love with one or two of them at the time – for a week or two, anyway.

“When you broke up with any of them, male or female, whoever, it doesn’t matter, but when you broke up with them, did you ever cry in your room because they didn’t want you anymore? Did you ever feel sad because that person wasn’t in your life? Were there times during the day, after the breakup, when you saw or did something and your first thought was to share that with the person you’d split from?”

Frowning, Vincent shook his head. “No. But then the splits were amicable. They always were. We’d have fun when we were together and then we weren’t, and I had fun with other people instead.”

“You could do that because you weren’t in love with them. Now think about how you’d feel if Orion told you he didn’t want to live in Faast anymore.”

“We could move somewhere else.” Vincent thought for a moment. “I don’t think either one of us would like to live in Tyrion, especially while King Oscar is on the throne, but hey, we could live in Monce which is just over the back from the mine project. Orion would probably like that.”

“But you’re the Crown Prince of Faast.” His mother started laughing.

Vincent couldn’t see what was so funny. “Yes, but you’re not going to die anytime soon, and if Orion’s unhappy here...”

“Son, son, it’s all right. It was a hypothetical situation. I’m sure Orion will love it here, and we’ll all make sure he feels like part of the family.”

“He might not appreciate your brand of humor.” Vincent still wasn’t sure why his mother thought it was a good idea to tease him.

“He will because he spends time willingly with you. Vincent, my lovely son, accept it. You’re in love. For the first time in your long and privileged life you have someone in your life that you care for more than yourself. You feel the same way about him as I did about your late father. I still miss that man every day.”

“Isn’t that hard, still feeling like that? He’s been gone so long.”

“I know, but the love we shared while he was alive made it all worth it. I have our memories, I hold him in my heart.”

“Orion can’t die before me.” Vincent shook his head. “You didn’t see him when he was lying under that stone slab and I didn’t know if I could get him free. I didn’t even know if he was breathing, or how much he’d been hurt. He’d broken his back in three places, and yet I still picked him up like a sack of potatoes to get him out of the cave because I didn’t know what else to do, but what if I’m the reason he still hurts now?” Vincent hadn’t realized his voice had risen, until his mother was hugging him close again.

“What if it’s my fault, Mother?” Vincent could hear the sob in his voice, but for once he didn’t try and hide it. Those days waiting for Orion to wake up and not knowing if he would. Those endless weeks trying to stay positive as he watched Orion struggle to heal. It was why Vincent insisted on sharing Orion’s room. Orion teased him about being needy, and he was, but not for the reasons Orion thought. Vincent had to know his husband was still breathing. “I was so scared he was going to die just because I’d been my usual stupid selfish self.”

“Oh, Vincent, you’ve been holding this in for a while, haven’t you.”

“I have to. I’ve got to be strong for Orion.” Vincent sat up, sniffing and wiping under his eyes with his hand. “I figure if he sees me treating him as though he wasn’t injured, then he’ll come to believe he will heal fully, too. And he will. Mortrin, the healer from Monce said as much. But they couldn’t tell us when, and Orion was already worried he wasn’t good enough for me. Mother, I’m scared he’s going to wake up one day and realize I’m not good enough for him.”

“From what I’ve heard, Orion’s not a shallow man. From what I’ve seen during our meeting, I can tell he cares for you as well. You just have to remember not to take his affection for granted and perhaps share your fears with him sometimes. I don’t mean for you to go crying on his shoulder every five minutes, but you should always be honest with him especially when it relates to your feelings for him.”

“I’ll try, but for now, the only important thing is Orion’s recovery.” Vincent shook off his negative thoughts and then patted his chest. “This being in love business is very emotionally challenging, isn’t it?”

“You’ll settle in time.” His mother was chuckling again. “Both of you will find your groove and learn to work with each other. There will be times when you won’t agree, but so long as you remember to talk things out between yourselves, you’ll be all right. Your marriage will work.”

“I really want it to.”

“That’s half the battle. Is this celebration event going to cause any problems? I’ve already put it off once because you couldn’t travel, but I really can’t justify doing it again. You know what the advisers are like. They’ll start spouting off their nonsense about you not taking your position seriously, or worse, they’ll be muttering in the hallways about what could possibly be wrong with your husband that you don’t want to go public with him.”

“It’s in two days, isn’t it?” Taking his mother’s hands, Vincent said, “Is it all right to tell you I’m not looking forward to this. I know we have to do it, and yes, I know I’m usually the life and soul of the party. But what if I do something wrong and Orion’s upset again? I genuinely don’t want to hurt him again, but some behaviors are habits for me. Maybe I need boundary training or something?” Vincent still wasn’t sure.

“Tell me what you did wrong at Carntan? I didn’t get any details. I was only told your husband left you because of it.”

“I humiliated him, multiple times. There was the kissing at the receiving line, actual kissing...” Vincent went through the whole thing. How he didn’t want to appear rude, how Orion didn’t actually say anything, the incident with Lady Violet, which had his mother frowning. “I didn’t want to be rude...”

