



AL BODARI FAMILY
BOOK 3

THE
SHEIK'S
Promise

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The Sheik's Promise

By Elizabeth Lennox

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt to “His Impossible Heir”](#)

Chapter 1

“You need to control your expressions!” Gael angrily growled, rubbing a frustrated hand over his face. You know that you can’t allow the press to see expressions!”

Princess Oreylia al Bodari cringed, then had to smother a small burst of laughter when her older brother, Sheik Gael al Bodari, Ruler of Hadair, glared at her because of her lack of decorum. “You’re right, of course,” she replied as she smothered her amusement. Oreylia knew the appropriate response and lowered her lashes, feigning shame. “It won’t happen again.”

Sheik Gael al Bodari shook his head with an impatient sigh. Oreylia mentally sighed as well, biting her lip as she tried to figure out what she could say that might appease her brother.

“This is serious, Oreylia,” Gael admonished. “The paparazzi are literally climbing over each other to get pictures of your latest reaction.”

She knew this was true, however, Oreylia couldn’t help but feel a bit miffed by the accusation. “Gael, I don’t think it’s fair to...!”

Oreylia stopped when her brother impatiently flipped his monitor around, reminding her of the image that had precipitated this current lecture.

Objectively, Oreylia was almost proud of the image. She’d worn her mother’s diamond earrings the night the photo had been taken. The champagne-colored evening gown sparkled, nearly matching the lights of the city off in the distance. However, it wasn’t her gown to which her brother objected. It was the eye roll that was the issue. Gael pressed a button on his keyboard and a second image popped up. In this picture, Oreylia was wearing a red dress and, again, she smiled faintly, proud of the red lipstick that perfectly matched her

dress. Oreylia also took note of the flattering twist of her dark hair before acknowledging that the cringe of horror on her face, captured by the stealthy photographer, wasn't...subtle.

Her older brother pressed the keys on the keyboard again, providing a hilarious montage of her features twisted into varying stages of horror, revulsion, boredom, or amusement. *Inappropriate* amusement, she mentally added. The last image showed her obviously fighting not to throw up.

"In my defense," Oreylia started, not daring to look at her brother, "in that last picture, His Grace had just let loose an impressively potent...well...!"

Gael realized where her explanation was heading. Her brother's eyes widened and he leaned forward, a trace of amusement sparkling in his own dark eyes. "He did *not!*" Gael hissed, then waited for Oreylia to either confirm or deny the fact that the Duke of Something, she was losing track of the names of the men at this point, had allowed his gastric issues to cut loose.

Oreylia winced at the memory as she nodded emphatically. "It was the third...uh...release in ten minutes."

Gael sighed, dropping his head into his hands briefly. Oreylia suspected that he might be trying not to laugh as well, but as the very powerful Sheik of Hadair, he wouldn't dare laugh. Edward Sheffield was the tenth Duke of something something. He was also thirty years older than Oreylia and a blinding bore.

Uncrossing her legs, she politely folded her hands on her knees, tilting her head curiously as she assessed her brother. "Why on earth would you think His Grace would be a good match for me?" Oreylia demanded impatiently. Pushing out of the chair, she paced the wide expanse of her brother's office. "Seriously Gael, I know I have to put myself out there and find a husband, but why would you encourage a man with unendurable flatulence and a penchant for loudly discussing the mating rituals of various species?"

Gael lifted his head, shock showing on his features as he processed her exclamation. “He did not!”

Oreylia crossed her arms over her chest, returning his glare with equal vehemence. “Oh yes, he did!” She huffed a bit, irritated by this entire effort to find her a husband. “Did you know that the male ostrich somehow turns his shins a bright crimson when he’s ready to mate?”

Her brother choked on horrified laughter but Oreylia continued. “Or maybe you’d be intrigued to know that the sea slug is a hermaphrodite. They have both a penis and a vagina.” Her brother stared wide-eyed at her before dropping his head into his hands in a vain effort to hide his amusement. But his shoulders were shaking with quiet laughter.

“And, after mating, the penis falls off!”

Gael sat up and she noticed he had to actively resist the urge to cover his groin. “He told you that?”

“Yep!” she answered, letting the “p” sound pop a bit.

“And then he farted?”

Oreylia shuddered in answer.

“I’m so sorry,” he groaned, bracing his elbows on his desk. “You just...,” he rubbed a hand over his forehead, “you mentioned you wanted to get married. You’ve been on dates with several men now, so when Sheffield asked me if he could court you, I just assumed that...!” he sighed, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’m so sorry. And I know the other men you’ve gone out with lately haven’t really clicked with you either.”

Oreylia managed to stifle another shudder, thinking back on the men she’d gone on dates with over the past several months.

His gaze softened as he watched the frustration in her eyes. “Why are you in such a rush, Oreylia?” he asked, his voice gentling.

She couldn’t maintain eye contact after that question. She walked over to the office windows, her arms tightening

around her waist as she thought about the boredom she felt right now. And the envy that threatened to swallow her when she witnessed how happy Gael was with his wife, and her sister Tessa with Asif, her new husband, and their baby boy. She tried to tamp down on the yearning for a husband and child of her own. Or something, *anything*, that she could claim as hers, alone. For too long, she'd been the little sister of her older brother, a princess of Hadair, the something of something. Nothing was her own.

"I just...I'm ready to make my own life," she told him. That was partly true, she thought.

"But why the sudden urgency?"

He had come up right behind her now and she wanted desperately to turn and throw herself into his arms. But they hadn't ever had that kind of relationship. He was her older brother, but because he was also ruler of Hadair and had a great many responsibilities, Gael didn't have time to coddle anyone. Not even his little sister.

"It's just feels like it's time," she said and turned away so that she didn't burst into tears. That would be humiliating.

Gael stopped her sudden retreat with a touch to her arm.

"Tessa just gave birth to her son. Why don't you go visit her for a while? I'm sure she'd love to see you."

Oreylia shook her head slowly. "No, I just spoke to her last night. She and Asif have been working out their issues. She doesn't need me right now. She's deliriously happy and I don't want to interrupt. I'll wait a bit until the excitement of the new baby has worn off. Then I'll check in and see if she's ready for visitors."

And with that, she left her brother's office, heading to her own and refusing to contemplate her future. It was too bleak to consider.

“I’m not going to have kids,” Daniesh announced abruptly.

Ritton Odenton, Sheik of Quarati, stopped to stare at his younger brother. “You’ve just...decided this?” he asked, leaning back in his leather chair.

Daniesh flushed and looked down, rolling the crystal glass between his palms. “I can’t...have children. I just found out,” he continued, still staring at the floor. “Apparently, I was very sick as a baby. Do you remember?”

Ritton remembered that year when his baby brother had gotten sick. The high fever, the constant wails that no one could ease as well as the constant terror of watching his younger brother suffer. There was also excessive sweating, violent nausea and incessant coughing, not to mention the horrible rash all over his body! “Yes. What of it?”

Daniesh rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I went to a doctor recently and he ran a series of tests. When I went back for a follow up, he asked me when I’d had the measles.”

Ritton stared at his younger brother in shock. “But... we’ve both been vaccinated!”

He nodded. “Yes, well, apparently, Mom and Dad didn’t think there was a threat of the disease because we were in the palace.” He stood up and started pacing. “Unfortunately, it wasn’t just a severe cold. It was a mild case of the measles. According to my medical records, because I recovered so quickly, they didn’t really test me for anything.” He turned away, staring out the window. “Regrettably, that means that I can’t have children.” Daniesh turned back to his older brother. “I will not be able to produce the heir that you need.”

There was a long, tense silence. The thought of not having children...! Producing an heir was required due to their birth. As members of the ruling family, this was devastating news.

A moment later, Ritton realized what his brother had just said. “I would never put that burden on your shoulders,” he told his brother sincerely. However, there had been a slim hope that Daniesh might marry and...no. That wasn't his brother's job. It was Ritton's alone.

Daniesh nodded in acknowledgement, the silence heavy as they both considered that news.

Daniesh was the first to break the silence. “Yes. Well, I know that after your first marriage and the tragedy...” he paused, not wanting to bring up that painful event. “I was under the impression that you would never again marry.” He sighed, frustrated by the awkwardness of this conversation. “Even if you hadn't hoped that I would produce an heir to the throne, I have to tell you that it's not going to happen. Children simply aren't in my future.” The word “unfortunately” hung in the air, unspoken.

Ritton stared at his brother, wondering if he should... yes. It was time. This news wasn't just devastating for his younger brother. Ritton knew that the news had serious implications for their country's future.

Looking at his younger brother, Ritton could see the resentment, the anger, in his handsome features. “Because you were sick as a baby.”

Daniesh turned away, fisting his hands on his hips as his shoulders bowed inward. Ritton completely understood the anguish.

“Yes,” Daniesh hissed.

Ritton leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He held his glass of scotch in one hand, swirling the amber liquid thoughtfully. “I'm so sorry,” he affirmed. “I've seen you with the kids during school visits. I know that you've always wanted children.”

Daniesh's eyes turned hard. “I can't complain about my life, brother-dear. I just...I always thought that one day, when I met the right woman, I'd have a wife and a family.”

Ritton reached out and touched his brother's shoulder. "You can adopt."

Daniesh closed his eyes, an internal battle waging within him. Then he nodded and opened his eyes. "You're right," he whispered. "Adoption is definitely a possibility."

Ritton's fingers tightened on his brother's shoulder. "We'll figure this out. We'll make it work."

There was a heavy sigh, then Daniesh nodded again. "Thank you. I was...terrified of telling you."

A dark eyebrow lifted and Ritton pulled back slightly. "Am I *that* bad?"

Daniesh chuckled, the tension melting away. "You're a terror, Ritton. And you know it. You purposely play up that side of your personality."

Ritton wasn't sure that he cared for that description but was that a good thing? "Perhaps I should...adjust my personality. If my own brother is afraid to tell me something personal about himself, then perhaps I've become a bit too...?"

"Austere," his brother supplied, nodding to emphasize the description. "I get it, Ritton," Daniesh assured him. "You are very aware of the responsibilities on your shoulders, big brother. And I understand why. I have no idea why you feel the need to isolate yourself, but I'm guessing that it has something to do with Fatima?"

Ritton automatically pulled back, not liking the direction the conversation was going. "Fatima is in the past."

"Is she?" Daniesh challenged. "She committed suicide several years ago. Ostensibly because she couldn't give you the heir that you needed."

Ritton didn't add that he hadn't tried all that hard. "Fatima struggled emotionally after she moved into the palace."

“Do you know why? She’d been such a happy person before.” He grinned at some memory, obviously more relaxed now that his horrible news had been taken so well. “She was so sweet and cheerful back when you courted her.”

Ritton’s jaw clenched. “Perhaps she grew sad after the wedding because she knew that we weren’t a love match.” He sighed and lifted the glass of scotch to his lips, but before he took a sip, he added, “And she knew we never would be.”

Daniesh heard the self-condemnation in his brother’s tone and reacted to it. “But that’s normal for our world. We marry for convenience and political reasons. We produce heirs with our spouse and then the husband and wife go our separate ways, live separate lives.”

Ritton slammed back the scotch, forgetting that it should be savored. “Evidently, I wasn’t clear enough with Fatima about the goal of our marriage initially. She had expectations of love and happily-ever-after.” He stared down into his empty glass. “She wanted me to be more of a husband to her and didn’t realize that I worked long hours. She felt... abandoned, I suppose.”

“So, what are you going to do now? Now that you know I absolutely can’t help with the ‘heir and a spare’ issue?”

Ritton smiled, but there wasn’t much humor in his words. “Don’t we have a few cousins in the wings that could produce the required heir?”

Daniesh winced. “Don’t you dare! Our cousins are merciless bastards and you know it! All they want is the power of your title as well access to your money.”

Ritton agreed with a grunt. “I could marry Fatima’s sister.”

“Hala?” Daniesh asked with stunned surprise, then shuddered with horror. “That’s possibly an even worse option!”

Ritton laughed at Daniesh’s dramatic reaction. “You don’t like Hala?”

“What’s to like? She’s a bit of fluff. A brainless twit.” He shook his head. “At least, that’s the impression she prefers to show the world. I suspect,” he continued, as his lip curled in disgust, “that Hala is more intelligent than she lets on. But I don’t like people who act like they haven’t any common sense.”

Ritton sighed, shaking his head. “Fatima was sweet. I think she was perhaps a bit on the naïve side, but she was a good person. Her mother, Noya, tried to encourage me to marry Hala at first. But Fatima was the older sister. And there was something about her that made me want to protect her.” He leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. “Obviously, I didn’t protect her well enough since she was so miserable with me.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Ritton,” Daniesh urged. “Fatima was more vulnerable than we realized. She committed suicide because she was desperately unhappy, but she hid her unhappiness from both of us. She’d only been here with you for a year. There’s no way you are to blame for her death. She was just a desperately unhappy person who needed help. I know you urged her to talk to a therapist many times and she always rejected that option.”

Ritton knew all of this, but the facts didn’t ease his guilt. He hadn’t done enough for Fatima. He’d been too consumed by his work and hadn’t spent enough time with her. He hadn’t noticed the signs of Fatima’s depression. Every time he spoke with her, she had seemed happy and cheerful. Ritton hadn’t seen any sign of his wife’s emotional spiral.

That was one of the reasons why he hadn’t remarried. He knew that he didn’t have the time to manage a successful relationship on top of his work. His responsibilities hadn’t eased since Fatima’s passing. If anything, his work was harder, more intense, keeping pace with the growth of Quarati over the years. Things were more...complex.

Pulling his thoughts firmly back to the present, he looked around and sighed. “Well, that isn’t something you need to worry about,” he told his brother. “I am relieved that

you felt safe enough to tell me. And, I'm sorry about...well, that you can't have children."

They both stood up. Ritton was only an inch taller than his younger brother, but they were equally strong and muscular. Daniesh didn't have the same level of cynism, but he wasn't easily fooled. Daniesh was the crown prince and took his responsibilities as Finance Minister very seriously. He was merciless, increasing both their family's wealth as well as administering sound, productive economic policies for the country. If he'd become a bit of a playboy over the past few years, Ritton wasn't going to judge. Both brothers enjoyed the company of women.

Daniesh's gaze shifted from concern to amusement in a flash. "You're not the only person in need of the perfect mate," he teased. "Have you seen the latest pictures of Princess Oryelia on her dates with various potential husbands?"

Ritton's mouth twitched. He knew of Oreylia. He'd met her several years ago. She was a stunningly beautiful woman with a vibrant personality. Unfortunately, he didn't know a whole lot about her beyond that.

"I haven't seen the news recently. What's going on?"

Daniesh pulled out his phone and flipped through several apps, then chuckled before handing the phone over. "This article did a series on her latest interactions with men. Her expressions are priceless."

Ritton flipped through the images, chuckling at some, shaking his head at others. "What does the article say about the men?"

Daniesh leaned back, grinning. He had relaxed now that his news was given. "The men are all completely smitten with her. Some are quoted as saying that the princess seemed to enjoy their dates. Others turned nasty, like they do whenever a man is 'disrespected' and publicly humiliated."

Ritton agreed that an awful lot of men reacted that way. Women were constantly treated as “less than” when they don’t fit within the standards by which men want them to abide. Those standards shifted with each man’s image of the “perfect” woman. Plus, any woman who had the audacity to reject a man was treated with nastiness and subjected to an emotionally charged response.

And that thought made him pause. Oreylia was openly emotional and freely expressed those emotions to the world. She didn’t hide who she was or how she felt, even from the press! So maybe, if she were upset about something, she wouldn’t hide her feelings from him!

An idea started forming, but he didn’t say anything to Daniesh. He poured them each another scotch and settled in to discuss financial issues with his brother. Daniesh was truly brilliant at understanding world markets and was an unparalleled advisor whenever an economic or financial issue arose.

So, while they were discussing a financial concern, Ritton toyed with the idea of marrying Oreylia. She had all of the qualifications, was beautiful and intelligent. And she wouldn’t hide her feelings from him! That was the clincher, he realized. Now that he couldn’t rely on his brother to produce an heir, Ritton knew that he had to marry and do the deed himself. He wasn’t looking forward to marriage or children. But for the stability of his country, he would accept the responsibility.

Chapter 2

“So, what do you think?”

Think? Oreylia was supposed to think? She was supposed to focus on something other than the tall, attractive man standing before her? No, that wasn't possible. Thinking wasn't possible. He was so...tall! Freakishly tall!

And, if she were being completely honest, oddly compelling.

“Princess Oreylia?” the tall stranger prompted.

Oreylia blinked, not sure what he'd just said. She surveyed the width of his shoulders again. Deliciously broad shoulders, she thought, feeling slightly breathless.

He stood and came around the low coffee table to sit beside her. Briefly, she noticed the untouched coffee service. She should have poured him a cup of coffee. When had the palace staff brought in the coffee? She'd been so overwhelmed by this man, her brain had simply fizzled to a stop.

He took her hand in his and the immediate heat was startling! Finally, she managed to lift her gaze, looking into his dark eyes. There was heat there. Heat and something more. Something she didn't quite understand. But the heat... she wasn't the only one who felt it!

“Will you marry me?” he asked.

Of all the words he'd spoken, those were what finally broke through her distraction.

“I'm...sorry?” she gasped. Surely she'd misunderstood. Surely this stranger hadn't just proposed to her!

He smiled faintly, a teasing glint entering his eyes now. “I've been proposing to you for the past fifteen minutes.

You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

She shook her head. "Not really. You're a bit... overwhelming, Your Highness."

He rubbed his thumb lightly over her knuckles and she tried to swallow a gasp of surprise. But it was pointless. He seemed to notice everything.

"What do you want from a marriage?" Sheik Ritton something or other asked.

Oooh! Easy question!

Nice shoulders!

Wait! Focus on the question. The man was waiting for a response.

What would it be like to kiss him? This man's lips looked firm and uncompromising. What would he do if she brushed her fingertip over those firm lips?

Probably bite her finger off!

The idea was so ludicrous that she nearly laughed.

But his dark eyebrow lifted, still waiting for her answer. Right! Question!

Oreylia blinked and shifted slightly. "I'm sorry, but could you repeat the question?" That would give her a moment to think. About his shoulders. He had really nice shoulders!

His hand tightened around hers and she inhaled sharply. His touch wasn't helping her focus. She needed to make a good impression. The internet loved a good story about a princess who accidentally humiliated powerful men.

Fortunately, there were no cameras today, but she hadn't realized that there were cameras during the last few interactions she'd had with men. And somehow, a photographer had captured her disdain and/or amusement for several very important men recently.

How tall *was* Sheik Odenton anyway?

“I’m six feet, three inches,” he explained.

Oops! Oreylia hadn’t meant to ask that question out loud!

Blinking, she lowered her eyes, trying to regain control of her run-away brain. “Oh. Well, that’s...nice.”

Those strong, sexy fingers were still holding her hand...were fingers allowed to be sexy?

“How tall are you?” he asked, his voice deep and husky. She liked his voice. She liked...a lot about this man, except for the fact that he was proposing marriage when she barely even knew him.

She pressed her lips together, trying to remember the question. Height! Right, he’d asked how tall she was! “I think I’m just over five feet, five inches.”

“Will the difference in our heights bother you?”

Bother her? She loved having a tall man standing next to her. “I like wearing heels,” she blurted, feeling rather stupid. Oreylia closed her eyes. “Sorry, that sounded stupid.” She opened them again and smiled politely at him, gently pulling her hand away. She folded her hands on her lap and shifted further from him. “I’m not trying to be rude, Your Highness. I just...there’s something about you that is very distracting. If you want me to form coherent sentences, then I need some space.”

He seemed to like that comment and, thankfully, didn’t seem offended. Regrettably, Oreylia was becoming too good at offending men lately.

She took a slow, deep breath, trying to steady herself. Tilting her head slightly, she tried to concentrate. “So, what was the original question again?”

“You feel a bit of attraction for me,” he observed, not repeating the damn question. “That’s good. You are a beautiful woman and I will admit I feel a strong attraction for you as well.”

Attraction? He felt a “strong attraction” for her? That sounded so...clinical.

“Oh. That’s...uh...nice.” Her response was a bit lame, but she wasn’t sure what to say. He was reducing something startling and overwhelming down to polite, tidy words.

“I agree,” he replied. Then he stood up and, because he was so tall, she had to tilt her head way back. “I also think that we could have a strong, companionable relationship. You are credited with an intelligent mind, a compassionate nature, and are quite attractive. I think that we could have a successful marriage, if you are willing.”

Marriage. How odd! She had been searching for a husband recently, but the man’s rational, oddly amusing proposal seemed...odd! And cold!

Standing, she moved to the window, staring outside for a moment admiring the glowing sunshine. She turned back to look at the extremely large, overwhelmingly compelling man sitting on the delicate sofa. For a moment, Oreylia tried to make sense of the situation. But the man’s dark, compelling eyes interfered with her brain processing.

“Let’s walk,” she announced, then turned and headed for the doors that would lead outside to one of the covered courtyards without waiting for his response. Oreylia loved being outdoors and most likely would have been an avid hiker if she hadn’t been born into the royal family of Hadair. Hiking down the tranquility of a mountain trail wasn’t easy when one was protected by bodyguards and constantly followed by a group of photographers clamoring to get a picture of her from five hundred different angles.

Ritton followed the pretty woman, wondering what was going through her head. He’d thought she would be more...animated. But so far, she’d merely stared at him with a stunned expression in her lovely, brown eyes.

If he were honest with himself, he knew he should get the hell out of here. The woman affected him in unexpected ways. The weight of those intense, brown eyes made him want to...do something. He wasn't exactly sure what, but suspected that it might offend the beautiful woman.

However, his life was rigidly ordered. He had enormous responsibilities, all of which she should understand since she was the sister of an equally powerful man. So why the hell were they walking along a stone pathway? Why couldn't she simply answer his question so they could get on with the wedding plans?

"How old are you?" she asked, peering up at him through her lashes.

She had incredibly long lashes, he noticed. Then mentally shook his head. Irrelevant.

"I'm thirty-five. And you are?"

"I'm nearly twenty-seven. I'm the youngest and probably should have been married off years ago, according to tradition."

"Why haven't you?"

She sighed and stopped, ostensibly looking around at the beautifully manicured gardens. But he suspected that she was blind to the beauty surrounding them.

"Because my work doesn't bring me into contact with the more...extraordinary representatives of the males of the species."

He stopped, stunned by her comment. "Work?" He'd thought her job was to promote her brother's policies.

"My sister and I run a public organization with..." she tilted her head slightly. "Well, we promote women's rights and education." She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to challenge her efforts. "And I *will* continue those efforts going forward."

The corners of his mouth curled up. “I have no issue with promoting women’s equality.”

Her lips pressed together for a moment. “I wasn’t asking your permission, Your Highness.”

Immediately, his body tightened with...arousal? Surely not! Was Princess Oreylia seriously challenging him? How...unexpected! And fascinating!

“I apologize for maligning your independent nature, Oreylia. It was unintentional,” he said with a dignified bow. But he couldn’t keep the amusement from lighting his eyes. She was even more delightful than he’d thought! The only person in the palace who dared to challenge him was Daniesh. And even then, only on some issues.

She seemed to relax with his words and continued walking. “The thing is, Tessa and I...well, Tessa just had a baby and so she had to stop her personal involvement with some of the...missions...when she was about four or five months along.” Oreylia glanced warily up at him and he wasn’t sure what she was talking about now. “Well, she stopped after a scare and decided to hire someone else to handle the extractions.”

“Extractions?” What on earth was she talking about?

Oreylia stopped and turned, facing him directly. “Yes. Extractions.” Her jaw was tight as she explained, “Tessa and I discovered that there are many human trafficking rings operating out of Hadair.” She looked down slightly. “Well, there used to be many.” Oreylia let out a huff of air and lifted her eyes once again. “Our efforts have slowed their ability to work so easily within the confines of our borders. It was awful in Campour as well. But we’ve slowed the trafficking to a trickle now. Unfortunately, that means that the sex traffickers that are still working, are still abusing women and children, although they are more secretive now. When my brother and my brother-in-law, Asif, realized what was going on, they created an agency within their governments to stop the traffickers, as well as the abuse of women. There are too

many men who think that women and children are a commodity, Your Highness. I don't agree. I think that it is a travesty to not protect these people. There are some men that become victims as well. It's horrible. Their lives are devastated and—”

She stopped when Ritton lifted a hand. “I agree, Oreylia,” he replied softly. “Asif and Gael spoke to me about this. I instituted both a government and non-government organization, both are fully funded by me and my administration, to stop the flow of humans that would be sold and abused.” He moved slightly closer. “Your efforts have been noticed. What you've done to protect the most vulnerable is admirable.” He reached out and took her hand, lifting her fingers to his lips. “I admire your work. I would be honored if you would continue to advocate for women in Quarati.” He lowered her hand, but kept her fingers within his grip. “Do you think you could help me? As my wife, you would have more power and more resources at your disposal. I would guarantee that.”

He felt her sharp intake of breath, noticed the glow of hope in her eyes. Of everything he could have offered, what she wanted most was the ability to save people. Damn, she was even more beautiful than he'd realized. Plus, her strength would give them strong, healthy children. He wanted that more than anything. Ritton wanted *her!*

She licked her lips, completely unaware of the impact on his senses. “You wouldn't interfere?”

He tucked her hand onto his elbow and led her along the pathway. “Would you vow to keep yourself safe?”

She considered his request, then glanced thoughtfully up at him. “Would you provide the same assurance?”

He was startled by her question, and considered the various missions that he occasionally participated in with his special forces teams. “Absolutely,” he promised. And he would keep that promise. “I've actually gone on a few raids over the years.” He turned to her. “Until this moment, I

hadn't realized just how vital I am to the government. I've occasionally fought against those hereditary restrictions. But thinking about you, as my wife, being in danger, I don't want that. Not for you or for my country. We've already mourned the loss of my late wife after she committed suicide. I won't put them through that again." He pulled her a step closer as they continued to stroll. "Her suicide was a tragic loss of a kind and sensitive woman. The world is a lesser place due to her loss. I won't put my country through that kind of grief again, Oreylia."

She nodded slowly her brown gaze glowing with empathy and understanding. "You're reputed to be a strong, fair leader, Your Highness."

He covered her hand with his, stopping whatever she was about to say. "Oreylia, since I'm proposing marriage to you, would you do me the honor of calling me Ritton instead of my title? It seems a bit awkward, don't you think? If you're going to seriously consider me as an intimate partner in life, it would help if we were on a first name basis."

She smiled and he felt something lighten within him. Odd, but he couldn't remember feeling such unexpected and strong reactions for Fatima. What did that mean?

He brought his thoughts back to the present with a quiet sigh. Fatima was his past. He had to focus on the future. He had to protect his country. Marriage and children would do that.

