



War King's Treasure (The War Kings #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: He expected to end a feud with his marriage. He never expected to be given the greatest treasure of his life.

When War King Gavin Montrose agreed to take the granddaughter of foolish King Phillip as a bride, he expected a spoiled brat. Instead, he finds the lovely Eleanor, a woman with untamed passion burning in her veins. A woman who might prove to be the greatest treasure a king could hold.

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Lady Eleanor Buckingham sat at the table, deaf to the conversation flowing around her. She wasn't sure why these men had plotted against her grandfather, King Phillip, or how they'd even discovered he was her grandfather. Perhaps, it was the way he doted on her and showed her special attention whenever she was around. All she knew was she was a weapon to hurt the man who meant the most to her, her maternal grandfather. Worse, there was nothing she could do about it. She was once again caught in a web made by men, and the spider poised to devour her sat at her side, his arm on the back of her chair, fingers grazing along her shoulder. His thumb brushed along her neck under the heavy fall of her hair, making her skin pebble as shivers tickled through her.

Gavin Montrose. War King. Bastard son. Husband. The last title raised her anxiety since the wife attached to that word was her. She had two days before their marriage was to be consummated, but he'd stated she would spend each night in his bed regardless.

"What do you think, Nori?"

She glanced up, having no clue who'd asked the question. At the moment, she didn't care. The last few days had her on edge and the only thing holding back her temper was the fact her lips were closed.

"You'll answer my sister, Nori," Gavin commanded at her side.

"And which one is she, my lord?" she snapped. "Or should I just answer the table. Yes, why don't I do that? My name is Eleanor, not Nori. Only those close to me are allowed that intimacy, and none of you have it." She glared at Gavin. "None of you.

As for the question, I have no clue what was asked. Until this moment, not a single one of you has spoken to me. About me, yes. Around me, yes. So excuse me, if I find your conversational skills lacking and unworthy of a response.”

Silence filled the room, and Nori knew Gavin felt her shaking under his grip as he leaned close.

“My king.”

“What?” She flicked her gaze at him but refused to hold his stare.

“You’ll address me as my king.”

She snorted. Didn’t even try to contain it.

“You might have coerced this farce of a marriage, but you are not my king. In fact, I think I’d prefer to take my dinner with my king.”

She stood, but Gavin refused to let her push back her chair.

“I said—”

“You’ll sit down and apologize to the table,” he ordered.

She fought briefly against his hold on her chair, but he refused to let her leave the table. It took all she had to settle back in her seat instead of crawling over or under the table. She kept her mouth shut.

“Nori.”

She ignored him. She had no reason to apologize to anyone in the room.

“You’re right,” a woman with golden-brown hair offered. “None of us have taken the time to introduce ourselves, and my brother hasn’t taken the time to make introductions.”

“Ah, the sister with the question. I apologize for not listening when you spoke to me. Then again, I didn’t realize you were.”

“I apologize for that, Eleanor. I’m Rory. Gavin’s sister.”

“My condolences,” Nori said.

“Oh, I really like you,” another woman said with a laugh. “I’m Jo, married to Gavin’s brother.”

“Theo,” the big guy next to Jo introduced himself.

Nori let her gaze bounce between the three of them.

“Theo and I have the same father but different mothers,” Gavin said beside her, but his voice was hard. It didn’t sound as if he liked his father much.

“My mother was forced to marry their father when she was pregnant with me,” Rory continued, and Nori realized, though Rory claimed sibling status, there was no blood connection.

“Your king sold her mother to the abusive bastard,” the male next to Rory snarled.

As quickly as her anger had surged, exhaustion replaced it. She let out her breath, slumping in her chair.

“I’d like to be excused now, Gavin.”

“You haven’t eaten,” he stated, and she hated that he’d watched her closely enough to realize that.

“The hostility has stolen my appetite.”

“There’s no hostility directed at you, Nori.”

“I’d like to be excused,” she asked again. “Please.”

“I’ll escort you to our room.”

She had her chair scooted back and was out of his reach before she addressed him again. “I can see myself upstairs. I’m sure you have more evil to plot with your friends.”

“Nori.”

She hated the way the hard command in his voice affected her. “Eleanor. And you’ve done enough. You’ve made it clear I’ll be in your bed tonight. I’d like a few moments alone to collect myself, so I don’t try to kill you in your sleep.”

His full lips twitched, drawing her attention. It looked as if he were trying not to smile. She hated how he stood so close to her, the way he reached out and touched her as if it were his right. Husband or not, it wasn’t.

“Should we be worried for you, brother?” Theo asked.

“She won’t harm me,” Gavin stated as if his decree alone was enough to stay her hand.

“Depends on your definition of harm,” she snapped. Apparently, her anger wasn’t

gone.

“I’ll take her above and show her your room, Gavin. This is my home—”

“Childhood home,” the man beside the woman who’d spoken said.

“Childhood home,” she corrected. “I’m Genevieve Blaywolf. That’s my husband, Marcus.”

“I’ll come too since it was my father who stood proxy for your groom. Serena Lyons,” she introduced herself. “And my husband, Geoffrey.”

“Jo and I will come, as well,” Rory said as she stood. “I believe our mothers were cousins, which makes us family.”

“I…” Nori paused and shook her head. “I don’t have any family.”

Silence again and she realized some of her sadness must have come through. She hadn’t meant to show that. It was too much. She dropped her head, gaze toward the floor as the first teardrop fell. She hated tears, but her control was gone.

A hard hand reached out, fingers clasping her jaw as her head was forced up. She refused to meet his gaze, but she couldn’t hide the tears. With a growl, he swept her up into his arms and carried her from the room. She held herself as stiffly as she could, but she couldn’t stop the tears.

“My king, do you need anything?”

Gavin paused and turned. Nori glanced at the two men waiting for Gavin’s answer. They were exact replicas of one another. Twins.

“We’re good for the evening. Have the men gather in the courtyard in the morning. No reason to ease up on training while we’re here.”

“Are you going to introduce us to your bride?”

Nori buried her head in Gavin’s neck. At the moment, he was the lesser of two evils. She definitely didn’t want to meet these two when she’d been crying. At least, their interruption had allowed her to get a handle on her emotions.

“I’ll introduce you to my wife tomorrow. She had a long trip and needs to rest.”

She wanted to bite him for the way he made it sound as if he held concern for her wellbeing. His actions told a different story.

“Until tomorrow then, my queen. My king.”

“My queen. My king,” the second one said before Gavin carried her toward the stairs.

“Who were they?” she asked, lifting her head from his neck.

“Crispin and Conrad, or Cris and Con as I call them. My seconds. One of them will be with you at all times when I’m not around.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re my wife and a queen of the Dread Lands. Your safety is my number one priority.”

She snorted. “Do you often pass your priorities on to others?”

“I can’t be everywhere,” he growled.

“No, of course not. I’m sure you have to prioritize by level of importance. Your wedding obviously didn’t make the list.”

“Our wedding,” he corrected.

“Oh, there was nothing of me in that farce of a ceremony. Tell me, should I expect a proxy when my two days are up and it’s time to consummate?”

She quickly found herself trapped against the wall. He turned her so they were chest-to-chest and his groin pressed against her most intimate part. She felt him, the fullness of him, and there was no controlling the way her body trembled.

“No man will touch you but me. Ever.”

“Until you prove to me that I’m truly a priority, neither will you.”

“Make no mistake, Nori. This marriage will be consummated in two days, but there’s a lot we can do before then.”

She shook her head. “You won’t touch me without my consent.”

He grinned then, and the way it reflected in his blue eyes made her catch her breath. “You’ll enjoy my touch. Beg for it. The way you’re rubbing against me right now assures me you’ll be as passionate a lover as I could ever desire.”

She felt her skin flush as she accepted she was brushing herself against him. It was mortifying. She didn’t even understand why she was doing it. What the hell was this man doing to her?

“I don’t want you.”

“You want me,” he disagreed. “Even more, you need me. More than you realize.”

She shook her head, but he ignored her, sweeping her into his arms again and continuing down the hallway to his room. He set her on her feet once they were inside the door and dropped a kiss atop her head.

“I’ll have a bath sent up for you and dinner, as well. You didn’t eat. You’ll eat and bathe, or I’ll feed you and wash you myself. I won’t have you hungry and uncomfortable. Not even to spite me. I will take care of you.” He turned back to the door but paused and glanced over his shoulder at her before exiting. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come get you myself. When you’re ready, I’ll explain everything. I’ll see you soon.”

Nori watched him shut the door. Only then did she take a deep breath. Since a group of soldiers had arrived at her family home and set her life into upheaval a few days ago, she’d encountered every emotion she could think of. She’d been prepared to hate the man she was married to. She wasn’t so sure anymore.

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Gavin waited to rejoin his bride until he was sure she was in the bath he'd sent up. He'd agreed to give her two days before they consummated their marriage, which meant he had two days to get her comfortable with his touch. There were a lot of things the two of them could share without breaching her virginity. He planned to try as many as she'd allow. He wanted to taste every inch of her, and if she desired to reciprocate, he'd offer no argument.

He pushed open the bedchamber door and feasted his eyes on the beauty relaxing in the tub that had been placed before the fire. Her hair was wrapped in a sheet, the material helping to pad her neck where she rested it along the rim. She was beautiful. More so than he'd expected. It was her quick wit and engaging banter that turned him on, though. He hadn't anticipated that. If she expected him to show guilt over forcing the marriage, she'd be disappointed. When he'd set things in motion, she'd been a means to an end, but the moment she'd opened her sassy mouth, she'd become his sole focus.

"Is there a reason you're watching me in my bath?"

Her voice was husky, and he wanted to hear her moan his name while he was buried deep inside her. Soon. Two days.

"You're my wife," he replied as he settled in the chair that had been moved slightly to accommodate the tub that had been carried in. He had a perfect view of her. Her knees were up, hiding what lay beneath the water. One arm covered her breasts though he could see enough of her curves to know she'd be a generous handful.

"On paper," she reminded, keeping her beautiful eyes closed.

Gavin bent to remove his boots but kept his gaze on Nori. When he stood only his leathers remained. He loosened the ties and eased them down his thighs until they pooled at his feet. Then without a word, he stepped into the tub, lifting his wife and sitting with her in his lap, his hardened shaft trapped between her back and his stomach.

“Be still,” he ordered when she squawked and tried to wiggle out of his grasp. “Unless you want to end up validating our marriage in this tub.”

She immediately froze. He lifted her enough, so his staff slipped between her thighs, then settled her back against him.

“Shh, Nori,” he soothed. “We’re just going to feel one another.”

“You said I had two days,” she whispered, her body shuddering against his.

“I’m not going to take your virginity yet.” He brushed his hand along her side, fingers grazing the side of her breast. He grinned at the whimper that spilled from her lips. “Just a little touching.”

“This isn’t appropriate.”

“There are no limits to the pleasures found between husband and wife,” he promised as he continued to run his hands up and down her sides, his fingers gliding along her breasts without actually stopping to cup and squeeze them as he wanted. Two days had never seemed so long, but Gavin was a man of his word.

“Why did you want this marriage?” she asked, relaxing slightly, though she kept one hand clenched along the edge of the wooden tub and the other over her chest.

“There are few things that give a man pleasure. A place to call home. Men who are

loyal and true. And a woman to warm his bed and give him children.”

“Sounds like any woman would work,” she said.

“No,” he countered, finally sliding a palm in to cup her mound. “If that were the case, I would have already married.”

“It’s not too late to pick another.”

He brushed his thumb under her arm to rub across her nipple.

“You’re my wife. Accept it,” he ordered.

“I don’t even know you,” she muttered.

“Put your arms in the water.” He took both of her hands and guided them beneath the surface to rest on his thighs before lifting his palms to her breasts again. “Relax.” He plucked at her buds with his fingers, enjoying the view as they rose in hardened nubs at his touch. “Close your eyes and let me touch you.”

“I...I’ve never done anything like this.”

He almost laughed at her confession. Of course, she hadn’t. He’d kill the man who’d taken advantage of her if something similar had happened. Her innocence enchanted him. Knowing he’d be her first and only made him feel things he wasn’t prepared for.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, leaning down to place a soft kiss on her neck. “Remember everything is okay between us. I like touching you. Your body’s response says you enjoy it, too.”

“Mmm,” she said, making him grin again. He was supposed to be making her fall for

him, not the other way around.

“My brother and I grew up here, in Phillip’s lands. Two bastard sons of a man unworthy of having anything. Instead, your grandfather gifted him a beautiful wife who was pregnant at the time. My father used and abused her until she died. He sent Theo to train under a man who was even more brutal, and I followed shortly after. When the time was right, Theo left and took me with him. We went to the Dread Lands. Conquered and claimed parts of it for ourselves.”

“And became War Kings,” she said, and he almost groaned when her fingers gently skimmed along his thighs. It took all he had not to tense at a touch she didn’t realize was tempting. His cock bobbed, rubbing along her folds, and he wondered how far he could lead her on their first sexual experience.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Emphasis on war. We fight every day to keep what we’ve built, and some of that is because of Phillip.”

“How?”

He took it as progress that she didn’t tense up again but remained softly rubbing his thighs and letting him explore her breasts with his hands.

“For years, the worst of the worst from this land have been finding their way into ours, terrorizing our people and committing the worst of crimes.”

“How is that my grandfather’s fault?”

“Don’t let him fool you when he says there’s nothing he could do to prevent it. Do you think we’ve never had bad seeds among our men? Yet not one of them has managed to get into Phillip’s land and wreak havoc. Because we punish swiftly and without mercy. It’s a harsh world, and those who rule it have to be just as harsh.”

“My grandfather isn’t harsh.”

Gavin snorted until she turned in his arms, her hard nipples grazing his chest as she straddled his thighs. Whether she meant to or not, she trapped his staff between her thighs, so that her sex sat on it. Hell, he was close to finding completion from that alone.

“He isn’t harsh. He’s kind and gentle. My mother died in childbirth, and my father was killed during a skirmish. He found my adoptive parents and gave me to them. He made sure they had everything they needed to keep me safe and happy. I wanted for nothing when I was growing up.”

“How often did he visit you?”

“Every few years or so, he’d check in personally, but my father wrote him all the time, so grandfather was aware of how I was.”

More like the bastard who Phillip had given her to had wanted to request more money, but Gavin didn’t want his Nori to know that.

“Were your parents affectionate with you?”

“I didn’t lack for anything, but I wasn’t their child. Not really. They had three of their own. Two sons and a daughter. There was always laughter and fun in their home.”

He did his best to hide his anger. Her grandfather had given her away, much as he had Rory’s mother. Gavin noted Nori had referred to them as her parents, but he had the feeling she’d been ordered to do that. She referred to their children, her siblings. Their home not hers. Her grandfather had paid for her comfort. It hadn’t been given to her, or at least, she’d been made to think it had been bought and paid for. It made him want to beat the hell out of Phillip. He vowed then and there she would never

doubt her place in his life. As his wife, his queen, the mother of his children. Their children. Their home. He swore she'd never feel like an outsider again because it was obvious from her words she always had.

"Were you the oldest? Youngest? In the middle?"

"I'm between their youngest son and their daughter. Mary was born a few months after me. Justin was the oldest followed by Robert," she told him.

He noted the switch in tone when she mentioned Robert. There was something there. He planned to find out what.

"You said Justin was the oldest?"

"He was killed in battle when I was thirteen," she told him.

"Were you close?"

"He treated me kindly," she offered.

"And the others? Robert and Mary?"

She shrugged. "You and Theo seem close."

"Theo and I never doubted we were brothers, and we've always acted like it. He took his role as big brother seriously. Watched over me. We've been through a lot. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my brother."

"That's nice," Nori murmured, rubbing her cheek against his skin as she settled into him. "I always wanted a sibling."

She was killing him and had no clue. It would take everything he had not to rip into Phillip for what he'd done. How could a male be so oblivious to the lives he ruined? He placed people where he wanted them, wiped his hands, and moved on. The man was unworthy of the crown he wore. That was the difference between a male born to inherit and one who fought for what he held.

She mumbled something, but he didn't catch what she said.

"Hmm?" Gavin glanced down as Nori nuzzled into his neck and went limp. His feisty little wife was sound asleep. Naked. In his arms. She'd allowed his touch and been soothed by it. Enough to relax and drift into sleep.

He stepped from the tub, being careful to jostle her as little as possible. He chuckled at her wrinkled nose and the way she muttered as he dried her body and placed her on the bed. He made quick work of wiping the droplets from his skin before sliding under the bedding beside her. He pulled her back into his arms, dropped a soft kiss on her lips, and made a vow. No one would hurt his wife again. He'd make sure of it.

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Nori woke alone, but she swore the touch of her husband lingered on her skin, on her lips. As memories of the night before flooded in, she groaned and hid her head in the bedding. Not only had she allowed his touch, she'd enjoyed it. Even now, she hated he wasn't with her when she'd awoken. His hands had done things to her breasts that had set her whole body afire with something she'd never felt. She had a feeling, if she hadn't fallen asleep last night, they would have consummated the marriage. There was only one thing to do now. She had to avoid her husband at all costs.

She rose from the bed and hurriedly dressed, brushing her hair until it hung in waves down her back. She quickly opened the door, stepped out and nearly shrieked when a male stepped directly in front of her.

"Good morning, my queen." He bowed before her. "I'll escort you below to break your fast."

"Which one are you?" she inquired, immediately recognizing him as one of the twins who served Gavin. Crispin and Conrad, or Cris and Con as Gavin had told her.

"Cris, at your service, my queen."

She waved that away. "I'm Nori."

He smiled but shook his head. "Though I appreciate your offer, my queen, calling you by your name would not be appropriate. You are my queen or Queen Montrose of the Dread Lands."

