



The Prince's Wife (Tales of Tavamara #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Aradishir has always been the loner amongst his siblings. That he's finally taken a full harem astonishes the whole court. He will someday have to take a wife as well, but that's a distant concern, especially as he's the youngest.

Then he meets Princess Relanya: smart, funny, as interested in helping people as he is, beautiful, and she seems to fit in perfectly in Tavamara, despite having never visited before. She is the woman of his dreams, and he would do anything, everything, asked of him to earn the honor of taking her as his wife.

She's also betrothed to his brother, and no woman on earth, especially an older and wiser woman like Relanya, would ever choose the little brother when she already has the crown prince...

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"Your Highness, I'm so sorry, please forgive me!" The woman dropped to her knees, bowing low and covering the back of her head with her hands.

Aradishir wiped whatever substance had just been accidentally thrown in his face out of his eyes so he could see. Nearby, doing a poor job of smothering his laughter, Heydar handed off a strip of cloth offered by one of the guards. A headwrap. He'd have to make sure it was properly replaced. "Thank you," he said, and cleaned up as best he could.

It was sweet smelling, whatever it was, accidentally tossed from a clay jar as the woman argued with someone else in the pavilion. Such carts were not supposed to be here, but people new to the job always made that mistake.

"Please, it's fine," Aradishir said. "As long as no one has been hurt. What is the problem here?"

The woman didn't stand, but she looked up briefly before dropping her eyes to the ground again, voice shaking as she said, "I am so very sorry, Your Highness. This man here was trying to take my goods, and when I tried to take them back..."

"I see." Aradishir looked to the posted guards, who nodded in confirmation. "Summon further guards, have the cart and all these people escorted to the proper yard, and have the House Mistress sort the matter out."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Make certain someone brings you a new wrap as well, and I'll return or replace this

one." Aradishir sighed. "Would you send someone to let Mother know I'll be a little late to lunch?" When the guards confirmed they would, he headed back inside and through the palace to his chambers, ignoring the looks and snickers from the people he passed.

In his room, he immediately went to bathe. "What is this stuff?" He sniffed it again, but all he got was sweet. Like liquid sugar, thick and sticky. "Why would they have entire jars of liquid sugar?"

"All sorts of cooking applications," Heydar said, cleaning up the small bits that had struck him. "We're lucky it was cooled and not still hot, or you'd have lost skin at the very least."

Aradishir shuddered. "What a delightful image, thank you."

Heydar laughed and went to change his clothes, returning shortly with new clothes for Aradishir.

Dressed again, Aradishir sat at his dressing table so Heydar could fix his hair. He'd known nothing of such things when first joining the harem, and it wasn't a duty he was expected to fill, but he'd proven interested and deft and so most often did it now.

"There," Heydar said after a few minutes. "Like it never happened at all, and your mother will love the tale."

"I can hear her laughing already," Aradishir said with a sigh, even as he smiled. "Shall we, then? I really want to know why she wants to speak with me so suddenly. I've behaved for the past three weeks!"

Heydar chuckled as they walked through the halls. "Maybe she wants to make certain of that, given you and your siblings can't generally go three days without stirring up

some sort of mischief."

"You're not funny."

Every now and then Heydar nodded to one of the many guards lining the palace walls, part of the small group he still spoke to now and again, those he'd gotten along with when he'd been a guard.

When they reached the Butterfly Room, his mother was already there with two of her concubines, one on each side, the three of them exchanging sips of wine and brief kisses. As ever, his mother was beautiful and perfect, the Jewel of Tavamara, the very definition of a queen. Aradishir did not envy the woman who would have to follow in her footsteps. He also didn't envy his brother having to follow in their father's.

He was perfectly happy being the youngest child, and no he wasn't spoiled rotten like his siblings insisted. "Good afternoon, Mother. I apologize for being late."

Fahima smiled. "I hear you were doused in sugar syrup."

"That stuff is unreasonably sticky," Aradishir replied as he took his seat opposite her, Heydar sitting on his right.

"What in the world were you doing in the main pavilion anyway?"

Aradishir rolled his eyes. "I was passing by on my way here and heard a ruckus." He took a sip of wine as Heydar offered the cup. "Better me than the poor guards."

Fahima smiled, soft and fond, eyes full of warmth. "Yes, I hear someone threw wine on them last week. That vendor did not enjoy what happened to his contract."

"Good," Aradishir replied. "Now stop torturing me, Mother. Why did you want to see

me so abruptly?" He took a bite of spicy meat as Heydar set a full plate in front of him, thanking him in a quiet murmur.

"So impatient," Fahima said, clucking her tongue. "You must learn patience, Ari."

"I sat through all of dinner last night while that oaf droned on about his stupid farms and didn't say one single rude thing."

"Your face said enough," one of her concubines, Matiana, said dryly.

Aradishir rolled his eyes. Heydar snickered and offered him more wine.

"Your father and I need a favor from you. Well, your brother needs the favor, and we're asking on his behalf," Fahima said.

"Where is Bakhtiar?"

"He was injured, badly, while at the Temple of Petyana. Broke his leg, and it's advised he move as little as possible for the next couple of weeks."

Aradishir laughed. "What did he do? Did he fall in another fountain?"

Fahima gave him a stern look.

"What? He's clearly fine, broken leg aside, or you wouldn't be sitting here so calmly. Tell me, tell me."

"You are twenty-five, not twelve," Fahima said, then relented with a sigh. "He was climbing a wall and fell, landed badly on his leg."

Aradishir laughed again, loudly and obnoxiously. "What a dumbass."

"Enough," Fahima chided. "The problem is that his betrothed is arriving tomorrow, and he will not be here to greet her. Your sister is in no state to be playing hostess, and your father and I cannot ignore our duties to do so."

"No, don't make me," Aradishir said with a groan. "I have enough work of my own! Why do I have to dance attendance upon his bride. He shouldn't have been climbing walls!"

"Ari."

He sighed in defeat. "Yes, Mother. You know I would never actually defy you—"

"Except all the times you'd done precisely that to sneak into the city," Fahima retorted.

"Except for those. Which I'm not sorry about because I got Javed and Heydar out of it."

"He doesn't sneak out anymore, Your Majesty, I promise you that," Heydar said.

Fahima smiled. "I appreciate your efforts, Lord Heydar. Here is everything you need to know about Princess Relanya, Ari. Read up, be ready to greet her tomorrow, treat her like the queen she is going to be."

"Of course, Mother."

"Thank you. I'll have my office coordinate with yours and have your duties reassigned, so your schedule is clear."

"Yes, Mother." Aradishir kissed and hugged her, then scooped up the folder she'd given him and headed off back to his rooms, so he could read the dossier without

interruption.

When he returned, it was to find that Javed and Merza had returned from their respective lessons in dancing and court decorum. How to be a proper gold, as Merza would say. "My mother is making me babysit my brother's betrothed because he went and broke his leg climbing a wall."

"Why in the world was he climbing a wall?" Javed asked. "It's no wonder they don't like to let the royal family leave the premises. All you do is get hurt and bring back strange men."

Aradishir snickered as he sat at his table, spreading out the papers from the dossier. "Let's learn about our future queen, shall we? Princess Relanya of Penna. Thirty years old, which means two years younger than my stupid brother, one..." Aradishir's eyes widened.

"What?" his concubines asked in chorus.

"She... she has a child . A five-year-old son. That... that..."

"What!" the other three said again.

Aradishir couldn't focus on the rest of the dossier. He'd never heard of a single monarch or future monarch marrying someone who already had a child. Depending on the marriage contract, that could make someone a foreign-born heir to the throne. If the contract terms stated they wouldn't be eligible, that could create all sorts of tension and resentment in the future. This wasn't going to cause a scandal; this was going to cause an upset that could—would—tear the court apart. Not to mention the country.

It was a bold move, even for his trouble-causing parents. No wonder they wanted him

to babysit her—they wanted her protected. Why in the world had they chosen such a scandalous spouse for Bakhtiar? That she was from Penna, a remote kingdom as covered in snow as Tavamara was in sand, was unusual enough.

He frowned pensively as he continued reading. Initially married at twenty-four, had a child at twenty-five, then... Well, fuck, the scandal grew and grew. Her husband and his inner circle had all been arrested and executed as traitors, colluding with Havarin. That was why his parents were doing this. Penna was remote, but they had crucial resources, and they'd prove a vital ally against the Havarin Empire.

"How have I never heard of this? Five people executed for colluding with Havarin against their own kingdom? That should have been all over court."

"You were twenty at the time, my prince," Heydar said, "and still quite focused on other matters. I don't think you began paying attention to politics until a little later."

Aradishir cast him an amused look. "How do you know that?"

"Gossip," Heydar replied blandly. "Everyone remarked how the rest of your family was deeply immersed, but you seemed utterly oblivious."

"No wonder everyone calls me the spoiled brat of the family." Aradishir sighed. "My parents have held nothing back with this marriage. I think half the court will collapse from their hearts giving out. I'm going to kill Bakhtiar myself for being so careless now when we need him most. What sort of impression will this make on Prince Relanya?"

"I think a woman who was married to a traitor and bore his child is not going to complain much about anything when she's betrothed to the crown prince of Tavamara," Merza said in his ruthlessly matter-of-fact way. "Don't know much about the ways of golds and diamonds, but I know that if she was told she had to run naked

through the streets for the marriage to go through, she'd be off running before anyone could ask if she agreed."

Aradishir snorted a laugh. "What an image. Thankfully she won't have to do anything that drastic, though it might be easier than gaining the court's approval. This explains the journey Mother went on a few years ago; no wonder Father was so especially stressed about it." She'd been gone for most of a year, a huge breach in protocol that the court still talked about whenever she offended their sensibilities yet again. This must have been what she'd gone to take care of, though at the time even he and his siblings had known only it was a 'diplomatic matter of great importance.' No wonder his parents had been so cagey.

Leave it to Bakhtiar to have a broken leg that removed him from dealing with the first and greatest wave of outrage and scandal. Aradishir was going to break his other leg. He might be the so-called spoiled brat, but Bakhtiar was a selfish ass.

On the opposite side of the table, Heydar was reading a different section of the dossier. "Says she's studied Tavamara extensively all her life, initially for pleasure and more recently to purpose. Fluent, familiar with our customs... Sounds like she's very much in earnest about coming here and making Tavamara her home. Bet Her Majesty assisted in that a great deal. If she already has Queen Fahima's approval..."

"Then woe betide any courtier stupid enough to disagree with my mother, and I look forward to watching them suffer," Aradishir said with another snorting laugh. "Who has her interests?"

"Music," Merza said. "She's bringing three handmaidens with her. I wouldn't be surprised if they're her intended harem, given how thorough she's been with everything else. Though she might have thought to restrict it to two, and have... Oh, nevermind, one of them is Tavamaran, the daughter of the ambassador to Pelenna. This really does seem important to her."

"To save face, I'd imagine, after the scandal of her late husband," Aradishir replied, drumming his fingers as he kept reading, heart going out to a woman who at only thirty had already endured so much misery and strife. Even if the marriage had been purely political, with no deeper affection between the couple, that would have been a blow. If she had loved him... and no doubt everyone continued to suspect she'd been party to the plot and her parents had kept that fact buried...

Despite the fact this visit would drastically upset his already busy schedule, he couldn't deny he was now deeply intrigued by the mysterious Prince Relanya. "What else does she like, Merza?"

"Tapestry work, especially traditional style, whatever that means," Merza replied. "Other appropriate feminine pursuits. What in the world does that mean?"

"Penna is a bit more rigid than Tavamara in what is suitable for men to do and what is suitable for women." Aradishir waved a hand in the air. "The way my sister is the one who largely contends with the military would never be tolerated in Penna. Military is a man's sphere. Women do 'delicate' things, like embroider and weave tapestries and the like."

Merza snorted. "If having hands deft enough to stitch a fine seam makes me a woman, then slap my ass and call me milady, 'cause I'll take that over stabbing people any day."

That sent the rest of the room into gales. Picking up the papers he'd scattered on the floor, Aradishir then crooked a finger. "Come here, little thief."

Grinning in that sharp, wicked way of his, Merza rounded the table and straddled Aradishir's lap, twining arms around his neck. "You summoned, my prince?"

Aradishir replied by kissing him, wrapping his own arms around Merza's trim waist,

savoring the heat of him, the scent of jasmine clinging to his skin, the eagerness of his kiss as he took control of it, a control Aradishir was always happy to concede.

It took only moments for them to spread him out on the floor, stripped naked and more than ready to take him after their thorough ministrations the night before. Aradishir groaned as Merza slid inside him, his wrists pinned above his head by Heydar's easy strength, and Javed toying with his cock while Merza fucked him.

Once Merza was finished with him, the other two had him, Heydar sliding into his well-used hole while Javed fucked his mouth.

Aradishir sprawled on the floor when they'd finished, wrung out and exhausted. "I don't think that's helping me prepare for Her Highness's visit, but I'm not terribly sorry about the distraction either. One of you miscreants help me to the bath."

Heydar scooped him up easily and carried him across the room, while Merza tidied up the mess of papers scattered across the table and floor and Javed called for wine.

Once he was scrubbed clean, Aradishir slid with a groan into the soothing hot water of his bath, resting his head against a cushion someone had placed for him. "What else does Princess Relanya enjoy? I need to start arranging things for us to do."

"Birds," Merza said as they joined him in the bath. "She has a collection of songbirds she's bringing with her."

"She'll love the temple, then, but likely she and Mother have already talked avidly about that."

"Charity work is important to her, along with other ways of helping people. To be honest, my prince, she seems to serve the same role back home that you do here. So I think you two will get along quite well. Perhaps she'll take an interest in some of your

causes; that would be a wonderful way for her to settle in and make good impressions."

"Maybe," Aradishir said. "She's to be queen, though, which will leave her little time for such things." That's why he managed all of it. He wouldn't gain significant assistance until he married himself, but he had no idea when that would be. Like with so many other traditions, his parents had chosen not to see their children married off while they were still quite young. The older Aradishir got, the more grateful he was. He was only twenty-five and even he could appreciate he'd been in no fit state for marriage at twenty, let alone eighteen.

Heaving out of the bath, he shrugged into a robe and returned to the table right as a servant arrived with wine. Taking his seat, he pulled pen and paper close to start listing out ideas and to dos. "How in the world am I going to entertain her for two weeks? Possibly longer, knowing my useless brother." He drummed his fingers on the table. "A proper tour of the palace and grounds will occupy a couple of days. Mother and Father would have already handled the banquets and such... Where is my schedule?"

"Here," Javed said, sliding it across the table. "There's also notes here in the dossier about what has already been planned."

"Oh, good," Aradishir said. "So arriving tomorrow morning or afternoon. I'm sure she'll just want to rest, so that's one day taken care of, the day after we can do the tour...Mother will likely take her to temple, so that's most of another day covered..." He frowned. "Wait. There's nothing here about what gifts Bakhtiar has purchased. I'll need to have those ready for her arrival. Why aren't there any notes on that?" There should be at least a full page listing out various welcome and betrothal gifts, for Princess Relanya, her son, and her handmaidens, since it was the height of rudeness to ignore anyone accompanying her. There should be additional pages of gifts for her handmaidens.

Aradishir had a horrible suspicion his mother had trusted the matter to Bakhtiar, and he had either forgotten entirely or assumed Mother was handling it. Fuck. "Heydar, go speak with Bakhtiar's staff and figure out where in the Divine the gifts are."

"Yes, my prince." Heydar strode quickly from the room via the secret passages.

"I'm going to kill him," Aradishir said. "If Bakhtiar let gifts for his future wife fall by the wayside, I am going to ride out to that temple, break his other leg and both his arms, and dump him in the Great Desert." He was used to his brother being careless, but this was beyond all comprehension. This woman was going to be his queen, the mother of his children. How could he forget to buy her gifts?

Hopefully he was panicking for nothing. He had to be. Even Bakhtiar wouldn't be this stupid. If nothing else, his concubines and staff would have reminded him.

He continued jotting notes and ideas, until the door to the secret passage swung open and Heydar returned—and the knot in his stomach tightened at the look on Heydar's face. "No."

"Yes," Heydar said. "Her Majesty told him to attend the matter, but for whatever reason he never did, and no one realized it until now. Her Majesty is... Well, your brother should be grateful he's too far away for her to maim him."

"Somebody go ready my horse, so I can commit fratricide," Aradishir said, raking his hands through his damp hair. "Damn it, Bakhti!" He slammed his hands on the table and pushed to his feet. "Come on, then. I need to get dressed, then we're going to the vaults, and then we're going into the city to do some shopping. Somebody inform my parents, so they know not to expect me at dinner. Damn it, my lists."

He turned around, and nearly crashed into Javed, who held the lists in one hand, and steadied Aradishir with the other. "Get dressed, my prince, and I have the lists to take

with us."

"Thank you," Aradishir said, and kissed him before hastening off to get dressed, mind spinning frantically with all that his brother had been given months to do and which Aradishir must now do in half a day.

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A sandstorm descended in the late morning and lasted for hours, easing off only as dusk began to creep across the sky. Aradishir was equal parts annoyed and relieved, as some of the gifts he'd ordered had not quite yet arrived and definitely wouldn't now, but he'd also gone to a lot of trouble for Princess Relanya's reception, and all those plans were now neatly out the window.

Ah, well. At least the storm was past, and his parents were handling her arrival, having said he would not have to begin his duties until the following morning. Gave him more time to refine everything and send servants out to ascertain when the straggling gifts would now be delivered.

He was also compiling a list of all the ways Bakhtiar owed him, because no way was his brother squirming out of these debts. If he dared to say one single word about how much of his money Aradishir had spent, he would find himself missing several teeth.

"You can't spend all your time plotting your brother's demise," Merza said with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, I can," Aradishir muttered. "I—" He stopped as a strange sound, like a child giggling, caught his ear. There were no children in the royal wing. The only child that should be here was still inside his sister, waiting to be born. "Am I losing my mind? Did anyone else hear that?"

"I did," Heydar said, setting down the book he'd been reading and crossing the room to slip through the archway into the garden.

He returned just a moment later, eyes wide. "Um. My prince... there appears to be a

child playing in your fishpond."

"What!" Aradishir stood so quickly he slammed his knee into the table. Swearing, wincing, he walked-hobbled to the archway and out into the garden. The sky was clear, the air redolent with the scent of flowers, especially the night-blooming jasmine he loved so much.

More giggling came, along with splashing, and he followed the sound around some trees and shrubs to where his fishpond was located in the back corner, flanked by a stone bench on one side and a small tree on the other.

Wading in the water was a boy of not more than five years of age, splashing the water to make the fish startle and swim about. He had brown skin, but a very different tone than was common in Tavamara. His hair was a sleek black, pulled back in a tiny braid, and his clothes were of a style Aradishir had never seen, stitched along the edges in bright colors depicting little black and white creatures with yellow beaks.

"Hello," Aradishir said tentatively.

The boy startled—slipped, crying out in panic. Aradishir surged forward, sliding down the bank of the pond and scooping the boy up out of the water. "Merciful Divine." He handed the boy off to Heydar as he came rushing up. "Who are you then, little bird?"

Eyes widening, tears immediately fading as he broke into a smile, the boy said, "That's what Mama calls me! Little bird! Do you know Mama?"

"I have not yet had that pleasure," Aradishir replied. "What is your Mama's name?"

"Princess," the boy said promptly.

Aradishir laughed. "However did you get into my garden, little bird?"

"I climbed the ivy." He eyed Aradishir warily as Heydar set him on his feet. "Are you going to tell Mama?"

"I'm afraid I won't have much of a choice, given she is probably searching for you, wondering where you have gone." It was certainly an impressive escape. His garden didn't even directly connect with the garden attached to Princess Relanya's chambers. The only way the boy could have come this far was if he climbed the wall, then walked along the top of it until something—the pond, presumably—drew his attention enough that he climbed down. "I bet you give your mama fits."

That seemed to please the boy. Kerrin, that was his name. This was Prince Kerrin. "Mama says that a lot. 'You give me fits and fits, Rin!' What's a fit? No one ever says."

"It means you make them scared and angry. Come on, we'd best return you."

Kerrin pouted. "Aww, I want to play with the fish. We saw lots of them while on the big boat, but we couldn't stop to play with them. Back home there's too much ice, but here the fish are right there, and the water isn't too cold—"

"Kerrin! Kerrin!" Came a beautiful but frantic voice. "Damn it, I will kill him myself for real this time."

Flinching, Kerrin said, "Mama is having a fit."

Biting his lip to avoid laughing, Aradishir bent and scooped him up. "Yes, she is. I used to give my mother fits when I was your age too. 'Ari, you are a brat and you will go to your room!' is what I heard almost every day."

That seemed all the permission Kerrin needed to launch into an avid, wandering discussion of all the ways his mother had fits about him, even though he wasn't doing anything wrong.

When they reached the chambers assigned Princess Relanya, the guards there slumped in relief. "Your Highness, you found him. I don't know how you managed it, but we're happy you did."

"He climbed the wall and found his way to my garden," Aradishir replied, and motioned with his chin for them to knock on the door.

It swung open a moment later, and every carefully rehearsed word fled Aradishir's head.

The thorough description of Princess Relanya had not done her a single bit of justice. Her son looked just like her, from the brown of her skin and black of her hair, to the beautiful gray eyes currently filled with murder as she glared at Kerrin. Her features were soft, slightly rounded, giving her a gentle appearance further enhanced by her buxom figure. She looked... huggable. Touchable. Achingly beautiful, even when she was clearly exhausted and furious. Aradishir had never seen such a fascinating woman in all his life.

