

Only Her



MATED QUEENS BOOK ONE
N. SLATER

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Only Her ~ Mated Queens Book One

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Dedication

To all those who want a little bit of sugar and spice in their
life,

Author's Note

This series, Mated Queens, is set in a parallel universe where royalty still rule the lands, kings and queens lead their countries and practices such as galas are used to find a partner or a 'mate' still exist. Kusovania is a peaceful country where carriages are common and it's perfectly normal to walk through the smaller towns such as Redhelm and pass by the blacksmith, the butcher, and the tavern all in one go. Modern technology is still a part of this universe, however it is not widely used.

Chapter One

SERAPHINA

“Give me one more,” I whisper, loving the way the woman lying beneath me is trying her best to stay quiet. Her fingers slip into my perfectly manicured hairstyle, pulling the pinup loose. My curls splay over her bare thighs as she tugs, her legs pressing against the sides of my face as she twists and turns beneath the attentions of my tongue. My fingers curl around her hips, digging into the ruffles of her dress that I rucked up earlier. The delicious bite of pain that I deal her rewards me with a whimper.

“Fuck, Fi, *please*.”

I love when she begs, especially when it’s for me. She may be the next queen of Kusovania, but here? In her bedroom, when it’s just us, I am her savior and her worst nightmare. I run my tongue through her folds, savoring her taste before pulling back again, “Come on, princess. Just one more.”

Her whines fill the room, bouncing off the velvety covered walls, consuming her sweet little sounds. I stuff two fingers in her pussy before nipping at her mound, her entire body bowing off the bed as she whimpers through an orgasm. I lap up her release, her fingers tightening in my hair until it's almost painful but I don't stop until she's pleading for relief.

“God, I could live between these legs all day,” I murmur, placing several kisses on her inner thigh before crawling back up her body. Her eyes are half-lidded with pleasure as she drags me into a kiss, not minding her own taste on my lips.

“You basically have been,” she finally says when she pulls away, her eyes sliding shut, the weariness of the royal life seeping from her. Princess Daniela had been tense for the past week, gearing up for the once-a-year gala and I just knew that she needed the release. “I thought you said you were busy,” she says before stuffing her face in the curve of my neck and resting against my side.

I wrap an arm around her waist, the other playing with her mussed hair. She cut it a few months ago and while most of the kingdom takes pride in the length, I quite prefer the shorter style. It suits her. “I was,” I purr in her ear. “I still am.” A grin splits across my face as I reach down between her legs, pressing lightly against her clit.

She squirms as she grabs my hand and pulls it away. “Goddess, no more. If I trip during the gala tonight, Kusovania will think I'm dying or something.”

A chuckle tears from my lips at the worry in her expression. I press a kiss to the bridge of her nose, “Well, we can’t have that, princess. After all, you should be *carried*.” Taking the opportunity, I roll her over onto her back, kissing her fiercely as she melts beneath me. Too soon, she comes to her senses and slaps my arm.

“Fi! No. Just... you have to go get ready anyway.”

I grumble and climb off her, slowly sitting up as I try to tame my curls. It’s a poor attempt. All of the maids will know exactly what’s been going on in here but I’m not worried. They’ve known about me and the princess for months, although it’ll never pan out. This gala is supposed to be where the king will pick Princess Daniela’s suitors.

Just another reason I stole her away for some personal time.

It might be the very last time I’m able to.

“You’re coming right?” Daniela asks as she scoots over to the edge of the bed behind me. She’s still in that lavish baby blue gown that I couldn’t be bothered to rip off her earlier. Now, I wish I had so that I could feel her naked curves against my back. “Seraphina.”

My voice is said with a stern command, the same command she uses with the Kusovanian people. I twist around to see her hardened expression but beyond that, she’s pleading for me to show up. “It’s just a bunch of postering, princess. There’s no place for me there. Besides, my father will have a suitor for me in the next week and the king will have-”

She firmly presses her lips to mine, cutting me off. “And I don’t want to hear it. Besides, my ex will be coming.”

“I’m going.”

She giggles, knowing that that would cement my decision. While the thought of her in anyone else’s arms pains me, her ex is never allowed to touch her again. Not with the way she hurt the most precious woman in the world. Daniela’s smile brightens up the room as she slips off the bed and moves toward her closet, “I knew that would work. Oh, and Fi? Wear something purple.”

I head for the back door, nodding. “As you wish, princess.”

“You can call me Daniela, you know.”

“And we both know that’s not why I call you my princess. Besides, one day you’ll be my Queen.”

“Promise?”

“Daniela...”

“I know. One can hope though.”

Chapter Two

SERAPHINA

The memory of her taste is still on my lips as I slip into the amethyst gown I had tailored to my measurements. I could have crafted this piece of art myself but with as many orders that continued to come in just before the gala, not to mention the extra time I've been spending with the princess, I didn't have the time.

It doesn't help that this gown represents the last time I'll be able to show off for the woman who's stolen my heart. After tonight, she'll be snuggling up in someone else's arms while I remain just the royal seamstress, and I hate that I hope she's just as heartbroken as I will be.

My unruly brunette curls fall around my shoulders, brushing against the covered love bites that Daniela so lovingly gave. Despite her rough persona as she sits on her throne beside her father, she's so soft in the bedroom. She succumbs to my desires and lets me play her body like the sweetest instrument. I sometimes wish that she let her people see that side of her,

the one that cares and loves and wants to help, rather than the persona that her deceased mother crafted.

It's not like I have any say in the matter, though.

I'm just the royal seamstress.

My thoughts travel to what Daniela will be dressed in, wondering if it will be one of my creations or one of the monstrosities brought over from another country. The former queen always loved to make a statement, something the king has continued with his daughter. Daniela submits quite easily to the royal commands but I can see it in her eyes that she's not satisfied, that she won't be until she gets to truly be herself.

Selfishly, I hope that she'll pick me out of the crowd of royals showing up tonight but I also know that it isn't entirely her choice. The king will choose someone to suit his daughter as well as the kingdom and, I have little to bring. I might be a noble, but without insane riches or tactical experience, I'm not sure what good I would do as a ruler.

Discarding that thought, I smooth down my gown, pulling it down just a little farther. My breasts are on full display beneath the near sheer fabric, making me a perfect magnet for a suitor. It isn't in my intention to make Daniela jealous but just as she must find a suitor, I should at least make an effort. Thirty is way past the prime age to be finding a mate, something my parents continually tell me.

Content with my appearance, I march down the stairs to present myself to my parents. My mother gives me a sweet

smile, masking her disdain for my choice of color, my father scowling that my dress isn't *low enough*. I know they're disappointed that I've yet to marry, especially since most of my friends found their partners at 25 or 26.

The problem is that I have found the love of my life. She's just off-limits.

Letting them give me one last once over, I make my way outside as I wait for my friend, Lania, and her sisters. Other than wielding off Daniela's ex, I have no real plans for tonight. Well, unless I can find another private moment with my princess. Just the thought of my head between her legs again has me pressing my thighs together. With a little more time, I would want to watch her cum all over those precious toys in her room while she shouts my name. The entire world is going to be watching her tonight though; getting her alone will be nearly impossible.

I wrap my arms around my shoulders to stave off the shivers of the cool night air. Grabbing a sweater or a shawl would have been smart but I have a statement to make. My gaze travels down the street as a double pulled carriage approaches. Lania has never done anything quietly and it makes sense that the yearly gala won't be any different. Her Friesians are gorgeous, dark flowing manes bouncing against their neck.

"Sera!" Lania calls out, waving from her seat. She's leaning dangerously over the edge as the carriage pulls up and I swiftly push her back down, scowling at her eagerness. She's nearly seven years younger than me, her two sisters sitting

quietly beside her. They're much quieter than she is, barely 20-years-old and hopeful that they'll find their mate tonight.

I climb in, squeezing into the last empty seat as I tap the side to let Lania's butler, Ezra, know that he can continue onto the castle. The castle that will signal my last night with my princess. I'm tempted to quit my job and try my hand at something else but know that the king will never allow it. I'm the best at what I do and my connection with everyone else in the business isn't something that can be just handed off.

Not to mention that I have no idea what else I would pick up in its stead.

Ezra, twists around to make sure that we're all seated, giving me a small nod and a smile. He doesn't reciprocate the gesture to the other three as he pulls off down the road but I don't expect him to. For some reason, most royals and nobles ignore the staff they employ. Even my parents always thought it odd that I thank my cooks and the staff around the house, saying that they've been hired to do a job and they completed it.

I'm glad that I never mentioned our house mistress was the one who helped me complete my very first dress all those years ago, pinning up the fabric and teaching me my first stitches. If it wasn't for Amelia, I might have never become the seamstress I am today.

I settle in my seat, tuning out Lania's excited squeals as she points at various things along the landscape. Lania and her sisters rarely leave home, waiting for the yearly gala to find a mate to whirl them into a new life. I couldn't fathom staying

indoors like that. Then again, I've had the grand fortune to waltz among royalty and take part in their lives, even if just for the delicacies offered in the castle halls.

The grandeur structure sits atop a small hill in the middle of Kusovania, surrounded by the many towns that have strengthened the country. A thick wall encases us in, protecting us from the outside but I've never been far enough in any direction to actually see the wall up close.

My thoughts drift to far different things, Daniela's flushed cheeks and bare shoulders finding a way into my head. Her beautiful laughter rings in my ears and as much as I know I'm torturing myself; I can't be bothered to think of something else.

Memories of finding her in the tavern a few streets over, covered in a thick cloak to keep Kusovians from recognizing her make me chuckle. It's how I figured out her favorite drink and the beginning of our forbidden relationship. She had no idea what she was doing, her baby blue eyes sparkling as I guided her around my small town of Redhelm, her hand firmly tucked in mine. Three years ago was our first kiss.

Tonight will be our last.

Lania jabs me in the side, "What's that smile for? You're thinking about that date you had!" I don't answer her but from the corner of my eye, I can see her sisters sit forward, eager to know as well. Lania's eyes widen. "You found someone,

didn't you? That's why you were late getting back home. Who is it?"

I can't tell her that my head was between the princess' legs. No one can know that. It's not wrong, per se, but it definitely won't be looked on fondly. We run in different circles and I don't want anything to harm Daniela's chance at the perfect mate. "No one you know," I finally say. And it's true. No one knows Daniela like I do. No one has heard that sweet laugh or those beautiful cries like I have.

Not even her ex, Queen Helvania.

I internalize the grin at the piece of Daniela that has only been mine.

Lania jabs me again but I won't tell her. This will be the secret I bring to my grave.

Not even waiting for the carriage to stop, I hop out. It's an ungraceful descent, but I never professed to be graceful. I help Lania and her sisters out, Ezra chuckling as I do his job for him. The girls stroll down the walkway, giving me a private moment with their butler.

"Be faster next time," I whisper jokingly, Ezra managing a snort before wiping the silly expression from his face. Lania's butler may be as old as my father with the salt and pepper hairs neatly brushed back but he's as close to a friend as he can be, what with the few conversations we've shared in passing.

"Have a lovely time, Miss Seraphina. I'll return at half past eleven to retrieve you." The words are meant only for me

because I know that the others will find their mate tonight. In previous years, Ezra's words have been a warm reminder that someone is here for me. This year, though, I hate them because it reminds me that the one woman I want will no longer be available.

I give him a small nod before following Lania into the venue, the hallway opening up into the gala. The vast elegance spread out around me has been done up with rich golds and silvers covering every available surface. The castle has always been overwhelming to me but I ignore it as I slip to the edge of the room, gaze focusing on the food table along the back wall.

Rich aromas meet my nose as I draw closer but I halt my approach when Princess Daniela takes over my view. Her bare shoulders are like a beacon as I stare, unashamedly, watching with rapt attention at the woman who has a stronghold over my heart.

Discreetly stuffing a crabcake into her mouth, her lips turn up in the most deviant smile, her gaze locked on something a few feet away. I follow her gaze and land on one of the royals, one that I've seen visiting some of the local towns the past few days. He's been trying to grace her with his presence but every time he bows his head toward her to ask permission to speak, she nods and then shakes her head a moment later.

I don't even know why he's still trying to speak with her as he fails at her playful directions, Daniela's body vibrating from laughter as she swallows. Tonight, she nods, letting the poor man approach and immediately her demeanor shifts. Her

back stiffens and she loses her smile, her royal poise taking over. I hate the part she has to play, or rather the one she thinks she has to play in front of the world.

If she was mine, I would never demand the façade she parades around. I only want her authentic self. I want her smiles, her laughter, her sweet demeanor to be the one that Kusovania sees.

Chapter Three

DANIELA

The prince is boring and so is the queen that spoke to me before him. At the very least, they brought me something to eat so I can occupy my hands but it isn't enough to keep my attention. My gaze is constantly wandering the hall for a possible suitor that will appease my father.

The problem is that I already know the woman I want and she's possibly the only one I can't have. Never in the history of Kusovania has a princess chosen a noble over a royal from another country. Uniting our forces is one of the main reasons to find a mate and yet, I could give a flying fuck about all that. I want to marry for *love*, a luxury I don't have.

Queen Helvania has been looking for me for the last half hour that she's been here, dressed in a full cloak of diamonds, scaring off any potential suitors. The people of Kusovania think that the king and I are vain enough to pick someone rich, flashy, and bold but she is also arrogant, rude, and

domineering in a way that will ruin what little Kusovania has to offer.

The strength of our country comes from the peaceful regions and the bartering trades, not armies or tactical experience. I don't want to harm Kusovania by introducing that mindset here. Still, in the end, it's my father's choice and I'll rule with whatever mate he chooses to put by my side.

"I'm sorry, uh..." I blank on the prince's name, smiling sheepishly and hoping that he understands that it's time to move on. He hangs his head and steps aside, giving me free access to the rest of the gala. However, my only desire is to return to my room, away from the chaos so that I can retrieve the one thing that bring my deepest fantasy to fruition.

A night with Seraphina.

I'm not convinced that it will be our last night but if it is, there's only one way I'd like to spend it. A wild smile splits across my face as I excuse myself, head bowed, and exit the gala. Royal eyes follow my departure, each salivating for a chance to win my attention but I'm not interested in that. No, I've shown up for one reason, hoping that Seraphina has shown up like she's promised.

I slip into my room, eyes peeled for the gift that I bought several days ago.

"Princess Daniela, you shouldn't be here."

I shriek and turn around before righting myself, checking that my short strands haven't loosened beneath my crown. My

personal maid, Grace, giggles as she hands me a large drawstring pouch. The velvety pocket dangles in my hands, my face beat red as she nods. “Had to make sure that it didn’t end up in the wrong hands. You know how nosy some of the newer maids are.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“Have a great night, sweetie.” Grace throws me a wink, making me blush even harder.

I bob my head up and down as I clutch the bag to my chest, thanking Grace before rushing back out into the hall and slipping out into the gardens. I know Seraphina will end up out here at some point as she’s just as enraptured by nature as I am, so all I have to do is wait and hope that it isn’t Queen Helvania that finds me first. I run through the speech I have planned but the only thing I can think of is how Seraphina will feel inside of me, her hands digging into my waist as she makes love to me one last time.

It’s my last wish and as selfish as it is, I hope she’ll accept.

Chapter Four

SERAPHINA

There aren't many places to stay out of sight in this room, especially not with the gown I've donned. The prince that was speaking with Daniela has found me but the only words on the tip of my tongue are that he's not worth my time. To save myself the embarrassment, I merely shake my head and push past him.