"I will consider your proposal, Ritton. And I am honored that you would choose me to potentially be your wife."

"You'll just *consider* my proposal?" he teased.

She laughed and leaned closer. The movement caused her lush, firm breasts to press against his arm. He had to clench his teeth to keep the sudden surge of desire from swamping him. Even that was an unexpected and

unprecedented reaction. Women were nice, but they'd never, ever, made him react with such need!

Perhaps this was a bad idea, he thought. Ritton definitely didn't need a wife that distracted him. He didn't want someone in his life that would pull him away from his duties.

He brought her fingers to his lips. "In that case, I will leave you to your contemplation of my value to your future." He kissed her fingers, then released her hand and bowed to her. "I eagerly await your answer."

With that, he went back into the palace, leaving her alone in the garden.

Stopping by Sheik Gael's office, Ritton shook his hand. "Thank you for allowing me time to speak with your sister."

Gael's, dark eyes narrowed as he waved Ritton into his office. "Did she agree?"

Ritton shook his head, chuckling with self-derision. "She needs time to consider my request."

Gael rolled his eyes. "She's more than a little stubborn sometimes."

Ritton grinned. "I appreciate her contemplation. This is a serious matter and shouldn't be taken lightly."

"Was she at least polite about it?"

Ritton couldn't stop the laugh that burst out of him. "She showed no outward signs of rudeness in any way. I feel honored by her lack of a grimace at my proposal."

Gael grumbled something under his breath that sounded like, "More than she gave the other saps." Then said, "She's an intelligent woman. I'm sure she'll see the value in your proposal." He turned to the leather chairs in his office. "Now that your personal business with my sister is finished for the moment, do you have time to discuss a few other issues?"

Ritton bowed. “Absolutely!” He wondered how long it would take Oreylia to decide that he was the best choice for a husband. He’d seen the others she’d “considered” and knew that he had the highest title, was probably ten times wealthier as the others, and he wasn’t fat. Although, when he considered each of those aspects, he wondered if perhaps Oreylia desired something more in a spouse than just someone who wasn’t an ass.

Chapter 3

“I’d like you to kiss me.”

Ritton stared down at the beautiful woman standing in front of him, surprised by her abrupt request.

She’d arrived in his country for a visit with her brother a half hour ago. They’d walked through the palace gardens of Quarati together and he’d explained the history of the various parts of the building. He’d shown her the priceless art and the ancient fort walls. He even took her through the old harem areas, which were now used for guests that came for special events.

She took it all in without saying much. Now he understood why she’d been so quiet during the tour. He was still holding her hand and could feel the slight tremors in her fingers.

“You’d like...a kiss?” he clarified.

She nodded shortly, her body tight with the tension. “Yes. I appreciate your proposal. And out of all of the men who have courted me over the past several months, I think your offer has the most merit.” She took a deep breath and, before he could offer her additional arguments towards his proposal, she continued, “However, a marriage is a more intimate relationship than a mere business contract. If we’re to be married, I want to know we’re more than just compatible. I want to ensure that there is good chemistry between us. Something that will help us with the process of creating the heir that you need.” She swallowed visibly and added, “I know that this whole proposal is merely for the benefit of your country. It’s a way to create an heir, Your Highness. I would merely be the vessel by which that heir is produced.”

His eyes narrowed. She was correct, but for some reason, the way she stated the situation felt...wrong. “I think that our marriage could be about more than just procreation.”

“Really?”

No, he didn't think so. Nor did he want more. He was a busy man. He didn't have time to pander to a wife's needs. It had been over a month since he'd proposed to this woman and Ritton admitted that he was more than slightly irritated by her silence. He'd thought to have this business over within a week.

Every day she'd made him wait, he'd grown more agitated by her silence. Every night, he'd pictured her bent over his knee as he spanked her pert ass until it was a warm pink for making him wait.

Now that she was here, standing in front of him, all he could think about was how he could “punish” her for making him wait so long. He had many creative ideas in mind. He could torment her body with pleasure, and hold back on giving her the release she would crave. He could learn everything about her soft, sweet body so that he could make her scream his name, begging for him to please her.

Yes, every damn night, he'd lain awake, thinking of different ways to torment her.

And that had irritated him even more. He wasn't used to denying his desires. And yet, since meeting Oreylia, he hadn't even thought of any other woman.

Ritton had told himself that he was merely practicing loyalty. He wouldn't betray his marriage vows by cheating on Oreylia after their wedding. So, he was simply being loyal to her now as he waited not so patiently for her to decide.

And a wedding was damn well going to happen! He'd decided that on the trip home after his first visit with Oreylia. She was magnificent! The way she'd stood up to him, her eyes filled with fire and determination. He wanted that fire and strength of will in his children.

That was another thing. He'd never seriously thought about children before meeting her, other than in the abstract need for an heir to carry on the leadership of his country. It

was merely another duty he would fulfill, when the time came. But after meeting Oreylia, those children had grown into a more concrete image in his head. He'd have to get the palace human resources office to start a search for appropriate nannies. He was looking forward to start on creating those children immediately!

"Just a kiss?" he asked, gazing down into those determined eyes.

"Yes. Just a kiss," she replied with a firm nod. "I want to ensure that our relationship won't be awkward when we start...well," she blushed prettily. "The act of creating children."

He chuckled. "There will be no issues there," he assured her and started to walk away again. Ritton didn't mention the very graphic dreams he'd had starring Oreylia. He had about a thousand different ways he hoped to make love to her.

"Prove it," she snapped. Then she shook her head with a sigh, stepping back. "No, you're right. Kissing would be stupid." With a sigh, she looked up at him, folding her hands neatly in front of her. "You want a nice, sweet, submissive wife. That is just not who I am. So, it doesn't matter if we aren't—"

Ritton didn't want to hear her tell him a marriage between them wouldn't work out because of whatever notion she'd gotten into her head. They were getting married. If she needed proof that there was chemistry, he'd prove it to her.

Pulling her into his arms, he brushed his lips over hers. When she blinked, looking disappointed and started to speak, he kissed her again, deepening the kiss.

Ritton knew at once that the kiss was a mistake. Hearing her moan, feeling her body press against his, felt even better than he'd expected. The small bit of awareness reminded him that he couldn't lift her up and carry her over to the bench to make love to her. Not here. Not yet.

But as she shifted, leaning into him, he questioned why it wasn't a good idea.

Oreylia was lost in a sea of desire. The first brush of his lips against hers had been disappointing. But feeling his strong hands grip her waist, the way his rock hard body felt pressed against her, was intoxicating! The way he tasted, a bit like smoke and something more, made her head spin. His tongue teasing hers was shocking and wonderful. Thoughts of climbing the man like a tree popped into her head and she had to pull back, overwhelmed by the wash of feelings roiling through her.

Staring up at him with open-mouthed shock, she slowly lifted her fingers to her lips. She felt burned. Scorched! Shocked by the depths of need that made her feel like she was shimmering with heat.

And then the kiss stopped! Blinking, she looked up at the man, feeling as if she were missing something very important!

"We'll be married in one week," he announced, as he took her hand and led her back inside.

For several moments, his words didn't actually register. A week? They'd be married in a week? That was... so fast!

"We can't!" she gasped, pulling away from him and stepping back, trying to remember how to breathe.

He paused, lifting a dark eyebrow in polite inquiry. "Why not? What other obstacles do you foresee in a relationship between us?"

Oreylia sputtered, not sure what to say. "I don't know," she gasped, stepping back again. There wasn't enough air, somehow. He was still so close that she could smell him, and his scent made her mouth water.

“Then one week,” he repeated with another nod. He reached for her hand. “We’ll speak with your brother now.”

Oreylia followed him into the palace where her brother was talking with someone that looked familiar, but she was fairly certain she’d never met him. He was almost as tall as Ritton, but not quite as muscular.

“Princess Oreylia, this is my younger brother, Crown Prince Daniesh Odenton.”

Oreylia extended her free hand, shaking the handsome man’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness,” she greeted him politely.

The man bowed, a friendly twinkle in his eyes. “Please, call me Daniesh. It’s going to be really awkward if we’re both using the same title when speaking with each other.” He glanced over at his brother who was standing stiff and tall. “And if my intuition is correct, you’re going to become my sister-in-law very soon.”

Oreylia had opened her mouth to respond, but at the reminder of the awkward marriage proposal, she turned to glare at Ritton over her shoulder. He stood stiffly beside her and silently lifted an eyebrow at her disrespectful gaze.

She turned back to Ritton’s charming brother, smiling up at him. “That hasn’t been decided yet.”

“Yes, it has,” Ritton announced, then turned to Gael. “I’d like to schedule the wedding for next week, if that works with your schedule?”

Gael glanced at Oreylia and she glared at him too. He chuckled, nodding. “If she’s okay with that, then yes. It’s fine with my schedule.”

“I’m *not* fine with that schedule,” she snapped. She turned to Ritton. “One kiss does not convince me that we are compatible, Your Highness.”

Ritton sighed, then glanced at Daniesh. “Any suggestions?”

He lifted his hands. “If you hadn’t noticed, I’m single as well. So, I have no experience in convincing a woman to marry me.”

Oreylia ignored their comments and focused on Ritton. “We have many issues to discuss.”

He took her hand. “Let’s get to those questions then, shall we?”

He led her out of the room and Oreylia followed, wondering if she’d just jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Glancing back over her shoulder, she noticed that Gael and Daniesh were talking earnestly about something.

“This way,” Ritton urged, tugging gently at Oreylia’s hand.

They rounded a corner, walking silently down the hallway. Their bodyguards surrounded them and Oreylia was suddenly relieved to have them close by. She was painfully aware of Ritton beside her, his body so close to her own that she could feel the warmth emanating from him, and there was an unexpected, unfamiliar desire to press closer to him.

So instead, she eased a bit more space between them. It wasn’t much, since he still had her hand, but it was something.

He paused at her action, then looked ahead, shaking his head with what looked like annoyance. Oreylia wasn’t sure what that was about, but she felt a pang of...happiness. Or was it triumph? She wasn’t sure, but her lips curled upwards in an unconsciously smug smile.

For about two seconds. Then she was yanked into a room, the door closed in their bodyguards’ faces. Before she could protest, he pulled her into his arms, glaring ferociously down at her. This time, his hands weren’t settled politely on her waist. Instead, they rested on her ribs, just underneath her breasts, and she gasped at the intimate contact, shocked that he would dare!

“What are you—”

He kissed her again, but this time, he also pressed her back until her butt nudged against something hard and unyielding. She gasped at the double contact, but that only allowed him to deepen the kiss. Dizzy with the need filling her, Oreylia gripped his shoulders, blindly allowing him to move her where he wanted.

She was vaguely aware of a shiver washing over her, but then he angled his head, nipping at her throat and earlobes. She gasped, shocked by the intensity of lust that was making her head spin. All she could do was hang on for dear life.

Ritton wanted her. The lust he felt for this slip of a woman was distracting and irritating as hell, but he couldn't stop it. He couldn't suppress it. The unfamiliar and unwanted lust drove him to kiss her deeply until she whimpered low in her throat, needing her to acknowledge that there was chemistry between them. Damn her, for making him want her like this! He didn't want these emotions, this all-encompassing need! He didn't want to lust after anyone, much less a woman who haunted his dreams as well as his conscious days.

And yet, he couldn't seem to stop kissing her, letting his fingers explore the soft curves of her body. He needed every one of those whimpers of pleasure more than he needed his next breath.

“Will you acknowledge the chemistry now?” he demanded, nipping her earlobe before she could answer. “Do you realize now how hot we could be in bed together?” She whimpered and the sound encouraged him to keep going. “Will you dare to keep arguing about next week's schedule?”

She was shaking like a leaf, clinging to him. Her hips rolled against his and he lifted her up onto the table, blindly driving her even wilder as he pressed his hips between her thighs. He was almost angry now, needing to hear her acknowledge that they would wed next week. Anything less

would be...he couldn't even conceive of anything less than complete agreement. He *had* to have her. And soon! In fact, he wanted her to stay here in his home while she prepared for their wedding!

When he lifted his mouth to look down at her, her eyes were closed, her lips swollen and open, soft and ready for another kiss.

He resisted, barely, and instead, lifted her down to the floor, startling her into opening her eyes.

Cupping her cheek, he tilted her head back, forcing her to look him in the eye. "Next week," he commanded, startling even himself with his authoritative growl.

Then he took her hand and sedately led her out of the room.

Oreylia trailed along behind Ritton in a haze of lust. That kiss, the way he'd touched her and the strange aching sensation deep within her were unfamiliar and she wasn't sure that she entirely liked the experience. She felt out of control and...and desperate! The whole thing felt overwhelming. For the rest of the afternoon, Oreylia felt like a bomb primed to explode, entirely distracted by overpowering need. She couldn't concentrate, walked into rooms and couldn't remember why, poured a cup of coffee, then immediately spilled it down the front of her dress and had to change clothes...the list of problems went on and on.

All because of that damned kiss!

At dinner that evening, she wondered what would happen if she simply stood up and demanded that he finish what he'd begun earlier.

Oreylia wasn't a virgin. She'd gone to an all girls' boarding school, but afterward she'd attended London University and earned a degree in economics and public administration. She'd studied hard, but she'd also explored a couple members of the male population.

And found every one of them lacking! Until meeting Ritton, she'd never felt such an overwhelming urge to climb onto a man's lap. She'd never felt a clawing, aching need to... to...to do something! Nope, the men in her past had left her cold and rather bored.

Which was why she was now twenty-seven years old and still unmarried. Sitting across the small, round table from Sheik Ritton, she was ready to scream at him. She wanted to straddle his lap and demand that he...what? What was lacking in her life now, that the man speaking with her brother could fix?

Nothing!

So, why did she feel so...distracted?

Was *this* sexual desire? She'd never experienced the sensation before and she wasn't sure she liked it! Nor did she like the man! He'd done this to her! He'd kissed her and ruined the perfect balance that she'd worked so hard to create in her life.

Oh, what a stupid, stupid demand she'd made of the arrogant sheik! She should have just...kneaded him in the groin and rushed out of this place! She should have told Gael that she needed to return home at once! Her brother would have done so immediately. She knew Gael already desperately missed his wife.

Oreylia silently pushed the food around on her plate since her appetite had vanished.

But she refused to look up at the obnoxious man. He'd bewitched her somehow, and she felt as if she actually hated him for the aching frustration that boiled hot and low in her body.

"Oreylia, could we speak privately?"

Oreylia looked up, startled to notice that everyone else had finished eating while she'd barely touched her dinner.

“Yes,” she gasped, feeling foolish. “Of course.” Delicately, she wiped her mouth and stood, following Ritton out of the dining room. He led the way to a private sitting room several doors down and ushered her inside.

Walking into the room, she looked blindly around, but she didn't actually see anything, too focused on her inner turmoil. Still, she'd been taught to be polite, so she said, “Your palace is lovely.”

He closed the door with a snick and turned to wave her toward a chair, which she ignored. “I would love to talk further about the décor choices of my ancestors, but since you barely heard the conversation during dinner, I doubt doing so would be helpful right now.”

She blinked at him as he approached her, a glint in his eyes that she was starting to understand.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, quickly stepping backwards.

“We're going to talk about why you were so silent and distant during dinner.”

She hadn't been aware of her silence during the meal, but she refused to let him intimidate her right now. “I wasn't trying to ignore you.”

“I know that. What I'd like to know is what's bothering you.”

“Stop!” she ordered, lifting a hand to halt his forward progress.

Thankfully, he stopped, standing in front of her with his hands by his sides.

When she looked up at him, Oreylia saw his concern and confusion, but at the moment, she was just relieved that he wasn't getting any closer. She needed breathing room.

Still, the anger that had been simmering all day was not appeased. She huffed a bit, then stomped her foot when he took another small step closer.

“You! You’re the reason I wasn’t hungry,” she exclaimed in frustration. “You’re the reason I haven’t been able to think clearly all afternoon!”

He paused, his head tilting slightly. “What did I do?”

She wanted to snarl at him. There was no way he didn’t know! She could see the truth lurking in his eyes, the triumphant gleam only infuriated her more! He knew *exactly* what he’d done.

“You kissed me!”

He slid his hands into his pants pockets and shrugged slightly. “You asked me to. You’re the one that wanted to ensure that there was chemistry between us before you would accept my proposal.” He stepped forward again and Oreylia put her hand back up, halting his progress again. “Yes, well, that was a mistake on my part.”

“On the contrary. I think it proved that we will have a strong, healthy marriage.” He reached out to her, pulling her inexorably closer. At the first heated touch, Oreylia’s resistance melted away.

And that was exactly the problem! She was drawn to this man in a strange, unfathomable way!

He held her still as she made a rather feeble attempt to pull away.

“You don’t like being distracted?”

“No!” she snapped, pushing ineffectually at his chest.

“You don’t like thinking about someone all the time, wondering what it will be like to feel my hands on your bare skin?”

She hissed sharply when those hands pulled her firmly against his chest.

“No!” she insisted, but there was less heat in her tone now.

“And you don’t like it when you can’t think about anything other than that person? Namely me?”

“No!” she repeated weakly, feeling herself melt into his arms.

“Good!” he growled. “Because that’s what I’ve endured for the past several weeks while you took your own sweet time responding to my proposal.” He lowered his head, erotically nuzzling the back of her ear. “I had an orderly life before I met you.” He nipped at her earlobe, making her tremble. “I could concentrate on my work. I could get things accomplished during the day.” He scraped the scruff of his jaw against the silky softness of her neck. The friction delighted her and she sighed, pressing closer still. “I could actually hear what people were saying during meetings before I met you.”

One hand moved higher, cupping her breast. She gasped, shifting slightly to press her hips closer to his groin. She felt his erection pressing against her belly and wanted more!

“I was a productive leader before you came into my life and took over my brain. Since I met you, I haven’t been able to concentrate on anything except you!”

His words made her heart soar. Or maybe it was the way his thumb teased her nipple. She wanted to lean into his touch and purr, to shove his hand under her dress and demand that he do things properly!

“Oh, Ritton!” she sighed, leaning back, which only pressed the lower half of her body more firmly against his.

“But you’re fighting my commands.”

“Get used to it,” she retorted, sliding her hands up his arms until she could wrap them around his neck. The shock of heat from his skin under her fingers was intoxicating! She wanted more, and her hands moved higher, sifting into his hair, trying to pull his mouth back to hers. She wanted a kiss.

She wanted to feel the tormenting, thrilling sensations that she'd experienced earlier. She wanted...more of him!

"I think I might hate you," she whispered against his lips.

"The feeling is mutual," he growled, then nipped at her earlobe while pinching her nipple.

She cried out, leaning into him. But when he started to take his fingers away, she grabbed his hand, keeping it where she wanted it. "Don't stop!" she begged, then whimpered when he pinched again. This time, just a bit harder and she felt her hips roll, her core throbbing with need. Never had she experienced anything like this!

"You're...a bastard!" she moaned, then grabbed his head, pulling his mouth back to hers. She kissed him with all of the need she felt boiling inside of her. She wanted to bite him, but if she did that, he might stop kissing her and she did not want him to stop. Oreylia was completely unaware of her hips rocking against his, pressing her core against that rigid staff hidden by his slacks. She wanted to smack him and beg him to keep going at the same time.

"And you're going to be mine! All mine!" He nipped at her neck again. "Say it!"

"No!"

He pulled away and she cried out in protest. The absence of his touch making her body ache with longing.

"Please," she whimpered, leaning her forehead against his chest.

"Tell me you're mine and I'll give you what you need!"

She sobbed, her body actually hurting now.

"I'm yours," she finally muttered, biting her lip against the power of those words.

That's when he muttered something under his breath and pressed her knees wide. She was straddling his leg now, as he reached under her dress. He ripped her panties away, then used his fingers to tease her swollen, pink folds. With a growl, he slid one finger inside of her and she cried out, throwing her head back. But even that wasn't enough. He kissed her, his tongue thrusting into her mouth with the same rhythm of his fingers thrusting into her body. Over and over again, mercilessly kissing her while his thumb flicked against that swollen nub. In mere moments, she was cried out, her body convulsing around his fingers as her first climax shuddered through her.

Ritton watched with pained triumph as Oreylia, his future wife, climaxed in his arms. It had happened much more quickly than he'd expected, which meant that she was starved for it. He had no idea if she was a virgin, nor did he care. All he cared about was that she was his. Completely, undeniably his. Yes, she would fight against this chemistry between them, but with one touch, he could bring her to this point.

Even better, Oreylia had no idea that he was in excruciating pain himself. His body clamored to thrust into her tight sheath over and over until she cried out again. He wanted to lose himself in her heated depths and in her cries of delighted surprise until she was no longer surprised by anything he did to her. He wanted to know her body so perfectly, that he could just look at her and she'd know what he was thinking.

Lust. Yes, he could appreciate lust in this marriage. It was good and healthy. Lust would help him achieve his goals that much sooner. If he and Oreylia could slake their lust for each other before she became pregnant, then they could figure out a good working relationship during their marriage. Once they'd worked through this desperate need for each other, then he would be able to concentrate. She would be happy and satisfied and they could get on with their lives, separately

during the day but coming together at night until this unexpected chemistry burned itself out.

Yes, that was a good plan, he thought as he kissed her gently, easing her back to the present. Ritton held her carefully, enjoying the soft way she purred against his shoulder as her climax played itself out. With fascination, he noticed her eyes flutter open, her gaze come back into focus.

He swallowed a chuckle when he saw the sudden horror wash over her. Quickly, she stepped out of his arms, trying to pull her dress down over her hips. She looked absolutely delightful, but he knew better than to say so. She was embarrassed enough already.

He'd proven his point. She was his and she'd accepted his proposal. Now, they could move forward.

Chapter 4

Oreylia paced the hallway, muttering under her breath. She was about to marry a stranger! An impressively sexy stranger who knew how to kiss her until her head spun, but still, she didn't know Sheik Ritton at all! Over the past week, she'd barely spoken with him. He'd allocated a half hour for breakfast with her to discuss wedding plans. After that, he was either sequestered in his office, working, or he was in meetings, talking with diplomats from other countries, negotiating with industry leaders, speaking with the press, or one of a thousand other tasks. Most of the time, Oreylia was by his side, especially during the dinner meetings. But she never got to learn anything personal about the man.

“You're upset,” a male voice observed from behind her.

Oreylia spun around, ready to blast her “fiancé” about his distant attitude. But the tall, handsome man coming towards her was Daniesh, not her target.

“Good morning, Prince Daniesh,” she greeted him, folding her hands in front of her in an attempt to appear calm and in control. She didn't need her “fiancé's” brother to know that she was seriously considering murdering her future husband.

“I thought we agreed to address each other by our names,” he teased, bowing politely before offering her his elbow. “Shall we walk and talk?”

Carefully, Oreylia tucked her hand onto his elbow, willing herself to stay calm and not reveal her personal anger towards his brother.

“Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to escort me.”

He laughed, patting her hand where it rested on his arm. “I'm sensing that there is more to that statement than just

a politically polite platitude to your future brother-in-law?”

Oreylia wrinkled her nose, wishing she was better at hiding her feelings. “Am I that transparent?”

He chuckled again. “If I may be so bold, I suspect your transparency is one of the reasons my brother chose you.”

She grumbled, but pasted a smile as she turned to look at him. “Why would that be a benefit? He doesn’t seem to show emotion at all. Why would he want a wife who reveals a fiery temper?”

He led her through to a small, beautifully appointed room. “Because of his first wife,” he admitted, nodding his appreciation to the servant who set down a coffee tray. He poured two cups of coffee, handing one to Oreylia before sitting down beside her.

“His first wife committed suicide, correct?”

“Yes,” he nodded, blowing on his coffee before taking a sip. “It was a heart shattering situation for everyone in the palace. The country hadn’t had time to get to know her well, but everyone adores Ritton, so they mourned for him as well.”

“That’s very loyal. But that doesn’t answer my question. Why would my transparency be a benefit? I’ve seen pictures on the internet of my so-called transparency,” she groaned, closing her eyes briefly. “I know that several of the images of me reacting to the men I’ve dated have been turned into hilarious memes.” She sighed. “I need to learn to hide my emotions better.”

He smiled, but there was a sadness lurking in his eyes. “His first wife, Fatima, cried herself to sleep most nights. She hid her depression from Ritton, and never spoke about how miserable she was.” He glanced out the window. “Fatima came to him as a fun, vibrant woman. Not even I noticed the slow, creeping depression that overwhelmed her. If we’d known she was struggling, we would have gotten her into therapy, found ways to help her. Ritton and I were completely unaware of her depression, although he’d sensed

something was wrong and urged her to talk, if not with him, than with *someone*.” He sighed, resting the cup and saucer on his knee. “Not even her mother and younger sister knew how bad it was.” Daniesh shook his head sadly. “That’s another reason he chose you. He liked the fact that you were so open about your dislike of your previous suitors. You don’t hold back. You’re open and aware of your feelings, and you don’t keep them to yourself.”

“That’s so tragic and I’m sorry that she went through that. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be so sad that one’s only option is to end one’s life.” She looked down, nodding slowly. “And now, he’s pulled inside of himself because he doesn’t want to be hurt again. Is that right?”

Daniesh tilted his head slightly. “I’m sure there’s some of that in his current demeanor. However, he’s also a workaholic. He’s always accepted a great deal of responsibility for what happens within the borders of Quarati. He’s conscientious and genuinely wants the best for everyone in this country.”

“That’s admirable. However, I still don’t *know* him. And yet, I’m supposed to marry the man tomorrow!”

Daniesh chuckled. “I don’t think he understands how stand-offish he comes across.” Daniesh lifted a hand and a servant instantly appeared at his side. “Bring us a bottle of champagne and some chocolate, please.”

Oreylia laughed, shaking her head. “It’s too early for champagne, Daniesh,” she admonished. “And I have a dress fitting later this afternoon. Drinking and eating chocolate isn’t going to help me fit into my wedding dress.”

He tsked. “First of all, you will be lovely tomorrow no matter what you wear. And secondly, chocolate is *always* appropriate. If one adds champagne, then chocolate becomes a party.”

“With just the two of us?” she laughed, watching as the servant quickly arrived with a bottle of chilled champagne

in an ice bucket. Behind him, another servant walked into the room with two champagne flutes and a large platter of what she suspected were decadent chocolate truffles.

“A party of two is more streamlined,” he pointed out, pouring the champagne. He selected one of the chocolates and pushed the tray closer to her. “Eat. This is actually your bachelorette party. Or are they called ‘hen parties’ now?”

He bit into one of the chocolate truffles and moaned with appreciation. “Drink up, girlie. We’ve got a lot of celebrating to do. You’re getting married tomorrow!”

