



The Demon King's Unruly Mate (Silvermist Mates #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Desire burns hotter than duty to a crown.

Talia

The throne should be mine. I survived my brothers murderous reign. I built a network of spies. I played the perfect daughter. But instead of naming me heir, my father hands my birthright and me to the mercenary who ended his sons life. Now Im bound to a man who sets my blood on fire with every touch, who left our marriage bed before sunrise and took everything I earned along with my freedom.

I should hate my new mate. Instead, I burn for the warrior who wears my crown while keeping his heart locked away.

Kaz

I expected to pay the ultimate price for killing the crown prince. Death would have been simpler than the kings true punishment: uniting our clans by taking his daughter as my unwilling mate.

My new bride is as dangerous as she is beautiful, a cunning princess who deserves more than a killers mark on her throat. Now court vultures circle what they think is easy prey, but theyll learn why the throne fears my clans name.

Even if she never forgives me for stealing her crown.

The Demon Kings Unruly Mate is a spicy monster romance featuring deadly court politics, two stubborn royals whod rather burn than bow, and an arranged marriage ready to ignite them both. Perfect for readers who love fated mates, enemies-to-lovers, and demons who play with fire.

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KAZ

The hellfire pendant dangled from Rava's fingers. Her face twisted with disgust as she commanded our tormentor to his knees. My little sister, wielding the very power that had violated us, using it to end this nightmare.

"You will confess your crimes," she said, her voice shaking with the effort of control. "You will submit to judgment for what you've done to everyone you hurt."

Javed howled and fought against her control like a rabid animal. Even on his knees, the bastard wouldn't yield. The pendant flickered in Rava's palm, her grip weakening as the relic's magic pushed back.

"Nowhere... will be safe," he spat, golden eyes burning with hatred. "I'll find you. Make you... pay."

Red smoke began swirling around him—teleporting. Escaping. Again .

Time slowed. I snatched the ax from the air as Malak's throw sent it tumbling toward me, the worn handle settling into my palm like it belonged there.

My body moved with practiced coordination, muscles responding to years of training rather than the lingering echo of Javed's commands that still buzzed beneath my skin.

The ax felt light in my grip, my arm strong despite the bone-deep ache from hours spent beating the orc under Javed's control.

The orc. Rava's mate . Another debt I couldn't repay.

Javed's teleportation cloud thickened, his form already beginning to dissolve. Not fast enough. I swung the blade into the center of the crimson haze and felt a sickening resistance as it connected.

The prince stumbled backward. Flickered. Half of him materialized inside the ornate chair he'd claimed as his throne. Wood and flesh fused together in a grotesque sculpture, a fitting monument to his twisted reign. His scream pierced the air, high and desperate.

I didn't hesitate. The ax came down again, cleaving through chair and prince alike.

Blood sprayed across my face. Hot. Metallic. The sound—gods, the sound —of blade separating flesh from wood and bone echoed in the sudden silence of our family hall.

Javed's head rolled to a stop at my feet, golden eyes wide with shock, mouth frozen in a final scream.

I killed the prince .

The thought hit me like a punch to the gut and stole the breath from my lungs. The ax slipped from my fingers. Clattered against the stone floor. Blood pooled around my boots, seeping into the cracks between the tiles.

For days, I'd been nothing but a weapon in Javed's hand. A blade he wielded against my own family. My brothers. My sister. The violation of it burned like acid in my veins.

And now I'd become exactly what he made me: a killer.

Only this time, the choice had been mine.

The room tilted around me as I stared at what remained of Prince Javed Fitsum. Heir to the throne. Son to the king. The man who'd been promised my sister's hand in marriage to finally bring our disputed family lines together.

Fuck .

Malak appeared at my side, his hand gripping my shoulder. "Kaz." His voice seemed to come from far away. "Kaz, look at me."

I tore my gaze from the corpse, meeting my brother's eyes. Blood streaked his face, but his expression was clear, focused. Free of Javed's control.

"It's done," he said firmly.

My tail lashed behind me, betraying the panic building beneath my ribs. "I killed the prince."

"You killed a monster," Malak corrected. His fingers dug into my shoulder. "One who tortured his siblings to death. Who would have done the same to Rava."

I shook my head, unable to process the magnitude of what I'd done. What I'd done to my family. My clan. "The king?—"

"Will understand when we present the evidence." Malak's voice was steady. "The relics alone are proof enough of his treason."

The relics. I darted a panicked look to where Rava had dropped the pendant, then where Javed's ring lay discarded on the floor. I expected pulsing, malevolent lights and whispering voices from the fires below.

There was nothing. No beacons of power threatening to control or destroy.

Just some glinting of gold, the same as any shiny object catching the light. Waiting for someone to slip on a finger or around a neck.

Waiting to tighten and press and snuff out any stray, unwanted thought of freedom or happiness.

“We need to destroy them,” I told him. “Now.”

Zane approached with a slight limp from the fight. “Agreed. But first, we need to deal with...” He gestured at the mess that had been our prince.

I forced myself to look again at what I’d done. At the head staring up at me with sightless eyes. At the blood coating my hands, my clothes, my home .

The fucking puppet show of Javed’s control twisted in my gut, a phantom pain where his magic had taken root. Even dead, his presence clung to me like a second skin. I could still feel his commands slithering through my mind, forcing my body to move against my will.

Strike your sister. Break her wrist. Make her submit.

My hands trembled with the memory. I’d fought against the compulsion with everything I had, but in the end, I’d still hurt her. Still betrayed her. The shame of it burned hotter than any fire.

Behind me, I heard Rava’s voice: “Kaz, this is Zral Shieldthorn. My mate.”

I turned to see my sister standing tall beside the battered orc, her chin lifted in that stubborn tilt I’d known since she was a child. Challenging me to argue. To protect

her. To control her.

Just like Javed tried to do.

The thought sobered me. I studied the orc—Zral—taking in the bruises blooming across his face, the way he favored his right side. Injuries I'd inflicted under Javed's command. Yet he stood straight, one arm around my sister's waist, protective despite his own pain.

I stepped forward, clasping his hand in a firm shake. "Welcome to the family," I said, then yanked him closer, unable to resist one last brotherly threat. "And good luck. This is just a taste of the hell she puts us through."

Zral's mouth quirked in a pained smile. "Worth it."

Rava's tail flicked against his leg, her eyes softer than I'd seen them in years.

I turned away to give them privacy and joined Malak crouched beside the relics. He looked up at me, his expression grim.

"What now?" he asked quietly.

I stared at the hellfire opal glinting in the pendant, at the gleaming gold of the ring.

Power beyond measure, forged in the depths of the underworld before half-breed demons were locked on the earthly plane.

Just being near them made my skin crawl with warning, a sensation every ifrit was born knowing to fear.

They were capable of enslaving our entire race, of twisting our magic against our

will.

Of turning brother against sister, warrior against clan.

“Now,” I said, reaching for the pendant, “we make sure this never happens again.”

The moment my fingers touched the relic, power surged through me—dark, seductive, promising control over anyone who crossed my path. For a heartbeat, I understood why Javed had been so addicted to its use. Why he’d never willingly let it go.

I snatched my hand back as if burned, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Fuck .

The king would demand answers. The Fitsum clan would cry for blood. And I—we—would have to face the consequences of what we’d done here today.

But as I looked at my sister leaning against her mate, at my brothers standing tall and free, I knew I’d make the same choice again. A thousand times over.

I’d killed a prince to save my family.

Now I just had to figure out how to keep us all alive.

CHAPTER ONE

TALIA

Red smoke swirled around me as I teleported, my body dissolving into particles before reforming in the traveling hall of the ancestral seat of Fitsum power. Griffin materialized beside me, his presence as constant as my own shadow.

“Home sweet home,” I muttered. What a useless phrase.

The sprawling palace with its vaulted ceilings and thick stench of incense had never been a sanctuary.

Just a battlefield where my brother had tormented me, where my father had ignored me, where I’d dreamed of teleporting far away, never to return.

Griffin’s expression didn’t change, but I caught the slight twitch of his tail—a tell I’d learned to read over years of service. He hated this place as much as I did.

“Indeed, Princess.” His tone betrayed nothing. Always the perfect bodyguard.

I straightened my spine as he strode for the doors to the grand hall. Time to don the mask of the perfect princess. Demure. Obedient. Utterly without ambition. The mask that had kept me alive while Javed murdered our siblings one by one.

Javed . Even thinking his name made my skin crawl.

It had been nearly two months since his death, and the court still performed its elaborate mourning rituals as though we'd lost a beloved prince rather than a monster.

My brother had been cruel since childhood, taking pleasure in tormenting those weaker than himself.

As he grew, so did his sadism, until even our siblings—the ones he hadn't already killed—learned to flee at the sight of him.

I'd survived by making myself useful. By becoming invisible when necessary and indispensable when possible. By building a network of informants that rivaled the king's own, gathering secrets like others gathered jewels.

And now Javed was dead, killed by the leader of the Kadhan clan—our knives, our rivals, our shadows.

I should feel something, shouldn't I? Grief for a lost sibling, anger at his murderer, relief that his reign of terror was over.

Instead, there was only a cold, hard knot of calculation in my chest.

The world was objectively better without Javed in it. And his absence left a power vacuum I fully intended to fill.

My father's chamberlain met us with a deep bow at the first crossroads of corridors. "Princess Talia, we've been expecting you."

"I came as soon as I received my father's summons." I kept my voice soft, my expression placid. "How is the king's health today?"

"Stable, Princess." The chamberlain's eyes darted away from mine—the first lie of

the day. My father's health was anything but stable. "He awaits you in the throne room."

I frowned. "Not his chambers?"

"The king has requested the throne room for today's audience," he repeated, gesturing toward the ornate doors of the antechamber cracked open behind him. There would be no negotiation or further explanation.

Audience . Not mourning dinner. Not family discussion. Audience . As if I were just another petitioner seeking the king's favor.

"I see." I maintained my serene smile even as irritation prickled beneath my skin. "And my cousins? Have they arrived?"

The chamberlain's hesitation told me everything I needed to know before he spoke. "You are the only one summoned today, Princess."

Interesting . Either my father had already spoken to my remaining relations separately, or I was the only one he deemed worth consulting tonight. Given Adron Fitsum's views on female capability, I suspected the former.

"Of course," I said smoothly. "I'm at his majesty's disposal."

The throne room was elegant but cold, its imposing seat of power and white marble walls adorned with portraits of past Fitsum rulers. All male, of course. I paced the length of the empty room, my reflection distorted in the polished floor beneath my feet.

Griffin took up position by the door, his posture relaxed but alert. "This isn't standard protocol."

“No.” I kept my voice low. “Something’s changed.”

Father had summoned me. Alone. No cousins, no distant relations with tenuous claims to royal blood. But more worryingly, none of my informants had picked up anything on this meeting.

I’d spent exactly twelve nights in this palace over the past decade.

Twelve nights when I couldn’t avoid the formal functions that required my presence.

The rest of my time had been divided between ‘educational trips’ abroad and ‘cultural visits’ to distant relatives.

Convenient excuses to keep me away from Javed’s increasingly violent outbursts, really.

Not that my father had particularly cared about my safety. I was simply more useful alive than dead, another piece on his political chessboard. The perfect princess to be traded in marriage when the time was right.

But now I was the last legitimate child of an aged, sickly king. By rights and circumstance, the throne should pass to me.

The doors again swung open and interrupted my thoughts. But instead of the chamberlain sweeping me away to somewhere less formal, a tall ifrit male strode inside.

My breath caught in my throat.

Kaz Kadhan.

Leader of the mercenary branch of the royal line. Killer of my brother. The most dangerous ifrit in our world.

And fuck , he was gorgeous.

Heat bloomed beneath my skin as our eyes met, a sudden, unexpected flush that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

He moved with that particularly dangerous masculine grace, all straight spine and broad shoulders, eyes scanning everything and everyone.

The rich red wine color of his skin was darker than mine, but striking against the black of his clothes.

Kaz's gold eyes narrowed slightly. A flicker of something—surprise? Guilt?—crossed his features before his expression settled into careful neutrality. He offered me a stiff nod as he crossed the room to stand near the window.

I'd seen him before, of course, in intelligence reports, surveillance images, the occasional formal function where our paths crossed but never connected.

Thirty-five years old. Trained in combat from childhood.

Unmarried, despite numerous political overtures.

His sister Rava had been betrothed to Javed in a political alliance meant to reunite our feuding families.

An alliance that had shattered when Kaz's ax separated my brother's head from his shoulders.

So, what was he doing here? Now? Tonight?

“I assume you’re here at the king’s summons as well,” I said, breaking the tense silence.

Kaz nodded once, his gaze moving past me to assess Griffin’s position by the door. “Seems we’re both being made to wait.”

“A favorite tactic of my father’s,” I said, my voice cool and controlled despite the strange heat coursing through my veins. I’d never reacted this way to anyone before, male or female. It was as disconcerting as it was unwelcome. “He believes it puts one at a psychological disadvantage.”

“Does it work?”

I allowed myself a small smirk. “Not on those who expect it.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in what might have been the beginning of a smile, but before he could respond, the doors behind the throne swung wide.

This time, it was my father who appeared—or rather, a diminished version of the imposing figure who had ruled the ifrit with an iron fist for decades. King Adron Fitsum leaned heavily on an ornate cane, his braided white hair swaying with the sharp shake of his head.

“I’ve heard enough,” he said, addressing someone still inside the corridor. “We’ll continue this discussion later.”

Emil Malum stepped into view, his pale red skin a stark contrast to the dark formal attire he favored. His face tightened with barely concealed fury as he bowed to my father.

The sight of the clan leader's obvious displeasure threaded the twins of satisfaction and concern through me. Emil was a snake, always had been. Whatever he'd been discussing with my father, I'd need to discover it sooner rather than later.

But then my father hobbled to his throne, and all other thoughts fled. Age and illness had taken their toll on the king's body, but his gold eyes remained sharp as they fixed on me, then Kaz.

"So," he said finally. "The last of my children and the man who killed my heir. How fitting that you should stand before me together."

I held my breath, waiting for the ax to fall—figuratively, this time. Would my father demand Kaz's execution? Declare war on the Kadhan clan? Either would devastate our already fragile political landscape.

And why in all the hells was I to stand witness?

Kaz stiffened beside me, but his voice remained steady when he spoke. "Your Majesty, I?—"

"Spare me your justifications, Kadhan." His mouth twisted in what might have been disgust or simply discomfort as he leaned back in his throne. "Fortunately for you, my son had become... problematic. His removal, while regrettable, has perhaps saved us all considerable difficulty."

I kept my expression locked down, though my mind raced. My father had never acknowledged Javed's cruelty before. Had never suggested he was anything but the perfect heir. What game was he playing now?

"However," my father continued, "his death has left us with a significant challenge. The Fitsum line requires an heir. The ifrit court requires stability. And the alliance

between our branches, which was to be secured through your sister's marriage to my son, remains unfulfilled."

No. I saw where this was heading a moment before my father spoke the words that would change everything.

"The solution is simple," he declared. "Princess Talia will wed Prince Kaz tonight. The royal and mercenary lines will be united, and a new heir will be secured."

The world seemed to tilt beneath my feet. "What?" The word escaped before I could stop it, a breach of protocol I'd never have allowed myself under normal circumstances.

Beside me, Kaz's expression froze in what might have been shock or horror or both.

"Father," I began, struggling to keep my voice steady. "Surely there are other?—"

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“Quiet, girl,” my father snapped. “You will do your duty. The royal line has never passed to a female heir, and it won’t start now.”

My mouth clicked closed as fury and humiliation burned in my chest. I’d known, of course. Known that no matter how clever I was, how ruthlessly I’d carved out my place in this world, I would always be seen as nothing more than a bargaining chip.

But to hear it stated so baldly, to be positioned so close to what I desired for myself...

Kaz slid a glance my way, his expression cooling further. I couldn’t read what lay behind those golden eyes, but the assessment made my skin prickle.

“Your Majesty,” Kaz started. “While I appreciate the... honor of your offer, I must decline. My clan?—”

“Your clan exists because this throne has allowed it,” my father interrupted. “The first Kadhan should have been executed for his rebellion, not allowed to establish a rival branch. Yours will be folded back into the royal line, where it belongs.”

Kaz’s tail lashed behind him, the only visible sign of his agitation. “Should I accept?—”

“You will,” my father stated, the words ringing with absolute certainty.

Kaz’s jaw tightened. “I have concerns.”

“Your concerns are noted and dismissed,” my father replied.

“You will take your sister’s place in this alliance, just as Talia will take Javed’s.

Upon my distant death, you will be crowned king under the Fitsum name.

All future children will bear the Fitsum name.

The Kadhan clan will cease to exist as a separate entity. ”

I wanted to scream, to rage, to burn the whole palace to ash.

But what choice did I have, truly? I could flee.

Disappear into the human world as some of my siblings had attempted before Javed hunted them down.

But a life in hiding, stripped of my power and constantly looking over my shoulder, was no life at all.

As much as I despised the idea of letting a Kadhan murderer claim my place on the throne and rule in my name, I could easily picture the clans ripping themselves apart in the power vacuum if left without a clear heir.

Emil and his supporters would make their move.

The other clans would rebel. Blood would flow through the palace halls just as it had when the Fitsum and Kadhan lines split generations ago.

At least as queen, even in name only, I’d have some influence. Some power. Some chance to work toward what I truly wanted.

I swallowed back the bitter taste of disappointment and straightened my spine. Fine.

If this was to be my fate, I would face it with dignity. I would not let them see me break.

I tuned back into the conversation as Kaz's voice hardened. "And if I refuse?"

My father smiled, the expression never reaching his eyes. "Then the evidence of your sister's involvement in Javed's death will be presented to the royal court. I believe the penalty for conspiring against the crown is particularly painful."

Kaz went utterly still, the only movement the slow curl of his fingers into fists at his sides. "Rava had nothing to do with it."

"The evidence suggests otherwise." My father's tone was almost bored. "Of course, as family, such matters could be overlooked. For the good of both our lines."

Blackmail. Simple and effective. It was exactly the kind of political maneuvering I'd come to expect from the king of the ifrit.

Beside me, Kaz seemed to have reached a similar conclusion. His shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly, a warrior recognizing when a battle cannot be won. "I accept your terms."

My father's smile was thin and satisfied. "Excellent. Now, approach the throne."

My eyes snapped to Kaz at the same moment his did to mine.

"Surely you didn't think I meant at some vague point in the future?" My father chuckled, the sound startlingly genuine. "No, the mating will happen now. Today. This moment."

What?