Aradishir gathered his scattered thoughts. "Um. Beg pardon, Your Highness, but I believe this belongs to you?"

"Yes," she said with a long sigh. "Where was he?" Her eyes skimmed Aradishir, then looked past his shoulder to where Heydar stood just behind him. "Oh, my, Your Highness, I didn't realize! I'm so sorry, how in the world did my son come to bother you?"

Chuckling, Aradishir handed him off. "He was playing in my fishpond. You

apparently have quite the climber on your hands."

"Climber, swimmer, digger, runner, everything but a hold-stiller," Relanya replied with another sigh. "Thank you for returning him. I am so very sorry he bothered you."

"No bother at all. I hope the rest of your night is peaceful, and I will see you at breakfast, Your Highness." He bowed and departed, heading quickly back to his own room, silently willing his pounding heart to calm.

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He woke bright and early, bathing and dressing with care, and double checked all the gifts were wrapped and waiting, ready to be given to Relanya after breakfast. She would open one or two, then have the rest sent on to her room while they headed off to begin their day.

Aradishir wished desperately that his heart would stop racing.

"—shir?"

"Huh?" He stared at Heydar, shook himself. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if you were all right," Heydar replied. "You've been a hundred leagues away all morning."

"Sorry, guess I'm distracted worrying about this visit."

Javed laughed. "You'd think, given you returned her son last night, already putting you in her good graces, that would have calmed some of your nerves."

"I'm certain there's nothing to be anxious about, my prince," Merza added. "Worse

comes to worst, the betrothal is still largely in the trial phase. There's nothing to worry about."

Aradishir sighed. "I know. I just... My useless brother isn't even here, her arrival was less than ideal... I just don't want her to dislike Tavamara right from the start."

"If she was that shallow and absurd, your mother never would have worked so hard to arrange this marriage," Heydar said. "Also, her son seems really sweet. A child like that would be raised by a woman with sense and kindness."

"I know, I know," Aradishir said. "Let's get to work then, before I fret myself into even more of a knot."

There was no way he would be admitting to anyone, not even his harem, that he was distracted not by anxiety, but eagerness, by a need to see Relanya again. Reassure himself that he'd blown that fleeting encounter from last night out of proportion. She wasn't as beautiful and fascinating and compelling as he'd thought all night. He'd exaggerated the brief encounter in his head. That was all. She was beautiful and interesting and his future sister-in-law. He just wanted to do well on Bakhtiar's behalf, even though the reckless jerk would deserve it if Aradishir ruined everything for him.

Normally, he'd only have one of his concubines accompany him throughout the day, swapping them out as they each needed to be somewhere else—training, practice, fittings, other little errands and chores they did for him. Contrary to the licentious suppositions of gawking foreigners, concubines did not spend their days lying sensuously about waiting to be ravished. As delightful an image as that was, they would all get bored very quickly.

Today, though, he wanted to make the best impression he could, and in Tavamara there was nothing more reassuring and impressive than a royal figure surrounded by

the whole of their harem. It conveyed trust, faith, and competence in a way nothing else quite could.

Aradishir reached the breakfast room first, pleased to see that all was ready: food, flowers, the gifts to be presented. Even the weather was cooperating.

He wanted badly to pace around the room, but it wouldn't do for Relanya to walk in and see him behaving so gracelessly. Instead he accepted the cup of tea Javed brought him, thanking him with a soft caress to his cheek.

"You need not be so nervous, my prince," Javed replied. "When have you ever made anything but a wonderful impression on anyone? I'm certain she was charmed by you last night."

"She was," Heydar replied. "A little frayed and tired, but definitely charmed."

Aradishir cast him a disbelieving look. "She barely noticed me."

That got him a pensive look from Merza, always a little too sharp for Aradishir's piece of mind.

Thankfully, before he could speak, the door was opened by one of the guards in the hallway and Relanya stepped inside, accompanied by two other women. All three were in Tavamaran dress, and one of the women looked as Tavamaran as was possible. She looked vaguely familiar, but she was the daughter of an ambassador, so that made sense.

Aradishir's eyes were only for Relanya, though. The short top and skirt were made of a beautiful fabric that shifted between gray and lavender, bringing out the smoky gray of her eyes. Chains of amethyst, diamond, and pearl were wrapped around her waist, and she'd affixed a ring of keys and a small pouch to them. On her head was a

matching diadem, and rings glittered on her fingers. Her beautiful ink-dark hair had been pulled into a single braid, affixed with white gold clasps at regular intervals.

Most fascinating of all was a beautiful, colorful tattoo on her right arm, a complicated geometric pattern done in myriad colors; a beautiful, intricate rainbow that covered her entire arm like a sleeve. Tattoos were not something done by royalty or nobility. They were for commoners or performers, concubines. The court was going to throw a fit. All Aradishir could think about was tracing every single line, first with his fingers and then—

Nothing. He was not going to make an absolute fool of himself and his family by lusting after his brother's betrothed .

Crossing the room, he bowed, arm across his chest. "Your Highness, it's an honor to properly make your acquaintance. I am sorry that your arrival in Tavamara has been so tumultuous.

Bowing in turn, Relanya replied, "Not at all, Your Highness. Not even monarchs can control the weather. I prefer your sand to my snow, to be certain. Thank you again for retrieving and returning my errant son. I wish I could say he will behave from here on out, but I expect that now I'm out of sight, he is once more into mischief."

Aradishir laughed, motioning her to the table and their waiting breakfast, trying and failing not to notice the beautiful perfume he caught a whiff of as she passed. Something delicate, honeysuckle and the barest hint of orange blossom and ginger. It suited her perfectly.

Taking a deep breath, Aradishir let it out slowly and went to take his own seat directly opposite her, his harem spread around the table so they could serve both parties easily, interspersed with Relanya's two handmaidens.

He could do this. His parents were trusting him. Bakhtiar was trusting him. He would do his duty, and this stupid little infatuation would pass. He was just flustered because he'd never been trusted with a duty like this, had never interacted with more than the women of the court, and Relanya was ridiculously beautiful and fascinating. Everyone was counting on him to do this right, and do it right he would.

"I am sorry, again, that Bakhtiar could not be here himself. I know he very much wanted to be, of course."

Relanya smiled. "These things happen, Your Highness, please do not worry on my behalf. Your home is even more beautiful than I imagined. So much green! Your deserts of sand are far more amenable to such things than my desert of snow. I brought some of my songbirds with me, and they have been trilling all the day long."

"They do not mind the lack of cold they must be used to?"

"No, my songbirds come from all over the world. I used to keep them in a specially made greenhouse. I'm told your temples keep birds as well."

Aradishir nodded, thanking Heydar for the tea he poured them before replying, "Yes, it's an old, old tradition of the temples. You'll no doubt hear the entire history when you visit them with my mother later in the week, so I won't tell it now. Today I thought I could show you around the palace and, if there's time, some of the city. Tonight of course there will be a banquet in your honor. I can regale you with the other plans arranged for the week later. Is there anything you would like to do that we might not have thought of?"

"I have every faith that Prince Bakhtiar planned everything perfectly," Relanya replied. "It's kind of you to carry out his duties in his absence. I hope he is recovering well?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Aradishir replied, even though for all he knew his dumbass brother's leg had rotted and fallen off. It would serve him right. Bakhtiar had his good points, but he was also a spoiled brat who never thought things through nearly as much as he should. Or put much effort into things he did not care about, like arranging all the details of his future wife's visit or buying her gifts or even pretending to care. Yet he was still getting all the credit, and Aradishir couldn't say a damn thing.

Whatever. It didn't matter. All that mattered was Relanya's happiness, and securing the marriage once and for all. Bakhtiar was going to owe him so many favors after this.

Merza served their breakfasts, and Heydar easily kept conversation flowing from there. He'd set Javed to serve Relanya, though at the banquet his mother's concubines would have that honor. Aradishir smiled faintly to see how intently the handmaidens were watching his concubines, no doubt trying to learn all they could, if they were indeed Relanya's future concubines. Truly impressive that she'd come so prepared, and people would be rightfully impressed that she arrived with three women already willing to devote their lives to her.

Who wouldn't want to, though? They'd only been speaking for an hour or so now, and she'd proven to be kind, friendly, charming, and an expert conversationalist, all vital to being a princess of Tavamara.

No, a queen. She was intended to be a queen someday.

Why did that reminder leave an ache in his chest?

Aradishir ignored it, focusing on the beautiful woman in front of him, discussing all the things he wanted to show her in the city, gritting his teeth that he had to spin them as Bakhtiar's plans and wishes that he was only carrying out.

As breakfast was finished and cleared away, Aradishir motioned for Merza to bring forward three of the many, many gifts he'd managed to secure, despite the challenges.

The first gift was a necklace from the vaults, a beautiful piece he'd bought years ago of a water lily made from precious jewels, with leaves all along the chain and on the right side, a jewel dragonfly on its way to perch on the water lily.

"Mercy me," one of the handmaidens said, while the other gasped. Relanya, of all things, seemed surprised. Why would a princess and future queen be surprised by jewelry?

"This is absolutely beautiful," Relanya said. "I love water lilies. They do not grow back home. I've tried to import them for my private garden, but they never survive, despite our best efforts. How incredibly thoughtful of Prince Bakhtiar."

Aradishir bit back every rude thing he wanted to say about his stupid brother and only smiled, "He'll be delighted to know you love it."

A servant took the jewelry case, and one of the handmaidens pushed the next gift in front of Relanya. "I feel a bit silly being the only one opening gifts."

"Not at all. Bakhtiar doesn't deserve them anyway for being a reckless fool and breaking his leg right on the cusp of your arrival."

Relanya laughed. "Brothers, all the same everywhere." She unwrapped the next gift, the wrapping itself a shawl made of softest wool and dyed an ombre purple. Within it was a book of poems and illustrations, bound in purple leather and debossed in gold leaf, more gold on the edges and in each of the illustrations. Only one hundred of them had been made, and Aradishir had volume number one. He hated to part with it, but a future queen deserved gifts worthy of that station.

"Oh, my goodness, this is the most beautiful book I've ever seen," Relanya said. "I cannot wait to read it. Look at this artwork!" She looked up with a smile that made her more beautiful than ever, like a little girl given the doll of her dreams for her birthday. "Your brother put a great deal of thought and care into this. I am deeply honored."

Death wasn't good enough for Bakhtiar. Aradishir was going to shackle him to the face of a cliff and leave him to rot.

For the present, he returned her smile. "I'm happy you like your gifts, Your Highness. He'll be delighted to know his efforts succeeded."

The book was taken away, and the third gift presented. This one was more basic, but a tradition all the same: a set of wine carafes and cups for her private use, at dinner, in her room, wherever else she wanted. She would gather more of them over the years, gifts from visitors, friends, and more, but this first set came from her future husband.

Aradishir had chosen it himself, from a variety of samples that had been sent to the palace for him, and delivered the moment the storm had cleared and it was safe to do so. The carafes were made of frosted glass that was pink at the bottom and a delicate orange at the top, the very colors of a setting sun. Each of the cups was a different coordinating color, rimmed in gold and the outside painted with gold flowers and butterflies.

"These are stunning!" Relanya said with a gasp. "Your brother has exquisite taste."

"I will be sure to convey your happiness to him," Aradishir said, mustering the smile he very much did not feel. It was stupid. He had no reason to be upset that Bakhtiar was getting all the credit. This was exactly what his mother had set him to do: make her happy, keep her safe, ensure the marriage went through.

It still hurt. He had picked out the necklace suspecting she'd love it. He'd known from everything he'd read that she'd love the book. He'd picked out her first personal wine set.

She would never know. Never should know. What did it matter? It didn't.

The more he repeated the words, the more hollow they felt.

"It makes happy hearing that you like your gifts so much. I hope you enjoy the others when you open them later. Shall we go on with our day? We can start with the royal gardens while the weather is still cool, and move indoors as it gets hotter."

Relanya rose gracefully and fell into step beside him as they left the dining room.

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He took her first to the succulent garden, which was Bakhtiar's favorite, probably because he too was prickly and high maintenance. "This is Bakhtiar's favorite of the public gardens. He has an even more impressive private garden that I'm sure he'll delight in showing you."

"They're beautiful. Is it true you can drink from them if you're in the desert?"

Aradishir smiled. "No, I'm afraid. I'm not sure how that rumor spread. If you try to drink the contents of any of these plants, it's likely to hurt and even kill you. Better to make certain you take plenty of water with you, but that is hardly a concern for you, Your Highness." He led her onward, pausing only to introduce her to a handful of the nobles and other visitors they passed. Next up was the rose garden, followed by one filled mostly with orchids. After that a few more general gardens with various plants and trees mixed about before he led her into the gardens accessible only to the royal family and those nobles with special permission.

The first of them included an enormous fishpond, filled with fish of nearly every color, with benches and loungers scattered around the edges for people to watch in comfort. Beyond that was his favorite garden, save for his own private garden. This one had a marble gazebo in the middle, surrounded by water and accessed by arched bridges. From there spilled out a winding walking path, all manner of trees and flowers, cultivated specifically for the butterflies that flew about, in more sizes and colors than could be easily counted.

Relanya and her handmaidens gasped. "This is stunning."

"The butterfly garden, designed by my mother not long after she moved to the palace,

and finished right before the wedding. They exchanged their vows right in the gazebo. I'm told it was a beautiful ceremony."

"I would imagine so, given how deeply your parents love each other," Relanya said with a smile tinged in sadness. "My first wedding was very much a matter of state, and... well, the relationship did not end well." She laughed, the sound sad and bitter. In the next moment, though, before he could figure out what to say to comfort her, she smiled brightly. "I can see why visitors always speak so avidly of the royal gardens of Tavamara. The only thing they talk about more is the famous Market. Will we get to see that too?"

"In some measure," Aradishir replied. "My mother would kill me if I let us simply wander about, but I will make certain you see it, never fear."

"Marvelous, thank you."

Once they were back inside, precisely on the side of the palace he'd wanted, Aradishir escorted her to the library, regaling her with its history, how it had once been the concubine hall before the new laws that limited how many concubines each royal could have, the fascinating story of the last Harem Master, King Ihsan, and Queen Euren [1] .

"What a tale, and what an absolute wonder this library is," Relanya said. "The palace as a whole is a work of art, but this library is truly remarkable."

"We are proud of it," Aradishir said with a grin. "Come, come, I'll show you the rare books collection."

Relanya returned the smile full measure, and Aradishir's heart gave another stupid, traitorous lurch.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't . Becoming smitten with his brother's future wife was quite literally the stupidest fucking thing he could ever do, and he wasn't going to sink that low.

Except he was pretty certain he was already halfway there.

After they left the library, he showed her the rest of the palace. They were in one of the small dining rooms when the door opened behind them, and a harried-looking Danial slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

Aradishir laughed. "Who is haranguing you today?"

Danial opened his eyes, then relaxed and smiled. "Who isn't? I just want to sit with Jahanara and lend what comfort I can. What are you doing in here?"

"Showing Princess Relanya around. Your Highness, I make you known to Prince Danial, my sister's husband. Danial, Princess Relanya, Bakhtiar's betrothed and our future queen."

Relanya flushed slightly at the words, but swept Danial a bow. "How is Princess Jahanara? The first child is always the most nerve-wracking."

"She is definitely not going to permit a second child," Danial said with a laugh. "An honor to meet you, Your Highness. Jahanara would love to meet you later, if you are inclined. I'm sure it would bring her comfort to speak with another woman who has already been through what she'll be facing quite soon. Even sooner than we expect, if the child is a girl as stubborn and determined as her predecessors," he added dryly.

Aradishir snickered.

Relanya gave them an amused look, but only said, "I would be honored to lend what

comfort I may to Her Highness. I fear we're busy today with the touring and banquet, but I can visit tomorrow? Morning? Afternoon?"

"Morning, I'll let you know the best time precisely once I know it," Danial replied with a warm smile. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Scoffing, Relanya said, "We are all to be family, are we not? Sisters look out for each other."

"Mother and Nara will certainly adore having another woman about the place, that is true," Aradishir said. "Also more children." He rolled his eyes. "Shall we continue, Your Highness? We can get changed and head into the city, perhaps find lunch there. I'll send the guards ahead to secure a location."

"That sounds lovely," Relanya said. "We'll go change at once."

Aradishir and Danial bowed as she left the room. The moment the door was closed, Danial turned to Aradishir. "That's Bakhti's princess? I have loved him as my brother all my life, but I don't see those two getting along."

"Why is that?" Aradishir asked, even though he'd been thinking the same thing.

Danial frowned, then said pensively, "They don't have the same sort of spark. You know? Nara and I spark the same, even if we're completely opposite on so many things. You and your harem...everyone and their harems...all share sparks. Maybe I'm just looking for trouble. Bakhtiar is a brat, but he's always taken being crown prince seriously."

Aradishir snorted.

"All right, recently he's been taking it more seriously. I still don't know how he turned

out the way he did when Their Majesties are hardly the type to spoil and coddle."

"I have no idea," Aradishir said. "He has a good heart, though, and I've faith he'll grow into the role. Perhaps Princess Relanya will help with that. She is very much calm waters to his stormy ones." Calm wasn't the right word, though. She was more like the butterfly garden she'd loved so much: vibrant and alive, bringing joy but also a feeling of calm and safety. Whereas his dumbass brother was the sand and scorching sun.

"Perhaps. Come on, I must find a way to get back to my wife, and you must get changed, and alas, there's no access to the passages from this room."

Aradishir laughed and led the way out. "Just walk with me. We'll go quickly, scowling the whole way, like something is amiss. No one will bother us."

"Brilliant, thank you," Danial said, and they proceeded to do precisely that.

A short time later, freshly cleaned and dressed for traipsing about the city, Aradishir and his harem met Relanya and her companions in the main courtyard, where an open carriage waited to take them around the city. Nearby stood a handful of servants holding large baskets, each one filled to the brim with little linen drawstring bags.

"What is this?" Relanya asked. She wore a peacock blue headwrap that did amazing things to her gray eyes.

Swallowing, Aradishir stared hard at the baskets. "For the children. Whenever they see my carriage, they come running, with gifts and for gifts. I'm sure with the knowledge I'll be escorting you around, even more people than usual will come."

Relanya broke into a smile that completely melted any hope Aradishir had of not falling utterly besotted with his brother's future wife. "I always wanted to do

something like that back home, but my parents forbade it." Her face clouded briefly, but in the next moment she was smiling again, if not as brilliantly as before. "Shall we be off? I really can't wait to see the famous market."

The guards were as implacable as ever, but if there was one thing they hated, it was the royal family going anywhere near the security nightmare that was the Great Market. The looks they exchanged said nothing to the casual observer, but Aradishir could read the stress, the silent conversations about steps that would need to be taken—especially since Relanya was foreign and not used to the way Tavamarans did things. Many countries would call Tavamara rigid, but Relanya's homeland would likely describe them as entirely too free.

Aradishir offered a hand to help Relanya into the carriage, tingling at the soft, warm touch of her skin. He climbed in after her, followed by his harem, who thankfully made certain there was plenty of space between him and the woman he could never have.

Even if he was an option, why would she choose him over Bakhtiar? The crown prince? Nobody in their right mind chose the youngest and weakest over the oldest and most powerful.

So he smiled and talked about the history of the city, assisted by his beautiful concubines.

Who could read him far too well by the looks they gave him, the looks they exchanged, but that was just one of the many reasons he loved them.

When they passed through the city gates and into the great pavilion, they were immediately overwhelmed by people, especially children. Aradishir came into the city so often for speeches, ceremonies, and more that they knew him well—better than his siblings, whose work mostly kept them in the palace. Broken leg from

misadventure notwithstanding.

Aradishir signaled the servants, who immediately left the carriage, climbed up onto stone stands meant for the purpose, and started tossing out the linen bags, which were caught eagerly by young and old alike, though most people had the decency to promptly hand them off to children too little to do any catching themselves. Inside the bags were sweets and a couple of coins.

When the bags were gone and the guards had sufficiently dispersed the crowd, they carried on, wending leisurely through the city as Aradishir and his concubines continued to relate its history.

Eventually, they stopped for lunch at a restaurant he tended to favor whenever he was in the city. It was also one of the few where his guards did not have to drive everyone else out; they merely took over the second floor, and Aradishir's staff assisted the restaurant staff, putting less pressure and strain on them.

They sat at a table near the balcony that spanned the length of the building, all three sets of doors slid open to let in a cool breeze. A server brought them wine, a cool, refreshing pale pink called Gentle Hour, and another brought some foods perfect for nibbling.

Aradishir nodded to Heydar to serve Relanya, leaving Javed to serve him and Merza to attend her companions.

"Tavamara is truly beautiful," Relanya said as she sipped the wine Heydar offered up. "Nothing at all like home. The colors, the air...everything is nearly the exact opposite of home, I love it."

"I'm surprised the heat does not bother you more," Merza said with a laugh. "That is what foreigners struggle with the most when they visit."

Relanya laughed with him. "It's not the extreme I'm used to, but if I can adjust to one, I can adjust to the other." She accepted another sip of wine then asked, "So how do the people know you so well, Your Highness? They seemed very excited it was you who was in the city."

"I come here often, at least compared to the rest of my family, to give speeches and attend events related to my various charity works and such."

