

# Princess of Azarmon

By : **Angelaine Espinosa**

Anya du Azarmon is not only a princess, she is also the protector of Azarmon. As a princess, she is sent out to manage the newly-conquered kingdom of Castolla. Castolla has no king left - or so Azarmon thought. When

Pierre stumbles upon Princess Anya in his kingdom, he decides to kick her out. That is, until he sees the princess as a potential queen. He traps her into marriage... only to find out that he has bitten off more than he can chew. Now they have two kingdoms to protect - one nearly destitute, the other threatened by an unknown enemy. They need to learn how to beat the odds... And how to fall into each other's arms.



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## **Table of Contents**

Princess of Azarmon Chapter 3

Princess of Azarmon Chapter 4

Princess of Azarmon Chapter 5

Princess of Azarmon Chapter 6

## Chapter 3

. o 0 C H A P T E R 3 0 o .

Pierre looked over his shoulder, at the four-post bed where his hostage lay asleep above his bedcovers. The flickering light from the fireplace in front of him danced over her still form. Even as manhandled as she was, this Anya du Azarmon was a pretty little thing. Her chest rose and fell as she slept soundly.

The bath water was cooling, so Pierre stood up and grabbed a folded towel from a stool that had been placed next to the tub. The tub itself would have to be removed the next morning, for a rush of servants would surely wake the girl. Besides, it would not fare well for him if the servants saw their houseguest shackled to the bed.

He approached the side of the bed in silence and stared down at her face. It was flushed with sleep. He could see that her brows were drawn together, so he gently smoothed the pads of his fingers over her forehead to make the furrows disappear. Her face visibly relaxed, and she unconsciously turned her head towards his hand.

While bathing, Anya had closed her eyes for modesty's sake and pretended to fall asleep. This amused and annoyed him at the same time, for no woman had been able to resist ogling him. He had tried to ask Anya questions about herself and Azarmon, but she refused to answer each one. So when she had fallen asleep, he sent for the castle books where the accounts were recorded. When he was still a child and living in the castle, he had seen how Kildare ruled his people. He had been wise and careful, sometimes even to the point that he was labeled a miser. But Pierre could see, based on his father's last records, that Kildare did an about-face in the last years of his life.

Somehow, Queen Leticia had taken to her sickbed. The book stated that a large amount of money was spent on entirely worthless things that Kildare acquired for his wife to ease her last days in life. By the 'last days', Kildare meant two years.

*Twelve new dresses for my beloved Leticia, since she claims the fever makes it hot for her to go outside - fourteen thousand Castols.*

*Thirty crates of herbal tea for my beloved Leticia, since her swollen throat cannot take anything else without aching - twenty-four thousand Castols.*

*Six silk-embroidered paisley pillows for my beloved Leticia, for her aching head that needs the comfort of something soft and comfortable - six thousand Castols.*

*Twenty-two thousand Castols in payment for my Leticia's lady's maid, due to her loyalty to her mistress in her time of need.*

Kildare must have been out of his mind! He had spent sixty-six thousand Castols on his wife in just a span of one month! That amount of money could have fed more than five hundred mouths. His Leticia, a woman Pierre remembered to be a spoilt trollop who valued her figure too much to be ruined by childbirth, did not deserve any of the expensive things her husband gave her. Why couldn't the man have loved either his or Stephen's mother instead?

Pierre moved to the cabinet and pulled out a shirt and hose which he donned before proceeding to a nearby bureau. The next book of accounts was the one which Anya had started just a few days ago. He turned the knob of the lantern beside him and opened the book to its most current page. Her handwriting was neat and

## Princess of Azarmon

more specific compared to his father's. He could see that someone had taken the time to teach her how to handle a kingdom's affairs. One particularly long entry caught his eye.

*Two issues have garnered my attention concerning the villagers. First and foremost is the lack of a health facility. Second is the lack of work horses this farming season. Both improvements require an amount of money that Castolla is sorely lacking.*

*In order to solve both problems as soon as possible, I will be spending some of Castolla's remaining funds in the building of an apothecary in the village, an amount totaling to twenty-thousand Castols, roughly ten-thousand Azars.*

*I will also borrow eighteen strong horses from my father's stables so that the farmers will not find it difficult to prepare the soil for planting.*

*I have left the assembly of a merchant caravan to my sister, Alice du Azarmon, as an additional source of income for the kingdom.*

*Twenty-two thousand Castols coming from the caravan will be set aside for buying new horses for the farmers in time for the sunny season planting.*

*By the kindness of my father, King Malcolm of Azarmon, Castolla now has twenty more wagon-fulls of food reserves, amounting to eight-thousand Castols.*

*Long live Castolla!*

Pierre was impressed. He could use someone like her. Stephen was good only for hands-on work and military tactics. But he needed someone with enough sense to keep kingdom activities within its limits. He needed someone close to the people. Somehow he needed to convince Anya to stay with him and work under him.