"Well, that's a mouthful," she muttered as she turned to walk toward the stairs.

“Indeed, it is,” Cris agreed.

“How long have you and your brother been with Gavin?” she asked. If he had to trail along with her, she could at least use him for information.

“We met when we were all sent to earn our keep under a brute of a lord here in the weak king’s lands. More than once, your husband stepped in to defend those too weak or injured to defend themselves.”

“You’ll not refer to my king as weak,” she charged, turning to face him. He gave her a confused look.

“I’ve just stated your king defended those who needed it most. He’s not weak.”

“I’m talking about my king not Gavin.”

Cris cleared his throat. “Your husband is your king now. As he is mine.”

She rolled her eyes and turned to walk away again, but his next words stopped her.

“Your grandfather, Phillip, is the weak king.”

“Don’t confuse kindness with weakness,” she corrected him.

Cris barked a laugh. “Phillip is many things to many people, but I can’t imagine any would use the term kind to describe him. Don’t confuse absence and neglect to be anything other than what it is, my queen.”

“And what is that?”

He opened his mouth, glanced over her shoulder, then pressed his lips together. She

knew Gavin stood behind her before she felt the delicious heat of his body surround her. He didn't stop until she felt the full length of his body along her back.

"Are you okay?" He nudged her until she faced him. She noted Con was with him.

Though the brothers were twins, and at first glance appeared identical, she noted Cris had a hint of honey in his brown eyes akin to the golden mead they drank, whereas Con's were a richer, darker shade of brown. She was sure if she paid close attention, she'd find other tells to help her know who was who between them.

"We're fine," she answered Gavin. "Cris and I were having a private conversation while he escorted me below to the hall."

"Cris can go check on the men," Gavin ordered. "I'll escort you."

"I'd prefer Cris."

Gavin glared. Cris stilled, and Con's mouth twitched with a grin.

"You'll be obedient, like a good little wife."

"You wish," she muttered and went to move around him. She'd barely gone two steps before he caught her arm and pulled her to his side.

"Keep that up, and I'll take you back to the bedroom to spank some obedience into you," he warned.

She inhaled sharply, cheeks burning as she glanced toward Cris and Con, who were thankfully already heading in the other direction and halfway down the hallway. Noting it was only her and Gavin, she jerked her arm from his touch.

“I’m not a child, and I won’t be threatened with a spanking.”

Her breath caught in her throat at the heat in his stare as he raked it over her before settling on her face. “I know you’re not a child. When I take you over my knee, you’ll be naked.” He leaned in, his breath tickling her ear. “Once I show you the pleasure to be found in the strike of my palm on your buttocks, you’ll beg me to spank you.”

“Never,” she whispered as a shudder went through her. Her nipples were hard points as she remembered the feel of his fingers and the way that touch had made her ache between her thighs.

“Is that a challenge?” he murmured.

“Stop it!” she ordered, jerking away from him again and heading with quick steps toward the stairs. “I won’t be intimidated by you, Gavin.”

He caught her arm at the top of the stairs, wrapped her hand around his elbow and held it there while he escorted her down to the main floor. She was relieved when they entered the main hall and there were others at the table breaking their fast. One of them yelled out as Gavin led her to join them.

“Eleanor!” the one she thought was Rory called out to her. Nori remembered her saying they were related. Cousins of some sort. She knew Gavin and his brother considered Rory their little sister even though they had no blood relationship.

“Gavin, your brother said to tell you to meet them in the courtyard. He’ll have your horse saddled and ready to go.” This was from Theo’s wife. If her memory was right, the woman was named Jo and was the sister of Rory’s husband, War King Jamie Drake.

“Sounds like someone is requesting your presence,” Nori muttered. “You should take

advantage of that. Not everyone does.”

Gavin laughed, spun her around until she faced him, then lowered his head and kissed her. Not a chaste peck either. He used his thumb on her chin to tug her mouth open then swept in and consumed her. There was no other way to describe it. She wasn't even sure when he broke away. Her eyes were still closed. Her legs threatening to collapse beneath her. Until she felt the tap of his hand against her buttock. Her eyes flew open and met the devilment in his gaze.

“I'll be back soon, and we'll spend the afternoon together,” he promised.

“Take your time,” she told him but doubted it came out the way she intended since she was breathless from his kiss.

“Miss me,” he ordered then turned and walked away, giving her another pat on the butt. Why? So, she'd think about the spanking he'd threatened her with? Good lord, he would drive her insane.

“Are you okay?” Rory asked, rising from the table.

“Sit,” Jo ordered her. “Jamie will kill me if you get up and walk around when you were dizzy this morning.”

“You were dizzy?” Nori asked, finally moving to join them.

“I was bent over, throwing up, and stood too fast,” Rory said. “My husband worries and is driving me crazy. So crazy this might be the only child we have.”

Jo snorted. “Good luck with that.”

“You're pregnant? How exciting! I've always dreamed of having a family,” Nori

admitted as she took a seat. A servant immediately placed food and drink before her.

“Gavin will make an amazing father,” Rory told her with a smile. “And the two of you will have beautiful children.”

“Oh.” Nori shook her head. “No.”

Rory and Jo exchanged a look.

“He’s your husband,” Jo reminded her. “Once your marriage is consummated, if he’s anything like his brother, you’ll spend a lot of time working on making a child.”

“I didn’t need to know that about my brother,” Rory muttered.

“Remember that when you talk about Jamie,” Jo fired back.

“We haven’t consummated yet. I’m hoping to talk him out of it.”

They both stared at her.

“I saw the way he looked at you,” Jo said. “He won’t change his mind.”

“You’re his wife, Eleanor,” Rory added.

“And today is your second day,” Jo added.

“Oh, God,” Nori moaned. What was she going to do? She couldn’t be here when Gavin came back inside. She’d have to find her grandfather and see if he could think of any way to free her from the marriage. Gavin hadn’t even been there. How could the vows she’d spoken be held true when the man she’d stood with wasn’t Gavin? Plus, her grandfather had mentioned something about having it annulled if there was

no consummation.

“What are you thinking?” Jo asked, and Nori blinked as she glanced up and took them in.

“I can’t let this marriage be consummated.”

“Good luck with that,” Jo said with another snort.

“Jo!” Rory reprimanded. “She’s afraid. Don’t be so callous.”

“I’m not afraid,” Nori said, but even she knew it wasn’t the truth. She was terrified of Gavin and the hold he seemed capable of having over her. She lost all sense of preservation when he was around. “I need to get out of this keep. Clear my head.”

“Do you ride?” Jo asked.

“Yes! I love to ride. I was allowed to bring my favorite horse with me when I came.”

“I love to ride also,” Jo told her. “Rory can’t because big brother doesn’t want her in any danger.”

Rory growled.

“He loves you.” Jo nudged Rory when she didn’t comment.

“I know. He just drives me crazy, and I’m barely into this pregnancy. Besides, I bet Theo will be even worse when you’re pregnant.”

“Please, I have that man wrapped around my finger,” Jo said with a grin.

“I think it’s the other way around,” Rory challenged with a laugh.

“About that ride?” Nori reminded them.

“Eat,” Jo ordered as she stood from the table. “I’ll take care of everything. Meet me at the stables when you’re through.”

Nori watched her stride out of the room before turning back to Rory.

“You’re not going to try to run away, are you?” Rory asked.

“Of course not,” Nori lied because she wasn’t sure what she was thinking. She just knew she needed space from Gavin. Time to come up with a plan to make him not want her. That was it! She’d come up with a way to make sure Gavin Montrose, War King of the Dread Lands, regretted choosing her for his bride.

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Gavin sat atop his horse, watching Nori as she left the keep at a steady canter, side by side with Jo. Cris followed behind with an entourage of men, including warriors who'd fought for Gavin, as well as his brother, Theo.

"Your wife is up to mischief," he told Theo, though he kept his gaze on his bride.

She sat her horse well, riding with an ease that showed she was more than just comfortable in the saddle. Jo said something to her that had Nori throwing her head back and laughing. Then she leaned low, nuzzling the stallion beneath her and making Gavin jealous of a damn horse. The next thing he knew, she was flying. Woman and beast one as they flew across the earth.

"My wife lives for mischief, and yours rides like the wind itself."

Gavin nodded in agreement with his brother. "Where do you think they're off to?"

"Jo's been restless since we got here. She doesn't like to stay in one place long. Even before she met me, Jamie couldn't keep her at his castle. She was always roaming."

"That would drive me crazy," Gavin admitted.

"I wouldn't change anything about her. I never would have caught her and made her mine if she'd stayed where she was told."

Theo was madly in love with his wife. It healed something in Gavin to see his brother so happy. Their lives had been hell in more ways than one. Their brutal father had shipped them off to an even more brutal male tasked with making soldiers out of

them. The men's actions had honed more than just the muscles under Gavin and Theo's skin. They'd honed them into hardened weapons and nurtured a soul-deep hatred. Gavin's one regret was he hadn't been the one to kill his father. He'd owed it to his mother, a beautiful and kind woman, who'd died long before she should have. He'd failed to protect her.

"We won't accomplish anything while they're out of sight. Neither of us will be able to focus. We should follow them." Theo nudged his horse, and Gavin stayed beside him, keeping a good distance between them and the women but staying close enough to hear the beat of the hooves ahead of them. They'd gone less than a mile when Theo spoke again. "Jo wants a baby."

Gavin glanced at his brother. "You'll make great parents."

Theo didn't say anything.

"You'll make a great dad, Theo. You have to know that."

"Do you ever wonder if any of his rot is inside us somewhere, waiting for something to make it grow until it consumes us and turns us into him?"

"In you? Never," Gavin swore. "You're the only reason goodness still exists in me."

"He did a great job of fucking us up," Theo growled.

"Not just us," Gavin said. "Rory, too."

It killed him that they'd been gone and unaware of what was happening with Rory. Rory's husband had been the one to end their father's life. The one to punish him for laying hands on Rory, for leaving scars on her skin that would never go away. Much like the ones Gavin and Theo bore.

“Sometimes, I think Jo hates him more than I do.”

“Have you talked to her about our childhood?” Gavin questioned.

“Yes. She eases my demons and reminds me goodness exists in this world. That I might deserve some of it.”

Gavin opened his mouth then closed it at the memory of holding Nori in his arms all night, the way her skin had felt against his. The way she’d listened and shared. She was honest and gentle and na?ve yet had a fire inside her she wasn’t afraid to show him. She drew him as no one ever had. She made him want things he’d never seen in his life. A home, a wife, children. She was supposed to be the pawn they needed to make Phillip put a stop to the riffraff making their way into the Dread Lands. A way to control him. Gavin wasn’t supposed to fall for her.

“Speaking of brides,” Theo began. “How was your first night with yours?”

“Better than I expected.”

“Do tell, little brother,” Theo encouraged with a grin.

“She’s not what I expected. Phillip’s lucky I didn’t know more about her before we spoke with him. I might have let Marcus kill him when he wanted to.”

“That explains your early morning messenger. What word did he bring you?” Theo asked.

“He sold her off like chattel,” Gavin seethed. “His daughter died giving birth to her. Her father was killed in battle, likely never knowing she was conceived. Phillip passed her off to a baron who needed the extra income. They fed her, clothed her, and did the bare minimum for her. According to the information I was given, they even

took her gifts from her grandfather from her or never gave them to her in the first place. That happened a lot when she was little since they knew he wouldn't visit."

"We knew he was a bastard," Theo reminded him, and Gavin growled. "I'm guessing this is why you've avoided him this morning."

"If I see him right now, I'll be hard pressed not to rip his head from his body, Theo. She hungers for any scraps of love and affection he throws at her. She told me about her parents, then about their children, and never once included herself as one of them. She wants a family of her own."

"Good. That's what she'll have as your bride. A family. You come with all of us. Me and Jo. Jamie and Rory. Geoffrey and Serena. Marcus and Genevieve. The grandfathers. Our men. Hell, I heard Cris and Con arguing over who'd get to be her second." Theo laughed. "For their safety, I won't tell you who won."

Gavin shook his head. He trusted Cris and Con with his life. He had no doubt they'd give theirs to protect Nori.

"Cris did," Gavin said. "Nori already told me she prefers him to me."

"You don't seem upset by that."

Gavin shrugged. "She's mine. She knows it. She just hasn't accepted it, yet."

"Your plans to get her to accept you?"

"I've already started getting her accustomed to my touch."

Theo's brows rose as he glanced at Gavin.

“Touching only. I’m a man of my word,” Gavin said.

“And this is day two.”

“Which ends at midnight.”

Theo shook his head. “You’ve always been a strategist, plotting and planning every move.”

“Only when it matters.”

“She’s more than a means to an end,” Theo stated, and Gavin nodded.

“I might have agreed without knowing everything, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t aware of her, that I didn’t already have someone stationed in the home she was sent to. As soon as I knew we were serious about standing off with Phillip, I sent one of my men to gather information for me.”

“You were already looking at the possibility of taking her before Genevieve’s grandfather made the suggestion.”

“Yes,” Gavin agreed. He’d been looking into her for a while. “I was already planning to take her and hold her until she agreed to be my wife. Lord Kingsley wanted to protect Genevieve. He presented what I wanted, and we all agreed to it.”

“Sometimes, you scare me, Gavin.” But Theo’s face didn’t show that. If anything, Gavin’s brother appeared impressed.

“I learned from the best.”

Theo shook his head. “I’m all brawn. That brain is all you. There’s one thing I don’t

understand, though. If you already had this in the works, why did you send Armstrong as your proxy?"

"I had things I needed to put in place back at the castle, and John was willing to stand in for me."

John, the father of Serena Armstrong, now Serena Lyons, had taken to all of them like a paternal figure. Gavin thought the man had more than a friendly liking of Geoffrey's mother, Maura, but if so, the two were keeping it quiet. Gavin respected that because he knew John Armstrong would never do anything without Maura Lyons' consent. That was a concept Gavin's father hadn't cared for.

"I thought the attacks from the coast were dying off," Theo said.

"They have. I wanted to make sure everyone understood that I would be returning with a wife." Gavin was a perceptive man. "I wanted everything prepared for her arrival."

"That was thoughtful," Theo said.

Gavin nodded, but his gaze was on the road ahead of them where Jo and Nori were surrounded by the warriors. Cris moved toward the front of the group while Gavin watched.

"What the hell?" Theo thundered. "That doesn't look like a friendly group to me."

"It looks like a troop of Phillip's soldiers. Do you think he called them before or after he agreed to our terms?" Gavin asked.

"Doesn't matter. If even one of them touches a hair on Jo's head, I'll kill them," Theo warned. "Let's go."

Gavin didn't bother with taking out his bow. Their men had Nori and Jo encircled. Not a man who wore Phillip's colors would get to them. Instead, he let out a hoarse, raspy cry that descended in pitch. It was that sound that had earned him the battle name of The Hawk. It served its purpose, pulling the eyes of Phillip's men to Gavin and Theo. Theo drew his axe and though Gavin was still too far to hear, he saw Jo say something that had his warriors laughing. Nori used that moment to urge her horse up by Cris'.

One of the soldiers rode closer, far too close to Nori for Gavin's liking. He was close enough to hear when the man spoke.

"We've come to fetch you home, Eleanor," the man yelled, reaching for her.

Nori reared back, startling her horse. Cris smoothly forced his mount in front of hers, managing to block access to her while still striking out and punching the other male in the jaw.

"What the hell? I knew you were heathens, but I didn't think you'd attack unprovoked," the man roared, fumbling for his sword.

"Unprovoked?" Gavin asked as his men parted to let him and Theo through. Theo halted next to Jo, who whispered something that had him grinning. Gavin rode straight for Nori. He never moved his gaze from the man who'd attempted to grab her as he swept his wife onto the saddle in front of him. "You meant to touch my wife. Men have lost their lives for much less than that."

"Your wife? What the hell is going on here?"

"Hello, Robert," Nori said, and Gavin heard the tremble she tried to hide, felt it as she pressed back against him. "Didn't your father tell you about my marriage?"

“I haven’t spoken to my father. I was made aware you were seen being taken from my home in the company of Lord Armstrong and a group of heathens. I feared for your safety.”

Nori laughed, but Gavin seethed as he took in Robert Buckingham’s use of my . My father. My home. Not theirs. His.

“You’ve never feared for my safety a day in your life, Robert. I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t bat an eye if something happened to me. I’m just a little, lost orphan girl who nobody loves, right?”

Gavin saw red then but didn’t let it show. He dropped a kiss atop his wife’s head and eased his hold as she lay her head against his shoulder. He saw Robert’s gaze narrow as he took them in.

“You’re married?” Robert looked ready to leap from his saddle and take Gavin to the ground. If not for Nori in his lap, Gavin would welcome the other man to attempt.

“We are,” Gavin answered.

“That’s impossible,” Robert argued.

“Why?” Gavin already knew the answer. It had been part of what his spy had shared with him when he’d arrived early that morning. What his man hadn’t been privy to was the fact Buckingham was looking for her.

“Because Eleanor is my bride. We were pledged to one another as children. She’s mine.”

“The hell you say!” Nori thundered. “I would never be your bride!”

Gavin smiled. “Of course not. Nori isn't suited to be the wife of the second-born son of a baron. She's meant to be mine. A War King's bride. His queen. The greatest treasure I'll ever hold.”

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Nori glanced up at Gavin, shocked at his words. Did he mean them? Did he see her as a treasure? Holy hell! She was a queen. She'd known that. Logically, at least. But hearing it... Hearing him refer to her that way to a man she both feared and hated, it put it in a different light.