I know what it looks like, that I'm too picky. After all, I'm several years older than most of the women looking for mates and my constant disregard for the men and women in this hall only add to my unapproachable personality. Sifting through the few that approach me anyway, I nod my way through their spiel before rejecting them. It's always the look of disappointment or disgust left on their faces that I won't give them the time of day.

"There you are!" Lania calls out as she stumbles upon my form wedged into a small chair just beside the doorway leading out into the gardens. She is accompanied by a large

man, undoubtedly pompous by the number of medals dangling from his uniform. It hardly seems like the right attire to wear to a gala. His hand is seated firmly on her waist, his entire demeanor boasting control in a way that seems perfect for her and stifling for me.

Lania doesn't value her freedom the same way I do. She wants the fairytale romance, complete with submission and a future she doesn't have to worry about. Lania steps forward but is stopped from moving further by the royal's grip on her waist. Her smile disappears for a second before returning, her hand tapping his twice to release her. He clears his throat and complies but I can see that it's more out of respect for my presence than it is for the woman he's chosen.

"This is Prince Malik. He's with the Mesonia Kingdom and he," she grunts when he tries to reach for her again and I stifle a giggle seeing that she's the one truly in charge. Oh, she so likes it like *that*. "He wanted to meet the rumored Seraphina that I kept talking about. This is the royal seamstress."

A frown sits on my lips even as I stand and then thrust my hand forward to greet him. It's disrespect at its finest, not offering a prince a curtsy but I don't feel like puffing up his ego. After all, I work for the royal family and my kingdom and he's just a visitor. Until he claims Lania, I don't feel he's earned my respect.

Shocked, he clasps his hand with mine before releasing it. "Wonderful to meet you, Seraphina."

His jaw tightens ever so slightly and I can see that he's not impressed. It's a good thing I don't need him to be. "You as well, Prince Malik. Unfortunately, I believe my duty is calling me elsewhere and I can't ignore it any longer." Lies. Everyone in the kingdom has taken off the night except for the royal chefs and kitchen staff. Even they have short shifts and I know my lies won't go unnoticed.

I push away from them and head for the golden doors leading to my small bite of freedom. Lania stops me, waiting for Prince Malik to sift into the crowd after she dismisses him to speak. "So? Thoughts?"

I catch myself from laughing, knowing that I have a part to play. I must be poised and elegant while in the midst of these individuals. Had it only been Kusovians, I might have been able to let down my guard. They know me as an independent woman that speaks her mind. The royals from the surrounding countries, however, do not. Turning back to my friend, I sigh. "Lania, Malik comes off as a controlling bastard. Is he the youngest?"

"*Prince* Malik and he'll definitely try to control me. He's the second to youngest so I won't have to run a kingdom but I'll be set and so will my sisters." She bites her lip and I catch on. If she brings money into the family, her sisters won't be forced to find their mates so soon. It's one reason I'm glad to be part of a noble line and am an only child. Lania giggles at my non-reaction as she explains his qualities and everything he'll bring to the table.

Yet another reason we're different. I don't want to find someone that will set me up for life or strengthen my family's name. I want someone to love.

"Your war hero sounds perfect for you, Lania. He also sounds like he'll be away from home a lot but if he loves you, then that's all that matters."

Her face twists in confusion before her shoulders sag. "Oh, Sera. You know we can't afford love. People like us marry for status, not for love. We marry for stability. Your position at the castle has done you well but time's running out. I didn't want to say anything but Sera-"

I hold my hand out to keep from hearing the same speech I've heard every day for the past ten years from my parents. I get that I'm not the prime age anymore, but that doesn't mean I'm unwanted. It just means that I won't settle. "Thank you, Lania. Truly but I don't need to hear it again."

"Maybe you do."

The disappointment in her eyes is evident but I won't let it sway me. The walls seem to close in a little, freedom calling me from the outside. "Lania, enjoy the rest of your night," I say curtly. I give her a small curtsy and push the golden doors open to escape outside.

This night, as much as it feels like a fairytale, is anything but.

Find a mate.

The nagging command in the back of my head continues to haunt me but I ignore it. Lania catches my wrist, stopping me again. “I didn’t want to say anything, Sera. I had thought that the stars in your eyes would disappear. Did you really think I didn’t know about the night at the tavern three years ago? Everyone in Redhelm knows. The one thing they don’t know is *who* your secret admirer is. Sera, it’ll never happen.”

I pull from her grasp. “Lania...”

“It’s time to let go of the frivolous thought that you have a chance. We’re *nobles*, Sera. Nobles. We’re not royals, we’re not in line for a throne, and we have *nothing* to bring to a kingdom. We’ll be lucky to grab a prince or princess, let alone another royal. There’s a few Kusovanian nobles that are sweet on you. What about them?” I can see that she’s pleading, hoping that I’ll just *choose* but I think it hurts more that she’s dismissing the woman I truly do want.

“Daniela-”

Lania tightens her grip, her gaze hardening. “*Princess* Daniela. Sera, you’ve let your little crush get out of hand. She is the *princess* of this kingdom, not your lover. She doesn’t even truly know who you are. Your parents mentioned that something was off but I had no idea it was this bad. Sera, choose someone tonight because if you don’t, I fear that your parents may choose for you.”

She releases me and I finally step outside, the doors closing behind me. My heart’s in my throat as I stand there, defeat coating my emotions. All I wanted was one last night before I

had to face reality but Lania's words hurt. Still, I won't let them ruin the rest of the time I have here. I will spend my last moments with Daniela and then return to my rightful place.

I take in the lush greenery, doused in rich blues and purples, and dashes of pink amongst the perfectly curated flowers and exotic plants that don't exist anywhere else in Kusovania. This garden is a source of our country's pride, holding wildlife from surrounding lands, brought back from the spoils of adventures that this kingdom has embarked on over the centuries. I take a deep breath, relishing the calm that sweeps over me in the silence of this place.

“Don't fancy any of the prospects in there?”

A giggle follows the question as I twist around to meet the soft voice of Princess Daniela, herself. It's the first time I'm actually seeing her in all of her royal glory tonight. Her hair falls against her bare shoulders, pulled from the royal hairstyle she usually dons for events like this. It hangs in stark contrast with her silver gown, glittering diamonds laced through the bodice. A thin crown twirls around in her left hand as her other hand runs through her midnight strands, her dark eyes focused solely on me.

Everyone finds her gaze intense. I find it intriguing, enticing, and entirely mine.

I need to stop thinking like that.

“Princess,” I say, giving her a bow instead of a curtsy. It's always been that way with us as I take the dominant position between us. Daniela waits for me to cross over to her before

wrapping her arms around my waist, her crown dangling from her fingertips against my back. “I didn’t think I’d get to see you,” I purr before kissing her softly. She leans into the embrace, one of my hands slipping into her hair as the other clutches at the lace attached to the back of her dress.

She fits so perfectly in my arms and I’m going to be devastated when I have to let her go.

“I was waiting for you,” she whispers against my lips when I pull away. I raise an eyebrow as she untangles herself from me and reaches over to the bench beside us. Resting on it is a velvet drawstring bag that is soon placed in my hands. Her smile takes over her face as she looks up at me. “I wanted our last night to be special.”

“Every moment with you is special, Princess.” And it is. Every single moment I’ve spent with this woman brings me joy. She’s visibly vibrating, waiting for me to unearth it. Curious, I slip a hand down the side, a knowing grin taking over my face as my fingers contour the side of a thick silicone cock. “You didn’t.”

Her hands clasp together, her head bobbing up and down repeatedly. “I did. Let me be selfish for one more night, Fi. *Please.*” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears and I can’t deny her any more than I can deny myself. I lean forward and kiss her again, savoring her taste on my tongue before she grabs my wrist and directs me to a small house at the back of the garden. It’s shrouded in pine and bushes, barely visible from the main gala.

“What is this place? I’ve never seen it before.”

Daniela giggles as she pulls me inside and then closes the door behind us. “Good. Mother showed it to me when I was younger and said that it was a place to escape when things became too much. She called it a slice of paradise. I am supposed to show it to my children and they will show it to theirs.”

I gape at the luxurious set up, the velvet bedspread atop a mattress that takes up nearly the entire room. Candles are lit along the perimeter, almost as if Daniela planned this beforehand. I swivel around, feeling the warmth and brightness that is my perfect little princess, the woman who’s stolen my heart and left nothing behind.

The sound of expensive cloth hitting the carpeted floor has me turning back around to see Daniela, naked as the day she was born, staring at me, ready for me to take charge. I lick my lips at the beauty in front of me, her perky breasts calling me to touch. I set the bag aside for a moment as I indulge, lowering my lips to the right breast and sucking it into my mouth. Her hands immediately find my shoulders as I knead her left breast with my hand, loving the tortured sounds I’m drawing from her lips.

“Fi,” she whines as fingers slip into my hair and tug. I grunt as my pussy clenches around nothing, yelling for relief. I know she’s just as needy, needing someone to take her apart again even though I took care of her earlier this afternoon.

When I feel her right breast has had enough attention, I switch, swirling my tongue around the erect nub on her left breast before tugging at it. She whines again as I continue, Daniela's grip tightening until it tears a moan from my throat.

I pull back and she attacks my lips, hands frantically trying to pull off my gown. Where I thought she might have started at my shoulders, she begins at my chest, fingers dipping beneath the sheer cloth and tugging at my breasts. I jerk forward, grinning against her lips as the passion between us grows. She explores, her lips traveling to my jaw as she undresses me.

My gown flutters to the floor, Daniela on her knees in front of me.

The power I hold as I stand here in front of my country's princess is unmatched and when she leans forward to press a kiss to the little patch of hair between my legs, I can't help but demand more. Daniela doesn't waste time as she presses me back against the door and stuffs her face between my legs. I gasp at the forcefulness behind her movements, Daniela directing one of my legs over her shoulder as her tongue runs through my folds.

I shudder at the sweetness she exudes, mingled with the raw desire for me and my body. She switches out her tongue with her fingers as she sucks and nips at my mound, trying to force an orgasm from me as if this is the last one that we'll ever have. I refuse to waste this night but I will give her this moment however she wants it.

Slowly, I slide my fingers into her hair and pull her back, “Princess, look what you do to me. How you wreck me.” Her face is glazed with my juices, her eyes wild as she reaches up to hold my free hand against my belly. Silence falls between us as my stomach rises and falls rapidly, my heart beating uncontrollably for the woman between my legs.

“Drown me, Fi.”

Her words are all I need as she resumes her attentions and I ride her face to completion, moaning through an orgasm that all but steals my soul. I hold onto the door as she lets my leg down, popping up to feed me back my own taste. I don’t deny her as I wrap a hand around her neck and pull her to me, devouring her lips as I walk her back to the mattress. I swipe the velvet bag as we stumble to the bed, Daniela’s giggles silenced as she catches the fire in my eyes.

“Fi, you know that I love you, right? That I would do anything to change tomorrow?” Daniela asks. There is so much pain and desire in that question as I lean down to press a chaste kiss to her lips.

“I know, princess. I know.”

Chapter Five

DANIELA

It hurts that when we leave this little piece of paradise the rest of our lives will begin. I am being selfish asking my beautiful Fi to give me her last night but having her here with me is everything. Watching her unearth my present brings a wild smile to my face as I press my thighs together, imagining her inside of me as we come together.

“Princess... this...” I hold my breath as I wait for Seraphina to finish her statement. “Is perfect.”

Seraphina straps it on and I grin at the large cock now protruding from between her legs. She’s made love to me before but this is different. I want to come together. I want her to know just how wet she makes me. I want to share our screams and our pleasure. For one night, I want it to just be us.

I slip off the bed, Seraphina tensing just slightly as I reach forward and place one finger between the strap on and her skin. It’s snug, just the way it needs to be. I reach around her

to unearth a small oval device from the stand by the bed. Her mouth drops open as I press a button, the clit stimulation turning on. Her hands fall to my shoulders as she involuntarily thrusts forward, the cock brushing along the inside of my thighs as she does so.

“Princess,” she drawls, her eyes rolling into the back of my head. “What-”

“I want to watch you, Fi. I want you to lose control. I want *you*.” These are the very same words she’s said to me a million times, wanting me to show her who I really am beneath the royal persona. And now I’m asking the same of her. I love the dominant version of my seamstress but tonight, I want everything.

She thrusts forward again, a guttural groan ripping from her throat, her grip on my shoulders tightening. A smile spreads across my face as I press a feather light kiss to her lips, enjoying the beginning of the show unfolding before me.

I’m flat on my back again before I know it, Seraphina running her fingers down my cheek as she silently asks for my permission. I widen my legs to let her settle between them. I don’t need to be prepped tonight. I just need her inside of me. Reaching between us, I guide the cock to my pussy, gasping as she thrusts in. We stay there for several moments, my pussy clenching around the silicone stuffed inside of me.

Seraphina’s hips are moving, rolling against me as the vibration pushes her toward an orgasm. As much as I love that she loves my pleasure, I want to watch her come undone. I

want to worship her. We don't have the time for what I want to share with her, so this will do, especially since I know what will set her off.

“Make love to me, Fi.”

“Gladly,” she purrs in my ear as she pulls out and thrusts back in. Her jaw pulls tight as she tries to stave off another orgasm, gritting her teeth as she pumps into my heat. I hold onto her shoulders, the remote discarded, and then dig my fingernails in as she howls, her eyes squeezing shut as she stills above me. “Fi, goddess save me.”

I grin at my triumph, watching her body shake with the force of her pleasure, the woman of my affections falling apart. Her cheeks are rosy as she tips over the edge, her lips parted in ecstasy. She could turn off the vibration if she wanted, merely by grabbing the remote but she doesn't. She just resumes her thrusts against where my hips meet hers.

I am so close as she lowers her lips to my ear, rolling us over until I'm on top. “Come with me, princess.” Her voice is rough as I swivel my hips, tumbling over the edge with my precious Fi, both of us holding each other as pleasure sweeps through our bodies.

Goddess, this is so much better than I had planned.

Seraphina's usual dominance is nowhere to be found but I'm not disappointed, just intrigued as I raise up off the silicone and move farther up the bed to retrieve the remote. I don't get far as two hands wrap around my hips and pull me backward, that cock slipping right back into my pussy. A scream tears

from my throat as Seraphina flattens herself against my back, pumping all over again.

“Give me another one, princess.”

Her thrusts are wild and unrestrained, and I think I love this version of her as her body shakes with another orgasm. I almost wonder what it would be like to drag out her pleasure, to take over in the bedroom but we'll never know. Her lips dip to my shoulder, her teeth dragging along the bare skin before pressing in further. I cry out as pleasure explodes inside of me, Seraphina's wild thrusts deepening until I can't help but burrow my screams into the pillow.

I'm shaking when she pulls out, Seraphina reaching for the remote to turn off the vibration. I can't hold back my giggles when she presses the wrong button and it begins pulsating with more force. “Goddess save me,” she mumbles again before her eyes slide shut and her body shudders again. A thin layer of sweat covers my woman as she finally sits up, the vibration gone, the silicone cock still bobbing between her legs, coated in my release.

She reaches down to undo the straps but I grab her wrists. “One more, Fi. Just one more. I want to feel you inside me one more time.” We definitely don't have time for this but she nods and I climb onto her lap, slowly lowering myself onto her cock. Seraphina holds me like this, chest to chest as I kneel over her thighs. I want to whisper that this won't actually be the last time but I won't lie to her. I'll just make sure that it's a night to remember.

Chapter Six

SERAPHINA

This kiss is much gentler as I savor her taste, not wanting the moment to end. Our tongues tangle as I drink her in, her arms draped over my shoulders as she rocks herself on the cock between us. Her breasts rub against mine as I wrap my arms around her back, pulling her impossibly closer to me.