My father signaled to the guards at the door, who opened them to admit the chamberlain. He stopped before my father in a deep bow, holding out a length of cord in offering.

“Father,” I began. Panic fluttered in my chest like a trapped bird. This was happening too fast, spinning out of my control. “Traditionally, there are preparations. Ceremonies. The court will expect?—”

“The court will accept what I decree,” he cut me off. “The formal celebration can come later. For now, we need the bond secured.”

It was really happening. Right now. In this cold hall, with only my father and his chamberlain as witnesses.

I was about to become Kaz Kadhan’s mate.

“Join hands,” King Adron commanded.

I looked at Kaz and found his expression as stunned as I felt.

He took my hand, his skin hot against mine.

The contact sent a jolt through me, like touching a live wire.

I’d expected his grip to be hard, punishing, a reflection of our forced circumstances.

Instead, his touch was careful, almost gentle.

King Adron dropped the cord over our hands. His mouth moved, but the words washed over me, fire and clan references blurring together until I could barely make sense of them. All I could focus on was the cord winding tighter around our hands

and the heat radiating from Kaz's body.

"Blood of my blood," Kaz intoned, his eyes never leaving mine as he spoke the words.

"Fire of my fire," I answered, the words heavy on my tongue.

"Bound by flame, bound by oath, bound by blood," King Adron declared, tying off the final inches of cord around our hands. "Let your claiming marks be given before witnesses and seal your bond in our most ancient ways."

Kaz's gaze dropped to my wrist, where the pulse of my blood beat visibly beneath the skin. In private ceremonies, mating bites were often placed on intimate areas of the body. But for a public claiming, the traditional location was the wrist.

He lifted my hand to his mouth, his breath hot against my skin. For a moment, the rest of the room seemed to fade away. There was only us, only this moment, only the heat building between us.

He brought my wrist to his mouth, his lips a whisper away from my flesh. I should have been thinking of politics, of power, of all I was losing in this moment. But Kaz lifted his eyes to mine and something passed between us—understanding, resignation, desire—before his fangs pierced my skin.

G ods . No one had warned me it would feel like this.

The pain was sharp but fleeting, immediately replaced by a wave of pleasure that nearly brought me to my knees. Heat spread from the bite, racing through my veins like liquid fire. More heat pooled low in my belly and between my thighs at his tongue soothing his bite.

When he finally released my wrist, I felt dizzy, disoriented. As if the world had shifted beneath me, and I wasn't entirely certain how to right myself.

"Princess Talia," King Adron prompted, his voice seeming to come from very far away. "You must complete the bond."

I took Kaz's wrist in my trembling hands. His skin burned against mine, hotter than any ifrit I'd ever touched.

His taste exploded across my tongue, making me want more, making me want everything. I felt him tense, heard the sharp intake of his breath. I glanced up and saw his eyes had darkened, the gold nearly swallowed by black. He was feeling it too, then, this unexpected, unwanted desire.

My father clapped once, the sharp sound breaking the spell that had fallen over us. "Excellent. Now that we are one happy family again, I have a spot of work for my new son-in-law."

Kaz tore his gaze from mine, turning to face my father with visible effort. "Work?"

"A simple matter," my father said, waving a dismissive hand. "A young female of the court, Leona Cadum, has been abducted. It would go a long way toward securing your place if you would retrieve her."

I frowned, struggling to focus through the haze of sensation still clouding my mind. "Leona? From the Malum clan?"

My father nodded. "A distant cousin of Emil's. She disappeared from her rooms three nights ago. Her family is quite distraught."

"And you want me to find her," Kaz said, his voice flat.

“Consider it your first official duty as crown prince.” The king’s smile turned cold. “I’m sure with your unique skills, it won’t take long.”

Kaz’s jaw tightened, but he nodded once. “I’ll get started right away.”

“Perhaps not too immediately?” The king’s gaze bounced meaningfully between us. “I believe there is a rather pressing matter to attend to first.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. The consummation. Of course. Because this day couldn’t possibly get any more mortifying than my father openly directing my sex life.

“Right,” Kaz replied stiffly. “If you’ll excuse us, Your Majesty.”

My father leaned back on his throne, satisfaction evident in his expression. “Good. I expect a report on your progress with the Cadum girl within the week.”

Just like that, my life had been irrevocably altered. I’d entered this hall as Princess Talia Fitsum, last surviving daughter of the king, secret contender for the throne. I left it as Kaz Kadhan’s mate.

Whatever game my father thought he was playing, whatever advantage he sought to gain by this arranged mating, I would find a way to turn it to my advantage.

I always did.

CHAPTER TWO

KAZ

I followed Talia down the corridor, her hips swaying with a confidence that seemed almost defiant. Each step brought us further from the throne room and closer to what awaited us.

The consummation.

The thought sent a jolt of heat through me that I immediately tried to smother with guilt. This woman was Javed's sister. I'd killed her brother. And now I was expected to bed her.

What the hell have I done?

Talia stopped before an ornate door and pushed it open without hesitation. I followed her inside, scanning the room automatically for exits and threats. Old habits.

It was a large suite, clearly her personal chambers rather than some guest room. The walls were lined with bookshelves interrupted by tall windows that looked out over the gardens. A massive four-poster bed dominated one side of the room, while a sitting area with plush chairs occupied the other.

Talia kicked off her shoes with a sigh of relief that seemed startlingly intimate, then reached up to unpin her hair. Dark waves cascaded down her back, transforming her from prim and proper princess to something wilder, more dangerous.

My mouth went dry. She was stunning, there was no denying it.

Light red skin that seemed to glow from within.

Delicate black horns curling from her temples like an artist's brushstrokes.

Her tail, slimmer than mine, moved with a languid grace that drew the eye.

And her scent—jasmine and embers—filled the room, wrapping around me like a warm embrace.

Stop it. She's not for you to admire. Not really.

She crossed to one of the chairs and draped herself across it like a cat claiming territory. Everything about her posture screamed indifference, from the tilt of her chin to the loose dangle of her fingers over the chair's arm.

It was as much a mask as the demure princess act she'd put on for her father. I recognized the performance because I'd spent my life doing the same, showing only what others needed to see, keeping the rest locked away. Nobody trusted a panicked leader.

But what was she hiding?

"Are you going to stand there all night?" she asked, one eyebrow arched in challenge.

I remained with my back against the door, keeping a respectable distance between us.

"I killed your brother."

The words hung in the air between us, ugly and unavoidable. Better to name the dragon in the room than pretend it wasn't there, breathing fire on everything.

Something flickered across her face, too quick to read, before her expression settled into practiced blankness. “Yes, you did.”

“And now we’re mated.” My mate. Fires below, she was my mate.

“Your powers of observation are truly remarkable,” she drawled, examining her nails. “Is this what counts as expertise in your clan?”

I ignored the jab. “How can you stand to be in the same room as me?”

Her eyes flicked up to mine, and for a moment, I glimpsed something raw and honest in them. Then it was gone, replaced by that cool, unreadable mask.

“My brother brought his fate upon himself,” she said simply. “We’ll carry on without him.”

I hadn’t expected that. Javed had been cruel, yes. And gods, once the full truth of his bullshit came out, I’d have torn the court apart to keep Rava from his grasp, ancient agreements and honor be damned. But to hear his own sister speak of him with such clinical detachment...

“Still,” I pressed, “I took your brother’s life. I took your family’s heir.”

“And now you’re the heir.” Her smile was sharp enough to cut. “Funny how things work out.”

The casual way she referenced the position I’d— we’d —just been forced into set my teeth on edge. Did she think I’d orchestrated this? That I’d killed Javed as part of some elaborate scheme to seize power?

Fuck, I hated this shit. Politics and lies and all the damn intrigue. Give me a

straightforward fight any day. At least I knew where I stood when blood was spilled and blades drawn.

The silence stretched between us, taut as a bowstring. I cleared my throat.

“Drink?” she asked, gesturing toward a decanter on a nearby table.

I moved mechanically and poured two glasses of amber liquid, my mind racing. This woman was my mate now. Mine to protect and provide for. Mine to know. And yet I knew almost nothing about her beyond her lineage and what little intelligence my clan had gathered over the years.

Princess Talia Fitsum. The quiet one. The sister who’d happily faded into the background of court politics. Or so we’d thought.

Looking at her now—the gleam in her eyes, the perfect posture even as she lounged—I wondered how we’d underestimated her. There was clearly more to her careful demeanor than simple survival.

I handed her one of the glasses, our fingers brushing briefly. Even that small contact sent a surge of heat through me. Insistent, demanding need licked at my insides. I pulled back sharply, unable to meet her eyes.

Damn it all, I needed to get a grip. Yes, Talia was my mate.

And yes, in another time and another life, I’d happily fuck her on every surface in the room.

But I couldn’t ignore the fact that she was Javed’s sister.

That we’d been thrown together under less-than-ideal circumstances.

And that there was every possibility she wanted as little to do with me as I did her.

So why did the thought leave me cold?

I retreated to a safe distance and took a long swallow of my drink, welcoming the burn. “Tell me about Leona.”

Talia’s eyes tracked my movement across the room. The corners of her mouth quirked up, quickly hidden behind the rim of her glass. “Leona Cadum. Daughter of the Malum clan. Twenty-two. Recently graduated from university.”

“Why would someone take her?”

“Why does anyone take a noble daughter?” She shrugged one elegant shoulder.

“Ransom. Political leverage. Personal vendetta.”

I moved to the window, using the excuse of studying the gardens below. The weight of her gaze followed me, and I couldn’t tell if she was watching me as a potential threat or something else entirely. Her interest felt dangerous, and not just because of the mate bond humming between us.

“Your father seemed concerned with her return.”

“The Malum clan has been loyal to the throne for generations.” She shifted in her seat, the sound as much an accusation as if she’d lobbed the words at my head: Unlike the Kadhans.

“Leona was to be mated within the year. Formal suitors were being considered. Return her, and you potentially cultivate favor with two families in one go.”

I turned to face her. “Maybe she didn’t want the male chosen for her.”

Talia's eyebrows rose. "So? If it is good enough for their queen, then they should be happy to fulfill their duties."

The bitterness in her voice was unmistakable.

I studied her more closely, seeing past the mask to the rigid set of her shoulders and the tight line of her jaw.

I couldn't fault her logic. Not really. Most of those in power were happy to let others do as they ordered, and then fuck off to do as they pleased.

There was honesty in leading by example.

A small whiff, strongly covered by the bullshit of tradition and propriety, but honesty nonetheless.

"Is that what you believe?" I asked quietly.

Her eyes narrowed. "What I believe is irrelevant. What matters is what I do."

"And what you do is whatever your father commands." I shouldn't antagonize her. None of this was her fault. I did this. I took her brother's head. And now we were both paying the price.

But something about her cool acceptance of our situation grated on me.

"As you've done," she countered, rising from her chair. "Or was there some other reason you agreed to claim me as your mate today?"

I set my glass down harder than necessary. "You know why I agreed."

“To protect your sister.” Her lip curled in a sneer. “How noble.”

“Would you rather I’d refused? Left you to whatever fate your father had planned next?” I pushed off from the wall, stalking closer. “Don’t pretend this is what you wanted, princess.”

Her eyes flashed. “What I wanted? What I wanted was to be seen as more than a womb to continue the bloodline. What I wanted was to be judged on my merits rather than my gender.” Another step closer. “What I wanted was the throne that should have been mine after you cleared out the competition.”

This, this finally felt like the first time seeing her.

No masks, no composure. Just her. Fierce, ambitious, and deeply, murderously, frustrated.

Fire crackled in her eyes with every slinking step she took to close the distance.

She craned her neck to glare daggers up at me, and that look would forever be seared into my mind.

“Instead,” she continued, “I get to watch a mercenary sit in my rightful place while I play the dutiful mate.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper.

“In the other scenarios, I’d at least have been taken away to some lord’s manor and allowed to run it as I saw fit.

A queen in my much smaller domain. But now?

” She gestured between us. “There is no hiding from my diminished status while tending to the male sitting in my seat.”

I wanted to taste her rage.

Her eyes dropped to my mouth, then back up.

Yeah, I fucking wanted that.

And she wanted it too.

I don't know which of us moved first, but suddenly we were a tangled mess of limbs and lips and tongues.

Fire sizzled along my nerve endings wherever we touched.

Every instinct roared at me to strip her bare, bend her over the nearest available surface, and bury myself inside her. Claim her, mark her, make her mine.

I groaned into her mouth, and gods. She tasted like fire and spice, like everything I'd ever wanted and everything I shouldn't have. But her hands were in my hair, pulling me closer, and I was drowning in the heat of her.

She broke the kiss, her breathing as ragged as mine. For a moment, we just stared at each other, both stunned by the intensity of what had just happened.

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I should step away. I should apologize. I should remember all the reasons this was a terrible idea.

Her lips parted, her eyes darkening as she watched me struggle with myself. “What are you waiting for?” she whispered, challenge and desire mingling in her voice.

With a growl, I surged forward and claimed her mouth in a fierce kiss. She met me with equal hunger, nipping at my lower lip as her hands tugged at my shirt. I tore it off, tossing it aside without care as to where it landed.

Her mouth was on me before the fabric hit the floor, hot kisses trailing across my collarbone, my chest, my stomach. My muscles jumped beneath her lips, sparks of pleasure igniting with each touch.

Fuck. She was going to undo me.

She sank to her knees and glanced up at me through long, dark lashes as she began to work my belt buckle. With agonizing slowness, she opened my trousers and freed my aching cock, her slim fingers circling my shaft with delicious pressure.

“Impressive,” she murmured, her breath hot against my skin. “Perhaps there are some benefits to this arrangement after all.”

She took me into her mouth before I could respond, and every clever retort died in my throat. Her tongue swirled around the head, tasting, teasing, and I had to brace myself against the wall to keep from buckling.

Fuck.

She took me deeper, her eyes locked on mine as she worked me with her mouth and hand in tandem. There was something defiant in her gaze, something almost angry, as if she resented how much she wanted this. Wanted me.

I understood the feeling all too well.

I eased my tail between her legs, dragging the tip over her knee and between her thighs. She shivered as I chased the deep pulse of her femoral higher and higher until I reached the thin silk of her panties. I growled, tangling my fingers in her hair.

Soaked. She was soaked, and the knowledge sent a bolt of pure lust straight to my cock.

Her eyes widened, but she didn't pull away. Instead, she took me deeper, swallowing around me until I felt the back of her throat. All while still glaring up at me like I'd personally offended her.

I pressed the flat of my tail firmly against her clit. She moaned around my length, rhythm faltering slightly before picking up again, more frantic than before. She rolled her hips, grinding shamelessly against my tail, seeking friction, pressure, release.

Beautiful. So damn beautiful, kneeling before me with her dress bunched around her hips, wet and wanting. The sight alone was enough to send me hurtling toward the edge, and I desperately wanted to be buried inside her when I fell.

"Enough," I ordered. When she didn't listen—of course she didn't—I tightened my grip in her hair. "Up. Now."

She released me with a wet pop, her lips swollen and glistening. "Afraid you can't

last?”

The taunt would have been more effective if her voice hadn't been so husky, if her pupils hadn't been blown wide with desire.

I yanked her to her feet and crushed my mouth against hers, devouring the soft moan of protest she made as my tail abandoned her clit.

One hand palmed her breast through her dress, tearing a gasp from her as I rubbed rough circles over her nipple.

The other slipped beneath her skirt, shoving the delicate fabric of her underwear aside as I sank a finger deep inside her molten heat.

Her inner walls clenched around me, rippling and fluttering. Ready. So ready.

I growled against her mouth, drunk on the scent and taste and feel of her. “Take off your clothes before I rip them off.”

For a heartbeat, she hesitated. Then with a tiny huff that shouldn't have been half as sexy as it was, she reached behind her and dragged down the zipper of her dress. I stepped back far enough to let her shrug out of the garment and kick it aside, followed by her bra and panties.

Fires below. She was gorgeous. Lean muscle, trim waist, mussed hair hanging like a cloak. Perky breasts that filled my palms perfectly. Eyes darkened by desire, lips still swollen from my kiss. She looked like sex, and sin, and everything I didn't deserve.

I didn't care.

I stroked a finger down her side, tracing the delicate shape of her rib cage. Her skin

was impossibly soft beneath my rough callouses, and I marveled that she didn't slap me away for daring to touch her.

"Get on the bed." The command came out rough and raw. Needy. Fuck, I was needy for her.

She obeyed without comment, climbing onto the bed and kneeling on the edge, facing me. Her tail swayed behind her, a blatant invitation.

Mine. The word pounded through my brain, echoed by the throbbing ache in my cock. I prowled closer, stroking myself slowly. Letting her watch, letting her want.

Her breath caught when I stopped just short of her, close enough to feel the heat coming off her skin but not quite touching. She tilted her head, exposing the elegant line of her throat in silent offering.

That tiny gesture undid me. With a groan, I leaned in to claim her mouth in a possessive kiss.

Her arms wound around my neck, pulling me closer.

We toppled backward, a tangle of limbs and tails and lust. I pinned her wrists above her head, holding her in place while I feasted on the sweetness of her mouth.

Our bodies were flush against each other, skin to skin, and I felt every curve and plane of her. My cock slid against the slick heat of her pussy, making us both moan. I wanted to sink into her, to fill her completely, to take her hard and fast and thorough.

But not yet. Not until I'd made her beg.

"What do you need, princess? Tell me." I needed the words. Needed to know she

wanted this as badly as I did. That this wasn't just another mask worn for my benefit, and I wasn't some monster.

"Kaz—" She arched her hips, seeking friction. A tiny whimper escaped her when I pulled back. "Please."

"Please what?"

Her eyes flashed in frustration. "You know what I need."

I bent to lick the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. "Not good enough."

"Kaz Kadhan," she hissed, writhing against the hold I kept on her wrists. "I need you inside me. Filling me. Fucking me. Right now."

Gods. That tone, those words... Fuck.

I couldn't deny her. And truth be told, I didn't want to. I wanted to give her everything she craved.

With a low growl, I sank into her, inch by glorious inch. We both groaned at the sensation. She was tight and hot around me, her inner walls gripping my cock like she never wanted to let go. For a moment, I couldn't move, overwhelmed by the perfection of being joined with my mate.

Talia was my mate. My fated mate.

Pure shock wrapped around me as tightly as her cunt. I stared down at her, drinking in the sight of her flushed cheeks and parted lips.

This wasn't just an arranged match born of political expediency. This wasn't just two

strangers trying to work their way toward intimacy.

What have I done?