Gavin said something else, but her ears were thundering with the rapid beat of her blood. He turned his horse, Cris beside him, holding the reins of her mount and leading him along with them. She should do something, say something, but she couldn't form words. She was betrothed to Robert? Her grandfather had never mentioned it. Not once. Why would he do that to her? She'd told him more than once how mean Robert was to her. Once, she'd even begged him to take her with him, to not leave her at the Buckingham's. He'd laughed it off and told her she was being silly.

"Nori."

She glanced up to meet Gavin's gaze when he cupped her jaw and tilted her face toward his. She wasn't sure how many times he'd called her name, but she could tell it had been more than once.

"You're mine. He can't touch you."

How did he know exactly what she needed to hear? How was he so attuned to her so quickly?

"We have to consummate the marriage. As soon as we get back."

She heard Cris try to cover a laugh but didn't care.

"We'll consummate after two days," Gavin told her. "That was my word to you."

"I don't care. Today. Tomorrow. I won't go with him. He can't make me!"

"No one is taking you from me, Nori."

"You promise?"

He bent and kissed her softly on the lips. Not one of the explorative kisses he'd given her the night before. This was a soft, fleeting brush of his lips over hers.

"I promise. I need you to promise to stay with either me, Cris, or Con at all times while we remain here. Can you do that?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I don't want you to be afraid. I'll protect you. Always. Buckingham can bluster all he wants. Phillip can as well. None of it matters. You're my wife."

"But we haven't consummated our marriage. My grandfather said it's not binding until we do."

Gavin looked angry. "Your grandfather lied to you. It seems he's made a habit of doing that. Our marriage is ours. I promised you two days to get accustomed to me. None of this changes my vow."

"I don't want to go with him. He hates me, Gavin. He made life horrible for me when we were growing up. He..." She paused, gulping down the fear that rose in her throat. "He did things. Said things. I won't survive."

“He’ll die for that alone.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Just make him leave.”

“Nori. Fuck, you’re shaking.” Gavin tugged her closer, wrapping his arms around her. “I’ve got you. He won’t touch you. I swear.”

She’d never been one to let fear rule her, but it had hold of her now.

“I need one more promise from you,” Gavin told her.

“Anything.”

“Don’t go anywhere with your grandfather.”

“You don’t trust him?” She knew it was a stupid question as soon as it left her mouth.

“Has he ever once mentioned the betrothal to you?”

“No.”

“Did the baron mention it to you?”

“No.”

“I know you love him, but I’m asking you to trust me. Don’t let him get you alone. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

How could her grandfather promise her to the very male she begged him to take her

away from? Why would he do that? Why would the Buckingham's never say anything about it to her?

"What's the plan?" Gavin's brother asked as they rode through the gates of the Kingsley Keep.

"Eleanor and I will find the others and head upstairs to talk. We won't let her out of our sight," Jo vowed. "Cris will be with us."

Nori almost smiled when Cris sighed heavily. Jo ignored him.

"And you know Geoffrey will have either Titus or Duncan with us. We'll be fine while you deal with this. My vote is you slit his throat."

Nori gasped at Jo's suggestion, but the other woman merely shrugged.

"He was going to take you, Eleanor. He needs to be taught that no one touches a queen unless she allows it." Jo's gaze was hard, as if she were remembering something. "And no one touches what belongs to a War King. No one."

Theo growled his agreement, and Jo smiled at her husband. Nori noted the love between the two. In fact, it seemed that all of the War Kings and their wives loved one another. She wondered how the other marriages had come about. She'd have to ask them when they were all together as Jo had said. Nori was curious how they'd fallen for their kings. She wondered if it was possible for her and Gavin.

Gavin rode his horse up to the keep steps before handing her down to Cris then dismounting and handing the reins to one of his men.

"Only Buckingham is allowed inside the keep. The others can join Phillip's men. I want the door guarded until further notice." He turned, took Nori's hand then led her

inside with him.

“Nori, I’ve been looking for you.” Her grandfather moved toward her, and she immediately stepped closer to Gavin.

“Go with Cris,” he told her, tilting her face up to him and kissing her before he urged her toward Cris. Jo joined her, linking their arms and heading them both toward the stairs.

“Nori!” Her grandfather called behind her, and for the first time in her life, she ignored him. “Nori!”

She heard the rumble of Gavin’s voice, but there was too much distance for her to know what was said. She heard a door slam open and barely kept from jumping.

Jo called out to one of the chambermaids in the hallway as they passed. “See that wine, bread, and cheese are brought up to the solar, please. And ale for the men,” she added when Cris sighed again.

“My queen.” Cris held open the chamber door for Nori and Jo.

Nori moved inside but couldn’t sit, pacing the room instead.

“I hear you had an encounter while out riding,” Rory offered when she and Serena entered.

Serena wore men’s clothes, leathers like the War Kings and their warriors, along with a shirt and boots that rose to just below her knees. She had a sword attached to the belt at her waist. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a braid. She looked like a warrior. Nori was both appalled and envious in the same breath. She’d never dream of wearing something so scandalous, but the other woman seemed confident.

“Where’s Genevieve?” Jo asked.

“Getting refreshments sent up from the kitchen,” Serena said. “She said not to say anything until she gets here.”

“Cris.”

Nori glanced over as Con filled the doorway and called to his brother. “Gavin wants you with him.” He glanced over and smiled at Nori. “I’m on queen watch.”

“Queen watch?” she questioned.

“He likes to tease, my queen,” Cris told her then gave his twin a pointed look. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice,” Con proclaimed.

“If he’s not, I’ll just tell Gavin,” Nori said without thought then felt her face flame as their gazes both jerked toward her.

Both of them grinned before Con spoke. “I like you.”

“I’m still deciding, but I like Cris.”

“A woman with taste, my queen,” Cris said then left the room with a laugh.

Before Con could say anything else, Genevieve walked in with two more men at her heels. Both carried trays filled with food. One of them was Lord Armstrong, the man who’d been Gavin’s proxy for their ceremony. She’d seen the other one around Serena before. She thought his name was Duncan. Four other men followed with filled pitchers and mugs for all of them. Once everything was set out per Genevieve’s

direction, Duncan directed the others out of the room.

“Queen Eleanor,” Lord Armstrong said as he headed her way. “I promised Gavin I’d keep all of you company while he’s occupied below.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she said. She had to admit, he’d been nothing but nice to her since he’d shown up and she’d become Eleanor Montrose, Queen of the Dread Lands. “Please, call me Nori.” She let her glance encompass the others. “All of you. Call me Nori.”

“I knew it was only a matter of time before you saw us as friends,” Jo said with a grin. “Welcome to the family!”

Nori wasn’t sure why those four words hit her so hard, but when the tears fell down her face, there was nothing she could do to stop them.

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Gavin held his temper on a taut leash.

“One word and I’ll make sure you never see your granddaughter again,” he swore when Phillip opened his mouth. The man had followed Gavin when he’d realized Nori wouldn’t answer his calls.

“What the hell is going on here?” Phillip demanded then turned toward the door when it was shoved open. “Buckingham? What are you doing there?”

Gavin was certain he saw the panic in Phillip’s eyes before he wrapped his hand around the man’s throat. A king? He was weak. A coward.

“Unhand me!” Phillip demanded.

Guards stepped forward at Phillip’s bellow, but none were stupid enough to try to interfere when faced with five War Kings and several of their warriors. Jamie, Geoffrey, and Marcus joined the group forming in the entryway.

“Let’s move this away from the stairs,” Marcus said, pointing them all toward the Great Hall.

“I should kill you now and save Nori the heartache of realizing what her grandfather is capable of.” Gavin gave Phillip’s neck a hard squeeze before releasing him and stepping away. He wasn’t surprised when Buckingham moved toward Phillip. Shaking his head in disgust, Gavin followed the other War Kings, taking a breath to help him gain control of his temper while he walked.

“I love my granddaughter,” Phillip proclaimed loudly.

“You don’t know the meaning of the word love. Hell, I question if you’ve ever loved anyone in your life,” Gavin said. “How long did you wait after her mother died before you removed her to another home? How quickly did you get rid of her? Days? Hours?”

“I mourned Rosamund when she died in childbirth. She was my daughter, but I had to focus on Eleanor. She was a newborn. She needed a wet nurse. A home. Court is no place for a baby.”

“Children need more than that,” Lord Kingsley said as he rose from his seat by the fireplace and came to stand beside Marcus. Kingsley was a grandfather who’d loved his grandchild with everything he had. He’d also accepted Marcus as soon as he saw how much Genevieve meant to him, that Marcus would love and protect her. Phillip could learn a lot from Kingsley.

“Is that what you tell yourself?” Gavin couldn’t imagine sending his child, his grandchild, to strangers. Never. Not as long as there was breath in his lungs. “Does it help you sleep at night? She needed family, love, protection.”

Theo growled in agreement, standing at Gavin’s other side.

“I gave her all of that when I placed her with the Buckingham family. A mother and father. Two older brothers and, soon after, a baby sister.”

Gavin wasn’t sure if Phillip actually believed his own lies or if he was merely offering them up as the excuses they were.

“Like you gave your niece and Rory to Montrose?” Jamie suggested, voice rife with anger.

“I did what I thought was best when I learned Anne was with child out of wedlock. I had to protect her and the child she carried,” Phillip argued.

“You did a great job of that,” Jamie snarled.

“I was assured everything was fine!” Phillip roared.

“Probably just like the Buckingham’s assured you Nori was fine. Fine with a family she was never a part of. They took your money, your gifts, but they never accepted Nori, never loved her,” Gavin roared. It tore him up. Only his brother’s grip on his shoulder kept him from planting a fist in Phillip’s face.

“My parents treated Eleanor like family,” Robert Buckingham countered, face red with rage. The bastard shouldn’t have reminded Gavin of his presence.

“Your parents treated her as little more than a servant unless her grandfather was in attendance, which was very fucking rare. When he did grace her with a visit, she was so happy to see him that she wouldn’t have said a bad thing in hopes he’d stay longer or take her with him. How many times did she ask you to let her go with you?”

Phillip shook his head. “She was just a child. It wouldn’t have been appropriate for her to be with me. A young girl needs a mother, a home.”

“What type of bastard leaves his granddaughter behind when she begs to go with you?” Lord Kingsley asked with disgust. “I raised my Genevieve after we lost her parents, and I dare anyone to tell me it wasn’t appropriate.”

“A child needs love. Unfortunately, your wealth and title couldn’t buy that. And you made her life hell at every chance,” Gavin continued, gaze going from Phillip to Buckingham then back to Phillip. “Still, you promised her to him as a bride.”

“You promised her to a man who referred to her as a little, lost orphan girl no one loved,” Cris added as he strode across to stand behind his king.

“Nori?” Gavin whispered, wanting to make sure his wife was settled.

“Fine. Con’s with her upstairs with the rest of the queens, Armstrong and Duncan,” Cris assured him.

“What?” Phillip bellowed, bringing attention back to him. He shook his head in denial. “She was promised to Justin not Robert.”

“The betrothal fell to me when Justin died.” Robert glared at Phillip.

“I never agreed to that. No matter what your father may have said, I never agreed with that. Nori made her opinion of you very clear. I’d planned to join her with another before that brute forced a marriage onto her,” Phillip snapped.

“She was forced?” Buckingham asked, his thoughts clear on his face.

“My wife is none of your concern.” Gavin reined his temper in. If he didn’t, blood would be shed. Soon.

“Nothing is final until her marriage has been consummated, War King, and by your own words, that hasn’t happened yet.” Phillip looked smug about that fact.

“Why hasn’t it been consummated?” Robert wanted to know.

“Our marriage is none of your concern.” His gaze moved from Robert and settled on Phillip. “I’ve allowed your presence here, allowed your men to stay.” He wouldn’t admit it, but it was because he saw none of them as a threat. He was sure all of them already knew that. Even now, Phillip stood by himself, his men still in the entryway

as far as they could get from the War Kings and their warriors.

“You needed me here while our agreement was drawn up and readied for us to sign,” Phillip argued.

“Which we did. If that were the only reason you remained, you’d have been shown to the gate yestereve with an escort of our men to make sure you didn’t find your way back. We have what we wanted. The land. The agreement to keep your criminals out of our lands. And I have Nori.”

“Not by her choice,” Phillip muttered.

“If you think to try to interfere in my marriage, your kingdom will be in search of a new king,” Gavin warned.

“I don’t take kindly to threats, War King,” Phillip warned.

“It wasn’t a threat,” Gavin told him. “Consider it a promise. I’d suggest you have your men ready to ride out first thing in the morning. This is part of the Dread Lands now, and you’re no longer welcome.”

“We’ll see what my granddaughter has to say about that.”

“If you’re lucky, I’ll let you say goodbye to her in the morning.” He would but the farewell wouldn’t be for Phillip. It would be for Nori.

Gavin turned then and focused on Buckingham, stepping into his space, so there were mere inches between them. He wanted to make sure the other man understood exactly what Gavin was telling him.

“Nori is not your concern. She never has been. She was never promised to you, and

even if she had been, it wouldn't have mattered. She's mine. Harm one hair on her head, and I'll rip you limb from limb. You'll leave tomorrow with your king and never show your face around my queen again. Are we clear?"

Buckingham's face was red with rage, but his chin jerked. Gavin didn't believe him. His expression said he'd try something stupid, and when he did, Gavin would see him dead.

"Go see that my soldiers are prepared to travel tomorrow," Phillip ordered Buckingham. "I'll see you back to your home. I'd like a word with your father. As for you," he pointed at Gavin. "I will be seeing my granddaughter before I take my leave. Furthermore, I'll continue to check in on her and ensure she's safe and well cared for."

"Unlikely," Jamie growled.

"I don't expect you to believe me, but what happened to Anne and her daughter is one of my greatest regrets. And it's something I must live with for the rest of my life," Phillip replied.

"At least, you can live with it," Jamie tossed out before turning and leaving the keep, Geoffrey following after him.

"I'll be with my men for the rest of the afternoon. Perhaps, I'll see my granddaughter at dinner."

"No," Gavin said, not offering further information. He planned to spend the evening with Nori in their room, continuing to get her comfortable to his touch. Then as the evening reached its peak, he planned to make his wife his. Completely.

Phillip sighed, shook his head, then left, Buckingham and the rest of the king's

soldiers following along with him.

“He’s not to be trusted,” Cris said once they were gone.

“She’s not to be left alone,” Gavin ordered. He didn’t need to ask who Cris referred to. It was obvious to both of them. Buckingham.

“Probably best if none of the women are left alone,” Kingsley warned. “I wouldn’t put it past a man like that to use whomever he can to get what he wants.”

Marcus nodded, agreeing with his wife’s grandfather. “Blood will spill before that one leaves.”

“As long as it’s his,” Gavin said, and he hoped he was the one to spill it.

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“Oh, Nori.”

Nori couldn't seem to control the tears pouring from her eyes, even as the women surrounded her, trying to offer comfort. It was as if, once the damn was broken, every ounce of sorrow and fear and pain was released in the torrent currently erupting from her. The men were silent, and she hoped Con wasn't even now rushing below to tell Gavin his wife was a sobbing mess.

“Go,” she heard Jo say.

“We're staying.” That was definitely Con's voice.

“You can guard us from the hall.” Jo wasn't backing down.

“Father, please.”

Nori thought that was Serena, Lord Armstrong's daughter.

“Let's go. The ladies are safe in here, and I believe the queens could use a bit of privacy.”

Nori had liked Lord Armstrong from the start. He'd been attentive and compassionate during the trip from the Buckingham home to Lord Kingsley's, where she'd met her husband. She thought she might have enjoyed having him for a father.

An arm tugged her from the women, and her head was tilted up to Con. She wasn't sure what he saw in her face, but she didn't see anger or judgment.

“You’re a queen,” he reminded her, and she did her best to gulp back her tears.

“I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “A queen has no need to apologize.”

“I can if I want to.”

His lips twitched as if he were fighting a smile. “I’ll be right outside the door, my queen. Anything you need, you’ve only to ask.”

“Thank you, Con.”

He winked at her. “I have to make sure you see who’s the better twin, my queen.”

She gave a watery laugh, and he nodded as if that was what he’d waited for.

“I’m outside the door,” Duncan told Serena, then he followed the others, pulling the door to the solar closed behind him.

“You’re going to be fine,” Jo told her as she wrapped her arm around Nori and led her to a chair. “You have family now. In fact, we’re sisters. I’ve gone from having no sisters to having two very quickly.”

“And we’re cousins of some distance,” Rory reminded her.

“I’d say as queens of the Dread Lands, we’re all sisters of sorts,” Genevieve stated firmly. “We have to stick together.”

“Agreed,” Serena put in.

“I get how overwhelmed you must be,” Jo told Nori. “I remember how I felt when Theo kidnapped me. My emotions were all over the place.”

“Theo kidnapped you?” Nori asked with disbelief.

Jo merely laughed. “And I’m thankful he did. I wouldn’t be as happy as I am now, if he hadn’t.”

“What?” Nori shook her head.

“Rory was kidnapped to,” Jo offered with a shrug.

“More like taken as a bounty when Jamie attacked our keep in retaliation for my father’s...well, for Lord Montrose’s actions.”

“I had no idea. You all seem so happy.” Kidnapped? Taken as a bounty? Nori couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“I am happy,” Rory assured her. “Jamie is the kindest, sweetest man I’ve ever known.”

Nori worried her eyes must be so wide they’d appeared absurdly large in her face.

“It’s true. He may seem like a ruthless brute to those who don’t know him, but he loves me. He’d never hurt me.”

“What about you and Serena?” Nori asked Genevieve.

“Marcus saved me from bandits and married me before he even got me to his castle. I fell for him instantly. He loves as fiercely as he rules the Dread Lands.”

“Geoffrey came to my rescue when my father went missing. He married me the day he arrived and has spent every moment since reminding me that I’m his queen. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him,” Serena told her.

“It seems you all had instant marriages,” Nori noted.