Javed chuckled as he offered Aradishir a sip of wine before finishing the rest himself and pouring more. "Yes, that's all it is. Nothing at all to do with how hard you work to fight the human trafficking that is the plague of this country, or the tales of how you rescued me, seduced away the son of the Commander of the Royal and City Guard, were taken in by the wiles of the only thief to successfully break into the royal palace more than once..."

Aradishir's face went hot. "Every last one of those tales has spun wildly out of control. The last I heard, I snuck into a shop where many people were being held prisoner and set them all free after a great fight against several enormous soldiers armed for war—" He threw up his hands. "I'm not even sure how that version ends, I grew so fed up hearing it."

Javed laughed so hard he had to set down the cup of wine he'd just picked up. It was Heydar who said drolly, "I believe my prince was in the process of removing the shackles of the prisoners when his eyes fell upon one in particular and he was instantly entranced, and Javed has not left your side since."

Relanya made no effort to contain or muffle her giggles. "Well, now I must hear the real story."

Before Aradishir could attempt to divert the conversation to something less humiliating, Javed happily launched into the tale, which of course led to stories of

how he'd met Heydar and Merza as well.

When the torment finally ended, though, he earned another of those beautiful, heart-stopping smiles that made the rest of the world vanish. His stupid brother would probably never appreciate the beauty of them, how precious they were.

"What charming tales. I can see why everyone regards you so highly, Prince Aradishir," Relanya said. "You're an honor to your family and your people."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Aradishir said, warmth filling him even as his heart cracked. Already she spoke to him like a sister, like a queen. The reminder of the divide between them was sorely needed, but that didn't make it hurt less.

If Bakhtiar so much as looked at her wrong, Aradishir would break his nose, then break it again for good measure.

As the next course was brought out, including a lavender wine Aradishir was fond of called Summer Festival, Relanya said, "So tell me some stories of Prince Bakhtiar. You must have some great ones, and I'd like to learn all I can."

"That would be my pleasure, Your Highness." Taking the sip of wine Merza offered, Aradishir then launched cheerfully into tales of Bakhtiar, interspersing good ones with those that would make Bakhtiar pout or scowl.

Eventually, though, as the second course was taken away and the main course brought out, he let Merza turn the conversation to other topics. "Have you given thought to what colors you'll have for the wedding?"

Relanya frowned slightly, head tilting. "What do you mean?"

"Did my mother not subject you to the wedding details?" Aradishir asked. "The bride

chooses the theme and colors for the wedding."

"Oh. Um, no, Her Majesty said we could speak of it after the matter had been settled, that there was no sense in going on about it sooner. I never gave it much thought, assuming one wedding ceremony was much like another. Silly, in retrospect. Why does the bride choose? Surely as the royal family there must be certain requirements."

"I think every region of Tavamara has its own version of the tradition's origin, but the short, simple version is that as it was our Goddess who shaped the world, new beginnings—new worlds, after a fashion—should also be shaped by women. It's a sign of arrogance for a man to shape the wedding, the same way it's not a man's decision how many children his wife will bear."

Relanya looked for a moment like she might cry, but she blinked the almost-tears away and smiled softly instead. "How beautiful. That is not how women are viewed back home, not even close. We do what the men want, when they want, and how they want, and the best women are those who do not argue, but quietly and happily obey."

"Wow, they must have hated my mother," Aradishir said with a laugh. "I wish I could have seen their faces."

"If the court artist could have drawn fast enough to capture them, I would have given her every coin to my name, that's for certain," Relanya said with a grin. "Your mother is wonderful, truly. I could see even before I arrived why they call her the Jewel of Tavamara. From what I've heard, you are her protégé."

Aradishir scoffed. "My sister is like her in every way, or near enough. I just take after my mother in charity pursuits and the like, leaving my siblings to their precious politics." And Bakhtiar to finding all the trouble he possibly could, though in begrudging fairness, Bakhtiar excelled at general audience, which he was doing more and more often. He would likely be the one to train Relanya, as when they were king

and queen, it would be one of their many shared duties.

She'd be good at it, listening to petitioners, assisting with their problems, treating everyone fairly and, where suited, generously. Aradishir had done it a couple of times, when the others fell sick, but thankfully he was normally put to work elsewhere. The helping people part he enjoyed, but the sitting still for hours on end he did not.

"This is delicious," Relanya said. "What is it?"

"A specialty of Tavalā—we call them kuku sabzi. Herb cake is the most common translation. Sometimes it's also called an herb frittata, though I'll be honest, I've no idea what a frittata is." Aradishir replied. "I especially like it with this cheese, made from sheep's milk and brined."

Relanya smiled. "A local delicacy back home is something called Gruzinchiki, a fish roll fried and served with melted butter. Rich and filling, as all cold weather foods must be."

"That would be fun to try sometime," Aradishir replied, and nearly bit his tongue stopping himself from saying perhaps for one of their private meals sometime. There were no private meals forthcoming. Because she wasn't marrying him. Divine he was stupid. "I'm sure we could find a cook who knows how to make it, or someone with knowledge to share with ours."

"That would be nice to do eventually, but for now, I'm certainly happy learning all I can about my new home, including foods I could never have dreamed up on my own. Thank you," she added as Heydar offered her more wine. "So what are we going to..." The words died off as they watched several servants and guards come rushing in, going straight to the open doors and closing them before pulling down an addition cover.

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One of her companions asked, "What's wrong?"

"Sandstorm, I would imagine," Aradishir replied quietly, and looked to Lieutenant Erfan as he came striding in.

"Yes, Your Highnesses. A rather abrupt one. It's come up with little warning. We won't have time to make it back to the palace, not with the chaos in the streets. I did send a runner to inform Their Majesties, though, and we should be more than fine sheltering here."

Relanya's eyes widened. "A sandstorm? Like the one that delayed us before?"

"Worse," Erfan replied. "That one lasted hours. This one... it could last the whole rest of the day and into the night. Hard to say, but it's much worse than the previous."

Aradishir asked, "The restaurant staff? Our people?"

"Many of the staff chose to try and make it home, as they live nearby, but four have remained and all our people are inside." His mouth quirked as he added, "Lucky for all of us, we're in a restaurant and it has a protected water source. Though I suppose we could make do with the wine."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Aradishir replied with a laugh. "I can see the looks on my parents' faces if I returned to the palace heavily drunk, explaining it was absolutely all we had to drink for hours or days."

Erfan's mouth twitched, but he said nothing, only bowed and slipped out of the room,

no doubt to check on everyone and get any updates on the storm.

One of Relanya's companions shuddered. "We had to stay on the ship last time, and it was like being back at sea all over again, tossed about by a storm, feeling like we would capsize at any moment."

"Thankfully there is no risk of capsizing here," Heydar replied, and refilled her wine. "Our biggest threat will be boredom, but hopefully with so many of us, that will not happen."

Merza refilled the rest of their wines, and Aradishir smiled, even as the wind kicked up, rattling the closed doors beyond the additional barrier. "Have you heard of the notorious tribes of the Great Desert?"

"Only that the Great Desert is dangerous for many reasons and to be avoided." Relanya made a face. "There are always stories of the wild savages of Tavamara and the Desert, but I find those distasteful. If I recall correctly, you have an uncle who is Prince of the Great Desert [2] ?"

"Uncle Sahayl," Aradishir said. "Father had him adopted into the family, which made him a prince, and gave him the authority to unite the tribes once and for all. It's a story fit for a novel. Would you like to hear it?"

"I would love to," Relanya replied, and her handmaidens looked just as excited.

"Father's Steward is from the Desert, you know. The Cobra Tribe. He's quite fierce looking, tattooed all over with snake scales. The story actually begins with him. You would like his wife; she is from Havarin and had a child from her first husband before he died, and she fled here so her son wouldn't be taken from her. It was that boy who became friends with..."

Aradishir told the story avidly, interspersed with anecdotes from Heydar, who knew some of it from his father, and even a few of the guards who had been there when Sahayl first arrived at the palace.

"You weren't kidding," Relanya said when he finished. "That could be turned into the most exciting play!" She smiled softly, something in her eyes making his heart trip over itself. "Of course, some of that is your gift as a storyteller. Gift and skill, I should say, for you've clearly honed what comes naturally to you."

Face hot, feeling suddenly shy, Aradishir looked at the table as he said, "Thank you, Your Highness. That means a lot to me. I like telling stories, but I don't have quite the same vivacity as my siblings."

"I do not believe you," Relanya said. "My son will not stop speaking about the man who found him and brought him back to me, and how he too gives people fits."

Aradishir groaned, burying his face in his hands as everyone laughed.

"Your son is delightfully charming," Heydar said, offering her more wine.

"Thank you," Relanya said. "He is a handful, but there is no one I love more."

"He seemed delightful. The whole court will adore him by the end of the week," Aradishir replied. If they didn't, he'd make them regret it.

The hand that nudged his thigh warned him at least three people at the table could read his thoughts. Aradishir stifled a sigh. "I think I've stolen all the attention for this luncheon. Tell me of your home, or a story about your son." Or maybe how many more children she'd like. Aradishir wouldn't be content until there was a little girl just like her in every way.

Fuck, he really was the stupidest person alive.

"There was the time he escaped his nursery and I found him sleeping with my father's sledding dogs," Relanya said with a long sigh. "My heart stopped, and the poor nurse thought I would terminate her on the spot, but I can hardly punish other people when he escapes me all the time."

Aradishir laughed. "Bakhtiar was also good at escaping his caretakers. Don't leave him and Kerrin alone, Bakhti will likely share notes."

"Marvelous," Relanya muttered. "Could I get some more of this wine?"

Snickering, Heydar dutifully refilled her cup and offered it up.

Outside, the wind was howling in earnest, battering the shutters so hard Aradishir half-feared they'd bust open, even though he knew very well that Tavamarans knew how to keep sand outside no matter what the circumstances.

"So what do you like to do for fun, Your Highness, on the rare occasion you have free time to enjoy?"

"Read, relax in my garden, enjoy music and performances. My father's concubine Nandakumar is the finest musician in the entire kingdom, and he plays for the family sometimes. I always greatly enjoy those evenings."

Relanya smiled. "I always enjoy plays. They're a highly popular pastime in the coldest months, when we get no sun, just endless night. Too cold even to go outside, so entertainment is vitally important and plays the most popular version. One of my favorites is about a woman whose family is utterly destitute and on the verge of being cast out of their home. She becomes a brigand, accosting the wealthy and powerful on the road, taking their valuables to sell for money to help her family. Until she winds

up having to kidnap the daughter of the evil duke, and of course there's all sorts of trouble and they fall in love... It's really quite a wonderful tale. I watch the play every year, multiple times. I have books, illustrations, and more."

"You'll have to loan me one of the books, if you're so inclined. I'd love to read it, given how avidly you speak of it."

"Of course!" Relanya pressed her hands together, as excited as a girl promised a new dress or toy. "I can't wait to discuss it with you." Lowering her hands, she accepted another sip of wine from Heydar and then said, "What sorts of things does Prince Bakhtiar like?"

"Bakhtiar likes to be a—oof." He cast Merza a dirty look. "That was uncalled for!"

"Be nice," Merza said, unrepentant.

Rolling his eyes, Aradishir tried again. "My brother is bad at holding still. He loves to do . Archery, horse riding, foot racing, the absolutely absurd challenge where they race barefoot over rocks during the hottest part of the year to prove who is the most talented at being stupid..."

That sent Relanya into a fit of giggles that made Aradishir forget all about his dumb brother. She was so sweet and pretty and fun . He could speak with her like this for hours.

He could do plenty of other things with her for hours, but he wasn't even going to think about letting his mind wander that road.

"How in the world did that become a tradition?" Relanya said. "Not that I can judge. We do something similar back home with cutting a hole in the ice and jumping into the water. Proves manliness or something."

"Proves strength, determination, discipline, endurance, a severe lack of intelligence, and a weird desire to burn one's feet for no reason at all..."

He could listen to Relanya giggle and laugh all day, every day. Especially if all he had to do was ruthlessly mock Bakhtiar.

"Is there a prize for winning this race of burning feet?"

Aradishir grinned. "In fairness, if you do it correctly, there's no burning, and the prize is typically a large purse, with second and third place prizes being things like wine. It's already happened this year, but you can certainly attend next year. Bakhtiar would love to know you're there watching him. He doesn't race for prizes, though. There's a race for the purse and then a race of friendly competition. Usually when he wins, he donates the same amount as the purse to a charity."

"That's lovely, how thoughtful."

Bakhtiar had stolen the idea from Aradishir, but he didn't mind leaving that detail out, because stolen was overdramatic, and Bakhtiar had done it with a good heart and sincere intentions.

"It makes him exceedingly popular, which is good, because we're going to drop him on the throne eventually."

Erfan slipped back into the room then, expression grim.

"What's wrong?" Aradishir asked, smile sliding from his face.

"You must come with us at once, all of you," Erfan said, as the rest of their guards spilled into the room and started helping everyone to their feet before ushering them out of the room, down the stairs—and then further down still, until they were in the

basement amongst barrels and crates and hanging meats and fruits.

Erfan closed the heavy trapdoor and locked it. Aradishir had a lot of questions about why a restaurant would need a basement that locked from the inside, but that would have to wait. "Erfan, what's going on?"

"We have reports of roving bandits taking advantage of the storm to plunder shops."

Relanya frowned. "Surely they wouldn't get very far with that, given the lack of visibility."

"Desperate people use desperate means," Erfan replied, "and greedy fools will go to foolish extremes."

Aradishir didn't believe a single word. Bandits didn't go about raiding shops in a sandstorm for precisely the reason Relanya had just given. And Erfan wouldn't lock them all in a basement for thieves who would take one look at their uniforms and run away because no loot was worth tangling with the royal guard.

Something more serious was going on. Something dire and dangerous. "Erfan, with me," he said sharply, and strode off behind a rack of wine barrels where they could speak in relative privacy. "What is really going on?"

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Erfan's mouth flattened, but after a moment he gave a bare nod and relented. "We noticed we had people following us earlier, but I thought I attended the matter when I sent soldiers to disperse or, if necessary, arrest them. There were six in all that we took care of, but I must have missed something, for which you have my deepest apologies, Your Highness. I believe your pursuers learned you would be touring the city and decided to take advantage of the opportunity. Whether they intend to kidnap or kill you, I do not know, but whichever the case, they will not leave survivors to tell the tale. The sandstorm should have slowed them down, but instead, I think they're going to try and use it to their advantage."

By killing everyone and using the lull that would come after the storm ended to sneak away, with no one the wiser about what had happened for possibly hours. Aradishir was sickened by the thought. All this because he dared to save people from being enslaved, abused, and worse. He would never understand why people did such things.

"I really am deeply sorry for my failures, Your Highness. We will not let you or Her Highness or anyone else come to harm."

"No apologies are necessary. It sounds like you and your people have done everything you possibly can. Thank you. We'll remain here until you think it's safe for us to return to the palace. Hopefully the storm will keep them away after all, or they will not be able to reach us here in the basement."

Erfan nodded, and they rejoined the others. Someone had found some old blankets and arranged them on a couple of crates for Relanya to sit. Merza sat next to her, offering up sips of a pale gold wine, as Javed and Heydar told stories about people in the palace.

If she was anxious about the abrupt turn in events, she gave no outward sign of it, a quality his parents would deeply admire. No doubt it was part of what had persuaded his mother during the initial negotiations.

Aradishir joined them, smiling when Heydar slid an arm across his shoulders and drew him in closer. Aradishir tilted his head up, and Heydar returned the smile before leaning down for the silent request for a kiss. He'd been enchanted with Heydar from the beginning, the sad soldier who clearly wanted a different life, but had no way of getting it. Matters between Heydar and his father were still tense, but they were talking, which according to Heydar was more than they'd ever done before.

He looked back toward the group as he and Heydar parted, and flushed for no good reason to see Relanya watching them. "Your men love you deeply." She looked about to say something else, something that provoked a bittersweet smile, but before she could voice the words, there was a series of loud bangs, like someone pounding ferociously at a door, and then the sound of heavy wood cracking. Shortly after that came pounding feet, muffled shouting that quickly turned angry as the assailants realized their targets weren't where they should be.

"Get back," Erfan said grimly, and motioned sharply to some of the guards. Four of them pulled Relanya and Aradishir to the farthest corner of the room. Merza and Heydar were also armed now with long daggers, though the idea of them being in a fight churned his stomach, no matter how good they both were. His thief and his soldier. Javed stood with Relanya's handmaidens, ready to get them out the very moment there was a chance.

Hopefully this matter wouldn't come to—

His hopes were dashed as someone tried to open the basement door, muffled swearing spilling through the room when they realized they couldn't. The voice faded off, but just moments later multiple voices could be heard.

Aradishir's heart jumped into his throat as the hammering from before started up again, closer and louder, driving against the last door standing between them and their assailants. He looked at Relanya. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. This is my fault. They're after me because of what I've done to their contemptible slave trade. If I had known they would do something this desperate, I never would have brought you into danger."

"You should never apologize for doing the right thing," Relanya said with a soft smile. "No one is to blame for their actions but them. Nor will they find us easy opponents. I've been attacked before, and by an arctic bear. Fellow humans are nothing." She winked at him, but before he could reply, or even figure out what to say, the door began cracking.

"Damn it," Aradishir said softly, dread sinking into his bones at the thought of all the lives at stake, how much more difficult the fighting would be in such an enclosed space.

The door was hammered again, more cracks forming, splinters of wood falling to scatter across the floor. Aradishir turned to Relanya and her handmaidens—and somehow wasn't remotely surprised to see they too had knives out now. He huffed a small laugh. "You will have to tell me the story of this arctic bear when we are back in the palace."

"Of course, Your Highness," Relanya replied. "It would be my pleasure. I'd never made my parents so angry in my life as I did that afternoon. We—"

She broke off as the door shattered entirely, the straggling remnants of it kicked out of the way by heavy boots before figures in dark brown and green clothes stepped into the room one by one, each with sword drawn.

Their eyes swept the room, and one of them landed briefly on Aradishir before the

guards surged forward and the fighting began.

Aradishir had expected only a few assailants, but instead more and more poured into the room, swiftly outnumbering the guards, but thankfully hampered by the lack of space. Cries of anger and pain filled the air, along with the smell of blood, and heady, potent wine as barrels were cracked and broken. It splashed across the floor, the fumes so strong they left him dizzy.

Erfan killed one man, but two more got him from behind, sending him to land in the mess of blood and wine.

"No!" Aradishir bellowed, and snarled in frustrated anguish as Heydar yanked him back and pushed him up against the wall where he was shielded by Heydar's body. "You can't let him die!"

"Our concern is you," Heydar snarled.

After that, Aradishir couldn't follow the fight, only grip Heydar's sides and rest his head between his shoulder blades, listening to the sounds all around him, trying not to breathe too deeply.

Eventually, the sounds slowed, then stopped, replaced by panting and the soldiers calling to each other. Aradishir shoved at Heydar until he moved. "Where is Erfan?"

"Here," said a weak, raspy voice. "Are you all right, Your Highness?" Erfan was pale, ashen, and even as he was helped to his feet, other guards were rushing up to tend his wounds. There was a nasty gash on his right side, and a cut on his forehead that thankfully didn't seem too severe, despite the copious bleeding.

Aradishir looked to Relanya, who had blood on her dagger and across her face. He must look pathetic, hiding behind his concubine and staying safe while Relanya and

her handmaidens had fought. He rushed over to her, taking her hands in his and squeezing them, and he didn't give a damn about propriety. "You're well? I'm sorry you had to fight, while I—" He froze as she placed a finger to his lips, heart in his throat as it slowly slid away, leaving a tingling burn that he hoped would never fade.

"You did nothing wrong, Your Highness. Please don't be one of those who thinks more of those of us who can wield a knife, and less of those of you who cannot. That is the type of toxic attitude I am trying to leave behind in the snow and ice."

"As you say, princess," Aradishir said with a soft huff of laughter. "I'm not very good at not being useful."

"Sometimes trusting others is the most helpful thing we can do. Also, you keep a remarkably cool head in dire circumstances, Your Highness. That is a rarer skill than you might think."

Heydar snorted softly. "You should have seen him the night we met Merza, when assassins came far too close to succeeding in their mission. He didn't care about them at all. He just wanted to know that Merza was all right."

"Diamonds have no sense in their heads," Merza said cheerfully, before wrapping an arm around Aradishir's waist and kissing his cheek. "Can we get out of here?"

It was Erfan himself who replied, "Momentarily. The storm is slowly subsiding. For now, we can go upstairs to wait."

"Make certain the owner is compensated for all this mess," Aradishir said with a sigh, "and that the repairs are made in good time."

"Of course, Your Highness." Erfan led the way upstairs, stubbornly ignoring the guard that tried to help him, one hand pressed to his wounded side.

They sat at several of the tables in the main dining area, and Aradishir thanked the guards who brought them water and wine. He looked to Erfan. "You need stitches at the very least."

"I'll be all right until we can get to the palace, Your Highness. I'm sorry again for not stopping this sooner."

"You did your best, and none of us thought they'd be so determined to kill me they'd risk going about in a sandstorm, nevermind one of this severity. Did we lose anyone?"

"No, Your Highness, the most severe injury is mine. The rest are scrapes and bruises. We took care of roughly thirty assailants."

"How in the world did we all fit down there?"