“And that’s what got you into trouble.” His mother tapped him sharply on the cheek. “You are a crown prince, remember that. You’re allowed to be perceived as rude sometimes. Nobody has the right to kiss you at a receiving line, or even air kiss you unless they are of the same rank as you. Now think about it. What are you going to do if someone tries that at this event? I know you’ve played fast and friendly with many of our society family members here as well as Carntan. I’m not saying those favors weren’t freely given and consensual, because I know they were, but you need to have a strategy in place, so you don’t allow those liberties again.”

“Morgan told me that what I should’ve done was told that person that they had disrespected me and my husband and that they had to leave immediately. And...I should probably demand a formal apology for Orion, too. Is that allowed?”

“That’s a good strategy. Do it. Now what about the business on the dance floor? Incidentally, Morgan was right. The first dance should always be with your husband and the person who jumped the queue so to speak was again, grossly out of line.”

“All right. If someone asks me to dance the first dance, I say no thank you and take Orion out onto the floor. If anyone asks me to dance after that, I am still going to say no, because I don’t want anyone dragging me into a quiet corner, causing gossip. My husband would not like that. Yes, that’s what I’ll do, and if I do get twitchy feet, and Orion is too tired at that stage to dance, I’m not going to make him feel bad about it, I’ll dance with one of my sisters instead. That will work, won’t it?”

“This is you, setting boundaries that you’ve never done before. What do you think?” But his mother was smiling, so Vincent was on the right track.

“I think I’m proud of my husband, I want to spend my time with him, and if anyone interferes with our celebration I will let them know they will no longer be welcome at the castle.” Vincent ran the words through his head again. “I can say that, can’t I?”

“There have been a few times in past celebrations when I wished you had said something like that, but yes, my son. As I said, you’re finally growing up and it warms my heart to see it. Although can I add a further piece of advice and suggest you remind your husband that his status is now elevated as well? The King and Queen of Tyrion might not have considered his needs or voice important, but here in Faast, the royal family supports each of their members to set their own boundaries, and I’ll support your husband’s right to speak up for himself, as much as I do yours.”

“Hmm, good point. It might take a while for Orion to understand how different things are here, but I will tell him.”

“Just keep repeating it until he understands it’s true. Now, tell me about how you got callouses of all things. Were you genuinely mining, in an actual mine?”

I’m so lucky I have my mother, Vincent thought, feeling a lot better as he told stories about his time working in Orion’s mine.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

Faast was distinctly different from Tyrion, but in so many positive ways. Orion's first clue on that had been the way Vincent's mother had greeted him when they'd first arrived. Rather than be formally presented, as Orion had expected, Vincent had taken him through into a beautiful and comfortable sitting room where five ladies were waiting – the queen and Vincent's four sisters. There was a huge cheer when they walked in, the young ladies jumping up and clamoring for hugs from Vincent who was more than happy to give them.

Used to a more formal protocol, Orion ducked past them and went over to the only woman present seated in a large chair. Bowing low, he said, "Queen Julia of Faast, I'm Orion, previously prince of Tyrion. I'm so very pleased to meet you."

"Aren't you an absolute delight." Queen Julia had stood up, and seconds later, Orion was being hugged, by a queen, and while it shouldn't have been unusual because he'd been raised by one to, it really was. Not only that, but after he'd been hugged, the young ladies decided it was their turn, grabbing him in turn, stating their name, and claiming he was their new brother now. "And the favorite one," Rosalyn had said, poking her tongue out at Vincent.

It was fun and chaotic, the way Orion imagined families could be, even though he'd never experienced it himself. He was truly grateful though when Vincent stepped in and said Orion needed to rest. No one thought it was unusual or rude of him to leave. The queen just asked Vincent to find her when they were settled so they could have a chat and catch up. A chat . Orion's mind was buzzing as Vincent took him to what would be their suite, but his heart was warmed by the genuine welcome.

After a quiet night, and after checking that John was equally settled and pleased with

the room that had been allocated to him, Orion was happy to agree when Vincent offered him a carriage ride around the city the next morning. “I have an open topped carriage,” Vincent said with his typical excitement over breakfast. “It will make it easier for you to see things and for people to see you.”

Considering Orion wasn't sure the good people of Faast would even be interested in him, given how they didn't know who he was, he still agreed. Vincent's excitement was quite contagious.

“I was thinking, I probably need to find a tailor, if that's possible. John has complained many times about the lack of formal clothing in my wardrobe. I will need something suitable for the event tomorrow night. A robe in the royal family colors perhaps? Would that do?” Orion looked up to see Vincent watching him with a strange expression on his face. “What's wrong? Should I wear the Tyrion colors instead?”

“I was really hoping you'd wear one of the waistcoats I bought you.” There was that pout again. “You look so handsome in them, and I was thinking if we took one of them to our tailor, then I could get him to make one that will fit me before tomorrow night, so we'd be in similar outfits.”

“You think that would be suitable for your mother's event?” Orion's mother would've had a fit if she'd seen him wearing something made by a woman from the markets. “They are not specifically formal wear, and I don't want to offend your mother. Are you sure she won't mind?”

“They are beautiful, they suit you, you're comfortable wearing them, and I personally think I'd look absolutely dashing in something similar.” Vince struck a pose, making Orion laugh.