“I love you, princess.” The words just slip out. I’m mortified, waiting for her rejection or at the very least her dismissal but there isn’t one as she picks up the pace, running her fingers through my hair as she kisses me again.

When she pulls away, there’s those precious tears glazing her blue eyes. “I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you in the tavern, Fi. From the moment I was nothing but a girl in your presence. From the moment you made me feel special and free. I’m going to be selfish for a little while longer.” Her hands move to cup my face, “I will always love you, Fi. *Always.*” Daniela presses her lips to mine as I grip her waist and begin directing her movements.

Goddess, she feels perfect, the brush of the stimulator attached to the strap on still stroking my oversensitive clit. I had no idea she had that up her sleeve but Daniela is a woman of many surprises and I love her for it. Our naked bodies slide together, the slap of sweaty skin spurring me onto what I know will be our last orgasm. I slow down her pace, wanting to savor these last moments with her.

“You are a goddess, princess,” I murmur against her shoulder as she slowly falls apart on my cock. She melts against my chest, our breathing soon matching in the dimly lit room. I want to hold her forever and repeat those beautiful words right back to her but the selfishness needs to end here. Slowly, I untangle Daniela from me, standing her up on wobbly legs, unsure of where to go from here. We can’t exactly slip back into those gowns and waltz back into the gala without everyone knowing what happened in this slice of Paradise. As much as I want to put that claim on Daniela, it is not my place to.

Daniela gestures to a small opening along the back wall, the edge of a bathroom coming into view. The next several minutes unfold in silence as we rinse off and I place my last several kisses on my princess’ bruised lips. We hold our hair out of the way as much as possible, using stray pins from the vanity to repin and resituate as best we can.

Once redressed as I help slip Daniela back into the shoulders of her dress, the silence comes to an end. I press a small kiss to her lips, “I’ll never forget this little slice of paradise, princess.”

My voice is firm and I'm proud that I don't let her hear my heart break as I step away from her and give her one last bow.

The next time I see her, I will have to curtsy, whenever that may be.

Daniela trails silently after me and I swipe her crown from the bench, presenting it to her. "Don't forget this, Princess Daniela. You'll need it." Her frown is palpable as she grabs it with trembling fingers, switching it with a small patch. It isn't until she reenters the gala that I look down at what she's left in my hands.

Her insignia. Kusovania's royal insignia.

This small piece of fabric gives me more power than Daniela realizes. An ancient tradition, a royal offering their insignia to another to choose them as their mate. It is not legally binding and the chosen one must still participate in the royal lineup but it's an in I didn't previously have.

I have no idea what Daniela is thinking.

I have nothing to offer.

Nothing other than my heart.

Chapter Seven

DANIELA

The night ends in a whirlwind of drinks and conversations that I'm not listening to as I wobble around on unsteady legs from the pleasure Seraphina gave me. I try to hide the flush to my skin but nothing will take away the small bite in my shoulder. I'm not even sure if she knew she did that, too overcome by the gift I gave her to think clearly.

I run my fingers across it as I lounge on one of the royal chairs, effectively a free time out from the festivities but still on display for everyone to stare and gossip. I try to sit up straight, my hands now resting in my lap as my mind wanders to the night I met Seraphina, the brunette goddess that stole my breath away.

I pull the cloak a little tighter over my hair, pretty sure no one knew that I escaped from the castle. Besides, most of our people don't even know what I look like. They won't know until I am properly mated and sitting on my father's throne. So, now

is the only freedom that I have to slip out and try the beer that Grace is always talking about.

Granted, I'm sure she would have brought me some had I asked but this is much more exciting.

Unfortunately, I have no idea what it's called and the large bills hanging out in my purse are going to give me away. It's one of my flaws, not thinking ahead but now I have to figure out what to say to the bartender who is very close to calling the authorities to see if I need help.

"Charles! I fixed your wife's shirt. Tell her to stop wearing the nice ones while she travels, yeah?"

The bartender grins as he takes a small bag from the woman who just stepped inside the tavern. She commands a certain presence, similar to the one I present when on my throne. Here though, I relish in her aura as it wraps around me like a safe cocoon. Her voice is sweet like honey but edged with a dark rasp that I want to explore.

"The usual?" He asks.

"Yeah, make it two."

It takes me a moment to realize that the second one was ordered for me as the woman taps the counter and then gestures off to a small table in the corner. I'm conflicted—wanting to follow her and yet, I know that it might be a trap. I'm the only heir to the Kusovania throne after all.

Her gentle hand lands on my arm and I give in willingly as I move and then sit across from her, a beer set in front of me.

“Now, princess, tell me—why are you all the way out here? And don’t tell me it’s just for the beer.” I don’t answer as I look up to see a wily grin on the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Her curls are untamed as they hang around her shoulders, her neatly, single colored fabrics accentuating every gorgeous curve of her body.

I’m tongue tied as I realize how she addressed me—not just that she noticed me but that she didn’t address me properly. And that smirk on her lips tells me that she’s silently laughing at my plight.

“I just wanted to taste the beer,” I state, straightening my shoulders. She doesn’t back down though, tilting her head to the side as she leans forward, placing her chin on her folded hands. I feel the need to explain my escape to her, to grab her approval when I realize that I recognize her. “You’re Seraphina.”

“I am.”

“The seamstress.”

“I’m much more than a seamstress, princess.”

My eyes widen at her forwardness. “And I’m Kusovania’s royal heir!” I hiss.

“And yet, you’re out here. Trying a beer. Tell me, princess, what are you doing out here?”

It’s as if she could see right through me and it took Seraphina nearly a year to reveal that she had been terrified during that entire meeting but wanted to act on her crush. I’m

glad she did. These past three years were the best ones of my life. I'm hoping now that it won't have to end. With my insignia, we might have another chance.

“Seems that you've been busy, Daniela.”

I am pulled out of my daydream, face to face with Queen Helvania. While she should be using my title in my kingdom, I let her get away with it, knowing that the fight isn't worth it. I stand and give her a small curtsy before stepping away from my throne. “Yes, I have.” There is no room for argument as I assume my royal persona—rigid, unapproachable, and graceful. Those three things don't really go together but I make it work.

“You aren't going to give me a moment of your time? You've given all these other poor souls a moment, but not me?”

I grit my teeth as I turn to face her, grimacing at the dramatic attire she's stuffed herself into. Everything seems a size too small to accentuate her curves. I'm sure many of the other royals have found her intriguing but Helvania's aura is quite toxic and brings only the darkest kingdoms to her door. She wasn't always that way, our youth reminding me of the sweet woman that existed before she took the throne.

She thinks that those moments, those firsts we had together when we were younger have saved her a seat beside me.

It hasn't.

“Then take your moments, Queen Helvania,” I say, clasping my hands across my stomach. As much as leaving out my title is disrespectful to me, using her title despite our history is a diss to her. I hide my smile, knowing that it will only make her angry.

Her fists curl at her side before releasing and I’m surprised that she relaxes in my presence rather than taking charge. Her crown sits much higher than mine but I will let her have that as well, seeing as she is a queen and I am still a princess. “You’ve grown very bold over the years, Daniela. It makes me very happy and excited for the future we’ll share together.”

My nose scrunches up at that awful idea. “You must still take part in the questions that my father sets forth, Queen Helvania. You are not exempt.”

“But will they truly be worth anything? Our fathers have shared many drinks over the years and we fit perfectly. Don’t fight fate, Daniela.” She leans forward to press a kiss to my cheek, her hand covering the bite on my shoulder. “If you think such frivolous things will push me away, you are sadly mistaken. And if you think things like this will continue, think again, Daniela.” Her voice lowers as she says those last words before gliding off to start up a conversation with someone else. I keep my composure until I’m in my room, rubbing hard at the lipstick stain on my flesh. It feels like it’s burning as I stare at it in the mirror. It cannot remain on my cheek, not near the claiming bite on my shoulder. Queen Helvania will not win my hand. I will make sure of it.

Without even undressing, I slip into bed, content to dream only of my last moments with Seraphina and hope that she understood my message.

Chapter Eight

SERAPHINA

I hold back any lingering emotions, plastering on a tight, polite smile as I wade through the gala to the front. It's nearly eleven as I dismiss any advances asking for my hand, curtsying like I am supposed to until diamonds sweep into my lowered gaze. My shoulders fall as I realize just who has stopped my escape, a woman who doesn't like to be ignored and one that I've had to deal with on more than one occasion.

The fact that I know she's Daniela's ex just makes me hate her a little more.

"Queen Helvania," I mention as I curtsy again before meeting her gaze. There's a petty scowl on her lips as she gives me a once-over. The queen's attire is rather blinding and flashy but that's how she always has been.

"Seraphina," she spits out. "I'm surprised to see you here. I thought they would have married you off to the butcher or blacksmith by now."

I war with the emotions bubbling up in my chest, knowing that disrespecting a royal won't look good for me. However, I have been victim to her petty games for years as she visits Kusovania, thinking that she has a permanent place in our country. I may very well have to bow to this woman in a few weeks if she is the chosen queen to accompany Daniela, but until then, I will speak my mind.

Clearing my throat, I manage a shrug. "I would be honored to be their wife; however, it seems that I'm not quite the woman they're looking for." It seems like a diss to me but both of those wonderful men are happily married. *To each other.* It was a gorgeous wedding too.

Her scowl deepens as she reaches up to right her crown, asserting dominance where it doesn't need to be. "You think you are so funny, Seraphina but this attitude that you carry around is precisely the reason that you remain unmarried."

I draw my hands behind me, clutching Daniela's insignia tight in my hands. If Queen Helvania sees it, my life as I know it will be over. She'll most definitely accuse me of stealing it and then my forbidden relationship with Kusovania's princess won't be so secret. "Maybe the reason I remain unmarried is the fact that I don't *need* someone to stand beside me."

A haughty laugh tears from her throat. "You enjoy being a seamstress that much? You know that you'll end up out of a job when I become the Queen of Kusovania, Seraphina. I will not tolerate your disrespect like your precious princess does."

My gaze darkens as I tilt my head to the side, my unruly curls moving with me.

“I’m sure you know what I’m referring to,” she says as she runs two fingers along her collarbone. “Stay in your lane, Seraphina. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave the royals to those that can handle them.”

I intended to hold my tongue but not when Queen Helvania refers to my beautiful woman as merely something to be *handled*. “D-Princess Daniela does not require *handling*, Queen Helvania. You’ll do best to remember that.” I give her another curtsy and skirt around her before I’m ridiculed for both my disrespect of a visiting queen and the fact that I nearly disrespected my own.

Between Daniela and I, my lack of titles is a turn on. In front of the Kusovian people and surrounding countries? I might find myself hung for treason. Well, nothing that dramatic but probably close.

Exiting the gala, I keep my eyes peeled for Ezra, grinning when he’s waiting for me just a few paces from the front. The ride is silent, what with Lania and her sisters absent from the carriage. I caught sight of Lania happily chatting with her prince and the other two whisked away by Kusovian nobles. By tomorrow, they will definitely be engaged. I am happy for them. Truly. However, sometimes it’s a little difficult watching everyone find their happily ever after while I must suffer alone.

I finger the insignia in my hands, not hopeful that it will do anything other than bring our relationship to light. There's no punishment for what we've done but I will lose my job and Daniela will be forced to take someone in order to smooth over her image.

Someone that won't be me.

"We're here, Seraphina."

I give Ezra a small nod, loving that he drops his guard around me. We've been 'friends' far longer than is appropriate and he sees far more than I've ever told him. I allow him to walk around and help me down, Ezra's gaze telling me that he knows what happened tonight. Not all of the details, but enough. After all, I came tonight to say goodbye.

"You don't need the extra push but just be yourself, Seraphina."

I frown. "You knew?" I was surprised earlier this evening that Lania knew so I'm not sure why I am shocked that Ezra does.

"You forget that I'm more than just their butler. The few nights you called me to pick you up rather than your own driver so that you were not caught by your parents... well, you have quite a few things to say about your forbidden love."

My cheeks flush as I bow my head, running my fingers over the small cloth in my hand. I can't believe I was so stupid.

"You've found a powerful woman," he continues. "But what she needs is not more power. She needs someone to stand

beside her. With her. To guide, to hold, to *listen*.”

My head snaps up as I search his expression, trying to understand how Ezra’s mind works. “Why are you telling me this?”

His gaze dips to the insignia in my hands. “You *are* thinking about it, aren’t you? Give it a shot. You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“And if I fail? I’ll be the laughingstock of the entire kingdom.” I’m not sure where all this doubt is coming from.

“No, you’ll be the one woman brave enough to fight for what you want.”

He leaves me with those words and I enter my house, intent on finding my mattress and going to sleep. However, my mother has her own greeting, one that involves telling me that I am now promised to one of the nobles that runs in the same circles. Apparently, the marriage will be one of cooperation and not of love.

“You are a disgrace, Seraphina. Not because you can’t find a mate but because you’ve rejected each and every one that has approached you. You will accept Miss Galin’s proposal.”

I leave her with a pert nod before climbing the stairs. Should this trial for the princess’ hand not work out, I will gladly take Miss Galin’s proposal if it still exists. I shed my dress, staring in the mirror at the light love bruises around my breasts from her fingers, a pained smile sliding onto my face as I remember my last moments with Daniela.

Maybe they won't be my last after all.

Chapter Nine

DANIELA

The next morning, standing in front of my mirror, my rumpled dress clinging to me from the constant twisting and turning makes me realize my new reality. The redness on my cheek has me scrubbing at it again, whining as I still feel the ghost of her lips and the stench of perfume lingering around me. I jump when my cousin's voice distracts me from my task, a wet rag pressed to my cheek.

“Daniela?” Charlotte stares at the disarray I'm in, the shoulders of my gown falling down and revealing the top of my chest. I notice the state of my hair as I begin smoothing it down, cursing myself for not taking care of it yesterday. “What are you doing? You should already be in-”

A laugh bursts from my lips as I continue scrubbing my face, finally satisfied that Queen Helvania's mark is gone. Charlotte approaches, her frown deepening as her fingers run across Seraphina's claiming bite. I step out of reach, covering it with my hand. “Shouldn't you be spending time with the queen I

was supposed to wed?” It’s a terrible thing to say but Charlotte and I are not friends. Not after I found Queen Lucille between her legs.

It’s not that I wanted Queen Lucille but a dishonest queen is not to be trusted.

“That was weeks ago and you didn’t even want her,” Charlotte grinds out as she folds her arms across her chest. She’s several years younger than me, last night’s gala only being her third since she turned of age. Queen Lucille would have never been hers, not after we found additional transgressions but running around the kingdom with my prospective mate puts Charlotte in my ‘do not talk to’ pile.

“That’s not the point, Charlotte, and you know it.” I move toward my bed, wondering if I want to slip back beneath the covers or attend to my daily duties.

Charlotte watches my indecision before speaking again. “Um, well... a few of the royals have asked the King for your hand.”

“So? That happens every year.” I manage a shrug, fingering the edge of my gown and smiling again when I remember Seraphina’s body against mine. My poker face needs work because I’m sure that blush is sliding all the way down my neck at this point. The desire to run my fingers over her bite grows but if Charlotte catches on, then it’ll all be over.

I mull over the threat of promising my hand to another royal or noble, but this year is more than that. My father was adamant before the gala that this is my last year of freedom as

he's set my coronation at the end of the year, not that anyone knows that. Three months from now I will be a queen with someone else at my side.