“War King’s take what they want without question,” Jo told her. She should know, since she’d grown up the sister to one king then married another. Plus, from what Nori had learned, Jamie, Geoffrey, and Marcus spent a lot of time together.

“Gavin didn’t marry me, though. Well, I mean he did, but it was Lord Armstrong who was there for the ceremony.” Nori wasn’t sure why that bothered her so much, but it did. She’d learned long ago not to expect to come first with the people in her life. Why would her wedding be any different?

“Please, don’t think that’s because you don’t mean anything to him.” Jo leaned close and clasped her hands with hers. “I’ve seen the way Gavin looks at you, the way he acts. He’s never looked at another woman the way he does you.”

“Our father did a number on all three of us,” Rory said. “I have scars, but I suspect Theo and Gavin’s wounds go even deeper. They were bastard sons, after all. Montrose had no love for any of us.”

“I understand my grandfather played a part in you ending up with Lord Montrose,” Nori whispered and watched Rory’s face redden with anger.

“My mother died because of his lack of care when it came to his favorite niece. She got pregnant out of wedlock, and he punished her by marrying her to a man who made her life absolute hell.” Rory clenched her fists on the table. “I know you love your grandfather, Nori, but I will never forgive him for what he allowed my mother to be subjected to.”

“I’m sorry,” Nori whispered.

“Don’t apologize for him. He’s unworthy of it. In fact, from what Jamie has shared, Phillip did the same thing to you. He placed you somewhere out of sight and trusted you’d be fine and happy to see him whenever he decided to grace you with his presence.”

Rori wasn’t wrong, so it was hard for Nori to find fault with her cousin’s words.

“Apparently, he agreed to wed me to Robert Buckingham.” She couldn’t control the shudder that ran through her at the mere thought of being under Robert’s thumb for the rest of her life. He would have made sure it was pure hell.

“More than likely, he made the agreement for the older Buckingham brother,” Genevieve said. “That’s the way those things usually work. Phillip tried to coerce my grandfather into arranging a marriage for me to a man of his choice. My grandfather refused.”

“Same with my father,” Serena put in. “And our former king isn’t one to take no for an answer when it comes to what he wants. That’s how I ended up married to Geoffrey. My father disappeared. Our lands were being attacked. I sent a group of soldiers into the Dread Lands to seek help, and Geoffrey came for me.”

“I’ve heard the most dreadful stories about the pagan kings of the Dread Lands. How they kill and rape and maim. It’s hard to reconcile that with Gavin and the other men I’ve met.” Nori had overheard more than one conversation about the brutes and the uncivilized lands they attempted to rule.

“None of them are what this country’s evil tales say they are. Jamie’s people are loyal. They stay with him because he protects them, sees that they have food and shelter. He fights along side his men, leading them, not staying behind until the battle

is done. His men respect him. Phillip holds his crown with soft hands and a conniving brain, always searching for how to manipulate a person or situation to get what he wants.” Rory fisted her hands at her sides. “He sold my mother, ignored my existence, and wiped his hands of you once you were born—until you became a woman he could use.”

“But I was already living with the Buckinghams. I admit that Robert’s older brother, Justin, was kind to me, but there was no love there.” Would her grandfather have issued a contract between her and Justin? Nori knew it was common and realized how naïve she’d been to think she might have been spared it because of who her grandfather was.

“If he put you with them, there had to be some advantageous reason for it. It would have only been strengthened by marriage,” Rory said.

“We could ask Marcus,” Genevieve said. “He has eyes everywhere.”

“She only needs to ask Gavin,” Jo argued. “From what Theo’s shared, Gavin has men who find out information for him, just as Marcus does.”

“I ask Gavin to consummate the marriage.” The confession was out of Nori’s mouth before she could swallow down the words.

“Well, that’s a change from earlier.” Jo shrugged when Nori glanced her way. “You couldn’t wait to get out of here. If given the opportunity, you would have tried to run.”

“You knew that?”

“We both did,” Rory admitted. “But you needed the air. Sometimes, it’s hard to breathe when they’re all together. They tend to dominate any room they’re in.”

Serena laughed. “They certainly do, though I only have eyes for my Geoffrey. He’s all I see when he’s near me.”

“You love your husband.” Nori didn’t word it as a question. She didn’t need to ask. It was written on the women’s faces, reflected in the way they spoke of their husbands.

“I’m betting when you asked Gavin to consummate, he told you he’d given his word and he’d honor it,” Jo said softly then nodded when Nori gasped in surprise. “He’s a man who values honor. He’ll protect you, Nori. He’ll respect you. And when he falls for you, he’ll love you beyond anything you’ve ever known.”

“I’m a means to an end,” Nori said softly. “He married me to gain my grandfather’s agreement to what they wanted.”

Rory shook her head. “There’s one thing you should learn about my brother. He never does anything he doesn’t want to. No matter what it might gain. When he decided to marry you, it was because he wanted to. Our men are hard but not cruel. They’ll defend their people and their lands with every breath. But their wives, the queens who stand beside them, there’s no wrath like the one they’ll show to the man who puts one of us in harm.”

“That’s possession. Not love.” Nori didn’t want to be chattel. She wanted to be loved. For once in her life, she wanted to know someone loved her.

“Then show him,” Jo said. “Theo took me in order to teach my brother a lesson. Instead, he found he couldn’t let me go. Not because of anything Jamie had done. Because of me, of how he felt with me. He loves me. That big brute of a man is mine.”

“Trust is the key,” Rory added.

“It’s in how he touches you,” Serena suggested.

“Definitely that,” Jo agreed, and all four of the women laughed.

Nori didn’t join in. She’d liked the way Gavin had touched her the night before, but she’d been embarrassed when daylight came. And trust? It would take more than a few days for that to form. Love? A dream whispered in the darkest part of the night.

Gavin was kind, though. His touch was tender, gentle, however it had ignited fires beneath her skin that had settled in her core and left her aching as she’d drifted into sleep.

“Nori.”

She glanced toward the door and wondered if she’d conjured Gavin with her thoughts. Then she really studied him. His long, muscular legs were displayed to perfection in leather. His chest was bare, revealing every dip and swell of muscle beneath his skin. He wore leather guards on his forearms that drew her eyes to his arms. The man made her feel things just by looking at him. And when he glanced at her? She blushed as she remembered how it felt to be naked in his arms while he was equally naked.

“What are you thinking, wife?” he asked, one corner of his mouth tugging upward. She knew the flush on her cheeks probably told him exactly what was on her mind, but she couldn’t stop.

“Ladies,” he addressed the others as he crossed to her, wrapping his arm around her and settling his palm against the small of her back. “Thank you for keeping Nori company.”

With that he guided her from the room. If any of the others said something, she didn’t

hear them. She was focused completely on Gavin Montrose. War King. Husband. She didn't even blink when he led them back to the bedroom she'd practically fled from earlier. Cris and Con were outside the door.

"Ensure eyes are kept on both Phillip and Buckingham," Gavin ordered then swept her inside and closed the door.

"Why are we here?" she asked. Part of her was terrified he would give in and take her virginity as she'd asked. Part of her was terrified he wouldn't. Both had her heart beating so fast she feared she'd pass out.

"You've been crying," he whispered, running his thumbs under her eyes. Then his arms were around her. His mouth met hers in a soft brush as his palm cupped her buttocks and lifted her into him. She felt him. All of him pressed firmly against her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, opened her mouth under the coaxing of his, and held on tight.

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Gavin had only meant to offer comfort, but when she came alive under his touch, he couldn't help himself. He took what she unwittingly offered. Tasting, touching, consuming and needing more. He wanted her as he'd never wanted. Only sheer force of will had him easing away from her, and when he glanced down to see her eyes closed, lips parted and damp from their kiss, he groaned.

Those gorgeous eyes blinked open.

"Did I hurt you?"

He took her hand in his and guided it to the front of his leathers, another groan spilling as her hand closed reflexively around him and squeezed.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered but didn't remove her hand. "Tell me what to do."

Gavin knew he had to wait. He'd given his word. But there were other things they could do. Ways he could show her the pleasure they'd share between them.

"Do you hurt?" he asked as he slid her hand up over his stomach to the safety of his chest.

She nodded, her pink tongue coming out to lick over her lips. She was killing him and had no clue. "I ache."

"Where?"

She hesitated for a moment then brushed her fingers along her breasts.

“Where else?”

“Gavin.”

“Where else?” he demanded, needing to know if she burned as hot as he did.

Her hand dropped low on her abdomen, stopping just above the juncture of her thighs.

“Will you trust me to ease you?”

“Yes.”

She surprised him with her quick consent, but he wouldn't question his good fortune. Instead, he pulled her to him, taking her mouth again while he worked to free her from her dress. He didn't stop kissing her until she stood before him in nothing but her shoes and stockings. He went to his knees then, leaning in to kiss the curls above her sex before lifting one of her feet to his knee.

“Gavin.” Her voice was a husky whisper with just a breath of fear.

“I'm going to take care of you, Nori. Take care of the ache with my mouth and hands. You want that, don't you? For the ache to go away.”

He placed kisses along her thigh as each inch of creamy, pale flesh was revealed. Then he treated her other leg the same until not a stitch covered her. He surged to his feet, scooped her up against his chest, and carried her to the bed. He placed her gently atop the bedding, pulling away only long enough to remove his boots before stretching out beside her.

“What about your pants?” She reached for the ties, but he caught her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing her fingers before guiding them to his shoulder.

“I think it’s best if they stay on for now.”

“Don’t make me wait. You’re my husband. I accept that. I accept you. Why wait any longer?”

Gavin gazed into her eyes. She was telling the truth, and it humbled him. Still.

“I gave my word. Two days.”

“I never asked for that.”

She had no idea how badly he wanted to concede, but not yet. He leaned down and took her mouth again. This time, he let his hands caress her while they kissed. First, he merely touched. Her skin was soft under his fingertips. He grazed along the sides of her breasts then inward over the slight curve of her belly before moving out to brush along the curve of her hips. She whimpered, rising into his touch and trying to follow the movement of his fingertips.

“Please,” she begged, pulling away from his kiss.

He trailed his lips along her neck, over her collarbone, then over the top curves of her breasts. Her fingers twined in his hair, guiding him toward where she wanted. He didn’t make her ask again. He licked over one taut nipple then latched on, sucking greedily while she keened beneath him. Her legs moved restlessly as he moved between her breasts, thoroughly taking his fill of the lush mounds. Then her cries turned sharper, fear causing a tremble in her tone.

“Gavin!”

He slipped one palm between her thighs and found his fingers drenched. His perfect wife was close to finding her pleasure with only his mouth on her breasts. He wedged his hand between her clenched thighs and found the bud hidden at the top of her sex, plucking it with his fingers as he took a nipple back into his mouth.

She came with a scream he hoped could be heard all over the castle. Let them know the pleasure his wife found at his touch. Let them know she was his and no man would ever take her from him. He gentled his touch, eased his mouth away and spread kisses as he moved lower. The sweet scent of her woman's mound had his mouth watering for a taste of what coated his fingers. She didn't move until his kisses trailed lower along her stomach and he shifted to lie between her thighs, spreading her wide to accommodate the width of his shoulders.

"What are you—"

She broke off with a cry as he opened her to his gaze and licked from her opening to her bud then back down, dipping inside with a groan. She was sweet on his tongue, like some treat he'd never known existed but would be the only thing he craved from now on.

"Gavin," she moaned, fingers back in his hair as if she needed to touch him.

He flattened one palm over her abdomen then pumped his tongue into her as he wanted to do with his manhood. She cried out, fingers clenching in his hair as she went between pressing him closer and trying to push him away. He stayed where he was, satiating his deep hunger for her. He planned to bring her to orgasm again, to have her drench his tongue as she had his fingers.

"Gavin!" she screamed as she came again. He continued fucking her with his tongue, thumb rubbing tight circles over her pleasure point as he did. He couldn't stop. Every taste only made him want more. He feasted until her voice broke, and she went limp

beneath him.

“Gavin, please.”

He glanced up from between her thighs and wasn't surprised to see her eyes closed, hands splayed out over her head. He licked over her again then paused when she jerked.

“Please,” she whispered again.

Reluctantly, he rose, moving to her side and lying beside her on the bed.

“What do you need, love?”

“You.” She lifted her hand and slipped it down between them, giving his manhood another firm squeeze. “I don't want to wait. Please. Make me your wife. I want to be your wife.”

Every reason he had for waiting the two days fled. Delaying had never been his idea to begin with. It had been a concession to her grandfather. Not for Phillip, but for her. For Nori. He could fight his need in order to allow her the time she needed to become comfortable with him touching her. He couldn't fight both of them.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “We can wait until tomorrow.”

“Don't you want me?”

Gavin groaned. “You can feel how much I want you.”

“Then don't make us wait.”

She rolled, sending him to his back before straddling his thighs and reaching for his laces. This time, he let her have her way. She tugged them loose then used her hands to spread the material wide. His shaft rose, long and thick, as she freed it from the confines of his leathers. He heard her gasp, and he glanced from the hands stroking over his flesh to her face.

“You’re large, Gavin. Too large, I fear. I’m not sure we’ll fit.”

“We’ll fit,” he vowed through clenched teeth. It took everything he possessed not to spill at the touch of her fingers as she explored his shaft.

“I want to try. I really do, but you won’t be angry if I can’t take you?”

“It’s my job to make sure you can take me.”

“You mean what you did with your fingers and mouth?” She blushed as she asked, making him smile. The woman had nearly ripped him bald while screaming her pleasure, and now, she was embarrassed.

“You liked what I did with my fingers and my mouth.”

“Gavin.” She glanced around as if someone might have snuck in and now listened to their conversation. Surely, she realized how loud she’d screamed his name? His grin widened. Maybe, she didn’t.

He flipped her onto her back again then made quick work of removing his pants before using his knee to spread her thighs.

“I wanted to taste you first,” she said as he slid between her legs.

“Next time,” he promised, knowing he’d never survive the feel of her mouth closing

over the head of his cock.

“Next time,” she repeated with a nod. “We have all night, don’t we?”

“All night,” he agreed, knowing she’d probably be able to handle him only once that night. His wife was a virgin, and the first time could be painful for a woman.

He leaned down and took her mouth again, kissing her while he used his fingers to reignite her passion. He planted kisses along her neck, making his way back to her breasts, which he now knew were sensitive to his touch. He stayed there, moving between the lush mounds until she panted and writhed. He lifted his head as he guided the head of his cock to her entrance. Watching her face, he pressed in. Her big eyes flew open, and she gasped as he thrust hard and deep, opening her with his shaft.

She whimpered, hands gripping his arms, nails digging deep, as her legs lifted to clench his hips.

“Gavin!”

“Shh, love. The worst is over. Be still, and let your body adjust.”

She shook her head even as her hips jerked toward him, impaling her even farther on his cock.

“I need...” She broke off, tossing her head back and forth against the bedding.

He groaned, holding himself above her with one arm while he used the other to grip her hip and hold her in place. He eased back, watching her face for any flickers of pain. Though she hissed between her teeth, she immediately tried to rise up and sheath him again.

“Easy,” he mumbled. Gods, she was sheer perfection. He’d known she would be. Known the fire that burned inside her would spark a passion to match his own.

He tried to take it slow, every stroke gently paced. Nori was having none of it. She clawed. She fought his hold, frantic to rise into every thrust. She screamed, begged, pleaded, until his control broke. Until he was like the heathen he was often called. He took her hard, fast, pounding into her with everything he had.

“Yes! Yes! Gavin! Gavin!”

Her screams had to fill the whole castle as she came again, her sex tightening around him. He joined her with a bellow, slamming deep once more before he spilled everything inside her. He swore he might pass out from the intensity of his orgasm.

He collapsed atop her, hearing the whoosh of air leaving her body, then managed to find enough energy to roll them until she sprawled over his chest. She mumbled something, nose pressed against his neck. He shuffled until he was able to reach one of the dislodged covers and pull it over them. Then with a sigh, he let sleep take him.

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Nori woke with a smile that only grew as she took in every delicious ache in her body. Most importantly, the one between her legs. The one that meant she was officially Eleanor Montrose. No. Queen Eleanor Montrose, wife of War King Gavin Montrose. And there was nothing anyone could do to change that fact. She enjoyed every ache because of what they represented.

She was disappointed to find the bed empty. Gavin had promised her they had the whole night, but after that first time, she'd passed out on his chest and didn't even know when he'd lifted her off him much less when he'd left it. She wished he were here so she could talk him into doing it all again. Well, maybe, they could start with her using her mouth on him the way he had her. She'd wanted to feel him against her tongue and see how he tasted. She wondered if every time with him would be as frenzied and impassioned.

Gingerly slipping from the bed, she saw a bowl of water, cloth, and soap left on the table. She used them to clean as best she could. She'd have to ask Gavin if it were possible to have another bath. She pulled on a fresh gown then brushed her hair, leaving it to hang down her back. She wasn't surprised to see Cris when she opened the chamber door.

"Just the man I wanted to see." She looped her arm through his and laughed at his lifted brow.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," he admitted.

She rose onto her toes and gave him a soft peck on the cheek. "Thank you for not allowing Robert to get to me. He's not a very nice man."

“Don’t thank me for doing my job, my queen. Also don’t kiss me unless you’d like to see my head removed from my body by your husband.”

“You’re safe,” Nori tried to assure him. “Gavin knows I like you best.”

His face turned red as he came to a halt.

“Between you and Con. Gavin knows I prefer you.”

“I think I might prefer that you didn’t prefer me,” Cris told her.

“Nonsense. We’re going to be good friends, Cris. I know it. Now, I’m starving. Escort me below, so I can break my fast.”

“Of course, my queen.”