This was all wrong. We were doing this backward, inside out. Fated mates were supposed to meet, recognize each other, court, and claim. Not be forced together by royal decree after one had killed the other's brother. Not fuck out of spite and anger and lust before either had acknowledged the bond.

"Don't stop." She arched against me, a sound somewhere between a moan and a snarl escaping her throat. Every touch, every taste, every sound was amplified, heightened, as if my senses had been dialed to their maximum setting. "Don't you dare fucking stop."

My mate.

The thought rang through my mind as I began to move inside her, setting a slow, torturous pace. My mate. She deserved better. Deserved courting and gentleness and wooing. Deserved everything I'd failed to give her.

But she gripped me tighter, demanded harder, urged faster.

Our mouths collided in a desperate tangle of teeth and tongues, her moans spurring me on as surely as my own desires.

She clawed at my back, biting down on my shoulder when I angled my thrusts just right.

The pain drove me wild, pushing me closer to the edge of control.

Mine.

I hitched her leg higher around my waist, opening her wider to me. I drove into her again and again, bottoming out with every stroke. She was fire in my arms, burning brighter than I could have imagined.

“You feel so good,” I groaned, burying my face in her neck. “So fucking perfect.”

Her scent filled my lungs, jasmine and embers and sex, driving me mad. I could feel her getting close, her inner walls fluttering around my cock as her breathing grew more ragged.

I caught her chin between my fingers. “Eyes on me, princess. I want to watch you come.”

Her gaze locked with mine, defiant even in pleasure. I felt her tighten around me, felt the first tremors of her release. And gods help me, I couldn’t look away as ecstasy washed over her face, as her lips parted on a cry, her body quaking with the force of her orgasm.

So fucking beautiful.

It only took a few more strokes before I tumbled after her, following her into bliss. I buried myself to the hilt and came hard, spilling inside her in hot, pulsing waves.

For several long moments, we lay tangled together, our bodies slick with sweat, our breathing gradually slowing. I could feel her heartbeat against my chest, the rhythm syncing with my own. The mate bond hummed between us, satisfied for now but still demanding more.

What now? What did one say to a mate claimed in such circumstances? To a woman who, by all rights, should hate me but instead had just wrapped her legs around me and begged for more?

I'd never felt more out of my depth. Battle strategies, tactical maneuvers, clan politics... I understood those. But this? This was uncharted territory, and I had no map to guide me.

What have I done?

CHAPTER THREE

KAZ

I flicked on the lights, and the new base hummed to life in all its fluorescent glory.

Dust motes danced in the air of the converted warehouse.

The whole place needed a good cleaning, but it had potential.

Solid brick walls, reinforced windows, back exit through the alley.

Not bad for something we'd secured on short notice.

"Once again, I'd like to lodge formal complaints over the location," Rava grouched behind me. "This feels a little like spying on me, Kaz."

I turned to face my sister, who stood with arms crossed and tail swishing irritably behind her. The barbed tip twitched with each sweep in a telltale sign she was genuinely annoyed, not just performing her usual dramatics.

"Silvermist Falls is strategically positioned," I explained for the twentieth time. "Close enough to major cities for easy access, remote enough to avoid unwanted attention."

"Top concerns for someone who can teleport anywhere in the world he's been before." She rolled her eyes. "Just admit you're checking up on me and Zral."

I wasn't, but arguing would only convince her otherwise. I liked Zral, and the several years of eating shit before gaining approval he would have needed had been drastically shortened by the beating he'd taken while I'd been under Javed's control.

My sister and her orc were still early into their mating, but even I could see past the protective older brother act that they were good for each other. Trouble for the rest of us, absolutely, and still finding their footing with each other, but still good.

At least they'd done it in the right order, and without blackmail at the center.

The truth of the relocation was simpler and more pathetic: I needed distance from the old compound. Every room, every hallway, every shadow still carried echoes of imprisonment. I'd ordered a complete purge after his death—new furniture, new paint, new everything—but he still lingered.

Some nights I'd wake gasping, convinced I could feel the phantom control of those damned infernal relics crawling under my skin, forcing me to hurt the people I loved. To hurt Rava.

Even now, thinking his name sent ice down my spine. Memories flashed: the gleam of the hellfire opal, the cold weight of compulsion, my hand closing around my sister's against my will?—

And then Talia's face, flushed with pleasure beneath me. The scent of jasmine and embers still clung to my skin despite the three showers I'd taken since leaving her bed. Since abandoning her while she slept.

Coward.

I'd marked her, claimed her, spilled inside her, and then fled like a thief in the night. What kind of male did that make me?

One who killed her brother and then fucked her on royal orders.

“Kaz?” Rava waved a hand in front of my face. “You in there?”

I blinked, shaking off the memories. “Morning meeting in thirty.” I cleared my throat. “Tell the others.”

I didn’t wait for her response, just strode toward the office I’d claimed at the far end of the building. Behind me, I heard Zane’s heavy footfalls and Malak’s lighter tread as they entered, carrying boxes of equipment. Good. We needed to get operational as quickly as possible.

My office was bare except for a desk and chair I’d teleported in last night. I’d handle decorating later. Right now, I had more pressing concerns.

I unpacked the slim file on Leona Cadum, spreading its contents across the desk.

A photo showed a young ifrit female with her dark hair twisted into an updo for some formal function or another.

Her file listed the basics: education, lineage, magical aptitude.

Nothing remarkable. Nothing to suggest why someone would target her.

But my gut said this wasn’t a standard kidnapping. The security footage from her family compound had been suspiciously turned off that night. Some personal items—clothes, jewelry, a few books—were missing, suggesting she’d packed before leaving. The room was neat, not ransacked.

This had all the hallmarks of a planned escape, not an abduction. Yet her family insisted she’d been taken against her will.

Malak could hack security systems along her likely escape route, Zane could check with his contacts in the underground, Rava could?—

No. I wouldn't involve them. This was my burden to bear. My obligation to the crown. To Talia.

The thought of her sent heat curling through my gut. I closed my eyes, but that only made it worse. Without visual distractions, I could feel the ghost of her touch on my skin, taste the sweetness of her mouth, hear the little gasps she made when I?—

I forced my eyes open and stared at the file. Leona had been away at university until recently. That's where I needed to start—who she knew there, what connections she might have made outside the watchful eyes of her family.

My fingers absently drifted to my wrist, tracing the marks Talia's fangs had left during our claiming. The skin was healed now, but I swore I could still feel the imprint of her teeth. The mate bond hummed, a constant reminder of what I'd done. What I'd taken.

What I'd run from.

The clock on the wall ticked over to the appointed hour. Time for the meeting. I gathered the file, tucking it away in a drawer. I'd return to it after we'd settled the immediate business of establishing our base.

The conference room was really just a cleared space with a table thrown in the middle, but it would do. Malak, Zane, and Rava were already seated when I entered. I took my place at the head of the table, spine straight, passing a look over each of them in turn. Leader mode activated.

"Status reports," I said.

Malak leaned forward, fingers steeped. “Barebones digital security will be operational by this evening. I’ve established firewalls and proxies to mask our activities.

Local networks have been mapped and access points identified.

I’ll have us ghost-level invisible to standard surveillance in no time after that. ”

I nodded. Malak’s ease at a keyboard was always a comfort. Like clockwork, he delivered exactly what was needed.

“Physical security is shit,” Zane cut in, blunt as always. “Main entrance has standard locks, easily picked. Windows on the east side are vulnerable unless you count ‘painted shut’ as a feature. Rear exit alarm is outdated. Anyone with basic training could breach this place in under two minutes.”

“We’re more likely to be killed out in the field than in the lobby during business hours,” I deadpanned.

Zane grunted. “Still.”

“Put together a list of what you need,” I told him. “Priority items first.”

A leader who doesn’t listen to what his people need is just a dictator with delusions.

The remembered words were just one of the many lessons my father had drilled into me before the ambush that took both my parents seven years ago. The entire Kadhan clan—not just this ragged bunch of misfits—had been mine to lead ever since.

It’d gone startlingly well. I’d kept us profitable, and most importantly, independent.

Our crews operated across the globe, taking on the jobs others couldn't handle.

Even the ifrit families who publicly sneered at our 'mercenary blood' privately slipped us contracts when their own security forces failed.

The Kadhan name commanded respect throughout the monster world, our reputation built on centuries of uncompromising standards. No complications, no loose ends.

Until Javed.

Rava flicked a folder to each of us. "I've compiled profiles on local businesses we should establish relationships with.

The apothecary run by the witch up in Grimstone might be useful for specialized supplies, and there's a vampire-owned overnight security firm we could partner with for certain jobs. "

"Beneficial to have friends in town," Malak agreed. "Especially since we're essentially moving into Rava and Zral's backyard."

"Finally, some honesty about your spying. You always were my favorite, Mal." Rava threw him a sickeningly sweet smile and scratched under his chin like she would an adorable animal. "Stay sweet, and I'll keep sharing my toys."

I should have smirked at that, kept them on track, contributed something useful to the conversation. Instead, my mind drifted again. Talia would be waking alone in our bed by now. Would she be angry? Relieved? Did she regret what we'd done?

Did she taste ash on her tongue and think of me?

"Kaz?" Malak's voice cut through my thoughts. "I asked about our timeline for full

operations.”

Shit. I’d missed half the conversation.

“We’ll settle in over the next week, bring more and more of the routine shit online here,” I said, hoping it was a reasonable response to whatever had been discussed. “Aim for new contracts by the end of the month.”

Malak and Zane exchanged a look that had me gritting my teeth. They knew me too well—knew when I wasn’t fully present.

“We’re done,” I said curtly, rising from my chair. “Get to work.”

I retreated back to my office and slumped against the door. This was pathetic. The clan needed their leader focused, not mooning over a mate he had no business claiming.

Distractions cost lives in our line of work.

I’d learned that lesson the hard way when I missed the signs of Rava’s discontent.

I’d been too busy with contracts to notice my own sister dropping her college classes and hatching a scheme to prove herself in Silvermist Falls.

If I’d been paying attention, she never would have felt the need to go rogue.

Never would have ended up in Javed’s crosshairs.

My fingers curled into fists at the memory.

I should have seen Javed’s cruelty sooner, should have recognized the danger he

posed to Rava beyond just a political marriage she didn't want.

The signs had been there in the whispers about his temper, the rumors of servants who disappeared, the way other royals gave him a wide berth at functions.

But I'd missed the monster lurking beneath the crown.

Then came the attack. The relics. The control. My own hands becoming weapons against those I'd sworn to protect.

Never again.

I pushed away from the door and straightened my shoulders. I needed to keep my shit together and stop letting Talia haunt me, crown and mate bond or no.

The rest of the day was spent between unpacking equipment and my secret search.

I caught myself absently touching my wrist while scrolling through Leona Cadum's carefully curated social media.

She was the perfect ifrit female attending formal events, family gatherings, appropriate cultural celebrations.

Too perfect. No personal interests, no casual photos, nothing that revealed the woman behind the polished image.

This would be easier if I could hand it to Malak. He could find shadow accounts, deleted posts, the digital breadcrumbs people leave when they're living double lives.

But this wasn't clan business. This was my burden to carry.

That night, I dreamed of Talia. Of her mouth on my skin, her body beneath mine. I woke sweating and hard, the phantom scent of jasmine and embers filling my nostrils.

The next day, Malak's morning drink carried hints of jasmine that had me halfway across our new headquarters before I recognized the scent wasn't hers.

"Something wrong with the tea?" Malak had asked, eyebrow raised.

"Just thought I smelled something," I'd muttered, turning back to my laptop where I'd been mapping Leona's purchases against local businesses.

A trail of small charges led north toward the Canadian border.

Gas stations. Convenience stores. A diner off the highway.

Leona—or whoever had her purse—was on the move, but not covering their tracks well. Amateurs.

By the third day, Zane's knowing looks had me snapping at my oldest friend over a simple sparring session.

"Your form's sloppy," I'd growled after he'd knocked me flat for the third time.

"The fuck it is." He'd squared up to me, tail lashing behind him. "What's got your horns in a twist?"

I walked away rather than answer, unable to explain the restless energy crawling under my skin. Back in my office, I found a response to my inquiry about Leona. I'd posed as an old family friend looking to surprise her with a book I just couldn't remember the title of.

The bookstore owner's reply confirmed what I'd suspected from her past purchases.

Leona was a regular, but she hadn't been visiting alone.

She'd been bringing a human male with her consistently over the last few months.

Close enough that he bought out Leona's entire wish list before her 'old family friend' had a chance.

A sudden violent abduction, the family claimed. Yet here was Leona, building relationships her family either didn't know about or chose not to mention. The story wasn't adding up.

The fourth day, I nearly incinerated my desk when Rava's not-so-gentle "Are your ears blocked, idiot?" hit too close to the truth I was denying. I was an idiot—for claiming Talia, for running away, for thinking I could simply ignore the mate bond humming between us.

"What's wrong with you lately?" Rava had demanded, perching on the edge of my desk. "You're distracted. Irritable. Not sleeping."

"I'm fine," I'd growled.

"Bullshit."

"Drop it, Rava."

She'd studied me for a long moment, her expression softening. "Whatever it is, you know you can tell me, right? We've been through worse."

The urge to confess everything had been overwhelming. To tell her about Talia, about

the mate bond, about the mission Adron had forced on me. But the words stuck in my throat. How could I admit I'd mated the sister of the man who'd nearly destroyed us?

Rava would know why I did it. Know, and feel guilty for something done to her.

"I know," I'd said instead. "Just got a lot on my mind."

She hadn't believed me, but she'd let it go.

On the fifth day of my slow descent into madness, I returned from a perimeter check that I'd used to finalize my plans for tracking down a small bed-and-breakfast near Niagara Falls.

The receptionist had confirmed a young ifrit woman matching Leona's description had checked in yesterday, accompanied by a human male.

They'd paid for three nights in advance.

If I left now, I could be there before nightfall. But something held me back. The pieces of this puzzle suggested a very different picture than what Adron had painted. I needed to see for myself before making any decisions.

As I stepped through the warehouse doors, a familiar scent hit me.

Jasmine and embers.

My body responded instantly, heart rate spiking, skin flushing hot. I froze, every muscle locked tight. For a moment, I thought I'd finally cracked, that my brain had conjured her scent from nothing but desperate longing.

Then Talia's voice cut through the room. "Where is my mate?"

CHAPTER FOUR

TALIA

The building wasn't much to look at. A nondescript warehouse conversion on the outskirts of Silvermist Falls, it bore none of the grandeur or imposing architecture I'd grown accustomed to in royal residences. Nothing declared it housed the future king of my people, not even a handwritten sign.

"This is it?" I asked Griffin, who stood at my shoulder like the ever-present shadow he was.

"According to our intelligence, yes." His voice remained steady, betraying none of the exhaustion I knew he must feel after five days of tracking. "Shall I announce you?"

"No need." I smoothed down my tailored jacket and straightened my spine. "I believe I can announce myself."

Five days. Five hellish days of tracking my wayward mate while fielding questions from courtiers and soothing the anxieties of clan leaders who feared what Kaz's absence might mean for our fragile new alliance.

Five days of enduring my father's thinly veiled disappointment at my inability to 'control my mate.' Five days of pretending the burning ache beneath my skin wasn't slowly driving me insane.

I'd spent the first day waiting for Kaz to return, assuming he'd merely stepped out to clear his head.

By the second day, I'd realized he had no intention of coming back.

By the third, I'd deployed my network of informants to track his movements.

And now, after following a trail that led from the abandoned Kadhan compound to this unremarkable building, I was finally close enough to sense him through our bond.

The relief was immediate and infuriating. My skin cooled, the persistent headache that had plagued me for days eased, and the knot in my chest loosened. My body recognized its mate was near, even as my mind seethed with indignation.

I pushed open the door without knocking.

The interior was as unimpressive as the exterior suggested: an open floor plan with a handful of doors leading to offices and a small kitchenette, while the far wall stood too close to the entrance not to conceal extensive warehouse space behind it.

Three pairs of gold eyes stared back at me, their expressions cycling through shock, confusion, and suspicion.

I recognized them from my files. Zane, the tall one with the shaved undercut, straightened from where he'd been removing weapons from a crate.

A slimmer male, Malak, stopped typing mid-keystroke.

And Rava, the princess-turned-runaway to escape my brother's clutches, narrowed her eyes at me from across the room.

But Kaz wasn't among them.

"Where is my mate?" I demanded, letting authority infuse my voice.

The silence that followed was absolute. Malak and Zane exchanged loaded glances before Malak asked very blandly, "Mate?"

He hadn't told them.

The realization knocked the righteous anger right out of me.

I'd spent the journey to Silvermist Falls imagining Kaz boasting to his clan about claiming the throne and bringing together the feuding lines.

I'd pictured him smug and self-satisfied, celebrating his victory while I dealt with the political fallout.

Instead, he'd kept our mating a secret. Even from his sister.

What did that mean?

Movement caught my eye, and there was Kaz, frozen in a doorway. His dark hair was disheveled, as if he'd been running his hands through it. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, revealing corded forearms marked with old scars. His gold eyes widened at the sight of me, pupils dilating.

At least I wasn't the only one affected.

Then his focus flicked to his clan members, and I saw something I never expected from the leader of the fearsome Kadhan mercenaries: uncertainty.

He shot me an almost pleading look, as if asking for discretion. I arched a brow, folded my arms across my chest, and waited. Let him explain. Let him squirm.

“Kaz?” Malak’s deceptively neutral voice broke the standoff. “Something you forgot to mention?”

Kaz stepped forward, jaw tight. “Talía and I were mated five days ago. By order of King Adron.”

By order . As if I were a package delivered to his doorstep. I bit back a scoff.

“So, you just... got mated?” Zane asked, incredulous. “Without telling any of us?”

“It wasn’t relevant to our operations,” Kaz said stiffly.

Rava made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. “Not relevant? You mated into the family that tried to destroy us, and you didn’t think it was relevant ?”

“It’s complicated,” Kaz said.

“Uncomplicate it,” Zane growled.

I watched their exchange with growing fascination.

This wasn’t how things worked in my father’s court.

No one questioned the king’s decisions so openly, or so bluntly.

Even his advisors couched their concerns in layers of flattery and deference.

But here was Kaz, a prince in his own right even if the Kadhans held no power

beyond their fists, allowing his clan members to challenge him directly.

Part of me envied the closeness and freedom to speak their minds without fear. Another part resented it. I'd had to grow into myself in the shadows, learning to manipulate from the margins because direct confrontation would have gotten me killed.