But the woman was a princess. She couldn't just 'work' for him. Her statues required that she be free of master and overlord. In fact, the only overlord allowed to rule her would have to be a husband - Pierre shut the book quickly.

That was his solution!

He quickly replaced the book as the idea formed in his mind. He needed a helpmeet. She needed a job. Castolla needed heirs. Definitely needed heirs. It was time he got himself a wife.

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Anya rolled to her side and snuggled closer to the warmer pillow on her left. She draped an arm over its hard frame and bent her leg forward to straddle it. It was strange. She swore that the pillow was squirming. Had one of the dogs in the kennel found its way into the castle? She swore she could smell her apple-scented bath oil on the pillow. But had she not slept without taking a bath? Hadn't she been cuffed to her own bed?

Wait. Her wrist was unshackled, and a little sore.

So the blackguard had finally seen reason and allowed her to sleep in comfort. If so, had he left? Where was he? Why was her pillow intimately caressing her waist with one large hand?! And who the hell was kissing her?!!!

## Princess of Azarmon

"Oh my stars!" Anya opened her eyes and sat up so fast that she lost her balance and fell to the floor.

A bout of masculine laughter boomed. And because of that, Anya on her wobbling knees grabbed the edge of the bed and attempted to stand in dignity.

But her mussed hair and her chemise askew must have been an appalling sight, for Pierre de Castolla's roared laughter increased. "And good morning to you too, sweeting." He said after most of his guffaws have subsided, leaving him teary-eyed and smirking.

"Why were you on this bed with me?!" she demanded, trying to find some sort of material to cover herself in the light of day. In the end she grabbed a pillow that had fallen off the bed and used it to cover her front.

"You seemed to need the extra warmth, sweeting."

"Don't call me that."

"I can call you whatever I want. It's my castle you're in."

Anya threw the pillow at him, but immediately realized her mistake, for she had nothing else she could use to cover herself. Unless she picked up and wore his discarded shirt. This was not an option, since Azarmonian culture could see the act as completely scandalous. It would be like announcing to the whole world that she had appointed him as a lover. Especially if the mark transferred to him.

"Oh. My. Bloodyâ !" "

Anya paled. She raised her hand and felt behind her neck, hoping and praying that the slightly raised skin under her brand was still there.

"Hey! What's the matter?"

Pierre scrambled from his bed and laid his hands on her upper arms. Anya had turned pale. She trembled. Her unfocused eyes faced forward. She bit down on her lower lip. This was not how he had planned to start the morning. He had planned to leave her to her bath, break his fast with her and escort her to the garden to discuss about the kingdom. "Please. Tell me. What's the matter?"

As if she had been catapulted from a crossbow, Anya shoved at his chest to little effect. He simply stepped away from her range and held up his hands in defense. "I'm ruined, damn you! That's what the matter is! This can't be possible! How can you - you of all people - get it?!"

"Nobody saw us! We're practically in this room together. Alone. So for goodness' sake, snap out of it."

"You don't understand! I am not referring to the fact that we slept on this bed together." Anya's lips quivered as she lifted her black hair over one shoulder and turned to present the back of her neck. There, just below her hairline, was a tattoo of what looked like a sole wing.

"So?"

"Look at your hand, you idiot."

Pierre looked at the palm of his left hand. Sure enough, there was an identical wing tattoo on his palm, the right wing to pair the one on Anya's neck. "What the hell? What is this thing?"

## Princess of Azarmon

"It's a brand that a magus on my father's council placed on each of his daughters. It's especially designed to transfer to the destined champions of our assigned kingdoms. I promised father I would never be careless and prevent the mark from transferring prematurely. And now I - now I - oh no!"

Damnation! Pierre caught her from behind as she sank to the floor. He steadied her and held her close. Comforting a wailing princess had most certainly not been on his schedule today. Good heavens! "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll fix it, I promise."

Anya wanted to step out of his arms, to break free. But what would that solve? She had lost her brand. If she wore her hair up, like she usually did, everybody would see. Everybody would know. Her father would be disappointed in her carelessness and mother would have a heart attack. Adele would be affected and Colin might even be judged for having a careless sister-in-law. And worst of all, Maximilian would know. The man had an obsessive streak where she was concerned. He'd make sure she died rather than go to somebody else.

Instead, she stayed in her captor's arms and allowed him to soothe her with his soft murmurs. She wept softly, for once letting someone else try to solve her problems. "Calm down, Your Highness. I have no idea of what is going on, and none of this crying will help any."