He gave her curious looks as they walked but didn’t say anything else. She pulled away when she saw Gavin was at the table and practically ran across to him. He’d gained his feet by the time she reached him, and she didn’t pause before throwing herself into his arms. She accepted the kiss he offered.

“I missed you when I woke up,” she admitted then blushed when someone cleared their throat. She hadn’t paid attention to who was at the table with him. She’d seen Gavin, and everything else had faded away.

“Soon, we’ll wake up together,” he promised, dropping another kiss on her lips before helping her to a seat then filling a trencher for her.

“I’m glad my mother isn’t here to see your behavior. She’d be appalled.”

Her gaze jerked to Robert then to her grandfather, who sat beside him. At least, he

didn't look disappointed in her. He appeared curious.

"There is nothing appalling with my wife's behavior," Gavin snapped at Robert.

"His mother didn't teach me anything, anyway," Nori said as one of the kitchen maids filled a mug for her. "She couldn't be bothered to do it for her own daughter. Why would she for me?"

"How dare you!" Robert pushed up from the table.

She flicked her gaze at him then glanced at Gavin, who nodded for her to continue.

"Let's be honest, Robert. I may have lived in your home, but I was never a member of your family. I was another mouth to feed, and unless my grandfather was there, I was mostly taught to fend for myself and stay out of sight. If it weren't for the staff, not a one of you would have cared if I'd disappeared."

"Is that true?" her grandfather demanded.

"No." Robert's face turned red with rage.

"Be honest. You wouldn't have noticed until you needed me around, so I could be presented to my grandfather with demands for more money for this or that, which were required to educate and make a lady out of me. Funny. I was educated by your father's steward, who taught me how to read, write, and calculate numbers. Old Moses taught me to ride a horse and took care of any injuries I had as a child. He even comforted me when your father sold my first pony because a selfish child like me didn't deserve such a fine animal."

"They sold your pony? Why wasn't I told of this?" her grandfather demanded, and as much as it hurt her, she knew it was time to admit what Gavin had seen from the very

beginning.

“Because you were never around,” she whispered, only realizing her hands were clenched when Gavin took one in his hand, forcing her fingers away from her palm and linking his between hers. He gave her hand a squeeze, letting her know he was there, though he didn’t interrupt the conversation.

“I’m the king. I couldn’t always be there.”

“No, you didn’t want to be there.” She lifted her hand when he would have spoken and for once, didn’t feel guilty. “I’m your granddaughter, not your subject, but you’ve never been able to make that distinction. You put me out of sight, sent money, and expected everything would be fine. It wasn’t. I used to cry for you, wishing and begging for you to come visit and take me away with you. I prayed and prayed and prayed. You never did. Then I stopped. No more wishes or prayers. I know I look like my mother because Lady Buckingham used to tell me I did, and that was why you didn’t want me around. Because Rosamund, my mother, had sullied herself with a soldier, marrying in secret. I was told the best thing my mother had done was die while giving birth. That it was a shame I hadn’t died with her.”

“I never...” Phillip opened and closed his mouth several times, his head swinging back and forth. “I’ll kill her for that. I’ll see her hanged.”

“I won’t have these lies spread about my family!” Robert bellowed. “Not by some ungrateful brat, who should be thankful we took her in.”

“Sit down!” Phillip yelled.

Nori was grateful when Gavin pulled her into his lap, wrapping his strong arms around her, helping her hold herself together while she finally released everything she’d held inside for so long.

“I don’t blame you,” she told her grandfather. “I’m sure you loved my mother in your own way. The same as you did with Rory’s mother. With me. But people aren’t objects you can set aside and expect to still be there waiting when you decide to take them out again.”

“I loved Rosamund with all my heart. She was my light and joy, and both were gone when she died. My only thought was to see you had the proper care needed for a newborn. As for Anne...” Phillip’s gaze conveyed more emotion than he probably realized “I’ll never forgive myself for what happened to her or her daughter, but there’s nothing I can do now. Nori, I need you to know you’re not an object to me. You’re the most precious person in my life.”

She wanted to believe him, but a lifetime of neglect had proven his words untrue.

“My husband has shown me more affection in the past few days than I’ve received from you in my whole life. He’s gone out of his way to make me feel accepted.” She turned and met Gavin’s gaze. “He’s made me feel many things, but most of all, he’s shown me what it is to be treasured. I know my life with him will be filled with new adventures, and all of them will be experienced with him.”

“Anything you desire,” Gavin promised.

“Gavin won’t tuck me away and only visit when he finds it convenient,” she continued.

“Never,” he swore.

“That’s what it means to care for someone,” she told her grandfather. “I’ve waited my whole life to find a place to belong, to build a family, so I’d never be alone again. Who knew I was waiting for a War King to force my hand in marriage and show me a side of myself I never knew I had.”

“What are you saying?” Phillip asked.

“I think it’s time you left, Grandfather. I’m no longer your burden to bear. My husband has me now.”

“Damn straight,” Jo said as she marched up to the table and sat beside Gavin and Nori. Theo took the place right beside her. “Nori’s ours now, and we’re not giving her back.”

“Agreed!” Rory called as she and Jamie followed Jo and Theo across the room.

Nori’s heart filled up as Rory and Jamie sat on their other side, Rory reaching out to clasp Nori’s hand. She noted her grandfather’s gaze going between her and Rory. She wondered if he was finally realizing what he’d lost. Maybe, he saw their mothers instead of them. Did Rory look as much like her mother, Anne, as Nori did her mother, Rosamund?

“I’ve made many mistakes in my life,” he admitted. “But none so devastating as the ones I’ve made with both of you. You!” He pointed at Robert. “Get out. Ride hard for home and let your family know I’ll be there soon, so they can feel the full brunt of my displeasure.”

“You’ll pay for this,” Robert snarled at Nori as he moved away.

“His blood is mine,” Gavin growled out to Phillip.

“I’ll handle the Buckingham,” Phillip countered.

“Not when it comes to my wife,” Gavin warned. She saw him nod and turned just in time to see Con and Cris follow Robert out of the keep. She felt no pity for him. Robert deserved whatever her husband did to him.

“I haven’t been honest with you,” Phillip said, pulling everyone’s attention to him.

“Of course not,” Jamie stated with no surprise.

“Your father is still alive,” Phillip told Rory. “He never knew your mother was pregnant. I thought I knew what was best for her, refused to allow another soldier into my family. I refused to believe he’d be worthy of my favored Anne. I was wrong, and all three of you suffered for it.”

“My father’s alive?” Rory sat forward. “Who is he? Where is he?”

“I sent word to him, requesting he join me here. I’m truly sorry, Rory. Your mother saw the man in him while I was too blinded to.”

“Who is he?” Jamie demanded again when Phillip didn’t answer Rory’s question.

“A commander in my army. He oversees our eastern border, and the raids that still occur along them. I sent word he was needed here. That was two days ago. He’ll need time to put measures in place at his post, then he’ll head this way. In another few days, perhaps, depending on how quickly the messengers rode. He won’t come alone. He’ll ride in with soldiers he’s handpicked and trained.”

“What message did you send?” Nori asked.

“That his king needed him,” Phillip stated.

“He’ll come prepared for battle,” Gavin warned.

Phillip sighed but nodded.

“You thought to attack a keep full of War Kings and their warriors?” There was no

missing the incredulity in Theo's voice.

"At the time, my only thought was to protect my kingdom and my granddaughter."

Nori felt the hit when he put his kingdom first. Before Gavin, she would have never questioned it.

"Don't underestimate Rowan York. He may be called a soldier, but he's more than proved he's a warrior to the core. One, I'll miss terribly," her grandfather added.

"Why would you miss him?" Nori asked then turned to Gavin. "Surely, you won't kill Rory's father?"

"My wife's father will be fine," Jamie answered. "Your grandfather is another story."

"I only meant I'd miss him because, once he finds out he has a daughter, he'll never remain by my side." Phillip laughed, but there was no humor to it. He gave Nori a look she found curious before he continued. "He'll probably attempt to kill me before any of the War Kings, and I wouldn't blame him. I wouldn't blame him at all."

Nori took a good look at her grandfather. She suspected he still hid something. It definitely weighed on him. She wasn't sure if it was the truths, the lies, or just the past catching up with him, but he looked weary. She felt a trickle of unease as she realized how very human he was. Flesh and blood, and flesh and blood could be injured. He was no longer the invincible figure she'd always found him to be. And that worried her more than she wanted to admit.

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“Where are you going?” Nori asked as Gavin lifted her from his lap and stood.

He couldn’t resist dropping a kiss on her lips. He wanted to carry her back up to the bedchamber they shared and indulge both of them with more love play, but he expected she might be too sore to enjoy it as much as he would.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asked and watched her turn red as she flicked her gaze toward Theo, who stood near them, making no attempt to pretend he wasn’t listening.

“Fine.” The word was whispered so softly Gavin might have missed it if he wasn’t looking at her.

“Would you like a bath? It might soothe—”

She smacked her hand over his mouth and glanced at Theo again.

“Would you excuse us for a moment?” She might have phrased it as a question, but Gavin knew it wasn’t.

“Should I meet you outside?” Theo asked Gavin.

Gavin kissed his wife’s palm and removed her hand from his mouth. “I need to go, Nori. Stay here with Rory and Jo. Don’t go anywhere by yourself.”

She gave him a curious look. “Are you worried Robert might try something? He won’t. He’s stupid, but even he wouldn’t risk your wrath, Gavin.”

“He already has. He threatened you.”

“It was only words,” she argued. “I’m sure he’ll think better when he leaves.”

“When left unchecked, words lead to actions,” Gavin warned her. “Buckingham made a choice when he threatened you. I’ll make sure he understands the consequences of that choice.”

“I’ll walk out with you,” Phillip said as he joined them. There was pain in his gaze when he looked at his granddaughter. “I mean to send another messenger to see how far out Rowan and his men are. I should also check on Buckingham.”

“I told you I’d deal with him,” Gavin warned.

“He’s young and impulsive, still. I ask that you not kill him. He’s his father’s only remaining son. I’ll see he brings no harm to my granddaughter,” Phillip vowed. “I’ll send word to his father immediately. He’ll make any amends you wish for the threats Robert uttered today. To you and me.”

“I don’t want amends,” Gavin growled. There was nothing the other man could offer that would appease the need to protect Nori from any threat. Especially one offered by the man given the honor of being father to Nori. A role he’d failed abysmally at. Phillip had made the mistake of trusting the Buckingham family with Nori’s safety. Gavin wouldn’t. Blood would spill.

“You’re looking unwell, grandfather,” Nori commented, stepping from Gavin’s side to Phillip’s. “Maybe, you should rest. I’m sure Gavin can see that your messages are sent.”

Phillip brushed the backs of his fingers down Nori’s cheek. “Thank you for worrying about me. Maybe, I haven’t lost you completely.”

“I’m not an object that can be lost,” Nori told him. “I’m your granddaughter, and I love you. That hasn’t changed. I have. I’m not a girl who’ll easily be set aside any longer. I ask questions now, and I want answers. I never got to know my mother or father because they were gone. Not knowing you was your choice. I’d like to think we can change that.”

“I’d like that,” Phillip whispered, pulling in Nori for a hug. Though Gavin hated seeing her in another man’s arms, he held in his growl. “Your father wasn’t merely a soldier. He was a noble-born knight. He and Rosamund were married by proxy much the way you were. When they were together, your mother’s smile shone brighter than the sun.”

“She loved him?” Nori asked, and Gavin heard the plea in her voice. Phillip must have, as well.

“Yes, much to my dismay. I didn’t feel he was worthy of her. Rosamund was a princess. She deserved marriage to a future king, but I couldn’t deny her. Though I never heard your father speak of his love for her, he showed it in the way he spoke of her, the way he treated her. It nearly broke her when he was killed in a border skirmish. This was before your war king and his fellow kings conquered the Dread Lands.” Phillip’s gaze seemed far away for a moment. He shook away whatever memory he’d summoned and with his arm still around Nori, began walking toward the front entry to Kingsley Keep. “I feared I’d lose her then, but Rosamund held strong for the child she carried. For you, Nori.”

“Only to die giving birth to me.” Nori’s whispered words were rife with turmoil. Gavin hated it and stepped forward, tugging her from Phillip as the door opened. Phillip turned then gasped, eyes flaring wide.

Gavin took it all in quickly, pushing Nori behind him and noting the way Theo moved his large body in front of her, as well. Then Gavin tugged Phillip down,

careful of the arrow through his shoulder.

“Grandfather!” Nori screamed while soldiers and warriors swarmed around them.

“Stay back!” Gavin bellowed. He turned to two of Phillip’s men. “Get your king inside. You, get the healer, quickly.” His gaze landed on his men. “Find whoever shot that arrow and bring them to me.” Gavin knew one thing. That arrow had been intended for Nori. She’d only been saved by Gavin pulling her to him and Phillip turning.

“Nori,” Phillip whispered through clenched teeth as he was lifted.

“No one will touch her,” Gavin swore.

“Grandfather!” Nori called again as she pushed her way through Phillip’s soldiers and took his hand. She glanced back at Gavin. “I’ll stay with him.”

Gavin nodded, fighting the urge to pull her close, to run his hands over her body until his heartbeat slowed and he accepted she was unharmed. Instead, he sent five of his warriors with them with strict order that she wasn’t to leave their sight.

“There’s Con,” Theo said, nudging Gavin out the door and onto the steps of the keep.

“A group of men fled through the gate, still firing arrows as they rode,” Con said as he yanked forward the body of a male, dropping him at the base of the steps. “Cris took ten warriors and followed. They’ll bring them back.”

“Buckingham?” Gavin asked.

“Escaped with the group during the chaos,” Con admitted, rage simmering in his gaze. “We’ll find him and see he pays for the threat to our queen.”

“This one?” Gavin glanced down at the unconscious man.

“He was part of the group who attacked. Miles was close enough to knock him from his mount. We’ll wake him and find out what he knows,” Con stated, and at Gavin’s nod, turned, and hauled away the man.

“Did Miles follow after Cris?” Theo asked.

“I’m here, my king,” Theo’s second called as he joined them.

“Bring me anyone who knows anything about what happened here,” Theo ordered Miles.

“I’m already working on it,” Miles said with a dip of his chin before he strode away, moving swiftly through the gathered men.

“That arrow wasn’t meant for Phillip,” Theo offered quietly at Gavin’s side.

“I know,” Gavin seethed.

“We’ll get them,” Theo said, giving Gavin’s shoulder a hard squeeze.

Gavin growled in agreement as he moved in the direction Con had taken. “If anything happens to Cris, Nori will be mad as hell.”

Theo laughed, pulling Gavin’s gaze his way.

“That’s what you’re thinking?” Theo asked.

“She has a soft spot for Cris,” Gavin admitted, not needing to share that he did, as well.

Cris and Con had been with him since they'd left the keep of the man who'd taken over their training and shown them what hell could be. They'd helped Gavin limp out of there, while the male who'd tortured them all lay broken and bleeding out behind them, his precious keep burning around him. Those who'd taken part in his vicious games and punishments had died that day, as well. They'd died when Theo had returned from the battle he'd been sent to and turned into the fierce bear-like warrior that had earned him his name of The Bear. His brother had taken exception to the games Gavin had been forced into. Games that had included Cris and Con and forged a bond that nothing would break.

He shoved away the memories and focused on the present. Nothing good would come from revisiting the past. There was nothing there for him. The present held everything in the gaze of the woman he'd vowed to protect at all costs. His wife. His queen. Nori.

He shoved open a door, taking the stairs down to the underbelly of Kingsley's keep, to a rarely used dungeon where only severe punishments were meted out. This was where Gavin would get his answers.

"My king!" One of his warriors called as he led a man forward. "This one says he knows who fired the arrow."

Gavin took in the young male. He didn't tremble as most men would. He held his head high, shoulders back as he faced Gain and Theo, who'd stopped with him.

"What do you know?" Gavin demanded.

"The arrow came from one of the men who rode in with Robert Buckingham, War King. They were readying their horses to leave. I don't know what Buckingham told them, but they were angry."

“How do you know this?” Theo demanded.

“I was close by when they mounted. Everything happened quickly after that. Buckingham yelled for retribution. They all echoed the cry. Then one of them notched an arrow. He glanced back toward the keep and shot. I didn’t even realize where he aimed until I saw King Phillip go down.”

“It wasn’t Buckingham who fired?” Gavin asked.

“No,” the boy said with a shake of his head. “But his words were the purpose. They fled when the king went down. There’s no need to torture for information, War King. Those with Buckingham are no longer here. All who are left are loyal to King Phillip.”

“What’s your name?” Gavin asked.

“James, War King. James Weston.”

“What do you know of the commander at the eastern border?” Gavin asked. If Weston was surprised at Gavin’s question, he didn’t show it.

“I hear Rowan York is a just man. Both feared and revered, depending on those you question. I hope to fight under him some day. He rarely travels from the east, though, so I’ll need to wait until King Phillip allows me to go there.”

Gavin understood why Phillip had sent Rory’s father to the opposite side of the country from where he’d delivered his niece and her mother. A place where Gavin knew the occasional raid still took place. Rowan York would have been kept busy at the border. He wondered what lie Phillip had told him to make him never turn his eyes westward.

“Does he have any family?”

Weston shook his head. “None that I know of. Some say he had a brother who was killed in battle, but York is bastard born. Same as me.”

“Well, if things don’t work out with York, let me know,” Gavin offered. “A man should never be judged by what side of the sheets he was conceived on.”

“Thank you, War King.” The boy looked at Gavin with a bit of awe, and Gavin dismissed him with a nod.

“That boy would be eaten alive in the Dread Lands,” Theo warned.