"Poorly," Relanya said. "The poor owner, that mess will take ages to clean up, and all that costly wine. It's kind of you to have already thought of that and attended the matter. My siblings would not have." She sighed. "I hope we can do a more successful tour later. I really did want to see more of the city."

An ache spread through Aradishir's chest, sharp and twisting. "You will, I promise. When Bakhtiar returns, he will take you himself, and I don't think anyone wants him dead the way they do me."

"Of course," Relanya replied, but Aradishir swore she looked disappointed for a moment. About what? That the tour would have to wait that long? Maybe he could speak with Mother and see something arranged.

Certainly, he couldn't continue to attend her in Bakhtiar's stead if simply being in his presence was going to put her in this much danger. She was the future queen. Her

safety was of the highest importance.

She would have been safe, or at least significantly safer, if she'd visited the city with literally anyone else.

A guard stepped inside and bowed, "Your Highnesses, Lieutenant, the storm has abated sufficiently, and guards have been dispersed to ensure our path home remains cleared."

"Thank you," Aradishir said, and motioned for Relanya and the others to be escorted first, then his harem, before he finally followed them. He was tempted to insist they travel separately, so that only his carriage would be at risk, but that would take time and more guards, and right now speed was their greatest advantage.

So he settled in his seat, directly across from Relanya, and stared out at the city as they went, heart heavy with regret and recrimination.

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Nearly a week had passed since he'd surrendered the greater part of his duties attending Relanya to his brother-in-law. His sister had tried to do it herself, but the crazy woman had just had a baby, for the love of the Gods. Thankfully, Mother had put a brisk end to that.

He still saw her around the palace, and could often hear her playing with her son in their private garden, but generally he only got to see her at dinner, which he determinedly attended every single night—to the amusement of his family, when he was well known to avoid the banquets whenever he could.

Hopefully they didn't realize why he was so determined to have dinner in the public hall these days. The last thing he needed was his family realizing he was smitten with Relanya. His parents would give him the lecture of a lifetime, his sister would tease him, and dear gods, if his brother ever found out... Well, one of them would have to die, that was absolute.

Aradishir set aside the contracts he'd been reading through as a favor to his sister and scrubbed at his face, willing away the exhaustion that washed over him. "Would you call for some tea, Heydar?"

"Of course, my prince." Heydar kissed him softly, then rose gracefully and went to see to it.

Flopping backward to sprawl on the floor, completely uncaring how childish the move was, especially given he was in his office, Aradishir stared at the ceiling and sighed. What was wrong with him? His entire life had been handed to him, and all he could do was mope about the one woman he couldn't have.

Still, the thought that she would always be right there but forever out of reach...

It had only been a little over a week since her arrival. To be this smitten was stupid. It was a silly infatuation. He'd get over it soon and be embarrassed with himself, and she'd be a wonderful sister. She would be an amazing queen, was already an amazing mother...

His stomach knotted at the thought of Relanya having children with Bakhtiar. They'd be beautiful children, and hopefully take more after their mother than their father...

Aradishir sat up sharply, palms pressed to the sides of his head as he stared unseeing at the contracts he needed to finish reviewing.

Hopelessly smitten with a so-called commoner? No problem. A royal guard? Fine. A thief? Had definitely gotten him yet another stern lecture, but overall, acceptable. His brother's betrothed?

He jerked upright as the door slid open, and mustered a smile for Heydar, who held the requested tray of tea. "Thank you."

Setting the tray down, Heydar poured for him and offered the cup for Aradishir to sip, gently stroking his cheek as he withdrew it. "Will you tell me what has been troubling you so much this past week, my prince? We can all see it, the three of us."

"Nothing. It's stupid. The less I talk about it—think about—the better off we'll all be."

"We are here to share those burdens with you, Ari." Heydar placed two fingers under his chin and gently tilted his head up. "Princess Relanya?"

Aradishir turned away, humiliation tearing through him. "My feelings are inappropriate—and fleeting, no doubt. I just want to be left alone until this childish

infatuation passes."

Heydar sighed softly, but only murmured, "As you wish, my prince," before coaxing Aradishir into finishing the tea and snacks. Once the meal was done and the dishes taken away, he went back to work on the contracts, marking the sections he had problems with and making notes for his sister to read over whenever she had the chance. "All right, let's stretch our legs before the meeting with the silk merchants." He was exhausted just thinking about it, but these meetings with the various merchant guilds were vital to all the changes he wanted to make to counter the trafficking.

Outside, the day was as sweltering as ever, but in the ornate, carefully arranged and maintained royal gardens, water and shade kept everything cool. Aradishir settled on a low, angled chair by the largest part of the artificial stream that wended through the garden, in the shade of a lush olive tree that had been planted when he was born. Fish darted about in the water, and birds sang all over the garden, though they would fall silent the moment they realized his sister's cat had gotten loose again.

"Have a guard capture that cat before my mother sees him and kills my sister," Aradishir said with a huff of laughter.

Heydar snorted. "I'll get it. The poor guards just wind up running laps until the cat gets bored. He headed in the direction of the bush Aradishir had indicated, and when he was just a few paces from it, a sleek, gold cat with black ears and paws bolted from cover and across the garden. "Damn it, cat!"

Laughing, but feeling bad, Aradishir got up to help, and the two of them chased the cat around the garden, darting around trees and leaping over bushes and across the stream. "Cat!" Aradishir said and made a lunge for it—only to slip on the moss by the stream and tumble right into the water.

He sat up just in time to watch the damned cat clear the east wall to go investigate a

different garden. "I'm going to skin that thing alive one of these days."

Heydar started to reply, sweaty and dirty and equally annoyed, when a beautiful, painfully familiar laugh rolled across the garden.

Groaning, face hot with exertion and mortification, Aradishir hauled himself to his feet and waded out of the water as Relanya drew closer, flanked by her handmaidens.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?" Relanya asked. "That was quite the tumble."

Aradishir climbed up the bank and onto the path, where a servant was already rushing up with a drying cloth. "I'm fine. As usual with my escapades, nothing is damaged except my dignity. Last time, I tried to stop a disagreement in the main pavilion and wound up doused in sugar syrup. I don't recall what happened before that."

"Puppies," Heydar said drolly. "My prince was attacked by a pack of puppies and toppled into a fountain."

Relanya and her handmaidens giggled—and it only worsened as Aradishir shot Heydar a glare.

Unrepentant, Heydar replied, "Shall I list the incidents before that? Like the time you were caught sneaking around the night market?"

"You were there too," Aradishir muttered.

"What is the night market?" one of the handmaidens asked.

Aradishir's face went hot, and even Heydar looked chagrined at having mentioned something so crass in front of a princess and her retinue. Setting his shoulders, he nevertheless said, "When the official market closes, after the sun sets, people arrive to

sell various items that are not appropriate for daylight hours."

"Or entirely legal," Aradishir added.

"Oh, I see," Relanya said, eyes glittering, and Aradishir very nearly threw himself right back into the stream. To cool off or drown, he hadn't yet decided.

As if sensing his thoughts, Heydar curved his arm around Aradishir, resting a hand gently but firmly on his hips, and leaned in to kiss his shoulder, right at the space between throat and shirt where skin was bared. "Shall we return to your rooms, my prince? The meeting with the silk merchants is soon, and I doubt you want to show up looking like...well, a wet cat."

"I hate you," Aradishir muttered, before sweeping Relanya the best bow he could manage under the soaking-wet circumstances. "I'll see you this evening at dinner, Your Highness. Hopefully in a dryer state."

"At dinner, Your Highness," Relanya replied, hand in front of her mouth, eyes still sparkling with something Aradishir could not name.

He smiled stiffly and departed, pulling away from Heydar's touch as they threaded through the gardens until they reached the back entrance of his rooms. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go drown myself in the bath."

"What in the world happened to you?" Merza asked, dropping the papers he'd been reading over and surging to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Aradishir said bitterly, jerking away from their attempts to touch. "First I nearly got her killed, and now I looked like a perfect fucking fool. What's next? Hurting her feelings? Breaking a limb like my stupid brother? Getting into a fight with one of those stupid clods on the council? Bah." He waved them off when they

tried again to help him, shucking his wet clothes on his way to the bath.

He slid into the hot water and sat so that it was up to his chin.

Normally he didn't mind his propensity to get himself into absurd situations, like the sugar syrup from the previous week. And who cared if his future sister-in-law thought he was a clumsy twit? But the humiliation of it all burned through him anyway, every laugh and giggle and amused glance. Between looking abjectly stupid and the way assassins had nearly gotten to them... the way Relanya had been able to fight, but Aradishir could only cower...

Even if he were the eldest child, she wouldn't want him.

He still couldn't believe that Javed, Heydar, and Merza wanted him. He was the youngest and least interesting of his siblings, and spent his days doing all the 'boring' work they didn't want to do.

The sound of muted splashing jerked him from his thoughts, and he scowled to see all three of the men occupying his thoughts had joined him. "I really think it best if you leave me alone for now. I can barely stand myself; I certainly don't expect anyone else to."

Javed slid onto the bench next to him and kissed his cheek. "You're too hard on yourself, my prince. Or are you forgetting that Bakhtiar isn't here because he broke his leg doing something stupid?"

The barest hint of a smile crept onto Aradishir's lips. "True. But he didn't do it in front of someone he's supposed to be impressing."

Heydar snorted. "He's lucky you're the one making the first impressions." He took Aradishir's right hand and squeezed it gently. "You are too harsh with yourself, like

always. There was nothing in Princess Relanya's eyes but fondness." He grinned in that slow, sharp way of his that always spelled trouble. "Especially fondness for how your wet clothes clung to every last detail of you."

Aradishir's face grew hot as he flailed upright. "She did not! Or something."

The others laughed, and it was Merza, moving to stand between his legs, who said, "My prince, there are people who would pay shocking amounts of money to own anything you wore, to see you naked for just ten seconds. I would be astonished if she didn't admire you."

"She's betrothed to Bakhtiar, and it's not the same thing as..." Wanting him . Plenty of people wanted to fuck him, for all manner of reasons, but none of them because they wanted Aradishir. Even if she wasn't promised elsewhere, wanting to fuck him wasn't the same as wanting him .

No, he'd wind up married to a woman of the court, more than likely, at most somebody from the Great Desert to continue strengthening that relationship. "I need to get ready for the meeting with the merchants." He climbed out of the bath and fetched a drying cloth himself, though the others caught up in time to help him dress, something he normally enjoyed.

Right then, though, he just wanted to be alone, to lick his wounds in private, regather himself to act like the prince he was, stop being so maudlin and clumsy and hopelessly pathetic.

Once he was clean and dressed again, Aradishir went back to meetings and contracts, until he had to prepare for dinner. He stood still as his harem dressed him in dark blue and green, with gold, sapphire, and emerald jewelry to accent. He'd invited a few merchants to dine with them tonight, mingling with guests invited by his sister and parents, a combination which should make for an interesting dinner, though also a

working one. Not something he looked forward to after such an exhausting day, but it was necessary so that was the end of the matter.

"Shall we?" he asked his harem once they were all ready, forcing back the exhaustion trying to creep over him.

They each kissed him softly before falling into place around him as they headed for the banquet hall, royal guards further flanking them for protection. He should be able to wander the palace in safety, hardly needing the same protections as his parents and Bakhtiar—when he actually bothered to be here—but these days it sometimes felt like he was in more danger than them.

He really couldn't wait for this whole mess to be settled, but the truth was that it would likely take years, even decades, to effect the kinds of changes he wanted. It would all be easier if he had more help at his level, but getting nobles to assist him was like trying to make his sister's cat behave, and he doubted even the chance to become a princess would motivate any of them. Nobody wanted to fight such a brutal battle, especially when it seemed like someone tried to kill him at least once every few weeks.

Whoever he did wind up marrying, they'd probably be certain to stay far away from the mess, attend other duties, and hope they weren't used against him anyway.

Such gloomy thoughts were for later. For the present, he forced his mind to the banquet, the proper conversations to have, what he needed from the guests he'd invited, and a stern reminder not to stare longingly at his brother's betrothed.

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The scents of various foods made his stomach growl faintly, but thankfully it was drowned out by conversation and the beautiful music played by Nandakumar, one of his father's concubines, and the soft singing of Aaliyah, one of his mother's concubines.

Aradishir smiled and nodded his head in reply to various greetings he received as he slowly traversed the banquet hall. His parents and Bakhtiar tended to arrive via private entrances, a matter of safety and practicality, but he and Jahanara had always done at least some measure of mingling. His parents had suggested he use the private entrances now that his life was in more danger, but Aradishir persisted.

His parents of course took up the side of the table facing the banquet hall, each with a concubine on either side, so two concubines shared the space between them. Directly opposite them were the three silk merchants Aradishir had invited to dine at the royal table, and a history scholar his sister had invited. Spaced between them were two of his sister's concubines, and the remaining spots taken by Heydar and Javed.

He took the seat on the right side of the table, near his mother, Merza and one of her concubines occupying the corner. The remaining spaces at the table were occupied by his sister, her third concubine, and more of his parents' concubines. On the rare nights they did not have guests, he took the side the merchants occupied, his brother-in-law took the side where his sister sat, and Bakhtiar of course sat to the right of their father.

Though it all seemed innocuous to most eyes, there was a lot of intricate work and meaning in the seating arrangements of the royal table. Aradishir was forever grateful that sorting the matter every night was not his problem.

Merza poured him wine, a pale, slightly fruity one perfect to enjoy before the meal began. Nearby, sitting to his father's right, was a handmaiden, then Beynum, and then Relanya, resplendent in ocean blue and shimmering opals set in silver. Her other handmaidens were scattered about the table, mingling expertly with the concubines and other guests. His mother had always excelled at arranging such things, and tonight was no exception, everyone carefully placed to full advantage for all that each of them needed and wanted.

Many thought dinner was when the royal family relaxed, got to sit in idle pleasure and leave their days behind, but the reality was that most often, this was when some of their most crucial work was done.

Aradishir watched as wine was poured for the guests, especially his own, the merchants clearly taken with being served by concubines, a privilege their class seldom enjoyed. He'd placed them with particular care, Heydar and his beautiful muscles, Javed and his soft, quiet charm and the vulnerability offered by his scars. He did not like using them thus, as playing pieces, but it was their job to help him charm and coax.

The gong sounded, and the main doors closed, signaling the formal start of the nightly banquet. Anyone who came in now would require permission and better have good reason for arriving late. Servants came out with the first course, flowing easily through the crowd to spread the food across the tables. A special, designated staff served the royal table, a matter of particular protocols unique to it and yet another security concern. It still amused him that Javed had been training with them back when he'd tried to keep his distance and give Javed a life with far more freedom than that of concubine.

Merza filled the plate they would share, and chose a new wine to go with it, offering up a sip and smiling as he took the remaining sip for himself.

"How did your meeting with the merchants go, Your Highness?" Relanya asked.

Hiding his surprise at the question, Aradishir accepted another sip of wine before replying, "Very well, Your Highness, thank you." He cast a brief glance at the merchants, who all knew it had, in fact, gone miserably. The changes he was proposing would be expensive and time-consuming, and the guilds, by their very own contracts, would be paying some of those costs, and the changes would be difficult to implement and slow down trade slightly for a time. Nothing the guilds couldn't weather, and the changes would benefit them in the long run, but like just about everyone else he tried to work with, they preferred to keep to what they knew rather than go to the trouble of changing.

Even though the changes would save a great many people from being kidnapped and forced into slavery.

There were times he really wished he could punch all of them and be tyrannical in making them do as they were told. Unfortunately, slow and careful diplomacy always worked better than being an authoritative brute.

So he smiled and had more wine and launched into his proposed changes, along with all the pros, cons, and whiny excuses the merchants had made. They could stand by them, right here in front of Their Majesties, or start acting like adults. If they hadn't known what they were in for when they'd accepted the invitation to dinner, they were about to find out.

Maybe he was being a little bit of a tyrant after all. Oh, well.

By the time the banquet concluded a little over three hours later, Aradishir was utterly exhausted. Not too exhausted, however, to escort Relanya to her room when his mother subtly, but none too gently, ordered him to do so. As though he would have minded, anyway. He stayed away for Relanya's sake, not his own. If he had his

way...

He didn't, though, so it didn't matter. Aradishir offered his arm, smiled as Relanya took it, and off they went through the halls.

"Very skillfully done tonight, Your Highness," Relanya said. "Those merchants did not like being put in their place or made the center of attention while you did it."

"I hope it went a long way toward accomplishing my goals. This fight is going to be uphill the entire way, and I won't get far without crucial points of support. You were most helpful, speaking of skillful. You will keep the council humble, I think, once you are queen, just as my mother does now."

Relanya smiled, though Aradishir thought there was something unhappy hiding in it. Maybe he was just projecting. "Thank you, that means a lot to me. I tend not to measure up against the rest of my family; it's been a breath of fresh air being here, where I am weighed on my own merit and not against everyone else." She squeezed his arm gently. "I know you have been keeping your distance for my safety, but I would be grateful if we could have lunch or something together later this week."

"I would like that too," Aradishir replied softly. "I will see it arranged."

"Wonderful!" They came to a stop in front of her rooms, and Aradishir bowed deeply. She smiled at him, warm and soft, so achingly beautiful and enthralling, then vanished with her handmaidens around her.

"I really hate Bakhti right now," Aradishir said bitterly, turning sharply and striding off to his own rooms, harem moving to keep up.

In his room, he let them help him undress and wash up, sighing to be relieved of all the heavy jewelry and ornate hair arrangements that gave him a headache after a

couple of hours. Dressed in loose sleep pants, he sprawled out in his bed and stared up at the ceiling, where he'd had a beautiful mural of the moon and stars painted, framed by the hooks from which the bed curtains hung, arms behind his head.

Moments later, Merza draped across him, kissing the edge of his chin. "You could speak with your parents. If it hurts you this deeply, you should. At the very worst they'll say no, and you'll have a firm answer and be able to move on. Brooding like this is only hurting you, my prince."

Aradishir shuddered just thinking about it. "Absolutely not. Humiliating myself like that won't make anything better. Bakhti will be home soon—I hope—and that will end the matter." Because Relanya would be immediately enamored of him, like so many others, and eager besides to officially establish herself as his future wife and queen. That would put his infatuation to a pyre far more effectively than a mortifying conversation with his parents.

Javed stretched out on his other side, arm draping across him and Merza, while Heydar settled so that Aradishir's head rested in his lap. How he'd managed to claim these three, why they'd chosen him over lives that would have been much easier, infinitely less restrictive, and far safer, he'd never truly comprehend. Whatever had persuaded them, he would do it a thousand times over to keep them. "Thank you," he said. "I would be so much worse off without the three of you here. I'm sorry I've been so moody and whiny."

"You've been neither, except maybe when you got bested by a cat," Heydar said with a smile, rubbing his temples smoothly, steadily banishing the lingering headache. "Do not give up until the battle is over, though, my prince. Remember that your mother was never meant to be queen, and your father risked much to marry her instead of her sister."

"The sister wasn't exactly an option."

Merza flicked his nose. "Yes, and His Majesty could have called off the marriage entirely and thrown them out of court. Instead, he caused a scandal to marry Her Majesty instead."

"Yes, yes," Aradishir replied. He'd heard the tale a thousand times, and did actually love the romance of it all, but there was a huge difference between taking a different woman to be his queen, and his brother's promised choosing him instead and settling for less than queen. Not to mention he was several years younger.

No matter what his lovers said to convince him otherwise, the matter was hopeless. That battle had been lost well before he even knew he wanted to fight.

Anyway, he shouldn't complain. He'd once thought he'd never even manage to have concubines, and now he had a complete harem that loved him dearly.

"Don't give up," Heydar said, echoing Merza. "Perhaps she and Bakhti will get along horribly. That's the entire point of this trial period. Maybe if offered the chance, she would choose you. How can you know if you don't try?"

"And when I fail, the awkwardness of the whole thing will hang like a cloud over the family for years. No, thank you. Enough of this. Talking about it is just making everything worse right now. What I need is some pleasant distractions, if you three are willing."

Javed chuckled, pushing to his knees and kissing along Aradishir's chest before being dragged up by the hair to share a kiss with Merza.

As distractions went, that was a lovely start.

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He woke later in the earliest hours of the morning, the world still dark, but with a hazy gray light around the edges, a promise of the pending sunrise. Yawning, Aradishir disentangled himself from the pile of warm bodies and clinging limbs. After refreshing himself and pulling on lounging clothes, he ventured out to his garden—and immediately spied an intruder. "I don't think you're supposed to be here, little man."

"Mama calls me Keri."

"I thought she called you 'little bird'," Aradishir replied with a smile.

"She calls me both," Kerrin mumbled, letting go of the poor frog he'd lifted from the pond. "Are you going to take me back?"

Laughing softly, Aradishir lifted him out of the pond and took him inside to get him dried off and improvise some dry clothes for him, careful to stay quiet all the while. When they were ready, he led Kerrin to the hallway. "Would you escort us, please?" he asked the guards posted at his door. Two of the six immediately stepped out of formation to do so, clearly curious about Kerrin, but far too well trained to ask.

Scooping Kerrin up, smiling as the boy laughed in delight and clung happily, with absolute trust, to his neck, Aradishir wove through the palace until he reached one of the entrances to his parents' gardens, and the far larger and grander fish pond therein. "How's that for water?"