"Adron summoned me to answer for Javed's death," Kaz explained. "I expected execution or exile. Instead, he proposed a solution—I would mate Talia, take the Fitsum name, and eventually assume the throne when he passes."

"And you agreed?" Rava stared at her brother, then at me, her tail lashing behind her. "After everything Javed did to us? After what he made you do to me?"

"I had little choice." Kaz's jaw worked with the effort to keep his voice even. "This honors the betrothals made to end the generations of fighting between our lines. The alternative was more bloodshed and death."

The room fell silent again, the tension thick enough to cut.

I found myself studying each of their faces, noting the concern, the anger, the confusion.

They cared for Kaz, that much was clear.

And he cared for them in return—enough to accept a mating he clearly hadn't wanted to protect them from further conflict.

It was... not what I had expected.

"What are you doing here?" Kaz asked, finally turning to me.

The abrupt question pulled me from my thoughts. I grinned like a cat in cream. I knew the extra drama I was lobbing into the room, but I didn't care. Let him feel a fraction of the annoyance that had been building in me while he pretended not a thing in the world had changed.

"Oh, just enjoying my new role as caretaker of your social calendar. Honestly, darling, did you forget so soon you had an appointment with the king?" I pretended to check my nails for imperfections. "He is so very interested in an update on your efforts to locate the Cadum girl."

The effect was immediate. Three pairs of eyes swiveled to Kaz, who looked like he'd swallowed something bitter.

"You're tracking someone for Adron?" Malak asked flatly.

Kaz's expression hardened. "It's a separate matter."

"Un-fucking-believable." Zane's tail lashed behind him. "Like your mating was a separate matter?"

Kaz's shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly. "Adron asked me to find Leona Cadum. She's missing from court, and her family believes she's been abducted."

"So let me get this straight," Rava said, her voice rising. "Another young female from a noble family goes missing, and instead of considering she might have left of her own free will, the immediate assumption is abduction? And you, of all people, volunteer to hunt her down and drag her back?"

"I didn't volunteer," Kaz said through gritted teeth. "It was part of the arrangement."

"So, you sold yourself twice over," Rava said bitterly. "Once at the altar and once as

Adron's personal bloodhound."

I felt a flicker of admiration for Rava's boldness, even as I bristled at the words. So, I arched a brow and fixed her with a cool stare. "Surely you're not foolish enough to think there would be no consequences for regicide."

Rava turned to me with a bright, biting smile on her face. "I'm glad you know you are a consequence, sister."

With that, she spun on her heel and stormed out of the room.

Malak and Zane exchanged glances.

"I should..." Malak gestured vaguely toward where Rava had disappeared.

"Yeah," Zane agreed. "We'll talk..."

He didn't finish the sentence, just followed Malak out. The silence left behind wrapped tightly around me, Kaz, and Griffin.

"Thank you for that," Kaz said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Truly. It's not as if there is anything challenging to this new reality."

"Challenging or not, it is," I replied. "So, stop acting like nothing has changed and you get to carry on with your little... business. You have greater responsibilities now."

I watched as he visibly swallowed back the retort I'd almost prodded out of him. Instead, he made a mocking bow and gestured toward a door at the far end of the room. "After you, Princess."

I spared a glance for Griffin and gestured for him to wait for me. My bodyguard nodded once, but didn't look happy about letting me out of his sight.

I swept past Kaz into what I assumed was his office and took in the sparse furnishings with a critical eye. A desk, some chairs. Boxes sat unpacked. No personal touches, nothing to indicate the man who occupied it.

I took the chair across from his desk with more confidence than I truly felt.

This was the first moment alone with my mate since we'd slept together.

I wanted to bathe in the anger and indignation that had carried me through the last five days, but all I could think about was how his mouth had felt on my skin, the way he'd made me beg?—

“You left,” I said without preamble as he closed the door behind us. “You fucked me, and then you left.”

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Kaz winced, looking suddenly pale. “I apologize for that,” he said, moving to stand behind his desk rather than sitting. “I took advantage of you in a situation neither of us chose. I assumed you would want nothing to do with a male you’d been forced to wed and bed.”

His words stunned me. I’d expected excuses, maybe even blame for seducing him . Not this... odd sense of honor.

“You didn’t take advantage,” I said evenly, plucking at an imaginary thread on my slacks. “I was a willing participant, if you recall.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Still. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” I said, the words feeling strange on my tongue. When was the last time anyone had apologized to me for anything? “I appreciate the consideration.”

His fingers twitched against the back of his chair, and I was thrown back into thoughts of those fingers on my body, inside me, making me come apart in ways I’d never experienced before. Heat flooded my cheeks, and I forced my attention back to safer territory.

“But that doesn’t change the fact that you’ve been avoiding your responsibilities,” I continued. “While you’ve been off playing mercenary, I’ve been at court ensuring our safety by diverting doubts and gossip.”

“Our safety was never in question,” Kaz said, frowning. “Adron got his heir to the throne.”

“A male heir who disappeared the moment the ceremony was complete,” I countered. “Do you have any idea how that looks? How vulnerable it leaves us both?”

He had the grace to look slightly chagrined at that. “I didn’t realize?—”

“Of course you didn’t. You’ve kept your clan away from those vipers while I nested with them,” I cut him off. I leaned forward, fixing him with a hard stare. “Have you made any progress finding Leona?”

It was clearly the wrong thing to ask. Whatever openness had been on Kaz’s face disappeared, replaced by a blank mask I recognized all too well from my own maneuverings.

“Some,” he admitted. “I received confirmation this morning that someone matching Leona’s description checked into a bed-and-breakfast near Niagara Falls with a human male.”

“A human?” That was unexpected. The Malum clan rarely associated with humans, let alone traveled with them. “You’re certain?”

The puzzle pieces scattered through my head.

Emil had been with my father just before our mating ceremony, discussing something in hushed tones.

Could the Malum clan be involved more than they let on?

Leona was, after all, from a branch of that clan.

Niagara Falls was a hop and a skip from Toronto, and Emil had a lake house a few hours north of the city...

But why? To what end?

Kaz hummed noncommittally. “I planned to teleport to New York City tonight. It’s the closest location I’m familiar with. From there, I can?—”

“That’s a waste of time,” I interrupted. “I can take us directly to Toronto and save several hours on the road.”

Kaz frowned. “You’re not coming with me.”

“I most certainly am.” I rose from my chair, matching his stance. “It’s clear you need me. Not just for teleportation, but for dealing with Leona when we find her. She knows me from court. She’ll be more likely to trust me than some ifrit she’s never met.”

“This isn’t the place for a princess,” Kaz argued. “If she’s been abducted, there could be danger. I’m not putting you at risk.”

“I’m not some delicate flower who needs protection,” I snapped. “I survived twenty-eight years with Javed as my brother. I think I can handle a human kidnapper.”

Kaz pretended to consider for just a moment, then leaned forward conspiratorially and shot a look toward the door. “Does your bodyguard go everywhere you go?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yes, Griffin knows every move I make.”

“Great,” Kaz said, striding for the office door. “Then I’ll use him to jump to Toronto.”

Fury surged through me. I was on his heels in an instant and slammed my palm against the door before it could crack an inch. “You will not.”

Kaz whirled to face me. His eyes dropped to my lips for the briefest moment before snapping back to meet my gaze.

I smirked and planted a finger in the center of his chest, spiraling outward before lifting my eyes to watch him from under my lashes. “You could kiss me again if you bring me along.”

It was meant to be a taunt. Only a bluff. Leverage, not truth.

Then Kaz closed the distance, and the heat of his body radiated against mine. We stood there for a charged moment, breath mingling in the scant space between us. All it would take was the slightest lean forward, the smallest surrender to the need clawing at both of us.

His hand came up to cup my cheek, fingers tracing the curve of my jaw. “Is that what you want?”

No. Yes.

“What I want,” I swallowed the unsteadiness of my voice, “is to be treated as your mate, not an inconvenience to be left behind.”

His thumb brushed across my lower lip, eyes locked on the motion. “If I bring you,” he rumbled, “you follow my lead. My mission, my rules.”

“I can agree to that,” I said, and I had to fight not to lean into his touch. “Within reason.”

“No.” His hand slid to the back of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair. “You listen to whatever I tell you to do. Without question.”

The commanding edge in his voice sent a shiver down my spine. “And if I don’t?”

“Then you stay here,” he said simply. “And I take Griffin instead.”

I considered my options. I could argue further, assert my authority, perhaps even threaten to inform my father of his insubordination. But that would only escalate the conflict between us, at the detriment to the people we were meant to lead.

“Fine,” I conceded. “Your mission, your rules. But,” I added, pressing my palm flat against his chest, “I expect proper compensation for my cooperation.”

Kaz’s pupils dilated, the gold of his eyes nearly swallowed by black. “Meaning?”

I rose on my toes, bringing my mouth to his ear. “No running away before dawn next time.”

His grip tightened in my hair, and I felt the growl that rumbled through his chest. “Deal.”

The word was barely out of his mouth before his lips claimed mine, one arm wrapping around my waist to crush me against him. I melted into him, my hands finding their way to his shoulders, then his neck, then tangling in his hair as the kiss deepened.

His kiss was nothing like our first time together, when anger and frustration had fueled our passion. This was slower, more deliberate, an exploration rather than a battle. He tasted like smoke and desire, his tongue teasing mine as his body pressed me firmly against the door.

Madness. Absolute madness. I’d come here furious, determined to drag him back to court and force him to fulfill his duties.

But as his hands slid down my back and his thumb found the sliver of bare skin between my blouse and slacks, I couldn't bring myself to care.

We could sort out the politics later. Right now, all that mattered was easing the ache that had plagued me since he'd left my bed.

Kaz broke the kiss first, his breathing ragged. "We should go," he said, though he made no move to release me.

I nodded, stepping back to put some distance between us. "I'll get Griffin. Meet me in the main room in five minutes."

"Talía." Kaz caught my wrist as I turned to leave. "Whatever we find, whatever happens... we present a united front. For both our sakes."

The request surprised me. Not because it was unreasonable, but because it suggested he was thinking of us as a team, not just reluctant allies forced together by circumstance.

"United front," I agreed. "But don't mistake that for blind obedience."

His lips quirked in what might have been a smile. "I wouldn't dream of it."

CHAPTER FIVE

KAZ

The receptionist's smile never wavered, but her eyes had gone flat and suspicious. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't give you that information."

"Of course not," I said, trying to keep the edge from my voice. "I understand. Thank you for your time."

I pushed through the front door of the bed-and-breakfast and stepped back onto the porch.

The cool evening air washed over my heated skin as my eyes immediately trained on Talia as if it were the most natural urge in the world.

She laughed at something Griffin said, the sound carrying from across the street.

Her hand rested briefly on his forearm, and hot, ugly jealousy twisted in my gut.

She's your mate, a voice inside me insisted. Claimed and marked.

I had no right to her or her affections.

She'd been forced into this just as much as I had.

Just because we'd slept together and she seemed eager to do so again didn't mean she

trusted me.

Hell, it didn't even mean she liked me. How did one even bring up fate in such a situation?

Sorry for your troubles, love, but we were destined to suffer to get here?

I crossed the street and cleared my throat as I approached. Talia's eyes flicked to me, her smile dimming slightly. That shouldn't have stung, but it did.

"No luck," I announced, not bothering to hide my irritation. "Receptionist says they're not answering calls to the room. And she wasn't forthcoming about when Leona might return."

Talia tapped one manicured nail against her lips, considering. "So, what now?"

"We look for ourselves, check back in a few hours if we haven't found them," I said, already turning toward the main street. "How many places can they be in a town this size?"

We fell into step together, Griffin trailing a few paces behind.

The small town just north of the Falls bustled with early evening activity.

Narrow streets were lined with quaint shops and cafes catering to tourists.

Couples strolled hand in hand, families headed to dinner, street performers set up for the night crowd.

Perfect for a romantic getaway. Perfect for getting lost in plain sight.

I flicked a glance at Griffin, noting how his eyes never stopped moving, cataloging threats, exits, opportunities.

I could, under certain interrogation techniques, possibly admit the male knew his business.

Talia still lived, didn't she? He'd almost undoubtedly thwarted an attempt or two on her life, maybe even from Javed himself.

Still, the sight of her smiling up at him left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I brushed a shoulder against Talia's as I leaned closer and murmured, "Do you ever get a minute without the babysitter?"

She gave me an amused side-eye. "He's very discreet."

My jaw clenched. Was that supposed to reassure me? Because it didn't. In fact, it reminded me how little I actually knew about my mate. What other males had she brought to her bed before me? A princess had no doubt had countless suitors. Maybe Griffin was among them.

"Discreet doesn't mean invisible," I muttered, glancing back at Griffin's stoic form. "Does he watch while you bathe too?"

Talia's laugh was bright and loud and real. "He's my bodyguard, Kaz. One of the few people I trust completely."

The word 'trust' hung between us like smoke. I let it linger, turning my attention to a storefront window as we passed. My reflection stared back—tense jaw, eyes scanning for threats even when there were none. Old habits.

“Trust,” I repeated finally. “And how many make that exclusive list?”

“Griffin. A handful of others.” Her golden eyes met mine, still laughing. “Perhaps you, eventually.”

“Eventually.” The word tasted both bitter and sweet on my tongue.

Eventually meant not now. Someday, maybe, but not now.

It meant waiting, proving myself worthy of something I was so sure I hadn’t wanted in the first place.

But that eventually settled deep in my chest and stuck to my ribs in a way I’d rather not examine too closely.

Not now. Not yet.

Eventually, perhaps.

I watched her as we walked, the graceful way she moved, the careful mask she wore even now.

We’d been bound by magic and politics, forced together by powers beyond our control.

Still, there was something else growing here.

Something that made my blood heat when she laughed, something that made me want to strip away every layer of pretense until I found the real woman underneath all that royal polish.

“What will you do with the throne when it’s yours?” she asked, her voice light but her eyes sharp as blades. “What kind of king will Kaz Kadhan be?”

I snorted. “I’m of half a mind to burn the palace to the ground and tell the courtiers and hangers-on to go home. ‘Thanks for your service, the monarchy is over, time to find real jobs.’“

Talia stopped dead in her tracks and stared at me as if I’d suggested we strip naked to dance in the Falls. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I kept walking, forcing her to catch up. “The whole system is rotten. Your father rules through fear and manipulation. The courtiers spend their days plotting against each other instead of doing anything useful. What’s the point of preserving any of it?”

“Those alliances through births and marriages will all still exist.” Frustration bled into her words.

“Those cliques and plots will keep marching on until someone decides they could be the new head cock on the block. There will be taking, then, and blood.” Her eyes flashed.

“They will do no such thing as quietly go home.”

I crossed my arms, studying her. I’d spent my life avoiding court politics, keeping my clan safely removed from the machinations that had nearly destroyed us. But she’d lived it, breathed it, survived it.

“What would you have me do, then?” I asked.

“Be king,” she said simply. “Rule.”

“That’s your solution? Just... rule?”

“Yes.” She stepped closer, her voice dropping.

“If you dissolve the crown, what then? What happens when the power vacuum forms and the strongest clans start carving up territory? What happens when the humans catch on that we can steal and murder right under their noses before vanishing in a cloud of smoke?”

I opened my mouth to offer a defense, but it felt weak even in my own mind. “The clans have kept to themselves for centuries?—”

“Have you seen any frost giants in those centuries?” she cut in.

The question stopped me cold. Frost giants had once ruled in the tallest, deepest mountain ranges. Powerful, ancient beings who had seen humans as little more than food. They’d preyed on villages, stealing people and livestock, leaving devastation in their wake.

Until the humans had organized. Hunted them. Slaughtered them to the last infant.

The stories were still told, though the humans thought them mere fables—Jack and the Beanstalk, the giant grinding bones to make his bread. But we knew the truth. We remembered the histories from when the humans thought monsters were just nightmares, and the dangers once they knew we were real.

She’s right , I admitted silently. Any change I wanted wouldn’t happen overnight, no matter how hard I pouted or tantrumed. The royal court was a beast with many heads; cut one problem off, and two more would grow in its place.

“My apologies, Your Highness,” I said, offering a mocking half-bow. “I didn’t realize

I'd mated the voice of reason."

"There's a great deal you don't realize about me.

" She let off a pleased hum as she tilted her head in teasing acknowledgment.

But the keen look never left her eyes, and she continued, "You already know about leadership and responsibility. The rest is just..." She waved a hand dismissively. "Window dressing."

Griffin cleared his throat, startling us both. I'd almost forgotten he was there.

"Your Highnesses," he said, his eyes darting to Talia, then me, then back to Talia. "I believe I've spotted Leona and a human entering that bookstore across the street."

I straightened. "Are they alone?"

"Yes," Griffin confirmed, still looking primarily at Talia as if unsure who was in charge. "They appear to be... on a date."

"Or under control," I said, my voice strained as unwelcome memories washed over me. Javed's magic seeped into my mind, forcing my body to move against my will, my hands reaching for Zral's throat?—

A soft touch at the base of my tail pulled me back to the present. Talia pressed a palm against my back in a hesitant, comforting gesture, even as her voice remained hard.

"If the boy is human, he couldn't possibly use the relics," she pointed out. "No human has that kind of power over our kind."

I took a breath, steadying myself. Of all people, she would understand. She'd

survived years under Javed's thumb. She must have learned to navigate his cruelty to keep her sanity intact. Our scars might not show on our skin, but they ran just as deep.

I gave her a slight nod, gratitude I couldn't voice aloud. Her fingers lingered a moment longer before falling away. The small kindness hit harder than it should have.

We crossed the street and entered the bookshop, a small bell announcing our arrival. The interior was cramped but cozy, with shelves reaching to the ceiling and the smell of paper and binding glue hanging in the air.

It took only moments to spot Leona and her companion among the stacks.

Leona stood with her back to us, leaning against a human male as they examined a book together.

His arm was wrapped around her waist, his chin resting on her shoulder.

They were laughing softly, completely absorbed in each other.

I exchanged a glance with Talia. There was no mistaking the happiness radiating from the couple. This was no kidnapping or coercion. This was an escape.

Before I could move, Talia stepped forward. "Leona."

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The young ifrit whirled around, her eyes widening in recognition and fear. In an instant, she positioned herself between her companion and us, her stance protective.

“Princess Talia,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “What are you doing here?”

The human looked confused, his gaze darting between Leona and us. “Lee? Who are these people?”

“Aaron,” Leona said, not taking her eyes off us, “they are... from home.”

Understanding dawned on his face. Worry, anger, and fear rushed in soon after. He threw a quick glance toward the door we blocked and the emergency exit a few aisles over, and reached for Leona’s hand.