I'm not ready for the responsibility but I'm not sure I ever will be.

"The King says that anyone who puts their bid in before breakfast will be able to take part in the three questions." Her smile is way too smug as I twist around, trying to understand the rush. It seems that my father truly isn't playing and wants me to finally make a decision. It also means that if Seraphina isn't in the throne room before breakfast, she won't have a shot.

I frantically look around, trying to get a hold of the time and sigh. I have maybe two hours but it's barely enough time to bring her back here. I could call but she rarely keeps her phone on her and when she does, it's usually off. I try anyway, not surprised when I get her voicemail. Still, I try again and even send her a text, hoping that it might at least alert of her my arrival. I'll have to retrieve her myself, a giddy sensation running down my spine.

Charlotte dips into an explanation of how last night unfolded for her and that she's possibly found a mate but my thoughts are on finding a gown a little less conspicuous. I settle on the one I met Seraphina in, using the same dark cloak to hide my face. I can't stop smiling, just imagining showing up at her door and pleading for her to run away with me to the castle.

Snagging a purse to drop my identification in should I be stopped; I nearly forget that Charlotte is still in my room. “What are you doing? You have prospective mates to meet!”

“I do. After breakfast. Right now? I need one last bite of freedom.” I shove her out of my room, knowing very well that Charlotte will blab to all the wrong people in the next five minutes. I rush around my bed and yank the private corridor entrance open. It leads to a set of old pathways that are hardly used anymore but just another thing my late mother showed me for a moment of peace from the demanding royal world.

Taking my beautiful horse is out of the question. There will be too much to explain and guards will insist that they come with me. This cannot be a spectacle and I don’t want Seraphina to feel like she doesn’t have a choice. Besides, the idea of whisking away Seraphina to the castle is a one of my fantasies.

Clutching my bag to my chest, I descend into the valley and stick to my usual escape route, moving as fast as I can. The swift pace isn’t something I’m used to, sweat breaking out along my skin as I head for the tavern that I first met Seraphina at.

This time, however, I’m not here for a beer.

I’ve definitely misjudged the distance because every time I believe that I’m nearly there, I realize that I’m not. Frustration bubbles up in my chest as I push myself, tears gathering in my eyes at the thought that I may not make it in time. Not being able to retrieve Seraphina would be disastrous but my father

learning that I did not return to the castle in time to meet my own prospective mates will be worse.

I push through, stumbling into the tavern out of breath and holding onto the counter as I try to catch the bartender's attention. "Um..."

"What can I get for the young lady?" Charles' voice is upbeat and chipper as he slides a napkin across the counter, patiently waiting for me to give him an order. This could ruin everything—what I'm about to do, but I take a deep breath and brush back my hood, just enough. His eyes widen and he leans forward, his brows furrowed. "Pretty sure I heard that you were getting engaged today, Princess Daniela. You can't be in my tavern."

"I know," I whine. "I need to see Seraphina."

His frown deepens. "The seamstress? Couldn't you have just *called*? If it's about clothing—"

I reach across the counter and grab his hand, pulling him closer. His entire body freezes and I remember that my actions have consequences before releasing him. "I'm sorry but it has nothing to do with the clothing. *Please*. Tell me where she is."

There are several seconds of silence as he searches my expression before his demeanor softens. "Ah. I always wondered if that first meeting ever came to anything."

"What? I thought no one knew!"

"Princess Daniela, *everyone* knew. Those that saw you in here anyway. But we value you and your freedom so we didn't

say anything. Seraphina has been smitten for years but I always thought it was just this one-sided thing. It'll be interesting to see how it plays out."

"Right. So..."

"Across the street, three houses to the left."

I thank him hurriedly and dash down the street after pulling up my hood. If everyone already knows of my little adventures, there is no reason to hide and yet I'm unwilling to announce my arrival until I've gotten what I came for.

Seraphina.

Three knocks on the door provide me with an eerie silence before the twinge of a door sends a shiver down my spine. "Princess Daniela? To what do we owe the pleasure?" Seraphina's mother hurriedly gestures me in before trying to figure out her next move. I'm about to ask for her daughter when Seraphina comes into view and my mouth runs dry.

I've seen Seraphina in many outfits and in many different situations, but this one has to be my favorite. Her hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail, the dress from last night switched out for a large beige linen shirt and grey trousers that stop short of her ankles. She's barefoot, her lean form accentuated by the rough clothes she's donned. Seraphina's hands are wrapped around a broom, her steps halted as she sees me.

Her gaze darts between her parents and me, wondering why I would show up at her house at this hour. I'm just wondering why it looks like she's cleaning when she has staff to do it. It's

a little hilarious that that dominant personality is for me and the people in my world but disappears when she returns home. Here, she's just a little rough around the edges but sweet and soft-spoken, like I am with her.

“Can we talk?” I ask. I want the woman I fell in love with. Soon enough her parents will know the truth if they don't already but I need to ask Seraphina freely without her fearing what her parents will say.

Seraphina slowly nods and gestures to the study down the hall. Her parents are both still staring but I'm more focused on the tension in my woman's shoulders as we step inside and then the doors close behind us. “Daniela-”

She doesn't get farther than that as I turn around and launch myself at her, smashing our lips together as I take what I need. It takes her a moment to relax, her arms wrapping around my back as she dominates the kiss, tugging at my bottom lip before pulling back. “You can't be here, princess.”

A giggle falls from my lips as the strong scent of peaches wafts from her skin. She must have showered recently and I can't get enough of the sweet smell surrounding her. Her fingers digging into my waist pull me out of my head. “Fi, we don't have a lot of time. Dad said that anyone who's there by breakfast has a chance for my hand.”

“And you're *here*?”

Seraphina's expression is wild as she takes me in, no doubt lingering on the sweat covering my skin. She doesn't understand. “I need you to come with me.” I search her eyes,

hoping that I don't find rejection. I find worry and fear as well as the smallest sliver of hope. "We only have until breakfast," I breathe as her grip tightens slightly. My lips part as her mouth descends on the bite on my shoulder.

"That's not a lot of time, princess."

"I know. We have to go. You have to-"

She pulls away, the absence of her touch haunting as she turns her back. I want to know what's going on in her head but we don't have time for a heart to heart. I need her to say yes. I need her to run with me. The next moment I'm pressed up against the door, her soft hand wrapped around my neck, her lips inches from mine. There's so much conflict in her eyes that it brings me pain but I wait for her words. "Princess, you don't know what you're asking. I have nothing to bring to Kusovania. I am just their seamstress and as much as I lo- as much as I want you, I can't be that selfish."

Her thumb massages the side of my neck as I sag against the door, defeated. I had no idea Seraphina cared so much for my future and yet, I don't want her to. I want her to try. I want her to fight. I want her to fight for me. "Fi, *please*."

"If this doesn't work Daniela, the least of my worries will be leaving my job as the royal seamstress."

"It'll work. Dad will see and-"

"And he'll choose what is best for the kingdom."

"And what if you're the best thing for the kingdom?"

I can see when she accepts my last question, that without trying, she'll never know. I'm asking her to risk everything with no guarantee but I know that if this doesn't work, I will support her in any way she needs. Even if that includes helping her to move to another country.

“Come with me, Fi.”

Chapter Ten

SERAPHINA

There are too many warring emotions for me to settle on just one. Mom and Dad try to ask a question as we slip out from the study. Daniela merely curtsies for them and shakes her head. “As much as I’d love to explain, Seraphina is needed at the castle immediately.”

Mom steps forward, worry etched into her expression. “Princess Daniela, is everything alright?”

I stand just behind Daniela, not sure if I should take over the situation but the princess has this handled as she reaches behind and grabs my hand. “Everything will be fine. But we must leave.” She twists around to look at me, holding my hand up to her chest as she clings to it. “I hope you have a mode of transportation other than walking,” she whispers. There’s a small giggle that accompanies her words and I nod, realizing that the princess just ran here to retrieve me.

I manage to have Daniela wait at the bottom of the stairs as I stuff a few outfits into a bag, ones that represent who I am just as Ezra told me to do. I just have to be myself. That's so much harder said than done when I will be sharing space with royals and nobles who have been living a certain kind of life way above my caliber. I grab my family's insignia along with Daniela's and stuff that in as well, knowing that I'll need to produce them later.

Daniela trails behind me as when I fly back down the stairs and guide her toward the stables, dismissing one of the stable hands so that I can prepare my horse. His eyes grow wide in shock as Daniela steps out from behind me but one glare from me has him biting his lip and disappearing into the adjacent barn.

Pushing those thoughts down, I stare at my pearl beauty, the horse bleating as I step closer. We don't have time to put on the saddle and as selfish as I want to be, pulling Daniela on to ride bareback, I'm not sure it's appropriate.

“Fi-”

Daniela slips between me and my horse, catching my face with her hands to calm my thoughts. I grab her wrists and shake my head, adrenaline pumping through my veins. “We don't have time for this, princess.”

Her smile widens at my nickname but I'll have to start using restraint to keep from saying it. “I need you, Fi.” It comes off a little as a whine as she presses a soft kiss to my lips.

“You had me last night.”

“And I want you again. I’ll *always* want you.”

The promise of her words are so sweet, so tempting but I can’t indulge. “Greedy, are we?” I let slip before righting my face and shaking my head. “Daniela...”

“Do you even want this or am I forcing you to take part in a ritual that you’ll regret?”

I can’t stand the pain in her expression as she tries to pull away from me. I press her against the body of my horse, trapping her between us. “Who told you that I didn’t want this? Who told you that I wouldn’t fight for us if I had a chance? I’m going today because I want to show you that I love you, not because I think the king will say yes. You might pick me but you don’t have the final say. The odds are not in our favor, Daniela.”

“Okay.

“A life beside you would be my pleasure but I don’t want to get your hopes up.”

“I love you, Fi.” She brushes my cheek and I take a step back as her shoulders fall. “You can say it too, you know. I can see that you feel it.”

“And I’m not going to stand here and continue to be selfish with you. When we return to the castle, remember who you are, Princess Daniela.” I hate putting this distance between us but she needs the reminder, lest Queen Helvania ruins this opportunity before it even starts.

“But...”

“You are about to be a queen, Daniela. Your people and your father need to see that.” I reach forward to wipe a tear that has escaped. “I do love you, princess. Enough to let you go.” There are no more words shared as I help her onto my horse and then I slide in behind her, my arms around her waist. “Ready for one last ride, princess?” It’s meant to be lighthearted but it falls flat.

Her voice wobbles as she nods, “Yes.”

Feeling her body bump against mine as we take off down the street is wonderful and I tighten my hold on her as we lean forward, my baby taking us to the castle.

Chapter
Eleven

Chapter Twelve

SERAPHINA

Shaking in my britches is the right term although no one would ever know with the way I approach the breakfast spread on the table. My stomach grumbles and I remember the last time I ate was at the beginning of the gala last night. One of the princes gives me a onceover, scoffing at my simple dress.

“And who might you be?” He snarls. I instantly know he won’t make it through the three questions that the king will pose, his hand firmly set on the hilt of his sword as he turns to me. His entire personality seems to revolve around asserting dominance and trying to garner respect through fear. He won’t survive long.

“Just another prospect,” I say, giving him a small head nod. It gives away my status but I’m not worried. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when I advance and he stays behind. I won’t win but I’ll get farther than he does.

Queen Helvania shoves her way into the conversation, seductively licking one of her fingers from the jam that made its way onto her digits rather than into her mouth. The prince is immediately enraptured but I'm disgusted that she's flirting with the other prospective mates *in front of the royal Kusovania family*.

“What she *meant* to say is that she's the royal seamstress of Kusovania and the only reason she's here is because of a rather-”

Her words are cut off by the king clearing his throat, a rather perfect moment that I'm sure is manufactured. The possibility that Daniela asked her father to step in is high. The participants move toward the thrones, standing at the edge of the first step. Queen Helvania holds me back, glaring down at me. She's still wearing that rather large crown, her dress boasting both her power and riches but it seems for naught in a place like this.

“Don't be fooled that since you're here, you have a chance. You don't. I meant what I said last night. Stay in your lane.” She pushes past me to stand with the others and I don't let her jealousy bother me because that's what it is right? The idea that someone of 'low' birth like me has captured Daniela's heart. The idea that without force or a command Daniela willingly fell into my arms. The idea that with disregard to her own kingdom, she would rather share her forever with me than a queen like her.

I stifle a chuckle as I move forward as well, locking my gaze with the king rather than Daniela. It is him I have to impress, not the woman of my affections.

The king stands and approaches, looking down at us with a curious expression on his face. “All of you have been given an opportunity to become my daughter’s mate and Kusovania’s next royal.” There are a host of murmured agreements. “The questions I will give you are easy but the answers are not. The result, shall you make it to the end, will have you sharing your kingdom with Kusovania or of those who do not have a kingdom, becoming one with the royal agenda.”

I feel his eyes on me and then on another one of the prospective mates. *Ah, so I’m not the only noble.* The male blushes and lowers his head and I can’t help but love the adorable crush he has on Daniela. I recognize him as one of the frequent visitors from one of the neighboring countries and it makes sense now why his presence has been so prevalent.

I take the time to truly observe my competitors, the seven of us eagerly standing here on velvet carpet. The prince from earlier is dressed from head to toe in armor, as if he’s come to literally fight for Daniela’s hand. The dark curls cropped near his head and the bright doe eyes tells me that his country prides itself in strength but this prince himself has never actually seen war. The man next to him, one of noble birth but without a country to offer, is closer to my age what with the lines starting to etch into his face.

He seems of sound mind but Daniela likes her mates a little more strong headed. I assume that the king will want the same.

The last prince is impeccably dressed but reminds me of a male Queen Helvania. The only difference is that he doesn't boast the same connection with Daniela that Helvania has. He also seems rather self-righteous, his gaze locked on Daniela as he tries to bend her into submission with a mere look. Both princes are much the same, I guess.

The two princesses standing next to them hold every bit of grace and beauty that I thought Daniela's prospective mates might have. Their gowns are exquisite, shimmering with jewelry and dangling items that scream a different kind of elegance than Queen Helvania. I recognize one of them but the other is new to me. Queen Helvania stands next to me, her deep purple dress spread out around her. It bows out at the waist, giving her a wide berth and promoting her power.

I scoot a little to the right to give myself more room and to find air that isn't consumed by her perfume, focusing on the king once again.

“You will be presented with three questions-”

The warrior chuckles. “Three questions? That's it? We're competing for your kingdom based on our answer to three questions?” He clears his throat immediately after he realizes that he said that aloud but the fact that he doesn't seem scared tells me that the crown atop his head is not a prince's, but a king's.

The Kusovanian king brushes a hand down his chest and continues. “Your answer to three questions will determine your eligibility for my daughter’s hand.” We all give him a short nod or curtsy of respect, although I swear Queen Helvania’s curtsy is not as elegant as the other princesses’ or mine. I’m hoping that her haughty attitude will get her disqualified. Sneaking a glance at Daniela, my heart sinks. I can’t read her expression. She’s fully in her royal persona as she surveys the candidates and when her gaze comes to rest on me, she merely gives me a nod before dismissing us.

Chapter Thirteen

SERAPHINA

We've spent moments in this room and I already can't stand Queen Helvania and her utter desire to destroy any chance I have to be Kusovania's next royal. She hasn't brought up my forbidden romance again but I suspect that that has more to do with the not so subtle threat she was given when pulled to the edge of the room by one of the king's guards. She does, however, keep clearing her throat, pushing into the conversations I try to have with the other royals and asserting her dominance by repeatedly fixing her crown.