Ritton walked into the dining room that night to find it empty. He labeled the feelings that washed over him as irritation that his fiancée was not here to dine with him. But deep down inside, he knew that it was something more significant than mere irritation. Not that he was able to label it.

This was simply a marriage of convenience. Oreylia knew that. He’d made it perfectly clear over the past week by staying away from her during the day. She was an exemplary diplomat during the evenings when he had guests visiting. And on the nights when they dined alone, he enjoyed her quick mind and uninhibited arguments. She was also well read and was able to offer her opinion on several of the latest book releases. Not that he had a great deal of time to read, unless it was a contract or international agreement, border proposals or whatever his cabinet members needed to inform him about. But he enjoyed listening to her talk about the various books she’d read and her insights into their prose.

Yes, he’d chosen well. Oreylia would be a good companion through the years and an excellent mother to their children. He already had five viable nanny candidate resumes on his desk.

Only, where was his fiancée?

Suddenly, he heard laughter coming from the next room. The small sitting room wasn't often used. It was too small for formal entertaining. And since he and Daniesh were normally too busy for a cozy chat, they generally ate at their desks.

It was only since Oreylia had entered his life that Ritton paused his work to eat in the dining room.

Peeking through the doorway, he surveyed his future wife and his brother as they poured another round of champagne. Both of them were drunk!

Well, not *drunk*, but certainly tipsy and giggling together. Perhaps Daniesh wasn't exactly giggling, but the deep sound caused Ritton to...?

He stepped into the room and noticed a tray of chocolate truffles that was more than halfway empty.

"Choosing a different sort of meal tonight?" he asked, lifting the tray and selecting one of the delicacies for himself.

Daniesh stood up, clapping Ritton on the shoulder. "Just telling your lovely fiancée all about your antics as a child, brother dear," he explained. "And now, I'm off to get some work done."

Daniesh pulled the door closed behind him, leaving Ritton alone with Oreylia. A playful smile lingered on her lovely features, making her eyes sparkle. And she was relaxed. More relaxed than he'd ever seen her.

"What have you learned about my boyish antics?" he asked, sitting down and pouring himself the remainder of the champagne. It was only half a glass, which told him that they'd been drinking for a while. Daniesh wasn't a heavy drinker and he doubted that Oreylia was either. During dinner, she'd rarely imbibed more than a half glass of wine.

"That's actually the hilarious part," she replied, leaning back and crossing her legs at the knee instead of the ankle, which showed off her long, lean legs. He hadn't really noticed her legs before, too fascinated by her breasts. It

bothered him that he hadn't realized how lovely her legs were before this moment. It demonstrated that he'd become too focused on one thing.

It also bothered him that he couldn't seem to pull his gaze away from those legs. She'd kicked off her shoes and the hem of her floaty dress had crept up over her knees, revealing several additional inches of well-muscled thigh. The sight made his mouth water and his body tightened. Memories of her gasping in his arms flashed through his head.

Inhaling deeply, he reminded himself firmly that they would be married tomorrow.

"Your brother is coming early in the morning?" he asked, needing to get his thoughts away from her sexy legs.

"Yes. And Bea, his wife, will be with him this time."

"That's good." He watched her carefully for a long moment, noting the flush on her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. "What did my brother tell you?"

"Nothing," she assured him with a chuckle. "From what he's told me, you were the perfect brother. You received top marks in your classes. You followed in your father's footsteps and went to Oxford University, graduating top of your class. And you have never done anything to embarrass yourself or your family. Ever!"

He shrugged. "I have a great many responsibilities," he replied, feeling as if he needed to defend his past.

"Yes, Daniesh mentioned that. And he applauded your deeply held sense of responsibility."

He tilted his head, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. "Then, why do I get the impression you are laughing at me?"

She chuckled. "Probably because I am?" She leaned forward and, immediately, his gaze dropped to the draping fabric that barely covered her cleavage. The shadow taunted him. Mocked him! "Haven't you ever wanted to just...cut loose and do something wild and unexpected?"

“Such as?” he prompted, glancing up before allowing his eyes to drop again. He couldn’t seem to stop ogling her breasts! Or was she leaning forward like that on purpose?

“For example, getting into a bar brawl. Or going to a sports game and just letting loose, screaming at the top of your lungs to cheer on your favorite team?”

He lifted the glass of champagne to his lips and drained it, then set the glass on the side table, leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees.

“I was always taught to be aware of my position within the hierarchy. And being surrounded by bodyguards, I was never in a position to get into in a bar brawl. Nor does that sound appealing. I don’t need to prove my masculinity by hitting another person. I feel secure in my own strength and have no desire to taunt another man into a fight, just to test my fighting skills.”

“What about climbing a mountain or hiking through a jungle?”

“No time. I always had responsibilities that kept me from exploring the world. However, I consider myself to be well conditioned and hope that I could take care of myself in any kind of battle.”

She sighed. “You’ve lived a rather tedious life, Ritton.”

He didn’t like the pity in her gaze. So, he did something he swore he wasn’t going to do. “There are many compensations for my life,” he said, a warning in his tone that she didn’t understand until he wrapped his fingers around the delicate bones of her wrist, then tugged until she was sitting on his lap.

He wrapped one hand around her knees, keeping her balanced while he held her securely with his other arm supporting her back. Startled, she flung her arms around his neck, which he liked very much.

“What are you doing?”

He shrugged slightly. “Showing you my wild side, I suppose.” He let his fingers slip underneath the hem of her dress. “Care to taunt me further?”

She hissed at the touch, scrambling to pull her dress back down over her knees. “I wasn’t taunting you, Ritton!”

“I think that—”

The door burst open before he could continue. They turned as one toward the door and found a pair of women staring at them with open-mouthed shock.

“Ritton!” the older woman gasped. “Please tell me that the woman on your lap is just a—” she stopped herself and waved her words away before trying again. “Well, please tell me that the rumors aren’t true!”

Oreylia quickly scooted off Ritton’s lap, embarrassed and horrified to be found in such a compromising position. Where were the guards? She’d assumed they were outside the door and it would be safe enough to flirt with her soon-to-be husband.

Obviously, she’d been wrong!

“Noya!” Ritton exclaimed, standing up and bringing Oreylia with him before wrapping his arm around her waist. Unconsciously, she leaned into his embrace and felt his arm tighten around her. The contact was soothing and banished her embarrassment. She might not completely understand this situation, but there was a growing connection between them that hinted that they might, possibly, be able to build a healthy relationship together.

Oreylia turned her attention to the two women who had interrupted their private moment, wondering what was going on. Who were they and why had the guards allowed them to enter without being announced first?

“You haven’t *forgotten* her, have you?” the older woman, apparently named “Noya” demanded, a beringed hand flipping to her chest. “Please tell me that you haven’t forgotten my poor angel!”

Ritton released Oreylia abruptly, which startled her enough that she forgot to control her expression. Ritton quickly moved to Noya, reaching for her hands.

“Of course I haven’t forgotten her, Noya,” he murmured, his voice low and soothing. He tucked her hand into his elbow and led her to the settee. “I could never forget Fatima. You know that. She will forever be in my heart.”

The pair sat down, talking quietly enough that Oreylia couldn’t hear what was said. So, she looked over at the second woman. She was younger, in her mid-twenties or so, and was absolutely stunning. She wore a heavy layer of makeup, but that only emphasized her youthful appearance. She had lush breasts and a tiny waist, all of which were covered in a fabulous designer dress and Jimmy Choo spike heels, both of which Oreylia adored on sight.

But the young woman’s expression was what caught Oreylia’s attention. There was an ugly darkness in those eyes. Her artificially long lashes lowered as if she were trying to appear demure, but Oreylia had seen the vicious triumph. She also watched as those glossy lips curled into a smug, satisfied smirk.

Bitch, Oreylia thought acidly. Then suppressed her immediate hatred for the woman, turning away to watch, fascinated, as her fiancé attempted to soothe the sobbing Noya.

Crocodile tears, Oreylia realized. As fake as her diamond rings. Why was this outwardly beautiful woman wearing fake jewelry? Obviously, they had the money for designer clothes. Oreylia recognized the pale blue dress the woman wore. Oreylia had seen it in a boutique in Paris a few months ago.

Turning her attention back to the younger woman, she stepped closer, extending her hand. “I’m Oreylia al Bodari.”

The young woman hesitated, but slowly lifted her gaze. The smug smile and triumphant gleam vanished without

a trace, replaced by a look of absolute innocence. “It’s an honor to meet you,” she murmured, feigning a shyness that was annoying. “I’m Hala Amani.” She waved a hand negligently towards the woman crying delicately beside Ritton. “That is my mother, Noya Amani.” Her eyes turned sad and there was a hint of tears. “My older sister, Fatima, is Ritton’s wife.”

Oreylia noticed that she used the present tense.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Oreylia replied, trying to sound sincere. But if this woman, Hala, cared a whit for her deceased sister, Oreylia would eat her shoes.

“Thank you,” Hala whispered, dropping her lashes again. The demurely folded hands were a nice touch, but Oreylia wasn’t convinced. “Has it been very hard for you since your sister’s passing?”

Hala blinked rapidly, pretending to fight back tears. “Absolutely!” she gasped, lowering her head again. She even lifted a finger as if to brush those crocodile tears away. “She was so beautiful,” Hala glanced quickly over at Ritton, ensuring that he was listening. “Fatima loved you *so* much. I didn’t think that you’d betray her memory like this.”

Ritton sighed, but kept his arm around Noya’s shoulders. “Hala, your sister was my first wife, but she’s gone. We all need to move on. It’s been two years. I have to marry and produce an heir. You know that.”

His words hurt more than Oreylia was willing to admit. She kept her face calm as Hala turned her weepy gaze back to her. “You’re not going to marry him, are you?”

“I am,” Oreylia replied. “How did you hear about the wedding? We haven’t sent out invitations. It is to be a quiet, *private* ceremony.”

“We have many friends in high places. We hear things. Plus,” she glanced at her mother, whose shoulders were shaking with what appeared to be renewed grief, “my mother and I are very dear friends of Ritton’s. We visit the

palace occasionally, just to check in on him and ensure that he's doing well. He was devastated by my sister's death and...well, we just want him to be happy. That's our dearest wish. That he finds happiness with someone worthy of him."

Oreylia didn't miss the insult. The bitch was implying that she doubted Ritton would be happy with her.

If she hadn't already decided that she disliked the woman, that comment sealed the deal.

Turning to Ritton, Oreylia said, "I'm sure that you would prefer to speak to your former in-laws in private. We can continue our conversation after they've left." She added a sugary smile in Ritton's direction, ignored the two women, and left the room.

As soon as she stepped through the doorway, her bodyguards surrounded her. "I know you can't stop those two from visiting the palace," she hissed, looking each of her bodyguards in the eye, "but please do not *ever* allow them to step into a room without being announced first." The men had seemed cautious when she'd started the command, but when she'd finished, they both smiled in relief as if they were eager to do her bidding.

"It would be our privilege," they said, nodding with obvious approval.

She paused in the middle of the hallway, glancing thoughtfully back at the now-closed door. Ritton's bodyguards were standing at attention, but they all wore rather disgruntled expressions. "What happened when those two showed up?"

Tisani, her lead guard, shuffled his feet slightly, revealing how uncomfortable the pair had made him. "We tried to stop them. We stepped in front of them, Your Highness. But the older one, she kept pushing. That's when Sheik Odenton's guards opened the doors. They caved, Your Highness."

Oreylia smiled at their disgust, but she made a mental note to mention the situation to Ritton. His guards shouldn't

give in to temper tantrums.

“I’ll talk to him and let him know that those two completely disregarded palace security measures.”

The two men immediately relaxed, nodding with gratitude. “Thank you, Your Highness. We really did try to stop them.”

She nodded, then said, “Next time, don’t let them in, no matter what. I’ll speak with Ritton and let him know that I won’t allow them to run roughshod over you or his team going forward.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” they said in unison.

Oreylia sighed, lowering her head slightly. “Tomorrow is my wedding day.” She looked around, not sure exactly how she felt about that. “I guess I should be excited.”

The guards didn’t have a response and she didn’t expect one. Silently, she wished that she could talk to Tessa. She and her sister had been very close until Tessa had married several months ago. They’d done so much together, accomplished so much good in the world.

However, Tessa was currently enjoying the first few weeks of being a mother. She was out of touch and probably blissfully happy.

Oreylia sighed, unaware of her shoulders slumping as she turned and headed down the hallway.

Lifting her head, she forced her thoughts back to her work issues. And she’d missed the final fitting for her wedding dress. She needed to talk to her volunteers out in the field. Plus, Oreylia wanted to start setting up programs here in Quarati to help women and children. There were networks to establish, teachers she needed to connect with, and a slew of other tasks she could work on instead of worrying about the horrible women who were trying to tempt her fiancé.

Why did she care so much? Why did she feel this twinge of jealousy at the thought of Ritton alone with Hala?

Ritton clenched his teeth, wishing that he could leave the room as easily as Oreylia had. These two had been the bane of his life while Fatima had been alive. Now, they were even worse. Every damn week, Hala showed up, trying to tempt him with her low cut outfits and her fluttering fake lashes. It irritated the hell out of him.

And now Noya was crying? What the hell? He'd been under the impression that Noya had barely acknowledged Fatima! The woman was finally grieving her daughter's passing *now*? Two years later?

What the hell were they trying to do? This was so completely out of character, he had to wonder what the ulterior motive was.

He didn't have to wait very long to find out.

Noya lifted tear-stained eyes up to him. "You don't love her anymore! My angel is gone and you've moved on! How like a man!"

Ritton mentally sighed, his frustration building. "I have not forgotten Fatima," he asserted firmly. "I've just continued to live my life." He took her hand, tightening his fingers around hers. "You should move on as well. Fatima wouldn't want you to mourn her forever." He looked into her eyes, but he was also wondering why she was wearing a fake diamond ring. And why the hell was she talking about Fatima in the present tense? Noya hadn't expressed any deep mourning for her oldest daughter in the past. Oh, she'd put on a good performance at the funeral two years ago. But after that, she had immediately shifted her focus to trying to get him to marry Hala.

Never going to happen, he thought with absolute certainty. Hala was a bitch. An absolutely spoiled pain in the ass! He'd seen the way Hala treated Fatima whenever she visited the palace. And Hala had come often.

Then there had been the sexual overtures, which had begun long before Fatima passed. Hala had been on the prowl since the wedding and Ritton had been disgusted! He'd seen the way Hala treated Fatima and she was an absolute witch. The sisters had been complete opposites. Fatima had been kind and considerate. Hala had walked into the palace as if she owned the place. She'd even ordered Fatima around, ridiculing her older sister in front of others and embarrassing Fatima at every opportunity.

Hala hadn't made an outright pass at Ritton, but he suspected that she would be more than willing if he asked for sexual favors.

He shuddered at the thought of Hala in his bed. The woman thrived on other people's pain. She was like a pain vampire, fueling her self-esteem whenever she hurt someone's feelings.

Gently, he pried his hand out of Noya's cloying grasp and stood up. "I'm very sorry you both heard about my impending wedding from the rumor grapevine. I should have called to let you know personally. That was my error." He paused, looking between them and wondering how they managed to wring out so many tears. He seriously doubted they were genuine, but what did he know? Maybe the news of the wedding tomorrow was more devastating than he'd thought!

"Marry Hala!" Noya commanded, standing up and wiping at her tears with a handkerchief.

Ritton stared at her for a long moment, praying he hadn't heard her properly. "Excuse me?" he prompted when both women just stared back at him. Noya's gaze was defiant while Hala seemed to be trying to look both coy and seductive at the same time. It was...off-putting, to say the least.

Noya stepped forward, balling the handkerchief in her fist. "Marry Hala. Not that—" she sneered, shaking her head in disgust, "upstart nobody. You deserve someone worthy of you. Someone who will adore you as my Fatima did." She

lowered her voice. “You need someone who will be proud to be on your arm during public events. Hala is that woman. Dismiss that other girl. She’s not worthy of you!”

Ritton clenched his teeth, unaware of the muscle flexing in his cheek. “You will address my future wife more respectfully, Noya,” he snapped. “She is Princess Oreylia al Bodari. Not only is her lineage extremely respectable, but she’s also an advocate for women and children. She works hard to promote women’s equality in a world where women are often treated as symbols of a man’s value.” He let his words and the meaning behind them, sink in for a moment. “Oreylia will be treated with the respect she deserves. She will *not* be dismissed as a nobody!”

Noya realized her mistake at once and she seemed to shrink into herself for a moment. But she rallied quickly. “I apologize, Ritton. I was just...shocked that you seemed to have forgotten my daughter so quickly.” She lifted her eyes, those tears back and he had no doubt that the tears were meant as a guilt trip.

He waited another heartbeat, then said flatly, “Apology accepted.” He glanced at Hala who was inching away from her mother. Was the woman as “innocent” as she tried to appear? He doubted it. He’d heard plenty of rumors about her sexual prowess and behavior. Ritton didn’t care if women embraced their sexuality. He did, why shouldn’t they? What he objected to was a façade of innocence in the hopes that he would find a virginal-type of woman more appealing. It was idiotic to think that a twenty-five year old woman was a virgin. Being a virgin shouldn’t be a badge of honor. One’s sexual history was none of his business. Especially since men didn’t go around listing their sexual conquests and having to give a “body count” to prospective lovers.

But he knew that he was in the minority on that opinion. Too many men, and women, still believed in the rather toxic idea of purity culture.

He thought about Oreylia's efforts to help women. He could do his part to help her movement by never asking about her sexual past. Just as he wouldn't discuss his previous lovers with her.

"Excuse me, ladies," he announced, turning and heading towards the door. "I have work to do."

The pair looked like they were trying to come up with a reason to detain him further. But he continued to the door, needing some fresh air.

He wouldn't mind if that air had a bit of Oreylia's scent in it, but firmly banished the thought. She was probably busy right now anyway.

Sighing, he headed back to his office, but at the door, he paused and turned to his guards. "Make sure that my former in-laws are not ever allowed to simply wander in going forward. They've been given too much leeway over the past few years, and I'm tired of them abusing those privileges. They need to respect my privacy. And Oreylia's as well."

"Yes, Your Highness," one of the guards replied and Ritton glanced at him, wondering if they'd been expecting that order. Their quietly pleased expressions answered that question, and he had to suppress a chuckle. He settled down at his desk and began to sift through the issues he needed to deal with today. Unfortunately, he was distracted by the memory of a set of lovely thighs hidden by a flouncy skirt.

Chapter 5

She was stunning! Ritton stared as Oreylia walked down the aisle on her brother's arm, the white silk shifting against her soft curves. Absolutely lovely! Gorgeous! Her dark hair was piled up on top of her head, but with small ringlets teasing the back of her neck.

When she stepped away from her brother, sliding her cold fingers into his hand, he realized she wasn't nearly as confident as she appeared. He tightened his hold around her trembling fingers, trying to send a bit of his strength to her. She smiled up at him in response and his body tightened. He wanted her. It wasn't a surprise. He'd wanted her from the first moment he'd met her. But seeing her now, knowing that she was about to become his wife, made the sensation all the more powerful.

Thirty minutes later, they were officially married.

Ritton turned and smiled down at Oreylia. She seemed just as surprised as he felt. The sensation of knowing that this was his wife, that Oreylia was his, made him feel... powerful and yet humbled. Such a vibrant, incredible woman had agreed to marry him! He owed her such an enormous debt!

And yet, thinking of their marriage in terms of debts and gratitude didn't feel right, somehow. But he couldn't deny the powerful surge of triumph. Bending in, he brushed his lips against hers, sealing their vows. Husband and wife. He was hers for the rest of their lives! Did she feel the same sense of power he did at this moment?

"It will be good," he assured her, squeezing her fingers, trying to convey his confidence.

She gave him a tentative smile, and together they turned, facing the small group of people that had come to celebrate.

“Congratulations, Oreylia,” Gael said giving his sister a gentle hug. “You look a bit stunned,” he whispered into her ear.

Oreylia returned the hug with interest, still not convinced that she fully grasped what had just happened. She was married? To Ritton? The whole ceremony had seemed unreal!

“Thank you,” she whispered, forcing a smile. Although she loved her brother dearly, Oreylia desperately wished that Tessa could have attended as well.

“I know you miss Tessa,” he said, reading her thoughts. “She called to ask me to send you her best wishes. She’s going to come visit you as soon as she recovers, okay?”

Oreylia pretended that it was okay. Nothing at this moment felt okay. She was married...to a man she barely knew!

No, that wasn’t right. She knew him. She just didn’t *know* him!

Suddenly, she was lifted off her feet in a massive bear hug. Oreylia laughed as Daniesh hugged her, shrieking playfully as he spun her around. “Welcome to the family!”

Oreylia hugged him tightly. This was exactly what she needed right now. “You’re a menace!” she teased, kissing his cheek before he set her feet back on the marble floor. Tilting her head to the side, she smiled up at him. “You seem to become more light hearted by the day. What’s going on with you?”

He chuckled. “The world just seems to get brighter and better with you in it, my dear.”

Oreylia rolled her eyes. “Fine. Keep your secrets. I get it.”

His smile faded and he looked warily around. Ritton was talking with Gael and some other dignitaries that had

attended the wedding. That meant that she and Daniesh were relatively alone.

Daniesh touched her shoulders and turned her to face him. “I only have a moment to explain this to you, so listen carefully.”

“What?” she asked, surprised by the urgency in his eyes.

“Trust Ritton. He cares more for you than you realize. More than *he* realizes.” He glanced over at the group of men, then turned back to Oreylia. He started to say something more, but a noise from the other end of the room stopped him. As soon as Noya and Hala stepped into the doorway, he bent closer to add, “And never, *ever*, trust those two!”

Oreylia had already figured that out. If she hadn’t realized it yesterday, she wouldn’t have understood the violent hatred with which the pair glared at her now. It was just a brief look of absolute loathing that flashed through their eyes before it was banked and hidden away, but she saw it and shrank back.

But Noya smiled, lifting her chin as she grasped Hala’s hand and walked forward. “We are late, Your Highness. I apologize for not arriving sooner.” She stopped in front of Ritton. “Congratulations!” she whispered up to him, then blinked her eyes rapidly as, once again, tears formed in her eyes. “I’m so happy that you’ve found someone now that my Fatima is gone.”

She stepped back and sniffed delicately, but then shook her head and pretended to smile. “This is a very special day.” She walked over to Oreylia, who had to fight not to shrink away from the vile woman.

“I know that you’re in a new and intimidating role, Oreylia,” she said with a raspy voice. “I will be here to help you. I’ll do whatever it takes to get you up to speed in your new role and all of the...duties...surrounding your new life.”

Noya lifted her handkerchief and dabbed at the corners of her eyes as if wiping away more tears. There was nothing there, Oreylia couldn't help but notice. But it was a creditable affectation.

“I appreciate your offer of help, Noya, but I'll be fine.”

Noya waved Oreylia's assurance aside. “This is a complex world you have only just stepped into. Your role will be difficult.” Noya patted Oreylia's hand patronizingly. “I'll be here when you need me.”

Oreylia reclaimed her hand, mentally vowing that she would never “need” this woman for anything.

One of the kitchen staff nodded in her direction and Oreylia tilted her head in acknowledgment. A moment later, a line of servants stepped through a set of double doors, bringing in trays of champagne.

Gael lifted his glass high. “To my sister and her new husband,” he announced. “I hope this union brings much happiness and hope for the future!”

Everyone called out in agreement, then lifted their champagne flutes to toast the new couple. Oreylia felt Ritton's arm slip around her waist as she took a long swallow.

There were several more toasts and a few amusing anecdotes traded around the small group and Oreylia was able to banish the two vile harpies from her thoughts, if not her sight. They stood in the middle of the group, laughing along with the other wedding guests. Oreylia wondered if those two had actually been invited, or if they'd just gatecrashed. She'd have to discuss their presence with the security team. There was no reason to put so much pressure on her bodyguards. Of course, Ritton might have something to say about them coming and going. Perhaps he'd given the order that they were free to visit the palace whenever they wanted. That would make sense, since they were relatives, sort of.

Still, she didn't like it. But before she could think about it further, the palace event coordinator gave the signal that the wedding feast was ready. The highly efficient woman herded everyone into the dining room, which had been elegantly done up in white and gold.

Thankfully, Ritton appeared at her side, so she was able to focus on enjoying the food and the excellent wine. She refused to think about what was to happen later tonight. In Ritton's bed! Nope, that wasn't on her mind. Not one little bit!

That first time in his arms, the night he'd cornered her in the sitting room might have flashed through her mind several thousand times over the course of the dinner. The pleasure he'd given her that night had been...shocking! She shivered, wondering if it had been a fluke, or if it might happen again.

Well, she definitely *wanted* it to happen again. The idea of him touching her like that, and even better, being able to touch him in return, made her core ache with anticipation.

"Are you okay?" Ritton asked, leaning in as if they were having an intimate conversation.

Startled, she looked up at him. "I'm fine," she replied, then tried to smile to back up her claim.

He shook his head. "You're not fine," he countered grimly. "Would you like to stay for a bit longer? Or are you ready to leave?"

She looked around, wanting to stay, but also wanting to leave and be alone with him, to explain her reservations as well as her hopes that he might touch her the same way he had before.

"Let's go," she whispered to him.

Ritton immediately stood up and lifted his glass in the air. Everyone stilled, turning to look at him. "Thank you all for being here to witness our wedding. Please enjoy the music and the dessert." He took a sip of his wine, then set it down on

the table before taking Oreylia's hand and leading her out of the ballroom. The guests clapped and Oreylia hid her face against his shoulder.

"Everyone in there knows what we're going to do next, Ritton," she hissed, fighting unsuccessfully against the blush that warmed her cheeks.

He laughed and pulled her against his side. "Everyone knew what we were going to do tonight as soon as they received the invitation to our wedding. It's what traditionally happens on a wedding night." He brought her into his suite and led her to a very pretty bedroom. "This is your room," he explained.

Oreylia looked around, and at his words, glanced up at him in surprise. "You have a separate bedroom?" she asked, not sure why the idea hurt so much.

"Yes. I work late into the night most of the time. You'll sleep better, more soundly, if you're not woken up when I come in at night." He took her hand, kissing each of her fingertips. "Plus, there have been several times when I was woken up in the middle of the night to deal with whatever had happened around the world. You'd be disturbed during those times as well."

What he said made perfect sense. She wasn't a light sleeper, but a stranger coming into the room at night would bother her.

"I suppose that's very considerate of you." She said, but wondered if there was another reason why they had separate bedrooms.

"That doesn't mean we can't share a bed on the nights when we want to be intimate."

Oreylia didn't like that phrasing either. It seemed too...clinical. Something was off and she wasn't sure what to do about it.