Kerrin shrieked in delight and squirmed free of Aradishir's hold, rushing to the pond and practically throwing himself into it. Aradishir waded in with him to ensure he

didn't drown, and soon found himself catching fish to show him more closely, getting into a splashing war, and finally hauling Kerrin onto his shoulders, reminding him of all the times his parents had done the very same with him and his siblings. It was even more fun being the adult in the situation, bringing joy to a child so simply and easily, enshrining memories he'd hopefully look back on fondly.

Familiar laughter that he was already far too fond of drew them up short, and Aradishir flushed as he spun around to find Relanya watching them, accompanied by Jahanara holding her new daughter, and their handmaidens and concubines. Of course he had an audience. Relanya stepped forward slightly, still laughing as she managed, "So who kidnapped who?"

"Little bit of both, I'd say," Aradishir said sheepishly, wading out of the water and helping Kerrin down, smiling as he immediately ran to Relanya and immediately starting regaling her with all their adventures. If she was upset that her beautiful lavender dress was now soaked with pond water, she made no show of it, only listened attentively and made all the right noises throughout the torrent of words.

Aradishir watched them for the barest moment then accepted the towel that a guard handed him and dried off as best he could before joining his sister. "May I hold my niece?"

"Well, you're already charming your nephew, so why not?" Jahanara said with a wink. "Don't be offended if she immediately starts fussing though; she's done that with everyone but me and Dani."

"Nephew? Oh," Aradishir said, rolling his eyes, ducking his head to hide the hurt at being called Kerrin's uncle when he'd so much rather be—

Well, it didn't matter. He never would be. So he focused all his attention on his niece, who would be named after three months, the day that would also be considered her

birthday, rather than the actual day of her birth. These days children were far less likely to die just days or weeks after birth, but the tradition of waiting three months continued.

She squirmed lightly in her sleep, a bubble of spit popping against her lips, before she went still again, happy in whatever dreams babies had. "She's lovely, Nara. You should be proud."

"Be certain I am," Jahanara said. "Look at that, still fast asleep. I guess you have a gift for children, Shir."

Aradishir gave her a look. "You sound surprised."

"Not really. You're the right combination of kind and stern, the same reason you're handling the trafficking problem so well. You have an empathy inherently that some of us have to learn, or have beaten into us, Bakhti."

He laughed briefly at that. There was nothing remarkable about him, but Bakhtiar deserved every insult levied at him. The jerk had better appreciate his new family, or Aradishir would drag him into the pond for a hostile talking to.

"Would you like to join us for breakfast?" Jahanara asked. "We were going to dine in Mama's butterfly garden and then go into town to do some shopping."

"I'd love to, so long as I have time to clean up first," Aradishir said with a laugh before kissing his darling niece and handing her back.

"As much as the court would delight in seeing you stroll the halls soaking wet," Jahanara replied dryly, "yes, of course you have time to change. Breakfast is in about half an hour now. We only left early because Kerrin had vanished, and you weren't in your room."

"What made you think to check here?"

"Relanya mentioned how enamored Kerrin is of water, especially your little pond. It wasn't hard to guess where he went if he woke up and wandered off, and where you might have taken him from there. Though it was even more adorable than anticipated. The ladies of the court will be clamoring to be your wife after hearing how precious an uncle you are." She snickered as he rolled his eyes again. "Though speaking of wandering off, your harem isn't terribly amused with you."

Aradishir groaned. "I took guards with me! I didn't want to wake them." Heaving a sigh, he lifted a hand in farewell and headed back to his room, though even the looming dressing down from his harem could not dampen his smile over a morning perfectly spent.

"Shir!" Merza said as he stepped inside. "Where have you been?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Aradishir said as all three swarmed him, and explained all that had transpired. "I should have thought to send someone to tell you where I'd gone, I apologize."

"You are determined to give me gray hairs," Heydar grumbled, kissing his temple. "I'm glad you had so much fun, though. " He smiled softly. "You are a wonderful uncle, and you'll be a wonderful father someday."

"I'd rather not think about it right now." He slipped from their hold and headed for the bath, determined to wash and dress quickly, so he would not keep the others waiting on him overlong.

His harem, however, had other ideas, and had him dressed far more finely than he'd normally bother for breakfast, though not so ornate that his sister would give him looks. The very last thing he needed was his sister realizing he was smitten with his

future sister-in-law. He would quite literally rather die.

"Am I finally suitable enough for you?"

"You'll suffice," Merza drawled.

Javed smiled softly and kissed his cheek. "Beautiful as always, my prince. Come on, your sister and your lady—"

"She's not mine!" Aradishir snapped. "I can tolerate the three of you teasing me on everything else, but not that."

"But—"

Aradishir strode off, not wanting to be angry with them or say something in that anger, but it hurt . They knew Relanya wasn't his, would never be his. He'd have more luck marrying the palace head chef.

His harem caught up to him, Javed sliding an arm around his waist in silent apology. "I don't think you should lose all faith, my prince. She looks at you too."

"Please just stop."

"As you wish."

Thankfully the rest of the walk was in silence, and a short time later guards slid open the doors to the dining room where Relanya, Jahanara, and their respective maidens and concubines waited. Javed sat next to Aradishir, and the other two scattered amongst the women, a casual arrangement in this instance rather than the strategic moves of a formal dinner.

"I'm so happy you could join us," Relanya said with one of her lovely smiles. "Thank you again for being so kind to Keri. He's never had the easiest time making friends, and moving to a whole new country is an entirely different set of challenges." Her mouth twisted slightly. "At least here he doesn't have to worry about people saying unkind things about his mother. Not yet, anyway."

"People can try it once," Aradishir said. "I promise they won't feel inclined to try it a second time. Whatever problems someone might have with a person, they shouldn't be dragging children into it unless the child is in danger." He smiled ruefully. "I wish I could stop the negativity entirely, but I overhear near daily that I'm a sanctimonious busybody who doesn't know what he's mucking with."

Jahanara narrowed her eyes. "Who are these people you have been overhearing? Because I don't take kindly to threats, veiled, vague, or blatant."

"I keep the guards apprised, put your teeth away."

"That does not give me any comfort, given the sordid history this palace has of backstabbing guards."

Heydar sighed. "My father is many things, most of them frustrating at best, but he would agree with you and is ruthless about cutting off those damaged limbs. I keep close watch of every whisperer, Your Highness, I promise."

Relanya tilted her head. "Who is your father?"

"Commander of the Guards."

"He's lucky he had the sense to still be your father," Aradishir said. "I think we'd all benefit by pitching his sorry ass into the ocean."

"Down, sweet prince. Family is nothing if not complicated."

"He had you whipped , multiple times!" Aradishir hissed. He would never forget all the blood on Heydar's back on multiple occasions, soaking through his layers of clothes. How despondent he'd been that night Aradishir had followed him into the city and finally worked up the nerve to ask Heydar to be his. He'd been certain Heydar would say no, would prefer to be quite literally anywhere else in the world.

His stupid father had recanted disowning him the next day, but Aradishir doubted it was from true remorse. More like he'd seen his son a royal concubine and realized all the trouble being at odds with him could cause. The man was a weaselly coward, and nobody would ever change his mind on that.

"Down, sweet prince," Javed echoed, kissing his cheek, one hand stroking his neck, thumb at his pulse. "We're all safe and happy now, you do not have to remain angry on our behalf."

"Or you could just let me throw people into the ocean," Aradishir grumbled.

Relanya smiled in understanding. "It's an even more pleasant daydream back in Penna, because the water ices back over quickly and they're trapped."

"What a lovely thought for all the cretins I'm enduring while I sort out this trafficking nightmare." He thanked the servants who set out a marvelous-looking breakfast, and took a sip of the tea Javed offered up.

"Two bloodthirsty scorpions in their den," Jahanara said dryly. "Speaking of bloodthirsty, I believe Mother is going to seek you out to help her sort a problem at the temple."

"Me?" Since when did their mother need him?

"You're easily the most diplomatic of us, Ari. It's a pretty contentious fight, from what she's told me, and she thinks you'd be able to help sort it out better than her."

"All of that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I can't even fight off mercenaries."

"Mercenaries don't put that much effort into hunting down someone they're not scared of," Relanya said, surprisingly somber. "If they thought you a pushover, they would have tried different tactics. Bribing, blackmail—though I can't imagine what they would use—or beating you. Instead, they've tried at least twice to assassinate you. That is the work of fear and anger. I have not met Bakhtiar yet, obviously, but I would agree with the assessment you're the most dangerous of you three. Patience, empathy, and a willingness to listen and compromise is a rare combination of traits, and all the more dangerous to people like the traffickers."

Aradishir had no idea what to say to that, face hot with discomfort. He was the youngest and most unremarkable. He was tending the trafficking matter because it was equal parts punishment and no one else having the time. "I don't think—"

He stopped as the doors opened, frowning that something was important enough to merit interrupting them.

The breath left his lungs as a familiar figure limped into the room supported by his personal bodyguard, as he was the only one of the three of them who required such a thing. "Bakhti!"

Grinning despite the obvious pain he was in, probably from pushing himself too hard on a broken leg, Bakhtiar grinned. "Hello, Ari, Nara. Miss me?"

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"Not even a little," Jahanara replied, making him laugh. "What are you doing back so soon? I didn't think you could even be on that leg yet."

"I couldn't just let you two do all the work, now could I? That's no way to treat my future wife," Bakhtiar replied, finally sweeping his gaze over Relanya, and then giving her a bow that was surprisingly graceful, given the awkwardness involved. "Your Highness."

"Your Highness," Relanya returned, climbing to her feet to give him a proper bow. A slight hesitation, and then she set her shoulders and approached him. "It's an honor and pleasure to at last make your acquaintance, though your siblings have been extremely kind and welcoming in your absence."

"Oh, really? So they can behave."

"Shut up, Bakhti, we're not the ones always getting into trouble, are we?"

Bakhtiar only grinned.

"Will you join us for breakfast?" Relanya asked.

Her face was the most closed off Aradishir had ever seen it, like she was taking great care not to share whatever thoughts were in her head. What could they possibly be? He doubted she was reacting negatively to Bakhtiar. His family might want to kill him on a daily basis, but to everyone else he was bright, charming, beautiful, and captivating. He was all the best and worst parts of their parents, and if he could ever stop acting like a fool, he'd be a magnificent king someday.

"I would love to, but I've only just arrived, and I should get cleaned up and let the royal healer fuss over my leg," Bakhtiar replied, "but perhaps I can see you at lunch, dear princess?"

"Of course," Relanya said with a warm smile that made Aradishir's gut churn. Why couldn't he have had just a little more time? Just one more day?

It didn't matter, though, whether he got one more day, one more week, or just one more hour. Relanya was meant to be queen, to be Bakhtiar's wife. There was no world where she would settle for him, pretending for a moment the thought had ever even crossed her mind.

No longer hungry, he pushed his food away and rose, waving off his harem as they moved to do the same. "I'll help you to your room, Bakhti. Where's your harem?"

"I sent them ahead to our rooms. They were exhausted from all the hard travel."

"You're lucky they don't smother you in your sleep," Aradishir said as he reached him, slinging one of Bakhtiar's arms across his shoulders and taking most of his weight. "Nara, Your Highness, we'll see you later."

He didn't wait for their reply, just hauled Bakhtiar out of there.

"What's the fucking hurry?" Bakhtiar muttered. "I worked hard to get back here so you didn't have to keep doing all this stupid courting stuff for me."

"I'm going to clobber you."

"I haven't done anything!"

"Courting stuff like it's a chore and not an honor, you're impossible," Aradishir

replied. "You shouldn't be pushing yourself, anyway. What if you cause yourself permanent damage?"

"Then I limp around dramatically the rest of my life."

Aradishir gnashed his teeth and said nothing.

"Seriously, Ari, why are you being so pissy? I haven't done anything to you—or anyone else for that matter. I came home and immediately sought out Her Highness. I would have thought that would please you. Mother sent endless messages about how wonderful and perfect her favorite child continues to be," he added in a mutter.

"I'm not her favorite child!"

Bakhtiar scoffed, but didn't get to reply as the door to his chambers opened and one of his concubines came bursting out. "Bakhti! You said you'd be right behind us, you worthless little liar ." Kurosh, the first of two concubines so far. In keeping with what seemed to be family tradition, taking Kurosh as his concubine had caused a scandal. It wasn't very often, after all, that a crown prince took as lover the man who'd tried to kill him. But nobody adored Bakhti, in all his irritating glory, more than the man currently yelling at him.

"Could everyone stop getting mad at me?" Bakhtiar asked, actually sounding and looking hurt. "I'm exhausted, in a great deal of pain, and I haven't eaten in nearly two days. Could I please be allowed to rest for a little bit before everyone tells me how pissed off they are this time?"

"Sorry," Aradishir muttered. "Come on, let's get you to bed." With Kurosh's help, it was much easier to get him into his room and settled on a long, wide sofa used for reclining. Across the room, his other concubine, Farrokh, was fussing with the refreshment tray servants had already brought. "How are you two?"

"Fine," Kurosh said. "It's good to be home. Now we just have to keep this stubborn ass still long enough to let his leg heal properly ."

"Yeah, yeah." Bakhtiar didn't bother to move his arm from where it was draped over his eyes, or to stir at all, in reaction to the jab. "At least we're no longer in that damned temple where everything seemed determined to poison me."

Aradishir frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Everything he ate made him violently sick," Farrokh said as he joined them, carrying a smaller tray of stuff taken from the large one. "It was most peculiar. There wasn't even one thing in common across all the meals that we could pinpoint as not agreeing with him. It was like whatever was wrong was wrong with all the food, even though the rest of us ate it just fine. Sit up, Bakhti."

"Teacher voice," Aradishir said with a snicker that turned to outright laughter as all three glared at him.

It was true, though. Farrokh had been one of Bakhtiar's tutors, and was nearly ten years older than him. That was hardly scandalous, though, not when one of their father's concubines was half his age—right around their age.

After several minutes, and looking significantly improved—and didn't Aradishir feel like an ass for not realizing just how bad Bakhtiar had looked—Bakhtiar looked at him. "So what had you so angry with me?"

Aradishir almost said nothing, let the matter go, but at the pointed look that earned him, he sighed and relented. "You were so flippant . She's given up so much, risked literally her entire world for this marriage, and you couldn't even bother to buy her gifts. I had to do that! Last minute! Then you show up out of nowhere and act like all is well."

"I wasn't trying to be flippant, I'm sorry."

"You—what?" Since when did Bakhtiar apologize all on his own, without being prodded first? Whatever, didn't matter. Aradishir shook his head. "It's fine, I overreacted. I still can't believe you forgot to buy her presents!"

"I know, I know," Bakhtiar said with a groan. "I appreciate all you've done, I really do. I owe you, Ari. I promise I'll pay my debt."

Biting back all he really wanted to say, the futile demands of a hopeless fool, he instead said, "Get some rest, Bakhti. I'll likely see you at dinner. Try to stay out of trouble."

Bakhtiar rolled his eyes but smiled and waved him off.

Departing, Aradishir retreated to his rooms. He needed to get to work, but surely the world could spare him a bit of time to collect himself, bury his hopeless wishes once and for all, gather the fortitude he needed to meet the expectations of family and court.

Unfortunately, the world could not spare him any sort of time. He wasn't even halfway back to his room when guards came rushing up. "Your Highness! You're needed at once. Some of your contacts in the city have come back hurt."

"Take me to them. Bring Heydar and Merza to me there."

"Yes, Your Highness!" One of the guards ran off, the other showed him through the palace to a lesser used receiving room, likely for the sake of privacy. A healer was also there, tending to the cuts, bruises, and what looked like a broken arm.

Aradishir hissed in dismay. "Are you all right? What happened? Who did this?"

"They had masks, Your Highness, though they spoke with southside accents."

That was a typical place to hire thugs and the sort.

"Found us in our little apartment near the docks, took us by surprise. Said to tell you that next time they won't be so kind, and if you know what's good for you and your people, you'll back off."

The door behind him slid open, and a moment later Heydar was at his right side, Merza at his left, both of them looking intently over the wounded contacts—spies, really—with a deep frown. They stepped forward slightly and started asking all manner of questions, from exact numbers, style of fighting, and more, so many things that Aradishir never would have thought to ask—precisely the reason he'd asked for them to come.

When they had all the information they could possibly think to gather, Aradishir sent his poor people off with the healer and instructions they weren't to go back to work for at least a month.

Once it was just him, Heydar, and Merza, he sat down at the table and spread his hands across it. "This is getting out of control. We need to do something about those merchants. All this because I'm making sure they can't keep trading people. How fucking long is this problem going to be the bane of our kingdom?"

"As long as there are buyers, there will be sellers," Merza said grimly. "It doesn't help that Tavamara is the perfect location, being such a hub for trade, with easy access to the rest of the world."

Aradishir sighed. "I feel like I'm trying to swim up a waterfall with this, but we've no choice but to persevere. One person saved makes all the effort worth it. So tell me what you gleaned from your hundreds of questions."

"Whoever sent them was cheap about it," Merza said. "I could find who did the work easy."

"I don't like you going into danger like that," Aradishir said. "You're supposed to be safe now." His mouth twisted. "Though at that, I suppose being my concubine puts you in more danger than you ever were before."

Merza leaned in to kiss his cheek and nuzzle into the hollow of his neck, breath hot against his skin, leaving it tingling. "I would face this and more to stay by your side, my prince. You know that." He pulled back and grinned. "I'll face assassins all night long if it means coming home and wrapping you in rope before using you as I please."

Aradishir laughed, even as his cheeks grew hot. "Shameless. All right, then. But take Heydar with you. Two is better than one, and his muscles are good for many things." He winked.

Heydar rolled his eyes. "We'll go while you're working, though that leaves Javed to work through the day with few breaks. I'll speak with His Majesty's concubines, so everyone is aware."

"Thank you. Suppose I should get on with the rest of my day."

"Let's return to our chambers first, get you dressed for that. I'm sorry the breakfast did not go well."

Aradishir shrugged, staring at the rug before he set his shoulders, lifted his head, and headed out. "Bakhti is home, that's all that matters."

Heydar and Merza sighed in unison, but at his scowl, held up their hands in surrender and said nothing, only walked with him back to their chambers, where they and Javed

helped him dress for another day of meetings, interviews, and socializing with powerful people.

His first official meeting was, conveniently, with some of the very merchants that were likely behind the attack on his contacts. Which reminded him that someone here in the palace must have let that knowledge slip. Someone close, a servant or a guard who'd caught sight of one private meeting or another. So easy to overlook their ubiquitous presence.

Javed fell into place at his side as they left his room, the others slipping away through the secret passages to speak with his father's concubines before departing.

Out in the hallway, Javed stopped them, though, and turned to the guards. "I'd like you both to attend His Highness today. His contacts in the city were nearly killed today, and you're the only two guards I entirely trust right now. We fear they might grow bolder in their attacks, and some of the perpetrators will be at the meeting we're to attend in a few minutes."

"Of course, Lord Javed," one guard replied, followed by the other adding, "It is our honor to serve, Your Highness."

"I appreciate it, deeply," Aradishir replied quietly. "Let's hope your presence is enough of a deterrent that nobody else gets hurt today." The guards fell into place around them, along with a couple of others who were silently ordered to as they headed down the hallway.

The guards at his door were always a rotation of the same eight, two on duty at all times. They'd been the same guards for the past ten years, a duty not granted lightly and only with the personal approval of the king or queen. According to his siblings, his mother had interrogated all eight of them at great length, given absolutely no quarter before she had decided upon them. His father had handled the guards that

watched his siblings; why his mother had taken care of his, Aradishir still didn't know. Likely just a matter of his father being busy and such, as was so often the case.

They turned onto the hallway where the meeting room he needed was located—and Aradishir drew to a startled halt to see Relanya there, surrounded by her handmaidens, right outside the door of the room he was headed for. Shouldn't she be with Bakhtiar? What was going on?

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"Your Highness? Is something wrong?"

A shocking amount of relief filled her face when she saw him, and before he could blink, she had strode over to him. "Prince Aradishir, I heard that some of your people had been injured. You also seemed so unhappy at breakfast, and before in the garden. I wanted to make certain you were all right."

Aradishir's cheeks flushed. She'd been worried about him? "My people are the worse for wear, but will be all right, thank you. I am sorry my bad mood bled so badly into breakfast and in the garden. Spending time with my future s-sister is always a pleasure. And playing with your little escape artist is always a joy."

Relanya huffed a small laugh. "That boy will truly be the death of me. He is deeply enamored of you, Your Highness. He keeps asking—" She stopped, an expression he couldn't parse flickering across her face. "Well, lots of questions, but what child doesn't, I suppose. Are you certain you're all right? Is there anything I can do?"

"That you care so much is more than enough," Aradishir replied. "Please, do not let me keep you from your day, getting to know Bakhti. I know he is most excited to finally meet you, spend time with you."

"Of course," Relanya said, but her smile was not as warm as usual, and it did not reach her eyes. "I hope your day goes well, Your Highness."

"And yours," Aradishir said softly, hands curling into fists, hidden by the folds of his robes, as he fought to keep from reaching out to her as she walked away. Once she was gone, he stifled a sigh, set his shoulders, and stepped into the room.

He was met with friendly smiles and cold eyes, save for a single merchant in the corner, a beautiful woman with dark skin and hair and the most vivid green eyes he'd ever seen. Even from across the room, their color was clear and bright, like jewels in the sun. Somehow, she reminded him faintly of his mother, that confident air about her that said she knew she was the smartest in the room and she liked it when no one else knew it.

Strange that he'd never met her before.