“You would look dashing in sack cloth, but I'm warning you now, the one you get

made won't be as beautiful as the ones you bought me. You're going to wish you'd bought some for yourself from the same market where you got mine."

"Hmm, do I sense some Tyrion Faast rivalry here? Challenge accepted. Let's head out."

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The city of Faast was a sprawled out vibrant mass of light colored stone buildings, wide cobbled streets, and bright awnings over shop windows where groups of people congregated to chat as they were doing their shopping. Orion kept turning his head, one way and then the other, trying to take it all in. Faast clearly enjoyed the mechanical side of life. He spotted a steam powered food cart, and someone was pushing a second cart that also appeared to have a steam powered device on it.

"What are those?" He asked, noticing large contraptions on almost every corner. They were huge and appeared to be an engine of some type, although they all had a large wheel on them as well wide pipes that seemed to go underground, and even a coiled hose on each side of the devices.

Vincent seemed pleased with the interest. "Those, my curious husband, are pumps. The city of Faast, the way it's situated below the mountain range up there." He pointed to the horizon line where Orion could see a line of hills. "It means any time there's a heavy rainfall, these streets can be prone to flooding. Mother had the pumps designed and installed when I was about eight years old. Everyone is taught as part of their schooling how to operate them. In the event of a flood, anyone closest to the pumps can turn them on. The excess water is sucked into the hoses, and then pumped underground where there is a series of pipes that send the water out from where it might do damage to homes and businesses. It's very effective."

"That's an ingenious idea," Orion said, smiling. He looked around some more. "Do

you not have an open air market here?”

“Why?” Vincent chuckled. “Are you thinking of setting one up?”

“I’m just getting my bearings.” Orion shook his head. “In Tyrion the citizens there love the idea of the marketplaces. It is another area where people can congregate, but more importantly it’s a venue where the regular townsfolk can sell handmade items and crafts on a smaller scale without having to outlay for the expense of a shop or permanent retail building. This allows them to sell their items directly to their customers, for cheaper than they might have to if they had a shop. But then if you have a flooding issue...”

“No. No. Our rainy season here is only about one month in twelve.” Vincent had his thinking face on. He always tapped his chin with his forefinger when he had something on his mind. “Having a market though, doesn’t that take business away from established companies that have bought or lease a building to sell from?”

“It doesn’t seem to, no. Established businesses have already built a reputation for the types of goods and services they provide. In fact, many of them appreciate the increased foot traffic the market brings into the retail area in town. And there are some businesses that start off in the market space, testing out their new products or craft items, who will then go into a permanent building if they build a similar reputation themselves. It seems to work.” Orion chuckled and pointed a discreet finger at a young girl who was waving madly at the carriage. “It looks like you have a fan.”

“Good day to you, Lady Molly.” Vincent waved madly and then did a half bow as the carriage went past. “She’s adorable. Her parents run a bakery that we will visit before heading back to the castle. The sweet pastries there are incredible. But first we need to visit with our tailor.”

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Orion had a love hate relationship with royal tailors. The one in Tyrion honestly acted as though he was doing his clients a favor being in the same room with them. Mr. Grainger, in Faast, was cut from the same cloth.

“I will endeavor to do my best to create you something similar in time for the event tomorrow evening, your highness,” he said in a lofty voice, fingering the material on Orion’s waistcoat and then checking his fingertips as if to make sure he didn’t get any dirt on them. “The color choices in this particular piece are an unusual combination...”

“And that’s what I want, Humphrey.” Vincent beamed at the dour man. “This was made in Tyrion. I told my husband that I was sure our royal tailor could make something that would compare or even rival his garment, which was originally a betrothal gift from me. I’m sure you won’t let me down.”

“I wouldn’t dream of letting you down, your highness.” Mr. Grainger pulled himself up to his full height of four foot ten. “It’s just...the material is definitely unusual. Crown Prince Consort, do you know where your tailor sourced the unusual threads that make up this garment? It is, without doubt, beautifully crafted in its construction, it’s just the threads are...unusual.”

“That would be because Martha, the lady who makes and sells these waistcoats, spins, dyes, and then weaves the fabrics herself.” Orion smiled, seeing the horror Mr. Grainger was trying to hide. “Each item is entirely unique, and no color combination is ever repeated. My husband bought me three of these, and he will attest that while they all share the same cut and size, each waistcoat looks very different from the others.”

“They are so beautiful, Humphrey.” Vincent slipped his hand around Orion’s arm.

“You should’ve seen her stall. It was so bright and colorful, it stood out from everything else in the marketplace.”

“A marketplace stall. How quaint.” Mr. Grainger seemed to want to say more on the subject, but then perhaps he remembered who he was speaking to. “I have no doubt that as the only royal tailor in Faast, my associates and I will have no trouble creating a suitable similar garment for you, your highness, and it will give me a great sense of pride to know you will be wearing it to such an auspicious event.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Humphrey. I’ll expect delivery at the castle no later than tomorrow afternoon. Come along, Orion. We have a bakery to visit.”