Ritton watched various emotions flit over Oreylia's beautiful features and he wanted to take back his words. But he knew this was the right path. She had her work and he had his. They didn't need to be in each other's way all the time. Couples all over the world slept in separate bedrooms. That didn't mean they couldn't have a strong friendship, while also enjoying a healthy sex life.

He'd just have to prove it to her.

With that thought in mind, his body immediately sprang to life. Not that his body had been calm today. Hell, he'd been anticipating tonight all week!

Yet another reason to have separate bedrooms, he thought, taking Oreylia's hand and rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. He'd let himself become too preoccupied with Oreylia over the past week. He thought about her constantly. Even as he'd tried to keep away from her, to maintain his self-discipline, his thoughts circled to her. He'd constantly wondered about all the different ways that he could pleasure her, what ways she'd like best.

But tonight, he didn't need to keep wondering. Tonight, he could languish in her beauty and discover all sorts of ways to make her sigh with pleasure.

"Oreylia, will you stay with me tonight? If you would prefer to sleep alone, you only need to say the words."

She stared thoughtfully up at him and he could feel how she was shaking.

"I don't want to be alone tonight," she admitted in a quiet voice. A moment later, her fingers slid up his chest and he almost groaned at the pleasure of it. Her soft fingertips would be heaven once he could feel them on his bare skin.

But her words seemed to relax the unnoticed tension within him. He hadn't realized how much he needed to hear her say that, to give him permission to be with her tonight.

And now that she had, he was going to show her how much he appreciated her. In so many ways!

Kissing Oreylia was like heaven, he thought. Lowering his head, he pressed his lips to hers, teasing her into participating. When she finally relaxed and returned his kiss, he pulled her closer, running his hands over her curves, relishing every moment of contact.

“You’re so soft!” he growled, his hands cupping her bottom and pulling her hips against his.

“You’re not!” she gasped, shifting against him.

He laughed, delighted with her teasing. But he needed to get her naked. With slow, easy movements, Ritton slid the zipper of her wedding gown down her back. Thankfully, there weren’t buttons. He wasn’t sure he could handle buttons just now.

He pulled back and watched as the satin and pearl dress whispered its way down her body to reveal a white, satin bustier, white satin panties, and...dear heaven, white silk stockings that hugged her soft thighs, making his mouth water with anticipation.

“You’ve had this on all day long?” he growled, letting his hands explore the satin.

She laughed, her shoulders curling in slightly, showing him that she felt self-conscious with his perusal.

“Well, I didn’t rush off to change at any point today, did I?” she replied.

Gently, Ritton took her hands, lowering them to her sides and holding them out so that he could admire her. “Please don’t hide from me, love,” he whispered, still stunned by how beautiful she looked. Her breasts were plumped up by the bustier and the white satin covering her core made him almost weak in the knees.

“How long are you going to look at me like that?” she asked, her voice cracking on the last word.

He lifted his eyes, staring into hers. “I’m making you nervous, am I?” he teased, but pulled her in closer, wrapping

his arms around her to cover her nakedness. The movement helped her and she lifted her arms, wrapping them around his neck, but it didn't help him at all.

“Just...I feel so warm when you touch me, Ritton,” she admitted softly.

He shook his head as he bent to nuzzle her neck. “I don't want you feeling warm, love. I want you feeling hot!”

Oreylia sighed and then shivered in surprise when she felt his lips press against her neck. He seemed to know exactly where to touch her, where to press his lips to give her the most sensation. She wanted to cry out, but his silence made her want to keep her silence as well. Unfortunately, she couldn't control the whimpers of pleasure when she felt him nipping at her earlobe.

“I like that!” she murmured with a nervous laugh.

He did it again and she nearly giggled. But the effect was spoiled when she felt her bustier loosen. How had he released all of those tiny hooks without her noticing? It had taken her maid a while to hook all of those tiny things earlier.

“Well, you're efficient,” she gasped, then covered her breasts with her arms as the bustier fell away.

“You're hiding from me again,” he commented, reaching for her hands.

“No, you first,” she ordered, keeping her arms around herself. “I'm not going to be the only one naked tonight.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “No, you're definitely not,” he assured her. He started at his tie, pulling it loose and tossing it aside. He did the same with his dress shirt and his jacket, unconcerned that the expensive material landed on the floor. “Better?” he asked as he revealed his bare chest.

Oreylia wasn't sure if it was better or worse. His shoulders, chest, and arms rippled with muscles, his chest had a light smattering of dark hair that her fingers itched to feel.

But she couldn't move. For several long moments, she merely stared silently at him, amazed by the sight of her husband.

"You're staring at me," he growled. "I'm starting to feel self-conscious."

She saw the teasing glint in his eyes and smiled. She let out a breath of air, but when he reached for her arms again, she still resisted.

"Trust me, Oreylia. We have a lot of years together. I'm going to see you naked many times."

She wasn't sure she believed him. Hadn't he implied that their intimacy would be over once she'd provided him with the requisite heir? Or had he said something else? She couldn't remember and couldn't focus on anything besides how much she wanted to touch his chest.

"May I?" she asked, nodding towards his chest.

"I'd love it if you touched me," he replied softly, his voice becoming husky and deeper.

Reaching out, she kept one arm over her breasts while her other hand slid over his bare skin. He was warmer than she expected and Oreylia stepped closer, fascinated. "You're so warm," she whispered.

"It feels good when you touch me."

She was surprised that he'd admit it so easily, but she liked it "I like touching you."

"May I touch *you*?" he asked, stepping closer.

"Yes!" she gasped, moving even closer to him. Looking up at him, she asked, "Would you please kiss me the way you did last week? I don't...I can't think when you kiss me like that."

Oreylia saw the surprise in his eyes, but he nodded. "I'd be delighted." And then he lowered his head, pressing his lips to hers. The kiss started slowly, but as her hands moved

up to his shoulders, he deepened the kiss until her head was spinning with the need she remembered so vividly.

Now there was no self-consciousness. All she felt was the urge to be close to him, to feel every part of his body against hers. And she wanted to run her fingers over every inch of his bare skin!

He cupped her breasts and she cried out, hissing with surprise when he stroked her nipples with his thumbs. “Yes!” she gasped and pressed her hands over his, keeping them where she wanted them. “I love it when you do that.”

He chuckled softly and slowly lowered her to the bed. “I think we should get more comfortable,” he declared her as he settled onto the bed next to her.

Propping himself up on his hands, Ritton gazed down at her and, for a brief moment under the weight of his eyes, her self-consciousness came back. But then he lowered his head, taking one of her nipples in his mouth. The heat shocked her initially. And when his tongue flicked against her nipple, she cried out with delight!

Unaware of what she was doing, Oreylia’s fingers dove into his hair, tugging and sliding while her inner thigh stroked his outer hip. She wasn’t aware of the purring, but kept touching him with her body because he just felt too wonderful.

His mouth moved lower and she felt the roughness of his jaw scrape her stomach. Even that felt erotic because the sensation was so different from all of his other touches. But he moved lower still and Oreylia realized what he was going to do.

Sitting up, she scooted backwards, shaking her head. “No, I don’t want that,” she told him.

He kissed her knee before looking at her. Pushing up, he kissed her, pressing her back against the bed. When he lay beside her this time, stroking her stomach, coming up to tease her nipple before moving lower again.

“Why not?” he asked, his fingers teasing the light hair between her legs.

Oreylia sighed with relief, her legs spreading a bit wider with every pass of his fingers against her thighs.

“Because I can’t...um...finish, like that,” she explained.

“Why not?”

She groaned and turned onto her side, pressing a kiss to the middle of his chest. “Because I just...feel too self-conscious of how long it takes me. And then I start overthinking and I can’t stop and then I just...it’s just frustrating.”

He stared at her for a long moment, then threw back his head, laughing. She started to pull away, but he wrapped his arms around her, still laughing with his face buried against her neck now.

When he finally calmed, he was still chuckling as he kissed her, bringing her right back to that passionate embrace. Meanwhile, his fingers moved to her thighs again, spreading her legs wide. When she shivered, Ritton slipped one finger along her pink folds, teasing her to open for him. When she did, he slid a finger into her heat, causing Oreylia to gasp in surprise. Her hips shifted, moving against his hand as her back arched.

“Do that again,” she whispered, biting her lip as he thrust into her again. When he did, she gasped, rolling her hips against his hand, needing more. “Again!” she begged, tightening her grip on his shoulders so she could move more easily as he touched her intimately.

Ritton moved over her, keeping his finger in her body as he thrust with two fingers now. Oreylia loved that and wanted to feel more. Her hips kept thrusting against his fingers and she enjoyed the way it felt. But then he took his hand away! When her eyes popped open, it was to find Ritton moving over her. A moment later, he grabbed her hands,

pinning them above her head, then slowly, carefully, pressed his erection into her. His shaft was significantly larger than his fingers and she arched her back, her mouth falling open as she moaned at this newest invasion. But he drew back before he was fully sheathed inside of her and she whimpered.

Ritton was caught up in the haze of desire. She felt so good and he'd wanted this for so long. So when her hips lifted, accepting his next thrust, he groaned, loving the way she was reacting.

"Do that again," he urged, then nearly roared as he felt her inner muscles clench tightly around him. "Damn!" he hissed, struggling to hold back.

Thrusting into Oreylia was the next best thing to heaven, he realized. He wanted this to last for a long time, but between those soft, intoxicating sounds and the tightness of her delectable body clamping down on him, he knew that he wasn't going to last as long as he'd like to, this time. The way she squirmed beneath him was driving him absolutely wild. So he reached down, rubbing his thumb against that sensitive nub to help her. Thrusting faster now, he gripped her hips, feeling her body tighten around him. As much as he wanted to watch Oreylia climax during this first time together, she was just too tight, too hot and slick.

Her scream of pleasure was the last thing he remembered before he was mindlessly thrusting into her, his orgasm coming so hard and so fast, he could barely remember how to breathe.

When it was over, he slumped down on top of her, breathing in the sweet scent of her skin.

"Wow!" she whispered, then laughed, her legs tightening around his waist.

That was so far from what he'd been expecting that he somehow found the energy to look up at her. Bracing his weight on his elbows, he lifted a dark eyebrow. "Wow?" he

repeated, wanting to laugh right along with her, but he didn't think he had enough energy to do anything just yet.

Oreylia laughed...giggled actually...then lifted higher to press a kiss against his chest.

Shockingly, Ritton's body began to tighten all over again and he pulled out before he hurt her. "Care to explain?" he asked, rolling to the side of the bed so that he could get a washcloth.

Oreylia didn't stay in the bed as he expected. Instead, she jumped up and, grabbing his shirt, trailing after him into the bathroom.

"Yes, that was definitely a wow moment," she laughed, spinning around. "I didn't know that...well," she looked up at him warily. "I know that I'm not supposed to speak of previous sexual encounters to my current lover," she began, and then yelped when his strong arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her close. She laughed again, throwing her arms around his neck.

"I think it's permissible to talk about them when you precede the conversation with 'wow'," he replied, and kissed her lingeringly.

"Wow!" she whispered again.

He chuckled, swatting her bottom playfully. Then he lifted her up onto the bathroom countertop and reached for a fluffy washcloth. "Spread your legs, woman," he ordered in a gruff, teasing voice.

"No!" she replied, then tried to grab the cloth out of his hands. He pulled it out of reach and ran it under warm water. "I can do it myself," she told him.

"I get to do this," he warned her, then stood in front of her. "Spread your legs, my dear."

She grinned saucily and crossed her legs, leaning back to brace her arms against the counter. "Nope."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. He couldn't help but be a little impressed that this woman, this tiny, audacious woman, had disobeyed him!

Standing in front of her, he cleaned himself off, then grabbed another cloth and warmed it under the water. "So, you're going to make this a challenge?" he asked, thinking she looked adorable.

"Yep. I think I am," she agreed cheerfully.

He moved closer, pressing his rising erection between her knees. "You know I'm bigger and stronger than you."

She was a bit breathless as she replied, "I'm not sure how that is a benefit in this situation."

He kissed her, a slow, drugging kiss that left her sighing, tilting her head back, hoping for more.

"It means I'm mightier, and," he nipped at her lower lip while he shifted her legs, spreading her wide for his ministrations. "And I'm trickier," he added as he slid the warm cloth between her legs. She gasped, sitting up straighter, but he gently and thoroughly cleaned her glistening folds. "There," he said, tossing the cloth into the other sink. "Now let's go back to bed and do it all over again."

She smiled, a wicked smile that whispered at all sorts of naughty activities. So, he scooped her up and carried her back to bed. This time, he went straight for her nipple, sucking harder this time, bringing her sexual need up to fever pitch more quickly than last time. When his mouth moved lower, he let his fingers linger on her nipples, pinching and teasing while he moved lower and lower. When his mouth finally found his goal, she gasped and started to sit up, but before she could object, his mouth covered that sensitive nub and he teased, sucked, and nibbled there, using his fingers again to thrust into her heat.

Oreylia gasped, falling limply back against the mattress! Then her fingers wove into his hair again, guiding him. Ritton was an excellent student and followed her

instructions precisely. It took only minutes until she was screaming his name to the heavens. Before she was able to stop writhing on the bed, he stood and thrust into her while placing her hands on his shoulders.

Because she looked so delectable, and he could still taste her juices on his lips, his own release came quickly and hard.

And then he pulled her into his arms, ensuring that every inch of her was touching as much of him as possible.

Ritton told himself that he'd hold her like this just until she fell asleep. Then he could shower, dress, and head back to his office. He had several contracts he needed to review and a military report that he'd like to get through before his meetings tomorrow.

But with Oreylia's soft, sweet breath whispering over his chest, Ritton fell fast asleep, completely forgetting about reports and contracts as his new wife's heart calmed him into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Chapter 6

Oreylia woke up and smiled, stretching her sore muscles. She could see the sunshine streaming in through the curtains, indicating that she'd slept in. Normally, she was up by the time the sun was brightening up the earth. Smiling, she turned, her hand searching for Ritton. She wanted to see him, to snuggle up next to him just as she'd done so many times during the night.

Goodness, he'd been a voracious lover! He hadn't allowed any inhibitions and demanded to know what she liked and didn't like.

"Loved it all," she whispered and pushed herself out of the bed. She was naked and blushed at the memory of how he'd stripped her last night. Hurrying through the doors of what she hoped was the dressing room, Oreylia was relieved to find her clothes hanging in the closet. She grabbed a silk robe, slipping her arms into the sleeves before tying the belt around her waist.

"Shower," she murmured, but paused to explore the room a bit more first. It was a sunny yellow and spring green room and she adored the colors. They were vibrant and energizing, the furniture plush and comfortable, although, so far, she could only attest to the comfort of the bed.

After showering and dressing in a creamy suit with wide-legged pants and a safari-style jacket that cinched at her waist, she felt much more confident and ready to take on the world. Or at least, see her new husband.

Unfortunately, Ritton wasn't in the dining room. Nor was he in any of the other rooms she peeked into. When she inquired, Oreylia learned that he'd left the palace for some type of inspection with his military advisors.

That stung, but Oreylia accepted that he had a great many responsibilities. So much for a honeymoon.

She took a few moments to wallow in self-pity, then realized what she was doing. Oreylia wasn't the pity-party type! She was strong and confident! Shaking off her melancholy, she forced herself to find a challenge.

She needed to get to work and reconnect with her teams in Hadair. She'd taken the last week off to get ready for her wedding, but perhaps it was time for her to get back to work.

With that goal in mind, she set out to find a space she could use as an office.

Unfortunately, Noya unexpectedly coming down the hallway halted her positive momentum. Unfortunately, Oreylia couldn't just turn around and walk the other way, because that would be rude. So instead, she pasted a bright, welcoming smile on her face as she waited for the obnoxious woman to come to her.

"Oreylia!" Noya called out, holding out her arms. "What a delightful surprise! I was heading to speak with the chef about this week's menu, thinking that you would be too preoccupied with your new role to think of it. But since you're here," she linked her arm with Oreylia's and pulled her in the opposite direction, "I have a few suggestions." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Well...more along the lines of advice, if you don't mind me offering?" she asked, then laughed as if the idea of Oreylia not wanting her advice was absolutely hilarious.

She patted Oreylia's arm and continued speaking in a patronizing tone. "Now, I know that you're new to this kind of a role, so here are just a few observations about last night." Noya half dragged Oreylia towards the kitchens. "First of all, you started the champagne toasts far too early. The drinks should have waited until everyone was seated. That way, they had a place to sit and to set their glasses down when they needed to clap for you."

Oreylia disagreed, but clenched her teeth against her response.

“Also, you were the hostess last night. Leaving before your guests showed very poor manners, dear.”

Again, Oreylia disagreed. In fact, she’d understood that it was considered bad manners for the guests to leave before the bride and groom. It was the one time when she and Ritton were not just permitted to leave before everyone else, but encouraged to do so. It was an ancient tradition where the wedding vows were sealed by the consummation of the marriage. It was an odd, most likely pagan, tradition, but it was a nearly universal truth in almost every culture.

Oreylia didn’t want more of this obnoxious woman’s “advice” and she pulled back. “That’s very kind of you to offer me advice, Noya, but I’ve been doing this for a while too. I’ve acted as my brother’s hostess for several years now and I’m well versed in diplomatic protocols.”

“Nonsense, darling,” Noya argued, patting Oreylia’s arm again. “I’m older and wiser. I’ve hosted more dinner parties than you’ve attended! Don’t worry,” she urged. “I’ll guide you through the intricacies of palace life.”

Oreylia wanted to argue, but she wasn’t sure what kind of relationship Ritton had with Noya. Offending the man’s mother-in-law, even if the relationship had been severed by death, wasn’t a good start to a marriage. So instead of telling Noya to go to hell, she smiled politely and continued to nod as Noya went on to pompously explain all of the myriad ways Oreylia had messed up the night before as Noya led her towards the kitchens.

By the time the palace chef stepped out of his office to greet them, Oreylia was starting to second guess herself. Had she offended the high council by not greeting each of them by name? Why hadn’t someone told her about the head of parliament’s new granddaughter? And who were the group of women that she’d apparently ignored? Oreylia hadn’t noticed a group of angry women glaring at her!

Goodness, where had her mind been last night? From Noya’s admonishing tone, Oreylia felt as if she’d sparked

world war three with her terrible lack of manners!

Shaking her head to push the woman's criticisms out of her thoughts, she stepped back. "Noya, thank you again for the offer of your help and guidance, but I'm fine."

The woman laughed. "Nonsense. Now, let's talk with the palace chef about the menus for the upcoming week." And off she went.

Oreylia held back, then shook her head. She wasn't going to deal with menus for the week or whatever was going on in the kitchens. There was an extremely capable events coordinator, who was incredibly talented and formally educated in diplomacy. The woman was very experienced and never would have allowed anyone to step on diplomatic toes. That was her whole job and, so far, nothing she'd had done last night seemed different from what Delly, the event coordinator for her brother's events in Hadair, had set up.

"I'm not following that woman," Oreylia told her guards and turned on her heel, heading back the way she'd come. "I know I can't be rude to her, but she's clearly trying to undermine my confidence." She glanced up at her guards, both of whom nodded their agreement. With a sigh of relief, she nodded as well, more to herself than to anyone else. "Right. I was looking for a space for my office. Let's get back to my original plan." And off they went, searching through the palace to find an empty space that would suit her needs.

Chapter 7

Ritton managed to stay away from Oreylia all day and well into the evening. It was almost a physical pain to work through the normal dinner hour, and he couldn't stop himself from inquiring if his wife had eaten dinner. When it was confirmed that she'd arrived in the dining room for the evening meal, he breathed a sigh of relief.

But the hours he'd tried to focus after that inquiry were pointless and rather lonely. The only thing his sacrifice proved was that he was an idiot. When he looked at the clock and realized that it was after midnight, he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Enough!" he snarled and pushed away from his desk.

Making his way down the long hallway, he considered all of the various ways he could make love to Oreylia tonight. She hadn't been a virgin, but last night had shown him that she wasn't well versed in the plethora of possibilities surrounding lovemaking. She'd been surprised and pleased when he'd pulled her on top of him, showed her how to ride him.

Would she do that again tonight? He was already stripping off his shirt as he stepped into her bedroom. But when he looked down at his sleeping wife, only a thin beam of light coming from the living room of their private apartment, she looked...devastated. Bending down, he touched her cheeks. Were those tears? Had his bride been crying?

Because of him? Or because of someone else? He knew that Noya had visited her earlier today, but when he'd asked about Noya's conversation with Oreylia, Ritton had heard that Noya was merely offering advice to the new bride.

That seemed pretty benign. Kind even. He wondered if he should be concerned about any seeming kindness coming from Noya. She hadn't seemed capable of it back when she'd visited Fatima. However, Noya had a vicious tendency to sweetly explain how badly a person dressed, or how painfully

incorrect their actions were. It all came across as well-meaning “advice”, but Ritton had thought it was closer to a form of gaslighting. Nevertheless, every time he’d asked Fatima about it, she’d assured him that her mother was only trying to be helpful and she didn’t want him to speak with her.

Looking back, he wondered if he should have ignored Fatima’s pleas to not speak to Noya. And if these tears on Oreylia’s cheeks were from the same source, he was going to ban Noya from the palace.

He felt his own mood plummet. Looking around the dim room, he wondered why this space felt so...sad! Not just sad, but desperate! What was it about this room that...felt...miserable? Was it merely the darkness? Perhaps he was even more exhausted than he’d realized. Or was he more affected by the fact that Oreylia had cried recently?

Either way, he didn’t want to be in here. However, the idea of sleeping without Oreylia was inconceivable.

Very carefully, he scooped his sleeping bride into his arms and carried her through the doorway to his bedroom. Almost immediately, he felt better. The lights had been dimmed and one of the palace servants had turned down the bedding. That made it simple to tuck Oreylia into his bed.

For a long moment, Ritton stared down at his new wife. When she sighed and shifted, he felt his spirits lift a little more. Slowly, he stripped off his clothes, tossing them onto one of the nearby chairs before going into the bathroom to take a quick shower and brush his teeth. The whole time, he felt a clawing need to take Oreylia into his arms and make love to his wife. Oreylia. *His wife!* The words sounded better than nice.

He had never felt this way towards Fatima. He’d cared about her, but Ritton acknowledged that he’d never felt this aching need to make love to his first wife. That should have angered him, because it felt like a betrayal to Fatima’s memory. But he also knew that he needed to put that part of his life in the past and move forward.

Discarding the towel, he gazed down at Oreylia. With a sigh, he slipped into bed beside her, pulling her into his arms. He wasn't willing to wake her; just holding her like this was enough. And when she curled into his arms, he closed his eyes and felt...whole. Turned on, but whole.

Chapter 8

Oreylia woke up with a start and looked around. This wasn't her bedroom. The décor of this room was darker, but she instantly liked it better.

"It *wasn't* a dream!" she muttered, looking around and smiling. She'd thought that she'd only imagined that Ritton had carried her off to his bedroom, but being here in his huge bed with the brown, silk comforter, which was very different from her bright yellow comforter, she knew that she hadn't dreamt it. He'd been with her last night. She'd curled up in his arms and she'd slept with her body spooned up against his.

"Good morning, Your Highness," a cheery, smiling servant stepped into the room, carrying a silk robe. "You didn't eat much for dinner last night. Would you like something for breakfast? Or a cup of coffee?"

Oreylia pushed out of the bed and slipped her arms into the silk robe, smiling her thanks to the woman. "Yes please. I'm starving!" she gushed, lifting her hair out of the robe. "Is my husband still here? Or is he already working?"

The servant smiled politely as she stated, "His Highness had an emergency and has left the palace. I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't know the details, but I can get more information if you need it."

Oreylia kept silent, but a deep bitterness welled up within her. Yesterday, he'd left her the morning after their wedding to work without even a word. Today, he'd actually left the building without telling her anything.

Inform his wife about his daily activities? Why on earth would Ritton think she needed to know where he was? She was only the woman he'd married two days ago!

Walking into her bedroom, she was practically stomping to her dressing room. As soon as she left the warm colors of Ritton's space, Oreylia's temper flared. For some

reason, the supposedly soothing colors of her domain only increased her frustration. Surveying the clothes hanging in the closet, Oreylia felt a burst of anger unlike anything she'd felt before.

But just as quickly as it had arrived, the temper subsided, to be replaced by the same aching sadness she'd felt yesterday. Surveying her wardrobe, she wasn't sure what to wear. Nothing appealed to her. Everything was too... colorful! After a long moment of trying to decide, Oreylia didn't even want to dress! Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the bed. Someone had already come through and remade it.

The appeal of just crawling into that bed and going back to sleep was tempting. What if she simply laid down and...maybe pulled the covers up over her head? Yes, it would be wonderful to block out the sunshine. She didn't need sun. Not today. Sleep. That aching sadness was nearly overwhelming. Perhaps if she just took a short nap, this sadness would pass.

No sleeping, she decided with a heavy sigh, and turned back to the closet to figure out what to wear.

None of the clothes held any appeal. Instead, she spotted a small, padded bench. Walking over to it, she lowered herself down. Then surprised herself by wiping away sudden tears. She was crying? Looking at the shine of moisture on her fingers, she stared at it, not sure why she was so sad. Yes, her husband had abandoned her again. But the servant had told her it was an emergency.

Still, she couldn't seem to fight the overwhelming wave of unhappiness that felt like a wet, heavy blanket smothering her. It was like an oppressive, grey cloud hanging over her, whispering that she was beyond pathetic and all she wanted to do was curl into a ball and sob.

"This is ridiculous!" she declared and forced herself to her feet. She grabbed a pair of black slacks and a black sweater. She didn't care that she probably look like she was in

mourning. She didn't want any color. Not today. Maybe she'd wear something colorful tomorrow.

Taking the clothes out of the dressing room, she forced herself to walk across the thick, lush carpeting to the bathroom. There, she showered and scrubbed herself clean, feeling almost contaminated all of a sudden. Anger was a relatively new emotion for Oreylia. She'd experienced frustration and irritation plenty of times throughout her life. But never this level of unexpected fury and an odd sense of being unclean!

Except, she couldn't seem to get herself clean enough!

As her skin turned red, she knew that she had to stop, to get out of the bathroom and stop this insanity.

"What is wrong with me?" she gasped, grabbing a white, fluffy towel and rushing out of the bathroom. She clutched the clothing to her chest, hurrying through the connecting doorway to Ritton's room.

For some reason, the ugly feelings seemed to dissipate as soon as she stepped through the door. Was it the soft brown décor? The warm glow of the sunshine pouring in through the windows? Oreylia couldn't quite figure out why she felt so immediately better in this room, but she wasn't going to fight it. The aching sadness and oppressive greyness seemed to magically float away.

With a sigh of relief, she dressed quickly and sat down. That other room was...miserable! She'd never before associated yellow and green with anger and depression, but she would from now on!