I'm not sure what the posturing is for but I hate it.

After several tries to include myself in the ring, I step back, allowing Queen Helvania and the other prospective mate, King Colton to take over. I'm not entirely sure what we are waiting for as Daniela and the king have exited the room. Are they watching? Is this merely a test on how we cooperate with other royals, especially ones we are competing with?

Or is this just time to destress?

I can't decide and move toward the breakfast spread, eyes peeled for the cheese I crave every time I step inside the castle. The kitchen staff knows me well enough to trade a stitch or two for cheese or those delicate almond pastries. Since I'm here though, I indulge on the little squares of cheese and nearly squeal when there's an almond pastry to the left.

Just before I snatch it, I realize something.

The table has been hardly touched.

My eyes wander to the chatting royals and nobles and then back to the table. It's almost a disappointment to leave this much prepared food alone. At the gala, the tables had been nearly empty, constantly replenished as everyone took part in the delicacies. Here though, it's almost as if the participants think that eating will cast a bad light on their actions. Will it? I'm not sure but Ezra's words sift into my mind again.

Be yourself.

He's told me that phrase countless times, that pretending to be anyone else will only come back to harm me and my future. So, I stuff the cheese into my mouth and start in on the pastry, resisting the urge to groan in appreciation. I catch one of the guard's gazes firmly locked on me, a cracked smile on his lips before it disappears. I will not apologize for my love of food.

“Stuffing your face with food you can't get at home, Seraphina? Maybe you should make a little baggie because this will be the last time you set foot inside here.” Queen

Helvania says sarcastically as she saddles up beside me. “Everyone knows that the food is for decoration after one or two bites. You should have eaten at home, or did you run out?”

I decline to bring up that she was eating earlier as it won't save me from the humiliation she is trying to dish out.

King Colton laughs along with her, the other participants unsure of which side to take. I frown and swallow, unsure why she is being so harsh. “The kitchen worked very hard on all this and it's warm. Why would I not partake if not at least to say my thanks?”

The two princesses murmur in agreement, grabbing one of the egg dishes and then a few of the biscuits. I refuse to smile in triumph, knowing that will only cause Queen Helvania to further rile up discord between us.

“Your lack of etiquette is showing, Seraphina.”

I shrug. “Not sure it matters, Queen Helvania. If I don't have a chance at Daniela's hand, then I don't have a chance. Let me enjoy the breakfast, suffer through as many questions as I can get through and then be left to my own devices.”

She doesn't seem to like my answer, King Colton stepping forward to rebuke me for my disrespect. Subconsciously, I think they would make a perfect pair although I know nothing about their countries. That partnership, however, I think would terrify me.

He clears his throat, his expression darkening as he resituates his crown, much the same way Queen Helvania has been

doing for the last several minutes. “I do want to ask, despite your lowly status, what are you bringing to Kusovania that would rival the rest of us? We are all bringing in some part a kingdom and tactical experience. Even the noble here is bringing riches.”

The noble in question currently has three strawberries stuffed in his mouth, eyes wide before quickly swallowing and puffing out his chest. He seems so adorable and innocent. The things I would do to him...

I snap out of that mindset and straighten my shoulders, not out of disrespect to the royalty standing before me but out of respect for myself, my craft, and my kingdom. After all, the kingdom I am representing is the very same one that Daniela is from. “It is none of your concern what I bring.” I open my mouth to continue that thought when a guard steps up behind me, placing a soft hand on my back. It’s a gesture no one else can see, merely for me to hold my tongue.

The guard knows me well enough to know that I might have shoved my foot in my mouth if I was given the opportunity and disgraced myself completely. I sigh and bow my head to thank him before the guard speaks. “You will be escorted to your rooms now so that you can freshen up. Please follow your guide and do not stray from the path. To keep this cordial, you will be situated in separate wings on the first floor. The upstairs halls are firmly off limits.”

The royal quarters.

Each of the prospective mates nod and curtsy before making their way to the entrance, a few guards guiding them through the wings. I am left with the guard at my side before he cracks a smile as soon as we are alone. “Seraphina, that woman will have your head if you give her the chance.”

I raise an eyebrow, “Then I shouldn’t give her the chance, should I, *Randall*?” He chuckles and shakes his head as he gestures for me to follow, bringing me down several hallways before pointing to the one at the end. After a small thanks, I disappear into the room, sighing as I can finally relax my shoulders and the fake smile on my face. Velvet surrounds me in here too, my bag that I had discarded in Daniela’s room now neatly placed by the entrance. I didn’t expect anything different as I move toward the bed, flinging myself onto it and letting out a deep groan.

“That bad?” A soft voice rings by my ear as weight is pressed to my side. I twist around to see Daniela draped over me and I roll over to wrap my arms around her and bring her closer. I avoid kissing her knowing that the delectable sight of her bruised flesh will only raise questions. Instead, I set a kiss to the bridge of her nose, the sweet smile spreading across her lips enough to satiate me for now.

“What are you doing in here?” I flatten myself against the mattress, loving the way she’s sprawled across me as I look upside down to see where she came from. A small crack in the wall tells me that the pathways extend everywhere in the castle. Daniela doesn’t answer, just snuggles into the crook of my neck as her fingers play with the bare skin over my

collarbone. I let out a deep breath, knowing if I allow her to keep touching me, we'll end up in a very precarious situation. Sifting out from beneath her, I sit up and pull her to her feet, to stand in front of me. "Daniela."

My command leaves no room for discussion as she bows her head, the most submissive I've ever seen her. Worry settles in my chest as I wonder if it's something serious, wrapping her hands in mine to grab her attention again. She sighs, shaking her head. "I just needed to see you, Fi. Putting on airs isn't easy and having Helvania back in court is hard."

"You dated her so many years ago, princess. What's really going on?" I can't help myself as I reach up to cup her cheek in my hand, Daniela nuzzling into the touch.

"I fear that my dad may actually pick one of the prospective mates," she whispers. I don't respond because what can I possibly say? I knew this would most likely happen, but I wanted to try, *needed* to. Daniela sags forward and I pull her into my lap. She fits so perfectly here but I know it's not permanent. "He wants someone to lead, to take care of the kingdom when he passes on, to be a true ruler."

I nod as my fingers find their way into her hair. I shouldn't but I pull it out of its manicured style, relishing the softness against my palm. "Makes sense. I'm not sure why you thought different."

"I just thought-"

"Princess, we don't have the luxury to fall in love. It's a beautiful dream but we should have known that it would never

last. You shouldn't even be here. I should be getting ready to return to the throne room and you need to prepare yourself for whatever decision your father makes." I release her, once again pushing her to her feet. She tries to protest, and I stand as well, knowing that this is for the best.

"Why does it feel like you're pushing me away?"

There are several seconds of silence between us and while I know playing the martyr won't save my fracturing heart, it might at least leave a few pieces to be picked up at a later point. Either option I choose is selfish but at least this one I come out with less pain. "Because I don't want it to hurt, princess. It already does. It's agony, just thinking of someone else spending forever with you. I didn't think it would hurt this much to know that it might not be me."

She forces through my barrier, kissing me anyway. My body relaxes against my will as I hold her, savoring her taste. When she pulls away, I chase her lips, but she puts a gentle hand to my chest. "Seraphina, I need you to decide what you want and how much you want it. I want you here despite what I think my father will choose. He can be swayed, I know he can but not if you don't show how much you want this. Besides," Daniela leans a little closer, her smile turning playful, "I've decided that I want to try something new. You always said that new was good and I... I want to make love to you, Fi."

"We did that last night."

"No, *I* want to make love to you."

I freeze, intrigued and excited.

“I want you to feel just how wonderful it is, to let go, to not have to think. Fi, I want to own you even for a little while but I can’t do that if you keep pulling away.”

“And if I’m not chosen.”

“Then we’ll sneak away before the wedding.”

I scrunch up my nose, not entirely okay with that idea. “I promise I’ll fight.”

“Good, now any chance I can stay and watch you get ready?”

I snort. “Not a chance, princess.”

Chapter Fourteen

SERAPHINA

The day drags on slowly as we are allowed to explore the first level. I spend most of my time in the gardens, even bringing my lunch out there, away from the other royals. I have nothing against them but speaking with them only seems to bring out the worst in me. I'm sure that's some point against me in this race for Daniela's hand but I'd rather not start a war.

One of the groundskeepers freezes when he sees me and then smiles, bounding over to my side. It's hilarious how comfortable they are with me. "Heyyyy, Fifi!" Arthur is much younger than the other staff, probably 20 or 21, bright eyed, and his whole future ahead of him. He's like the little brother I never had.

I throw out my arm and let him lean against my side as I ruffle his hair with my other hand. "How are you holding up?" His father passed away a few months ago, the kid distraught but it's nice to see how far he's come.

“Good but how are you? I didn’t think you’d actually do it.” His eyes sparkle as he snuggles a little closer. “None of us did. We saw you with the princess’ insignia but…” Arthur pulls away and looks up at me. I expect to see disappointment but there’s only excitement and hope.

“I didn’t think I would either but if I never try, we’ll never know.”

“Right. Always the facts. Loosen up a bit, Fifi. Everything will be fine, and we know that Daniela will choose you in the end.”

“And we both know it’s not Daniela who chooses.”

The boy stands up and runs his hands down his pants before shrugging. “Whatever you say.” He skips off around the back of the castle, most likely heading to the stables, leaving me a little confused. Is it really her decision at the end? That can’t be right. Daniela would know. She would tell me that, right? Ignoring the little bite of pain now spreading through my chest, I head inside and to the throne room with the other prospective mates.

Each is facing the throne, the Kusovanian king and princess sitting side by side as the king offers the first question. I’m not surprised by it but the simplicity of it makes everything seem too easy. However, easy just means that this is a test and as much as I want to make my accomplishments seem *more*, the call to be genuine is greater.

“Should you be chosen to take my daughter’s hand, what will you bring to Kusovania?”

The participants shuffle nervously, except for King Colton, Queen Helvania, and me. The male warrior moves forward, bowing, and then showing off his riches and kingdom's accomplishments. He boasts of the times he's been to war and the victories he's secured. Moments later, he clicks his tongue, and two guards arrive to place a stack of papers which must outline the accomplishments in painstaking detail.

Daniela looks unamused but even more so, the king doesn't so much as glance at the papers, merely nodding and moving to the next. The male noble and the king are much the same, boasting about their country, riches, tactical experience, and how they will be an asset to the kingdom.

The princesses are of a different breed, each offering up their hearts first, then their riches, and then promising Daniela a life of freedom and adventure and opportunity to see the world. I stare in horror as I realize that the one thing I can offer pales in comparison to what everyone else can give.

The men offer stability and strength. The women, while they offer the same, also offer freedom. And when Queen Helvania steps up, shooting me one last cursed look, I know that my presence here won't be for much longer.

Unless Arthur is right; that the choice is ultimately Daniela's.

Queen Helvania doesn't just curtsy this time. She lowers herself to her knees, her dress fanned around her in an elegant fashion. She bows her head in respect before looking back up, "I can offer her the world, King Emyr." It's only now that I see

her dress isn't just purple but small stones have been intricately woven in with every stitch. Even as 'simple' as it is, it really isn't. "I can give her the best life, with everything she wants, including that freedom she craves so much."

I cringe at how Queen Helvania has phrased that because unlike the two princesses that offered freedom, Queen Helvania's offer seems conditional on Daniela's obedience to her. My momentary lapse in expression is caught by King Emyr but I bow my head to avoid any argument as Queen Helvania continues her elaborate piece.

"I don't need her kingdom or her riches to sustain me. I am here for her heart and her hand, nothing more." She bows her head once more before standing up and returning to her spot, leaving me for last.

Swallowing nervously, all eyes now focused on me, I approach and bow my head slightly, ignoring the curtsy. I'm not sure why but it seems appropriate because following Queen Helvania's movements is not only excessive but also isn't something I would normally do.

The king stands and I'm not expecting his words, words that essentially cement what I'm doing here. "Seraphina, you were handpicked by my daughter. I've seen these romances sparkle until they fizz out and leave a chasm in their wake. However, I'm inclined to give you a chance because I see the smile you bring to my daughter's face. Tell me, what can you bring to Kusovania's throne should I give you Daniela's hand?" I can't

read his expression, but I can tell he has feelings about my relationship with his daughter.

Unfortunately, I can't tell if they are good or bad.

I suck my bottom lip through my teeth, feeling silly about anything I could possibly say after the first six offered so much more than I am worth. The king has already declared that my love for Daniela is a mutual affair. With that out of the way, I focus on what else I can bring. One deep breath later and I offer it. "I bring information." Snickers follow my words, but I ignore them, keeping my eyes on the king.

Unlike other royals, I want to show that while I respect the man on the throne, I am not terrified of him and I am not going to fall over for the father of my lover. I have a strong head on my shoulders and I intend to portray that. Granted, it makes it easier that I have spent a time or two in the throne room with the king in an informal setting.

He raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to explain my words. "What kind of information?"

From experience, I know that Kusovania does not need tactical experience or riches. The land is abundant with what we need and we have an ongoing peace treaty with every surrounding country. Should war overtake a neighboring country, we would offer our resources but partnering with a royal who brings the possibility of war will harm Kusovania, not help it.

"I have lived among the Kusovians my entire life. I know what they need, what they want. I hear their complaints and

their griefs. They are my colleagues, friends, and family. I have an inside look into a country that you are ruling and will ultimately become your daughter's. I can help you bring this castle closer to your people." My services aren't just for the royal family. I sell my work all across Kusovania, my designs even sometimes making it to surrounding countries, not that I have left the walls myself. While many in similar crafts have a network that they spread duties between, I manage my own craft. There are a few other royal seamstresses but they stay local and behind the scenes.

I enjoy speaking with vendors and catching up with the tavern owners. I've been invited to birthday parties and weddings, not to fix clothes, but because I have garnered a relationship with the people I work with and for. It has given me an insight that most royals will never get and while it's such a small thing to bring compared to the other six prospective mates, it's all I have to give.

The king rubs his chin, nodding as he accepts my answer before asking another question. "And my daughter. How do you feel about her?"

The only reason he's asking is because I am the only one that hasn't said a thing about Daniela. My gaze moves over to my princess, catching the hopeful look in her eyes as I answer. "She's my entire world."

A grin splits the king's face as he pushes to his feet. "The first question has been answered." Daniela stands as well, plastering her hands in front of her as she holds her head high.

The king clears his throat, his voice strong as his words reverberate through the room. “I did not expect to send so many of you home so soon. However, I believe that some of your answers make you ill-suited for both Kusovania and my daughter.”

The king looks between the seven of us several times and while each of them hold their heads high and stand tall, I wait submissively as I have been trained to do in the presence of royals. Head slightly bowed, hands clasped in front of me, my body relaxed. His next words are ones that I am expecting.

“Kusovania has been a country of peace for a very long time. I intend to hand over this burden in the same way that it was handed to me. Our trades and our alliances are the strength of this country, our ability to support others and to flourish on our own is a source of pride. However, many of you came today boasting about power and tactical experience. This country hasn’t been at war for nearly a century.” The king’s voice thunders through the room and I wish I could understand the mixed emotions running through the other prospective mates’ faces.

King Colton grunts at that declaration, “But-”

One look from King Emyr and the prospective mate falls silent. “This is why two of you are dismissed. While your experience is impressive, it isn’t important here. You are ill-suited for this kingdom and for my daughter. As for the other two that I will dismiss, you offer her freedom and opportunity. However, you seem to forget that my daughter is a princess.