“Some would have said that about us, once upon a time,” Gavin reminded his brother. “The boy’s honest and willing to speak up when others would hold their tongues. It’s commendable.”

“Mmm,” was all Theo offered.

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Nori held herself tightly together as the healer worked on her grandfather. Rory had come in moment ago, and the other woman had crossed silently to her side, worry etched on her face as she linked her fingers with Nori's. With Phillip's soldiers and the five warriors Gavin had sent with Nori, the room was beyond crowded.

"I've cleaned and sutured the wound," the healer said as she stood.

"He's okay?" Nori whispered, not wanting to awaken her grandfather who'd drifted off shortly after the older woman had arrived and given him a drink laced with something to help with the pain.

"I've done all I can. If he catches a fever or infection sets in..." The woman shook her head. "It's in the gods' hands now." She hefted the bowl of bloodied water and headed toward the door.

Nori didn't see who ushered out the woman. She moved closer to the bed, taking the chair the woman had vacated and leaning in to rest her head by her grandfather's.

"You saved my life," she whispered, knowing the arrow had been meant for her. If Gavin hadn't tugged her to him at that moment. If her grandfather hadn't turned when he did. It would be her lying there.

"We'll keep vigil on your king," Rory said behind her. Nori glanced back and saw her point at one of the men who'd helped carry Phillip above stairs. "You may stay. The rest of you will guard the door from the corridor."

None of them argued, not even to challenge the fact the five warriors from the Dread

Lands were staying inside. They simply bowed to their unconscious king and filed out of the room, the last one tugging the door closed behind him.

“Don’t think taking an arrow will save you from sharing more about my parents,” Nori warned the too still figure before her. “There’s so much I want to know. Things only you can tell me.”

The door opened behind her, and she knew who was there before he even spoke. She felt it in the way her body relaxed as if his mere presence would make everything okay. Then he was at her side, lifting her to take her place in the chair then setting her on his lap. She wrapped around him, burying her face in his neck as she finally gave way to the tears she’d held inside. He spoke, but her sobs kept her from hearing what he said. All she knew was that he was there, holding her, protecting her. His arms were tight around her, fingers brushing through her hair as she cried until she felt empty.

“I don’t want to lose him.”

“I know,” he said, not giving any false promises.

She forced her gaze up to his. “Was it Robert?”

He nodded, hand cupping her face. “He may not have fired the arrow, but he was definitely behind it. He’ll never get the chance to touch you again.”

“Once word spreads of what he’s done to my grandfather, there will be nowhere he can hide,” she vowed. She was sure even his father wouldn’t try to hide him.

“Cris took a group of warriors and went after him. They’ll bring him back here for justice.”

She nodded at Gavin's words, throwing up a silent prayer for Cris and the others. Robert had proven beyond a doubt that he wasn't a man of honor. If Cris were hurt...

"He'll be fine," Gavin said, pulling her gaze back to him.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Your worry is easy to read and unnecessary. Cris is no mere soldier. He's a warrior."

"Soldiers aren't weak," she argued. "My father was a knight, a soldier. Rory's father is a soldier."

"Mmm," he agreed noncommittally. "Luckily, you're both married to war kings and will be surrounded by warriors for the rest of your lives."

She shook her head then laid it against his chest again. They sat in silence for a long time, the sound of his heartbeat lulling her into a light sleep. She wasn't sure how long she had been out before the sound of someone calling her name tugged her awake. She glanced up at Gavin, but he nodded toward the bed. With her heart in her throat, she turned and found her grandfather's gaze on her.

"You're awake. How do you feel?" She shook her head at that question. He'd been shot with an arrow. Did she really expect him to say he was fine? "Do you want a drink? Are you in pain?" She was babbling and couldn't seem to stop.

"I'm fine." His voice lacked the strength it usually had, and once again, she found herself thinking he was no longer the larger-than-life figure he'd always played in her life, a man whose mere presence had everyone around him bowing and begging for the opportunity to serve him in any way he needed. She'd watched him with awed eyes as a child. Now, she saw the man behind the crown. The one he could be if he only allowed himself.

“York should be here soon,” Gavin told him.

Phillip nodded. “Thank you. At least, he might not kill me if I’m already knocking on the door.”

“No!” Nori cried. “You said you were fine.”

“I am. Forgive my poor attempt at humor. You look tired, Nori. Why don’t you go rest, now that you can see I’m alright. I’ll rest better knowing you’re taking care of yourself.”

She wanted to argue, but Gavin agreed, lifting her to her feet and standing beside her.

“I’ll be back.” She leaned down and placed a kiss on her grandfather’s cheek.

“I’ll be here,” he promised. “Rest well.”

Gavin took her hand and led her from the room.

“See that a tub and water are brought to our room,” he commanded the warriors in the hall.

“I don’t need—”

“You have blood on your dress,” Gavin interrupted. “We could both use a chance to clean up.”

“What about Robert?”

“Con will let me know when Cris returns.”

He opened the door to the room they were staying in and, with his palm against her back, guided her inside, leaving the door open. He led her to the chair before the fireplace and sat, pulling her back onto his lap. When he wrapped her tightly in his arms again, she realized he was doing it as much for himself as he was for her.

“I’m okay, Gavin.”

He shuddered, dropping his head and breathing her in. She returned the embrace, and neither of them said another word until the tub was in place, steam rising from the water that had been added, and the door was closed, leaving them blessedly alone.

“Let’s get you undressed,” he whispered.

He made quick work of removing her clothes then his own, letting her know he planned to join her. She kept the silence until he was at her back, one palm covering her stomach while the other hand brushed through her hair.

“Gavin?” She sensed he was deep in thought and wondered what pulled him away from her.

“I’m not an easy man, Nori. They call us savages, and there are times when I am that and more.”

She almost turned to face him but felt his hands tighten as if to halt her. She forced her body to relax against him instead. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“I hope that’s true,” he whispered. “At some point, you’re going to see the brute I am, but I need you to know, no matter what you witness, I will never hurt you.”

“I know that,” she promised. They sat in silence for a few moments before Gavin spoke again.

“My father wasn’t a kind man, but he was a saint compared to the man he sent me to train under, Bolton. Bolton liked to play games,” he began. “Theo was sent to him for training before me. I was quiet and skilled at hiding, which was no fun for our father, so Montrose didn’t wait too long before sending his other bastard son for training. He was probably already thinking it would leave Rory unprotected, though I didn’t realize it at the time.”

She placed her hand over his on her belly, lacing their fingers together.

“Bolton took advantage of Theo’s size, sending him into situations he didn’t think he’d survive. Probably at our father’s suggestion. The fact Theo always returned enraged him. He saw the way the others looked at Theo with a bit of hero worship. Still, he sent Theo out, again and again. That was his way of trying to break my brother.”

“And you? How did he try to break you?” Nori forced the question out.

“He started sending me with Theo. I think he hoped I’d either die or be the cause of my brother dying.”

The way Gavin said it sent a shiver over her, but he didn’t seem to notice it this time. She wondered if that was all he’d share, but after another long moment, he continued.

“I kept returning with Theo. Battle after battle, we survived. I’d met Crispin and Conrad and maneuvered things until they were forced to join us along with several men my brother had formed a friendship with. All of them are still with us.”

“When did you decide to leave Bolton and his training?” she asked.

“We were sent to join a battle on the border of the Dread Lands. It was a set up. One we weren’t meant to walk away from. At that point, we’d had enough battles near or

in the Dread Lands that we'd already spoken of leaving and seeing what we could build there. None of us were willing to allow the bastard who'd tortured us to live. We returned long enough to kill Bolton and any of the men who stood with him then burned his keep until only the charred skeleton remained. Jamie, Marcus, and Geoffrey were already trying to tame things along the border of the Dread Lands, but there was plenty of land left for others. We headed deeper into the Dread Lands and claimed some of it as our own. Theo met Miles and a group of warriors with him and ended up taking Miles as his second."

"Cris and Con stayed with you."

"They did. I refused to choose between them, so they both became my seconds. We helped Theo gain control of his lands then decided to forge farther. I made my home on the coast. It's beautiful, with white sandy beaches and water for as far as the eye can see. We had trouble with marauders trying to attack from the sea for a bit, but those have tapered off since I sent back the last ship with a crew of two and a warning."

"I can't wait to see our home," she murmured, glancing up at him.

"I need you to understand I won't bend when it comes to your protection," Gavin warned, gripping her hips and helping her turn until she straddled his thighs, facing him. "I won't compromise. I've killed to protect my people and the lands we've claimed. There's no limit to what I'll do when it comes to you."

She nodded, unsure what he wanted her to say.

"When Buckingham is brought in, he will die by my hand. I won't allow his actions, or those of any men who stand with him, to go unpunished."

"I know," she whispered.

“You won’t ask me to spare him?”

“I’ll never ask you to be anything less than the War King you are,” she vowed. “I trust you.” She leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips.

“I’ll never make you regret that,” he swore then took her mouth again. She felt his hardness against her and rose to her knees in preparation to sheath him. He stopped her, though, gripping her hips and lifting her as he stood. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck, as he stepped from the wooden tub and took her to the bed.

“I need you,” he whispered as he bore her down, sliding easily between her thighs and thrusting deep.

“Yes!” she agreed, rising to meet each thrust, running her fingers and tongue over every inch of him she could reach. His mouth slid across hers, teeth tugging at her bottom lip before nipping bites scattered across her jaw as he moved to her ear.

“You make me feel alive,” he whispered. “I may never be worthy of a queen like you, but I promise I’ll spend every moment of the rest of our lives striving to.”

“You’re the man I never knew I needed,” she fired back. “The man I’m falling in love with.”

With a groan, he took her mouth again, his lovemaking desperate as if he needed her like he needed air to breathe. She understood. She needed him with the same ferocity. They crested the tide together, flew, and when she crashed back down, he was there, wrapping her in his arms, holding her tightly with an unspoken promise that he’d never let her go.

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A sharp knock on the door brought Gavin out of the peace he'd found in his queen's arms. He wasn't sure how long he'd lain there, holding her, watching her breathe, her body still aglow with the pleasure they'd shared. Reluctantly, he climbed to his feet, tugging on his leathers before quickly heading to the door. He wasn't surprised to see Con standing there.

"Cris is back. They finally caught up to Buckingham and the men with him. They brought the survivors back with them," Con said.

"Buckingham?" He was the one Gavin wanted to get his hands on the most.

"He's been taken to the dungeon with the others. Cris is there now."

Gavin glanced back at his wife. He could have lost her. The terror that had filled him at that realization had nearly brought him to his knees. It had also driven home how much she'd come to mean to him. She'd told him she was falling in love with him, but he was certain he'd already taken that tumble.

"Let me finish dressing." Gavin left the door open while he grabbed his boots and weapons.

"Is she okay?" Con asked, nodding toward the bed.

Gavin nodded. "She's resting."

"She's been through a lot over the last few days."

“Since our marriage.” As if Gavin needed the reminder of what he’d brought into her life.

“Even before you,” Con countered. “She hasn’t had an easy life, despite what Phillip wants to convince himself of. She’s better off with us than she’s ever been.”

Gavin let Con’s words soak in. Nori was better off with him. He glanced toward her once more before following Con out of the room and shutting the door softly behind him. He nodded to the warriors Con had brought along to watch over her. He’d told her she would always be with him, Con, or Cris.

“I’m going,” Con snarled as if he knew Gavin’s thoughts.

“One of you come for me if she wakes before I get back,” Gavin ordered. “She goes nowhere without one of you with her.”

“I will guard the queen with my life,” Alan vowed as he stepped forward. “With my life, I’ll protect our queen.”

Gavin knew Alan was a good warrior. In fact, he might be one who could be placed as Nori’s permanent guard. Reality was, there would be times when both Con and Cris might be unavailable due to their duties as his seconds. Times when he would need both of them. He should have accounted for that earlier.

“What do you think of putting Alan in charge of Nori’s protection?” Gavin asked Con as they moved through the keep.

“He’s a good warrior. Strong. Smart. Disciplined.” Con nodded. “He’s trustworthy. I can’t see the queen finding any fault in him.”

“We’ll need to pick out at least four more who will serve as her personal escort.”

“You don’t actually think she’ll be in danger when we get home?” Con asked with surprise.

“It’s a risk I’m unwilling to take. Not after what happened here.”

“Understood,” Con said as he pushed open the door to the keep. The sun was already sinking in the sky as they made their way along the exterior wall of the keep. Kingsley had made it so the only way to reach the dungeon was through the courtyard. It had been built that way so that anyone who might manage to escape would have no direct access into the keep. It was a safeguard Gavin appreciated with his wife tucked inside.

“Any news on York yet?” Gavin asked.

“He hasn’t arrived yet. King Lyons and King Drake took some men and rode out to see if they could intercept the commander and his men. Lord Armstrong went with them.”

“At least, Geoffrey will keep Jamie calm,” Gavin added.

Con laughed. “Sure, he will.”

Gavin ignored his second as they were joined by Marcus and Lord Kingsley.

“These dungeons have seen more action since you arrived than they have in most of my life,” Kingsley offered. “I knew you five would keep things interesting, especially now that my land is officially part of the Dread Lands, but I hadn’t accounted for this. At this rate, I’ll need to clean them and add extra security measures.”

“I’ll take care of that for you,” Marcus offered as he held open the door for them to enter.

“And here, I was hoping you’d say it shouldn’t be needed again,” Kingsley groaned.

“A man should always be prepared to deal with his enemies,” Gavin told him, but Kingsley merely sighed.

Cris stood with feet apart, arms crossed over his chest, staring down at a man restrained to the chair in front of him. All Gavin noted was it wasn’t Buckingham.

“Where is he?” Gavin growled out.

“Cell on the left with the others,” Cris offered. “I thought you might want to start on this one. He’s the one who fired the arrow intended for our queen.”

Gavin paused, turning back to the chair and the male who’d dared to fire at his wife. The man glanced up then away, not wanting to hold Gavin’s glare. Disliking that, Gavin fisted his hand in the man’s hair and jerked his head back, straining his neck with the angle he held him at.

“I didn’t know!” the male cried immediately. Gavin hadn’t even needed to open his mouth to question him. “He said she’d betrayed us. That you were invading. That she’d handed King Phillip over to you.”

“Show me his hands,” Gavin ordered then watched as Cris released the man’s hands one at a time. Cris held each one up, knowing exactly what Gavin was searching for. The male held his bow in his left hand and fired with his right. Reaching out, Gavin gripped his right hand and slammed it against the wooden arm of the chair.

“Wait! What are you doing? Wait!” the male screamed as Gavin drew his dagger then made quick work of removing the offending fingers from the hand splayed before him.

“I didn’t hit her! Oh, gods! My fingers! My fingers!”

“Release him,” Gavin ordered then watched as the male fell from the chair to his knees, hand clasped close to his chest while he vomited on the floor. One of the warriors dragged him through it before tossing him into the opened cell door. “Bring Buckingham to me.”

“Stop.” The word was panted from behind Gavin, and he turned to see Phillip standing there. The male looked as if he might pass out at any moment.

“Why are you here?” Gavin demanded.

“Because I knew you would try to claim his life yourself when he’s mine to deal with.” Phillip remained on his feet only due to the soldiers on either side of him.

“He’s mine,” Gavin growled.

“No, I bear the wound from their actions. I’ll be the one collecting justice. For myself and my kingdom.”

“His blood is mine,” Gavin challenged.

“If you think I’ll go easy on him because I entrusted my granddaughter to his family, then you’re wrong. Buckingham will die. Publicly.”

“Fine,” Gavin conceded. “Then let me be the hand of justice.”

Phillip opened his mouth then closed it. Hell, the man was losing what little color he’d had when he’d entered. It couldn’t be good for him to be up and about with his injury.

“What do you have in mind?” Phillip finally asked.

“A fight to the death,” Gavin said.

Phillip grunted. “A fight to defeat, not death. He’ll face the gallows after facing you. I want his head on a pike to warn any others who might think to challenge me.”

“To the death, but I’ll happily remove his head from his shoulders for you,” Gavin offered.

“Give me a few days to recover,” Phillip requested. “Allow for my commander’s arrival and that of Buckingham’s father. He’ll witness his son’s fate. Give me that.”

Gavin would have challenged, but Phillip sagged, sweat dotting his brow. Nori wouldn’t be happy if something happened to her grandfather while Gavin was in a position to prevent it. Instead, he clenched his jaw when Buckingham was yanked forward.

“Toss him back inside,” Gavin snarled, knowing if he got his hands on the other male now, he wouldn’t stop until Buckingham was dead. He turned back toward Phillip. “Get your king back to his bed. Fetch the healer to make sure he hasn’t undone any of her work.”

“I’ve already sent for my personal physician,” Phillip said. “I’ll be fine until he arrives. Why don’t you walk back up with me.”

“I gave you my word,” Gavin barked. “Buckingham will remain here until you’re ready for your spectacle. Just remember who will be the one to spill his blood.”

Phillip didn’t comment, but he motioned for his soldiers to release him. The fool took a steadying breath then moved out of the room under his own power. Maybe, he was

tougher than he seemed. Either way, Gavin knew he needed to make some kind of peace with the other man for Nori's sake. He wouldn't cause her distress by constantly being at odds with her grandfather, and he refused to disappear whenever the other man was around.

He turned to Cris and Con. "You, go wash up. Nori will expect to see you when she wakes, and I'd rather you not be covered in blood."

Cris smiled. "She was worried about me, wasn't she?"

"Shut up," Gavin ordered, making both of his seconds laugh. "I've decided to make Alan her permanent guard anyway."

"What?" Cris' smile disappeared. "It should be either Con or me with her if you're not around."

"It will, but on the occasions when it's not possible, she'll have Alan. It's better if she gets accustomed to him. I need her to trust whoever is with her. Between the three of us, we'll come up with four others to join him, but we'll rotate until she's met every warrior under my command. It's important she learn their names and faces."