"Greetings," he said coolly, moving to take his spot at the head of the long table they all sat around, positioned so that the sun was behind him, streaming through large, costly glass windows. This time of day, it would be difficult to stare directly at him—and so all the harder to attack him. "I hope you came prepared to listen to me, because I'm not in the mood for your whining and complaining. We are fighting against human trafficking. Against people, children, being sold and bartered like goods. I've long grown tired of your reluctance to attend the problem." He rested his gaze on the woman sitting in the far right corner. "Who are you, my lady? I do not recognize you."

"No, you have dealt with my father thus far, Your Highness. Bulus Saqqaf is his name. He fell to severe illness last night, and the healers say he'll not be well again anytime soon, so I have taken over the business. My name is Kubra. I apologize for not having the time to inform you of the changes before now."

"You can hardly be to blame for not having enough time. I hope your father recovers fully." Not really, Bulus was one of the worst offenders for refusing to even compromise on Aradishir's proposed changes.

"Thank you, Your Highness." She gestured to a woman standing just behind her, who moved down the table to present a sheaf of papers to one of the guards who moved forward protectively. "These papers were submitted to the office some time ago. I am

returning them signed."

Aradishir only nodded as he accepted them, but inside he was filled with no small amount of shock. Bulus had found every excuse in the kingdom to avoid signing them. They weren't even anything major, just agreements to add additional security measures, costs that would be partially subsidized by the throne. Most of those gathered had agreed to them, some more gracefully than others, because at the end of the day, it was hard to argue against improved security when thieving at the ports was such a known, endemic problem. Bulus had been the only outlier, which made him all the more suspicious in Aradishir's eyes.

This was an interesting development. He penned a quick note and handed it off to the same guard, who slipped smoothly down the line to deliver it to Kubra, who glanced at it briefly before tucking it away in her sash.

"Let's get to work, shall we?" Aradishir said, and pulled up his notes. "First order of business: the independent inspectors. They're going to happen whether you like it or not, merchants, so you may as well contribute your thoughts to the effort instead of throwing tantrums about it."

"It's just another office to be inevitably corrupted," one of them said. "How does that help matters?"

"The current inspection system is rotted all the way through, and has too many personal ties to all of you. There's no saving that. A new system can only improve on that, and as it will be entirely independent, funded by the crown, there are no direct ties which will cut down significantly on the corruption. We've said all this before. Offer suggestions on how to institute it or be quiet."

Nobody replied, and Aradishir marked it off before moving to the next point. He wasn't really expecting to get anywhere; they had built a stone wall from the very

beginning and showed no signs of taking it down. No, by this point he wanted only to give Merza, Heydar, and the guards plenty of time to take their measure. He would push, strike, lash, and see how they all reacted.

Then, once he had the thoughts of those he trusted, he would formulate a plan for attending this problem once and for all.

When the meeting finally concluded, Kubra lingered as he'd requested in his note. When they were alone, him, Kubra, and Javed, Aradishir said, "You are not like your father, at least at first glance."

"I try my hardest not to be, Your Highness," Kubra replied. "I grew up with him, I know what he's like better than most." Her mouth twisted. "He would prefer not to leave the business to me, but his eldest son died three years ago, and his remaining son is currently in prison, and he's too proud to leave it to someone outside the family."

"Interesting you call them his sons rather than your brothers."

"I was not close to either of them and prefer it that way. My family would tell you I am contrary, difficult, and quite unbearable."

Aradishir laughed. "Those are qualities I can support." When they weren't describing his brother anyway. "What illness has befallen your father?"

"A life of excess and indulgence," Kubra replied. "His heart has given him trouble for a long time, but he refused to do anything about it. The results of his behavior are coming due."

"I see." He glanced at Javed, who gave the barest nod. Aradishir gave a faint roll of his head, motioning for Javed to give her a cup of wine.

She drew a sharp intake of breath. "Your Highness..."

"People I can trust are in short supply regarding this matter. I want to trust you."

Sipping the wine offered her, Kubra then bowed low, head not quite touching the table. "I am honored to be given the chance to earn your trust, Your Highness. However I can serve, you've only to tell me."

"Let's walk, shall we? We've been sitting for ages; I could use a good stretch. We can tour the gardens, and you can tell me all about your peers."

"I would be honored to see the gardens," Kubra said, eyes widening, looking flustered for a moment before she recovered herself. But it wasn't every day a merchant was invited to tour the royal gardens, let alone the private ones.

Aradishir rose, Javed at his side, and once Kubra had joined them, he led the way out of the meeting room and across the palace to his family's private gardens, bodyguards folding in around them.

"I'm afraid I do not have much to tell you, and only things you may already know," she said as they walked. "My father always hoped I would agree to be married off to one of them, be his little spy, but I never agreed to any offer." She shrugged one shoulder.

Not so very long ago, mere decades, she would have had no choice in the matter. Parents arranged marriages, children obeyed. Thankfully, the law had been abolished by his grandfather, though to hear the tales, it had been quite the battle.

Then again, he was trying to convince people to stop selling other people like cattle, so it didn't surprise him in the slightest that they fought against not forcing people into relationships and lives they didn't want.

"Anything at all would be helpful."

Nodding, Kubra started talking, relaying gossip, rumors, how they'd each behaved at parties, who they associated with that she knew of, what shopkeepers and the like had to say about them, the offers some of them had made in the hopes of marriage. Most of it he had known, but the marriage offers were definitely interesting. "Do you still have copies of those offers?"

"My father probably kept them. I can check his office when I get home, and courier whatever I find to you." She seemed puzzled by the request, but didn't ask questions. "These orchids are lovely."

Aradishir smiled as he looked at them, orchids he'd seen a thousand times or more. "Morning Drops. One of my father's favorites, a gift from my mother on one of their wedding anniversaries. If you see an orchid, my father is probably responsible. My mother prefers her lilies."

"What is your personal favorite?"

"I'll show you," Aradishir replied, and led the way over a footbridge until they came to a pond filled with fish and scattered with water lilies in all manner of hues, from softest pink to sunset orange to evening lavender. "These. Difficult to obtain, even for a spoiled prince."

"They're lovely. My...friend...would love them. He studies plants for a living, though mostly he focuses on herbs. He keeps flowers, though, in his little room above a butcher shop."

"Friend?" Aradishir asked gently.

She smiled sadly. "Yes. I would like to propose marriage, but he would refuse,

always insisting he's not good enough. Spoiled rich girl, humble poor boy, a story older than time."

"I believe we listened to a ballad on that subject just last night at dinner," Aradishir said wryly. "I hope your tale turns out better than it did."

"One hopes."

"Come, you've given me plenty to work with, and it's heartening to have an ally at last in this fight. I'm sure you'd like to be on your way."

She laughed. "I am hardly going to complain about being permitted to tour your family's beautiful gardens. I am most honored, Your Highness. I hope I can continue to be of use."

"Don't worry, I will have plenty of work for you soon," Aradishir replied with a laugh. As they reached the entrance hall, he motioned to nearby guards. "See that Lady Kubra makes it home safely, would you, please?"

The two guards bowed. "Of course, Your Highness."

"Thank you. Lady Kubra, I bid you good evening."

"Your Highness."

Once she was gone from sight, Aradishir headed for his rooms, Javed at his side. "I would like to know more about her friend."

"I'll see it attended once you're safely back in your rooms," Javed said. "I'm glad she's nothing like her father."

"I suppose she could be playing an intricate game of her own, but she didn't strike me as conniving. Clever, strategizing, but not conniving."

Javed took his hand, tangling their fingers together and kissing the back of Aradishir's. "You have an instinct for these things, my prince. If you didn't, I do not think we would have a former thief in our midst."

"I am never living that down," Aradishir said with a sigh, smiling the whole time. "I think I want a nap before dinner; I feel that it's going to be a very long banquet."

Especially since he would have to watch Bakhtiar and Relanya together, but he didn't have the energy to brood on that for the moment.

"A nap sounds just the thing," Javed replied, and dragged him straight to bed the moment they reached his chambers.

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When Aradishir woke a few hours later, however, it was to a summons from his mother to attend her before dinner. Which was...one hour away. Damn it. "You should have woken me."

"It won't take long to dress you, we have everything ready," Merza said, dragging him out of bed, kissing him quick and hard, and then dragging him off to wash up. Once he was clean, Heydar and Javed got him dressed quickly, precisely as promised. His clothes were forest green with black and gold embroidery, with gold and jade jewelry, his hair woven into fancy braids that were woven together and pinned up.

"Did my mother give any indication what she wanted to talk to me about?"

"Unfortunately not, though the messenger hinted it might have to do with Her Highness."

Dread knotted Aradishir's stomach. His mother had noticed he was smitten and was going to give him a dressing down. Wonderful. He just loved being utterly and completely humiliated right before he had to go and be in public all night.

"Shir, why do you suddenly look like you're going to your funeral?"

Aradishir just shook his head, not certain he could voice his fears without completely falling apart. Maybe his mother would excuse him from dinner after she was done reprimanding him. A reprimanding he deserved, but that wouldn't make it hurt less.

The walk down the hall to his mother's chambers was both the longest and shortest walk he'd ever made. He nodded to the guards, who knocked for him—and the doors

opened almost immediately, as though Tasha, one of his mother's concubines, had been waiting right there by them. "Shir, come in, come in. I was about to come find you."

"I'm sorry, I was asleep and my concubines were too kind to wake me."

"It wasn't worth disturbing your sleep," Fahima said as she crossed the room to hug him and kiss his cheek. "Not yet, anyway."

Anxiety so strong he was starting to feel nauseous, Aradishir replied, "What's wrong, Mother?"

"Sit, sit," she said, motioning him to her sitting area, where wine already waited for them. "It's about Princess Relanya."

"I see," Aradishir said quietly. Exactly as he feared, but he couldn't bring himself to admit, just continued to play oblivious. "Is she all right?"

"She was cornered today by several women who didn't like some foreign upstart swooping in to steal their crown prince."

Anxiety turned to fury. "What did they do! Who did it? How dare —"

"Sit down," Fahima said with the barest hint of smile. "All is well, it was grossly inappropriate, but the women have been identified and are currently being punished—severely. Princess Relanya is fine, mostly just hurt that she's being so poorly received." Her mouth tightened. "We knew there would be protests to a foreign princess—one with a child, no less—but we were not expecting this level of backlash. I need the whole family to give full support to her tonight, show the court and everyone else in attendance at dinner that she is one of us, she belongs here, and we all will flourish by her presence. You are closer to her than everyone, even Bakhti

right now, so I wanted to speak with you especially. Much of the court has a soft spot for you, though you never notice, and the more they see you supporting her and this marriage, the more who will change their minds."

This was so very far from what he'd expected, Aradishir didn't know what to say, or even think for that matter. "Of course, Mother. It would be my honor. Her Highness is wonderful, and will make an excellent queen. I'll make them all realize it, no matter what it takes." He didn't wait for Merza to serve him, simply picked up the wine in front of him and tossed it back.

It was going to be an even longer meal than he'd feared, but for Relanya he would do anything and everything. "You're sure she's all right? To have come this far only to be..."

"She is used to this sort of nonsense, believe me," Fahima replied. "She's dealt with worse. Being the widow of a traitor is no easy thing, and she was an outlier in her family to begin with, so being picked on by insecure, petty children masquerading as grown adults is nothing new."

That just made him angrier. Relanya didn't deserve to be treated so, and she certainly didn't deserve to be used to it. She was a princess, and in all the ways that mattered, not simply by birth. He'd make her his princess in a moment, and do and give everything her heart desired, as was proper and right.

But she was meant to be queen, and she should be queen, and he would make the whole of the court suffer miserably if that was what it took for them to behave.

"Don't make them suffer too much, darling," Fahima said, but there was only affection and approval in her eyes. "Come along, then. Bakhti will be escorting her to dinner, and I want the rest of us there waiting so all eyes are on them." She rose with a grace that could only be envied, never replicated, and Aradishir rose to join her,

their harems gathering around them, bodyguards in front and behind as they headed off through the palace to the waiting banquet.

At the banquet table, he took up his usual place directly opposite his parents. He always hated having his back to the room, but there was no helping it, and as the youngest that was his place. Bakhtiar would have his usual place on the side of the table to their father's right, and a space had been set for Relanya to sit there as well, with both of his concubines between them. His sister and her husband would have their usual spot, and the remaining spaces occupied by various concubines. A family dinner and show of support—and force.

It certainly wouldn't hurt people to be reminded that amongst the concubines were: a guard, a thief, an assassin, a pirate, a temple duelist, and—perhaps most notorious of them all—a foreign general who'd chosen their father over becoming royalty himself. In summary, it would be stupid in the extreme to attempt to harm Relanya or anyone else. Far more likely, people would simply make snide remarks and the like, but this would also at least force them to whisper or save their mean words for later.

Servants brought wine, a bit earlier than usual, and nobody else in the hall had been served, but that was precisely the kind of move his mother would make. It was a soft, pale wine, only slightly stronger from the extremely mild ones given to older children to start teaching them how to properly drink wine.

He'd just finished his first cup when voices rose, conversation increasing, a small gong sounding to announce the arrival of the crown prince. Aradishir itched to turn and look, but that would be rude, turning away from the table to gawk. Even if he would happily stare at Relanya all day every day and never grow bored.

Moments later Bakhtiar and Relanya took their seats, and Aradishir smiled warmly in greeting. "Good evening, Your Highness. I am sorry you did not have a very good day."

"It's improved significantly since my unfortunate conversation with some of your noblewomen."

"I'm happy to hear it." The starter wine came then, along with appetizers. When they all had their food and the fresh wine had been served, Relanya said, "How was your day, Your Highness?"

"Fruitful, I may finally be making progress on my battle. Time will tell." As slavery wasn't really a subject for dinner, Aradishir shifted the topic to other subjects, and from there everyone else joined in, keeping the conversation lively and flowing.

As the first course was taken away and the second course brought, fragrant meats, rice, vegetables, and more, Aradishir asked, "Have you arranged a new tour of the city? One that might come with less disruption."

"Disruption?" Bakhtiar asked. "What do you mean?"

Jahanara gave him a look of disbelief. "Did you not hear that assassins attacked them?"

"When exactly would I have heard that?" Bakhtiar asked. "While I was throwing up every ten minutes from food poisoning nobody could pin down? While I was unconscious because the pain in my leg combined with the aforementioned poisoning was making life literally unbearable? Or when I struggled to get back here as soon as possible anyway so nobody was further burdened with my duties?" He clearly had more to say, but bit it back at a look from their mother, scowling at his food instead.

Jahanara looked ashamed. "You're right, I'm sorry, that was stupid."

Bakhtiar nodded tersely. "What happened?"

"They followed us through the city and used a sandstorm to try and get the better of us. Erfan was injured, badly but not severely, and your princess here is far more capable than me in self-defense. She was quite impressive."

"It's standard for most of us who dwell on the ice, as the predators there are few but extremely deadly," Relanya replied. "Your team was most impressive."

"Well, hopefully Bakhti can offer you a quieter tour. You should be certain he takes you to the Grand Theatre. Mother and Father sometimes have the troupe come to perform for us here in the palace, but seeing a play in the theatre proper is always a treat."

"It was," Shah said wistfully. "I only got to do it twice before I was bound to the palace permanently. Thankfully they are willing to perform here."

Willing. Like anyone would refuse a request—and the obscene pay—from the king and queen. "Do you have a favorite play? I've always been fondest of Follow the Star ."

"I love that one," Relanya said. "We don't get many foreign plays in Penna, but that is one of them, and I've watched it many times."

Well, that was the greatest thing he'd ever heard, and it was all he needed to launch into an avid discussion of the play with her, a conversation that carried through the second course and most of the third, before his mother gave him a warning look, and he reluctantly moved on to other things that would include everyone else at the table.

Throughout, Bakhtiar was quieter than usual. He conversed with the rest of them, paid attention to Relanya, but anyone could see his actions were rote, not heartfelt. Maybe he was simply in too much pain to focus properly.

As dinner wound down, the last of the platters and drinks taken away, Bakhtiar made to stand—then abruptly collapsed again, wincing and falling against Kurosh.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" Fahima asked.

Sitting up again, Bakhtiar gave a sharp jerk of his head. "Not really. My leg is killing me. Shir, would you do me a favor and escort Princess Relanya for me? Your Highness, I apologize I cannot do it myself."

"Of course. I hope you start to feel better soon, Bakhti. I know it's unlikely, but try to stay in your room tomorrow and just rest , hmm?"

Bakhtiar gave him a grateful smile, and then a couple of guards helped him up, and his concubines escorted him away, no doubt to take a secret passage back to his room, a shorter and quieter journey.

At his mother's nod of dismissal, Aradishir rose and bowed to Relanya before offering a hand. She smiled and accepted it, rising gracefully to her feet with his support, and then settled her hand in the crook of his elbow. They walked in step easily, concubines, handmaidens, and guards around them.

"So what are you up to tomorrow?"

"His Highness is escorting your mother and me to the temple. I'm quite excited. Charity work means a lot to me, but for my family and most nobility, it's simply a chore done for appearance's sake and with minimal effort. He also said he would take me to see the aviary kept in another temple."

"Lasharana Temple, on the opposite side of the city, built about thirty years after Kelestar Temple." Kelestar had always been bound to the royal family, even older than the palace itself, older even than the city. "Kelestar has birds too, but not nearly

as impressive as Lasharana. You'd like that temple. It's devoted to a minor but important demigoddess of hidden water."

"How charming. I've never heard of a god so specific, but in a place where water is rare and precious, hidden caches of it would be invaluable and nigh spiritual indeed. I cannot wait to see it." She started to say something else, then only closed her mouth with a snap and gave a bare shake of her head, as though reprimanding herself or trying to dislodge a thought. "Thank you for the escort, Your Highness. It's a charming practice I've already grown quite fond of. " She smiled softly, slowly let go of his arm, and slipped away into her room.

Aradishir stifled a sigh and trudged back to his own room, ignoring the weight of his concubines' unspoken words.

Back in his room, he washed and dressed for bed.

"You could say something," Merza said at last. "I think it might go better than you think. Nobody is taking well to the idea of her as queen, and strategically, it might be wise to have her still marry into the family but not as crown princess. I saw their faces tonight. Everyone is thinking it."

"What about Relanya? She's a person, not a pawn. She came here to be queen, her family is expecting her to be queen, and I doubt she'd feel terribly happy about broken promises and being thrown to the youngest and least important child."

"You are vitally important, Shir," Heydar said quietly. "You do not get the attention and admiration you deserve, but those who do the hardest work seldom do. I think Relanya looks at you longingly when she thinks no one else is looking, and would be far more amenable to the change in marriage arrangements than you think or want to hope for. Suffering in silent misery never helped anyone. I know that better than most. You should talk to her and then to your parents."

"I agree," Javed said. "All this keeping feelings bottled is hurting everyone. Bakhti, who clearly doesn't want the marriage, but is pushing anyway because it's his duty, and he does like to make people happy, even if that doesn't always seem obvious. Relanya, who is seeking freedom from a life that clearly made her miserable, and you."

Aradishir drew a deep breath and let it out slowly before finally saying, "All right. I can't really argue when you keep speaking so much sense. And what did you say before? If all I get is rejection, at least that is closure. Do you really think she..."

"I think she is just as enamored of you as you are of her," Javed said. "Who wouldn't be?"

"Plenty of people," Aradishir muttered.

Merza smirked. "I think she's looking forward to making babies with you."

"You be quiet!" Aradishir hissed, while Heydar and Javed laughed because they were all brats forever encouraging each other. "I—"

He stopped as a loud, pounding knock came at his door, the kind that spoke of urgency. Heydar crossed the room to open it and admitted city guards who appeared to be escorting a frantic looking man dripping blood from a cut on his forehead and another across his left arm. He also had an arm across his stomach, but at least there didn't seem to be blood there.

The man also looked close to either collapsing or doing something reckless and drastic. Who in the world was this?

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"Master Masood," Heydar said. "What are you doing here?"

"She's been taken!" Masood said. "I was over at her house this evening, and some men burst inside, killed some of the servants, nearly killed me, and took her. You have to help!"

"This is Kubra's beloved," Merza said, though Aradishir had already surmised that. There was only one 'she' he knew that people would want to kidnap. Hopefully they hadn't killed her yet.

Thank the divine the royal guards had sense enough to bring the man here, instead of detaining him and delaying rescue. "Guards, with me, call for additional. Heydar, collect information from the city guards. Merza, help me dress. Javed, summon healers to attend Master Masood and then go have horses readied."

"You're not going yourself," Heydar said.

"I am. Don't waste time arguing."

Heydar and Javed sighed, but immediately set to work without further protest.

"You should stay here," Merza said. "I know it's a futile effort, but I'm making it anyway. Your parents are going to kill you."

"What else is new? I want it driven home that I take this seriously, up to and including risking my own life, and that if they continue to trifle with me, it will be their lives that are forfeit."

His personal guards and several additional entered, including Captain Queria of the royal guards. "Your Highness, I was summoned on an urgent matter?"

"Yes, thank you for coming so quickly. Let's walk." As they headed through the palace and out to the main courtyard, Aradishir explained everything. "I am going to Lady Kubra's home to oversee matters myself. Do as you see fit, but I want her found." He swung into the saddle of his horse and pulled up his wrap to cover his head and part of his face.

"Yes, Your Highness." Queria ordered various guards to accompany him, then spun away with several others falling in behind him, vanishing back into the palace.