Orion managed to keep his laughter to himself until they were well clear of the shop. “That man,” he said, laughing so hard he almost fell as he was helped into the carriage. “Did you hear the way he said marketplace stall? And calling it quaint? He must’ve used the word unusual at least four times.”

“Humphrey is one of those businesses who prides itself on his closeness to the crown, although he was devastated when my father passed away.” Vincent jumped in beside him, closing his door before the driver even had a chance. “With having four sisters, I was the only one left he can outfit now, as he doesn’t do women’s fashion at all. And now you of course. My mother has a wonderful dressmaker for herself and my sisters. But I do feel sometimes Humphrey doesn’t understand my fashion sense.”

“I’ve seen you in two formal outfits that are very dashing, and one might say unusual. That lavender outfit you wore for our wedding wasn’t what you’d call a traditional color a person might wear to get married in.”

Vincent leaned closer. “Don’t tell anyone, but I had those made for me in Monce. Prince Serron put me onto his tailor, who also does amazing work.”

“You do realize that the waistcoat you’re going to get is not going to look like anything Martha made, don’t you?”

“He said he would make me a similar garment, so we will just have to wait and see.”

Orion sat back in the carriage as they moved through the streets again, a quiet smile on his face. He’d wager Martha’s skills against Mr. Grainger’s any day of the week.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

“That ridiculous man has made this out of gold and black threads, and look...look. It covers my butt.” Vincent stormed out of the room where he’d been dressing, getting ready for the night’s event, into the sitting room where Orion was waiting with John and Morgan.

It was the next day. The package had arrived from the tailor an hour earlier, but Vincent had resisted opening it. “I want it to be a surprise for you when you see it on me,” he’d told Orion, even though he was secretly excited to see the new waistcoat for himself. Or at least he had been until he actually saw it. It was worse when he put it on.

“Look at it.” Vincent waved his hands at the offending material. “This is meant to be a waistcoat, just like my husband’s. Covering my shoulders, but leaving my arms bare, and cut into the waist here,” he pointed to his waist. “This thing,” he tugged at the bottom of the offending garment. “This thing goes way past my waist, and hips, and is almost down to my knees!”

Orion, who was already dressed and had been sitting reading, smirked from where he was seated. “At least it’s not robe length,” he offered. “It’s very demure, and the color looks dashing on you.”

“I have got coats and robes in this color already.” Vincent stomped into the bedroom and grabbed a handful of material items from his closet. Going back into the sitting room, he said, “Look at this. A robe in gold and black. A coat in gold and black. Oh, look here, another robe in...wait for it...gold and black threads. Oh, here’s something different.” Dropping the other items on the floor, he held onto one piece that looked like a robe as well. “He’s used silver for this one. Silver and black. How radical of

him.” He dropped that one on the floor and walked over them. “There’s no color. Why are the only colorful items I have in my closet clothes I bought from somewhere outside of Faast?”

“You’re going to have to wear it.” Orion wasn’t looking at him directly, but Vincent could still see the smirk. “You told Mr. Grainger you would when you impressed on him you needed it for the event tonight. He will be gutted if you wear something else.”

“But I wanted to wear a waistcoat like yours.” Vincent slumped down in the nearest chair in disgust. “Yours shows off your lovely shape. Mine makes me look like a drain cleaner pipe.”

“A very fancy drain cleaner pipe.” Orion was still chuckling. “I would wear something else, but you specifically said you wanted to see me in one of your gifts and I don’t have anything in my rather sparse wardrobe that would compare to your...whatever that is.”

“Exactly. Even you don’t know what it is.” Vincent plucked at where the material was now bunched up over his hips. “There’s no flare or slit in the back. I’m going to have to unbutton this just to sit down in it, otherwise I’m going to look like I’m hiding something underneath it if someone peeks under the table.” He undid three of the buttons and smoothed out the material. “Gold and black threads. The man has no imagination. We even showed them a copy of what I was looking for.”

“We could get in touch with Martha from Tyrion and ask her to make some custom waistcoats for your highness for future events,” John suggested.

“Although, if you’re going to keep throwing them on the floor, I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Morgan grumbled as he and John went to pick up the items Vincent had dropped. He and John disappeared into the bedroom, probably to iron and then put

the offending items away.

“You look like a very distinguished prince.” Orion put his book aside. “I’m guessing that was the look Mr. Grainger was going for.”

“I told mother I was getting something made that was different. She’s going to laugh at me.” Vincent hopped up from his chair and went over to where Orion was sitting, helping him to stand. They had spent the day quietly, and Vincent made sure Orion had plenty of rest. “Are you nervous? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I’m rested. I’ve been spoiled all day.” Orion’s hand was warm on his face. “This is as good as I’m going to get right now. Your mother assured me we weren’t having a reception line, which was very kind of her. It means I won’t have to stand for too long, but I want you to have a good time. These are your people.”

“They are yours, too, now.” Vincent felt the same heart flutter he always did standing so close to his husband. “Remember what mother said. You will outrank everyone there tonight except me and my mother. You’re even higher ranked than my sisters.”

“Don’t let them hear you say that.” Orion nodded. “I know and I appreciate the efforts your mother is making to help me feel like part of the family. It’s all still new to me, but I cherish theirs and your concern. I will be fine.”