She placed her hands over his linked ones. What other choice did she have?

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Stephen strapped his leather satchel to the saddle of his horse. It was still early in the morning, but he wanted to be sure that he delivered all the important information to his brother as soon as possible.

On their journey to Castolla, he and his half-brother split up, Pierre to continue on to Castolla and take charge of the castle and Stephen to detour to Auria and gain knowledge about King Malcolm. He learned from several innkeepers that King Malcolm's daughter, Adele du Azarmon, was to be married to Auria's own Prince Colin. In fact, the engagement celebration was to be held on that very day in Azarmon.

Alexei, his noble chestnut Trakehner steed, snorted in impatience.

"All right, boy. We're going, we're going."

Several hours into their journey, they reached the border of the Castollan lands. They emerged from the tree line and onto a dirt path that stretched into the valley where Castolla was located. Part of the path cut through a channel with rock walls on both sides. As Stephen eased his mount into the narrow pathway, a sudden whip of air swooped close to his cheek. The sound of an arrow embedding itself onto the rock wall close to his side garnered his attention. Someone had indeed tried to kill him!

"Show yourself you coward!" Stephen removed his sword from the sheath attached to his hip, then focused on the area above the rock wall where the arrow had most likely come from. He turned his horse in that direction and scanned the surface.

He did not, however, expect his enemy to jump from it and land straight onto him.

Alexei reared from the surprise impact of an added weight, causing his master and the attacker to fall to the dirt path. Stephen felt like the world was spinning. He barely realized that he was rolling and rolling on the dirt path, with his attacker still latched onto him. It was several seconds later when he realized that he was sprawled on his back in the middle of the road, his killer pinning him down with-

## Princess of Azarmon

With *her* body?

"Who are you and why are you going this way?" the woman asked as she pressed the sharp edge of her dagger into his throat. Her red and gold curls swayed in the breeze, tickling the sides of his face. Her cold eyes, however murderous their gaze now, were the most intriguing color Stephen had ever seen.

He cleared his throat more from surprise than fear. Nobody had ever snuck up to him without his notice. No woman had ever successfully shot an arrow that close to him. And no woman had definitely been able to pin him helpless before, something which he could still remedy. Stephen rolled to his side, catching her unawares, and switched their positions. "Now that I have the advantage, I think I'm the one who's supposed to ask - Ah!"

Blasted son of a harlot! The girl had kned him where it was most important!

"What the blazes did you do that for?!" Stephen ranted as he doubled over and tried to at least sit up. "Do you have any idea that you just attacked a Castollan Lord right in his-"

"You? Ha! A Castollan Lord? Very funny, mister. I suggest you shut your mouth until we reach my sister's castle."

Oh god. The woman was mad! How on earth would he be able to face two of them? "My name is not Mister. It's Sir Stephen de Castolla, son of the late king Kildare. And if I'm not mistaken, the castle you're referring to is the one my brother's about to own as the new king of Castolla." Stephen spoke of his background while he approached the woman with his hands up. He did NOT want another attack, especially one that would end his ability to procreate.

"I don't trust you." the woman said.

"Of course you wouldn'tâ What are you doing with my horse?"

The woman had taken Alexei's reins and seated herself on the saddle. "Borrowing it."

"And what am I supposed to use?" Stephen positioned himself in front of the animal so it wouldn't go anywhere. Alexei knew better than to trample his own master. "I can't just walk into the kingdom without my horse. My brother paid for this horse. He'll kill me if I lose him."

"Look, Stephen or whoever you are. I don't care where you came from or why you're here. But if you want to stay alive, you better hop on behind me. I have better things to do than play nanny to your pathetic backside."

"That's not very nice," Stephen tried to yank the reins off her hands, but she slapped his hand away. "I am brother to the future king of Castolla and I demand that you return my horse."

"Aren't you even listening to me? If you don't get out of this channel this instant, you're dead!"

"Give me back my horse!"

"Listen to me, arse-head!"

"My horse!"

"Listen!"

## Princess of Azarmon

And Stephen did hear something. It sounded like running feet. Very fast running feet. And it was coming from above the rock wall.

Black silhouettes stood against the blinding rays of the sun. They appeared one by one on top of the wall, their huge forms and heavy weights causing several loose rocks to roll downward. Stephen gulped. With his friends, he could take on any enemy. But he had no comrades nearby. He had only himself, plus a lady to protect. He grabbed for his sword, which was lying close to his feet, and gripped it tightly. "Who are they?" he asked his female companion.

The woman readied her own sword in her hand. She did not take her eyes away from the shadows. "Pelans."

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This was not how Alice expected her Castollan homecoming to happen. Somehow she ended up without a horse of her own, a lost Lord for a helpmate and her sword as the only available weapon to resort to. She pointed the tip of her sword to the biggest of the men atop the wall.