Her hair was still wet, but she wasn't willing to go back into her bathroom to dry and style it. She'd just twist it up into a messy bun.

"I'm *not* losing my mind!" she whispered as she twisted her hair up and secured it with a pen she found.

Without makeup or even jewelry, Oreylia stepped out of Ritton's room, surprising a pair of servants. They clearly weren't expecting anyone to come out of her husband's room and their stunned expressions made her smile. The first smile she'd felt in more than twenty-four hours!

"Could one of you direct me to the palace maintenance staff, please?" she asked.

One of the ladies immediately curtsied and led the way down a long corridor.

"How may I help you, Your Highness?" the maintenance director asked, adding a respectful bow to his question.

Oreylia smiled. "I need an office. Actually, what I need is about five office spaces for myself and my staff."

The director nodded and came around his desk. "How about if I show you where—"

She lifted her hand, stopping his explanation. "I don't want to work in Fatima's office, if that's where you were going."

The man smiled awkwardly, shuffling on his feet and running a nervous hand down the front of his uniform. "I was going to suggest it because it's one of the nicest spaces around. Sheik Odenton had it fitted out specifically for his first wife and you might find some of the bells and whistles helpful."

Oreylia considered the offering for a moment, tilting her head slightly. Then her eyes narrowed in suspicion and she asked, "Did Hala or Fatima's mother ever visit Fatima in that office?"

The man's smile brightened and he nodded eagerly. "All the time, Your Highness. They were near daily visitors here at the palace."

Oreylia nodded slowly as a thought occurred to her. But she kept her mouth shut. "Interesting," was all she said.

Then brought her mind back to her current predicament and shook her head. “Regardless, I’d rather not take over Fatima’s office area. I’d prefer a new space. Also, I’d prefer to be a bit further away from my husband’s administrative staff.”

For the rest of the day, Oreylia and the maintenance manager walked through the palace, exploring the various empty rooms, brainstorming ideas on how to fit up each area for her needs. When they found an area with adequate space for her staff, they called in the decorator. The ideas the two offered her were brilliant and her new office would be even better than the one she’d left behind in Hadair.

Now, they could coordinate with Tessa in Campour, once she returned from maternity leave, and also here in Quarati. Perhaps their international efforts would be more effective now that they had a presence in three different countries.

She skipped dinner that night, not interested in dining alone again. Instead, she worked through the evening meal hour and, when the words blurred on the page from fatigue, Oreylia gave up and returned to her bedroom.

She was less than three feet through the doorway when she felt that strange, pervasive sadness wash over her. Rushing out of the room, she pushed through the doorway to Ritton’s bedroom. He wouldn’t mind if she slept in here, would he? He probably wouldn’t even know! He was still gone and he hadn’t bothered to tell her when he’d be back.

Besides, she felt happy here. There was no sadness in here!

Chapter 9

Ritton stared down at the gorgeous woman fast asleep in his bed. He was absolutely exhausted. He probably should have napped on the flight back, but his spinning thoughts wouldn't let him relax. For some ridiculous reason, he'd felt a deep, urgent need to hurry back to the palace. To Oreylia!

Turning away from the beautiful sight, he stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. He ignored the profound satisfaction he felt at finding her in his bed, focusing on getting clean and trying to think of new ways to alleviate the brewing tensions between industry leaders and the workers who were threatening to strike.

Unfortunately, the only thing on his mind was Oreylia and the way her long, dark hair draped behind her over the pillow. And the curve of her lush hips under the light blankets. Why was she in his bed? Why wasn't she in her own?

Looking down, he realized that he'd palmed his painful erection. For a moment, he told himself to stop, to just go to bed.

But there was nothing he could do to stop himself from fantasizing about his beautiful wife. He groaned, closing his eyes and tried to stop, but the images of the last time he had her in his arms kept flashing behind his eyes. He wanted her! Oreylia was like a drug that he craved!

After he climaxed, he cursed at his lack of self-discipline. And then muttered another stream of curses when he realized that his body was still hard and aching for the actual woman.

Flipping off the shower, he dried off and forced himself to consider the problems he'd just left behind.

He needed to...!

He should...?

What if he...?

He tossed the wet towel into the bin with a frustrated sigh and stepped out of the bathroom. Staring down at Oreylia, he debated the wisdom of slipping into the bed and pulling her into his arms, or....?

No! He couldn't allow himself to become more deeply involved with her! He couldn't go through the devastation he'd endured when Fatima had taken her own life ever again! Not that he thought Oreylia was suicidal. But he hadn't thought Fatima had been either.

No, it was better to keep himself separate from Oreylia. He'd been hurt when Fatima had taken her own life. But something deep within him warned that he'd be far more devastated if anything happened to Oreylia. Which meant that she'd somehow gotten too close already and he needed to control himself more effectively.

He was simply reacting to the newness of his relationship with Oreylia. She was beautiful and enticing, a delightful debate partner and an animated conversationalist.

It was just that everything with her was new, he told himself as he headed into his dressing room. Pulling on a pair of loose slacks, he convinced himself that Oreylia was merely a new toy. She was bright, shiny, and fun to be around, talk to and make love with, and just...be around!

But that would wear off soon enough

He went out to the living area and picked up the stack of reports he needed to review. Settling down on the wide sofa, he propped himself into a comfortable position and started to read. He'd push Oreylia out of his mind by focusing on work issues.

Oreylia yawned and rolled over, feeling much better this morning. That yellow and green room was demented, she

thought as she padded barefoot into Ritton's bathroom. She flipped on the shower and stripped off her silk nightgown before stepping under the warm spray of water. It felt wonderful! Goodness, she hadn't realized how...sad...she'd become over the past few days!

Picking up the shower gel, she sniffed experimentally and smiled. "Excellent!" she whispered, then squeezed the pine scented body wash onto her hand, then slid the deliciously scented gel over her body. Thinking about Ritton, she moved her hands over her breasts, pinching her nipples as he'd done the other night. Closing her eyes, she moved her hands over her body, pretending that it was actually his hands touching her, making her feel so...amazing! Had he touched her here, she wondered, letting her fingers slide lower. With one hand teasing her nipple and her other hand sliding between her legs, she pretended that Ritton was doing this, not her. That he was in the shower with her and not off somewhere doing something she knew anything about. He was here, with her and teasing her until...!

Oreylia moaned as she crested the wave of pleasure. With a sigh, she opened her eyes and...looked right into Ritton's hungry gaze.

"Don't stop!" he growled, pushing his loose pants down to the floor and stepping out of them. He was already fully erect as he came towards the shower. "Keep going!" he ordered, palming his erection and stroking himself slowly. Ritton stepped into the shower, his eyes blazing with heat.

Oreylia didn't know what to say. She should be embarrassed, but she was too turned on for that. He'd seen her! And it had brought him to her? Oh my! She'd do that every morning if this was her reward.

"I'm...uh...done," she whispered, her cheeks flaring with heat. She wasn't, but was too self-conscious to keep going.

Ritton braced a hand against the wall behind her head, still stroking his throbbing erection. "What do you like to

think about when you touch yourself?” he asked huskily.

Oreylia choked, not expecting such a question.

“Tell me,” he ordered, stepping in close. He took her hand and placed it on his shaft. “I think of you doing this to me.” He covered her fingers with his, showing her how to stroke him as he stared into her eyes. “I think of being deep inside of you, watching your breasts dance, tasting your nipples.” He moved her hand faster. “I think of how good you taste, how gorgeous you look when you climax in my arms.”

Oreylia made a strange noise in the back of her throat, and then gasped when he released her hand.

“Tell me what you think about,” he ordered again, his hands coming up to gently cup her breasts. “This? Do you think about what it feels like when I touch you like this?”

She whimpered, her eyes drifting closed.

“Look at me,” he commanded firmly. As she opened her eyes, Oreylia felt his hardness press into her hands. It was a strange sensation to be touching him like this, while he teased her breasts, but she enjoyed how good it felt. “Or do you prefer this?” He pinched her nipples lightly. “I saw you do that to yourself and I was envious.”

“Of what?” she asked, needing to hear him say the words.

“I was envious,” he whispered, his mouth hovering over hers, “because I wanted to do this to you.”

That’s when she felt his hand slide lower, his fingers teasing her core. With impressive accuracy, he rubbed one finger over her nub, teasing it to life again.

Oreylia gasped, her hand tightening around his shaft. He groaned, leaning in to kiss her hard! She lifted up onto her toes, and also spread her legs wider, giving him better access. Every time he teased her nub, Oreylia’s hand tightened on his shaft, stroking him harder or sliding over the top. She didn’t realize what she was doing, but her stroking hands guided his

fingers against her nub, teaching him exactly how she liked to be touched. Because every time he did something she liked, every stroke of his finger that brought her closer to pleasure, she stroked the tip of his shaft, bringing him right up to that precipice with her.

Their breathing grew harsh as they teased and tormented the other. Firmer, lighter, faster, and then slower. Their fingers and hands moved together, the warm water cascading over their bodies until...!

Oreylia cried out first, her body quaking with the force of her climax and her hand automatically tightened on his shaft. When he groaned with his pleasure, Oreylia smiled against his mouth, thrilled with herself as well as her amazing husband.

Sighing, she opened her eyes to find Ritton watching her with a slight smile on his features as well.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

Reluctantly, she released him, then quickly turned into the water, squeezing more of that lovely pine scented body wash onto her hands to finish her shower. She hadn’t planned to wash her hair, but before she could say so, she felt his strong hands moving into her hair, gently lathering in the most soothing way.

“You’re embarrassed. Why?” he asked, continuing to massage her scalp.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. I want to hear you say it.” His fingers pressed against the base of her skull and she moaned. “We need to be open and honest with each other. If I did something you don’t like, you’d tell me, right?”

“Yes,” she sighed, closing her eyes and unconsciously leaning back against his chest.

“Then why won’t you tell me what’s on your mind?” He nipped at her shoulder. “And I know you enjoyed what we

just did, Oreylia. I felt you climax against my hand.” He soothed the spot with a kiss. “And I loved you doing that to me. Your hand felt like a hot, tight glove around my shaft, it was incredible.”

“Ritton!” she hissed, but a smile curled at her mouth. “You really...liked it?”

“I loved it,” he emphasized. “And I loved watching you touch yourself as well.” He brushed his lips against the nape of her neck, making her shiver. “Will you touch yourself for me again sometime?”

She laughed, feeling suddenly euphoric. “Yes,” she replied, then turned around to rinse the shampoo out of her hair. “Thank you!” Oreylia even managed to lift up onto her toes to kiss him.

He grunted, then shampooed his own hair. “You’re going to smell like me,” he warned.

“That’s a good thing!”

He chuckled and ogled her butt as she reached for his conditioner.

“What’s on your schedule for today?” she asked.

Another grunt and he took the bottle of conditioner from her, using a much smaller amount for his hair. “I am going to look over these new offices you’ve selected.” He lifted a dark eyebrow at her surprised expression. “What? You didn’t think I’d hear about your day? I always hear about what you’ve been up to, even while I’m gone.”

Some of her joy faded with his words. “You know, Ritton, you can call me if you want to know what I’m doing. You don’t have to have your staff spy on me.”

Immediately, his expression shuttered and she wanted to smack herself for saying anything. Then she shook herself mentally.

“Right,” she muttered, frustration eating at her as she turned away, quickly rinsing the conditioner out of her hair.

She snapped a towel off of the stack as she stepped out of the shower and vigorously dried herself.

“Why are you angry with me?”

She turned around to glare at him, ignoring the way her wet hair dripped down her shoulders. “Because you want a ‘companionable marriage’ with me. While I want something real. I want a husband who cares about me instead of keeping me at a careful distance!” She sputtered her frustration. “I don’t even understand why you insist on keeping me at arm’s length, Ritton. I just...!”

She saw the way his shoulders drooped and the closed, almost blank look and gave up, aware that she wasn’t getting through to him. He’d shut down. Hell, he was probably thinking about his next meeting!

“I have work to do!” she snapped and turned away, hurrying back into her own bedroom. Immediately, she felt the sadness envelope her. She rushed into her dressing room, grabbed some clothes and dressed at the speed of light. As she’d done yesterday, Oreylia didn’t bother with makeup or even drying her hair. She simply twisted it up into a bun and rushed out of that horrible bedroom. She was going to have to find a new place to sleep, dress, and shower, she thought. Because there was no way she was sleeping in that bedroom ever again. Nor would she sleep with her husband! Obviously, this marriage had been a monumental mistake!

Was she already pregnant? Ritton hadn’t used any kind of protection when they’d made love on their wedding night. Had that really only been three days ago?

Goodness, time flies when one is miserable!

Ritton cursed under his breath as he left their apartment. Heading to his office, he went over the conversation he’d just had with Oreylia. He knew he’d messed up by mentioning her offices, but he wasn’t exactly sure how he’d messed up.

Was it merely because his staff had mentioned to him that she'd requested offices and he was curious? He didn't care that she had a role she was passionate about. If anything, he was glad that she had an interest that would occupy her time. Hell, they'd discussed her work before they'd married. He truly appreciated her efforts and was eager for her to start helping women and children in his country. So why would she think he would mind her setting up offices?

Or was it because he hadn't asked her about the offices? Was that his mistake? Had she wanted to tell him what she was doing during the day? He remembered the week prior to their marriage. They'd sat down to breakfast and dinner each night discussing various political issues. He'd become very aware of her political opinions and appreciated her sharp mind. But had they ever discussed the events that had happened during their days? He remembered reading an article that talked about how married life wasn't about the big things. A good marriage acknowledged the daily activities.

Unfortunately, Ritton didn't remember discussing anything along those lines.

And yet, he vaguely remembered the shimmering hope in her pretty, dark eyes. She'd wanted to tell him the news. She'd wanted to give him an update on her progress. He had to assume that was what was bothering her.

He rubbed the back of his neck with a deep sigh as he entered his office. They hadn't ever talked about their days before, but if they were to become companions, maybe that wouldn't be a step over the line. Maybe he could appease her fragile feelings by...hell, he had no idea! Maybe it would be progress if he...? Gave her a nightly play by play of the meetings he endured every damn day? Told her about the endless reports that crossed his desk that he had to read?

It wasn't interesting stuff. But if talking with her about his day would make Oreylia feel less...whatever...about their relationship, then he could do that.

Walking to his desk, he watched as his assistant brought him a large mug of hot, black coffee. Was Oreylia sipping on her coffee already? Was she in the dining room? Alone? Staring at nothing because she didn't have anyone to talk with over breakfast?

A moment later, Ritton startled his assistant when he rushed by the man's desk with his coffee in hand. "I'll be back later," he announced and headed towards the dining room.

Every other step, he ordered himself to stop, to get back to work. He wasn't going to become involved in his wife's life. He'd told Oreylia before their marriage, hell, before their engagement, that he wanted a companionable marriage. He didn't do emotions. Not anymore!

So, why did he feel a burning ache when he pictured Oreylia sitting at the dining room table alone? She wouldn't look unhappy.

He stopped in the doorway to the dining room, staring at Oreylia, noting her long, dark hair and the defeat in her posture.

He must have made a sound because her head jerked upwards and she stared at him.

"I thought you were working," she finally managed. It wasn't really a question, but he took it as one.

Stepping into the room, delicious scents washed over him as a servant arrived with her breakfast. She'd asked for fruit and some sort of cinnamon scented muffin.

"I was," Ritton replied, stepping into the room and taking a seat. When the dining room servant stepped forward, silently asking what he wanted for breakfast, he wasn't sure. He usually waited for his assistant to bring him something and the meal varied from day to day. So he gestured with his coffee cup towards Oreylia's plate. "I'll have the same meal as my wife," he replied, hoping that the muffin was more substantial than it looked.

The servant bowed, then hurried into the kitchen to retrieve another breakfast.

Ritton returned his attention to Oreylia as she carefully cut into the warm muffin, adding a pat of butter. “Why were you sleeping in my bed last night?” he asked, then mentally cursed himself. That hadn’t been what he’d intended to ask. However, now that the question was out there, he did want to know.

Oreylia opened her mouth but before she could utter a word, the shrill voice of his former mother-in-law interrupted.

“Good morning, Ritton!” Noya exclaimed in an oddly singsong voice.

Ritton stood up, smothering his immediate cringe of revulsion. Was it her perfume that bothered him so much? He wasn’t sure if it was her abrasive voice or that awful scent that repulsed him so badly, but it didn’t matter.

“Good morning, Noya. How are you?” he asked, reaching out to shake her hand, but she practically threw herself into his arms, forcing him to catch her. It took a great deal of mental control to keep from gagging. Why the hell did the woman wear so much of the cloying, obnoxious scent? And she didn’t always wear it. What was her rationale for wearing the heavy scent today? He’d like to figure out which days and why Noya doused herself in the horrible scent so that he could avoid her on those days.

However, he gave himself a mental pat on the back for being able to avoid her during her previous few visits.

As Noya pulled away, Ritton looked towards the doorway. “Where is Hala?” he asked.

Noya laughed and waved a hand behind her. “Oh, she stopped by the courtyard where she and her sister used to chat.” Noya turned her head as if addressing Oreylia, but Ritton knew that the words were intended for him. “Hala gets nostalgic every time we visit.” She patted Ritton’s shoulder and laughed, returning her gaze to him. “You know that, silly

man!” Then she glanced at Oreylia again. “Hala and Fatima were always so close and visiting one particular courtyard helps my only remaining daughter feel more connected.” She sighed deeply and shook her head. “Or that’s what she says, at least.” She leaned forward slightly and Ritton had to fight not to lean away as she added in a conspiratorial tone, “Personally, I think she just needs to get the tears out of the way before she presents herself to you. She doesn’t like to impose her grief on others.”

Ritton nearly choked on his disbelief because if there’s one thing Noya and Hala seemed to enjoy, it was announcing as loudly as possible, to everyone, how they were still grieving for Fatima.

He shot an aghast glance at Oreylia, wondering if she felt the same irritation at Noya’s presence as he did. But his wife stood politely to one side, wearing a placid smile. He wanted to pull Oreylia aside and ask her if she was okay with Noya’s visits, but his wife appeared to be unaffected by the older woman’s visit. Even welcoming. So instead, he bowed slightly. “I’ll leave you ladies to enjoy your breakfast without me.”

And with that, he walked out of the dining room, wishing he could banish Noya and her annoying daughter from the palace forever. However, if Noya was helping Oreylia to settle into her role as his wife and advise her on how to take charge of her responsibilities, then he felt he should allow it.

He passed by the long hallway that led to his apartment and noticed a movement from the corner of his eye. Pausing, he narrowed his eyes. No one should be in that hallway except himself and Oreylia. And his guards, of course. Had the movement been only one of his guards patrolling the hallway?

He continued to watch for another long moment, waiting for another movement. Was he seeing things now?

“Your Highness?” one of his guards prompted.

Ritton shook his head. “Nothing. It was nothing.”

Then he moved on, heading back to his office. Of course, now he didn't have his coffee, since he'd abandoned it in the dining room. And he was still curious about the muffin he'd left behind. Plus, he really wanted to talk with Oreylia. Not about anything specific, but now that he'd gotten the idea into his head, he realized he truly did want to hear about her day.

Oreylia watched with a heavy dose of resignation as Noya settled into the chair that Ritton had previously occupied. She'd been thrilled to see him, not expecting to after the way they'd left each other earlier. So, to have him walk into the dining room had been...pleasantly exciting. There was no other term for what she'd felt. Straight up, happy excitement.

But his mother-in-law's sudden invasion had put a stop to whatever Ritton had been about to say. And now, Noya's disgusting perfume was making Oreylia's stomach twist alarmingly. What was that horrible scent? And had the woman bathed in it? Noya definitely didn't understand the concept of “less is more”.

Orelia wanted to tell the grating woman to get the hell out of the breakfast room, or at least, stay far away from her. She'd wanted a nice, peaceful breakfast where she could go over her schedule for the day. When Ritton had stepped into the room, she'd hoped for something wonderful. Just five minutes in his presence made her body sing.

Of course, it didn't hurt that he'd given her such a lovely orgasm less than thirty minutes ago!

Noya waited until Ritton was out of the room and Oreylia's stomach muscles tightened with dread. That dread had nothing to do with the awful perfume and everything to do with whatever horrible “advice” Noya was about to impart.

The older woman sighed with relief, clapped her hands, then sat down without waiting for an invitation. “You’re not going to eat all of those carbs, are you dear?” She didn’t wait for a response before she continued, “You’re eventually going to have to leave the palace and confront the journalists and photographers that are eagerly awaiting an introduction. They want to know who you are, darling. And cameras always add ten pounds!”

Oreylia groaned silently. But since Ritton hadn’t seen fit to ban Noya from the palace, Oreylia supposed she couldn’t either. Such a pity.

Oreylia curved her fingers around the delicate, porcelain cup, warming her hands from the heat of her coffee. “Noya, you must realize the press already knows all about me. They’ve written extensively about my work in the past. And there are probably hundreds, maybe even thousands, of photographs of me in circulation already.”

Noya waved the comment away. She glanced over at the dining room servant who had stopped in the doorway with Ritton’s forgotten breakfast. “Oh, excellent, you’ve brought me breakfast. I haven’t eaten a thing since yesterday at lunch and I’m famished.”

The servant hesitated, looking over at Oreylia. When she nodded her agreement, the servant came forward with the elaborately cut fruit and a warm cinnamon roll, then quickly bowed himself out of the room.

Lucky bastard, Oreylia thought as she pushed the fruit around on her plate. She wasn’t hungry anymore. Not when this woman and her stench had ruined the meal.

“Dear, you simply *must* set up interviews! You have to establish yourself as Ritton’s bride. You must assert your authority and let the world know who you are!” Then she halved the roll, adding butter to one side. Apparently, worrying about carbs only applied to Oreylia.

“I’m sure you’re right,” Oreylia replied with as much sincerity as she could fake. A moment later, Hala stepped into the room, wiping at tears that Oreylia suspected weren’t real, then smiled sweetly at the dining room servant standing with his back to the wall.

“Would you mind getting me a cup of herbal tea?” she asked in a sickly sweet tone.

The servant disappeared and Hala minced daintily over to the table, pulling out a chair and perching her tiny butt on the edge. “I’m better, Mother. Thank you for those moments alone with Fatima. She’s doing well.”

Noya nodded as if that made perfect sense to her. “Yes, I’m grateful to you for keeping in touch with her. I wish I had that ability, but alas, my talents lay elsewhere.”

Hala smiled and Oreylia was sure the woman practiced that angelic expression in the mirror every morning, just to ensure that she did it correctly. Oreylia was also quite sure that the younger woman was evil to the core. She just couldn’t prove it!

Oreylia stood up and smiled at the two women. “Ladies, I hate to leave you but I have a great deal of work to get done today. Enjoy your breakfasts and I’m sure that the guards will escort you out when you are finished.”

Hala gasped and Noya glared at her. “Are you insinuating that we are not allowed to adequately mourn the loss of my darling girl?”

Oreylia wondered how much longer the woman needed to be in the palace to “mourn”.

“Of course you may mourn for as long as you need,” she managed to get out. But some niggles caused her to think that these women were up to something. Something more than simply undermining Oreylia’s self-esteem. So instead of smiling, she simply said, “My guards will ensure you both are well protected while within the palace. We wouldn’t want

either of you to be hurt within these honored walls, would we?” she asked.

For some reason, the women’s jaws dropped almost simultaneously. That only confirmed to Oreylia that the women were up to no good. They were scheming about something!

And that made her wonder where Hala had actually been. The younger woman had been alone for at least ten minutes, maybe longer. Oreylia was definitely going to speak with the head of palace security. Something didn’t smell right and it wasn’t Noya’s sickly perfume.

“Why would we need protection here in the palace?” Hala asked innocently, obviously the more practiced of the two. “We’re perfectly safe, but we do appreciate the thought.”

Noya nodded emphatically.

Their effusive refusal only made Oreylia even more certain that they were doing something that they shouldn’t be doing. What that could be, she couldn’t possibly guess. But she knew one way to find out!

“Nonsense!” she insisted sweetly. “You are a very special person to my husband. I must ensure your safety whenever possible.” She lifted a hand when Noya started to argue. “I won’t hear any more about it. You are important to my husband, therefore, you are important to me. I am going to take a very special interest in your safety when you are here in the palace.” She glanced at the time on her phone and sighed dramatically. “Unfortunately, I don’t have time for breakfast. I have interviews for potential staff members.” She pasted a bright, falsely friendly smile on her face. “Please excuse me, ladies.”

Without a second thought, she turned on her heel and left the dining room. She really did have a lot planned for this morning, but her “interview” was really a meeting with the head of the human resources department. Oreylia needed staff

and today was the day she started the search for the best people to help her with her programs.

Several hours later, Oreylia grimaced at the time. She'd wanted to speak with the palace head of security about following Noya and Hala around whenever they visited the palace, but the day quickly got away from her. She spoke with the human resources director and that led to immediate conversations with several palace staff members who were interested in the job postings. Because Oreylia wanted to dive right into setting up the new programs, she immediately spoke with the candidates, who also knew of several people within the community who might also be interested in helping either directly or with finding places they could use for staging of the new programs.

By the time she finished with her interviews and meetings, it was after eight o'clock at night and she was exhausted, but also exhilarated. She'd made a lot of progress today and felt...good!

Walking into her bedroom, the exhilaration vanished abruptly and she suddenly felt as if the weight of the world had fallen onto her shoulders. All she wanted was to slip into a hot bath and soak for the next hour with a glass of wine by her side. She didn't even want food. Eating would require too much energy.

"What's wrong?" Ritton demanded.

Oreylia jumped, startled. Turning, she found him sitting in a deep chair with a sheaf of papers on his lap.

"Why are you in here instead of your office?" she asked, instead of answering his question.

Ritton eyed her carefully, noting the lines of fatigue around her mouth and eyes. "Because I was worried about you," he replied, putting the papers aside so that he could stand up. "I've been waiting for you."

"You...have?" she asked, perking up very slightly.

“Yes.”

Oreylia opened her mouth to say something, but paused and sniffed the air. “Does it smell weird in here to you?”

His eyes widened, but he hesitated, sniffing the air carefully. He looked around, almost as if looking for a dead animal stuffed into a corner. “Yes. But...I can’t really place the smell.” He sniffed again then said, “I hadn’t noticed the scent until you said something. Now that you’ve pointed it out...!” He sniffed again and made a face, then took her hand and led her into his bedroom. “That’s awful,” he growled. Then with one hand, he spun her around. “Tell me about your day.”

Oreylia jumped, startled by his demand. “Well... um...!” She backed up a few steps, but he followed her, his eyebrows drawn low over his eyes. “Why are you coming towards me like that?” she whispered.

Ritton let his eyes roam up and down her body “Because you make me burn for you,” he admitted. Shaking his head, he added, “I don’t want that, Oreylia.”