“You have banishing powers now. You can demand that anyone leave the court who makes you uncomfortable.” Tucking his arm around Orion’s waist Vincent led them to the door.

“Have you thought about doing that to Mr. Grainger?” There was that chuckle again which made Vincent feel all warm inside.

“Many times,” he admitted grimly. “Unfortunately, if I go to him and complain about

this thing that I'm wearing, he'll simply say it's one of his apprentices' fault, and they'd get fired. I'm not doing that. Mother also reminded me that if I fired him personally, there'd be no one else to take his place. It wouldn't be so bad. His tailoring skills are incredible, but it's like he can't get his hands on any materials that aren't black and gold."

"Well, there's a new community project for you. You could set up a spinning and dying company for locals to use to make custom materials for clothes, upholstery or other cloth items." Orion suggested. "I mean, your country might have one already, but if you did, then it's possible there's a tailor in the making lurking in a smaller town around here, who might appreciate an opportunity."

"There won't be one in town, I know that much. I'm sure Humphrey intimidates anyone who comes into town and tries to set up their own tailoring business. There's been a few over the years who have started up and then closed up again almost as quickly."

"Ooh, underhand company tactics. Sounds like something else we could investigate." Orion leaned on him as they approached the ballroom. "Okay. Little bit nervous now."

"Thank you for sharing that with me." Vincent dropped a kiss on Orion's cheek. "You look amazing in that waistcoat, and I am so very proud of you."

"Thank you, Vincent. Let's do this, then."

Vincent nodded at the doorman who threw open the doors. "Be upstanding for Crown Prince Vincent and Crown Prince Consort Orion," he called out in a loud voice.

Don't let me mess this up.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:30 am

The first part of the celebratory dinner went much like Orion expected – to a point. He didn't expect the queen to hug him as Vincent led him to his seat, but it was welcome and he hugged her back, making her smile. There were some new food items he tried, which Vincent told him were local to Faast, including a particularly spicy herb that was used to sprinkle on the top of the main course, which Orion enjoyed.

When Rosalyn, who seemed the most outspoken of Vincent's sisters, learned he'd never had it before, she kept putting small pieces of food on his plate, saying "you should try this," or, "have you had this before?" That was a fun and tasty experience. In a lot of ways, it was how Orion would imagine an ordinary family dinner would go, if he could forget roughly two hundred people were watching them eat.

He wasn't that surprised either when the Queen Julia rose, at the end of the meal, to make a small speech. Orion knew his father used to do that on many an occasion. Large balls and celebrations were an ideal time for the ruling family to make announcements to their society family members. He leaned back, cradling a half of glass of wine, conscious of Vincent's arm across the back of his chair, looking in her direction, which was the respectful thing to do.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the queen smiled as she surveyed the room. "As a parent, I'm sure my words will resonate with many of you when I say how difficult it can be as our children get older, and we have to set them free to find their way in life. As a crown prince, my Vincent spread his wings further than most, and there are times I wonder when he's going to come home, but I know in my heart he always will."

There were some polite chuckles. Queen Julia waited for them to settle down before

continuing. “I have always been inordinately proud of my son. He’s spread the word about our little country far and wide, forging many useful friendships with neighboring countries and those even farther afield. But I will admit, as both a mother and a queen that when I heard word that my son was getting married, I had a few anxious moments, wondering what type of person my son would consider a suitable spouse.

“But I shouldn’t have worried.” The queen was looking directly at Orion. “My son brought home a fine, upstanding, intelligent prince. A lineage and a match any parent would and should be proud of. But what warmed my heart more was seeing how much our crown prince had grown and matured, due to the caring these two men share in their relationship. When I asked Vincent in jest, during a private conversation, what he might do if our crown prince consort didn’t enjoy living in Faast, he immediately started listing other countries where he thought his husband would prefer to live with him.”

Orion’s eyes widened, when Queen Julia continued, “I had to inform my son I was simply teasing him and reminded him he was the crown prince of our lovely country, however I think that dedication and devotion to another person is something rarely seen among royal relationships. I hope you will all join me in ensuring our crown prince consort comes to love our country as much as we do.”

There was a smatter of polite applause, but as the queen was still standing, it didn’t last for long.

“There was one other question my son had for me, during our chat, and that concerned the protocol surrounding who gets to claim the first dance with a crown prince. Under normal circumstances it would be the consort, and I was very firm about that. As the crown prince consort ranks higher than anyone else in this room with two exceptions, it is his right to dance with his husband before any other. Anyone who would seek to usurp my new son-in-law’s position in this court

wouldn't find themselves welcome at this court any longer."

She's trying to help me, Orion realized, and he put his wine glass on the table for fear he would drop it.

"However, I'm the one who is going to break with protocol this evening." Queen Julia paused for a moment and then said, "I understand the dancing typically does not start until I, as your ruling queen leaves the room, but tonight because my son-in-law is already so special to me, I will ask. Orion, would you do me the honor of sharing this first dance with me." She held out her hand. "I'm the only one in the room who has the right to ask you, because I'm the only one who still outranks my son."