"Who are you and why did you come here?!"

"We seek a Princess of Azarmon."

"It is I." she said, tossing a lock of her hair behind her shoulder before raising her chin. They could have just said so in the first place. Instead they had to watch her from a distance. They ran when she ran, they lingered when she stopped. She might not have left Czarina to find her own way home once she realized somebody was silently following her.

"Not you. Your sister."

"What do you want with my sister?" This was definitely not good. She could understand if they wanted money or a ride to the nearest inn. What did these big Neanderthals want with Anya?

"Lord Maximilian sent us."

Oh great. "What does he want?"

"None of your business."

"Then I'll make it my business!"

No sooner had Alice said the words than the Pelans jumped down to circle her and Stephen. There were five all in all, each wearing black leather vests over tattered shirts that needed a miracle more than mending and washing. They weren't part of the Pelan army, so they must have been hired for some dirty job.

"I'll take care of this."

Alice heard the lost Lord scrape the tip of his sword on the dirt before lunging at the closest enemy. The long blade slid effortlessly between the man's ribs before he could blink. The man's speed was impressive. Not to be outdone, Alice levered herself and twirled on her toes, leaning to one side as she did so. Her momentum caused an increase in the force with which her sword slapped the closest enemy's chest, spraying her with a warm splash of blood. The man fell to the road, eyes still open. "Haven't you forgotten the saying 'ladies first'?"



## Princess of Azarmon

"I'm not exactly a gentleman now, am I?" Stephen answered jokingly without breaking his movements. He pulled out the sword from the man's chest and somersaulted, landing close to the second opponent and chopping his arm off. A quick slash to said man's chest also had him dead. "And from the way you fight, you're not exactly a lady."

"Why thank you for the compliment." Alice muttered as she chased the fourth Pelan down the road. She caught up with the man and stabbed him in the back. Blood spread over the back of his vest.

Like a synchronized dance, both Stephen and Alice turned about to face each other, trapping their last enemy between them. Stephen had his sword at the ready, the tip dripping blood on the dirt at his feet. But Alice did not want to end things so quickly. She had to know just what the Lord of Pela was planning. "What does Maximilian want to do with Anya?"

"Please madam," The man, his frame trembling, dropped to hands and knees. "We were sent to find the princess and take her to Pela. When we saw you riding towards Castolla, we thought to follow you in hopes that you may lead us to the woman. We don't know anything beyond this. I swear!"

Alice raised the tip of her sword a mere inch before the man's nose. "For attacking a member of the Azarmonian royal household I could kill you."

"Mercy madam!"

Alice looked at Stephen, who was clearly confused and looking from her to the Pelan and back again. "You, Stephen whoever you are, tie this man to the horse if you may. He may be of use to me when we get to Castolla."

"You're ordering me about?" Stephen asked.

Alice rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Fine then. If you won't help me, then go. Though if you truly were a lord and a gentleman you would not abandon a helpless woman-princess in the middle of the road, horseless and with a possibly dangerous hostage."

"Helpless? Hardy-har-har. And princess? Forgive me for saying so, but you talk like a nagging milkmaid. From what I can see you're more dangerous than that sorry excuse for a man." But even as he said so, he led his horse to Alice and took out a length of rope from his satchel. Alice grinned.

Stephen tied the man's wrists tight, and then looped the other end around Alexei's neck. He then took Alice by surprise when he grabbed her by the waist and settled her side-saddle on the horse.

"What do you think you are doing?!" Alice demanded as Stephen hopped up behind her, then restrained her from getting down by anchoring her to his chest with one arm.

"I am taking you to Castolla, Your Highness."

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Pierre paced the length of the breakfast table as the servants set the dishes that cook had prepared. He knew that Wendell stood just outside the door to the room, waiting for the Princess Anya to descend from the royal chambers.

## Princess of Azarmon

He had no idea of what got into his head. One minute, he was looking down on the girl, and the next he had the sudden urge to taste those pouty lips. It was just one kiss, he justified to himself. It was just one taste, to see if they were compatible enough as a couple. He should have known better. One taste was all it took and he was a goner. He had not even noticed that his hand began roaming to more other interesting places than the pillow at his other side.

The black imprint of a wing stood out against the pale skin of his palm. Pierre stared at it as he came to a stop at the end of the table. In a span of just a few hours, he had found a perfect queen. Smart, feisty, somewhat pleasant to the eyes. He tried to tell himself that these were the reasons why Anya would make a good helpmeet with his reign over Castolla. Not the spark of energy that passed between them when their lips met in a drowsy kiss.

"Master, may I announce the presence of Princess Anya du Azarmon."