She is soon to be queen and she will not need your permission to explore. She will be the ruler of a country.”

I hold back a chuckle, not having seen it from that perspective. Queen Helvania loses her smile momentarily before fixing her face. Surely, the king wouldn't send her home after the first round, right? I raise my head to meet the king's gaze, hoping to determine the four he is speaking about. King Emyr calls off the four names, all three males and one of the women leaving the throne room escorted by a guard. The remaining prospective mates leaves three of us in the throne room, one of the princesses, Queen Helvania, and me.

The others give their farewell before being guided out by the royal guards to return to their countries. I can't even release a sigh of relief as I'm not sure how much longer I have in the castle before Queen Helvania wins Daniela's hand.

The king clears his throat again, drawing my attention back to him. “There are still two questions left for you to answer. The next, I shall give you an hour. This may seem an easy question but think long and hard before you bring me your answer. Daniela,” He turns to his daughter slightly, giving her a warm smile, “Is the light of my life, the beauty of my world. I need to know what you find gorgeous, beautiful. What gives you pause during the day to experience its shine. Find it and bring it to me. Everything in this castle is at your disposal.” He nods as if that's supposed to make answering the question easier.

Queen Helvania and the remaining princess take off without hesitation but I'm confused. Something beautiful? Something that gives me pause? What is the king looking for as an answer? Rubies? Gold? Horses?

Be genuine.

Right. But how? How could my genuine answer surpass the others? I don't even know how my last answer measured up against the other two.

Giving the king and princess one last glance, I take off down the hall as well, rushing back to the bedroom given to me to grab a cloak. I have an idea in mind, a place that reminds me of Daniela, even more so after she showed me a little piece of paradise.

Skirting around shocked staff, I rush out to the stables, eyes peeled for my horse. A petite hand circles my wrist, halting my movements. "What are you doing, Fi?" Daniela's eyes are blown wide, both of us out of breath as I slip from her grasp. Her touch is wonderful but if Queen Helvania sees it, she may produce it as evidence to the king as my way of trying to sway Daniela's decision.

"I'm going to get something beautiful."

"One of my horses?"

"No—I need mine but he's not here. I don't—" He must still be tied up in the other pasture or being fed in one of the other stables. I don't have time to search or call for one of the stable

boys to bring him. I have under an hour and while the place isn't far, I need a specific thing to make this work.

“If you leave, it'll be difficult to get back in. You only have an hour!”

I can hear the exasperation in her voice and I can't help myself as I pull her into my chest, kissing her forehead to calm her. “Then let me take yours,” I purr in her ear. Riding the royal steed will allow me entry anywhere, including the castle, without question so long as I'm not carrying a weapon. She stiffens in my arms and then nods.

With one last kiss, I wait for one of the stable boys to bring her midnight beauty over to me, my hand grazing his stomach before I hop on. Tears gather in her eyes as she reaches up to grab my hand. Her fingers brush across my outstretched palm as I take off, hoping that I can complete this journey in less than an hour.

My chance at Daniela's hand depends on it.

Chapter Fifteen

DANIELA

I watch in horror as Seraphina takes off on my horse, Obsidian. A small part of me wishes I was seated in front of her again, the free look on her face something that I crave. Her fingers dig into his mane as she rides off into the distance, leaving me a little more than just distressed. Whatever she needed or thought was beautiful, could have been found here, right?

“Princess, you’ve never let someone borrow your horse before.”

“I’ve never needed to,” I reply, making my way back into the castle. Queen Helvania is standing there to greet me, nodding off to where Seraphina disappeared.

“She make a run for it on your horse? She won’t win, Daniela. Your father is keeping her on as a pity vote, something that will give the staff something to talk about.” She smirks, hoping to get a rise out of me but all it does is just

perpetuate the notion that I don't want this woman anywhere near my castle when this is all over and done with. Pushing past her doesn't work as the queen catches my arm and drags me back in front of her. "You think you're so special, Daniela. You think that in this world you have *choices*. You're going to drag that poor girl's heart through the mud and for what?"

I rip my arm away from her, trying to keep my expression flat. The instant she thinks she's gotten under my skin, Queen Helvania will attack. "You forget that this is still *my* country, Helvania."

"And you forget that it will soon be mine," she says. She reaches up to touch my cheek, her fingers moving along the line of my jaw before running across the fading bite on my shoulder. "We were in love once."

"We *fucked*," I spit out, not wanting to rehash the memories. They aren't painful and in fact she was sweet then. However, her ongoing need to bash every choice I've made since including Seraphina won't stand with me. "Besides, a previous relationship will not cement your place here. Yes, our fathers are close and we know each other but the control you crave is not needed here. I want a *partnership*, Helvania. Not a ruler."

She bursts out laughing, a movement so unlike her with all of the elegance she usually boasts. "I've already convinced your father that I am the best. I've even completed the questions before they've even been asked. Your father will see who is best for the kingdom and for you. Do you even know what the other princess, Princess Gertrude, brought? She

brought *food*. She thinks food is beautiful.” Helvania shakes her head, “Pray your *crush* returns in time but regardless, I can’t wait to see her face when she sees she has failed and your face when you realize that the only choice left is me.”

Despair isn’t quite what I’m feeling but it’s pretty close.

Chapter Sixteen

SERAPHINA

I tumble off Obsidian as I skid to a stop in front of Lania's estate, not caring about the looks I am drawing from the staff. Ezra has an amused look on his face as he opens the door, a small chuckle slipping from his lips when I bend over to catch my breath. Nothing about this screams future royal but I'm working on borrowed time so manners can come later.

Lania flies down the staircase, her sisters leaning over the banister. "What are you doing coming in here like that? Aren't you supposed to be at the castle?" I can hear the judgment in her voice but I just don't have time to deal with it.

I nod, holding up a finger as I take sweet gulps of air before speaking. "Sketchbook."

"What?"

"Your sketchbook!" I straighten up and look at her, still holding my side. This is going to be the talk of our little town, especially if I don't become the next ruler of Kusovania.

“Wait, why do you know that I’m supposed to be at the castle?”

“Everyone knows, Sera. The fucking princess of Kusovania came to retrieve you. Your mother also blabbed.” Again, Lania sounds judgmental rather than ecstatic that her friend might become a royal. She disappears upstairs and returns with her sketchbook, shoving it at my chest. “How did you pull that off by the way?”

“Long story. I don’t have time.”

Lania runs her tongue across her top lip, narrowing her eyes at me as if she’s going to press the matter. She doesn’t. “What’s the sketchbook for?”

I’m not listening to her though. Time has stopped as my eyes fall on the prize that I am seeking. Lania has never seen the paradise that I found at the edge Redhelm. Not wanting for a moment to miss any part of that place, I sought out Lania to draw Paradise from my detailed explanations. I had her keep it, not letting her know what precious gold she had in her hands but now it’s time to take it back.

“Let me have this,” I ask quietly.

She glances at the picture of paradise, a small piece of forest that holds a place in my heart. “Um, it’s kind of yours anyway? What is this about?”

I rip the page from the book and profusely apologize before handing the sketchbook back and rushing out the door. I owe

her an explanation but there's still one more place I have to visit before I can return to the castle and time is running out.

Once upon a time, I stumbled upon this piece of forest that didn't seem to belong. It was like a fantasy world in the midst of our country, with colors and flowers I had never seen before. And no, not even the castle carried them. Butterflies of all shapes and sizes and a small stream that glistened beneath the sun and glowed under the moon. It was magical.

And it was one of the few things that gave me pause in this world.

Grabbing Lania's rendition of this magical place is only one part of the puzzle. I need one of those flowers. I need to show Daniela and her father the true magic of this place. He wanted genuine and Daniela likes to escape. This is all I have to offer but it is also *everything* I have to offer. Daniela has everything she needs to succeed—a strong kingdom, riches, clothing, a castle... the list goes on.

She doesn't need someone to protect her or to own her.

She doesn't even *need* a partner.

She needs a place to be herself, unapologetically and my paradise is just the place.

I hope it will be enough.

Chapter Seventeen

DANIELA

Princess Gertrude has already gone, bowing her head as she places a dish on the table before me. I fork off a healthy bite, smiling as I taste it. Rich flavors explode on my tongue and I stare at the dish, colors and spices that I don't recognize staring back at me. While it's probably one of the most delicious things I've tasted, I don't understand how this is what gives her pause every day.

I also don't know how Queen Helvania convinced the king to start this second question earlier. My heart is in my throat as I look over to my father but his attention is on Princess Gertrude, waiting for an explanation.

“The late nights that I was given freedom in the kitchen to perfect recipes remind me of the nights I miss most. It's why I understand the need for creative expression aside from just royal duties. I've seen the way the princess' eyes glitter at times and want to ensure she never loses that spark.” Princess Gertrude smiles as she takes a step back and I swallow.

“It’s very lovely,” I say, trying hard to mask my feelings. I still don’t understand how this gives her pause, that this is what she thinks is beautiful.

My father stands and approaches from behind me, “Princess Gertrude, am I right in saying that what you bring here today isn’t just the food but what it symbolizes? What gives you pause, what you think is beautiful is those few nights of freedom in the kitchen?”

She nods enthusiastically and I reign in my sigh of disappointment. The way her eyes glitter when it comes to her creation tell me that she’s not really here for my heart. She’s here, making empty promises as a princess who has too much hope. She’s been allowed to frivolously believe that she has the freedom to do anything and everything she wants. Her parents have coddled her and held her hand. In the end, it will ruin the happiness on her face because ruling a kingdom is so much more.

The king dismisses her with a nod, Queen Helvania stepping forward with a wild grin on her lips. She resituates her crown with one hand, the utmost disrespect in front of my father, as she clutches a small bag to her chest in the other.

“I bring you the things I find most precious, second to princess Daniela.” She dumps the bag onto the table before me, pushing the dish to the side. “Rare jewels and minerals that can only be found in our country. They remind me of Daniela’s beauty and her ability to shine during the darkest

days.” She reaches across the table and grabs my hand before lifting it to her lips.

I resist the urge to pull away, grimacing as her lips linger on my knuckles. My father seems pleased with her display, as the queen releases my hand and steps back. Seraphina isn’t back yet and the hour is nearly up. I twist around to look at my father, the first time I finally show some emotion, wondering if this was his plan all along.

Did he want me to see that my romance was frivolous, that I should give her up before it even truly began?

My father places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes a little, offering a nod toward the door. My expression falters again as Obsidian rides into the throne room, Seraphina on his back like a warrior in battle. It’s almost as if my father knew she would arrive, his stoic demeanor contrasting the extra squeeze on my shoulder as I stand to receive the last prospective mate.

The only prospective mate *I* want.

She tumbles off the horse ungracefully as my guards receive Obsidian, Seraphina grinning as she rushes forward. The light in her eyes make me want to reach across the table and demand a kiss but showing favoritism at this moment will have the opposite effect that I need it to.

My father steps around me, nearly laughing at Seraphina’s chaotic arrival. “Shall we see what you’ve brought, Seraphina?”

She nods enthusiastically, her skin flushed as she pulls a small flower from her pocket and lays it atop the riches Queen Helvania left on the desk before me. I bend down to look at it, confused until I realize that it isn't one of the flowers from my garden, my little slice of paradise. A garden that has nearly every flower known to man from the surrounding countries. The petals hold a strange hue of blue and purple, streaks of midnight along the stalks, and the middle a bright yellow that makes the flower entirely unique to Kusovania.

“Where did you find this?” I whisper as I delicately run my fingers along the petal. It's fresh, which means she just picked it, that wherever she took Obsidian holds this beautiful flower.

Seraphina lays the second part of her gift on the table, a piece of paper holding a window to something that can only be described as paradise itself, *the* paradise that I'm sure my mother spoke of all the time. Tears gather at the corner of my eyes as I bring the paper closer to my face, unsure of what I'm looking at but loving it all the same. My father crowds at my back as we stare at it together, the strange trees and bushes giving me pause in a world that only seeks to drag me forward. The waterfall calls out to me but nothing more than the purple butterfly that seems to shine, one that I desperately yearn to hold.

“What is this?” My father asks, reiterating my question.

“I call it Paradise, King Emyr.”

The king lets out a hearty laugh. “That's quite the name for an unknown place, Seraphina. I assume that's where you took

off on the royal horse?” He gestures to the creature still in the court and Seraphina nods, wringing her hands together. My father did say that anything in the castle was at their disposal which would extend to my horse. She holds my father’s gaze, not as a challenge, but in a way to give him respect and at the same time show him that she doesn’t fear him.

It’s a bold move and I love it.

“Where is this?” I ask again, gathering the flower in my hand and shoving it toward her. “Is this here? In Kusovania?”

Seraphina nods. “I found it a few years ago. The place rests with butterflies and strange flowers and that waterfall which flows south below the wall. It has bits of nature that I haven’t seen anywhere else but there so I don’t think many people know about it.”

I try to keep my face neutral but I’ve never been good at that. Everyone in the throne room can see which of these gifts have piqued my interest. I want Paradise. I want Seraphina. I want Seraphina *in* Paradise.

My body thrums with energy, my cheeks flushing a light pink at the idea of Seraphina allowing me to pleasure her until she passes out amongst the most beautiful flowers I have ever seen. I hope she’ll grant me at least that wish...

The king mulls over Seraphina’s admission before returning to his seat. He sits there for several moments in silence, gaze trained on the table in front of me with the three gifts that give these women pause. When he does speak, I feel my breath leave me as I hope Seraphina will remain.

“All three of you have offered wonderful gifts, something of beauty other than my daughter. Two of you will move onto the final question. Princess Gertrude, you may return to your country.” The words are final and unlike the first question, it isn’t easy to see *why* my father has dismissed her.

Silence follows as Princess Gertrude is led out of the room, Queen Helvania pointing shamelessly at Seraphina, “She stole a royal horse and she’s still here? Why are we playing these games?!”

My father glares at her. “I’ll have you know that Seraphina is one of the most honorable women in this castle. She asked before she took it and she arrived before the deadline. I also remember saying that anything within the castle was at your disposal. I will speak with her about the etiquette allowed here as animals are rarely allowed in the court, *however*, that does not disqualify her from answering this question.”

When I look over at Seraphina, I expect to see shock or relief but instead I find her trying to hide a smile. Her actions have never been quiet in the castle. She is a joy to everyone she meets and they love her energy just as much as I love the woman standing before me. As much as I want to pry and ask where this magical place is, I will have to wait until the third question has been asked and we have some time alone.

“The last round has been adapted to the two of you.” I straighten in my seat because that’s utterly impossible. Seven prospective mates started this morning and he would have no idea who would end up at the end unless... he’s already

chosen. I try not to believe that he has set his sights on Queen Helvania and that all of her recent threats are actually promises. The king continues speaking, oblivious to my inner turmoil. “Tomorrow, you will both spend the day with Daniela, going through what she will require of you in the castle. You will take note and then we shall reconvene after dinner.”

I frown, unsure of what the endgame was. “Father, how would one win?”

He laughs, “Merely listen and learn. This will be your castle someday as well and I can’t have an individual that can’t pick up the basics at a place they’re destined to run. You may be dismissed until breakfast tomorrow.”

Queen Helvania smirks, telling me she is sure of her win and with this last test, she probably will. Seraphina is smart and while she has dabbled in the royal world, she is an amateur compared to the queen. If my father is looking for excellence, Seraphina will surely fail but if there is something else...

I can’t dwell on it, waiting for the prospective queen to be led from the throne room so I can have my private moment with Seraphina. The king leans over to me, dragging my attention away for a mere moment, “Be careful, Daniela. I know the outcome you want but she must prove herself just as the others would have.”