I raised my hands, palms out. “We just want to talk. We’re not here to hurt you.”

Leona’s eyes narrowed. “Then why are you here? Did my cousin send you?”

Beside me, I felt Talia go rigid.

“Your cousin?” she asked, her tone suddenly sharp.

“Emil,” Leona confirmed, her chin lifting slightly. “He said he would help us.”

Emil Malum. The name clicked into place as a noble with distant royal blood. I’d heard of him through security briefings, but never paid much attention to court personalities beyond assessing potential threats.

I glanced at my mate, watching as her face transformed. The haughty princess vanished, replaced by a warm, concerned friend I'd never seen before.

“Emil sent us,” Talia said, her voice gentle and reassuring. “We’re here to help.”

I nearly choked on my own tongue. The lie rolled off her lips so smoothly that for a moment, I questioned my own reality.

Leona’s shoulders relaxed slightly, though wariness still clouded her eyes. “He said he would arrange safe passage.”

“And he has,” Talia continued, moving closer with a conspirator’s smile. “We’re to take your place here while you move to the next location. Make sure no one follows your trail.”

The human—Aaron—finally spoke up. “And where, exactly, is that?”

Talia turned to me, considering for a moment. “London?” she asked, as if confirming a plan we’d discussed at length.

I had no fucking idea what she was doing, but I nodded and forced confidence into my voice. “London will be perfect.”

Talia beamed at me before turning to nod at the shadow behind her. “Griffin, will you get the penthouse open?”

The male nodded, and vanished in a cloud of red smoke.

Leona’s tail swished nervously behind her. “Why would you help us? You’re the crown princess.”

“And you’re in love,” Talia said simply, as if that explained everything. She softened with a small sigh and smile. “If I wanted to drag you back to court, I would have done so already. But I understand wanting to choose your own path. Your own mate, perhaps?”

The words hit far, far too close to home.

Talia draped an arm over Leona’s shoulders and eased her toward the door before anyone voiced another objection. “Now, you booked a room somewhere close, yes? Let’s get your things packed. Griffin will accompany you once he’s returned.”

An hour later, we’d moved into the B&B room Leona and Aaron had vacated.

Griffin had teleported the couple to Talia’s London penthouse, promising to return by morning.

The room was small but comfortable, with a queen-sized bed dominating the space.

I tried not to think about sharing it with Talia later.

“I’m surprised you let them go,” I said, watching her as she explored the room, running her fingers along the dresser and peering out the window as twilight settled over the town.

The proud tilt of her chin, the fire in her eyes, the full lips that had been pressed against mine just hours ago.

She was infuriating and brilliant and beautiful, and despite everything, I wanted her.

“Are you?” she asked, not looking at me. “I would have thought you’d be pleased. Isn’t this what you wanted? To avoid dragging an unwilling female back to a fate she

didn't choose?"

I moved to the well-stocked minibar the lovebirds had left behind and poured us glasses of whiskey from tiny bottles. "Yes, but I didn't expect you to be the one to suggest it."

"I did it for more than sentiment for the happy couple." She turned to face me, fingers drumming against the windowsill. "Emil is playing some game here, and I want to know what he's planning."

I studied her face, trying to read beyond the mask she wore so effortlessly. "And the quickest way to find out is to step into his plan."

"You might not be hopeless at ruling after all." She smiled, a small, genuine thing that made her shine. "Though I'll admit, I prefer when kindness isn't wrapped in politics. But I will take that kindness wherever I can find it."

The admission caught me off guard. This small crack in her perfect facade, this glimpse of the woman beneath the crown...

I liked it. Too much.

"And in the meantime, two young lovers get their happily ever after." I offered her a glass of whiskey, which she accepted with a nod of thanks. Our fingers brushed, the contact lingering a heartbeat too long.

Her eyes met mine, and for once, they weren't calculating or guarded. They were simply... seeing me.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice softer than I'd ever heard it. "For what Javed did to you."

I stiffened, the glass halfway to my lips. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve noticed your reactions,” she continued, her eyes dropping to where my free hand had clenched into a fist at the mere mention of Javed’s name. “The way you tense when someone mentions control or compulsion. What he did with those relics...”

The glass nearly shattered in my grip.

“I don’t want your pity,” I growled, retreating across the room to stare out the window.

“It isn’t pity, Kaz.” Her voice followed me, quiet but firm. “It’s understanding. If this mating is to work, we need that between us. We’ve both survived him.”

I kept my back to her, watching the tourists below laugh and stroll without a care in the world. Normal people living normal lives. No royal bullshit, no arranged marriages, no scheming.

“Understanding,” I repeated, the word feeling foreign on my tongue.

In the reflection of the glass, I could see her waiting.

The princess who’d tracked me across countries with ruthless determination.

The same woman who’d lied without hesitation to Leona, slipping into Emil’s scheme to further her own goals.

The female who’d shown me a small kindness when the memories threatened to drown me.

And beneath it all, the sister of the man I'd killed.

I took a long swallow of whiskey, letting it burn down my throat. "We need to figure out what Emil is up to."

Talia sighed, but didn't push back on the change of subject. She moved to pour herself another tiny bottle of whiskey and took a graceful seat on the edge of the bed. "We confront him directly. We go to the lake house under the guise of traveling with Leona, and make him tell us what he's after."

I snorted. "Just walk up and ask? That's your grand strategy?"

"Sometimes the direct approach catches people off guard." She sipped her drink, watching me over the rim of her glass. "Emil expects elaborate schemes and political maneuvering. He won't be prepared for bluntness."

"And if he refuses to talk?" I raised an eyebrow.

Her smile turned sharp. "Everyone has a pressure point, Kaz. Emil is ambitious. He wants something badly enough to risk moving against the crown. We just need to identify what it is, and leverage it."

"And if what he wants is the throne itself?"

Talia's eyes gleamed in the fading light. "Then he'll have to go through both of us to get it."

The casual threat from those perfect lips sent heat straight through me. Not a princess claiming her birthright, but a warrior marking our shared territory. Understanding, she'd called it earlier, but this was something deeper. This was Talia choosing to stand with me, not just endure me.

Like this was real. Like we were... partners.

Mates.

“You know,” I said, moving closer, “for someone raised to be the perfect princess, you have a surprisingly vicious streak.”

“For someone raised to be a mercenary,” she countered, not backing away, “you have a surprisingly soft heart.”

“I wouldn’t call it soft,” I growled.

“No?” Her tail brushed against mine. “What would you call it, then?”

“Selective judgment.” I plucked her glass from her hands and set it on the nightstand with my own. “I choose my battles carefully.”

“And am I a battle worth fighting?” she asked, leaning back on her hands to keep our eyes locked.

I moved closer, tracing my thumb along the curve of her jaw. Her skin was impossibly soft beneath my calloused fingers. “Oh, I’m certain you’ll make me wage wars for your heart.”

She laughed, the sound sending a shiver down my spine as her cheek pressed into my palm. “At least you’re honest.”

“I try,” I promised. “Even when it’s inconvenient.”

“Like now?” Her breath ghosted across my thumb. “When you’re thinking about kissing me again?”

Fuck it.

CHAPTER SIX

TALIA

The gold in Kaz's eyes darkened as his thumb made another pass over my lower lip. For a heartbeat, he hesitated, the honorable mercenary warring with the male who'd claimed me as his mate.

Then he was on me.

His mouth crashed against mine, hot and demanding. I gasped, opening for him as his tongue swept inside, tasting of whiskey and smoke and him. My fingers tangled in his short hair, pulling him closer as I arched up from the bed.

Kaz growled, the sound vibrating through my chest. His hands slid down my sides, gripping my ass and lifting me further onto the mattress. My back hit the sheets as he followed, his powerful body covering mine, pinning me beneath him. This was possession. This was claiming.

This was real.

And exactly I wanted, I realized with startling clarity. Not just the physical pleasure, but his grasping hands and panted breaths, the feeling of being wanted so desperately that honor and restraint crumbled to ash.

His lips broke from mine to trail fire down, down, down to the sensitive spot where my pulse hammered against my skin. His tongue traced patterns there, teeth grazing

just enough to make me writhe. I moaned, tilting my head to give him better access.

“You drive me fucking crazy,” he murmured against my throat. His hands slid under my blouse, calloused palms rough against my stomach. “Do you know that?”

I smiled, arching as his fingers found the underside of my breast. “I’m beginning to suspect.”

It wasn’t just the bond driving us together. It was the understanding that had grown of shared scars and stubborn goals. The realization that perhaps we weren’t so mismatched after all.

He kissed me again, slow and deep, stealing what little remained of my thoughts. There was only him and his wicked, wonderful mouth, the heat of his body pinning mine against the mattress.

I melted into it, giving myself permission to enjoy this moment outside of courtly politics and royal games. Outside of past wounds and future burdens. Just me and my mate, losing ourselves in each other.

His hands slid down my sides, finding the bottom button of my blouse and quickly working his way up as I worked my way down.

I arched into his touch, helping him strip the garment away.

The cool air against my heated skin made me shiver, but Kaz’s hands were fire, trailing heat wherever they touched.

He sat back on his heels, eyes darkening as he took in the sight of me in my lacy black bra. The hunger in his gaze made me feel powerful in a way no crown ever could.

“I’ve thought about this every night since I left,” he growled against my lips.

“Show me,” I challenged, my fingers finding the buttons of his shirt.

He caught my wrists, pinning them gently above my head with one hand. The other tipped my chin up, forcing me to meet his molten gold eyes.

“Not like last time,” he murmured, trailing a finger along the edge of the lace of my bra. “This time, I plan to take my time. I’m going to savor you, Talia. Every. Inch.”

He punctuated each word with a kiss to my lips, then my jaw, then the hollow of my throat. Another between my breasts, his tongue tracing the edge of my bra. With one hand still holding my wrists, he used the other to unclasp the front hook, exposing me to his hungry gaze.

I shivered, caught between the desire to assert control and the pleasure of surrendering to his touch.

Control can wait, I decided as his mouth closed over my nipple, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my core. For now.

Kaz released my wrists to cup both breasts, thumbs circling the hardened peaks as his tongue laved and teeth gently scraped. I threaded my fingers through his hair, holding him to me as my back arched off the bed.

“Beautiful,” he murmured against my skin, moving to lavish attention on my other breast. “So fucking beautiful, my queen.”

“Kaz,” I gasped, my tail wrapping around his thigh. “Please.”

He released my wrists, trailing kisses down my stomach as he moved lower.

His eyes never left mine as he hooked his fingers into the waistband of my slacks and dragged them down my legs.

He followed the fabric with his mouth, pressing kisses to my thighs, my knees, my calves.

Each touch was like a brand, marking me as his.

My breath caught as he leaned forward to nip the sensitive skin just above the fabric. His thumbs rubbed circles along the insides of my thighs, stroking closer to the ache building between my legs with each pass.

I whimpered as his tongue dipped down to trace the edge of my panties. Even through the thin fabric, his warm breath against my core sent heat spiraling through me. Then, slowly, torturously, he peeled the lace away, revealing me to his greedy gaze.

“Gods,” he purred, sliding down farther until he lay between my spread legs, his face inches from my pussy. “You’re going to taste so fucking sweet, aren’t you, Talia?”

He answered his own question with a lick that made me buck off the bed. His arms hooked under my thighs, drawing them over his shoulders as he buried himself between them. His tongue was merciless, circling my clit again and again as my gasps turned to moans.

“Kaz.” One hand fisted in the sheets while I gripped a horn to hold him against me. “Fuck, don’t stop.”

Kaz groaned, the vibration rippling through me as his fingers dug into my hips, locking me against him. Pleasure built, racing through me with every stroke of his clever tongue. Gods, it was too much, it wasn’t nearly never enough, I needed more.

He must have sensed it, because one finger circled my entrance before easing inside, curling upward. I couldn't stop the sounds escaping my throat, the little whimpers and moans as he licked and sucked and pumped inside me.

“Come for me, Talia,” Kaz demanded, his voice muffled against my skin. “Let me feel you come apart.”

I was close, so close, balanced on the knife's edge of pleasure when his lips sealed around my clit and sucked hard. I reached blindly for him, needing something to anchor me as the wave crested.

He caught my hand and laced our fingers together, his gold eyes locking with mine over the curve of my body.

His thumb stroked over my knuckles while he devoured me, a gesture so unexpectedly gentle while he did such filthy things with his mouth.

That connection, his strength anchoring me while his tongue claimed me, was what finally pushed me over.

I cried out his name, squeezing his hand tight as I came. He worked me through it, each swirl of his tongue drawing another pulse of pleasure, until I was a shaking mess on the bed.

I collapsed back, utterly boneless. Kaz pressed a lingering kiss to my inner thigh, the heat of his mouth sending one last shiver through me. He kept our fingers twined together as he moved up my body, his weight settling against me as he brought his lips to mine.

He kissed me deeply, and I moaned as I tasted whiskey and my own arousal. The combination made my head spin more than drinks alone. I nipped at his lower lip,

soothing the sting with my tongue.

“Smug looks terrible on you,” I lied, my voice still breathless.

He laughed, and the sound warmed me from the inside out. “Liar.”

“Perhaps.” I wiggled, feeling his cock press hard against me even through the barrier of his jeans. “But I need to wipe that smirk off your face.”

His fingers curled in my hair, and a gentle tug tilted my head back to expose my throat. His mouth trailed along the column of my neck, setting my pulse pounding against his lips.

“Can you blame me?” he murmured against my skin. “To have my queen begging for my mouth and my fingers?”

I pressed my hips against him, rolling against the bulge straining his fly as I nipped his earlobe. “And do you want to fuck your queen?”

His chuckle was rough and ragged against my skin. “Gods, Talia. What sort of question is that?”

“Is that a yes?” I asked innocently, reaching between us to palm his cock through his jeans. “Tell me, Kaz. Do you want to bury your cock inside me?”

With a quick movement, I flipped our positions, straddling his hips as he looked up at me with surprise and hunger.

I’d had lovers before—discreet, carefully vetted males who knew to keep their mouths shut about bedding the princess.

None of them had made me feel like this.

None of them had looked at me the way Kaz did, like I was something precious and wild all at once.

I rocked against his throbbing erection, and he let out a strangled groan. My wetness coated the rough denim of his jeans, making me shudder with fresh desire.

“You’re still dressed,” I observed, running my hands down his chest. “That seems terribly inconvenient.”

“By all means,” he ground out, hands settling on my hips and thumbs tracing circles on my bare skin, “remedy the situation.”

I unbuttoned his shirt slowly, revealing inch by inch of taut red skin stretched over lean muscle. My tongue darted out, following the path of my fingers. Salt and smoke, spice and smoky lust, filled my nose and danced on my tongue as I raked my nails lightly down his sides.

He hissed at the sensation, but didn’t pull away. His skin was fire to the touch, but gods, I wanted more. Needed more.

A faint scar snaked across his side, and I traced it with my tongue. He tensed under me, and I held him down as I nibbled the edge.

“Too much?” I murmured against his skin, looking up through my eyelashes to find him watching me with undisguised desire.

“I—” His throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. “Don’t stop.”

I gave him a predatory grin and returned to my task, flicking the button of his jeans

open with practiced ease. The metallic sound of his zipper filled the quiet room as I lowered it tooth by tooth.

“Someone’s enjoying herself,” he murmured, lifting his hips to help me tug his pants down his powerful thighs.

“Immensely,” I confirmed, my breath catching as his cock sprang free, thick and hard against his stomach. I wrapped my fingers around him, savoring the velvet heat of him pulsing in my palm. “Though not nearly as much as I’m about to.”

His eyes darkened as I stroked him lazily. Once, twice. Thumb swiping across the drop of liquid shining on the head.

“Talía.” My name was a strangled plea on his lips. “Fuck.”

I gave him one more slow stroke before crawling up his body. I positioned myself above him, the tip of his cock brushing against my entrance. Heat pooled between my legs as his hips jerked, desperate to thrust inside.

“Every queen needs a proper throne,” I purred, lowering myself just enough for him to feel me, the tip of his cock barely entering my pussy. “And you, my king, look sturdy enough to support my reign.”

His hands gripped my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Unholy hells, Talía, stop teasing.”

I leaned forward, pressing my breasts to his chest as I put my lips next to his ear. “Beg me,” I whispered, rolling my hips slightly.

He shoved upright, one arm wrapping up my back and tangling in my hair, the other bracing my hip. He thrust up, sinking just an inch into me before pulling us apart

again. His cock slipped from my pussy, the cool air making me gasp.

“Take your throne, my queen,” he said, decidedly not begging. He lined himself up again, his gaze locking with mine as he eased back inside. “And ride me until you come.”

The stretch of him filling me drew a long moan from my throat. He felt impossibly good, thick and hot inside me. We stayed frozen there for a heartbeat, foreheads pressed together, sharing breath. Our eyes met, and a hint of tenderness crept in amid the desire.

It was too much.

Not enough.

Perfect.

Kaz kissed me then, a soft brush of his lips that sparked every nerve ending in my body. I shifted, pulling my hips back until he almost fell from my body. Then, I slammed back down, taking him fully.

Groans dripped from us both. His mouth trailed along my jaw, his hand tangled in my hair, holding me close. His teeth scored my neck as I rocked against him. Over and over, my movements grew harder, faster, chasing the friction and fullness of our bodies moving together.

“Gods,” Kaz breathed, his eyes fixed on where our bodies joined. “This is amazing.”

“Fucking phenomenal,” I agreed, my head dropping back on a moan.

Sweat beaded on both our skin as we chased release. The room filled with the sounds

of sex: skin slapping skin, groans and gasps, whispered praise and curses. Nothing mattered except the push and pull and heat between us.

Kaz's hands cupped my ass, kneading the muscles as I rode him harder. He surged up to kiss me, his arms wrapping around my back as he thrust up into me. The new angle had me gasping against his mouth, my nails digging into his shoulders.

"I can feel you getting close," he murmured, one hand sliding between us to circle my clit. "Come for me again, Talia. Let me feel you come on my cock."

Pressure built rapidly inside me. Every nerve ending sang as I clutched him tighter, fucking myself on his cock. The world shrank to his body moving beneath me, his fingers rubbing tight circles around my clit, his lips whispering filthy encouragement in my ear.

"Keep your eyes on your queen," I commanded, my voice breaking as the tension coiled tighter. "Watch me come."

His eyes locked with mine, his pupils blown wide as he drove up into me again and again. He never looked away as the pressure exploded, pleasure wracking my body as I cried out. Kaz fucked me through it, his fingers never faltering as he kept working my clit.

"Talia," he groaned, his whole body tensing. "Fuck!"