Anya slipped through the doorway, the hem of her lacy silver-colored dress barely sweeping the floor. She had tied her black hair into a braided bun at the nape of her neck. A lone golden chain decorated her neck, just above those delectable collar bones that Pierre had been tempted to sample as well.

"Good morning, your highness."

Anya eyed him wearily before taking a seat. Pierre, upon realizing that she had no intent to answer his greeting, proceeded to seat himself on a chair beside her. Throughout the meal they did not touch or talk, except when Pierre requested she pass some of the dishes that were on her side of the table.

Finally, when both their plates were clear of food, Anya made to get up. But Pierre stopped her before she could go anywhere. "I've arranged for a carriage to take us to Azarmon this afternoon," he began. "I wanted to ask for your hand in marriage in person instead of just by letter."

Anya glared at him and pulled her hand from his. "I don't love you," she said.

Pierre just sat back and eyed her from head to toe. "But you don't really have a choice, right? Plus, you did say that you intended to help Castolla recover from poverty. I say the position of queen wields more authority."

"So this is it? Some sort of contract?"

"You can't honestly expect for something more to come out of it." Pierre said, although he did think that something more than just status would come from the bargain. "And I've barely known you for one day."

Anya turned her head away and faced the open window behind her. "I suppose you're right. Why would I even think someone like you wouldâ!"

There was a definite sorrowful set to her shoulders. A wistful note in her voice that caught his attention. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"That's not nothing. You're hiding something from me, sweeting."

"I told you not to call me that," the sharp edge in her voice was back again.

## Princess of Azarmon

Pierre ignored the tell-tale annoyance in her sentence and moved to her side, taking her hand in his. She was unyielding, but Pierre held fast, finally succeeding in prying her fingers open and intertwining them with his. "Once your father sees the black wing on my palm and gives us his blessing, I can arrange for a simple wedding ceremony in the castle temple as soon as we return. Wendell says that the village priest can still make the journey here despite his advanced age."

"Why?"

"Well, we can't exactly pay for a three-day festival."

"No," Anya faced him, confusion evident in her onyx eyes. "That's not what I meant. Why did you kiss me? This morning, in the bedchamber?"

She deserved a good answer to a perfectly innocent question. But what could he say? That he found her fascinating? That she looked like an untried delicacy when she slept peacefully on his bed? That her intelligence and common sense were so evident in her writing his admiration for her could not be expressed by words alone? So many reasons, and all true. Finally Pierre gathered his courage and pulled her closer, so that if they both breathed deeply enough, they would touch.

"I kissed you," he said, looking down at her upturned face, "because I wanted you."

And after he said the words, he found his lips on her again.

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Anya knew what she was doing was foolish. Standing close to him, letting him kiss her, was something she never thought she would ever do. But she was doing just that now. This was crazy! Want was different from love. Want was a thousand steps below love. But it was as irresistible as a favorite wine. By the stars, she did want him! With a fire that swept through her very being. She was acting worse than a wanton.

"No," she breathed as she tried to move away from his grasp. "I can't let you do this to me." his hands kept a good hold on her forearms, pinning her securely in place in front of him.

"Why not?" Pierre moved closer, brushing his lips over hers once again. "We have more than what others have. We find each other irresistible. It's more than what others find in marriage. Don't deny it. I see it in your eyes, as you see it in mine."

Anya looked up at his eyes, their half-closed lids barely masking the desire they contained. Then they closed once more as Pierre took the light kisses deeper. Anya's knees grew weak and she instinctively grasped the lapels of his jacket to keep herself upright, allowing Pierre to slide his hands to the back of her waist. "I'm afraid," she whispered between kisses, "I don't know if I canât love youât!"

"Thenât don't force it." After one deep kiss, Pierre released her lips and looked into her eyes. "Can you not be content?"

Anya's body was pressed to his, and for some reason she felt it not the least uncomfortable or inappropriate. The hard planes of his chest and stomach cushioned her softness. The muscles in his arms embraced and warmed her. She could feel the strength of his legs even with her skirt between them. She felt oddly protected. She was more than content. She felt more alive than she had ever been before.

"Anya, can you not be content?"

## Princess of Azarmon

"I-"

"You'll have to be." The new female voice that interrupted them forced Anya to leap away from Pierre. But his protective instincts must have kicked up, for he had her behind him in no time. Anya peeked from behind him and, when she saw who stood at the door, placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him from doing anything rash.

"You know that girl?" Pierre asked.

"My sister," Anya eased out from behind him. But no sooner had she moved than Pierre had her hand in his. She dismissed scolding him for now and led him to the doorway. "This is Alice du Azarmon, my twin sister. Alice, this is Pierre de Castolla, heir apparent to the Castollan throne."