Honor? Orion was floored. He could barely get out of his chair, but when he did he bowed low, before straightening. "You have honored me, Your Majesty," he said quietly, taking Queen Julia's hand. Conscious of every eye in the room on him, he led the queen to the floor, worried if his legs would actually hold him upright.

"Play something slow, band leader," Queen Julia called out as she slid into his arms. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

They started to move. "You didn't have to do that, Your Majesty," Orion whispered, carefully guiding his mother-in-law around the floor. They did one lap and then he noticed Vincent with Rosalyn and then the other sisters being escorted by partners he hadn't met yet, all joining them on the floor.

"It never hurts to keep Vincent on his toes." Queen Julia's eyes were just like her son's. "He cares deeply for you. That makes you important to me and this country. But if you ever think he needs a tap around the ears, then just let me know and I'll do it for you."

Orion couldn't help but smile. He could see where Vincent got a lot of his

personality. “You have honored me, and in a small way, the country of Tyrion this evening. I will be sure to mention this to my brother Onyx in my next communication with him.”

“Ah yes, how is your dear brother?” The queen and he moved around the floor again. “I did have hopes I could pair him with one of my daughters, but then he went and married Princess Evangaline from Elembaum. I was so disappointed although I did send a gift.”

“He and Evangaline are very happy together. She’s admitted at times she would rather they just lived quietly in a rural house somewhere, instead of being the crown princess, but she is devoted to Onyx and he to her.”

“Then I am very pleased for them both.” Queen Julia sighed as the music closed on the first number. “Thank you, Orion. In truth I haven’t danced since my late husband was alive. That was a real pleasure.”

“The pleasure was mine.” Orion kept his breathing even as he slowly escorted the queen to the door, bowing low as he let go of her hand. “You’ve made my night, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

“It’s me who should be thanking you, Orion,” Queen Julia said with a twinkle in her eyes. “At least now Vincent is married, I know where he is at nights and can sleep soundly because of that.”

“Good night, Your Majesty.” Orion was still smiling when he turned to find Vincent standing behind him.

“Are you feeling all right?” Vincent bent low to whisper in Orion’s ear. “Here, take my arm. We can sit this next one out.”

“I’m a little overwhelmed, to be honest.” Orion kept his voice low as well. People were watching them, but none of them were close enough to hear anything. “Your mother just gave me the highest honor. Did you ask her to do that?”

“Nope. That’s just the way my mother is. Renegade queen,” Vincent said fondly. “She won’t even dance with me. Here’s our seat and I got some water for you. Just remember what my mother said about you being important to Faast. You’re about to be approached in droves.”

“What fun.” Orion smiled dutifully as a couple approached their seats.

“This is Errol and Caroline Macelroy. Lord and lady. They own an estate just beyond the city walls.” Vincent sat down resting his arm over the back of Orion’s chair again. “It’s nice to see you two this evening.”

“You, too, your highness,” Errol said stiffly, bowing just enough to show respect. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Crown Prince Consort. I hear you’re from Tyrion. Is that where you secured that delightful...waistcoat?”

He sounds like Mr. Grainger. Looking up with a perfectly straight face, Orion shook his head. “No, actually. My husband sourced it for me. I believe it was made by the gremlins in the border mountains, was that right, Vincent?”

“You remembered.” Vincent burst out laughing, until he must’ve noticed the couple were still waiting for him to speak. “Yes, yes, the consort is correct. I had them made specially from the gremlins from the border mountains. My husband has a number of them and they’re all unique, don’t you think?”

“Really unique indeed,” Errol agreed. “Your highness, I would truly appreciate knowing your contact for them...”

Orion zoned out, happy to let his husband carry the conversation while he sipped his water and lean against the back of his chair, the weight of his husband's arm keeping him grounded. His legs were holding up, his back wasn't aching too badly. Hopefully I'll get to dance with my husband as well before this night is over.

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Vincent had never felt so proud and thankful for his mother and his husband. His mother had welcomed Orion and showed her support for him in every way possible. Orion, in turn showed a grace on the dance floor Vincent hadn't seen in his husband before, and he was keen to feel his husband in his arms.

Of course, people came up and talked to them. That's what the party was about, and Vincent knew everyone in attendance. But unlike other times when Vincent felt he needed to be moving, being part of the action, he was perfectly content to sit with his husband, introducing friends to Orion, and making small talk. When he was asked a couple of times if he'd like to dance, Vincent just shook his head and kept on talking. It was so much easier than he thought it would be. Thank you mother.

He was still internally chuckling over Orion's gremlin comment. In that one sentence Orion had shown he had not only remembered something Vincent had said from back when they first met, but he had the confidence to use the same gremlins in conversation. It might not have meant much to a lot of people, but to Vincent it meant the world. He and his husband were going to be all right.

It was a few hours later. The party was winding down and the music had slowed. During a lull in conversations Vincent could tell Orion was wilting. "Can you manage one tiny dance, just for me?" He asked quietly. "Say no, if you're too tired."

"I was hoping you'd ask. Sweep me off into your arms, my prince."