She flinched as if he’d struck her. When he reached toward her, she pulled away. “What do you want from me?”

He snarled his answer. “I *want* an uncomplicated, platonic friendship where we figure out how to produce an heir!” He took a slow, deep breath, then added, “But you won’t let me have that, will you?”

She inhaled sharply. “What am I doing to stop you? I’m just—”

He stopped abruptly, his hands coming to press on both sides of his head. “You come into my world and drive me wild!” he snapped, interrupting her. “You make me want you! You distract me from everything that I know I should be doing!”

“I...do?” she whispered, secretly thrilled but trying to hide it. She kept moving backwards as he stalked her, but felt

her shoulders hit the wall behind her. But with his exclamation, Oreylia wasn't sure that she wanted to escape. Not anymore!

“Yes!” he snarled and stepped even closer, blocking her in. “I wanted something easy. I wanted a marriage where I could be friends with my wife.”

That hurt! “I'm not your friend?”

He lowered his head, his eyes still angry. “My friends don't distract me when they come home late,” he whispered harshly. He nipped at her ear. As punishment? “Friends don't distract me all day long, making me think about them naked or make me want to do salacious things to their bodies!”

She swallowed hard, her mind reeling even as her body reacted to his words. “What kinds of salacious things?” she asked.

“I want to make you lose your mind. Because you make me feel like that every time I look at you!”

“I...do?”

“Yes!”

He pressed his thigh between hers, shifting her legs apart. When she acquiesced, he lifted her higher against his thigh, pressing firmly while he gripped her hips, keeping her in that vulnerable position. “I want to know what you're doing when I can't see you. And that is distracting.”

“Oh!”

“When I'm in a meeting, I wonder where you are. Who you are meeting with.” He kissed the other side of her neck, then sucked hard against the skin. Oreylia wondered if she would need a scarf tomorrow, but when his grip tightened on her hips, shifting her core against his rock-hard thigh, she decided that she didn't care. Not at all!

Ritton lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed. He wanted her naked, but didn't think he could wait long enough to make it happen. What he could do was drive her wild with his mouth. With that purpose in mind, he laid her down on his bed, then pressed her legs wider. She was still dressed in a pretty scarlet dress. He felt like a bull seeing that red.

“Why do you need to know?” she asked, breathlessly and he could see the challenge burning in her eyes.

That only waved the red flag harder.

“Because you are *my* woman and I need to know every damn thing about you!” he growled, pushing her onto her back and spreading her legs further. “Why would you want to hide something from me?”

He ripped her panties off without bothering to draw them down her legs. He heard the sharp intake of breath and knew that she was wet and ready for him.

“This isn't very companionable, Ritton.”

“I don't feel companionable,” he snarled back. “What. Did. You. Do?”

She laughed, propping herself up on her elbows while she opened her legs still further. She was taunting him and he was very much up to the challenge!

“You're not going to tell me?”

She smiled, shifting backwards on the bed. “I don't think so. Companions don't tell each other *everything*. Companions are selective of what they share.”

Between her taunting gaze and her clearly issued challenge, not to mention the delectable scent of her arousal, Ritton was brought to a fever pitch.

“Oh, so that's how it's going to be, eh?”

She shrugged playfully. “Yeah. You're not the only one who can make rules in this relationship.”

He growled again, then pushed her dress up and out of the way before sliding his finger down through her glistening, pink folds. “You think you can resist me?”

She froze, her eyes dilated and he noticed her hands clenching into fists by her sides.

“You can’t, love,” he explained with infinite patience. He leaned over her, close enough that she could feel his breath along her inner thighs. “Tell me what I want to know and I’ll make this easy for you.”

She tried to wiggle away, starting to realize his intent. But that only turned him on further still.

“I don’t have to tell you anything. You want to be a companion. You want to be frie...!” she gasped as his mouth latched onto her nub, his tongue flicking mercilessly against her. He licked his way along her folds, then returned to suckling on that sensitive nub. She was gasping for breath, her hips rocking against his mouth but he wasn’t ready to allow her a release. Not until she gave him what he wanted.

“Tell me, Oreylia,” he ordered between licks.

“We’re *companions*, Ritton!” she yelled, still trying to squirm away. But he caught her hips, bringing her right back to him and holding her there. Remembering everything he’d ever read about the female body, plus his own intuition about Oreylia’s particular preferences, he continued sucking, then licking when she got too close to a climax. She was screaming his name within minutes, but he pulled back, gentling her. He could feel the shaking in her limbs, could hear it in her hitched breath. She was so close and he was so turned on, he could barely see straight. But this...tormenting his beautiful wife, was one of the hottest experiences of his life.

“Tell me about your day and I’ll give you what you want.”

She laughed, but there was no amusement in her voice. “You set the rules!” she shrieked. He watched in delight as she reached for her nub, rubbing and circling that

part of her that he knew desperately needed relief. But when he realized that she was on the brink of climaxing, he pulled her hand away, bringing her fingers to his lips as he sucked the juices from them. Then licked his lips while she screamed his name with frustration. She was crazed now, pulling out of his arms and glaring at him.

“You’re a bastard!” she yelled, then whimpered when she tried to crawl off the bed, only to turn around and crawl back towards him. “Please, Ritton. I just need...I need...!”

“I need to know what you did today,” he soothed, stroking her back as he pulled her onto his lap. He was fully clothed and her dress had fallen back down over her naked hips, but they both knew what was underneath.

Oreylia wiggled on his lap, trying to shift so that she was straddling his hips. “Ritton, please,” she whispered, licking her lips as she fumbled to release the buttons on his shirt. “Can we talk about this later?”

“I don’t think so, love,” he replied, unzipping her dress as she pulled his shirt away, placing small licks on the skin she revealed.

“Meetings,” she hissed, shifting so that she was actually straddling his lap. She wiggled closer, groaning when she felt his erection exactly where she needed it to be. Gripping his shoulders, she rolled her hips, lifting her hands briefly when he pulled her dress up and over her head, dumping it on the floor behind her.

“Who else attended those meetings?” he asked, lifting her hips slightly so that she was pressing against him more perfectly.

She hissed as she fumbled with his zipper. “Um...,” she couldn’t really pay attention to the conversation and Ritton knew it. The fact that he could so completely distract her was making his head spin with desire. He wanted to hold out. He wanted to *make* her talk to him. But her fumbling, frantic fingers had released his erection. She began stroking him with

slow, firm movements that he felt all the way down to his toes. She knelt at his feet and...holy...! Her mouth covered his shaft, licking the tip then enveloping him fully. He gripped her hair, the heat of her mouth on his erection overwhelming him. But she kept going as he fought not to explode! Tightening his grip in her hair, he watched for a long moment, their eyes meeting briefly before she returned her full attention to her task.

Between the sensations of her mouth and hand, plus watching her suck and lick him in such an inexperienced, and yet completely devastating way, it made him lose control. He flipped her onto her back, pulled her legs over his shoulders, and thrust into her. Hard! For a brief moment, Ritton worried that he'd hurt her but she merely rolled her hips, silently demanding more. So, he gave her more. He thrust into her harder, faster, his thumb rubbing that sensitive nub to ensure that she found her pleasure quickly because Ritton knew that he couldn't last much longer!

He clenched his teeth, holding back on his own pleasure until he heard her scream. Suddenly, her inner muscles clenched him tighter and her pleasure pushed him over the edge with her. He clung to her as he pounded into her again and again, the pleasure a continuous cascade of throbbing release. He emptied himself into her, feeling a wave of tenderness for this woman who had turned the tables on him so completely.

When it was all over, he rolled onto his back, bringing her with him. He stroked her back as she snuggled against his chest. He felt her soft sighs, her sweet breath warming his skin. It was a shock to realize that he hadn't even taken off her bra. He was a breast man, but he hadn't given her breasts any attention.

Still, he stroked her body, feeling an occasional shiver and smiled. This was his woman, he thought. Damn, she was beautiful!

Oreylia was too sated to move. What had just happened? One moment, he'd been demanding...what? What had he asked her to explain? She wasn't really sure because the past...however long...was a rather sensual blur. But she remembered that Ritton had asked her about something.

About her day? Yes, that was it. He'd wanted to know about her day. What she'd done and who she'd met with.

Why? Why was her schedule suddenly so important to him?

Was it because he wanted to control who she met with? No, that didn't make any sense. He had never tried to restrict her movements. On the one hand, if he did ever try to do that, she'd rebel against him. She would like to believe that she'd leave him, but Ritton had all of the power in this relationship.

She smiled, thinking of the power she held. As soon as she'd taken him into her mouth, she had taken the power. All the power. He'd been stunned. After only moments of her licking him like that, she'd been in control.

Oreylia giggled, remembering how little control she'd had. The man had flipped her over and taken back every bit of control.

“What's so funny?” he asked, his voice low and sexy.

She twisted her head so that her chin rested on his chest. “I was just contemplating life,” she fibbed.

He stroked her hair, his fingers tangling in the mussed tresses. She loved when he touched her hair like that. She wanted to purr!

“I'd really like to know what you did today.”

She opened her eyes and frowned quizzically into his darkly intense gaze. “Why?”

He looked confused by her question and shrugged. “I don't know. I guess,” he sighed and ran a hand over his face,

then looked down at her again. He stuffed a pillow behind his head. “I guess because I just do. Maybe because so far, you won’t tell me.”

Oreylia considered that for a long moment, unaware of how she was biting her lower lip as she thought back to the events of the day. She’d been hurt when he’d announced that his staff had spied on her. Now, he was asking her what she’d done during the day? What did that mean? Was she fooling herself with the possibility that he might...care...for her? Just a little?

It was such a wonderful possibility that she hugged it to her heart for a long moment. Before she’d decided where to start telling him about her day, he’d flipped her over so that he was looking down at her again. “You know, it suddenly occurred to me that you might just be being stubborn now.” Her eyes widened as she felt him harden inside of her. She squirmed, gasping as he filled her. Then moaned when he thrust a little deeper into her.

“Ritton!” she hissed, grabbing onto his shoulders as her hips shifted against his body. He thrust harder.

“I am rather astonished that your stubbornness is such a turn on for me, Oreylia.”

She was too wrapped up in the moment to respond. “I don’t think—”

“Don’t think, love,” he urged. “Just feel.”

This time, he wasn’t fast and furious. This time, Ritton went slowly, thrusting deeply into her, ensuring that his body rubbed against that nub with every delicious thrust. She hadn’t thought she could take another round. At least, not so soon. But Ritton’s rhythm caused her body to tighten almost immediately. Instead of screaming as she had during the last round, Oreylia sighed and moaned, her hips undulating in time with his rhythm. The heat built slowly, an unrelenting march toward that ultimate pleasure.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice rumbling over her as he watched her.

“Yes,” she replied, lifting her legs to wrap around his waist. “More than okay.”

He reached out, cupping her breast. He continued thrusting in and out of her, while teasing her nipple, pinching, soothing, then pinching again. It was almost as if his pinching and soothing came in sync with his thrusts. Oreylia moaned, her hands sliding up his chest. She rubbed her fingers against his nipples and felt him shudder in response. So, she did it again, mimicking his attention to her nipples.

And that’s when their slow, easy lovemaking shifted into high gear. With each teasing the other’s nipples, pinching and stroking in time with their thrusts, the tension skyrocketed. There were no more slow, easy thrusts. Now it was an urgent, frantic need to fulfill each other. Now, it was hot breath and burning need.

When their orgasms came this time, it was almost as if the air held its breath for a long moment. Then it was there, groans echoed through the room as they climaxed together.

Oreylia wasn’t sure she could move, even if she wanted to. Their limbs were tangled together. It was as if they had truly become one.

Endless moments later, he carried her into the shower. The warm water washed away the scent of their lovemaking and she leaned into him, too stunned by the past several hours to process exactly what had just happened. Oh, she knew that they’d had incredible, mind-blowing, life altering sex. But now that their lives were “altered”, what was next? What did it all mean? She fell asleep in his arms, nude and sated, but her head was still reeling with confusion.

Chapter 10

Oreylia sat at the dining room table, waiting on her usual breakfast of a bran muffin and fresh fruit. She was earlier than normal, so she didn't mind the wait.

The reality was, she needed some time away from Ritton. Last night had been...unexpected, to say the least. Beautiful and satisfying in some ways, but...she was baffled. Last night, he'd been so adamant initially. She'd been angry earlier because he'd learned of her schedule through his staff. Then he'd sexually teased her into giving him details of her day? That didn't make any sense!

Unless he was trying to make amends for sending his staff to spy on her. But what did that mean?

A noise outside the dining room pulled her out of her contemplation. Standing up, she moved to the doorway and secretly smiled. Her bodyguards had orders to not let Noya and Hala into the room. Finally, they'd stopped the women's abrupt entry!

"Oreylia, tell this...goon...to allow me into the dining room!" Noya demanded, tugging at her fitted jacket. Had she actually tried to physically move one of the guards out of the way? Is that why her scarf was hanging at an odd angle?

"Noya, I appreciate your offer of assistance," Oreylia lied smoothly. "However, you need to call before coming for a visit. I have a very busy schedule today and I don't have time to..." she searched for the right word. After a huff, she shrugged and continued. "I don't have time for your passive aggressive shots at me. In fact, if it were up to me, you would never be allowed into the palace again, under any circumstances."

"You can't do that!" Noya hissed. "I come first in Ritton's life, not you!"

Oreylia was starting to doubt that. “Then, if you want to visit the palace, I expect you to call Ritton’s assistant first. His schedule is extremely tight as well.”

Noya visibly fought to pull herself together, and folded her hands together in front of her. “It isn’t Ritton that needs my help. You are the one that is going to humiliate our country.” She huffed a bit, jerking her jacket straighter. “Oreylia, you can’t just—”

Oreylia’s eyes narrowed. “I have not given you leave to address me so informally,” she announced, putting all of her royal upbringing into her tone. “As I said, from now on, you *will* phone before visiting the palace. And going forward, you will address me as ‘Your Highness’ and I will not hear any criticism or disrespect from you.” Oreylia stepped closer. “Is that understood?” she asked, her voice low and threatening.

To her left, Oreylia heard a gasp, then a muffled chuckle. She looked around to see Hala coming around the corner. The younger woman stopped, her hand covering her mouth but there was glee sparkling in her eyes as she watched the unfolding scene.

Oreylia didn’t bother to say anything more. She simply turned on her heel and headed away from the dining room. She wasn’t hungry any longer.

She should probably return to their private apartment and warn Ritton about what she’d just decreed, but before she could Daniesh appeared, clapping his hands delightedly. “Well done, my dear!” he laughed, as he draped his arm over her shoulders and fell into step beside her. “I’ve wanted to tell that bitch to go to hell ever since my brother decided to marry her eldest daughter.”

When they rounded the corner, she stopped and Daniesh let his arm drop away. “Is Ritton going to be upset with me?”

Daniesh laughed harder, shaking his head. “No way. He can’t stand her either. Besides, Noya was becoming

obnoxious about her not-so-subtle campaign to get Ritton to marry Hala. He'd been resisting, feigning ignorance whenever she mentioned the idea."

"But, why wouldn't he just—"

"Guilt," he answered before she could finish her question. "My brother feels responsible for Fatima's suicide. He thinks he should have realized how depressed she was. He believes that he should have recognized the signs."

Oreylia tilted her head thoughtfully. "Were there any signs? Was she sad or depressed?"

"Not that I ever noticed," Daniesh replied with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders. "She was always happy and sweet." He considered those words for a moment, tilting his head slightly. "Except when her mother was around." He grimaced. "I've often wondered if Fatima married Ritton just so she could get away from her mother."

Oreylia shivered. "I've endured Noya's lovely brand of 'encouragement' for only a short period of time. I cannot imagine how anyone could deal with it longer than a few days. No wonder Hala wants to get away from her mother so desperately."

Daniesh continued walking with Oreylia beside him. "Hala has her own ways of dealing with her mother. Hala isn't nearly as...innocent and sweet as she tries to come across."

"How do you know?"

He grunted slightly as they walked into his office. "Because Hala has made several passes at me, promising sexual favors that I didn't even know were physically possible." He gave a mock shudder.

Oreylia laughed, then looked around at Daniesh's space. "This is where you work all day long?"

Daniesh looked around as well, then shrugged. "Not as pretty as what you're used to?"

She laughed. “*Six* monitors? Do you really need all six?”

He chuckled. “I like knowing what’s happening in different parts of the world. He gestured to the other side of the desk. “I can see what’s happening on eight different stock exchanges and even track the futures on those markets.” He pointed to another monitor. “This one tracks the various stocks I’m interested in buying, and I monitor their progress over time.” He pointed to a third. “And this one shows me live feeds. I’ve set up alarms for various industries so I know what’s happening and when. I also track legislation in various countries so I can anticipate how the potential laws might impact my investments or the economy here.” He pointed to yet another screen. “And this is my message board so I can communicate with the various people who work for me. They research different issues for me that help me make better decisions.”

“Very impressive!” she said with a laugh.

He gave her a mock bow. “I appreciate your praise.”

She chuckled and rolled her eyes. “You are the last person who needs an ego boost.”

He slapped a hand to the middle of his chest. “Are you saying I’m arrogant?”

Oreylia was able to produce an innocent expression, which only made him laugh harder. He wrapped her up in a bear hug, kissing the top of her head before he released her. “Go away cruel woman! I need to recover from your vicious words!”

She laughed as she left his office, heading to her own. The man was an impressive figure and she didn’t understand why someone hadn’t snatched him up already!

However, as soon as she stepped into her office, her laughter died as she found she had about fifty issues to deal with. Oreylia was amazed at how desperately so many

organizations want to help with her brand of programs. It was both flattering and overwhelming.

Chapter 11

Noya tapped her foot impatiently as she waited at Ritton's office door. The man would have to speak with her eventually. The bastard's assistant kept telling her that he was busy, he was in a meeting, he was speaking with blah blah! She didn't care who had called to speak with Ritton, she was more important! Noya was the woman who had given birth to his wife! Well, his first wife, which was far more important than the classless bitch that had just spoken down to her! Noya was Oreylia's superior in every way!

Finally, the door opened and Ritton stepped out.

"It's about time!" she snapped and didn't wait for him to invite her inside. She swept past him, regal in her demeanor, because she was nearly royalty anyway.

Hala followed right at her heels and Noya glared at her younger daughter. "You don't need to be here for this," she snapped.

Hala merely perched her dainty derriere on the edge of the leather sofa. "I'm here to support you, Mother," she replied softly, tilting her head slightly.

Noya merely glared, hating her daughter for her pure, unwrinkled skin and the perky boobs. Noya had been the beauty of her time, but that was years ago! Now she was just...well, it didn't matter, she reminded herself as she straightened her back.

"What is bothering you, Noya?" Ritton asked, his tone neutral.

Good! That meant that Oreylia hadn't gotten her story in first! It was always the first person to get their story in that won the battle!

"Your wife just insulted me!" she whispered, adding a sniff. She would have conjured up a few tears, but Noya was

too angry. It took concentration to produce credible tears.

“Is that so?” Ritton asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “What happened?”

“First of all, she ordered me to address her formally!” She slapped a hand to her chest. “I’m *family*, Ritton. You know this! She needs to be told that I’m part of your family! We will always be connected through Fatima!”

“I will speak with her, Noya.” He stood up, dropping his arms. “Is that all?”

“I wish that was all the little hussy said!” she gasped. She moved closer, her eyes burning with anger. “She also commanded that I call before coming to visit you! She said you were too busy for me and my grief!” The needed tears appeared and Noya mentally patted herself on the back. “The gall of that...*woman*! To tell me that I can’t come to visit you when I need to talk about my precious daughter, or to just visit the places she used to love, to be closer to my dearest daughter.”

Ritton watched the obnoxious woman’s performance, wondering how soon he could get her out of his office. He had a meeting in three minutes and about ten reports he needed to review before this afternoon. Plus, the mention of Oreylia setting down rules for Noya made his body tighten with renewed lust. After last night and this morning, he wasn’t sure how that was possible. He’d left their apartment feeling relaxed and fully in control. Now, hearing that Oreylia had given Noya the set-down that she so richly deserved...! Damn, he wanted her all over again!

“It *would* be better if you called first, Noya. If you would call before visiting, then I could ensure that my wife isn’t around. You would be protected from her viciousness,” he barely won the battle against the traitorous smirk hovering behind his lips, “and you could mourn Fatima in peace. I could have a palace guard escort you to and from your favorite

courtyard. And if Oreylia comes anywhere near you, the guard would protect you from any altercations.” That would also help him limit the number of times Noya came to bother him! He was seriously tired of catering to her grief performances. In fact, he doubted the woman’s grief was real.

Noya’s jaw dropped at his suggestion and he braced himself for another onslaught of tears.

“You....you won’t allow me to be with my first born daughter? My precious angel?”

Ritton glanced over at Hala and caught her rolling her eyes. He almost laughed, but that only confirmed his opinion that Noya was faking her grief.

“Just the opposite! I encourage you to grieve your daughter. But I also think that it’s time to move on, Noya. It’s time to focus on something other than standing alone in the courtyard where you say Fatima loved to be.” He made a mental note to speak with the guards who had protected Fatima. Had his first wife really spent so much of her time in some isolated courtyard? Or was that a ruse as well? He’d felt so much guilt over Fatima’s demise, he hadn’t bothered to confirm most of Noya’s statements.

It hadn’t been until Oreylia’s commands for Noya to call first that he’d thought about what was happening. Had his brilliant, beautiful, and sexy wife just provided the clue he needed to free himself?

He’d have to speak with her. But not during the day. He wasn’t sure he would be able to keep his hands off of Oreylia if he saw her right now.

Of course, he hadn’t seen her new offices yet. He really should be a concerned husband and visit her new workspace. Maybe he could offer her some opinions. Yes, that sounded like a great idea.

“Mother, His Highness doesn’t want to hear about it,” Hala pointed out, rising from her perched position. She sashayed over, her pretty eyes narrowing as Ritton pulled

himself back to the present. “He’s focused on the future now. He has a new wife and he wants to forget the past.”

Ritton frowned at Hala, wondering what she was up to now.

“I am *not* trying to push the past away, Hala,” he replied firmly. “I’m trying to protect you from any harm while you’re in the palace. And apparently, my wife doesn’t like either of you.” He loved the way Hala’s face paled at his words. But she rallied quickly.

“You’re right, of course,” she replied, linking her arm through her mother’s, stopping her mother’s sputtering objections. “Come along, Mother. We’ve been given instructions and we should follow our ruler’s wise decisions.”

Ritton was amazed at how adeptly Hala worked her mother. The two were gone before he could blink.

But he knew palace politics too well. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that something was off about those two.

He turned to his bodyguards who were standing just outside his office door.

“Have Dave,” he began, referring to the head of security, “look into those two.” One guard instantly lifted his wrist radio and began muttering into it. Ritton turned to the other guard. “Also, I want to speak with Fatima’s bodyguards. Where are they now?”

“They are in the security office, Your Highness. I’ll have them here in less than three minutes.”

Ritton lifted his hand. “I have another meeting, so no rush. But have them come to me after my meeting.”

The guard nodded and Ritton headed for the conference room. However, his thoughts weren’t on the current debate. He was sifting through his memories of the time he’d spent with Fatima. She’d been such a delicate, fragile woman, but she’d always had a bright, welcoming

smile when he'd approached her. That was one of the reasons he never realized just how sad she was.

Which was another issue. *No one* had noticed that Fatima had been struggling. Depression and suicide were complex issues and he could never know what went on inside someone's head when they were so sad, so disconnected from the world, that they felt death was the only way out.

But perhaps it was time to do a bit more investigating. Maybe, there was more to his first wife's passing than he realized.

Although, how that could be, he wasn't sure. Fatima had been found in her bed with an empty bottle of sleeping pills at her side.

He stopped abruptly, unaware of his bodyguards' startled glances at the unprecedented cessation. Normally, Ritton moved through the hallways from one meeting to the next with a determined stride, never halting or hesitating. Even if someone needed to speak with him, he usually waved them to walk with him as he continued toward his next task.

At this moment though, he was thinking about something that hadn't occurred to him until now.

Where had Fatima gotten the sleeping pills? At the time, he'd assumed that she'd been taking them for a long time. But he suddenly realized that he'd never seen her take any medication before bedtime. Not even vitamins. And as far as he knew, his first wife hadn't struggled to sleep.

Although, perhaps the reason she hadn't struggled to sleep was because she'd been taking sleeping pills.

He turned to his assistant. "I need to speak with the palace doctor. Can you have him in my office after this meeting?"

His assistant immediately nodded, then they all headed into his next meeting.

Twenty-four hours later, Hala's mother stormed into the house, anger suffusing her features. "What's wrong?" Hala demanded as soon as she saw her mother stomp into the house. She didn't really care, but knew it was always better to understand her mother's moods. Knowledge was power, she reminded herself.

"That..." Noya sputtered, her anger overwhelming her briefly before she finally blurted, "bitch!"

"Since you only just returned from the palace, I suppose the 'bitch' you are referring to is Princess Oreylia?"

Noya turned furious eyes on Hala. "Don't say that woman's name in my presence!"

Hala suppressed her amusement. "Fine. What did 'the bitch' do today?" she asked. "Did Oreylia ignore your advice again? Was she eating too many carbs? Wearing the wrong color dress? Was she in the courtyard that you've convinced everyone was where Fatima loved to contemplate her life?"

Noya tossed her fake designer bag onto the table. "Your sarcasm isn't appreciated," she snapped and slumped onto the down-filled sofa cushion. "She's followed through on her threat to ban me from the palace." Noya's hands curled into fists. "I didn't think she'd do it after yesterday, but the guards wouldn't allow me entry today."

Hala went cold. "Excuse me?" There was no sarcasm in her tone now. Instead, there was a cold fury bubbling up within her.

"The guards told me that I needed to call before I visited the palace going forward. And that I would be escorted around by guards! That whore threatened me with that yesterday, but I didn't think she'd really do it!"

Hala felt a cold finger trail down her spine, then shook her head. "No, that's not going to work, Mother." She stood up and stalked to stand over her mother. "You *said* that Ritton would marry me!" she snapped, poking a finger at her chest.

“You *promised* I would be the next queen!” Hala was really working up a temper now. “I gave up marrying Count Vitali last year because *you* said I could do better!” She started pacing. “You promised me a tiara, mother! You promised you had a plan for getting Ritton to marry me! Even after news of his recent marriage, you insisted it wouldn’t last! That she would run home to her big, bad brother and annul the marriage! You had *a plan!*” She huffed, still glaring at her mother as she tried to contain her mounting fury. “I would have been a countess right now if you hadn’t convinced me that I could do better! Now Vitali is married! Besides, I’m too old for him! Even if I could convince the idiot to get rid of his current wife, he wouldn’t want me anymore!”