Heydar sighed. "He's going to get my father."

"Even I will not deny that your father is good at his job, and as he is the connecting point between the palace and city guards, that's a good call. Let's move."

The city was quiet as they rode through it as quickly as they safely dared. At this hour, the night market would still be thriving, but almost everywhere else people were asleep or doing things quietly. In the northeast corner of the city was the Peregrine district, an upper-class neighborhood mostly populated by those who were wealthy but not noble, or nobles not quite as rich as their peers.

At Kubra's house, guards were scattered about everywhere: talking to people, making notes, standing watch. Everyone stopped, though, as they realized who had arrived. "Don't, that's not necessary," Aradishir said when they started to kneel. "You, lieutenant, tell me what, if any, new information we have. Tell me exactly what happened."

The lieutenant bowed. "Your Highness, we were summoned by a Master Masood at just past midnight. He told us that Lady Kubra had been kidnapped by hooded figures

who first killed the servants and two personal guards also in the room. They tried to kill him as well, but he was thrown over the west balcony in the scuffle, granting a chance to escape and call for help. He ran off shortly after that, I assume now to summon you. We have secured the bodies of the dead. They were all stabbed, two in the throat, one in the gut, another right in the heart. Each was stabbed only once, speaking to expertise, likely thugs hired from the docks. We've already sent people to start investigating. Captain Desmaradi is on his way; he was across town overseeing a triple murder investigation, but kidnappings of course take precedence."

Especially when a royal prince showed up with no warning, undoubtedly. "Thank you. Show me to where she was kidnapped."

Though she didn't look happy about that request, the lieutenant nodded, tucked away her notebook, and escorted him personally.

Inside was the usual courtyard, a fountain in the very center that would help to keep the whole building cool during the hottest parts of the day. Spatters of blood on the tiles indicated where either Masood had stood briefly when talking to guards or, more likely, where the killers had passed on their way back out of the home.

When he figured out who exactly had been behind all this, necks would be breaking at the end of a rope.

Upstairs, the lieutenant led him into what proved to be a bed chamber. So Masood had been 'visiting' likely, something everyone was being kind enough not to mention, as that would be a serious scandal, even though literally everyone flouted societal rules all the time. He could name more people who were having illicit affairs than weren't. Even his own parents had only married to avoid one such scandal, for crying out loud.

From the look of things, they'd been enjoying wine at the table close to the balcony.

The intruders had come in through the door, no doubt that was how Masood had been driven back enough he'd gone over the balcony. It was a miracle he wasn't more severely injured—or dead, for that matter. "Do we know how many attacked?"

"Four," the lieutenant replied. "That's how they were able to kill the guards and servants so quickly—and carry her away. They could be anywhere in the city, though there are a few bolt holes commonly used for this sort of thing that we'll check first."

What a depressing statement.

Before Aradishir could ask further questions, voices came from the hallway, and in the next moment Captain Desmaradi, Captain Queria, and Commander Yahra strode into the room. "Your Highness!" Yahra said. "You should not be here. It isn't safe."

"I'd like to see the person brazen enough to try and kill me while I'm surrounded by tens of guards, and all three of their leaders," Aradishir said. "I'm here, I'm not leaving, stop wasting time reprimanding me. I promise you my mother will do it enough for ten later. I want Lady Kubra found, and you can go round up all the merchants I've been dealing with lately as well and haul them to the palace. Search their homes for evidence of this and the attempt on my life and that of Princess Relanya a few weeks ago. The more terrified they are, the better."

"Understood," Captain Desmaradi said, bowing and then spinning neatly around, striding from the room calling people to him.

On the other side of the room, Kubra's desk had been utterly wrecked, papers scattered, ripped, crushed, drawer pulled out and dumped. Part of the job or just looking for quick valuables to pawn? "Javed, would you gather up all these papers, anything else you feel might be pertinent? I want Kubra to be able to look it all over and see if anything is missing, or if there is some sense to what was destroyed."

"Of course."

The guards scattered around the room looked hastily away as Aradishir swept his gaze. In their defense, the royal concubines were always a topic of conversation, and they probably had not expected to see one in their life, let alone his entire harem in the dead of the night in the aftermath of a brutal kidnapping.

"How is Master Masood?" Aradishir asked.

"I was told he was doing well as I was leaving," Queria replied. "I also sent someone to inform His Majesty of this."

Damn it. The decision was sound, but he'd really been hoping to save informing him until morning and delay the inevitable lecture that much longer. "Do we have any idea who actually did the deed yet?"

"Not yet, Your Highness," Yahra said. "We have our suspicions, as there aren't actually that many people in the city capable of this kind of work, not with this level of skill. They knew how to get inside, bypass the guards downstairs, quickly execute several people, and take Kubra away without alerting any of the surrounding houses."

"Chalk," Javed said from where he was still at the desk. "Some of these papers have traces of chalk dust on them, like it was on someone's hands or clothes."

Queria and Yahra's gazes sharpened at that, and they shared a look. Chalk wasn't native to Tavamara, except for very small deposits at the north end of the Great Desert. But even further north, their triad of neighbors had plenty, especially Lavarre, who exported it to them in exchange for glass-quality sand. That trade, along with so many other arrangements, had been suspended for a few years when hostilities arose, but had in the past year resumed. Various industries were still recovering from the shortfall, in fact, but trade matters were Bakhti's purview, with guidance from their

father. "What would chalk have to do with this?"

"Someone involved in this worked with chalk, likely responsible for moving it into or out of the warehouse. That will make it much easier to find who we're looking for," Queria replied. "I'll go find Desmaradi and get guards pointed in the right direction."

He swept from the room, leaving only Yahra, as even the other guards who'd been investigating the room had departed. "Highness, you really should not be out here. No one will attack you here in Lady Kubra's home, but anyone could assault you between here and the palace."

"They would have to get past my guards, who are better trained than the unfortunate souls who died tonight protecting Lady Kubra. Also, your son is with me, and he's the best protector I have by far. That being said, there is nothing further I can do here, if there was ever anything at all. We'll be taking the papers Javed gathered. Please bring Lady Kubra to the palace the moment you find her."

"Of course."

"Thank you." Aradishir left, his harem around him and guards flanking them, to where his horses waited in the courtyard. Out on the street, more than a few people—staff, likely, sent out by the lords and ladies of the various houses—were milling about like it was normal to stand around in the middle of the night.

Heydar held his horse, and then rested a hand on his leg once he was up, squeezing lightly in comfort and reassurance. Unfortunately, there was no guarantee whatsoever that they would find Kubra alive. He had a million questions, but everything would have to wait until they were home again. "Let's go." Heeling his horse into motion, he followed the guards back to the palace.

They'd barely reached the courtyard when Witcher himself stepped from the

shadows. His father must be truly incensed to send his secret favorite to watch for him. "Your Highness."

Aradishir sighed. "Where are they?"

"The hummingbird room, Your Highness. I'm to escort you personally," Witcher said, mouth twitching with the barest hint of a smile. "For what it's worth, they aren't mad at you, only worried, and extremely angry at the situation. They want to speak with you to fully understand and sort out what steps to take next. I think you can agree this problem has spiraled beyond your scope."

"I could have handled it," Aradishir said with a sigh, but didn't argue further. Because yes, kidnapping people to force him to cooperate, or whatever they were doing, was out of control. The merchants, and whoever they were tied up with in all of this, were panicking. Acting desperately. If they were not stopped, more lives were going to be lost.

In the hummingbird room, a small parlor with an obvious theme, his parents waited. His mother had two concubines with her, Harata and Onri, and his father had Witcher and Nandakumar, who had more political acumen than the whole rest of the court combined. "Father, Mother. I did not mean for anyone to wake you. I was going to tell you everything in the morning." His parents, more than anyone, rarely got a full night of sleep, and he hated to be yet another person taking that from them.

"I'd rather be informed straight away. If they are willing to kidnap a powerful merchant, and kill to do it, they're willing to go to even greater extremes," Shah replied. "Tell us everything, every last detail of this war you have been waging. I keep apprised, but not as well as I should have, clearly."

Servants arrived then with food and strong tea, and after Heydar had poured for him, Aradishir told them everything, from the very day he had taken up the fight at his

mother's command. It was a fight of a few years now, and even more acrimonious than when it had started. "I don't know why I didn't think they would do this, when they have already tried to assassinate me on two different occasions."

"Four, actually," Shah said quietly. "We simply prevented two of them before they got close enough for you to be aware of the problem."

Aradishir drew a sharp breath. "What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You have enough to worry about, and they were dealt with, so there was no reason to further burden you. Why did you insist on going to Lady Kubra's house?"

"Because I don't fully trust all the guards, even if Commander Yahra has been working hard to weed out traitors. I was worried that something important might be destroyed. As there were already plenty of guards when I arrived, it's still possible, but we did salvage what we could of the papers. Seemed strange to me that, in the midst of a kidnapping, under heavy risk of being caught, they made a point of stopping to destroy everything on that desk. I'll start going through it all after I've gotten some rest, as right now it would probably all just look like gibberish."

"At least we have a lead with the chalk, thanks to you, Lord Javed," Fahima said. "Thank you."

"I'm always happy to help however I can, Your Majesty."

"You don't have to suck up to my mother, she already likes you," Aradishir said.

"Shir," Fahima said in light reproval.

"I'm just saying, if you wanted to kill me, nothing would dissuade you."

She rolled her eyes. "There will be no killing. Mostly because I am asking nicely that you do not leave the palace again until this matter is resolved once and for all. Please do not force me to make it an order."

"I won't— I mean, I'll stay, I won't make you order me." Aradishir yawned. "So what are we going to do?"

"Get some rest. There isn't much we can do until everyone else is awake, though once Commander Yahra returns, we'll start making whatever plans we can. Mostly, we must unfortunately wait until Lady Kubra is found. Go get some rest, Shir. I'll send someone to wake you if something changes before you wake on your own," Shah said. "Thank you for doing so much. I am sorry this problem has gotten so much uglier than we ever anticipated. I knew they would be angry; I did not know they would resort to all of this."

Aradishir nodded, losing the battle to another yawn as he stood. Hopefully his parents would get a few more hours of sleep as well. "You'd better. I'm sorry we had to wake you."

"It's nothing to apologize for, my dear," Shah replied. "Get to bed."

Bowing to them, Aradishir then left, concubines and guards around him like always. In his room, they all bathed thoroughly before simply relaxing in the hot water, letting the last of the tension fade away before finally drying off and going to bed.

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When he woke from his nap, his harem was gathered around the small table where they nearly always ate breakfast, the only exception when he had guests or special meetings. "Any word?" he asked around a yawn.

"Not yet, unfortunately," Merza said. "They've dragged in many people, merchants and dock goons alike, but we still have not located Lady Kubra. Master Masood is doing well, though."

"I'm glad." Aradishir wandered off to clean up and dress for the day, then joined them at the table and ate the fruit and pastries waiting for him, along with a pot of tea that was still hot, because his concubines knew what they were about. "Thank you. My parents?"

"Your mother said that if you woke before noon, to tell you to find her, and she'd update you on everything. The last I heard she was in the minor throne room sorting through problems that were too onerous for public court. Prince Bakhtiar is holding general audience today, showing Relanya how to do it. I believe His Majesty has been in meetings regarding our problem all day, and not a single person has left that room looking happy."

Heydar snorted. "They have tried multiple times to kill his son, and now are killing anyone in their path with wanton recklessness. I wouldn't be happy either if I was so involved the king himself demanded an audience. Every merchant in the city and their most distant cousin has been summoned today, and nobility is walking around like they have glass bowls full of water balanced on their heads."

"Diamonds are loose in their settings, to be sure," Merza said.

Aradishir smiled softly, fond as ever of Merza's slang. "Let's go find my mother then."

Several minutes later, they found her in the library, surrounded by her harem and looking peeved with the librarians and clerks attending her. "Mother."

Her irritation vanished as she turned to him, breaking into a smile. "Shir, there you are, darling. Did you get some rest?"

"Probably more than you." He took her hands and kissed her cheek. "What are you doing here?"

"Seeking records for your father, but they've all mysteriously gone missing," she replied, ire returning. "Copies of certain contracts, specifically. And no one is able to explain to me how such important documents have gone missing."

"I have copies of them," Merza said, causing everyone to turn to look at him. "Golds and diamonds always snatch the papers when they get to dark dealing. The moment this became my prince's problem, I took out the contracts, made official copies of all of them myself, and put everything back. Took me quite some time. Which reminds me, you have no security in this place against smuggling out books and papers that you might want to remain on the premises." He clicked his tongue. "If I'd been paid to steal papers instead of jewels, I'd have had a much higher success rate."

"Oh, I think stealing the heart of a prince ranks pretty high on the list of successes," Fahima said dryly. "Fetch me those copies, please, Lord Merza."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'll go now and deliver them to your chambers."

"Tasha," she said quietly, and the concubine slipped away to join Merza.

Turning back to the clerks, who all looked like they were about to face their execution, she said, "This abysmal failure will be addressed later when I can put my full attention on it. If I were you, I'd compose a very thorough report about what went wrong and how you will keep it from happening again. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the head librarian said quietly, eyes on the floor.

"Good." She swept off without further word, and Aradishir cast the poor man a sympathetic look before hastening after her.

"Why would they steal contracts? Especially when there are also copies with the courts, and with each person who signed the contract?" Multiple copies, all certified, made it impossible for any one person to alter a contract after the fact, something that had been done long in the past and caused no small amount of confusion and harm.

Javed said, "If they were willing to steal them from here, they likely stole them from other locations. That would explain in part why they have been dragging this process out. What was in the contracts, Your Majesty?"

"On the surface, simple trade deals with various foreign parties, but Beynum noticed a few odd things in the couple that we do have copies of, though only by chance. Turns of phrase, certain objects, that he recognized from his pirating days."

Aradishir felt abysmally stupid he had not noticed such important details.

"Don't think like that." Fahima smiled when he looked up. "I didn't see it. Your father didn't see it. Why would we? The whole point is for most people to never see it. The only one of us who did in this entire family was a former pirate. The only failure is that neither I nor your father thought to ask him in the first place. What matters is that Beynum did see it, and now we have new information to work with. I'll show you."

As they reached the room where his father was, the guards posted outside bowed low, greeting them quietly before sliding the doors open.

Inside, Shah looked up, frown melting away. "Hello, my jewel. Shir, you look rested."

"You don't," Aradishir said unhappily.

Shah waved the words aside. "I'll get plenty of rest when this is over, believe me. I am king, this is what I do. Were you able to get the contracts, my love?"

"There was a bit of an issue, but also an impressive resolution," she replied, and by the time she'd finished, Merza and Tashi had returned with the copies.

"Well done, Merza," Shah said. "You have an instinct that one can only be born with."

Merza flushed, looking at the table as he replied, "Thank you, Your Majesty. You're far too kind."

His father was kind, but he also did not dole out praise that wasn't earned.

"So what are we looking for?"

Beynum, sitting to Shah's right, said, "We're matching contracts to manifests. These manifests list things like barrels of certain wines, sacks of spices, which on the surface seem normal, but these particular wines and spices are not sold in these quantities. Other strange things like that—I've made a full list. Normally a full contract would not be necessary for such things..."

"But they're not really trading those kinds of goods, so assurance of payment and

such was necessary. Right beneath my nose this whole damned time," Aradishir said bitterly.

"They've been destroying many of them for some time, and without the contracts to match to the manifests, why would you know? None of us knew, until Beynum happened to look at one while waiting for me to finish speaking with someone. We all missed it for years. That was the whole point," Shah said. "Do not berate yourself for such things, my son. It accomplishes nothing. We showed our wisdom in picking pirates and thieves, hmm?" He leaned up to kiss Beynum softly. "Though I think my pirate picked me, really."

Aradishir didn't roll his eyes, but only because he knew he had no room to talk, at all, even a little. He was just as sappy with his concubines as his parents were with theirs. "So we go through the contracts and manifests, match them up? Wouldn't that be fairly simple?"

"Yes and no," Beynum said. "The contracts only state what is traded, with no specific dates, only a broad, unhelpful range to meet the barest legal requirements. Further arrangements, not written down in any useful legal way, would have been made later. So we have to look through the contracts and figure out which manifests they go with, hope they are specific enough to irrevocably prove the connection, the nefarious actions they are hiding."

"Their arrogance will certainly work against them," Shah said. "I have this well in hand, though, now you've brought the contracts to me. All the merchants have been rounded up, so you—" He stopped as a frantic knock came at the door. "Enter."

Two guards burst inside, barely toppling to their knees and bowing their heads before saying, "Your Majesty, we've found Lady Kubra! She's being escorted to the palace as we speak and should be here soon."

Aradishir bolted, hastening through the palace, barely noticing everyone around him or the admonitions to slow down. Mere moments after he'd reached the main entrance, exasperated concubines and aggravated guards right behind him, a cart belonging to the city guards pulled into the pavilion.

It came to a stop in front of him, guards saluting, other people bowing, still others gawking not-so-subtly. The doors opened, and a guard offered assistance to a pale, exhausted and still-shaken Lady Kubra. "Y-Your Highness!" she said, clearly surprised.

Aradishir dismissed the guards, lending his own assistance into the palace. "I am so sorry you've endured such torment, Lady Kubra."

"Masood?" she asked, and from the look on her face it was clear she was bracing herself for the worst possible news. "He went over the balcony trying to defend me, I—" Her bottom lip trembled, and she bit it in a vain attempt to hold back tears.

"He's fine, doing quite well in fact. I was going to go see him when I was done meeting with my father."

Kubra cried in earnest then, and Aradishir hugged her close, stifling his anger for the time being. Everyone responsible would pay eventually, and he would make them suffer a thousand-fold for all the torment they had caused hundreds, possibly thousands, of people. Right now, though, anger would help nothing.

So he led her through the halls to one of the royal guest rooms, prepared in anticipation—hope—of her arrival at some point. He left her there, with plenty of guards stationed outside and well-trained servants within, to get cleaned and fed and rested.

With nothing else to do, but unlikely to be able to focus on work, he headed out to his

gardens to simply breathe, get his thoughts in order, and start plotting how he was going to destroy all these worthless merchants once and for all.

He'd been sitting there for a couple of hours, though after an hour he'd resumed work by sending out notes, letters, and more, slowly bringing all the pieces he needed together, when a servant came to inform him that Lady Kubra would enjoy speaking with him at his leisure.

"Escort her to my sunroom, please. I'll speak with her there. Have a late lunch brought, and whatever Lady Kubra would like. If Master Masood is fit to join us, invite him as well. I'll be there shortly."

"Yes, Your Highness," the woman replied, and faded off in that smooth, silent way that staff mastered so easily and nobles only wished they could do half as well.

"Are you all right, my prince?" Javed asked.

"Been better, but also I'm not the one who has been beaten and kidnapped and further terrorized. I'm only angry I did not stop all of this before it came to this point."

"You are fighting against a tide with a bucket," Merza said. "Golds don't give up their comforts without a fight, and the more spoiled they are, the nastier they fight. You're also fighting the reds that cater to the golds, and they're even worse, because unlike golds, most of them had to make their money first. If stopping them was easy, someone would have already done it."

"Reds," Aradishir echoed. Because red was an expensive color, difficult to maintain the brightness of, and one of the first colors people indulged in when they had money enough. Also, merchants were flashy by nature, and red was a flashy color. There was rarely anything subtle or understated about red. "They'll have a new, bloody reason for their nickname by the time I'm finished. " If he had his way, several would be

sentenced to execution, which would be enough to scare good behavior into the rest, at least for a time.

He sent off the last of his messages with another servant standing by to take them, then finally left the garden to go freshen up properly before he joined Lady Kubra.

A short time later he stepped into the sunroom, a beautiful room of glass and light that overlooked a small butterfly garden. Keri would probably love the butterflies. How had he not thought to bring Keri to see them sooner?

"Your Highness," Lady Kubra and Masood said together, pulling apart where they'd been tightly embracing. They sank to their knees and bowed low. "Thank you so much for everything. I—" Lady Kubra stopped, took a deep breath. "I did not think I would ever leave that awful place alive. See Masood again."

"I'm glad the guards were able to find you," he said quietly. "Please, sit. Eat, drink, get your strength back. "

"Thank you," she said again, and they both took their seats a respectful distance apart, since as they were not married, they should not really be touching at all except in the most perfunctory ways. Thankfully, the guards already present in the room before Aradishir had arrived were not so stupidly fussy.

"Javed."

Javed immediately sat between the pair and served the tea and food on the tray there, smiling and soothing their flustered demeanors.

It was always interesting, seeing how people reacted to something that Aradishir and his family simply took as understood. Concubines to serve them was never a matter of if, only when. Though he had for years despaired he would ever find his, given he

was the least interesting of his family.

A discussion on privilege and being a spoiled brat, to be sure.

"We're glad you're all right, my lady, " Javed said as he arranged plates of food for both of them.

Aradishir gave a slight nod. "We'll do better about keeping you safe. I did not think they would go to such extremes."

"Neither did I," Kubra said. "I thought they would ostracize me, spread unpleasant rumors, that sort of thing. Not kidnap me."

"Do you know who took you?"

"Yes, I do, and I already named them in the formal report I gave right after the guards found me," Kubra said, voice hardening like steel. "Yusef, Vahid, and Kambiz. I would know their cretinous guards anywhere. They all use the same militia, and the warehouse they took me to is one of Yusef's, though not one on his books. I knew it because I've had him tailed there before, and went to see it myself one night."