“Isn’t it strange,” Vincent mused as he did as Orion asked, taking him to the dance floor and holding him close as they slowly moved together. “In all the time we’ve known each other, this is our first dance together. That makes this night special, don’t you think?”

“This whole night has been magical.” Orion leaned close and Vincent tightened his hold, enjoying the feel of Orion’s body against his. “We’ve slayed the party dragons...”

“Invoked the gremlins of the border mountains.”

“Martha won the waistcoat challenge, as I knew she would.”

“Yes. Well. We’ll have conversations about changing tailors in the morning,” Vincent grumbled but he was only teasing. Honestly, it had been the best night of his life. Nothing could spoil it.

“We’ve come so far, and done so much together,” Orion’s voice sounded wistful. “There’s only one more thing I can think of that would make this night even more special.”

“If it’s in my power, it’s yours,” Vincent promised looking down to see Orion looking up at him.

“When we go to bed tonight, I’d dearly love a kiss before sleep.” Two red slashes appeared on Orion’s cheeks. “And not on my hair like you do when you think I’m already asleep. A proper kiss while I’m awake.”

“I can do that. I’d happily do that. We can go and do that now.”

“Keep dancing.” Orion patted his chest. “This is lovely, just being held and moving

like this. Let's enjoy it a while longer."

Enjoy it? Vincent was floating on clouds.

Three months later

“Do you have any idea why the queen wants to see us?” Orion asked as he and Vincent got into their open air carriage. They’d been walking around, visiting local businesses, getting a feel for what public sentiment might be for the proposed market venture Orion wanted to set up in the city of Faast. They were just thinking about getting lunch when a footman from the castle came to notify them Queen Julia wanted to see them urgently.

“With mother it could be anything,” Vincent admitted, sitting beside him and taking his hand as the carriage made its way back to the castle. “I think she just likes seeing your face every day, and we did slip out this morning before breakfast.”

“It was worth it. I just had an urge for those bakery pastries this morning. The ones at the castle are not the same.” Orion grinned as he and Vincent waved at Molly who was waving back at them. “Hello, Lady Molly.”

Orion was loving life in Faast. In fact, it could be said he was thriving. After the celebration event, he and Vincent settled into a comfortable routine that was only mildly interrupted by Vincent’s occasional spontaneity. Like the time Vincent took him off in the dead of night just to soak in some healing hot pools up in the mountain region. It was very relaxing and did help Orion’s back, although it was a hike to get there.

Or another time when Vincent took it into his head to try and cook for Orion personally. He’d heard somewhere it was a romantic thing to do, and Orion didn’t know anything about it until he was called down to the castle kitchen.

“Get him out of my kitchen, your highness, please,” the chef had pleaded, waving his dishcloth in Vincent’s direction. “He’s making a mess everywhere and he says it’s all for you. If you eat that food he’s making, I’m sure you’ll die.”

Fun times, so Orion was fairly confident that whatever reason the queen had for speaking with them, it would be something he and Vincent could handle together.

Queen Julia was in her private sitting room, and Orion was struck by how worried she looked, sitting as she was with a bundle of papers in her hands. “Your Majesty, is something wrong?”

“Sit. Sit.” The Queen waved at the chairs next to her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to come across as dramatic, but there’s been news from Tyrion.”

“Bad news?” Orion collapsed into the chair, a huge pit of lead in his stomach. He and Onyx still kept in touch regularly, and he and Vincent had traveled to celebrate the first shipment of crystals leaving the mine the month before. “Has there been an accident at the mine?”

“No, the mine is fine.” The queen smiled at him. “It concerns the castle.” She looked at her pages. “Your brother has finally taken the unusual step of asking the World Council to assess your father, King Oscar, in terms of his mental capacity and fitness to lead the country.”

“Oh, boy. That doesn’t sound good,” Vincent said. “There’s no way anyone could hide King Oscar’s condition from the truth sayers at the World Council.”

“Exactly. The World Council found that King Oscar is to be permanently detained in a facility that will ensure his continued comfort and treatment. Because of this it was decided by the World Council that King Oscar can no longer remain in his position.”

“And my mother?” Orion was stunned. “How is she taking all this?”

“The former Queen of Tyrion has requested leave from the court to move to a small, undisclosed location to live out her life in privacy and comfort. The new King Onyx has granted her request.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Orion put his hand to his mouth, his mind racing as he tried to work out what he’d just heard. Onyx had always been adamant that appearances needed to be maintained for as long as possible. “The ex-king, my father, did he hurt someone?”

His mother-in-law nodded. “The crown princess, well, now I should say Queen Evangaline. Oscar was apparently drunk one night, and while Onyx was working late in his office he went to his daughter-in-law’s rooms. Details are sparse, there was apparently a lot of shouting, and when your father’s man tried to intervene, he was punched and pushed into a wall. All Onyx would say is that she is recovering from her ordeal and wasn’t physically hurt, although she was understandably shaken. The valet suffered a few injuries, but he is recovering well, too. From what Onyx has said those actions were the final straw.”

“Oh, no. Poor Evangaline and Peter, too.” Orion looked across at Vincent. “We should probably go...”