Heat filled me as Kaz spilled inside me. I rocked against him, riding out the aftershocks until both of us were spent. I collapsed on top of him, burying my face in the crook of his neck as our breathing slowed.

"You know," I said, tracing lazy patterns on his forearm, "I think I might be starting to like you, princeling."

I felt his chuckle rumble through his chest. “High praise indeed, princess.”

We fell into a comfortable silence, the kind that felt earned rather than awkward. I closed my eyes at the press of his lips against my temple and allowed myself a small moment of peace before the next battle. Emil’s schemes, the throne, the future of our clans, all of it could wait until morning.

For tonight, I was simply Talia. And he was simply Kaz. And what lay between us was ours alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TALIA

I woke to the gentle press of lips against my skin, trailing along the back of my neck and across my shoulder.

Warmth radiated from the body curled around mine, and chased away the morning chill.

For a moment, I kept my eyes closed, and savored the sensation of Kaz's mouth on my skin, his arm draped possessively over my waist, our legs tangled beneath the sheets.

This is new , I thought, fighting the smile that threatened to curve my lips.

I wasn't used to my bedmates lingering till morning, much less showering me with affection.

Usually, they were gone before the first hint of dawn, dismissed with a wave of my hand and firm reiteration that discretion was paramount.

But Kaz wasn't just another bedmate, was he? He was my mate. My husband. My future king.

"I know you're awake," he murmured, his breath hot against the nape of my neck. "Your breathing changed."

My smile matched the one I felt growing against my shoulder. “And you’re still here. How unexpected.”

His chuckle vibrated through me in a pleasant rumble that settled somewhere beneath my ribs. “The day is still young. The trouble you bring might still make me flee.”

“Mmm. You say the sweetest things.” I stretched against him, my tail lazily curling around his calf. “Such a romantic.”

“Would you prefer poetry?” he teased, his hand splaying across my stomach, thumb tracing idle patterns just below my navel. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

I snorted. “Really? That’s the best you can do?”

“Shakespeare famously had a way with words.” His teeth grazed my earlobe. “Though none capture the way you taste.”

There was something oddly intimate about being wrapped in each other’s arms, naked, but facing away.

I couldn’t see his expressions, couldn’t read the minute shifts in his features that might reveal his thoughts.

Instead, I felt every reaction in the tension of his muscles, the catch of his breath, the heat of his skin against mine.

He trailed his fingers up my arm before finding my hand where it rested on the pillow. Our fingers twisted together, palm to palm, fitting together perfectly. As if this were right, somehow.

Fated.

His thumb traced the delicate bones of my wrist where his mark stood out against my red skin. He lingered there, circling the spot where our bond was made visible, before moving higher to the lines of my palm.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he explored each finger, each knuckle, as if memorizing them. “For leaving you after our mating. It was... cowardly.”

I squeezed his fingers, considering my response. The prideful, wounded part of me wanted to lash out, to make him suffer for abandoning me to face the court alone. But what would that accomplish, beyond pushing away the fragile understanding growing between us?

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” I said in the quiet. “I didn’t ask to be protected or sheltered or left to handle court on my own while you disappeared to play hero.”

“I wasn’t playing hero,” he countered, his fingers stilling against mine. “I was giving you space.”

“I never wanted space,” I huffed. “I just wanted to be seen.”

The silence stretched between us, filled only by our breathing and the distant sounds of the town coming alive outside our window. I hadn’t meant to be so honest or reveal that particular vulnerability. I blamed the damned hand holding for making me soft.

“The first attempt on my life was also the last time I was in a room with all my siblings alive and breathing,” I said, beginning to toy with his fingers.

“I was seven, and my eldest brother had just reached maturity. Javed was twelve, and already showing signs of what he’d become.

The poison in our lemonade killed our eldest brother and elevated Javed to heir.

No one could prove it was him, of course. ”

“Seven,” Kaz repeated, his fingers tightening around mine.

I nodded. “We were separated shortly after to the first of many temporary homes. My father claimed it was for our safety, but really, it was just easier to brush the incident under the rug.”

“You didn’t grow up in the palace?” Surprise colored his tone.

“Not consistently. Javed’s threats and kills drove many of the moves, though I didn’t understand that until I was older.

” I dragged the tip of my tail along his calf, glad we weren’t in danger of eye contact.

Just as he didn’t want pity, I couldn’t bear to see it on his face for myself.

“But I learned to use it to my advantage. Each new home meant new staff, new neighbors, new potential allies. I turned those sympathetic hearts into my network of eyes and ears. By the time I was sixteen, I knew more about the workings of the court than most of the ministers.”

Kaz was silent for a long moment, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand.

“Then... you would have no objections to living elsewhere? Away from the palace?”

I stiffened. “If you’re again suggesting we dissolve the crown?—”

“I’m not.” He cut me off gently. “But you’ve called the court a pit of vipers on more than one occasion. I’m simply asking if you would consider sleeping somewhere

else.”

I rolled over to face him, needing to see his expression for this. His gold eyes were serious, and watching me carefully.

“The court expects the king and queen to reside in the palace,” I said slowly.

“But what duties actually require our physical presence?” He traced my collarbone with one finger. “The meetings, the formal functions, yes. But do we need to sleep there? Eat there? Live our private moments under the watchful eyes of courtiers and servants who report to gods know who?”

I frowned, turning the idea over in my mind. The thought of escaping the palace’s suffocating atmosphere was tempting. “What do you propose, then?”

“That those times belong to us, and us alone,” he said, his voice dropping to a rumble that sent heat pooling between my legs. “And I will guard those minutes jealously.”

Something warm unfurled in my chest at his words.

The distance between my father and mother had been legendary—separate wings, separate lives, coming together only for formal functions and the occasional begrudging production of heirs.

The thought that Kaz wanted to be with me, not distracted or disinterested, was. .. pleasing.

But doubt crept in, as it always did. “You’re just trying to avoid giving up your clan.”

“Is that truly so selfish of me?” Gold eyes searched mine. “They’re my family, Talia.”

Could I blame him? The display back in Silvermist Falls was enough to paint a pretty picture to contrast with the hellish landscape of my relatives. Kaz had a sister he'd defend to the death, brothers-in-arms that would do the same for them both, dozens and dozens of loyal ifrit across the globe.

I wouldn't willingly throw myself in with the vipers, either.

"We can find a solution." I caught his hand dipping maddeningly closer to my breast and twined our fingers this way and that, just needing to touch and be touched. "Roll them into the royal guard, perhaps. They certainly have the fighting skills."

He shook his head. "The Kadhan clan isn't meant for guard duty. We're used to taking what jobs we want, when we want. Making us stare at the same walls without end would be a waste of our talents and an insult to the actual guard."

"You can't have both," I said, my fingers trailing across his chest. "You can't be clan leader and king at once."

Kaz caught my wandering hand, pressing it flat against his heart. "Why not?"

"Because the crown demands your full attention and loyalty." I tried to sound firm, but the heat of his skin beneath my palm and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat made it difficult to focus. "One clan can't be seen as placed above all others."

His gold eyes narrowed, searching mine. "Isn't that exactly what your father did to you? Passed over the most qualified ruler because of outdated traditions?" His voice softened. "And now you're asking me to abandon my clan, my responsibilities... everything I've built."

I hesitated, feeling the weight of his words. This mattered to him—deeply. And if we were to build anything real between us, I needed to acknowledge that.

“Perhaps...” I traced a slow circle around his heart, considering my words. “Perhaps you could save it for a second son.”

His eyebrows shot up, and a slow grin spread across his face. “Already planning our family, princess? Do I get any say in this?”

Heat crept up my neck. “Pregnancy is not an immediate plan, but it will be part of our future.” I met his gaze steadily. “Heirs will solidify our claim to the throne. And frankly, we need more ifrit in the world.”

“Is that so?”

“Do you know how rare pure ifrit children are now? Mixed couples often don’t know if their children will be orc or ifrit or something in between.

Bloodlines get diluted. Numbers dwindle.

” I looked away, surprising myself with the sudden lump in my throat.

“I don’t want to see my people fade away into nothing. ”

Our people , I corrected myself silently. Because they were his too, weren’t they? Even if his branch had broken away generations ago. Even if he didn’t want anything to do with the dramatics.

He caught my hand and brought my palm to his lips. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft but firm. “That’s not a good enough reason for forced arranged matings.”

I rolled to my back with a huff, breaking eye contact and staring at the ceiling. “That’s not what I meant.”

Kaz caught my chin gently between his thumb and forefinger, turning my face toward his. His golden eyes burned as he leaned over me. “You told me that if an arranged mating is good enough for you, then everyone else should be happy to follow your example.”

“That’s not fair,” I protested, even as a small voice inside me acknowledged the truth in his words.

“What’s not fair is trapping people in bonds they didn’t choose,” he countered. “There needs to be an out available for all parties involved, and not just because of tarnished bloodline objections or to prevent future bloodshed.”

I knew he was thinking of Rava. The way his sister had fled rather than be bound to Javed. How close she’d come to a life of misery, or worse.

“How would you balance the old agreements with new thinking?” I asked. “Some of these contracts were made generations ago, specifically to prevent more bloodshed.”

“I don’t know.” Kaz ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in every line of his body. “But I wanted to whisk Rava away the moment I learned what Javed was, and I couldn’t. As a people, we need to do better.”

I couldn’t disagree with him, though the political implications would be messy. Tradition and duty had their place, but so did choice. My own feelings on the matter were... complicated.

I’d spent my life preparing for a political match, knowing it was expected of me. But I’d also harbored secret fantasies of finding someone who wanted me for myself, not for my bloodline or position.

Like Kaz?

I pushed the thought away and fell back on familiar territory.

“And if you stray from your idealism,” I teased, arching an overly chilly eyebrow, “I suppose I could always start a coup against you to install my favorite son. I’d gather all the ladies of the court to my cause.”

“Or favorite daughter?” Kaz leaned in, his breath hot against my ear. “I don’t think you should wait for our hypothetical children. I’d love to take you over my knee and thwart your plans with one slap of your perfect ass at a time.”

I wiggled said ass, enjoying the way his eyes darkened. Better that than admit the stomach flipping feelings at his apparent openness to a female heir. “You think my ass is perfect?”

He reached down and grabbed a handful, his fingers digging into my flesh with just the right pressure. “It was made to be bitten.”

Heat spread slowly through my limbs as he turned his head, eyes dark with hunger. I arched toward him, body already anticipating the delicious pleasure of his hands, his tongue, his cock.

But before we could indulge ourselves, a sharp knock sounded at the door.

We froze, staring at each other. I placed a finger over my lips, hoping whoever it was would go away if we ignored them.

The second round of knocking was more insistent, accompanied by Griffin’s urgent voice. “Princess! I need to speak with you immediately.”

Something in his tone made my blood run cold. Griffin never sounded panicked. His calm composure was what made him such an effective bodyguard. For him to sound

so out-of-sorts now...

“Emil has made his move,” Griffin called through the door.

I was out of bed in an instant, wrapping the sheet around me as I rushed to unlock the door.

Griffin stood in the hallway with singed clothes and a nasty cut marring his left cheek.

His eyes flicked briefly to Kaz, who had pulled on his pants and stood just behind me, but there was no judgment in his gaze.

Only urgency.

“What happened?” I demanded.

“I received your emergency code from the palace. I went immediately, but...” Griffin hesitated, and my stomach dropped. “The king is dead, Princess. Emil has seized the throne.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

KAZ

The conference room in our new Silvermist base felt too small, too hot, too real.

Malak, Zane, and Rava sat opposite us on one side of the table.

Malak's face remained blank and unreadable, Zane's twisted with barely contained rage, and Rava's eyes narrowed with sharp suspicion.

Griffin stood behind Talia's chair, hands clasped behind his back despite the angry burn on his cheek that still needed treatment.

Talia herself sat beside me, her spine straight, hands folded neatly on the table.

Emil has seized the throne.

"Start from the beginning," I said to Griffin.

He nodded. "I received the Princess's emergency code from the palace approximately four hours ago. I teleported directly there, but was intercepted before even leaving the hall by Emil's personal guard."

"So, they were waiting for you," Malak said, leaning forward slightly.

Griffin nodded grimly. "They captured me and took me to the cells. I overheard the

guards talking about Emil taking control and King Adron being dead. They planned to use me to track Princess Talia.”

“A coordinated attack,” Talia spat. “Continue.”

I watched her from the corner of my eye, noting the slight tremor in her hands that she tried to hide by keeping them tightly clasped. I’d known her for such a short time, but I could read the shock and fury radiating from her like heat waves.

“They underestimated how much I’d fight to get back to you.” A hint of pride flickered in Griffin’s voice. “I managed to break free and make my way out of the palace.”

The king is dead. The thought hammered in my brain, making everything else feel absurdly normal when nothing was.

“So, what’s happening at the palace now?” Rava asked, leaning forward.

Griffin shook his head. “I couldn’t get much information. The guards were keeping quiet, but I managed to hear that Emil had taken control by right of ‘pure blood and clear conscience.’“

“Emil must have some support,” Talia said flatly. “He wouldn’t make such a move without preparation.”

“What exactly are they saying about us?” I asked. The answer wasn’t difficult to guess.

Griffin hesitated, glancing at Talia. “He’s accused you both of treason. He claims you orchestrated Leona’s kidnapping as a distraction while you murdered the king.”

“How convenient,” Talia scoffed. She turned to her bodyguard. “Leona and Aaron?”

“Safe in London, as you arranged,” Griffin assured her. “Emil doesn’t know their location.”

“Yet,” Malak said grimly.

Talia’s face hardened into a mask I recognized all too well. It was her armor, the same expression she’d worn when facing her father in the throne room just days ago. Watching her put it on piece by piece felt like watching someone disappear behind a wall.

“Then we have work to do,” she said, and I could almost believe she felt nothing at all.

“So,” Zane said, cracking his knuckles, “who do we hit first?”

Pride swelled in my chest, even as anxiety churned in my gut. This was my clan. My family.

I could feel the tension still simmering between us. They were pissed I’d hidden my mating with Talia, furious I’d taken on the Leona mission alone. But none of that mattered now. Rava would give me so much shit. Zane and Malak would still fight at my side. They always had.

“We can’t just storm the palace,” I said, though part of me wanted nothing more than to burn the place to the ground with Emil inside it. “We don’t know how much immediate support he has.”

“Griffin,” Talia said, drumming her fingers on the polished tabletop, “did you get a sense of how many clans have been informed? Or support Emil’s actions?”

Griffin shook his head. “Everything happened too fast. I think some of the guard made it easy for me to escape, but I couldn’t tell how deep the loyalties run.”

“So, we go in quiet,” Rava said, her eyes meeting mine. “Get in, take out Emil, get out.”

“No,” I growled. “Too risky.”

Rava’s eyes flashed. “Need I remind you if I hadn’t taken that risk, we’d all be mindless puppets acting out Javed’s twisted fantasies right now?”

I flinched. Javed’s control through the relics was still a raw wound, the memory of being forced to hurt my own sister haunting my nightmares. If she’d played it safe...

“We need to move fast, before Emil secures his position,” Talia said softly. I saw her wince at the mention of Javed, but her voice was steady. “The longer we wait, the more time he has to consolidate power and eliminate potential opposition.”

I wanted to argue, to insist we take more time to plan, but I knew they were right. Emil was undoubtedly moving quickly to shore up his claim. Every moment of our absence was one more for him to paint us as villains.

“Malak, pull every surveillance feed you can access,” I ordered. “I want to know who’s in the palace, where they’re positioned, and which entry points are least guarded.”

Malak nodded, already reaching for his tablet.

“Zane, weapons check. I want everything prepped and ready to move in thirty.”

“On it.” Zane pushed away from the table and headed for the door.

“Rava, help Griffin with that burn, then gear up. I want you to know everything he knows about the palace before we leave. Hiding spots, likely personnel, routes and areas reserved for the royal family and their guards.”

My sister nodded, her earlier anger seemingly forgotten in the face of action.

I caught Talia’s arm and drew her away from the others. Her skin was warm beneath my fingers, reminding me of how we’d woken wrapped around each other just hours ago. “Can I speak with you? Privately.”

She followed me into my office, her expression guarded.

I’d been turning this over in my mind since the moment Griffin had appeared at our door, bloodied and desperate.

The thought of Talia walking into Emil’s trap, of her bleeding out on marble floors, or locked away in some dungeon where I couldn’t reach her, made the fire stir beneath my skin.

“We could walk away,” I said, my voice low enough that only she could hear. “Start fresh somewhere else. No court politics, no power games. Just us.”

The words felt like a betrayal even as I spoke them, but I couldn’t stop myself. I’d felt what happened to those who challenged royal power, and I couldn’t let anything close happen to her. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t just thinking about honor and duty.

Her eyes widened in disbelief, then narrowed in fury. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.” I tightened my grip on her arm. “Emil isn’t our problem. Let the vipers eat each other.”

“And what happens to our people while they do?” she hissed. “Do you think Emil would have let Rava mate her orc? Or Leona run off with Aaron?”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t. Because she was right, again, and we both knew it.

“You said you wanted to see our people do better,” she continued, her voice softening. “We are the best path forward, Kaz. You and me.”

You and me. The words echoed in my head, dangerously appealing. I’d spent my life fighting for my clan’s independence, for the right to choose our own path. Now here I was, contemplating a crown. For her. For us.

“Then at least stay behind,” I said, already knowing it was the wrong thing to say. “You’re the last Fitsum, not me. We shouldn’t both rush headlong into danger.”

“So, I should hide while you risk your life? Is that your idea of partnership?” Her eyes flashed. “Absolutely not.”

“This isn’t a game, Talia. This is my job.”

“Our job. Our responsibility.” She stepped closer, the scent of jasmine and embers filling my lungs. “I am your mate, and this is royal business.”

The fierceness in her amber eyes took my breath away. This woman—this queen—with her stubborn determination and unwavering courage. I’d been a fool to think she would hide while others fought her battles.

I kissed her, hard and fast, pouring everything I couldn’t say into the press of my lips against hers. I still thought she should stay behind, safe from Emil’s reach, but I wouldn’t insult her by suggesting it again. She had every right to fight for her people, her throne, her future.

Our future.

“Let’s go get your crown,” I said against her lips.

Red smoke cleared as we landed in Talia’s chambers, the lingering scent of jasmine now mixed with unfamiliar footprints. Books were pulled from shelves and drawers hung open, her private desk upended and papers strewn carelessly about.

I caught the flash of rage in Talia’s eyes as she took in her ransacked belongings, confirming she hadn’t left the room in such a state. Griffin’s tense posture said everything. We were in enemy territory now, and every second counted.