Cris sighed but nodded.

"Afraid you won't be her favorite, brother?" Con taunted.

"Our queen will always favor me to you," Cris threw back.

Gavin listened to their banter as they followed him back out to the courtyard.

"I'm heading back to bed for the night. Wake me if there are any issues. I want our men on watch in there." He nodded toward the dungeon. "I also want them on the

gate. I want to know when both York and Buckingham's father arrive."

"Yes, my king," Con and Cris both replied with a bow of their head.

As Gavin entered the keep and headed for the stairs, he found himself torn between hoping his wife was sleeping soundly and hoping she was awake, so he could tire her all over again. Now that he'd tasted her passion, it was a hunger he'd never sate. Nori was definitely a treasure that would enrich both king and kingdom. With the rate his seconds and warriors were succumbing to her beauty and charms, he had little doubt his people would love her.

He nodded to Alan as he entered the room, shutting the door quietly behind him. One glance at the bed showed him Nori still slept. He stripped to the skin and slid in beside her, tugging her warm body against his. She muttered in her sleep then rolled until she faced him, throwing an arm over his stomach and a leg over his thigh. She snuggled into him, whispering his name as she did, then settled back into sleep with a contented sigh. Nothing in his life had ever felt so perfect.

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Nori woke alone again. She'd have to speak with Gavin about leaving their bed without waking her to say goodbye. She wanted his skin on hers, his lips pressed against hers. She blushed at the memory of all they'd done the evening before. Then she remembered her grandfather and Buckingham and that Rory's father would be showing up soon. Feeling guilty for not thinking of any of that first, she jumped from bed and did a quick job of washing and dressing.

She was delighted to see Cris when she opened the door.

"You're okay!"

Cris gave her a cocky grin. "Of course, my queen."

"I was worried when Gavin said you rode off after Robert and those with him."

"I assure you, I was never in any danger."

"It feels like that's what all of you are in. Constantly," she murmured. "Don't think I've forgotten why I was brought here in the first place."

"Because you're our queen," Cris suggested.

"Because I was a pawn in a game between kings," she replied. "One taken to prevent a war."

"War Kings and their warriors don't fear war," Cris told her.

“I’m sure they don’t, but maybe those who love them do,” she offered, thinking of Rory and the baby she carried. Nori startled at the sudden thought that she might be pregnant at this point. If not, it was only a matter of time. The thought of losing Gavin the way her mother had lost her father was inconceivable.

“What are you thinking?” Cris asked, giving her a curious look.

“That War Kings and warriors think awful highly of themselves,” she fired back. “Why no one holds a candle to any of you, do they?”

Cris grinned. “I’m glad you realize that.”

“I realize you are as bad as my husband,” she countered but grinned back before turning and making her way down the hallway. “I plan to check on my grandfather before breaking my fast.”

Cris nodded then bowed at the shoulders. “After you, my queen.”

The soldiers outside the door moved out of the way when they approached. Cris knocked on the door once before pushing it open. Whatever he saw must have appeased him as he continued, pushing the door wide, so she could enter. A soldier was in the room with her grandfather and another man. She realized quickly the second man must be her grandfather’s private physician.

“How’s he doing?” she asked softly, taking in the sleeping form on the bed.

The physician glanced up then stood quickly when he saw her standing there. He bowed his head to her.

“He’s resting, m’lady. He managed to rip the stitches Lord Kingsley’s healer used to close the wounds. I’ve given him a tonic to help him sleep then redressed the injury

to ward off any infection. His temperature has risen slightly. I'll keep a close eye on him until he's out of the woods."

"A temperature?" She knew how bad that could be. "How did he rip his stitches?"

"I understand he left this room last night to speak with your husband and obtain information on the man responsible for him lying here."

Her gaze went to his face. "You know who I am?"

His smile was soft, kind. "You look like your mother, Queen Montrose."

"You knew my mother?"

"I have been your grandfather's physician for a long time. I knew many people in his family. Rosamund was the light of his life. She was as kind and beautiful as her mother. You look remarkably like her," he offered. "Now then, you should head below to break your fast. There's nothing you can do here. I'll keep watch and make sure you're kept informed."

She moved to the bed, not acknowledging the man's words. Instead, she sat beside her grandfather, taking his limp hand in hers as she leaned close to place a kiss on his brow. He was warm to the touch but thankfully not burning.

"I'll have those stories from you," she whispered to him. "Rest. I'll be back to check on you soon." She glanced over at the physician, who nodded at her words.

She rose then glanced down at her grandfather for a long moment.

"Don't let him die."

The physician swallowed, his glance going behind her to where Cris stood.

“I’ll do everything in my power to see that our king survives,” he promised.

“Your king,” she replied without thought. “My grandfather.”

“My queen.” Cris pulled her attention then nodded at the door. They were halfway down the hall before she spoke again.

“Why did he leave his room when he was recovering from an arrow wound?” She shook her head before Cris could answer. “To make sure my husband didn’t kill Robert. Why? He can’t possibly want to pardon the man responsible for putting an arrow through him.”

“He wants justice to be his and knew my king would want the same. They came to an agreement, and King Montrose sent your grandfather back to his room with firm orders to stay put until he was healed enough to be about,” Cris told her.

“What agreement?” Nori asked, not sure if Cris would answer her or not.

“Buckingham will face our king in battle. Normally, it is a fight to the death, but Phillip wants Buckingham to die...” He paused, clearing his throat. “In the manner befitting treason to the crown.”

“Decapitation,” she murmured, knowing what the price of betraying king and country entailed. “Gavin will grant my grandfather’s wish as long as he’s the one wielding justice.”

“Yes, my queen,” Cris confirmed.

She nodded, not saying another word as they made their way to the great room below

and the head table where Rory sat with Marcus and Genevieve, Lord Kingsley, Serena, and Jo. She wasn't sure where the others were and didn't ask. Gavin would be putting things in place for Robert's execution, which is what it would be. He wouldn't stand a chance against a man of Gavin's strength and cunning. She should feel something for Robert since she'd been a part of his household since she was an infant. Maybe, if he'd ever treated her with kindness, she'd feel some remorse for what was coming. He hadn't, and so she didn't. She was glad Justin wasn't alive to see what had come of his brother, though.

"Queen Montrose," Lord Kingsley greeted her, waving his hand toward a server nearby. "It's lovely to see you this morning. I hope you slept well."

She kept her gaze down as she thought of all the things she and Gavin had done before she'd drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

"Very well," she agreed as she took a seat beside Rory.

Rory immediately grabbed her hand and squeezed it as she leaned in. "Are you okay?"

Nori nodded. "You?"

Rory shrugged, but Nori noted the lost look in the other woman's gaze.

"He hasn't arrived yet," Rory told her. "Jamie went to meet him. Serena's father and Geoffrey went with him."

"Is that a good idea?" Nori couldn't help asking. War King Jamie Drake wasn't known for his ability to put people at ease. Plus, he was fiercely protective of his wife. If he thought Rory's father was unworthy of even meeting her, there was no telling what he'd do.

“Geoffrey and my father are with him,” Serena offered. “It will be fine.”

“It helps that Rory’s father never knew Rory’s mother was pregnant or even where she was sent. Apparently, Phillip told him she’d been given in a political marriage,” Jo told her.

“How do you know that?” Nori wanted to know.

“Your grandfather’s physician,” Genevieve shared. “He took one look at Rory when he arrived this morning and knew exactly who she was.”

“He cried,” Jo added.

“Apparently, he knew my mother,” Rory said, tears brimming in her eyes and spilling over. “Told me how beloved she was.”

“He said Anne was a woman of beauty and grace, and that Rory favored her in both,” Jo continued, grabbing Rory’s free hand and squeezing.

“He knew my mother also,” Nori told them, leaning closer to Rory. “But I still don’t understand how a commander in the army wouldn’t know what had been done to your mother.”

“He wasn’t as high ranking at the time,” Lord Kingsley said. “Rowan York was merely a foot soldier, but even then, he had a presence about him. I met him a few times in those early days and have seen him a few since. He might never have been knighted, but he’s an honorable man. Had he known what happened, he would have died trying to save the woman he loved.”

“But wouldn’t he have heard something? It was news when Lord Montrose and his daughter were both taken. I remember Baron Buckingham speaking of it,” Nori told

them.

“Montrose’s daughter,” Marcus said. “From what I’ve been able to find out since Rory and Jamie married, no one knew who Rory’s mother was at the time. Only that she was wed to Montrose with the king’s approval.”

“He would have kept it quiet, just as he hid who you were,” Lord Kingsley stated. “I saw Montrose several times and never suspected Rory wasn’t his daughter. I’m sure Phillip believed he was protecting both of you.”

No one said anything, but Nori saw the judgment on the faces around her. She didn’t blame them. Her grandfather had made numerous mistakes, especially when it came to her and Rory’s mother. He should have kept them with him. Should have protected them by loving them and keeping them close. There was no changing the past for any of them, and she refused to let it harden her. She’d find a way to forgive him. Even if no one else could.

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The bailey was filled with people when the large group rode in. Gavin stood with Marcus and Theo, arms crossed over his chest as he studied the riders in search of Jamie, Geoffrey, and John Armstrong. Nori was with her grandfather. He wasn't sure where the other wives were but knew they were inside. If Rory got word that Jamie was here, though, she'd be flying out of the keep toward her husband and throwing herself into his arms. As much as he'd wanted to kill Jamie in the beginning, Gavin admitted he was happy Rory had met the other War King. His sister was the happiest and safest she'd ever been.

He watched the three men he'd been looking for dismount and stride toward them.

"I assume he's among them?" Marcus asked.

Jamie nodded. "He is."

"And?" Gavin asked. "What do you make of him?"

Jamie shrugged. "He's a hard man but just. Didn't blink an eye when we met him and his soldiers, as if it was nothing new to run into War Kings and their warriors."

"Do you think he knows?" Theo asked.

"No," Geoffrey answered. "He knows only that his king sent for him. He asked if we were the cause."

"I told him Phillip had been attacked by one of his own, a baron's son. That he was healing at Lord Kingsley's keep," Jamie continued. "Armstrong introduced Geoffrey

as his granddaughter's husband. Shared that four of the five War Kings were married to women from Phillip's kingdom. Armstrong, Kingsley, Buckingham, Montrose. He recognized the names but..." Jamie cut off with a sigh. "I believe Phillip. Rowan York had no idea where Rory's mother was sent or that he has a daughter."

"How do you think he'll react when he finds out?" Theo asked.

Jamie shrugged, and Gavin knew he only thought of his wife. Jamie wouldn't care what York thought. His sole concern would be for his wife and how everything about to unfold would affect her.

"How is Phillip?" Geoffrey asked.

"Healing," Gavin replied. "His personal physician arrived, and he's been watching over him. Phillip reopened his stitches, and there was a brief fear of fever, but he's healing."

"Good," Geoffrey said before turning to the courtyard, now filled with soldiers and warriors. "York!"

A tall man strode forward, the bulge of muscle apparent even through the thin armor he wore. A large sword hung from his belt, resting along one thigh. A dagger was sheathed along the other. At his back were a group of men Gavin knew had to be his handpicked and trained soldiers. They moved in a way Gavin recognized, a way warriors moved. He wasn't sure exactly what battles were encountered in the east, but he knew the men before him had waged war and won.

"Where is King Phillip?" Rowan York asked as he faced them, no fear in his eyes as he stared down all five War Kings. The male earned Gavin's respect in that moment, and he suspected York earned that from the others, as well.

“He’s resting inside,” Gavin offered. “My wife is watching over him.”

York’s eyes narrowed.

“She’s his granddaughter,” Gavin said.

York never blinked. Gavin watched as he processed the information. He opened his mouth to reply only to snap his jaws shut, gaze going wide as the door behind them opened. Gavin didn’t need to look to know who was there. Jamie moved for his wife, hauling her into his side. Rory had eyes for no one but her husband.

“You’re back!” she cried, wrapping around him, and Jamie lifted her as he lowered his head, meeting her lips and kissing her as if they weren’t all watching. “I missed you,” she murmured as she nuzzled into her husband.

York watched with dazed eyes, head shaking in denial. Jamie’s gaze went to him and drew Rory’s with it. Gavin realized she didn’t suspect who she was meeting yet.

“Hello,” Rory said, but as everyone stared, she paused. Gavin saw the exact moment it dawned on his sister exactly who looked at her. She clung harder to Jamie.

“Forgive me for staring. You look like someone I used to know,” York said, then nodded and moved past her into the keep.

“That was...” Rory didn’t finish as Jamie lifted her into his arms.

“Yes,” he told her then glanced at the others. “I’m taking my wife to our room. Let us know when he’s aware and ready to talk.”

Gavin nodded before following. “I’m going to Nori. I don’t want her caught between the two men when Phillip confesses his sins. York doesn’t strike me as a man to take

Phillip's lies lightly."

Theo followed at his side.

"Phillip will probably order everyone from the room before he confesses," he said as they gained the stairs and headed up.

"The man's going to discover he's a father and about to be a grandfather in one day," Rory told them as they paused at the top. "I can't imagine that will sit well, and Nori will be hurt if her grandfather is injured further. She loves him. You have to protect him, Gavin. For her."

Gavin nodded, knowing his sister spoke the truth.

"I'll stay," he promised.

"We'll stay," Theo countered. "You won't face this alone. I'll be with you. It's only right since it involves both of my siblings."

"Put me down," Rory ordered Jamie. When she was on her feet, she pulled both Gavin and Theo into a group hug. "I love you both so much. Knowing that we aren't blood nearly killed me."

"Doesn't matter," Theo growled.

"You'll always be our baby sister," Gavin agreed. He thought she was better off for not having to claim blood with Montrose. He and Theo weren't as lucky.

Before they could say anything else, a woman's scream pierced the air.

Gavin felt his heart stop. It was Nori. He took off at a run, roar spilling from his lips.

He paid no heed to the sound of footsteps behind him. All he knew was he needed to get to his wife. He took in everything as he filled the doorway. Immediately, he moved toward Nori who stood behind Alan, who had his sword drawn.

Theo, Jamie, and Rory crowed into the room after him. Gavin continued toward his wife, tugging her against his chest while he continued to assess the room for danger. Phillip was on the bed, hand clutched to his chest, blood staining the bandages at his shoulder. He must have ripped his stitches again. Rowan York was by the wall, rage brewing in his gaze as he stared at Phillip.

“He attacked Queen Montrose’s grandfather, my king,” Alan said. “While our queen was in the room.”

“I’d never harm a woman,” York said, briefly flicking his gaze toward Gavin and Nori. “My apologies.”

He glanced toward Rory, and it was a broken man who stared out of those eyes. Tears spilled unabashedly down his cheeks.

“I didn’t know.” He shook his head, pleading in his tone. “If I had... Gods! What he took from me! What he robbed us of. Anne. Your mother. She was the love of my life. I never stopped loving her. Never.” Rowan’s gaze went back to Phillip. “I curse your name. Knowing what you did. Do you think I didn’t hear of how Montrose abused his wife? Or what was discovered when his daughter, my daughter, married a War King? My Anne. Dear gods, what she suffered. I’ll never forgive you for what you did. Never.”

Rowan took two steps toward Rory then paused as Jamie moved slightly in front of her.

“Know this, War King, hurt one hair on my daughter’s head, and I’ll see you pay for

it.”

“How dare you!” Jamie thundered. “I would die before I hurt my wife.”

“Did you not take her to punish her for Montrose’s sins?” York countered.

“None of that matters,” Rory said as she leaned into her husband. “Jamie loves me. He’d never see me harmed. He’s threatened to kill Phillip many times for what he set in place, what he allowed.” She glanced toward Nori. “But we’ve made our peace now. I love my husband, but I might never have known him if not for Montrose.”

“Rory—”

“Shh,” Rory said, placing her fingers against Jamie’s lips. “From darkness to the light. You rescued me before you even knew I needed it.” She turned back to York, to her father. “I would like to know you. To know more of my mother through you. But my husband is my everything. He and the child we’ve created. That won’t change.”

York’s gaze went toward where Rory cupped her belly, Jamie’s large hand surrounding hers. “You’re pregnant?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m sure our child would love to know his grandfather.”

More tears spilled down York’s cheeks as he nodded. “I’d like that.” He raised his gaze to Jamie’s. “I’d like to offer my services. I’m good with my sword, better with my dagger, but best when it comes to strategy.”

“I won’t relieve you from duty so quickly, York,” Phillip warned.

“My fealty was gone the moment I learned of your actions. My men and I won’t be returning. We’ll head to the Dread Lands if my daughter’s husband will have us.”

“Maybe, we should take this discussion below,” Theo suggested.

“York, we need to speak,” Phillip called.

“You need to rest,” Nori told her grandfather, though she didn’t make a move to step away from Gavin’s arms.

“We have nothing further to discuss,” York replied. “If someone will direct me where we should set up camp, I’ll go see to my men.”

“Your men can camp with mine,” Jamie offered with a glance down at Rory. “I’ll show you as soon as I see my wife is napping as she should be.”

“I’m not napping,” Rory argued. “I’m pregnant not ill. I’ll walk with you. This babe and I need fresh air.”

Jamie gave in with a sigh, and Gavin watched the change in York’s expression. It was obvious he was still questioning the love between the War King and the daughter he’d yet to really discover.

“We’ll walk with you,” Jamie relented.

Rory smiled then surprised them all by reaching for York’s hand. “Come. Tell me how you met my mother.”

York looked lost for a moment. “Anne was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen,” he began, taking her hand and letting her lead him from the room, Jamie mere steps behind them.