His words don’t deter me as I thought they might have. They seem to be some kind of guide as I rise from my throne and approach Obsidian. He neighs happily as his nose nuzzles my open palm. I twist around, Seraphina staring at me puzzled

until I reach out for her to join me. No one in the throne room reacts, knowing who my choice has been all along.

There have only been so many places to disappear around here.

We silently walk to the stables but I have no intentions of returning my horse, my fingers tangled with hers. She tries to pull away but I merely bring her hand to my lips. "Show me," I ask softly.

Seraphina stops walking and I'm tugged toward her chest as she searches my expression. "Do you even know what you're asking?"

I nod. No one else knows about Paradise. Just her. And then it will be just me. I am being selfish, asking her to give a piece of herself to me despite what might happen tomorrow but I can't let her go. The conflict in her face is evident as she tries to reason with her own emotions and logic.

"Show me Paradise," I whisper again, this time grazing my lips with hers. She melts against me, nodding.

"I could never deny you, princess."

The sweet words bring tears to my eyes because it may be one of the last times I ever hear them.

Chapter Eighteen

SERAPHINA

The blissed-out look on Daniela's face as we enter Paradise is everything I needed it to be. Her horse walks closely behind us as we travel the main path I made years ago. Strange little creatures flutter by and around us, flowers seemingly bloom as we pass. The constant gasps and squeals of excitement from nature, which very well may be in my head, tell me that even if I don't win her hand, I have won her heart.

And that's all that truly matters. The heartbreak is worth the few years I have spent loving this woman.

She turns to me, halting our walk. "You're perfect, you know that?" Those are usually my words for her and it warms my heart to know that she wants me just the same. "I-"

I steal the words from her mouth, pressing my lips to hers. "You're everything, princess. You always will be." She leans into the kiss just as I pull back, "But I need you to know that-" She shakes her head and I stop from voicing my thought that

this may be our last moments together. We should just enjoy it. I should just enjoy my princess regardless of the consequences.

The king already mentioned that he would speak with me about my etiquette. I'm sure this is just another tick in the box.

Not willing to wait any longer, my hands cup her cheeks and drag her closer as I capture her lips with mine. I swallow one of her delicious moans as her tongue tangles with mine, her hands roaming up and down my sides before massaging my breasts through my dress. I gasp at the sensation as she presses herself further against me before we're tumbling into the long grass.

The shock on Daniela's face makes me smile as she realizes that it's not the scratchy stalks of green found everywhere else in Kusovania. This grass is pillowy and soft, Paradise a place of rest and peace in every sense of the word. I roll her beneath me, content to take my time pressing my lips to her soft skin, caressing her jaw and neck until she's squirming for release.

Just as my hand slides down her side, she catches my wrist. "Let me taste you, Fi."

I pause, pulling away to see her expression. Daniela has always wanted to let go in moments like this but I'm not opposed to this change in dynamic as I let her roll us over until she's straddling my thighs.

"I want you to know how you make me feel all the time, Fi. You're always the strong one, the one that tries to do the right thing, the one who will end up with the short end of the stick

at the end of this. For once, I want *you* to let go and let me make *you* feel.”

My heart pounds in my chest as my eyes flutter close and she bends down to kiss me again. It’s sweet and slow, reminding me of all those precious times we’ve spent in town and at the castle. It brings back every wonderful memory I’ve had with my princess, a woman who may not be in my life tomorrow.

Flat on my back, I can do nothing else than let this woman take what she wants. She always does, even though she doesn’t know it. Daniela brings me pleasure merely from her smile and I gasp as her delicate fingers slide under the shoulders of my dress and began to push them down my arms.

“Daniela-” I breathe against her lips, my legs shifting so that she’s now perched in between my thighs.

“That’s *princess* to you,” she mumbles, reminding me of her pet name as she continues undressing me. My breasts are bare to Paradise and to my woman as her attention draws south, sweet kisses pressed along my skin until her lips close on one of the tight buds of my breast. I gasp and arch upward, Daniela giggling as she sucks and teases until my hips are bucking forward for relief. I slide a hand between us to do just that when she stops me. “No, I get to do it this time. You get to be patient.”

A growl of frustration leaves me as she restricts my movement, continuing her attention on the one breast before moving to the next. I can’t help as my fingers tangle in her

hair and I tug, needing more than she's giving me. I can't help but be greedy with her and I would rather be between her beautiful thighs. Being the center of attention isn't normal for me and it feels... strange.

She smirks as she understands, sliding down my body, pulling my dress with it. I'm left in only my panties, the cool air of Paradise swarming around me like the sweetest hug. My hips shift again, eager to feel Daniela against me as she mumbles 'patience' again, giggles slipping through the soft dominance she exudes. Daniela has mentioned that she wanted to make love to me and I'm fantasizing just how she would do that, how she would take me. Would it be loving and slow like this? Would it be raw and passionate the way I take her or would it be an entirely new dynamic altogether?

I can't dwell on that fantasy any longer as her lips caress the inside of my thigh, her petite fingers wrapped around my hips as she shifts between my legs. A gasp leaves me as she presses a kiss to my sex through my panties, her finger tugging the fabric to the side and her tongue swiping through my folds seconds later. She sighs as she tastes me, content to torture me through little nips and kisses as I try my hardest to stay still.

My fingers dig into the ground around us, my focus stolen by nature as it seemingly erupts around us in shifting colors and fluttering creatures that respond to my noises.

"Princess, if you don't"-

"No."

“What do you mean *no*?” I growl at her and her head peeks up, her cheeks rosy and it takes me a moment to realize that this is what she is trying to draw out of me. Daniela watches my expression as she stuffs two fingers inside of me, drawing a whine from my throat. My movements are sharp and needy as I shamelessly ride those fingers that are quickly switched out for her tongue until I’m exploding all over her sweet lips.

She sits back, licking her lips, satisfied with her conquest. “You taste like honey.”

“My turn.” I grin. She squeals as I have her undressed, both of us naked in this field of beauty. Her legs wrap around me without hesitation as I capture her lips with mine, tasting myself on her delicate flesh.

Chapter Nineteen

DANIELA

I missed the spark in her eyes this morning after the first question but it's back as she ravages me, her wild curls sprung around her as she kisses me. "You had your moment, princess but now it's my turn," she purrs in my ear as she pushes a thigh between my legs and grinds it against my sex. "Now? I'm going to let every little critter and aspect of nature in Paradise watch you fall apart. And when I'm done? I'm going to do it all over again." This is the woman I've been missing and I can only grin as my hips move of their own accord, riding her thigh as my mouth parts in anticipation.

"Fi, I-"

Her smile turns devious as she grinds her leg against me again, my back bowing off the ground. One of her hands moves to my breast as she rolls us onto our sides, giving her better access and I can't help but cling to her as she pulls forward my first orgasm. Seraphina grins with triumph as she

kisses me again, her tongue tangling with mine, even as I try to catch my breath.

“Fi, goddess, we can’t do this.” The shame of being naked out in the open is catching up to me but she’s not phased.

“You started this, princess and besides, no one knows about Paradise.”

Her thigh starts moving again and I bury my face in her shoulder as the pleasure resumes that familiar thrum through my limbs. With her, it’s always so easy to find my release, regardless of what she does. I’m sure just her lips on my breasts could make me cum if she tried hard enough. Her fingers join her thigh, pinching my clit and I howl into her shoulder as my entire body shakes with another orgasm.

I pull back just enough to see that Seraphina isn’t done with me yet but I’m sure she’s about to make me cum again with the way she slips her fingers into her mouth and moans at my taste on her tongue. “Perfection, princess.”

I pull her into a kiss, both of us tasting ourselves as our tongues dance together, nature around us settling as if our joining is just what it needed. *What it needs*. This isn’t just Paradise anymore, it’s ours.

Chapter Twenty

QUEEN HELVANIA

I watched them leave as if nothing else in the world mattered. Well, Seraphina had the good grace to look skeptical but Daniela still had that bright expression on her face. She still doesn't understand that freedom comes with obedience and her country needs a boost. Kusovania has been the peacemaker for centuries, offering support and material to the surrounding countries, however, it is far removed from the world that way.

With no conflict, they can't take part in some of the more heated discussions that plague us all. Kusovania is the perfect explanation of a country that is out of touch. I intend to change that, starting with Seraphina's reach in the castle.

"King Emyr," I start as I curtsy and step into the library where he is lounging, staring at a family picture. I shouldn't be up here in the royal quarters but the staff knows me enough to not to interfere with my roaming, although a few of them

scowled at me. They will be promptly fired when I become Daniela's counterpart.

The king twists around to see me and lets out a heavy sigh. "Queen Helvania, why have you traveled up here?"

"I meant to speak with you earlier."

"And you were told to stay on the first level. That rule was for everyone."

I ignore his distaste for my disobedience because it won't matter come tomorrow morning. "And yet your daughter runs off into the wild with your seamstress."

Several seconds of silence meet my statement before he stands and returns the frame to the table before turning to face me. He has resumed his royal poise as he looks down on me. "Queen Helvania, I have always admired your tenacity and your desire to make everything the best it can be. However, I cannot tolerate your disregard of my rules. Regarding my daughter, your clarification is not accurate and also hurtful to both the princess and your prospective rival."

He takes a step closer and I resist the urge to flinch. I am a queen, the queen of Regnali and I will not step down. "Your favoritism is showing, King Emyr."

"Or maybe, I am giving Daniela the opportunity to see the world as it truly is." He raises an eyebrow before dismissing me with a nod and I return to my quarters, scowling at the staff I've brought with me. It's a disgrace that Seraphina is my rival as I bring much more to this kingdom than she ever will.

The thought that she may win Daniela's hand is a terrifying thought but I know that the last question rides on our ability to assume royal duties and that is one thing I know Seraphina doesn't have expertise in. She will not be able to fake her way through that.

I will give her this last night with Daniela and then I will show her what happens when she touches what is promised to me, what *was* promised to me from the beginning.

“Should we begin packing, Queen Helvania?”

I glare at one of my maids, narrowing my gaze at her. “All of you out. I would like the night to myself and for your information, no. There will be no packing.” I am appalled that even they think that I will not win. They obviously don't know me very well. I have a few more tricks up my sleeve and if Seraphina doesn't leave on her own, I'll just make sure she won't be able to finish out tomorrow without a mishap.

Chapter Twenty-One

SERAPHINA

The moments of bliss wane as the night morphs into the morning, both of us content to hold each other beneath the moonlight. Nature seems to curl in around us, bringing us into their home the longer we stay but as the sun rises, I know it is time to return. Our last trial is upon us and this will determine my place at Daniela's side.

We dress, sharing soft touches and kisses, before riding back in silence. I curl around her back as we ride, Paradise still clinging to her skin as we slip back in from the stable. The staff averts their eyes as Daniela disappears up the stairs, all attention pasted on me as I find my way to my room for a chance of clothes.

My shoulders sag the moment I close the door, my body working on autopilot as I strip and make my way to the shower. I savor Daniela's and Paradise's scent on my skin, even as I rinse myself and let my thoughts run free.

I don't know this trial, Fi. I wish I did. I wish I knew what my father was thinking. He knows about us and he knows what I want but I have no idea what he is doing. Fi, I fear this may be the end.

I try to ignore the pain in my heart as I hear Daniela's last words ring in my head. Conflicting information confuses me on who's choice it truly is. Is it Daniela's? Is it the king's? Is this all a game where neither of us will be chosen and the real choice shall arrive at dinner tonight?

I bow my head beneath the heated stream and let the agonized tears fall until the water runs cold. Shaking, I dry myself off and slip on a mauve dress that covers my shoulders and runs three-fourths down my arms. It's not that I want to hide last night's moments but I believe a royal should not parade their moments through the castle. Covering up is the respectable thing to do.

Spending much more time on my hair, drying and pinning it up in a small bun to keep it out of the way, I don a simple look, not wanting to overpower my duties with my presence. After all, I will be supporting Daniela in this role, not leading it.

The creak of my door alerts me that one of the staff has entered, a maid I recognize bowing slightly as she moves toward where I am sitting at the edge of the bed debating my sanity. "Am I being stupid thinking I have a chance?" I ask.

She smiles, shaking her head. "You're never stupid for following who you love. We're all rooting for you, Seraphina.

Queen Helvania, while she is the stronger royal, you are the one who understands our princess. You treat us with respect. And your desire would not be to consume this kingdom but to help lead and support it. Your smile brightens a room. You demand respect with kindness. Don't worry about anything else and do as you always do. The king will see that.”

That doesn't make me feel any better as I make my way to the dining hall, Queen Helvania already sitting beside Daniela as if she owns that spot. The king is sitting at the head, watching my movements and while the empty spot beside Daniela is calling my name, I know that it will only look as if I'm trying to stake my claim.

Instead, I sit across from them, Daniela trying to hide a smile at how covered up I am. Her dress is much less conservative, the edge of one of my love bites on her neck peeking forth. The king nods to the kitchen and then turns to us. “This morning will have you following Daniela as she shows you the duties that you will assume should you become my daughter's mate. Please eat and drink.”

All of this feels like a test as we eat in silence, only the clinking of metal against porcelain echoing through the dining hall. Breakfast drags on, Daniela finally standing up and acknowledging the beginning of the end. “Ready?”

I stand as well and curtsy to the king before following her, Queen Helvania walking by her side. Once again, the space on Daniela's other side beckons to me but that doesn't feel like a place I belong—not because I think Queen Helvania has

earned it but because it feels like I am trying to compete for Daniela's attention.

If I become a queen, I will not be fighting for dominance. I will not be trying to take her crown. I will not be showing our people that I deserve that spot more than Daniela does. Standing beside her the way Helvania does feels like disrespect. When I stand beside Daniela, it will be as friends and as lovers but I will gladly concede to her where her expertise is required.

It takes me a few moments to realize that Queen Helvania is probably warring with her own emotions as she tries to find out where she fits in. She may be a queen but here, she would simply be 'her majesty' and would have to answer to Daniela, unless an agreement is signed that Kusovania is to be given to Queen Helvania and her country.

Anger burns deep within me at the thought of someone trying to take over Kusovania, our peaceful little country. It will crumble in that spiteful woman's hands and I hope that everyone else sees that. Regardless, the outcome of this last test is more important. If I lose, I will not even have a place in the castle, knowing full well that Queen Helvania will discard me without hesitation.

Daniela migrates through the halls, showing us the staff's quarters, the offices, the gala we were in two days ago and then moves to one of the libraries on the first level just off the kitchen. The double doors open with ease as we step in amongst rich reds and golds climbing the walls, accompanied

by mahogany everywhere else, Daniela sifting through paperwork I've never seen before.

I've always known that it wasn't all games but I hadn't expected documentation between other countries about trades and support and meetings that include bartering. Queen Helvania flips through a few pieces as Daniela explains, the woman radiating sunshine as she details the position she will fall into. I have yet to see this side of her. I have always been her escape from this world so this political piece has never been one we've shared.

I'm wondering if that's all I am, an escape, and if that will grow old. Despite the love we share for each other, I'm wondering if she needs more.

Still, I'm fascinated as I drink in the vast amount of information, ideas spiraling about how we can further the colors we use in our fabrics and the stitches and...

"Seraphina, would you like some tea?" The doors have opened again, a maid unsteadily holding a tray as I stand beside Queen Helvania. I shake out of my stupor and nod as she moves forward, the tray slipping from her hands and spraying us with hot tea. I shriek as the heat seeps into my dress and I hold the cloth off me to keep from being scalded. The maid begins apologizing profusely but Queen Helvania's response is much different to mine.