“Security room first,” I murmured to Griffin. “Get Malak in place.”

Griffin nodded, gripping Malak’s shoulder.

They vanished, leaving the rest of us to wait in tense silence.

I scanned Talia’s quarters, taking in the details I’d missed during our brief stay after our mating.

The mess somehow made the room more sterile, like a high-end hotel suite rather than a home.

No photos among the wreckage, no mementos smashed to pieces.

Nothing that revealed the woman behind the princess mask.

Had she ever felt safe enough to put down roots anywhere?

Griffin reappeared, his face grim. “Malak’s in. He said to give him five minutes to

loop the security feeds, then he'll guide us through on comms."

He handed each of us a small earpiece, and I tucked mine into place. We'd used them on countless missions, but never for something like this. Never to take down a false king.

"Testing, one-two. Can everyone hear me?"

Perfect timing. We each confirmed, keeping our voices low.

"Movement on the south corridor, two guards at the door," Malak's voice crackled through our earpieces. "Emil just passed through with a group of six. They're heading toward the throne room."

"Throne room," Talia repeated. She nodded grimly, the fire in her eyes burning hotter than ever.

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“Let’s move,” I ordered, signaling Rava and Zane to take point.

We stepped swiftly through the palace corridors, sticking to the shadows. The usual bustle of servants and courtiers was absent, the halls eerily quiet except for the occasional patrol of guards. Not good. Emil had cleared the palace of witnesses.

“Hold,” Malak warned through our earpieces. “Two guards approaching from the east.”

We froze against the wall, barely breathing as footsteps neared. Talia’s tail brushed against my leg, and I reached out instinctively, my fingers finding hers behind me. She squeezed once, hard, before letting go.

I glanced at Zane, who grinned. “On it.”

He slipped around the corner, and seconds later, I heard the soft thud of bodies hitting the floor. Zane reappeared, beckoning us forward.

He mouthed along to Malak’s verbal, “Clear.”

We moved through the palace corridors like shadows. The silence sounded unnatural for a place that should be bustling with servants and guards. Twice we diverted our path when Malak warned of approaching patrols and once ducked into an empty chamber until danger passed.

We approached the massive doors to the throne room, left slightly ajar and unguarded. Voices drifted through the crack, a smooth, confident voice carrying

clearly.

“...a tragedy that strikes at the very heart of our people,” he was saying. “But we cannot allow grief to blind us to the threat that still exists. A member of my own clan is still missing by their hands. We must bring these traitors to justice.”

I glanced at Talia, whose jaw tightened in recognition. Emil. Had to be. And fuck the bastard for already spinning his story to paint us as the villains.

Malak’s voice entered our ears before I had a chance to ask. “The room is more guard than courtier. I’m counting fifteen, no, sixteen to seven.” A pause. “There’s... something on the throne.”

Something. The way he said it made my skin crawl.

“Ready?” I silently asked the others.

They nodded, and I pushed the doors open.

The throne room fell silent as we entered. Guards immediately snapped to attention along the walls, hands moving to weapons. Sixteen, just as Malak said.

Seven clan leaders and advisors froze mid-conversation, heads swiveling toward us like startled deer.

I recognized that look, that rapid consideration of which side to back for maximum survival and profit.

Half of them were already inching toward the exits, while the others plastered themselves with fake shock that wouldn’t fool a child.

Emil stood on the dais, one hand resting on the arm of the throne—Talía's throne. Displayed like some macabre trophy, sat the body of King Adron.

Even from a distance, I could see the wound that had killed him: a messy slash across the throat. The king's eyes were open, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. Blood had pooled beneath him, staining the marble black.

Beside me, Talía went rigid. I couldn't tell if it was grief or rage or some combination of both that made her hands clench into fists at her sides.

Emil's surprise lasted only a moment before his face settled into a smug smile. "Ah, the murderers return to the scene of their crime. How predictable."

"You killed my father," Talía said, each word sharp as glass.

Emil tsked, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

"Such accusations from the princess who fled with her father's killer.

Tell me, how long were you planning this coup?

Was it before or after your brother's unfortunate demise?

Oh, didn't this Kadhan scum also have a hand in Prince Javed's murder? "

I felt the heat of anger building beneath my skin, fire itching to be released.

"In this time of crisis," Emil continued, back to addressing his supporters, "a pure ifrit must step forward to prevent the crown from falling to murderers and kidnappers." He spread his arms wide. "I present myself as your rightful king, ready to lead our people back to prosperity and honor."

The nobles shifted uncomfortably, exchanging uncertain glances. Emil noticed their hesitation and smiled coldly.

“Perhaps we should ask the king himself.” He turned to Adron’s body with theatrical gravity. “Your Majesty, do you have any objections to my taking the throne?”

Silence filled the room. Emil waited a beat, then grabbed a handful of the dead king’s white hair, shaking his head slightly. “What’s that, Your Majesty? You believe I am the rightful heir? How generous.”

Talia made a strangled sound beside me as Emil let the king’s head drop, then shoved the body roughly aside with his foot. He settled himself on the throne, crossing his legs casually.

“Now,” he said, “let us discuss how to deal with the traitors.”

“You disrespectful piece of shit,” Talia shouted, her control finally breaking. “You fucking traitor! You’re just an opportunistic sleaze.”

“Such harsh words from such pretty lips,” Emil chided. “Come, Princess, sit on my lap, and you can claim anything you’d like.” His eyes raked over her body. “So long as you know who’s in charge.”

I snarled, the sound ripping from my throat before I could stop it.

The fire beneath my skin flared hotter, demanding release.

The crude suggestion, the implication that Talia— my mate —would ever submit to him, sent a wave of possessive rage through me that threatened to consume everything in its path.

The sound seemed to startle even Emil, whose smug expression faltered for a moment. Then his hand shot up, flames already gathering in his palm.

“Die like your father,” Emil snarled, launching a massive fireball straight at Talia’s heart.

Griffin teleported directly in front of Talia. The blast caught him full in the shoulder, the impact spinning him halfway around. His scream cut through the chaos as flames ate through cloth and skin. He stumbled but planted himself more firmly, his good arm raised.

“Go!” he ground out through clenched teeth. “Both of you, get out of here!”

Like hell.

The guards charged forward while the nobles scattered like vermin, teleporting away in clouds of red smoke. Zane and Rava met them head-on, my sister’s fire cutting a swath through the first wave while Zane’s massive fists connected with jaw after jaw.

I locked eyes with Talia. Something passed between us. Understanding. Purpose. Rage.

Emil would not win. He couldn’t.

We moved as one, stepping forward instead of back.

Fire roared from my hands, a torrent of destruction that cleared a path through the guards. I didn’t hold back, didn’t temper the inferno the way I normally would. Behind me, Talia struck fast and hard. Any guard who escaped my initial blast or blades found themselves facing her flames.

These men had chosen their side when they stood with Emil. They'd chosen wrong.

For a moment, victory seemed within reach. The first wave of guards lay scattered across the floor, some moaning in pain, others ominously still. Emil's smug expression had vanished, replaced by something closer to fear.

"Another wave coming through the west corridor," Malak's voice crackled in my ear. "At least ten more guards and?—"

Static filled the earpiece, then silence.

"Malak?" I called, panic clawing at my throat. "Malak, report!"

Nothing.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The doors burst open, and fresh guards poured into the throne room, cutting off our path to Emil. I spun, trying to track threats from all directions at once. A fireball grazed my shoulder, the heat singeing my skin even as I dodged.

"Kaz!" Talia shouted.

I turned just in time to see a massive blast of fire heading straight for her. She vanished in a cloud of red smoke a split second before it would have hit her. Relief flooded through me, followed immediately by dread as I realized I was now exposed on all sides.

Where is she? Where the fuck is she?

Guards circled me, fire dancing between their fingers. Zane and Rava were backed

against a pillar, fighting desperately to keep enemies at bay. Griffin, his shoulder a charred mess, was down on one knee but still hurling fireballs with his good arm.

We were going to lose.

Then I saw it. A cloud of red smoke taking shape behind the throne.

Talia materialized beside Emil, a wicked dagger glinting in her hand. Before he could turn, she drove the blade deep into his lower back. Emil howled, arching in pain, but he didn't fall. Instead, he whirled on her, fire already gathering in his palms.

“No!” The word tore my throat raw.

I hurled myself forward, sending balls of fire at anyone who stood between me and the throne. Guards scattered, some falling beneath my onslaught, others diving for cover. I didn't care. All I saw was Emil, his hands wreathed in flames, reaching for my mate.

I reached the dais in three bounds, grabbing Emil by the back of the neck and yanking him away from Talia. Our eyes locked, and we both understood what needed to be done.

Together, Talia and I unleashed our fire, pouring it into Emil from both sides. His screams echoed through the throne room as he burned, the flames consuming him until nothing remained but ash.

The room fell silent, save for the crackle of dying flames and the groans of the wounded.

“Kaz!” Malak's voice, rough but blessedly alive, broke the silence. He appeared at the far entrance, a group of guards in royal colors behind him. “We secured the

communications room and found loyalists in the barracks. These men still serve the crown.”

Relief washed over me, but it was short-lived. Across the body of our enemy, Talia’s eyes had found her father. She moved to him like a sleepwalker, kneeling beside the throne where Emil had carelessly tossed his body.

I turned to Malak and the waiting guards. “Take everyone who followed Emil to the cells. They’ll be judged later.” My voice sounded strange to my own ears. Distant. Hollow. “Secure the palace. No one enters or leaves without my permission.”

Malak nodded, already directing the loyal guards to round up Emil’s supporters. Zane and Rava moved among the fallen, separating the dead from those who could still be saved. Griffin stood watch over it all, his injured arm hanging uselessly at his side, but his eyes alert.

I crossed to where Talia knelt beside her father’s body. I didn’t speak. What could I possibly say that wouldn’t sound empty? Instead, I simply reached for her hand.

Her fingers twined with mine, squeezing so hard it hurt. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. “I don’t know what to feel. I have everything I ever wanted, but at what cost? An entire family, rotten as it was?”

“You don’t need to know how to feel right now,” I said softly.

I knelt beside her, my free hand coming up to cup her cheek.

“It can be different tomorrow, or the day after. And that can be different ten days from now.” I pressed my forehead to hers, breathing in the scent of jasmine and embers that had become as necessary to me as air.

“I’ll be with you through it all, Talia. ”

She closed her eyes, a single tear tracking down her cheek. I caught it with my thumb, this precious evidence of her humanity, her heart.

“My queen,” I whispered. Vowed.

Her eyes opened, meeting mine with a fierce, wounded pride that took my breath away. I knew with bone-deep certainty that I would spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of her trust, her strength, her vulnerability.

“My king,” she answered, and somehow, in the midst of death and chaos, it felt like the beginning of something extraordinary.

The crown was still stained with blood. The throne room still reeked of death and betrayal. But as Talia’s hand tightened in mine, I felt something I hadn’t expected to find in this place of power and poison.

Hope.

CHAPTER NINE

TALIA

The weight of the crown settled against my temples.

Not as heavy as I'd imagined all these years—just gold and jewels, after all—but the responsibility it represented pressed down on my shoulders like a mountain.

Three days of coronation celebrations, and I still couldn't quite believe it was mine. Ours.

I stood on the balcony overlooking the grand ballroom and watched the sea of bodies below. Red skin in every shade, horns gleaming with oils and jewels, tails adorned with precious metals swaying to the music. The nobility and elite of ifrit society, all here to pay homage to their new rulers.

King Kaz and Queen Talia Fitsum.

A title I'd dreamed of since I was old enough to understand what power meant. What I hadn't dreamed of was the ifrit catching my eye down below, or the butterflies in my stomach when he slipped away from his conversation. His eyes hardly left mine as he climbed the stairs to join me on the balcony.

Kaz's fingers brushed against mine, the contact sending a familiar spark up my arm. "How much longer must we endure this circus?" he murmured, his breath warm against my ear.

I suppressed a smile. “Patience, my king. A proper ruler knows when to make a graceful exit.”

“And when might that be?”

I glanced sideways at him, taking in the sharp line of his jaw, the glint of gold in his eyes.

The formal attire suited him—black and crimson, tailored to emphasize the breadth of his shoulders and the lean strength of his body.

The crown resting on his brow looked as though it had been made for him.

Mine . My mate. My king.

And to think I’d once seen our arranged mating as just another move in the endless game of court politics.

The memory of that first night, of viewing Kaz as nothing more than an opponent to outmaneuver, brought a wry twist to my lips.

How wrong I’d been. He wasn’t a piece on the board at all, but rather the partner I’d never known I needed.

“Soon,” I promised, letting my tail brush against his. “The slimiest of the bastards are drunk enough that they won’t notice a short absence.”

Below us, a handful of Emil’s former supporters mingled with those who had remained ignorant to his short-lived coup.

He’d been careful with his murder and blame, approaching only those he thought

would support his claim to the throne.

Now they drank and laughed with those who truly had been unaware of the coming bloodshed, as if their hands were just as clean.

In the aftermath, every clan had scrambled to prove their loyalty to the crown.

My network of spies had been busy these past weeks, carefully unraveling who knew what and when.

I knew the convenient alibis wouldn't hold forever.

Someone would slip. Until then, I kept them close where I could see exactly which proclamations of devotion were genuine and which were born from fear of sharing Emil's fate.

Griffin stood at attention near the doors, his shoulder now healed from the fight in the throne room. He caught my eye and nodded slightly at my raised brow. The signal that all was secure, that we could slip away without concern.

"Now," I said, turning to Kaz. "We can sneak away now."

Relief washed across his face. "Thank fuck. Let's get out of here."

I caught Kaz's hand and pulled him into the shadows. Red smoke curled around us as I teleported us directly to the royal family's reception chambers.

These rooms weren't ours, not really. They belonged to the crown, to ceremony, to the ghosts of rulers past. Tomorrow we'd return to our true home in Silvermist Falls, but our duties tonight demanded we maintain the illusion of palace life a few hours longer.

Still, the room felt blissfully cool and quiet after the heat and noise of the ballroom. I exhaled slowly, feeling tension drain from my shoulders.

“Freedom,” Kaz murmured, his hands finding my waist.

“For now,” I hummed, toying with a button on his jacket. “We still need to complete the midnight toast. Three nights of celebration, three toasts to seal our reign. Rava threatened to hunt us down if we try to skip it.”

“Rava can go fuck herself.”

I laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls. “Such sentiment from a king.”

“Would you prefer I be more formal, Your Majesty?” His low growl sent heat pooling low in my belly. “A decree, perhaps? Interruptions will result in heads meeting spikes?”

“You know,” I said slowly, pretending to consider the idea. “I think I might be starting to like you, princeling.”

“Is that your way of saying you don’t hate me after all?” he teased. The tip of his tail trailed up my calf to the back of my knee. “High praise indeed, princess.”

“Queen,” I corrected, leaning up to nip at his lower lip. “Your queen.”

“My queen,” he agreed simply. Then his voice dropped to a sinful drawl. “Have I told you how exquisite you look in that dress?”

The gown had been specially made for the coronation. Deep teal silk that clung to my curves before flaring at the knees. The neckline dipped low, exposing more skin than was strictly proper for a queen, but I’d insisted. I knew the effect it would have on my

mate.

“You mentioned it,” I said, my breath catching as his fingers traced the edge of the bodice. “I believe your exact words were ‘I can’t wait to tear that off you.’”

His low laugh did wicked things to my insides. “Did I say that? How unrefined.”

“Positively barbaric,” I agreed, arching into him as his lips traced my jaw. “Whatever would the court think of their king?”

“I don’t give a fuck what they think.” His teeth scraped along my collarbone, making me shiver. “I only care what my queen thinks. Perhaps she requires proper homage?”

I threaded my hands in his hair, already losing myself in the heat of his mouth on my skin. Two months with him, and he’d already learned exactly what drove me wild. Each touch, each kiss, another tie binding up together, and I couldn’t get enough. “I would never refuse a loyal subject’s devotion.”

His lips claimed mine in a kiss that stole my breath. There was hunger and possession and fire, so much fire. Everything about this male consumed me. He drew me closer, the heat of his body seeping through our clothing to warm me to my core.

Red smoke curled around us when we finally broke apart, and I realized Kaz had teleported us.

Not to the old throne room with its dark memories and single seat of power.

No, we stood in the newly renovated chamber, moonlight streaming through tall windows to illuminate twin thrones on their raised dais.

A room we technically shouldn’t be in until we took our seats tomorrow.

Kaz planted his hands on my shoulders and gave me a gentle shove. I staggered back, falling into the throne behind me. My heart pounded as I gazed up at him. He stalked forward, his eyes never leaving mine as he sank to his knees before me.

Strong hands wrapped around my calves as his lips curved into a wolfish grin. “Let me worship every inch of you, Your Majesty.”

The words sent a surge of arousal through me. Heat built low in my belly as his fingers traced circles on my legs. I parted my thighs slightly, granting him access. “As my king desires.”

He pushed the skirt of my dress up slowly, inching it higher along my thighs until he revealed the bare flesh beneath.

I watched his gaze trail hungrily over me, his pupils blown wide with desire.

I shivered as his fingers hooked into the waistband of my panties, drawing them down my legs with deliberate slowness.

“Keep your hands on the throne,” he ordered, his breath hot against my skin.

He bent his head to press a slow kiss against the inside of my knee.

Then another. Another. I closed my eyes and tipped my head back, savoring the sensation of his mouth working its way higher along my thigh.

He stopped just short of my center, switching to the other leg and repeating the same torturous kisses.

By the time his tongue stroked across my folds, I was trembling with need. He swirled slowly around my clit, then slid lower to tease my entrance. Every flick of his

tongue drove me higher, pushing me closer to the edge.

I clutched the arms of the throne, resisting the urge to grip his hair and hold him there until I shattered completely. He continued to torment me with lazy strokes, coaxing little moans from my lips that grew louder with each passing moment.

He chuckled against my flesh, sending vibrations rippling through my core. “You taste amazing, my queen.”

My only reply was a desperate moan as he plunged two fingers inside me. My hands flew to his horns as I cried out, unable to hold back any longer.

And then there was nothing. No heat, no lips or tongue or hands. I forced my eyes open, searching for him. “Kaz...”

He’d drawn back, a wicked smirk on his lips. “I said to keep your hands on the throne.”

I whimpered, arching toward him, seeking more contact. “Please.”

“Hands on the throne,” he repeated, his tone laced with steel. “Or I stop.”

My nails dug into the arms of the throne. “Yes, my king.”