Noya was shocked by her daughter’s rage for a moment, but rallied quickly. “Don’t take that tone with me, missy!” she sneered. “I can still make this happen! You *will* be the next queen!” She huffed a bit, jerking at the bottom of her suit jacket to straighten it. “Yes, the whore has banned me from the palace for now. But I have other ways.” She bit the tip of her thumb, contemplating the problem. “I will simply have to speed up the time table for my plan.”

Hala watched her stupid mother mince out of the room, looking like she owned the freaking world. Taking a slow, steadying breath, she smoothed down her hair. For a moment, she contemplated flying to Paris tonight and tempting that duke what’s-his-name. He’d been slaving over her for months now. She could wheedle a marriage proposal out of him lickety-split if she put in a little effort.

But maybe there was still hope. Maybe her mother could pull a rabbit out of her hat and get Hala that tiara. Hala had her doubts. She suspected Sheik Ritton was madly in love with his new wife. The signs were there. He hadn’t been this smitten with Fatima. However, Hala knew her older sister hadn’t fully grasped how to use her body and her wiles to gain control of a man.

Hala knew. She knew exactly how to make a man beg. She smoothed a hand over her hip, thinking of the man she'd tormented just last weekend.

Perhaps she needed to increase her efforts on several fronts. It wasn't a good idea to leave anything to chance. Nope, Hala had learned the hard way to keep several options open for her future. And it was better to have those options hot and bothered.

Chapter 12

Ritton stepped into his office, rubbing a hand over his face as he considered the heavy decisions he needed to make. But he was used to this pressure. He'd been raised to grasp the nuances of every decision, understand the pros and cons, and make the hard decisions regardless.

However, it was a surprise to find a professional-looking woman standing in his office.

“Can I help you?” he asked, startling the woman into turning around. She turned and offered him a polite, professional smile. But, sexually, the woman did nothing for him.

Oreylia had done this to him, he thought with an internal surge of happiness. Other women, beautiful, smart, and vital women no longer tempted him. Not that he would have cheated on Oreylia even if they had tempted him. He took his wedding vows seriously. But other women no longer interested him now that he had Oreylia in his life and in his bed. No other woman could compare to his precious wife. She was...his world! When had that happened?

“I believe I'm here to help you,” the woman replied, interrupting his contemplation of his wife and his memories of the previous night. He must have looked mystified because she smiled and folded her hands in front of her. “I'm Doctor Anis. Your assistant mentioned that you wanted to speak with me? However, the man didn't give me any details about your concerns, so I have to admit that I might not be able to answer your questions immediately.”

His memory of wanting to speak with the palace doctor came back to him now. Ritton waved away the doctor's concerns about not being able to answer his questions immediately. “I know. This is something that I didn't want anyone else to know about. Not yet anyway.”

He led her over to the sitting area, gesturing to one of the leather chairs. Once they were seated, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he said, "I need to know if my first wife was ever prescribed sleeping pills." He lifted his hand to stop her objection. "I know that you want to maintain patient confidentiality, but here's my concern. I didn't know that Fatima was taking any sleeping pills. There was no evidence of any medication until I found her in bed after her overdose."

The woman hesitated, then sighed quietly. "Your Highness, I don't know the details of your first wife's medical data. Would you give me some time to review the files before I answer that question?"

Ritton narrowed his eyes on her, knowing that she suspected something and didn't want to say it without proof. "What are you worried about?" he asked.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She considered her words, then made some sort of mental decision before saying, "Sleeping pills aren't an effective way to commit suicide these days." She tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear as she continued. "The newer sleep aides... there was a slew of suicides from sleep aides in the past so the formulas for the newer medicines are safer. It's not impossible to commit suicide from sleeping pills, but it would be difficult."

There was a long silence. Finally, Ritton nodded slowly. "Thank you for that." He contemplated that news, then nodded and stood up. "Please get back to me with whatever information you can about Fatima."

Doctor Anis rose as well and nodded. "You understand, Your Highness, that I wasn't the palace physician during that time period, correct?"

He hadn't known that and said so. "Who was here before?"

“The previous palace doctor died last year. He was eight-five years old.”

Another piece of information that he hadn't known. But he nodded sharply. “Whatever you can find out, I'd appreciate.”

The woman nodded, and gave a slight bow. “I'll dig into the medical files and see what I can learn.” She turned and walked out of his office. She was gone before he thought of something else he wanted to know. But he'd ask about Daniesh's medical situation at another time.

“Or maybe not,” he grumbled, turning to walk around to his desk chair. “Not my business.”

He turned to face his desk, but for some reason, he needed...something else.

Turning resolutely away from the stack of files on his desk, he left his office. For the second time that day, he startled his bodyguards by veering from his normal routines.

Hurrying down the hallway, he went to the bedroom where Fatima had slept. Alone, he looked around, not sure what he was looking for, let alone what he expected to find.

They'd shared this apartment, sleeping in the same room. But he'd also had a separate bedroom that he'd used when he worked late and didn't want to disturb her.

No, that wasn't true, he acknowledged. Until this moment, he hadn't realized the truth about his first marriage. He'd worked late so that he could sleep alone, not the other way around. He'd cared for Fatima, but she'd been a child. She hadn't had any opinions that weren't his own. In fact, he suspected that she'd asked him about his opinions simply so that she could adopt them.

Standing in the middle of their former bedroom, he now accepted that her lack of an independent thought had pissed him off! He'd thought less of her.

Wow! That wasn't something he'd recognized until this moment.

Why hadn't he realized that he hadn't respected Fatima? And what did that imply about her death?

Rubbing a hand over his face, he sighed heavily, not sure why he was here. That's when he realized that the room shouldn't be such a miserable place. Looking around, he wondered why he'd avoided this room so often during his marriage.

Because it was a depressing place? Yes, but not *because* of Fatima's passing. It had been a depressing place to be well before her suicide. He'd always hated this room, hated being in it. Every time he'd slept in here, he'd come away feeling as if the world was about to end! It wasn't until he'd reached his office that he'd felt...relief? No, that wasn't quite right. Joy?

Yes!

Dear heaven, he'd felt a sense of joy and relief whenever he'd escaped this room!

Ritton paused, waiting for the guilt that always washed over him when he thought about Fatima. But the guilt didn't arrive. He didn't feel the usual overwhelming sense of anger or confusion. Instead, he was simply...curious?

What an out of place emotion to feel when he thought back on his first wife's life and untimely passing.

For some reason, he felt the need to look around. What he was looking *for*, he hadn't a clue. Ritton just had a nebulous feeling that something in this room...wasn't right.

Except, it was absent from this room now.

And that's when it hit him. He'd felt that same sense of desolation when he'd walked into Oreylia's room a few days ago!

"What the hell?" he grumbled under his breath.

That's when he heard a panicked scream. He'd just stepped out of Fatima's bedroom when Oreylia screamed at the top of her lungs.

He rushed down the hallway, flinging open the doors so that he could sprint down the hallway to his new apartment.

Another scream rang out. Ritton prayed that her guards were there, protecting her.

He and his guards came to a sliding halt when he took in the tableau. However, Oreylia was safe. She looked frightened, but...she and her guards were ducking down, as if trying to avoid something from above.

But there shouldn't be anything above them!

"What the hell?" he demanded, rushing forward to scoop Oreylia into his arms and carry her to safety. He'd just picked her up when he felt...something. Glancing up, he saw a dark shadow flit across the ceiling.

"What the hell is that?" he roared.

His guards took over, grabbing onto his upper arms, which was awkward since he'd just lifted Oreylia into his arms, and guided him toward the door. But what the hell was the threat? It was just a dark shadow dashing back and forth across the ceiling!

"What is that thing?" he demanded as everyone, including his guards, rushed out of the room. His bodyguards were hovering over him and Oreylia, protecting them with their bodies as everyone rushed out to the hallway.

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure it's possessed!" Oreylia replied, her arms wrapped so tightly around his neck he worried she might choke him.

But, Ritton didn't mind because it showed him that she was alive and safe!

He carefully lowered her feet to the ground, then pushed her behind his back. "I'm going to find out what that

thing is!” Ritton growled, stepping forward.

“Your Highness!” his lead bodyguard argued, “Let us handle this!”

He shook his head. “Something is threatening my woman!” he snarled. “I’m going in there!”

Two more guards moved forward, blocking his entrance to the apartment. “We’re on this,” they both assured him, nearly in unison. The first one continued, “This is *our* job, Your Highness. Let us figure out what’s in there.”

They didn’t wait for his answer. They were gone, pushing the doors closed before he could argue with either of them.

Ritton ran a hand through his hair, frustration almost palpable as he watched the closed door. The other guards surrounded him and Oreylia, their weapons drawn as they watched for potential threats. There was silence as they waited, wondering what was going on in the apartment.

“We need to move you to a secure location,” his lead guard announced.

Ritton shook his head. “Take my wife to a safe place. I’m not leaving.”

Oreylia gasped, shaking her head as she plastered herself against him, wrapping her arms firmly around his waist. “I’m not leaving you!” she whispered urgently. “And you’re *not* going in there.”

He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Love, I need to make sure you’re safe.”

His guards stepped closer. “That’s our job,” one announced grimly.

Ritton felt impotent, torn between needing to get Oreylia to safety, and wanting to know what the hell was going on!

They all stared at the closed apartment door, silent and tense. Finally, the two guards returned, one holding a bag while the other scratched his head in confusion.

“What was it?” Ritton demanded, feeling Oreylia’s arms tighten around his waist.

“A bat,” the guard replied.

There was a baffled silence. “Excuse me?” Ritton replied, still not sure he understood.

The guard lifted the plastic garbage bag higher. “It was a bat, Your Highness. A bat with wings and fur.”

The bag fluttered and he felt Oreylia inch around him so she was now pressed against his back.

“Seriously?” she whispered, looking at the bag, then at the guard. “A bat? Like...in the vampire movies?”

The other guard chuckled at her reference, but nodded confirmation. “Yes, Your Highness. A bat.”

Ritton’s fury erupted. “How the hell did a bat get into my wife’s bedroom?” he demanded.

Shrugs went around the circle of guards. “No idea, Your Highness. I’ll work with the maintenance manager to find out how this little guy got in.” He held the bag away from himself. “How about if I go let this bat out? I’m sure that it’s just as freaked out and confused as we are.”

Ritton nodded sharply, and almost smiled when he heard Oreylia mutter, “I doubt that.”

Fifteen minutes later, the maintenance manager poked a screwdriver through a small hole in the ceiling of Oreylia’s dressing room. “What’s that?” Ritton demanded, keeping Oreylia against his side.

“That’s where the bat came in, Your Highness,” the manager explained. He pointed the screwdriver at a small spot on the wall and another on the floor. “This is bat guano.” He

shook his head. “I can’t figure out how the—” he looked down at the floor, then bent to his knees. “What the hell is this?”

He picked up the small box that was about an inch square. Examining it closely, he lifted it to the light. “This isn’t part of the palace maintenance system.” He handed it to one of the bodyguards. “Is this part of your security system?” he asked.

One of the guards took the box, eyeing it carefully. But his lips compressed and he shook his head. “This is definitely some sort of speaker, Your Highness,” he explained. “But it isn’t one of our speakers.”

For a moment, everyone stared at the device while pondering the implications of its existence.

“Take it to your office. Find out what it is.” Ritton turned to the maintenance manager. “I want to know how this got into my wife’s room. Also, work with the palace security to search for any more devices.” He surveyed everyone, then added, “You have twelve hours to tell me what this device is and how it found its way into my wife’s room.” With a final nod, he took Oreylia’s hand and walked out.

Oreylia hurried after her husband. Despite the terrifying discoveries, she felt an unexpected warmth seeping into her heart. Ritton had been terrified because she’d been in danger! That had to mean something, right? That had to mean that he felt something more towards her than just a companion!

Or was she simply grasping at something that wasn’t there?

“Ritton, please, I can’t keep up. My legs aren’t as long.”

He stopped abruptly, glancing down at her as if he hadn’t remembered she was there. Her heart cracked at that confused look and she stepped back.

“Don’t,” he hissed, trying to pull her close again.

Oreylia’s jaw tightened. “Don’t what?” she asked, trying to hide the pain of his rejection. “Don’t ask that you not drag me around like a limp blanket that you’ve forgotten about?” Their bodyguards still surrounded her, but she was beyond caring who overheard her. “Don’t love you? Don’t get angry when you make love to me, act as if you are in love with me, only to pretend we’re mere acquaintances the next moment?” Her chin jutted up and she prayed that he didn’t see the tears that threatened to spill over. She jerked her hand away. “Don’t *what*, Ritton?”

She turned on her heel and headed for...she wasn’t sure where. Away from him! Away from the pain he caused every time he did something that made her think that maybe, they *could* have more.

Before she’d gone more than a step or two, someone grabbed her arm and spun her around. She yelped in surprise and ended up smacking into Ritton’s hard chest.

“Don’t leave me,” he murmured, his fingers gently gripping her upper arms. “Please, don’t stop...!” he struggled, not sure what he wanted to say.

She saw the confusion in his eyes and understanding washed over her. At least, she hoped that was what she was feeling.

Was she about to get her feelings crushed all over again? Was he about to do or say something that would give her hope, only to smash those tender feelings under his heartless heel?

“Don’t what, Ritton?” she asked softly, her eyes pleading with him to say something sweet and wonderful.

“Don’t...” he started, only to stop again. She saw the muscles working in his jaw, then his eyes shuttered again, shutting her out.

Her heart aching, she reached up and peeled his hands off of her arms. “I get it, Ritton,” she whispered, pushing the

pain, and the tears, away as she valiantly tried to hide her feelings from him. “You don’t love me. You’ll never love me.” She stepped back and pasted a polite smile on her face. “I’m in charge of conceiving your heir. Nothing more.” For a moment, she pressed her lips together, bowing her head since she couldn’t stand to look at him anymore. “I won’t forget my place again.”

And she turned, walking away from him one more time. This time, she wouldn’t stop! This time, she would protect herself. This time...she started running, needing to get away from him. Ritton didn’t love her and never would. She’d been a fool to think she could change him. Good grief, how many women had married men, hoping to change them?

“Oreylia, stop!” Ritton called out.

The tears were streaming down her face now and his voice only pushed her to run faster. She ran blindly down the hallway, not sure where she was going. She just needed to get away. She needed to find a place to hide. Preferably a dark room where she could be alone. Oreylia knew that she just needed a bit of time to...to recover from this latest blow.

“Oreylia!”

She stumbled, sobbing as strong arms caught her before she hit the floor. Wrenching away from him, she pushed ineffectively at him. But he was much bigger and he held her firmly, careful not to hurt her.

“Stop it, Ritton!” she cried, bowing her head. “Just leave me alone! I’ll do my duty. I’ll figure out how to give you an heir. Then we can...” she trailed off, sobbing as the pain of his rejection stabbed at her heart like a knife.

“I don’t want you to just do your duty, Oreylia!” he sighed, pulling her into his arms. “I just...I...!”

“Just leave me alone, Ritton,” she pleaded. “You’re bigger and stronger than I am. So you will always be able to stop me from running away.” She took a deep breath. “I won’t—”

“I...love...you,” he got out. But the words sounded like they were being torn from him.

She lifted tear-stained eyes up to him. “No, you don’t.” Her chin trembled as she saw the immediate anger in his eyes. “You’re just saying what you think I want to hear.”

“No!” Ritton stepped back, releasing her so that he could run fingers through his hair.

Oreylia blinked, startled by his unexpected denial. But she couldn’t let herself hope. Not anymore.

“Just...!” she wasn’t sure what she wanted now. “I appreciate that you’re concerned for me, Ritton,” she whispered. “But I understand. You’re not capable of love. You don’t want anything more than companionship.” The last word had a bit of a crack in it and she felt the tears well up again. “You didn’t lie to me. From the first moment you suggested that we marry, you were honest about what you could offer.” She turned away slightly, needing to run but wanting to get this conversation over. “You offered me friendship and I fell in love.” She smiled at him briefly before looking away. “I’ll be fine. I just need to...be alone for a bit.”

“Don’t leave me!” he whispered as she turned away. “I love you, Oreylia.”

She turned back, but didn’t look up into his eyes. She couldn’t. “You don’t need to say those words, Ritton. I’ll be fine.”

“I love you!” he reached for her, but dropped his arms when she shrank away from him. “I know what I said. But please...!” he sighed, rubbing his hands over his face in frustration. He turned away, growling deep in his throat. He paced for a moment and Oreylia watched, fascinated despite the aching sadness. When he turned back to her, his hands were held out in front, pleading with her to understand.

“I know I said that I only wanted companionship, Oreylia,” he explained in what he probably thought was a controlled voice. But to her, it sounded like he was whispering

through broken glass, the words ruthlessly ripped from his soul. “But I...” he stopped, sighed and tried again. “Oreylia, I...love you. But I’m...If anything were to happen to you...” he stopped again, closing his eyes. When he opened them again, there was heat and passion and...determination within them. “I love you, damn it! I love you so damn much, it scares the hell out of me! I’ve been pretending that it wasn’t love. I didn’t want to love you! But you...you...!” He sighed, his hands fisting at his sides. “You are wonderful, Oreylia. I love talking with you.” He stepped closer to her. “I love spending time with you.” Another step. “I love hearing about your day and knowing that you’re close by.” He was close enough that she could feel the heat emanating from him. “I love feeling your passion, when you’re in my arms as well as when you’re talking about something that you are passionate about. You say everything with such enthusiasm and I don’t know how you’re not exhausted constantly.”

She tried to laugh, but the amusement came out as a hiccup. “Then, why are you always pushing me away?”

“Because you scare the hell out of me!” he admitted. He reached out, gently touching her arms. “I...love you. I only cared about Fatima and her death was devastating.” He moved closer to her, resting his forehead against hers. “If anything were to happen to you, Oreylia, I would be destroyed. I would lose my mind.” He sighed and kissed her gently. “I need you. Every damn day, I need to see you. Talk to you. Just be near you! And that scares me more than anything!”

“Oh!” Oreylia opened her mouth to say something more, but she couldn’t figure out the words. She was more than slightly flummoxed by his admission. “You *really* love me?” she asked. “You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

He laughed and it was a rough sound. “Hell no! I seriously...I love you, Oreylia. And...please...I’m new to this. I don’t know...I need...!”

She kissed him, stopping his halting admission. And with that kiss, he took over, deepening the caress, pulling her against him.

When he straightened up, they were both breathless. His thumb stroked her cheek, touching the tears that were still shimmering on her cheeks. “I’m sorry for being such a fool. I’m sorry I hurt you because I was too obtuse to realize what I was feeling.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “You *really* love me?”

He kissed her again. “Yes. I really do. I didn’t want to. I fought it. But you...you just wormed your way into my heart.”

Oreylia pulled back, wrinkling her nose at his description. “I don’t think I like being compared to a worm.”

He laughed and pulled her close again. “Sorry. Remember, I’m new to this love stuff.”

She pulled back, then punched his shoulder playfully. “Get better. Fast!”

He chuckled and nodded. “Order received.” He slung his arm over her shoulders and led her back to their apartment, avoiding her bedroom and leading her directly to his own. “What are we going to do with that second bedroom?” he asked as he kissed her neck. “Because now that I’ve figured out that I’ve been a fool in love, you’re never sleeping alone again.”

She gasped when he nipped her shoulder. “Never?” she whispered, closing her eyes and leaning back against him, smiling when he nipped again.

“Never.”

Chapter 13

“What have you discovered?” Ritton demanded, his fingers laced through Oreylia’s as they walked into the security office.

His head of security, a former special forces soldier named Dave, turned and waved them towards the security lab where the device from Oreylia’s bedroom was laid out on the table, disassembled.

“It was a speaker that functions on very low wavelengths.” He nodded to one of the lab guys who backed away, making room for the others. “We’ve recorded the message and,” he looked at both of them, then shook his head, “You’re not going to like it.”

“What message is it sending?”

Dave’s lips compressed for a moment, then he nodded towards the nearest monitor. “It’s a subliminal message.” The lab tech guy pressed a few buttons and the message reeled out on the screen.

“I am miserable! I am a miserable human being and I want to die. I am so depressed that I just want to die! There is nothing in this world that is worth living for. I just want to end it all!”

It took several moments for Oreylia and Ritton to read the message. Then reread it. It took another few moments for them to absorb the full impact of that message.

Oreylia turned to stare at the security director. Pointing to the screen, she asked, “That’s what was being played in my bedroom?” Her voice revealed her horror and confusion.

Dave turned and nodded. “Yes, Your Highness. Over and over.”

Oreylia felt her head swim in panic, but then anger swept over her, clearing her mind. She remembered the

desolation and sadness, the utter exhaustion and lifelessness she'd felt while in that room. She thought about the times she'd rushed out of the room, tears streaming down her cheeks. Or the time she'd wanted to simply crawl into bed and never come out! With every memory, her anger burned higher!

"I felt that! Those messages worked! I hated being in that room because, whenever I was there, I just felt so... desolate! I felt as if," she paused, glancing at the screen again, "...as if there was no point to even continuing to try! It was so overwhelming."

She felt Ritton's arm wrap around her, pressing her against his strength to comfort her.

"I felt it too. I hated being in your room, but I wasn't sure why. I just felt...as if the colors were wrong." He shook his head and kissed the top of Oreylia's head.

They looked at the director. "How did it get there? And why wasn't it found until now?"

Dave sighed. "I don't have that information yet, however, we're reviewing the video surveillance of the hallway and interviewing everyone who had access to your wife's room."

"Noya!" Oreylia gasped. She pulled away slightly, staring up at Ritton in alarm. "I'm betting that it was Noya or Hala."

Ritton was still for a long moment, and Oreylia was relieved that he hadn't rejected her suggestion outright.

Finally, he frowned at her curiously. "Why would you think so? Has she said something to you?"

Oreylia considered for a moment, then shook her head. "She never said anything like *that* to me," she replied, indicating in the general direction of the computer screen. "But Noya went out of her way to make snide little comments, clearly hoping to undermine my confidence. Finally, I told her that she had to call before coming to the palace. It was the

only way I could stop her sudden presence. But she still tried to break through the security measures. It was hard to keep her away.”

“In what way?” Dave demanded.

Oreylia frowned thoughtfully. “I’m not sure, actually. Initially, I told my guards not to allow her to enter a room without being announced, but she would barrel straight through them, claiming a close relationship with Ritton, or saying that she needs to grieve for her daughter in a certain courtyard that Fatima used to enjoy.” She glanced over at Ritton. “It wasn’t until I told her to call first, then you backed me up, that she stopped showing up. I would ask that she be banned from the palace completely, but I know that you...”

“I don’t want her here either.” He took her hand. “I don’t think her grief is genuine, but I’m a man and I’m not sure what’s going through her head. So I’ve been...lax about enforcing the rules.”

Another guard turned away from the computer monitor and said, “Sir, Your Highnesses, I heard one of the security guards stationed at the gate commenting on how Ms. Amani and her daughter...” He hesitated for a moment before continuing, “He thinks that they don’t always use the front gate.”

Dave went still for a long moment, then nodded firmly. “I understand.” He turned, looking at the others. “We need the room,” he snapped, hands fisting on his lean hips.

Immediately, every person in the room except Ritton and Oryelia evacuated the space. Dave didn’t say anything until they were alone and they heard the security door lock with a snick.

Only then did he turn and face them. “Your Highness, if you ordered your bodyguards to block someone’s access to the palace, that should have been the end of that person’s visits to the palace.” He sighed rubbed his forehead. “If that order wasn’t carried out, then I need to investigate further.”

“I agree with you,” Ritton replied. “I’ll speak with my personal guards as well.”

He lifted a hand. “I appreciate the offer, and I understand that these men and women have been guarding you for years now. They are your personal guards. But if you wouldn’t mind, they are now under my department. I train and supervise them. They all need to be ready to follow my commands without question. If I discover any information that could harm you, I don’t have time to explain to anyone. I need them to act without hesitation.”

Ritton’s eyes narrowed on the director. “My guards are loyal to me.”

“I agree, Your Highness,” he replied with a firm nod. “However, if you issued a command and it wasn’t followed, then there is a problem with my team. And your team isn’t being respected. You have absolute authority here in the palace. Your word is law.” He paused briefly, looking at each of them in turn. “However, from what I’m hearing, you issued a command and it was ignored.” His voice dropped as his anger built. “That’s unacceptable, not allowed, and means there is something wrong with my team.”

Dave sighed and rubbed a frustrated hand over the back of his neck. “Furthermore, someone in this office missed seeing someone go into and then come back out of your apartment,” he said, looking directly at Oreylia. His tone was dire now. “That’s a career ending mistake on someone’s part.” He looked at Ritton. “Including mine. I’ll tender my resignation for this error as soon as I find the culprit.”

Ritton’s arm tightened on Oreylia’s waist. “I will not accept your resignation. I will, however, accept the head of the person you find who did this. And I’ll accept a report on how you plan to fix this issue so that something like this never happens again.”

Dave’s jaw clenched, but he nodded sharply. “Of course, Your Highness. I’ll have updates for you every hour.”

Ritton nodded in return. “Good enough for me.”

Ritton swung around, tugging Oreylia along with him. “We’ll be in our apartment. Let us know what you discover.”

Oreylia hurried after him and she felt him slow down, lacing his fingers through hers again.

“You just said we’ll be in our apartment!”

“Yes,” he replied, glancing down at her. There was a mischievous twinkle in his dark eyes. “Do you have a great deal of work to do?”

“Well, no,” she replied, trying to think of the last time he’d taken the day off. “But...you never take time off.”

“Of course I do,” he argued, twirling her, then pulling her in close to place a kiss on the tip of her nose. “I took the day off for our wedding.”

She laughed, delighted with this newer, more relaxed version of her husband. “Who are you and what have you done with the workaholic I married?” she teased, playfully feigning confusion.

“I’m the man who has been hiding from you,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck and making her laugh.

When he lifted his head, he was still smiling down at her, but her smile faded. “You’ve been hiding from me. Why?”

“Because...I didn’t know how to admit how much I loved you.”

She beamed, her heart melting. After this afternoon, she was more in love with him than ever. “You don’t have to say things like that to me,” she warned.

“I do,” he replied, serious now. “I need to say it to you because you need to hear it.” He sighed and pulled her close. “And I need to say it to myself, to give myself permission to feel it.” He looked around, relieved that his

guards were focused on the hallway, giving them privacy. Looking back down at her, Ritton explained, “Earlier today, when I thought you were going to leave me, I was—”

“I wasn’t going to leave you, Ritton.”

“You were,” he argued, stroking her cheek. “You might not have left me physically, but...” he sighed, then continued, “when you told me that you’d do your ‘duty’, I couldn’t stand the thought of not feeling you come alive in my arms when I make love to you.”