"I see father's conquest is indeed useless now," Alice moved into the room and looked them both over. "Apparently I've been gone for only one night and already a few interesting things have happened. So it is true?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," a brown-haired, green-eyed gent stepped into the dining room as well, leading a roped man behind him.

"Sister, who is he?"

"That's my brother, Stephen." Pierre muttered, facing his sibling and raising one brow in question as to who his companion was. His brother wore a shirt a shade lighter than his own forest green. It was dusty, as were the black pants and boots that were so much similar to his. He could also see the splotches of blood on his shirt and pants.

"We were attacked by Pelans," Stephen announced in explanation. "And before you could say anything, I wasn't the only one involved. Miss Independent here took out several of the enemy as well. Now there's only this one and he keeps telling us that the Princess of Azarmon's presence is required in Pela."

"Pela?" Anya gasped, earning Pierre's curiosity and concern. "That's Lord Maximilian's kingdom. What does he want?"

"You know he's always wanted you. For the last ten years he's always wanted you." Alice muttered.

"No doubt for my dowry and the position on the Azarmonian council. But he won't touch anything that's mine. Would you please lock the man up in the dungeon?"

Stephen huffed in agitation and crossed his arms in front of him, almost causing their captive to trip over himself. "Pierre, are you really going to allow these ninnies to boss us around? This is our kingdom after all."

"Do as she says, Stephen."

"What?"

"I said 'do as she says.' She's to be my wife, after all."

"And like I said before," Alice interjected, casting her gaze to her twin. "You'll have to be content Anya. Maximilian will do anything to get you as his bride. He already attacked the guards that father sent to watch after us."

## Princess of Azarmon

"Wait, there were guards following us here?"

"*Were* being the operative word, as they're all dead now." Alice moved passed her sister and faced Pierre. She set a determined look on her face and poked a finger to his chest. Even if she was wearing her dirtiest set of shirt and trousers, she had to make her stand clear to the two brothers. "You sir may be a future king, but I will not stand for anything if I find out you hurt my sister. Considering I found you both in a very interesting position before I came here, can I assume that I'll be hearing wedding bells in the near future?"

Pierre grinned, tightening his grip on Anya's hand. Lord Maximilian. The man's name didn't ring a bell, but Pierre could see from the way Anya stiffened at the mention of that name, he was not exactly welcome. This was another leverage he could use to tide Anya over. "We were supposed to leave for Azarmon this afternoon, but your warning came just in time. I think it's safer that the wedding take place *before* we leave."

"I agree," Alice turned to Anya. "Only if my sister allows it."

## Chapter 4

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"So are you really going to go through with this?" Alice asked as she settled herself in an upholstered settee opposite to the one her sister occupied. She fingered the edge of a cushion encased in velvet, its golden color similar to the one of her gown. She had changed into a new gown after helping Stephen and several of the castle servants shove their prisoner in one of the basement cellars.

The twins were sitting atop a balcony on the west side of the Castollan castle. The raised balcony's railings were crawling with vines, reaching the small roof that shaded it from the sun. The two settees faced each other, separated by a crystal table that held an expensive tea set Wendell had provided the both of them.

"What else could I do?" Anya said as she set down her teacup on her lap. "When we were born, mother wasn't going to be able to bear a male heir for the Azarmonian throne. Father has no male children to inherit his kingdom, no male keepers for his other external kingdoms. That's why Magus Napoleon branded us, so that we may be able to find men with the ability to take care of the kingdoms until such time *our* sons can take over them."

"Maybe Sir Pierre tricked you into giving up your wing. Haven't you ever thought about that?"

Anya pursed her lips. "He couldn't have possibly known about our brands. Not even mother knows their real purpose."

Alice looked over the railing and spotted Pierre and Stephen in the courtyard below. They were down to their shirts and pants, the metallic clash of their swords permeating the air as they sparred with each other. "Are you sure, sis? How much do we really know about these brothers? For all we know, they came back just because they want to sack the kingdom."

"That can't be. Magus Napoleon said that the wing would transfer only to those deserving of the kingdom."

"So you think this Pierre de Castolla is capable of handling Azarmon?"

"Hush!" Anya rushed to her sister's side, spilling her tea to the floor in the process. But she didn't bother with cleaning it up. She instead took her sister's hand and pulled her away from the railing, as if anybody standing beneath them would hear.

"Oh my goodness, I didn't realize I just said that!" Alice stated.

"Nobody must ever know that Azarmon is bound to *my* name," Anya said.

Alice nodded. She knew the many measures that King Malcolm took to secure Azarmon. The strategic tactics taught down the generations have saved the kingdom from both natural and man-made threats. The idea of binding the home kingdom to the youngest daughter's name had come about as a necessity due to the increasing number of suitors after Adele's hand.