A low purr of satisfaction rumbled in his chest, the vibration running through me as his mouth found my center once more.

This time he didn’t hesitate. He licked and sucked and fucked me with his fingers, driving me relentlessly toward orgasm.

My muscles tensed and my toes curled, the pressure building until I thought I would

explode.

“Don’t stop,” I gasped. “Kaz... Please...”

And he didn’t. My world dissolved into blinding pleasure as his mouth worked magic between my legs. I bucked and writhed in the chair, but he held me in place with firm hands on my thighs.

And mine didn’t leave the throne.

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I cried out as my release slammed through me, scattering any last coherent thought.

Wave after wave of ecstasy washed over me, pulsing in time with the movement of his tongue.

He licked and lapped at my skin as I rode out the aftershocks, drawing out every last shudder and quiver until I collapsed boneless in the throne.

“Was that devotion to your satisfaction, Your Majesty?” he asked, planting a soft kiss on the inside of my thigh.

I hauled him to his feet, capturing his mouth in a fierce kiss that tasted of me and him together. “It’s a start,” I said against his lips. “But I believe we’ve only just begun.”

I pushed him back onto the throne, already working at the fastenings of his suit.

The jacket came off first, then the shirt, revealing the expanse of his chest that never failed to make my mouth water.

Red skin stretched over defined muscle, ridged with scars earned in battle, protection, and training. He was beautiful. Powerful.

Mine.

The force of that thought stole my breath. I traced my fingers over a scar near his heart, remembering that first day in the audience chamber. The instant pull I’d felt toward him, before my father spoke a word of arranged matings. Before duty tried to

claim what was already written in our blood.

“I felt it then,” I admitted on a whisper. “When you walked into my father’s court.”

Surprise flickered in his eyes, chased quickly by something tentative and delicate. He cupped my cheek gently, brushing his thumb along my lower lip. “What do you mean?”

“The pull.” I dropped my hands to my thighs and slowly bunched my dress higher. “It was never just politics. Never just duty.” I planted a knee outside of his thigh, then the other, kneeling over his lap. “You were my mate from the start.”

His hands found my hips, holding me steady, not moving, just... touching. He canted his head back and stared up at me with molten golden eyes. His fingers shook where they gripped my hips, the smallest tremor against my skin.

“I thought I was losing my mind,” he said. “Wanting the daughter of the king whose heir I’d just killed.”

“Wanting the princess you were being forced to claim.”

“Not forced.” His fingers tightened. “Fated.”

The air rushed from my lungs at the simple truth spoken aloud. All our layers had been peeled back, the masks dropped, the armor shed. We weren’t trapped anymore. This was choice. This was freedom.

This was love.

I kissed him with the certainty of that knowledge, pouring everything I had into it. My fear of losing him, my joy at having found him. My wonder that this fierce,

honorable man was mine.

His hands found the fastenings of my gown, deftly undoing them until the silk slid from my shoulders to pool with the rest at my waist. I gripped the top of the high back as I rolled my hips against his, grinding against the hard length of him.

He growled and buried his face in my breasts, teasing my nipples with his teeth and tongue.

His fingers dug into my ass as he guided me to rise just enough for him to work himself free. My breathing sped up as I felt him against my folds, his cock straining to reach me. With aching slowness, I sank down onto him, reveling in the feel of him filling me.

His lips blazed a trail of fire across my chest, alternately licking and biting the tender skin. I began to rock my hips, rising and falling in a torturously slow rhythm. His grip tightened on me, urging me faster, but I ignored him, continuing to torture him with agonizing slowness.

“My queen,” he groaned.

“Your mate,” I murmured, rolling my hips in a way that made him curse.

His lips found mine again, his tongue darting out to trace my lower lip.

I gasped as he nipped it lightly, then soothed the sting with another stroke.

He took advantage of my surprise to drive his hips up hard, forcing himself deeper inside me.

Pleasure flooded my senses as he moved his attention to my neck, sucking and

nibbling at my pulse point.

My rhythm faltered as need consumed me. I rode him harder, faster, chasing the building pressure at my core. His hands gripped my ass, guiding my movements as I ground against him. Each thrust sent sparks of pleasure racing through my body.

“Fuck, Talia.” His voice was pure sin against my skin.

“Mark me, Kaz.” I tilted my head and bared my throat. Needed this. Needed him beyond the clinical and ceremonial bites we’d given each other. “Make me yours.”

He growled, the sound vibrating through my chest. His fangs scraped my shoulder, testing, teasing. I shuddered and clenched around him.

“Together,” I gasped, my lips finding the curve where his neck met his shoulder. The salt of his skin, the heat of him, drove me wild. “Come with me.”

Our hips crashed together, the pace turning desperate. His fangs pierced my flesh at the same moment mine sank into him. The taste of him filled my mouth as pleasure exploded through my body.

Fire raced along every nerve. I felt him everywhere, inside me, around me, part of me. His release triggered another wave of pleasure, and I moaned his name against his shoulder as we rode out our shared climax.

Slowly, our movements ceased, our bodies trembling as aftershocks continued to rack us. I pressed light kisses against the bite marks on his neck and grinned as his cock twitched inside me.

Kaz wrapped his arms around my back and gathered me close. We sat like that for several long minutes, tangled together, exchanging lazy kisses and murmured

endearments.

“We should go back,” I murmured eventually, though I made no move to get up.
“The final toast.”

Kaz groaned and buried his face in my neck. “Five more minutes.”

I laughed against his shoulder. “Five minutes. Then we need to make ourselves presentable.”

Kaz lifted his head, his eyes soft as they traced over my features. His fingers followed, trailing along my cheekbone, down my jaw, lingering at my lips. Such gentleness from hands that commanded fire and blade. Such tenderness from the warrior who’d killed for his clan, for his crown, for me.

“I love you.” His voice was quiet, but steady, a promise sealed in blood. “My queen. My mate.”

I caught his hand and pressed my lips to his knuckles. “I love you. My king. My mate.”

His mouth found mine, the kiss slow and sweet.

Then his tongue swept across my lips and heat flared between us.

I pressed closer, threading my fingers through his hair as the kiss deepened.

He groaned against my mouth, his hands sliding down my back to pull me tighter against him.

Every brush of his lips, every stroke of his tongue made me burn hotter, need more.

Duty could wait a bit longer. For now, it was just us.

KAZ

The male in front of me looked nervous as hell. Kept straightening the lapels of his suit jacket and smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from his pants. Couldn't blame him, really. I'd been on the other side of this conversation, though under far different circumstances.

"Prince Kadhan, I mean, Your Majesty," he started for the third time.

"Kaz, please," I said, trying to calm him. "This isn't a formal proceeding. Queen Talia and I just want to speak briefly with both of you."

"Kaz." He swallowed hard and nodded, still looking like he wanted to be sick.

"So, Cal. I understand your parents suggested the match," I prompted. This was the part that mattered. "Did they pressure you? There's no shame admitting you want something different for yourself."

"No, no quite the opposite." A small smile broke through his anxiety. "They noticed I mentioned Nira in every conversation and finally asked if I'd considered having a conversation with her. When I admitted I was too nervous to approach her directly, they offered to speak with her family."

"And if she refused the match?" I asked.

"I... Well, I'd be disappointed. That she felt she couldn't tell me herself." The green tinge returned to his complexion. "But I'd respect her decision. There are plenty of

ifrit who prefer to find their mates through less traditional means these days.”

I nodded, keeping my expression blank. “Tell me about her.”

His face transformed. The nervousness fell away, melting into something soft and warm.

“Nira’s brilliant. We’ve been meeting for coffee the past month, and each conversation flows easier than the last. She has this way of explaining complex financial regulations that makes them fascinating.

” He chuckled, his smile going wide. “And she laughs at my terrible jokes.”

I leaned back in my chair, watching. No signs of coercion or rehearsed answers. Just an ifrit clearly smitten with his prospective mate.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. I’d purposefully scheduled this for the end of my day, and time was running short. “Is there anything else you’d like me to know?”

“Just that I’m grateful for these meetings.” His tail flicked behind him. “My grandmother was pushed into a match set by her parents. Even when we were little, my brothers and I could spot the difference after Grandfather passed. I’m glad to know that won’t happen to us.”

Pride filled my chest. It wasn’t a perfect system—none were—but I had to believe it was better than what came before.

Between Talia’s information network and these little interviews, we’d managed to save a handful of young ifrit from lifetimes of unhappiness.

We didn’t want to see anyone else forced to be a pawn instead of a mate.

“I’ll consider everything you’ve shared,” I said, rising to signal the end of our meeting. “You’ll have our decision within the week.”

He stood and bowed. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

I gestured for the guards to escort him out, already convinced he’d receive our approval.

I quickly gathered my notes and slipped them into a folder for Talia to review later, then checked the time again.

Shit . Three more hours until Talia would be home, and I still had clan business to handle before I could start preparations for tonight.

Our anniversary. One year since we’d claimed the throne together.

One year of waking beside Talia, of building something neither of us had dared imagine when her father forced us together. My fingers absently traced the claiming mark on my neck, the skin still warm to the touch even after all these months.

I’d never expected to fall in love with the sharp-tongued princess. Never thought I’d find a partner who matched me in ambition, intelligence, and fire. But Talia had become everything: my queen, my confidante, my mate.

And tonight, I wanted to show her exactly how much that meant to me.

Fifteen minutes and a non-emergency emergency later, the familiar scent of earth and steel washed over me as my smoke cleared.

The converted warehouse had come a long way from the mess of boxes and tangled wires we’d first moved into.

Clean lines, organized workstations, and reinforced walls spoke to both Malak's obsession with order and Zane's paranoia about security.

"Look who dragged himself in from the hells," Zane called from his sprawl across one of the couches in the common area, idly flipping a knife. He tipped his head back to look at me upside down. "Slumming it with us peasants today, Your Royal Hind Ass?"

"Damn, Zane. Only a year to come up with that? Should I assume your letters are coming along, too, or can we keep spelling out secrets around you?" I replied without heat and dropped into a chair across from him. "Where's Malak?"

Zane jerked his thumb toward the tech room. "Where else? Something about satellite tracking and unholy firewall configurations."

I snorted. "He kick you out again?"

"Absolutely not. I'm a housebroken gentleman, as well as letter-learned.

Not my fault he doesn't understand desks are viable footrests.

" He sat up and stretched his arms overhead.

"Malak thinks he has a lead on that vampire smuggling ring we've been after.

You staying for the briefing, or just checking in? "

I glanced at my watch again. "Just checking in. I've got plans tonight."

Zane's grin turned wolfish. "Ah, yes. The anniversary. Special plans for our queen?"

“None of your business.”

“That means yes.” Zane leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Come on, give me details. I need ideas for when I finally settle down.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You? Settle down? The world must be ending.”

“It might.” He shrugged, but there was something almost wistful in his expression. “Met someone interesting last month on that job in Prague.”

That caught my attention. “Interesting how?”

“Just... interesting.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Anyway, we’re talking about you. What’d you get her? Jewelry? Lingerie?” His grin widened. “Or are you the gift, all wrapped up with a bow on your?—”

“If you finish that sentence, I will personally ensure your next assignment is babysitting duty.”

Another shrug. He went back to flipping his knife. “Might not be so bad. Maybe I’ll find my own princess.”

“Actual babies, Zane. With diapers, and puke.”

Zane laughed, the sound echoing through the room. “Cruel and unusual punishment, Your Majesty.”

The door to the tech room opened, and Malak emerged, his hair disheveled and eyes bloodshot. “Thought I heard your voice,” he said, nodding to me. “Good timing. I’ve got something.”

I followed him back into his domain, a maze of screens and equipment that made my head hurt just looking at it. Zane trailed behind us, clearly having nothing better to do.

“I tracked their communications to a port near the border, but that’s where they go dark,” Malak said, pulling up a satellite image. “The warehouse, though, is in a flurry of preparations for something big next Tuesday. Not sure what yet, but based on the security they’re arranging, it’s valuable.”

I studied the zoomed-out building and its empty lot. Malak tapped a few keys, bringing up a different image. The same lot, now very packed. “Could it be for another client?”

“They have no other clients. Not that I’ve found yet, that is.”

“Dig in, and let’s get surveillance on the site. Good work,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Keep me updated.”

I checked my watch again. Still time, but cutting it close.

Malak swiveled in his chair. “Got something important tonight, boss?”

I narrowed my eyes at his benign tone. “Something like that.”

“Does she know you approved Zane’s request for a flamethrower last week?” Malak asked dryly.

I froze, staring at him. “I thought that was a joke.”

“It was,” Zane laughed. “But you signed it, anyway. And now I have a flamethrower, sucker.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Is there any other business we need to discuss, or did you just want to give me shit?”

“Little of both,” Zane admitted. “But mostly the second thing.”

The familiar banter loosened something in my chest. Despite everything that had shifted in the past year, this remained unchanged.

My clan. My family. The people who’d fought at my side through political storms and literal fire.

The ones who’d followed me into battle against Emil without hesitation.

The ones who still treated me like their pain in the ass brother instead of their king.

Rava strode in from the training room, her tail whipping behind her. Her eyes lit up when she saw me. “Look who finally remembered we exist.”

“I was here last week.”

“Ancient history.” She grinned. “Shouldn’t you be preparing some grand romantic gesture? Diamonds? A weekend getaway? Or are you just going to set something on fire and call it a day?”

“I am,” I growled. “Or I would be if my family would let me get back to it.”

Her expression softened. “Anything I can help with?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not taking romantic advice from someone who mated an orc because he ruined her mission.”

“Hey, that’s oversimplifying a complex series of events.” She crossed her arms. “And Zral did not ruin my mission. He enhanced it.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“You know,” Rava said, her voice gentler than usual, “a year ago I wouldn’t have believed we’d be here.”

The room quieted. We all knew what she meant. A year ago, we’d been fighting for our lives, for the throne, for a future that seemed impossible.

“You’ve done good, brother,” she continued. “With the crown. With Talia.” She glanced around the room. “With all of us.”

I cleared my throat, uncomfortable with the sudden sentiment. “Don’t get soft on me now.”

She punched my arm. “Never. Just saying thanks, I guess. For making sure Zral and I could have our shot.”

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I swallowed hard, unsure how to respond to such naked sentiment from my usually sarcastic sister. “It was worth it,” I said finally. “You were worth it. And Talia... she makes everything worth it.”

Rava smiled. “Good. Now go before you’re late for your own anniversary.”

The smell of garlic and herbs from Silver Kettle’s kitchen filled the air.

The local fine dining establishment had delivered dinner twenty minutes ago, leaving me time to prepare the rest. I checked the table setting one last time, smoothing the cloth napkins beside simple white plates.

A bottle of Talia’s favorite wine chilled in a bucket of ice.

“Kaz? You home?”

The clock chimed six. Perfect timing. I lit the candles with a flick of my fingers and dimmed the lights. “In here.”

“You wouldn’t believe the day I’ve had,” she groused as she swept into the dining room.

I turned from where I poured our wine, taking in the sight of her. Deep green dress hugged her curves, a slit exposing one toned leg as she moved. Her long dark hair hung loose around her shoulders. Candlelight danced in her amber eyes.

Fuck, she was gorgeous.

“Emil’s widow is making noise about reinstating the Malum clan to court,” she continued, pacing the length of the room. “As if we’d forget that bastard tried to kill us both.”

“Talía,” I tried to interrupt, gesturing to the table.

“And then—oh, you won’t believe this—Lady Korvan had the audacity to suggest her daughter would make an excellent lady-in-waiting, when everyone knows she’s just hoping to catch Griffin’s eye. As if I’d allow that scheming little shit?”

I stepped into her path. “Talía.”

She paused, blinking at me as if just noticing my presence. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the rest of the scene. “Is there an occasion I’ve forgotten?”

I stared at her. “Did you forget what day it is?”

She tilted her head, expression innocently confused. “It’s... Tuesday?”

“...And?”

“And you’re too easy to tease.” Her smile turned wicked as her fingers toyed with the bow holding her dress together. “Do you really think I’d forget our anniversary?”

She tugged on the ties, letting the silky fabric fall open to reveal miles of smooth red skin. Black lace covered her breasts, edged with dark teal ribbon that drew my eye down to the matching panties. Hells.

“I had meetings all day,” she said, her voice dropping to a husky purr as she stepped closer. Her fingers traced the buttons of my shirt. “But all I’ve been thinking about is you.”

“What exactly were you thinking about?” I caught her wandering hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. “Besides torturing me, of course.”

“How much everything’s changed.” She splayed her other palm over my heart. “A year ago, I thought you were just another male trying to take what was mine.”

“And now?” My thumb traced circles on her captured wrist, right over her claiming mark.

“Now I’m happy.” She leaned in, her lips brushing my jaw.

“Just happy?” I teased, but my heart squeezed at the softness in her voice.

“I’ve never felt so safe or sure of my place in the world.” She pulled her hand free and slid both palms up my chest to link behind my neck. “Every morning, I wake up next to you and just want to laugh at how right it feels.”

I pressed my forehead to hers, breathing in the scent of jasmine and embers that was uniquely Talia. “Me, too,” I whispered. “More than I ever dared dream.”

“Those mornings are perfect.” She rose up on her toes to nip at my earlobe, her voice growing darker. “Though I have an idea that might make them even better.”

I closed my eyes as her teeth scraped along the mate mark on my neck. “Do you now?”

“Mhm.” Her breath teased my ear. “Well, multiple ideas, really. Several years in the making. You did promise a future queen and second son to me and the Kadhan clan.”

My heart slammed against my ribs at her words. Children. With her.

The image of little ones with Talia’s sharp smile and fire in their eyes sent a wave of

longing through me. An image crystallized in my mind of training those little hellions. Teaching them to control their fire, to fight with honor, to lead with both strength and compassion.

I slid my hands down to her hips. “And you’re ready to start on that project tonight?”

“Maybe.” That wicked smile curved her lips, the one that always went straight to my cock. “Consider it our duty. And we’ll need to take it very seriously.”

I lifted her onto the edge of the table in one smooth motion. The candles flickered as she laughed, shadows dancing across her red skin. “Dinner’s going to get cold.”

“Let it.” She grabbed the wine bottle, skipping the glasses entirely to take a long pull straight from the neck. Her eyes locked with mine as she drank, then held it out to me. “We’ve got better things to celebrate.”

“To us.” I took the bottle, our fingers brushing in a moment that felt as charged as our first touch. “To the queen who captured my heart, and the future we’re building together.”

“To the king who proved me wrong about everything.” Talia’s eyes sparkled in the candlelight. “To us.”