"Against my begging and pleading for you to not do so," Masood grumbled.

"Well, it proved useful in the end, didn't it?"

Masood only sighed.

Javed, Heydar, and Merza laughed. "We can commiserate with both sides," Javed said. "If my prince did not have a bad habit sneaking out of the palace and into the city in the dead of night, we would have never met, but that also means he was putting himself in needless danger, which none of us likes him doing."

"It paid off," Aradishir said, sharing a smirk with Kubra.

Masood and his concubines rolled their eyes as one.

"I'm just saying, you should listen to me more often," Kubra added, and some weighty, silent conversation seemed to pass between them.

"I'm listening now, right?" Masood said.

Kubra smiled, bright and happy, all her recent troubles clearly far away for the moment. "Yes, you are."

Wasn't hard to guess what was going on, not really. Aradishir smiled. "So you accepted an offer of marriage, I assume?"

"Yes," Kubra said. "He did! Finally!"

Masood rolled his eyes again, but it was performative at best. "Try to stay out of trouble in the interim, please."

"Don't get your hopes up," Heydar said. "We beg Aradishir the same, and all he does is find more trouble."

"You're exaggerating," Aradishir said, ignoring the looks all three of them sent him. "So Yusef, Vahid, and Kambiz. That does not surprise me. Those three seem to be the leaders in all this. Have we captured them yet?"

A guard by the door replied, "The last report we received, they were still being sought, believed to be in hiding or to have fled the city entirely. That was some hours ago, though, Your Highness. Shall I send someone to get an update?"

"No, not worth the trouble. I'll speak with my parents after this. I'm sure they'll have the latest info."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"So they took you to a warehouse."

"Yes," Kubra said. "I think their plan was to force me to sign some papers and then... well, make certain I couldn't contest them later. But from what the guards said, the hunt for them was more intense than anticipated. They couldn't come to sign the papers themselves, not until everything calmed down and they could come out of hiding. I was found beforehand, thankfully. I'm astonished they didn't make me sign the papers and then simply worry about their own signatures later."

"Probably didn't have the papers entirely ready," Aradishir said. Contracts, even sketchy ones, took time to draft. "If they'd been smart, they would have drafted the papers, made certain all was ready, arranged or waited for some big distraction, and then kidnapped you, buying them hours or even days of time before your absence was noticed."

Kubra stared at him a moment, then gave a bare shake of her head. "I can see why they're scared of you, and I'm glad you're on our side, Your Highness."

"He would indeed be dangerous as a villain," Merza said. "The worse or greater a deed, the more that doing or not doing it is a choice. A penniless mother desperate to feed her children? Stealing isn't really a choice. A wealthy man who can get still more wealth by selling children? That is a choice. Fortunately for everyone in this city, my prince has a pure spirit and a heart of fire."

"Oh, be quiet," Aradishir said. "I do what is required of my position. Now then, I am certain the two of you would like to get more rest, and put these terrible events

behind you once and for all. I am certain we will have more questions, but for now please rest. You are my guests for as long as you want to remain here, and every visit in the future." He rose so they could rise as well and led the way out of the room.

In the hallway, he stopped them one last time. "I am truly happy to hear you will be getting married. Let my wedding gift to you be to pay for the celebrations in full."

Masood looked ready to pass out, as Kubra gasped, hands over her mouth before she dropped them to say, "Your Highness! That is too generous by far. We have done nothing—"

"You have done everything ," Aradishir said firmly. "Without your choices, your actions, they would not have made these foolish, reckless movements that have damned them once and for all. You broke a bitter stalemate to my favor. To pay for your wedding festivities is a trifling thing for me, and we all know it. Please, I insist."

"Thank you," Kubra said, blinking away tears—and then threw away all protocol to hug him tightly "I am always happy to help you, Your Highness. Whatever you need, no matter the day or the hour."

"I appreciate it. Now go, get some rest and be well."

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Once they were gone, Aradishir sighed, stretching his limbs and rolling his neck before setting his shoulders. "What's next, then? I suppose we must go find my parents again, see what they've been up to since I left."

"Indeed," said a guard with faint amusement. "A message was delivered to tell you to meet them in His Majesty's private gardens when you were done meeting with Lady Kubra and Master Masood. They stressed there was no urgency, and they would be there for some time."

"Thank you." Aradishir gave his clothes a once over, but they'd be suitable for nearly anything that came up until he had to change for dinner. "I'll head there now then."

His parents were in the gazebo, a beautiful stone piece draped in various climbing plants that lent cooling shade, located on a miniature island in the middle of the large pool that dominated this part of the sprawling gardens. In the middle of the gazebo, settled on a large, plush cushion, his father's concubine Nandakumar played soft music. Beynum and Witcher sat with his father, Aaliyah and Gulzar sat with his mother.

"Hiding from the rest of the palace?" Aradishir asked with a grin as he took a seat, accepting the tray of wine a servant set beside him with a soft thank you.

Heydar took over pouring, as Merza sat on his other side and Javed nearby, conversing quietly with Beynum.

"Yes," his mother said. "It's been untenable. We—" she stopped as three guards approached.

The guards knelt and bowed, and then the sergeant at the front of the trio said, "Your Majesties, Your Highness, we have captured the errant merchants."

"Good," Shahjahan said. "Thank you. Take them and everyone else arrested today to the grand throne room."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The guards left, and Shah motioned to a servant standing off to the side awaiting orders. "Summon the council to the grand throne room. I want everyone in attendance. No excuses, save health and familial emergencies."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Shah rose and offered a hand to Fahima. "Shall we end this?"

Aradishir tossed back the wine Heydar handed him, then rose as well. "Let's end this." Out in the hall, they went their separate ways to return to their rooms and dress properly for court. The casual clothes he currently wore wouldn't do, especially when he wanted to make a statement.

In his room, he stripped off his clothes, washed up quickly, then dutifully held still—or moved only as bid—while his harem dressed him, braided his hair, and affixed jewelry. As Aradishir spent most of his time in his office, meeting rooms, parlors, or showing people around the gardens, he rarely had occasion to dress as finely as his siblings did. There simply wasn't any point when he was going to be sitting at a desk or table, well out of sight, most of the day.

When he was finally ready, dressed in green, black, and gold, harem resplendent as always, they headed out for court and whatever else the day brought.

They were almost there when someone called, "Your Highness!"

Aradishir turned, delight and misery flooding him in equal measure. "Your Highness, how are you today?"

Relanya smiled, but strangely it did not quite meet her eyes. "Wonderful as always in your fine home, Your Highness. I wanted to congratulate you."

"Oh? Thank you. How did you hear so quickly?"

"The staff has been positively abuzz with the news."

"They have?" Aradishir's brows rose. "I wouldn't have thought most people would care so much, but I suppose it's not every day that multiple merchants are arrested all at once on charges of human trafficking, kidnapping, and attempted murder, and dragged to the palace to be made a spectacle of. It will be nice to have this over with finally."

Surprise filled Relanya's face, and her eyes suddenly looked less sad. "You caught them? That's marvelous. That I had not heard."

"Then what were you congratulating me for?" Aradishir said. "I admit I am thoroughly confused now."

Relanya laughed, though it was a weak effort honestly, and the momentary happiness brightening her eyes faded again, despite the fact she was clearly making an effort to maintain her levity. She must be tired or something—well, stressed, obviously, dumbass. Her visit had been nothing but one disaster after another. "Why on your engagement of course. To that beautiful woman I saw you embracing this morning, I assume."

"What woman? I haven't—oh!" Aradishir laughed. "No, not mine! I mean not me." He sighed at himself. "I mean that I am not the one getting married, though that woman was. Is. Mercy, I cannot speak anymore. The woman is Lady Kubra, a friend

and ally in my fight against those stupid merchants. I offered to pay for her wedding." He quickly explained all that had transpired. "In thanks, and because she certainly deserves it, I insisted on paying for everything. She and Master Masood were quite beside themselves. I hope it gives them something happy to focus on after all the stress and fear."

"That's incredibly kind of you," Relanya said. "I feel silly. I asked several people just to be certain I was hearing right, because I thought it strange that everything was so abrupt, but then I just figured I had missed all the history that meant it wasn't abrupt, or maybe that it was some romantic, whirlwind thing."

Aradishir smiled crookedly. "Alas, marriage is not in my near future. All else aside, the focus should be on you and Bakhti right now. I would never be so rude or disrespectful to you, my brother, and a non-existent bride to have our engagements at the same time. I'm sure something will be arranged for me in a few more years." He offered his arm. "Were you on your way to the throne room to watch the proceedings?"

"No, but I would greatly like to, thank you." Relanya accepted his arm, and with guards, concubines, and handmaidens around them, they headed off to the throne room.

He wasn't surprised that Bakhti, Jahanara, and Danial were also there, though he was annoyed that Bakhtiar hadn't thought to invite Relanya, given that this sort of thing would be amongst their primary duties one day.

"There you are, and you found Relanya along the way," Fahima said warmly. "Sit with me and Jahanara, dear. It's so nice having two daughters, feels like I can finally put the boys in their place."

Shahjahan gave a snorting laugh. "My jewel, you put all of us in our place three times a day."

Fahima smirked, sharing a look with him that Aradishir had no desire to witness whatsoever.

So he ignored them, as he often did when they were acting like that, and settled into his seat.

Relanya took the seat next to his, and it took all of his training not to show his surprise. Why would she sit with him and not Bahkti?

To their father's right, Bahkti seemed wholly unbothered by the decision. If he'd even noticed, which was fifty-fifty with him.

"Summon the prisoners," Shah said to the guard at the base of the dais, who saluted and strode to the doors, where he instructed the guards outside.

Several minutes later, before the whole of the council and much of the court who'd decided to observe the public proceedings, every merchant that Aradishir had struggled with was brought into the throne room in chains.

Shah must have ordered that explicitly, because ordinarily the only prisoners kept in chains were those who were an immediate danger to those around them or at extreme risk of trying to flee. He was sending a message, and to judge by the silence that swept through the room and the expressions on several faces, the message had been received.

"Merchants," Shah said, another insult and warning. His father was, above all else, respectful to everyone. Where too many in the palace would sneer and scoff at a poor farmer or awkward laborer who'd never learned to read and write, Shah treated them with the same accord afforded his nobles. Some days, more, because no one taxed Shah's infamous patience like the spoiled brats that were, unfortunately, just as necessary to the running of the kingdom as the lower classes. "You are charged with many crimes, the most severe of which is the trafficking of people. If convicted, the

punishment is execution. Steward, the list of crimes in full, if you please."

Ikram, his father's long-time steward, lifted the piece of paper in his hand and began to read. Normally a clerk would do such a thing, but Shah was determined to make his points as clear and sharp as possible.

Though he was calm, quiet, and incredibly kind, Ikram was also dangerous and fierce. Combined with his full body tattoo of snake scales and having him read out the damning list of your crimes, it was a situation that would humble even the most arrogant person.

Trafficking. Kidnapping. Abuse. Nevermind the financial crimes entailed with hiding money, the lying about cargo bound for international trade, and so many more. Not only were they facing execution, their homes and other assets would be seized to make right by every victim that could be found and returned home.

As to their families... first the culpability of wives, relatives, and so forth must be determined. Knowing his father and Ikram, those persons had already been detained and were awaiting an audience. Aradishir would probably take on that duty, as this entire matter had been given to him.

The children would be the most difficult, but people who trafficked children shouldn't be trusted with their own, certainly. So that was something else he would have to attend. Relanya would probably be good at that. Pity she could not help him, even if she wanted to, which he couldn't be certain of. She was simply too busy learning all her duties as crown princess.

"Have you anything to say in your defense?" Shah asked, calm but as cold as a desert night.

The merchants were silent, most staring sullenly at the floor, a few casting Aradishir looks of hate and loathing before being roughly nudged by guards to lower their eyes.

"The evidence is quite damning," Shah continued when the silence had stretched on. "You will of course be given a fair and honest trial, but I think we all know that it will not go in your favor. Especially you four, as you decided to kidnap Lady Kubra and kill several people in the process. No, I don't want to hear you didn't do the actual killing. I don't actually kill the soldiers of opposing armies when we must go to war, I don't actually kill our soldiers, but it is my decisions that led to their deaths. If I can take responsibility for that, so can you. The trials will begin in one week, you have that long to prepare your personal defenses and to make arrangements for your families, though of course the court and the throne can countermand them if we deem them untoward. You are dismissed."

In the end, such matters were always rather anticlimactic. They would return to their cells. They would write useless pleas for their lives. Their lawyers would do their job. Their families would be left adequate homes and funds for a stable life that would still be better than the poor ever got. As many people as possible would be found where they'd been sold across the world and brought home. International relations would be tense as Tavamara worked with various countries to get those people back.

All of that would take a lifetime. Aradishir's lifetime. A worthy way to spend a life, but it shouldn't have to be done at all.

The whole affair would be easier if he had someone to help him, work alongside him. He would of course have plenty of help, especially Lady Kubra, but an actual partner who could help with the political side of things, especially internationally... Like say a certain princess who could not be more perfect for the job...

Well, he'd managed this long; he would continue to do so. There were plenty of other people who could help him, and he'd build international alliances as he progressed.

Once the throne room was empty, he rose to leave.

"Aradishir, I would like to speak with you," Fahima said. "Wait for me in my reading

room, if you do not mind."

"You say that like I have a choice," Aradishir said, even as his stomach worked itself into a thousand knots. "Of course. I'll head there now."

He nodded farewell to his father and siblings, bowed slightly in parting to Relanya, and headed off to his mother's private reading room, where wine and food were already waiting. So she'd intended this since before the throne room. Wonderful. "What did I do now?" he asked with a sigh. "This can't be about the trafficking, my parents would have simply spoken to me in the throne room."

Heydar wrapped arms around him from behind, resting his head on Aradishir's shoulder. "You worry too much. Your mother has no reason to be angry with you—"

"—except over how I can't stop making eyes at my brother's fiancé," Aradishir said bitterly. "Maybe I'll get lucky and this whole cleaning up the mess the merchants made will require me traveling overseas."

"It probably will," Fahima said from behind him, making Aradishir jump and barely refrain from screaming.

She stood where a bookcase had moved, because he was a dumbass and forgot this room had access to the secret passages. "Mother."

Fahima smiled faintly. "I did want to talk to you about Princess Relanya, as it happens."

Aradishir recoiled, pulling free from Heydar and warding off all the others. Right now he didn't want anyone touching him. "I didn't— I haven't—"

"Calm down," Fahima said gently. With anyone else, the words would have infuriated him. But his mother was not the condescending type, not unless she was

purposely pissing off smarmy councilmen who thought she couldn't possibly be as smart as them. "Leave us, please," she said to all the concubines.

Once they were alone, she took his hands, rubbing the backs of them with her thumbs as she had so many times in her life. "You are smitten with her."

"How could I not be?" Aradishir asked bitterly. "I promise I won't cause problems. I haven't so far."

Fahima smiled in that soft, fond way of hers that he'd always found so soothing, even at his most upset as a child. "Whatever I tease about you being a troublemaker, the truth is that you are the least troublesome of my children. Everyone says you take after me, and this is very true. Right up to and including marrying someone intended for your sibling."

Aradishir's heart seized in his chest. "I'm not marrying her though."

"Would you, though, if you could?"

"You must know my answer to that, and I don't see why tormenting me like this—"

"Because the engagement is causing more problems than we anticipated. While as king and queen we could certainly do whatever we wanted anyway, no wise ruler upsets their people willfully when there are other options. Everyone likes Relanya, but they do not like her as queen."

"You can't... you can't be saying what I think you're saying."

Fahima smiled. "If I am?"

"She's not a taki piece to just be moved around as the player likes!" Aradishir snapped. "She should be queen, not—"

"Aradishir," Fahima cut in sternly. "You cannot think that I of all people would make people go through with something so important and pivotal if all parties were not amenable to the change."

Aradishir couldn't breathe . "What do you mean?"

Fahima laughed softly. "Silly boy, do you think that you are the only one smitten where you think you shouldn't be? The whole of the palace has noticed that you and Relanya seem more like a happy couple than she ever does with Bakhti."

"They have?" he asked, hoping his face wasn't as red as it felt. "That can't be true. She's older than me, better—"

"Nobody is better than you, my son, and any woman would be lucky to have you. After a point, age is not so important a thing. Look at me and your father. Look at Rakiah and your father. Age gaps all of us, quite significant in Rakiah's case. But he was an adult, and knew his own mind, and made his choices freely and fully informed. I promise that she is as smitten with you as you are with her. I had hoped to have this conversation in a few more days, when other matters were addressed, like speaking with her parents and getting the paperwork adjusted, so all of that was taken care of before I spoke with the two of you. But with all the recent upheaval, best to get this done. People will enjoy your courtship, where they have unfortunately been too narrow minded when she was Bakhti's promised. Anyway, even a blind fool can see those two have all the spark of a lump of mud."

Aradishir had to laugh at that, wobbly though it was. "So you think I should be engaged to Relanya instead."

"My son, half the kingdom already thinks the two of you are," Fahima said dryly. "That the rumors of her and Bakhti is just a strange mix up and people spreading falsehoods, that obviously you are the one engaged to her, just look at how well the two of you get along, and you've been seen with her son just the two of you..."

"I...I don't know how to respond to that."

"Say you agree to the change in plans."

"If Relanya is not upset with the change, then neither am I, obviously . I didn't realize I was being so pathetically obvious."

"Love should never be easy to overlook, even when it's new and still growing." She reached up to brush a strand of hair from his cheek, another motherly gesture she'd done a thousand times and always made him feel better for no reason at all. "I think you two will do very well together, and that will make the whole family and court better. It already shows. But I will let the two of you speak, of course, and make the final decision together."

Aradishir could only nod, not sure what to say, even if he could form the words.

Fahima left, and Aradishir paced restlessly around the room, pulling random books off the shelves, flipping through them without reading a single word before shoving them back into place and moving onto the next.

When the door finally opened, he nearly jumped right out of his skin. He turned around, heart in his throat—and all his worries and hope turned to anger. "You've been crying! Who—"

Relanya laughed. "You truly are the sweetest person I know, Your Highness. I was crying because I'm happy, silly thing. Come here."

Helpless to do anything but obey, Aradishir crossed the room—and very nearly stopped breathing as she cupped his face, her hands soft and warm, the scent of roses and honeysuckle surrounding them. "I am told you would not be opposed to marrying some older woman who already has a child and a dark past."

"You should be a queen," Aradishir said. "You deserve to be queen."

Relanya sighed softly, slowly pulling her hands away, leaving a tingling warmth in their wake. "Darling, all I want is a family that loves me and a home that feels safe. Also to never see snow again if I can help it."

"I...I am pretty certain I can offer most of that. If we have to travel, you might be forced to see snow again," Aradishir said, offering a smile as the last of his anxiety faded, making room for tentative joy. "I'm not nearly the catch my brother is."

"You bought me wonderful presents based on nothing but a dossier, my son is already convinced you're his future stepfather, and—well, I could go on for quite some time. I was distraught and seething with jealousy when I thought you had gotten engaged this morning. I felt so silly."

Aradishir offered his hand and squeezed gently when she took it. "Lady Kubra is my colleague, nothing more. It never occurred to me to see her as anything else, except perhaps a friend. I've been quite dazzled by you since your arrival."

"And we met because my son ran away to play with frogs," Relanya said with a sigh. "What a first impression."

"Well, it worked, because I have agreed quite happily to steal you from my brother, if you are amenable to being stolen."

She pulled her hand free, and entirely nonsensical panic overtook him for a split second before she threw her arms around his neck and dragged him into a kiss that banished any lingering worries. She tasted sweet, and kissed like he belonged to her, an arrangement he could find no issue with.

The rest of her was as soft as her hands had been, as warm as the lips claiming his, the scent of roses and honeysuckle sinking into his very bones. He slid his arms

around her waist and went easily as she backed him into the nearest bookcase.
"Relanya..."

"I like hearing you say my name," she whispered before kissing him again. "Are you this sweet and pliant in bed?"

"Maybe," Aradishir muttered, cheeks heating, before kissing her again.

When they eventually parted again, flushed and mussed, she said, "Your concubines call you Shir. Can I call you that too?"

"Of course. You can call me whatever you like, my princess."

"Good." She kissed him one last time then pushed away and set to straightening her clothes and hair. "Fahima said—"

"You can't call my mother by her name, oh my god!" Aradishir said. "That is entirely too familiar and scares me."

Relanya burst into giggles. "What else should I call her? You're so silly. Anyway, she said we should join her in the azure dining room when we were done talking, to enjoy a private celebration of our engagement? I spoke to Bakhtiar too, you know. We were both quite relieved to be parted, it's honestly quite ridiculous."

"Is that how you knew I actually bought the gifts?"

"I figured that out on my own, actually, but he confirmed it."

Neat and tidy again, Aradishir offered his arm as they headed out. In the hallway, his harem and her handmaidens waited for them, all grinning shamelessly. "Not a single word from any of you," Aradishir said uselessly.

"Congratulations," Heydar said, the others echoing the words. "We told you so."

"I told you not a word," Aradishir said with a sigh, not bothering to hide his grin.

"Come on, dinner and a barrage of teasing awaits us, if you're ready for it, my princess."

"More than ready, my prince," Relanya replied, and kissed him quick and sharp right there in front of the guards, servants, and passersby before they continued on their way, conversation exploding in their wake.

End