It was the kingdom of Kantilla that had been left to Adele's name. And it was this kingdom that Prince Colin would be protecting with his title. The town of Maya was bound to Alice. Alice's future husband would ensure the safety of that external post.

## Princess of Azarmon

It was Anya who carried most of the burden. Aside from the fact that Azarmon was bound to her name, their father also planned to give her Castolla. And her future husband was entitled to a seat in the Azarmonian Council. Nobody in the whole kingdom except King Malcolm, Magus Napoleon and the three sisters knew about these arrangements.

"Does Pierre even know that he will be in charge of both Azarmon and Castolla once you two are married?"

Anya frowned. "Over my dead body he will. If he does marry me, I won't agree to just his terms. Either we divide the kingdoms, with Azarmon obviously in my care, or we share the power."

Alice considered this. "You know that Adele gave her brand to Colin not because of its ability to detect a powerful leader, but because she loved him. Are you sure you'll be able to live the rest of your life under a contract?"

"Under a contract?" Anya's hand paused midway to summoning a servant to clean up the mess of she made of the tea. "Oh shoot! Alice, I just realized something. On our tenth birthday, father and Magus Napoleon wrote the contract containing our names and the kingdoms and wealth entailed to each of us. It hasn't been changed since."

"So?"

"That was the birthday when we decided to ditch the party and go wandering in the forest. That was the day we rescued Lord Maximilian. We took him to the castle to be taken care of. He never left the castle for a month because of his broken leg. He may have seen the contract at some point of his stay. Do you think that's why he's after me now? Do you think he knows Azarmon is under my name?"

Alice crossed her arms. "I don't know sis. That's an unlikely theorem, but I'm not about to throw it out the window. But still, how would he have known anything about the contract?"

"I don't know Alice," Anya rubbed her temple as she crossed the room to the door. Too many questions were still unanswered, too many mysteries unsolved. What was Maximilian's motive behind his pursuit? And why had he waited to act now? "But as Fate has decreed that Pierre de Castolla carry my brand, then so be it. I will not go against it."

"Anya," Alice moved to her sister's side. "I worry for you. Fate has a way of crippling people. What if this doesn't turn out right?"

"Then I guess," Anya answered, "I'll just have to deal with it." And with that Anya left the room to find her bridegroom.

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Anya made her way across the courtyard, her silvery gown snagging on several long clumps of grass. But this did not stop her from looking at the two half-brothers that continued to attack each other with the skills of a master swordsman.

Both men's shirts were soaked with sweat and clinging to their toned torsos. It was clear to anyone watching that their brisk footwork took years in the making, as did the bulk of their leg muscles. Their arms tensed and strained every time they struck or blocked. The two set a rhythm that Anya guessed only they could tackle. She wouldn't be surprised if they were better sword masters than her sister.

## Princess of Azarmon

She didn't know that she was gaping at them until, both men paused mid-strike. "Why did you stop?" she heard Stephen ask, whose back was to her and his sword raised to block Pierre's.

Pierre lowered his sword and leaned to the side to look over Stephen's shoulder. And Anya felt her face heat up the moment he winked at her. "Oh, I see!" Stephen continued, now looking in her direction.

Anya shook her head and brushed a stray lock of hair away from her cheek, hoping that some of the blush would cool down immediately. Then, having not noticed that she had stopped walking, Anya resumed her fast pace until she stood in front of them. "I need to talk to you," she said.

"To the grass?" Pierre asked with amusement in his voice.

How could Anya be able to make eye contact with him? Especially when he was enticingly covered with a sheen of sweat? Especially if, the moment their gazes clashed, a wave of heat would cause her body to shiver and eyes to widen with desire. But if that was what it took to stop him from fooling around then she would look at him. After all, come sunset they would be facing the altar.

"Pierre, I need to talk to you. It's of the utmost importance."

"Hmm, wonder what that would be," Stephen murmured as he sheathed his sword and reached for a towel hanging from a nearby post.

Anya ignored the man's jabbing and pulled Pierre by the hand.

"Hey! I haven't even cleaned myself."

"There's a barrel of fresh, clean water in the stables you can make use of."

"Holy heavens, woman! Can't this wait 'til morning? If it's the wedding night you're worried about-"

Anya halted abruptly and faced him so quickly that she ripped a part of her skirt on a bush close by. But she didn't even care about the rip. Hands on hips, she glared at Pierre unmercifully.

"Now what in heaven's name gave you that idea? Here I thought you agreed that my life was at stake and you intended to help me."

"I do intend to help you."

"Oh really? Well you should be enthusiastic that I'm giving you a heads-up by providing information on my past. And I do believe it would make the difference between the survival of both our kingdoms and utter destruction."