She smiled shyly. “I came alive in your arms last night. And then you said you loved me. That’s enough.”

“Not nearly,” he argued. “I still need to prove it. And I need to give myself permission to be happy with you, Oreylia.”

“Why? What has held you back?” But she knew. And she whispered the name. “Because of Fatima?”

“Yes. But not in the way you think.” He kissed her lightly. “Every time you made me feel...something, I felt another layer of guilt because I never felt this way for Fatima. She was a very sweet, kind woman. And I cared deeply for her. But there was never this...passion...with her. Not like what you and I have. It’s so different and...and I’m not exactly sure that I deserve this happiness.”

“You do!” she whispered urgently. “You’re a good man, Ritton. It’s okay that you didn’t love Fatima. You cared for her.”

He leaned down, kissing her gently. “I love you.”

She smiled and lifted up onto her toes so that she could return his kiss with interest. “I love you too.”

“I was thinking about going for a swim. Relaxing. Maybe reading in the afternoon with you in my arms.”

Hope swelled in her chest. “I think that’s a beautiful plan,” she told him. “I’d love to join you on your first day off. I get the feeling you don’t do it very often, do you?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever taken a *whole* day off before.”

She laughed and snuggled closer. “Then it’s high time that you had an entire day off. I’m going to do my best to ensure that you have no distractions, other than Dave giving us updates.”

“Let’s do it then,” he replied with a soft, husky chuckle. Then he took her hand and led her to their suite where they changed into bathing suits. But as soon as she stripped off her clothes, he was distracted by her nudity. He made love to her, a fast and furious expression of his feelings for her, on the floor of their shared dressing room!

Afterwards, they lazily wandered to the large pool that was warmed by the sunshine. They frolicked in the water, and then stretched out on lounge chairs by the pool, sipping lemonade until a servant brought out lunch. The day was just as relaxing as they hoped.

Until the late afternoon.

“Goodness, is this a lazy day?” Noya’s shrill voice rang out, her pink suit flashing through the leaves of the vegetation surrounding the pool. Hala was right behind her mother, dressed in a pale lilac suit and matching shoes.

Ritton stiffened and his guards immediately stepped forward, blocking the pair from coming closer.

Hala yelped when one of Oreylia’s bodyguards grabbed her arm, twisting it behind her back.

Noya gasped, turning to find her daughter being detained and started shrieking. “What are you doing! Release my daughter this instant!” She turned to see Ritton walking towards her and reached for him entreatingly. “Ritton, make them stop! Order these goons to release Hala immediately!” She stomped her foot as if that would add force to her demand.

Hala squirmed, trying to ease the pressure on her arm, but the guard refused to let go. He looked to Oreylia, seeking

guidance on what to do with Hala.

“How did you two get into the palace?” Ritton demanded, ignoring Hala for a moment.

“We walked in, of course!” she snapped. “Now tell them to release Hala! She’s your sister-in-law! Why would you allow anyone to treat her like this?”

Hala kept struggling, but Noya turned to glare at her daughter, who froze under the weight of Noya’s gaze. When Hala was still, Noya turned to smile engagingly up at Ritton. “Dear, I insist that you ask your wife’s gorillas to release my daughter. Is this any way to respect the love of your life?”

Ritton felt Oreylia tense up, but kept his attention on his former mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

“How did you get into the palace?” he repeated firmly.

Noya sighed, pretending to suppress her impatience. “We just walked in!” she snapped. “We are your family, dear. The guards know this.”

He narrowed his eyes on her, seeing the lie in her eyes this time. Had she always been like this? How many times had his guilt over Fatima’s passing overwhelmed his ability to read his ex mother-in-law?

“No, you didn’t come in through the front entrance,” he stated with absolute confidence. He stepped closer to her, glancing at his guards. Two stepped forward and grabbed Noya’s arms. “How did you get in, Noya?” he asked, softly but with absolute authority.

“The front!” she hissed, pulling at her arms. But the guards held firm. It was obvious that his bodyguards were eager to restrain her. He might have laughed at the situation if this weren’t such a serious issue.

Dave was hurrying around the edge of the pool, followed by several more guards.

“My *former*,” Ritton emphasized the word, “mother-in-law and her daughter somehow got into the palace,” Ritton

announced to his head of security. Dave stepped in front of the two women, both of whom had stopped struggling as they glowered up at him.

“You did *not* enter through the front gate,” Dave stated firmly, leaning in as he stared at the unhappy pair. He turned, glancing over his shoulder at Ritton. “I will take it from here, Your Highness. I will put them into an interrogation room and find out what, exactly, they were attempting.”

Noya and Hala gasped in unison. “Interrogation room?” Noya blurted, sincerely horrified. “We are not criminals! We are family! Ritton, you don’t want the world to know how badly you treat your family, do you? It wouldn’t sit well with your competitors if they discovered you treat your family so terribly!” She glanced over at Oreylia who had been standing by in a bathing suit cover-up. “Your brother would be horrified if he knew that you were treated in this manner!”

Oreylia shrugged nonchalantly. “I didn’t sneak into the palace illegally,” she replied, crossing her arms over her chest as she watched the unfolding scene. Their faces, normally so perfectly made-up and beautiful, turned an unflattering shade of red.

“We didn’t sneak in either! We were escorted into the palace!” Hala snapped, still struggling.

Dave shook his head. “As soon as I saw you enter the pool patio, I checked with the front gate guards. They confirmed that you didn’t enter the palace through the front.” He moved closer. “How did you get in?” he demanded, emphasizing each word.

The woman glanced nervously at Ritton, but obviously knew they could no longer depend on his support. Noya glanced beseechingly at Oreylia, who shook her head, silently warning the woman that she would not help them.

Then a thought struck her. Oreylia stepped closer, tilting her head as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. “You put the speaker in my bedroom, didn’t you?”

Noya blinked and shot a glance at Ritton but there was sincere confusion in her eyes. “Speaker? Why in the world would I put a speaker in your bedroom?”

Oreylia frowned at her for a moment, and turned to Hala. The horror on her face was crystal clear and she knew she’d found the culprit. “It was you!” she gasped, standing before Hala. “You put that subliminal speaker in my bedroom!”

Oreylia wanted to slap the smug expression off Hala’s face. She clenched her hands into fists, trying to restrain herself.

The beautiful woman snarled, still fighting against the guards’ hold. “You’re weak, just like my boring sister!” Hala snapped. “A few more days, and you would have...” She stopped, turning to Ritton. Instantly, her expression and body language shifted to coquettish. “I’m the perfect wife for you!” she purred. “Get rid of her and marry me,” she urged, still straining at the hands that were holding her arms, while still trying to exert her wiles. “With me by your side, we could have so much power! The world would bow at our feet!”

Ritton snapped his fingers and Hala was on her knees in front of him, courtesy of the guards. “The people of Campour already respect me.” He stepped closer. “And apparently, you already bow to me.” He paused, letting that comment sink in. “And for the record, I would never marry a malevolent, evil schemer like you.” He didn’t sneer, but the implication came through clearly. “Did you use the speaker to drive your sister to suicide?”

Hala’s jaw tightened and it was obvious that she was in pain. She still struggled against the hold. She was livid now. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ritton stepped back. “Take her fingerprints,” he said to his guards. “I suspect that Hala’s prints will be all over that speaker.” He also turned to Dave. “You have my permission to search their house. I suspect you will find recording

software on her computer that will implicate her in the death of her sister.”

Hala’s jaw dropped. “What? You can’t do that! You can’t invade my personal space! This is an invasion of my privacy!”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Are you actually trying to tell me that I cannot authorize a search of someone’s house?”

Noya gasped, struggling in earnest now. “You wouldn’t dare! That’s my daughter! Your sister-in-law!”

Ritton leaned in, anger burning hot in his eyes. “You are no longer related to me in any way,” he announced firmly, emphasizing every word. “You’ve snuck into my home and into the government offices. As far as I’m concerned, you are a traitor and shall be treated as one.” He leaned in even closer. “And you *will* show me how you got into the palace.”

Noya was adequately subdued, but Hala was inconsolable. She fought and shrieked, furious beyond measure that Ritton wasn’t listening to her. She was hauled away, still screaming, “You should have chosen me! You were *supposed* to choose me!”

After the guards took the duplicitous pair away, Dave spoke up. “I’ll find out how they got into the palace, Your Highnesses. There has to be a secret entry somewhere. I’ll scan the—”

“My dressing room!” Oreylia yelped.

Both men turned to stare at her.

Oreylia laughed, wondering why she hadn’t thought of it before. “My dressing room! Hala had to have been getting in through a secret entryway, directly into my dressing room!” She turned to Ritton, suddenly excited. “Think about it. The rooms you used to share with Fatima are directly across the hall, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, it would make sense if there’s an old tunnel, most likely for the harem women so they could travel through the palace without being seen. The rules used to be strict about the women of the harem not being seen by any other man, besides the eunuchs that guarded them and the sheik, right?”

“Yes, very strict.”

“Right,” she answered, snapping her fingers. “I wonder if there’s a secret passageway underneath those rooms. Some hidden entrance that Hala and Noya discovered while Fatima was still here.” She grabbed Ritton’s hand. “You’d mentioned before that Fatima loved architecture, right? And she loved to explore the older sections of the palace?”

“Well yes, but—”

“So, let’s go check out my dressing room. I bet we’ll find an underground tunnel that goes right below that area. And I’m betting that the harem staff had a separate entryway. Didn’t they have separate kitchens and guards when the harems were big?”

“Yes.” Ritton gazed at Dave, both nodding their agreement. “Let’s go investigate.”

All three went to Oreylia’s dressing room, but she and Ritton stopped by his bedroom to change clothes. She didn’t feel like searching through secret tunnels in a damp bikini and diaphanous coverup. After pulling on a pair of jeans and an old tee-shirt, she, Ritton, Dave and several guards started the search.

It only took thirty minutes to find the loose carpet in the corner of her dressing room.

“Wow!” Ritton muttered, pulling back the piece of wood that covered the hole. “Let’s see where this leads.”

They all climbed down into the hole and, sure enough, there was a stone tunnel that led directly under the private quarters of the palace. “I can’t believe no one remembered

this was here!” Oreylia whispered as the three of them moved carefully down the tunnel.

“It wouldn’t be in the official drawings of the palace,” Ritton explained. “Harems were closely guarded secrets. My ancestors never wanted anyone to know exactly how many women they had in their harems. It was a matter of pride to keep one’s harem a secret. Only one’s wives were ever put on display, and even that was rare.”

“I’m relieved that you don’t follow that practice,” she told him with a pointedly significant look.

He chuckled and pulled her in for a hug. “You want to be hidden away?”

She grumbled, but kissed his chest. “I don’t want to share,” she admitted quietly.

Obviously, he liked her response. They continued down the tunnel, eventually finding an area they’d never seen before. It opened into an overgrown courtyard filled with broken tiles, crumbling stone, and bars on the windows.

“Are those to keep people out?” Oreylia asked, swallowing hard as the next possibility occurred to her. “Or to keep the women in?”

“Probably both,” Dave grumbled, brushing a heavy vine away. “Over there.” He pointed to another tunnel, at the far end of which was a light. “Looks like that could be an exit.”

They followed the light, but it led to a kitchen. Even the windows there were barred, as if the kitchen staff had been held captive as well.

“My ancestors were bastards,” Ritton grumbled.

Twenty minutes later, they found another tunnel. This one led to a barred gate that opened to the street. This entrance went well beyond the palace walls and Dave immediately pulled out his phone, calling in extra guards.

“This area needs to be secured at once.” He shook his head in disgust. “I guess we know how those two kept getting in.”

Ritton was stunned. “I can’t believe we never knew about this part of the palace until now.”

“This should have been in the architectural drawings,” Dave grumbled.

“Well, at least we know it wasn’t one of our guards who was betraying our confidence by letting Noya and Hala in through the front gates.” Ritton shook his head. “And obviously Fatima knew about this place as well. She should have told me.”

Oreylia slipped into his arms and he automatically wrapped his arm around her. “What was she really like?”

Dave was already heading out through the gate, wanting to know more about this area of the palace, leaving them alone.

“You don’t want to know about my first wife, Oreylia.”

She leaned her cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “I’d like to know more about your life, Ritton. And since Fatima was part of your life, I’d like to learn about her too.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “You still don’t truly believe that I love you, do you?”

She smiled and kissed him. “I do,” she assured him. “But you said yesterday that you were trying to hide it, even from yourself.” Oreylia let her hand slide down over his stomach. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we had conversations without boundaries? Nothing is forbidden?” she asked. “Especially your past?”

“She’s not relevant to us now.”

There was a long silence, then Oreylia said, “I used to think I was less than my siblings.” At his surprised expression, she nodded. “Yep. My brother was...well,

obviously...the heir to my father's throne. So, he spent a great deal of time with our father. Tessa was...quiet. Determined. It wasn't until we started brainstorming potential programs for women and children that we grew to really know each other. But back when we were kids, I was pretty lonely. I felt like my brother was larger than life. My sister was a stunningly beautiful and charming person who could make people laugh. And then there was me. I never thought there was anything special about me. I hid in the shadows, this quiet person who didn't know how to be extraordinary, like her siblings." She slipped out of his arms. "Over the past year, those feelings started to come back. Gael was married and happily in love. Tessa left me to marry her handsome husband. And there I was, left behind and all alone again. No one to talk to, except Tessa over long distance phone calls." She smiled sadly. "I felt I didn't have anyone or anything."

"You *are* special, Oreylia!" he insisted.

She smiled, but there was still sadness behind it. "When you arrived and proposed a relationship, I jumped at the opportunity." She sighed. "You were so incredibly handsome and magnetic. So dynamic and mysterious." She laughed at his grimace, and continued. "You made me feel special, Ritton. When you looked at me, you made me feel like there were stars in my hair and I thought that I set your body on fire with my touch."

"You do, my love," he assured her, taking her hands.

She smiled, tightening her hold on his hands. "Thank you," she whispered. "I love you for making me feel special." She moved closer. "But that's my point. My past left me...threatened...by your inability to understand your feelings for me. I was close to giving up on us yesterday because I thought I couldn't possibly win your heart, the way you'd won mine." She lifted her hand to his cheek. "And that feeling was because of my past. Because I'd always felt left out and abandoned as a child."

He sighed and kissed her deeply. “You’re saying that my feelings for you are impacted by my past relationship with Fatima.”

“I suspect so, yes.”

He hesitated for a long moment, then he took her hands and led her over to an old, cracked stone bench. For the next hour, he held her hand and told her about his first wife, their marriage, their relationship, and Fatima’s passing. Unconsciously, he tightened his grip as he explained his anger and confusion when he’d discovered Fatima and the empty pill bottle in her bed.

“Now, I wonder if she’d been pushed to commit suicide by that subliminal soundtrack. She always looked cheerful when we dined together at night.”

“It’s probable.”

“I’ll get the truth out of Noya and Hala. I want to know everything they did to torture you and Fatima. She was such a sweet and caring woman. She didn’t deserve any of what happened to her.”

“No one deserves that kind of message,” she agreed, leaning her head against her husband’s shoulder.

“I love you, Oreylia. You know that, right?”

She smiled and scooted closer to him. “Yeah. I do.” She lifted his hand and kissed his fingers. “I’ve loved you ever since...” she sighed and lowered their clasped hands. “I think I loved you from the first moment I saw you.”

He chuckled. “I wasn’t particularly loveable then.”

She smiled. “You were so tall and handsome. I loved the way you looked at me.”

“I wanted to rip your clothes off!” he admitted.

“Good!” She giggled when he lifted her onto his lap. “Now what?”

He shrugged, admiring the curves of her breasts underneath her thin tee shirt. “Now, I think that I should take you back to our bedroom,” he emphasized the “our”, “And make love to you until you believe that I love you.”

She smiled and wrapped her legs around his waist. “I think that’s an excellent plan!” she agreed.

Epilogue

“No!” Oreylia laughed, running away from her husband. “Stay away from me, you dirty old man!”

He laughed and, with another two steps, caught her. “Who are you calling old?” he demanded.

Oreylia giggled, wrapping her arms around his neck. “My siblings will be here with their families any time now. We’re going to be good and celebrate my birthday with them. No sneaking off like last summer when we were in Hadair for my brother’s birthday.”

He nuzzled her neck as he pulled her into his arms. “Ah, but you felt special, didn’t you?”

She smiled and blushed as she nodded. “Very special,” she admitted.

Their teenage daughter burst through the doors, then came to an abrupt halt, a disgusted look on her face. “Are you two at it *again*?” she demanded. “Ick!”

With a flip of her hair, she raced back out of the room, passing her older brother. “They’re kissing again,” she warned, causing him to stop and roll his eyes. “Gross,” her brother groaned and they both turned, heading out of the room together.

Ritton and Oreylia listened, then burst out laughing. “Should we follow them?” she asked.

Ritton shook his head. “No. The things I want to do to your delectable body aren’t for our children’s eyes.”

Oreylia looked at him and laughed, fully on board with his plan!

A message from Elizabeth:

Thank you so much for reading this story! Every time I release a story into the world, I feel as if my dreams have come true. I knew that I wanted to write romance at the beginning of eight grade – from the first time I read a romance. So having you read my stories is literally my dream! Thank you!

However – my dream rides on reviews! Improving my stories is based on your feedback. If you wouldn't mind, could you take just a moment to leave one for me? Here's a [QUICK LINK](#) to the review page – and I thank you!

As usual, if you don't want to leave feedback in a public forum, feel free to e-mail me directly at elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com. I answer all e-mails personally, although it sometimes takes me a while. Please don't be offended if I don't respond immediately. I tend to lose myself in writing stories and have a hard time pulling my head out of the book.

Elizabeth

Keep scrolling for a sneak peek at “His Impossible Heir” – Book 4 in the Al-Bodari series!

Excerpt to “His Impossible Heir”

Release Date: December 15, 2023

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“Stop it. You look great!” Emma whispered in Amanda’s ear.

Amanda grumbled and looked around. “Why are we at the back entryway?” she asked, unfamiliar with royal protocols.

“Because it’s safer to go through the back than the front,” Rayed explained. “We avoid publicity whenever...” he paused, his eyes narrowing, when another limousine rounded the corner.

Before he and Emma could rush inside to safety, another limousine came to a halt and...!

Amanda’s breath caught in her throat as she watched a tall, muscular man step out of the limousine. For a brief moment, Amanda wondered if the tall stranger was a member of the security team. But no, he pulled his tuxedo closed ala James Bond, buttoning up the tailored suit and looking better than chocolate! He was...devastatingly handsome! As his lithe form straightened, his dark hair shimmering in the overhead security lights.

The back alley of the hotel was one of the least romantic places Amanda could think of. But she couldn’t pull her gaze from the man. Her heart began to pound as shivers of awareness flowed over her.

For a long moment, she stood there, staring, one hand clutching her ugly trench coat as the man stepped forward. He murmured something to his companion, but Amanda couldn't look away from the man long enough to see who he was speaking with.

Then their eyes met and she couldn't breathe. The dark, compelling stranger kept coming closer and closer. She felt tingles wash down her arms and her head began to spin, sizzling in a way that was completely foreign to her. Part of her screamed to run away, to hide. And yet, another part was compelled to run towards him, to touch him, just to see if the man was real!

Vaguely, she heard Rayed greet the other man enthusiastically. They did that half-hug thing that so many men had perfected, then slapped each other resoundingly on the back. Next, Rayed introduced Emma to the stranger, Emma's hand extended and...for some bizarre reason that Amanda couldn't quite explain, even to herself, she wanted to rip her friend's hand out of the stranger's grip. She wanted to scratch Emma's eyes out, push her away, whatever it took to get her best friend away from the tall, overwhelmingly handsome man.

The moment was too unexpected and overwhelming for her to understand, unfortunately Amanda didn't have time to come to terms with the wash of foreign emotions. Because now Rayed was introducing her! The stranger, the man with the dark, penetrating eyes and the sharp nose, the hard jawline and the shoulders that seemed impossibly wide...he was smiling at her. Those eyes felt like laser beams and she felt like her internal organs were beginning to boil.

"Ms. Thomas," the stranger greeted her, his voice deeper and sexier than even that Barry White guy. His voice felt like warm chocolate, smoothing over her skin and she wanted to curl up against him and...!

Curl up against him? A stranger? Amanda blinked, mentally shaking her head as she tried to make sense of her

turmoil.

What in the world was she thinking? She *wasn't* thinking! She was...reacting! And reacting in a completely inappropriate manner! This was a complete stranger!

"It's an honor to meet you," the handsome stranger continued.

"Yes," she whispered, her mouth feeling numb.
"Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you as well."

His hand was hot! Her fingers disappeared into his grip and she felt a jolt of something powerful, staggering, and incredibly overwhelming! For a long moment, he didn't release her hand and she stared up into the depths of his dark eyes. Something flashed, something intense and unfamiliar, in those dark eyes and she felt another jolt. When she tried to pull her hand away, he tightened his fingers briefly, then he released her hand with a suddenness that almost startled her.

She stepped back, feeling chilled now that the intense heat from his touch was gone. She took a lungful of the cool, night air, hoping to calm herself.

"Shall we head inside?" Rayed suggested.

Emma touched her arm and Amanda felt like she was suddenly yanked back to the present. She looked around, stunned to realize that they were still standing in the back alley. The overhead security lights were bright, almost invasive.

Amanda bowed her head slightly, not sure how to react. Emma gave her a smile that held tinges of knowing triumph, but Amanda didn't understand. Her thoughts were racing, trying to make sense of the past several minutes. Rayed wrapped his arm around his wife's waist and led her inside.

"After you, Ms. Thomas," the stranger offered, gesturing politely towards the open door.

Amanda didn't know his name! She remembered Rayed introducing them, but she'd been too busy having a

panic attack to hear his name.

Good grief, this was embarrassing! What was his name? Fabulous! This was going to be painfully awkward.

“Thank you,” she replied, delicately lifting the hem of her green gown as she stepped into the shockingly bright interior of the building. Blinking to help her eyes adjust to the brightness that lit up the busy kitchen. She stumbled slightly and felt a strong hand reach out to steady her. Glancing up, she trembled at how close the man was. She couldn’t seem to get herself to stop shaking in reaction. He was... amazingly powerful. And attractive in that raw, rugged sort of way. He was a leaner version of the Marlboro man, but without the lung cancer issues.

And his touch, as light as it was, still singed her skin even through the layers of her coat and dress.

“I’ve got you,” the stranger murmured, dangerously close to her ear.

Amanda looked up and froze for a moment, too stunned to move. But a pot clanging somewhere close by startled her, and she started moving forward, trying not to trip again. She couldn’t handle the man’s touch one more time. Nope, that was dangerous!

“You can give your coat to the waiter, Amanda. He’ll store it for later.”

Amanda looked up, realized that Emma was speaking to her.

Take off her coat? No, that wasn’t going to happen! Not with this handsome stranger standing so close! She was... well, the cut of the green dress! It was so low! So revealing!

“Amanda?” Emma prompted.

Amanda blinked and swallowed hard before she turned to the waiting hotel employee. “My coat?” she repeated, her fingers gripping the knot on her belt. Suddenly, she wanted to wear the ugly coat for the rest of the night!

Emma gestured to the waiting hotel staff member, her head tilting slightly. “Yes, just...give him your coat. He’ll keep it safe.” Emma was watching Amanda curiously, a suspicion hovering in the back of her mind. In the end, there was nothing she could do but hand over the coat.

Daniesh couldn’t believe how beautiful Amanda Thomas was. She was beyond stunning with her shining dark hair, sparkling green eyes and beautiful, alabaster skin. There was a slight tinge of pink to her soft, petal-like cheeks. Who was she? Amanda Thomas, he thought, saying her name over again in his mind. Amanda. The name suited her.

Quickly, he shrugged out of his coat and handed it to the hotel staff member, then waited while Emma released the elaborate buttons on her velvet cape. Turning, Daniesh stepped behind Amanda, ready to take her coat and hand it over before they moved into the reception. But the beautiful woman was clutching at the coat as if it were a shield. Odd, but his hands were still itching to touch her, to feel her slender shoulders.

She was absolutely incredible, he thought. He wondered why she was hesitating about taking off her coat until...!

Rayed and Emma didn’t hear the sharp intake of his breath, but Amanda did. She glanced at him over her shoulder and Daniesh quickly schooled his features into something more polite and less...aroused!

The miserable trench coat dropped away to reveal the soft swells of the most magnificent breasts Daniesh had ever seen. The strapless green dress pushed those lovely mounds high, making his mouth water for just a taste.

Somehow, he managed to pull himself together and stepped back, handing the coat to the waiter who quickly vanished with it.

“May I escort you into the reception, Ms. Thomas?” he asked, offering his elbow.

She blushed and he was enchanted. He couldn't help but watch as the pink flowed down her throat and kept going to her breasts. Somehow he managed to rip his fascinated gaze away and look up...his breath caught all over again. Her emerald green eyes were even more appealing than her breasts. The corners of her eyes tipped up ever so slightly, making him think of a purring kitten. Amanda Thomas was... extraordinary.

“I don't really know how to...*do* these kinds of events,” she whispered nervously to him.

He smiled, delighted at such a golden opportunity. “You put your hand right here,” he explained patiently, taking her hand and tucking it into his elbow. “And I get the honor of escorting you around tonight.” He leaned in and added, “The only other advice I can offer is to smile and nod as if you know and care about what someone is saying to you. If they think you don't agree, or worse, don't understand, then they will keep talking in an effort to help you understand and convince you to agree with them.”

She laughed and he was delighted. Her laugh was light and melodic, plus, her breasts bounced appealingly with every step she took. “That sounds absolutely miserable.”

He lowered his head as they moved through the kitchen, keeping his voice low, as if saying something top secret. “These things usually are.”

She smiled up at him, those sparkling green eyes making his heart to skip a beat.

Someone, perhaps a hotel employee, opened the doors, revealing the lobby filled with guests, and he looked around. He didn't notice the glittering chandeliers or the crowd applauding as Crown Prince Rayed made his appearance. His whole focus was on the slender beauty clinging to his arm.

She took a breath, pasting a smile on her gorgeous features. “The rest of the world thinks this is what a very glamorous life is like. Are you trying to tell me you don’t appreciate all of the glittering beauties?”

He didn’t even look around. The only beauty he wanted to get to know was the lovely Amanda. “Everyone here has a schtick,” he explained. “Everyone wants to see or be seen with the most important person in the room.”

Those lovely green eyes lifted, watching him. “And who would be the most important person in the room?” she whispered as they walked through the lobby. Immediately, the paparazzi started yelling, lights flashing as cameras clicked about a gazillion photographs.

“Just hold onto me and I’ll get you through tonight unscathed,” he promised, patting her hand reassuringly.

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