“He won’t be leaving me,” Phillip groused from the bed. “Mark my words, he’ll—”

“Enough,” Nori whispered with a shake of her head. “You’ll let him and his men go because it’s the right thing to do. The only thing to do. Because I’m asking it of you. You’ve done enough damage, grandfather. Now, it’s time to work on amends.” She turned to Gavin. “Take me out of here.”

Theo followed them out but parted ways once in the hallway. Theo headed down the stairs in search of his wife while Gavin led Nori back toward their bedroom. He waited until they were alone in their room before asking, “What do you need?”

“Hold me,” Nori asked, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing herself tightly against him. “I just need you to hold me.”

“Always,” he vowed. “You’re not alone anymore.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I’m so glad I have you.”

He stopped questioning what he felt at that moment. He knew he was in love with his wife.

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Nori breathed in the early morning air. Her emotions were all over the place. A man would die today because he'd lifted his hand against her. She wasn't to blame. Robert's actions weren't hers. They were his and his alone.

For a moment, she'd been afraid when his father had arrived that the man who'd agreed to rear her might join his son. He'd blustered and yelled, raising hell as he tried to save his remaining son. When he'd turned his vitriol toward her, she'd feared Gavin might kill him. Then she'd feared her grandfather would. Either way, it didn't matter. Robert Buckingham would die today. By Gavin's hand.

"Are you okay?" Cris asked as he joined Nori.

"I'm good." She glanced over the courtyard, watching as more and more people filled the space around where Gavin and Robert were to fight.

"You know there's no need to worry," Cris assured her. "Your king has nothing to fear."

"I know Gavin will win," she admitted.

"But?" Cris asked when she stopped. "What is it you fear, my queen?"

"Is all this because of me? Did I bring this on?"

"Men live and die by the choices they make," Cris said. "You control only yourself. Buckingham is responsible for his choices and what those have led to."

She nodded. "How will it go today?"

"The people will form a circle that King Montrose and Buckingham will be inside. They will fight. Usually, it is to the death, but this time, it will be until Buckingham is defeated. Afterward he will be led to the stage they've constructed, and your grandfather will pass judgment over him. Then he will die." Cris paused for a moment, gaze running over the crowd. "There's no need for you to bear witness, my queen. No one expects that of you."

"I'll stay."

"As you wish, my queen."

She stood, Cris at her side as the noise grew. There was an energy in the air. Fear, excitement, and others she couldn't put her finger on. She'd started the morning in Gavin's arms. He'd made love to her before they'd both dressed and headed below. He'd left her with Cris while he and Con had disappeared to make sure everything was ready. She'd purposely ignored her grandfather, who was doing better physically, at least. Then she'd avoided the baron, not wanting another confrontation before he watched his son die.

At some point, Rory took her position at her side, her hand sliding into Nori's. Jo stood at her other side. Serena and Genevieve joined them.

"We stand together," Genevieve stated when her grandfather came to shoo them back inside.

"You should all be inside the keep," Lord Kingsley grouched. "This is no place for a woman."

"Maybe not," Nori conceded. "But it is for a queen, and I'll watch until my husband

leaves the circle.”

Everything grew quiet when Robert Buckingham was led out. He was pushed into the ring of warriors and soldiers, then the ties on his hands were cut free.

“What is the meaning of this?” Robert bellowed, glancing around. Perhaps searching for a friendly face, but those who’d left with him were all gone. Killed by her grandfather’s men.

“Today, you’ll face justice, boy,” Phillip called.

“Swords, daggers, or fists?” Gavin asked, rolling his head from side to side.

“Justice? For what? I did nothing that would warrant any form of justice,” Robert argued. His gaze finally found the baron and relief filled his face. “Father. I’m glad you’re here. I’m sure you can put a stop to all this.”

The baron looked haggard as if he hadn’t slept a wink all night. Nori doubted if he had. She remembered the grief he’d expressed when Justin had been killed. She wondered if he’d feel the same for Robert.

“You’ve committed treason,” Baron Buckingham snapped.

“No.” Robert shook his head. “I did nothing. I was leaving as I’d been told, heading home to speak with you. I didn’t even realize our king had been shot until I was attacked and dragged back here by those heathen warriors from the Dread Lands.”

“You would attempt to tell lies to save yourself?” Phillip asked.

“You would kill the man you pledged your granddaughter to?” Robert fired back.

“Eleanor was never pledged to you,” the baron called out after a warning glance from Phillip. “She was betrothed to your brother. That alliance ended with his death. She was never meant for you.”

“Liar!” Robert roared. “You told me she’d be mine. You promised.”

His father shook his head, but it was Gavin who answered as he stepped through the crowd into the circle.

“It matters little now,” Gavin said. “Queen Montrose is my wife.”

“A marriage that hasn’t even been consummated yet.”

Gavin laughed, and Nori felt herself blush at that look on her husband’s face. Any who looked between them would know that their vows were true. Consummation had occurred.

“I’ve told you my wife and marriage are none of your business. You made a grave mistake when you threatened her, Buckingham. Another one when you talked your men into believing she’d betrayed their king. You might not have fired the weapon, but your words were the push to see it done.”

“I said nothing!” Robert argued.

“Your men stated otherwise,” Gavin said.

“Tortured men will say anything.”

Gavin laughed. “They all offered you up before they died. Not by my hand. By your king’s. Save your words. They won’t sway me. We’ll fight until my need to spill your blood is satisfied.”

“You won’t kill me?” Robert asked, and Nori almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

“Your death won’t be by my hands,” Gavin agreed, and Nori knew everyone could see how unhappy that made her husband.

Robert waved his fingers. “Let’s go then. I have no fear of you.”

Even she knew how stupid Robert was to say such a thing. Gavin merely grinned before roaring to the sky and running at Robert. They met in a clash with Gavin taking Robert to the ground beneath him. They fought, split apart, then crashed together again. Nori knew Gavin was merely playing with the other man. She could see it in the way he allowed Robert to skirt around him, the way he let the other man gain confidence. He wanted Robert to think he might walk away when everyone watching knew there was no chance.

“Not so tough are you, War King?” Robert sneered, wiping blood from his busted lip onto the shoulder of his tunic. “Let’s end this.”

“Let’s,” Gavin agreed, standing his ground as Robert flew for him.

Nori saw the glint as sun hit blade and screamed her husband’s name as Robert lunged for him. Gavin sidestepped, grabbing Robert’s hand and twisting. The sound of breaking bone filled the air as the blade fell to the dirt before Gavin kicked it away. As if Gavin had only been waiting for that moment, he attacked. His fists struck with brutal force as he knocked Robert to his knees. Still, he didn’t stop. Not until, with one final punch, the other man was knocked flat in the dirt.

The crowd roared their approval. She knew there had been executions at her grandfather’s castle. Seeing this, she was grateful she hadn’t been there to witness them or the bloodthirst of the crowd, civilized people lost in the haze of violence. This was something she never wanted to see again. She squeezed Rory’s hand.

“I think I’m ready to go inside, now,” she said to no one in particular.

“About time,” Lord Kingsley muttered as he ushered them back into the keep. “I’ll have some water brought to the table for you, Queen Drake.”

Nori glanced at the woman in question and felt guilty for not thinking of her condition while they stood outside.

“I’m fine,” Rory assured her. “Jamie would have created a scene if he thought I shouldn’t be there. Baby and I are fine, but I will accept the promise of water.”

Lord Kingsley led them all to the upper table, making sure they were seated with plenty of warriors around them, before leaving to see that food and drink were brought for them. Cris sat at one of the lower tables with several other warriors, not seeming upset at all that he wasn’t outside watching the fight.

“Did you get a chance to speak with your father?” Nori asked Rory, once they’d been served.

Rory nodded. “He’s better than I’d hoped for. I see what my mother saw in him. He’s strong, intelligent, and charming. He and his men plan to head back with Jamie and me. He asked for an opportunity to show me the kind of father he can be. He apologized over and over for not knowing, for not coming for me and my mother. He showed me a ribbon my mother gave him long ago. He keeps it in between the pages of a book and takes it with him wherever he goes.”

“That’s romantic,” Serena offered with a sigh.

“And you?” Jo asked. “Do you want to build a relationship with him?”

“I do,” Rory told them before casting a glance at Nori. “I’ll never forgive Phillip for

what he did. For placing my mother with Montrose, for leaving me there. For not letting my father know I existed. He robbed us of what we might have shared as a family. He let my mother be used and abused when there was a man who loved her and would have treated her well. Phillip made those choices and didn't care about the consequences. He never even checked on us himself. I can't forgive that. I don't think my father ever will, either."

"I understand," Nori promised, and she did. There were things she struggled with, as well. She loved her grandfather, though. Had always loved him. She merely saw him more clearly now. Flaws and all.

They were still chatting at the high table when the men joined them. Gavin had cleaned up and wore fresh leathers.

"You bathed without me," she murmured as he pulled her close. She brushed her fingers along his brow, down his cheek, then along the line of his jaw. "It's done?"

"It's done," he agreed. "We'll leave for home tomorrow."

She'd been expecting that announcement once this final matter was finished. She'd honestly expected him to say they'd leave as soon as Robert had been dealt with.

"Why morning?" she asked. "There's plenty of day left."

"I thought you might enjoy a little more time with your grandfather. Plus, I have something planned for this evening."

"What do you have planned?" she asked.

"A surprise," he said then chuckled at her expression. "A good one, I promise."

“Will it end with you and I in our bed?” she leaned closer to whisper.

“Definitely,” he murmured then ran his tongue along her neck, causing a shiver of desire to pass over her skin.

“Maybe, I don’t want to wait for my surprise,” she told him, tilting her head to give him better access.

“You’ll want this,” he swore. “Trust me.”

She nodded. She trusted him. Despite their rocky start, he’d been honest and true with her. He’d shown her he was a man of his word, one she could trust with her heart. Whatever surprise he had in store, she was ready.

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Gavin held his breath as Nori appeared at the end of the aisle. He didn't glance at her grandfather whose arm she clung to. He had eyes only for her as she walked toward him. His bride. One who'd been robbed of the wedding she should have had. He hoped tonight's ceremony would make up for that. The joy on her face made him believe it did.

She wore a white gown with silver threading woven throughout. A silver chord emphasized the dip at her waist. She had a veil draped over the length of her hair, the light catching on her blonde locks through the translucent material. She was a vision to behold, and Gavin realized what he'd missed by sending a proxy to take his vows instead of showing himself.

"You're beautiful," Gavin told Nori once Phillip had passed her hand from his to Gavin's. Her fingers trembled. "What are you afraid of?"

Nori glanced up at him with luminous eyes, her smile more radiant than the sun, letting him know it wasn't fear that had her hand shaking. "I can't believe you'd do this for me. We're already married," she whispered.

"I'd do anything for you, Nori. Besides, someone explained how remiss I was to send another to speak my vows for me at our first wedding."

She blushed. Gavin almost laughed, remembering the tongue lashing she'd given him when she'd told him to figure out what was important enough to require his presence and asked if she should expect another in their bed when the time came to consummate their vows. He'd never fail her again.

He kept his gaze on her the entire ceremony. The priest was quick to refer to it as a renewal of their vows since Gavin had readily admitted he'd already claimed her as a man does his wife. God's truth, he couldn't wait to do so again. He kissed her, sealing their bond for all to see before turning to face the people who'd joined them.

Theo and Jo sat together, and the way his brother rubbed his fingers over her stomach made Gavin wonder if there would be another announcement soon. Jamie and Rory sat next to them, with Gavin's sister throwing fleeting glances toward the father she'd just met. For now, Gavin was still reserving judgment on Rowan York, but the man seemed to genuinely love Rory and want to build a relationship with her and Jamie. Then there was Serena sitting between her husband and father. Geoffrey's arm was around his wife's shoulder, holding her close while John Armstrong looked on with pride. Not only was he proving to be a great father-in-law to Geoffrey, but he presented a father figure to the rest of them who hadn't had one or had a poor example of one. John nodding at Gavin. He'd already told Gavin he was doing the right thing by having another ceremony, so he could be in his rightful place instead of having John as his proxy.

Finally, there was Marcus with his wife, Genevieve, and her grandfather, Lord Sevres Kingsley. It had been his idea for Gavin to find and wed Nori. At least, Gavin had let everyone believe that. He'd already started looking into the possibility. He'd let them think she was a means to an end in the beginning before he'd met her, engaged with her, and touched her. Nori was fire, both in bed and out. Gavin planned to make up for the years of neglect she'd experienced due to her grandfather and the man appointed as her caretaker.

King Phillip and Baron Buckingham. Gavin let the heat of his glare encompass both men. He might tolerate Phillip since he was Nori's grandfather, who she loved despite everything he'd done, but Buckingham was another story. It still surprised him the baron had stayed for the wedding after his sole heir had been executed. Gavin was sure that was Phillip's doing. A way to remind Buckingham who had all the control in his life. He'd overheard Phillip telling the man his youngest daughter

would be married in a fortnight to the male Phillip had selected, one who would take over for the baron. Gavin hadn't cared enough to stay and listen to the rest of the conversation. If he'd had his way, the baron would have died along with his son. War Kings didn't keep traitorous men alive to manipulate them.

"Gavin?"

Nori's soft voice pulled his gaze, and he dropped another kiss onto her upturned face before taking her hand and leading their guests back to the keep. There would be plenty of wine and food and dancing tonight. Then they'd need to hold another celebration when they returned to his castle and Nori would be introduced to all of her people as their queen.

He led her into a dance as soon as the music began then watched as she danced with her grandfather and Lord Kingsley. He grinned when Theo stepped up when Jo ordered him to dance with his new sister. More often than not, his wife remained in his arms and the need they shared for one another grew hotter and hotter. Finally, when he felt enough time had passed, he went to fetch his wife from her latest partner.

He tugged his wife out of Lord Armstrong's arms when the dance ended and led her out of the laughter and revelry and to the stairs that would take them to their bedchamber above.

"I was hoping we'd head up soon," she murmured as they climbed.

"I wanted you to enjoy the celebration."

"I'll enjoy our private celebration more," she vowed, and Gavin paused, pulling her roughly against him and taking her mouth.

The heat in her gaze when he pulled back had him sweeping her up into his arms and

taking the stairs at a hurried pace. He ignored the men outside their chamber, waving them away after they'd opened the door. He heard the bawdy comments about a king and his sword but cared little. They didn't say anything untoward about Nori, and that was all Gavin cared about.

"How do I get you out of this?" he asked as he set Nori on her feet.

She reached up and removed her veil first then scooped her hair over a shoulder before turning and giving him her back. "There are laces in the back."

His fingers felt too large as he worked the laces loose, trying his best not to rend the material in his need to see her. Unable to hold back, he dropped his mouth to her neck, kissing her softly while his knuckles grazed the skin exposed beneath the laces.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look?" he whispered.

"Yes," she moaned. "Hurry, Gavin. I need to feel you against me."

"Fuck!" he growled, biting down on her neck before grabbing his dagger and cutting the knotted ribbons free.

Between the two of them they had her stripped down to her stockings in minutes. Gavin lifted her to sit on the side of the bed then went to his knees before her. He took his time removing each of her stockings, kissing her from mid-thigh to the arch of her foot before spreading her legs and taking in the soft pink petals that shielded what he wanted to taste. He leaned in, licking over the plump folds, dipping his tongue inside to flick along her opening.

"Gavin!"

"Mmm," he groaned. "You taste better than anything served at our marriage banquet. Delicious. I could gorge myself for hours."

He dove in, using his shoulders to keep her spread wide while his fingers opened her completely to his touch. He licked and sucked, reveling in each cry he pulled from her lips. He didn't stop until she came undone, screaming his name at the top of her lungs. Even then, he barely let her catch her breath before he was pushing her over that edge, again and again, and her body was flushed with pleasure, her voice hoarse as she begged him to thrust with his manhood instead.

"I'd have a painting of you just like this, if I could," he murmured as he stepped back and made quick work of his clothes. "But I can't paint, and I'd kill any man who saw you like this."

She moaned, one hand reaching out for him. "Gavin."

He took those fingers, kissing them before trailing his mouth along her arm, across her shoulder, then up her neck to her waiting mouth. He was soft and slow, taking his time with her.

"Gavin, please!"

"What do you need?" he asked as he licked over one rosy nipple before gripping it between his teeth and giving it a tug.

"Oh, gods!"

He tugged her nipple again then wrapped his lips around it and sucked greedily while working his tongue against it. She held him to her, legs around his waist, ankles locked behind his back while she urged him to suckle harder. He wasn't sure how he'd managed not to take her the very first moment he'd seen her. With every taste, he wanted more. Needed more.

"Gavin!"

With a groan, he relented, sliding up her body until his cock lodged at her portal. He thrust deep, catching her cry with his mouth as he pressed their lips together and licked into her mouth, sharing the taste of her decadent cream with her. This woman wrecked him completely. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her. If every moment of his life had been required to lead him to her, to this moment, he would suffer through all of it, again and again, knowing the outcome was well worth it.

"Gavin!" she screamed again, nails digging deep into his shoulders while her heels rode low on his back.

"I love you," he whispered, needing to share those words with her.

Her gaze met his, emotion spilling from her eyes in liquid drops that only highlighted the beauty of her eyes.

"I love you, Gavin. For now and always." She leaned up to kiss him once, twice, three times before meeting his gaze again. "Thank you for finding me. For claiming me. Nothing in my life has ever felt as real as you."

He gazed down at her. "I put all my focus into taming a land people claimed could never be tamed. Into holding what others coveted and tried to take. I found solace in a home built by my own hands, with people who I protected and respected for their hard work and dedication. But nothing will ever compare to you, Nori. You're my treasure. You're what I've spent my whole life searching for. You are my home."

"Home," she agreed, and he vowed that no matter what life threw at them, they would always find their home in one another.