She roughly grabs the maid by her blouse, screaming in her face that she doesn't deserve to breathe the same air, that the stains won't come out of a dress that cost more than the

woman's salary. I haven't seen such disrespect in my life, the secondhand embarrassment making me step farther away, my gaze snagging on two things—Daniela's smug expression and the king peeking into the library.

Is this a test? Am I supposed to berate the maid as well? Am I supposed to ignore it?

Be genuine.

I bite my lip and then bend down to start picking up the shattered pieces of china. "Is there something we can use to wipe this up?" I ask softly, trying to ease the situation. The tea is starting to cool down, damp cloth clinging to my skin. I tug at the maid, Queen Helvania releasing her much to my relief. "A rag, possibly?" The maid races off to the corner and returns with a towel, the queen laughing at the both of us.

"This is why you're unfit, Seraphina. You should *never* be on your knees."

I sit back and look up at Helvania and take a deep breath to gather the courage I need to clap back on that. "Then maybe you're doing it wrong. There might be a status difference between us but we're all still *human* and judging someone based on a mistake makes *you* unfit."

I pick up the last of the china and walk with the maid through the double doors back to the kitchen. She is still trembling until we step over the threshold, the king mysteriously absent from where he had been watching. A smile spreads over the maid's lips as she drops the towel in the trash. "I didn't expect that, Seraphina. Thought you were

going to remain silent as you always do. There's a dress over in the corner for you to change into."

"Wait, that was on purpose?"

She giggles. "Ruling a kingdom is difficult but being nice to others is just as important as the trades we make with surrounding countries. If you can't rule your own people, how will you convince anyone else?" She winks at me and pushes me to change, leaving me with that piece of wisdom—which means that I still have a chance. The king watched Queen Helvania berate the maid while I helped her. Is that what he's looking for?

A prospective mate unafraid to be human around others?

Chapter Twenty-Two

SERAPHINA

The day drags on with no other incidents. Helvania scowls at me every chance she gets, pushing me to stand behind them or having me stand away from Daniela's side. I don't understand the constant barrage against me until Queen Helvania catches me exiting the bathroom just before dinner. She pins me against the wall, frantically searching my expression.

Gone is the elegant woman I had met this morning—no, this is *personal*.

“You've got a crush on the goddamn princess. I get it. It feels *nice*. But in no way will you win this. You can't. You bring *nothing*. Paradise? That's a fucking joke and the way you've not picked up *anything* today will show both Daniela *and* the king that you are unfit.”

She isn't entirely wrong. I haven't mastered any of the duties that Daniela had shown us today but it seems like I wasn't supposed to. Those seem like *her* duties and while the king

said she was going to show us the day-to-day, I can't see myself signing treaties. I can't be sure but today is for me to find *my* place, not take over Daniela's.

Which means that my job has nothing to do with *anything* Daniela had been showing us and everything to do with the things she hasn't mentioned. The staff. The stables. The kitchen. The security. Maintaining the safety and security of the castle. Mingling with the people of Kusovania. Everything that the queen-to-be won't have time for; not that they are lesser tasks but that they are just too much for one person.

And *that* is the lesson that I needed to learn. Treating the staff with respect is only one piece of it. The king doesn't want us to *take over*, he wants us to help, to support, to stand *beside*. Just like Ezra said.

So, I merely look up at Queen Helvania and just smile. "Well, it's time for dinner so let's have the king tell me I'm unfit so I can go home, alright? I've enjoyed my time at the castle and the stolen kisses. I love the princess and that's no secret, but you're right, I don't bring what you do." I head for the dining hall, smoothing down my dress while trying to keep a neutral expression on my face.

I slip into my seat just like this morning, across from Daniela but this time Queen Helvania sits beside me, closer to the king. No doubt, she is still trying to show that she is better than me. The problem is that she *is* better. In nearly every way that a kingdom needs. However, the questions hadn't been *for the kingdom* but for *Daniela's hand*.

Dinner passes by in awkward silence before the king lays down his fork and we do the same, Daniela's eyes on her father until he says something none of us are ready for. "This evening is when one of you will become the next queen alongside my daughter." His gaze moves to Queen Helvania and my heart drops into my stomach. "You are my first choice, Queen Helvania. You have been for a very long time, for the kingdom, for Kusovania. You hold a certain air that demands respect; however, the choice was never for the kingdom but for my daughter's hand. There will be more than one ruler of this country during the next coronation and that must be considered."

He takes a deep breath and then turns to his daughter. "It's why I've left the final choice to my daughter, Daniela, because her choice means far more than mine ever will."

Queen Helvania launches out of her chair, slamming her hands onto the table. Once again, gone is the royal and present is the ruthless woman who has been playing along for the last few days. "This is preposterous! I have busted my ass and passed every question but you're saying it's *her* choice? Everyone knows about the indecent relationship these two have with each other not to mention that Seraphina brings *nothing* to the kingdom."

The king clears his throat, Queen Helvania stuffing herself back into the chair. Daniela gives us a sweet smile, pushing her plate away from her. "As much as I'd love to choose, I only know what my heart wants. The rose-colored glasses that I've donned will prevent me from making the choice I need to.

Father, you know who my heart wants. You know what my heart has *always* wanted but that same person may not be who the kingdom needs.”

I am shocked and hurt at the news until I realize there’s a silent understanding between Daniela and her father. His presentation at this dinner is a lesson to us all and for a quick moment, I hold onto hope.

The king sits forward, clasping his hands together. “Queen Helvania, no doubt that you can rule a kingdom but the burden of ruling two is a bit much for a first-time queen. You forget that your attention would be split between Kusovania and Regnali.”

“I didn’t forget.”

He spares her a sharp glance before looking to me. “And you have no experience ruling a kingdom at all. Your learning curve will be extremely steep and handing this land over to you and my daughter will make your life more difficult than you can imagine.”

Queen Helvania is back to that smug expression as she leans back, believing that she has won. She’s already staring at Daniela, trying to claim a smile from the woman that has my heart. The king clears his throat, bringing our attention back to him.

“However, the measure of who will be the best for my daughter doesn’t lie in how well you can run a country. That’s *her* job. Your job is to support and stand beside Daniela, not in front of her. You are to bring your strength and expertise to

this kingdom to make it better, not add it to your repertoire. Queen Helvania, your strengths are many but they clash with how Kusovania operates. When I had you follow my daughter today, I did not want you to take over. I wanted you to find out where you could support. You talked down to our staff, disregarded the rules, and tried to make your presence known in every room you entered.”

“You’re saying I’m unfit to be a queen?” Queen Helvania pushes out, seething.

The king shakes his head, not addressing her disrespect. All of the staff in the dining hall look uncomfortable as they shift, waiting for a verdict.

“You are not unfit to be a queen, but you are unfit for this country and for my daughter.” The king doesn’t wait for her breakdown as he turns to me. “You are not ready for an entire kingdom, Seraphina, but then again, so many royals aren’t. You will; however, be perfect for this country to move forward. You are also in love with my daughter. I know you will treat her well, as you always have.” He waves his hand, two guards approaching Queen Helvania to lead her back to her room. There is a lot of grumbling but no more outbursts, of which I am ecstatic.

I open my mouth to say something but the king holds up his hand.

“Things are going to change for you. Drastically. Usually, royals are sent home to gather the last of their things but I feel it better for you to remain here. Your family and friends will

be invited to a dinner here in the next few days as we get you up to speed and prepare you for your coronation.”

My shoulders sag amidst the excitement as I sit back in my chair, “This is all a little fast.” I didn’t expect a full coronation so soon after ‘winning’.

Daniela giggles from across the table, “What did you think was going to happen?”

“How are you so calm about this? What if your father—the king—had chosen someone else?” I feel like I am sitting around my table at home with friends rather than royals. It is just a little too comfortable.

The king reaches forward and pats my hand, “Seraphina, I would have never chosen Queen Helvania. Not only does Daniela despise her, her ideals clash with all of ours. She would rule with an iron fist where we are used to soft and gentle. She would upend the peace we’ve been holding onto for decades.”

“But-”

Daniela shakes her head and pushes away from the table before walking over to me. She waits until I stand out of respect before her arms wrap around my waist and she places her chin on my chest, looking up at me. “Dad wanted to teach all of the prospective mates a lesson. He wanted them to leave here with a little more information than when they arrived. The first few believed their strength would make them a perfect match. He told them why it wasn’t. Then there was what was most beautiful. He gave a lesson with that. And even

with this, he gave a lesson. Queen Helvania won't be happy but she'll understand *why*. You were always going to win so as long as you stayed genuine. I didn't realize it until now but Dad always uses a lesson. I get it now." She twists a little to look at her father, the king. "You didn't want Seraphina to think that she had to emulate any of the others. She can't bring what they can and *you didn't want her to.*"

The king stands up and rounds the table. I tap Daniela's shoulders for her to release me before turning to him and giving him a small bow of my head. Daniela finds my hand and squeezes, giving me a little more courage. He waits until I make eye contact with him again to speak. "Seraphina," his voice ripples through the dining hall, most of the staff trying to hide their smiles. "This is all highly unconventional. While you gave me respect, you never once denied me or anyone else your true personality. You never cowered. You didn't shout. You explained yourself well. You will learn a lot here but I'm sure we'll learn just as much from you." He pats my shoulder before moving toward the hallway. "I'm sure you two have much to discuss but training starts tomorrow, *your highness.*"

Those two words are all I need to realize this is real and despite my surroundings, I twist around to place a fat kiss on Daniela's lips. It's the first time I've ever publicly shown my feelings to her but it definitely won't be the last. When I pull away, the staff's heads are bowed as they should be around royals, my cheeks flaming as I realize the power I now wield with mere words from the king's mouth.

"Princess, I'm—"

She shakes her head, holding onto me so I can't pull away. "No, this is real. Us. You're going to be a *queen*." She's not wrong although I'll hold the title of 'your highness' until coronation and then it will be 'your majesty. Only Daniela will hold the true title of queen, not that I mind.

I'm nodding as I lean in again for another kiss, willing to savor this precious moment until I swallow one of her wanton moans. "Greedy, are we?"

"Always."

"Then I think it's time to move this somewhere a little more private. After all, the king said that training begins tomorrow and I'm feeling we need to make up for what will inevitably be lost time."

Daniela doesn't hesitate as she grabs my hand and drags me out of the dining hall and up the stairs to her royal chambers. "Ready, your highness?"

I chuckle as I push forward, wrapping an arm around her waist and eagerly undoing the laces at the front of her bodice. "*Always, princess.*"

Chapter Twenty-Three

THREE MONTHS LATER; MOMENTS BEFORE THE CORONATION

SERAPHINA

An urgent knock on the door tries to pull me out of my trance as I stare at my queen emerging from the bathroom. We should have accepted the help of our maids but Daniela wanted these last few moments alone. I can't blame her but she made a mistake by locking the door and kicking everyone out. Three glorious months by Daniela's side has only strengthened our romance.

The entire kingdom swoons every time they catch us stealing kisses and laughing when they catch me cornering Daniela for just a bit more. My parents were rather surprised when they were invited to the castle but welcoming of their new daughter-in-law. Why wouldn't they be? They now have a stake in the royal family.

Lania wasn't as excited when the news was spread across Kusovania and I still firmly believe that she thinks this will fall apart. Prince Malik has asked for her hand but she's stalling, not that she'll explain why. As much as I want to talk to her and figure it out, I now have my own share of duties that require keeping up a kingdom.

And making sure that a certain queen of mine is satisfied.

The knock comes again but we both ignore it. Daniela screamed at one of the guards that unless one of us are screaming for our lives, we were not to be disturbed. I agree wholeheartedly, especially now that I see my mate approaching me with the biggest smile on her face.

"You didn't ever think this would happen, did you?" She says as she reaches for me. I take her into my arms, peppering kisses up and down her neck before catching her lips. Daniela melts against me as she waits for my answer.

"No, I thought it was a dream out of reach, Daniela." I've resorted to using her name as it's no longer appropriate to use 'princess', even while playing. "Now," my voice drops a few octaves as I press my lips against her ear, "Get on the bed so I can worship you, my queen." Her cheeks flush a gorgeous pink as she pulls away, furiously shaking her head.

"Fi-"

"The coronation can wait. My taste for you cannot. I should have you hanged..." I chuckle at the mock horror on her face as I continue, dragging her against me again for a sloppy kiss. "Upside down so I can take what I want from you until you're

a whimpering mess.” There have been many discoveries since I’ve been given access to all the secret chambers and libraries. I’ve never seen so many books in my life but the contraptions found in the rooms that royalty no longer uses intrigue me.

The way Daniela’s eyes lit up when she saw one of them gave me several ideas, ones we haven’t yet been able to plan out. Apparently, moving one of those devices into the bedroom was vetoed by nearly every staff member here. However, when Daniela becomes queen, it won’t be so much of a request as it will be a command.

For now, I can make do. I know what my woman likes and what it takes to draw out those beautiful sounds. I’m hoping for a repeat with that special present she gave me on the night of the gala. We just haven’t had the time to explore. But now? Now is a great time, moments before the coronation as the entirety of Kusovania waits for us.

Daniela giggles as I push her toward the mattress, a larger version of her old one that we’ve been sharing the moment since I won her hand. She falls against the plush duvet, her dress fanning out around her as she props herself up on her elbows. “We really should-”

I cut her off with more kisses, Daniela not fighting me as I crawl onto the mattress after her, straddling her hips as I look down at her, taking in the breathtaking view that is all mine. Flushed cheeks, sparkling blue eyes, and a wide smile brighter than the sun. “A queen’s pleasure should wait for no man.” I joke before scooting down the bed. Raising her dress with one

hand, I drag the other up the inside of her thigh, loving the way her breath catches in her throat. “Now, scream so they can hear the pleasure from your lips and know that you are satisfied.” I can’t help the stupid smile that spreads across my lips.

“Fi-“

“That’s your majesty, my queen.” She slaps her hands over her mouth to stay quiet but we can’t have that. I need to hear her. I want to hear just how I make her feel, her thighs wrapped around my head as I look up at her again. “Daniela, don’t hold back.”

“But they’ll come in,” she says, a moan following as I run my tongue through her folds. Her entire body shakes with the attention, my gaze still locked with hers. The faint blush on her cheeks tells me that she’s not embarrassed but turned on by the idea of an audience.

I’ll be storing that idea for later as well. “Scream for me, my queen.”

I wait for her to pull back again but this time I find her fingers sliding into my hair, pulling it out of the pinup for coronation. “Of course, your majesty.”

Secret Obsession

We might be saying goodbye to Queen Daniela & Her Majesty, Seraphina but there's more romance to be had in the next installment: Secret Obsession!

As a Duchess and cousin to the Kusovanian throne, there are rules I must abide by. But not tonight during the famous masquerade ball. One night of debauchery and sin behind a mask so no one can tell who I am.

And when I mistakenly find myself sandwiched between visiting royals, King Theodore and Queen Valentina, I wholeheartedly give in.

Until I find out that they're only visiting to smooth over relations between our countries.

The problem is now that they know my identity, they want me just as bad as I want them. What started as a little game has

become a full-blown craving.

*I shouldn't want what I can't have but when it feels so right,
how can it be wrong?*

*Secret Admirer is the second installment of the Mated
Queens series. It is a mature standalone set in the same
universe involving FF, MF, and MFF pairings.*

And after that, check out some more of N. Slater's works,
exclusives, signed copies, and newsletter

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