“You will have to visit there. You should make plans to leave today,” Queen Julia said quickly. “Onyx got in touch personally, because of course his steps to have his father removed are almost unprecedented and he was worried about the possible implications this might have on both you and your sister Olivia. I have sent Onyx an urgent reply, letting him know that as far as I am concerned he did the only right and decent thing, and that the Faast royal family will stand united with his decision and continue to offer any support they may need.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much. I know Onyx, the only reason why he wanted the situation hidden for so long was because he didn’t want to damage the reputations of my mother, me, and Olivia. But can we hope the king and queen of Carntan would

feel the same as you do?”

“Yes, and there have also been messages of support from the king and queen of Elembaum, Evangaline’s parents as well.” The queen nodded. “But the reason why you will need to travel there is because first, I’d like you to represent the Faast royal family at King Onyx’s coronation, but apparently you will need to go there for your own inauguration as well.”

She leaned over, handing Orion a piece of paper. “In accordance with the World Council’s decree and King Onyx’s wishes, you will take the king’s place as Crown Prince of Tyrion. He doesn’t have a current heir, so you’re it.”

“How’s that going to even work?” Orion looked between his mother-in-law and Vincent who was grinning wildly. “I’m the Crown Prince Consort of Faast. I can’t be in two places at once.”

“Oh, does that make me Crown Prince Consort of Tyrion?” Vincent seemed excited by the idea. “You’d get to boss me around as my superior.”

“I do that anyway and you love every minute of it.” Orion sighed. “Your Majesty, how would this work?”

“Onyx explained he and Evangaline do plan on raising a family,” the queen said kindly. “It’s just with the stresses they had both been under during the past year or so, it wasn’t something they were comfortable doing. Onyx assures me that now the stress has been removed from the castle, he’ll be able to use his improved position to delegate more tasks and spend more time with his wife. Queen Evangaline is insisting on him doing that, in fact. So for you it is simply a placeholder position for now. Nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about, right.” Orion glanced at his husband. “I don’t know what you’re grinning about. You wouldn’t have even looked at me if I’d have been the

Crown Prince of Tyrion before we married.”

“You would’ve caught my eye no matter what status you had in the castle, my wonderful husband. So when do we leave for Tyrion?” Vincent rubbed his hands together. “I see more fun adventures ahead.”

Orion groaned and looked at Queen Julia. “Can we just send him by himself? He’s always got so much energy, he makes me tired just looking at him.”

“As much as I’d be happy to keep you here, it’s you who has to go to Tyrion,” the queen said with a smile. “I could keep Vincent here if that was easier for you...”

But Vincent was already shaking his head. “I would follow. Even if you chained me in the deepest dungeons, I would get free and follow the man who holds my heart. He could get attacked by gremlins, you know.”

“This castle doesn’t have dungeons, and those gremlins are a figment of your imagination.” Getting to his feet, Orion bowed to the queen. “Thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty. Your crown princes will be back in time for the harvest festival, if not before.” He took Vincent’s hand as the man bounced up beside him. “Well, one of us will be. This bouncy one might get lost on his great adventure.”

The queen was still laughing as they left the room.

“You can’t lose me,” Vincent said as they made their way back to their room. “I’ll just find you again.”

“I know.” Orion smiled. “But I’m undecided if that’s a good thing or if that just makes you a stalker.” Softening his tease with a quick kiss, he swung Vincent’s hand as they walked. His heart hurt for Evangaline, although he was so proud of what Onyx had done. In a world where reputation was everything, for Onyx to take that step took a lot of courage. Orion had no doubt his sister and Jaxon would be at the

coronation, too.

“Hey, do you think there’s anyway we could take our bed with us?” Vincent said as they went into their room to find John and Morgan already packing for them. “I’ve gotten used to you being in it with me.”

“We’ll have to leave it for us to come back to.” Orion looked around the room seeing his books on the bookshelf, one of his waistcoats hanging on the wardrobe door, and his boots by the door. “No matter where we go, we’ve always got home to come back to.”

“And this is your home?”

“This is my home. With you.” Orion nodded. “There’s one positive with going to Tyrion, aside from seeing my family again.”

“Oh, something exciting?”

“Well, that depends on whether or not you want to get your own waistcoats from Martha at the market?”

“Yes. Yes.” Vincent waved his hands at Morgan and John. “Pack faster, we’ve got a trip to make to see a true artisan. She’s amazing.”

Orion, seeing that Vincent was going to just get in the way, went over to sit by the window. As he looked out, he thought about how much his life had changed. His back still ached if he was on his feet too much, but it was nowhere near as bad as it had been. And nowadays, his legs only felt shaky if Vincent was teasing him with kisses.

Three...two...one... “Your highness, sir, Crown Prince Consort Orion, can you please take your husband out of here and feed him or something?” Morgan pleaded

from the other room. “We’ll never get the packing done if your husband keeps trying to help.”

“Hey, Vincent,” Orion called as he stood up again. “I’m off to lunch. Do you want some?”

Silly question, he thought as Vincent reached the door before he did, opening it and giving Orion a courtly bow. “After you, Crown Prince Orion of Tyrion.”

“Don’t start with that nonsense.” But they were both laughing as they headed out to find lunch.

The End