"Very well, lead on then."

Pierre and Anya entered the stables, her eyes darting everywhere except at him, his eyes never leaving her. Ultimately Pierre found the barrel, where he immediately dunked his head. He shook the water off his hair afterwards, not caring if they splashed the woman standing beside him.

"Would you cut that out?!"

"You told me I could use the water in here."



## Princess of Azarmon

"I didn't tell you to get me wet in the process," Anya marched to a stack of hay and propped herself up on a low bale. She crossed one knee over the other and laid her hands palm down on either side of her. "Now, regarding the information."

"Yes?"

"I suppose you know the custom of the land. In the event that a kingdom has no male heir, the kingdom itself and the other belongings that the king owns are divided between the daughters according to how he sees fit. The properties are bound to his daughters' names until such time that *they* produce the male heir, the eldest of them being the one to relinquish the home kingdom and all higher properties."

"Of course I do. Though I'm not exactly a pureblood I was educated."

"Well, I have to inform you that, if we proceed with our plan to marry, you will not only be king to Castolla, but also champion to Azarmon."

"Pardon?!" Pierre stepped closer to her, his index finger plugged to one ear as if clearing it of any obstruction. "Did I hear correctly? I'm champion to Azarmon? Azarmon!"

"Yes. Champion, protector, defender, whatever you want to call yourself. Bottom line is, you will protect Azarmon. Because Azarmon is bound to my name."

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"How could that be?" Pierre asked, sitting beside her, his eyes never leaving the black pearls that were her eyes. They seemed masked, shrouded in darkness, as if Anya did not want them to reveal anything until the time she chose to let them do so. "Stephen told me you had an older sister. Should she not be the one to hold Azarmon in her name?"

Anya drew small circles in the area between them, feeling the texture of the hay as she traced her pattern with her eyes. "My father's council is made up of many different men, all strong and loyal to his name. One of them is Magus Napoleon, famous for his ability to see into the future, as well as his magical capabilities. Magus Napoleon is a godfather to us three. He provided us with the brands and he became our tutor while we were growing up. He taught Alice how to fight and he taught me how to heal. He also wrote the contract binding the names of the different kingdoms to us. He consulted with my father and only they know the true reason behind the arrangement."

Pierre looked up at the rafters that held the barn together. "And somehow you were more fitting to hold Azarmon."

"No Pierre," Anya replied firmly, "the reason why Azarmon was bound to my name was because somehow Magus Napoleon knew that I would give the kingdom to you. It was to your protection that Magus Napoleon expected the kingdom to go to. At first, I thought I had been careless by being so close to you, but now I realize only love can transfer the mark. And since I don't love you, the only reason left is that Azarmon was truly meant for you."

"So what is this?" Pierre exclaimed, "The hand of Fate? By the stars, Anya. No man could have guessed I would be the one standing beside you at the altar tonight. And - and why would I be chosen to protect Azarmon? From your vast knowledge you would be as fitting."

"So you agree?" She said quickly.

## Princess of Azarmon

"To what?"

"That I alone will be enough to rule over Azarmon. I mean, I am not judging you incapable, just that I have been helping my father hold Azarmon for so long that it has become close to my heart. Once we marry, I can give you back Castolla. You will be king and you can rule however you want to. It will be like a payment for restoring my reputation. I thank you, and I'll let you go."

Pierre's eyes widened in surprise. He stared at her, his pride somewhat hurt by the words she had uttered. True, he did not want her to expect anything from their marriage. He'd tasted love and women too many times in his twenty-five years. He knew they could dissolve and leave one or both parties hurting. He remembered the last woman he had promised to cherish. In the end, she had walked away on the arm of another man. And he had just watched, because he had never loved her enough to keep her. Falling for someone was one thing, but keeping her was another.

However, hearing this one girl say the words he had told so many women was hurtful. How many times had he thanked a woman and told her to go? Now he realized how much it hurt to have your affections thrown back at you without being considered.

Pierre did not know what affection he harbored for Anya du Azarmon, but something in the resolved way she talked to him about marriage, specifically their marriage, squeezed his heart. Could it be possible that he had become fond of her overnight? "I appreciate the offer, but I think it best if we work together. We may have gotten off on the wrong foot, but come on. I don't think I'm so horrible that you would want to avoid me for the rest of your life."

Anya let out a little laugh. "Somehow I don't believe in the things you're saying, Pierre. I mean, you could avoid me anytime you wanted to. I won't blame you for doing so if you did."

Pierre drew his brows together. "What makes you say that?"

Anya shrugged, drawing her hand back to her lap. "I know I'm not beautiful. I know very few take a second glance at me. All my life only Lord Maximilian has shown interest in me, and it's not even true love. I don't have stars in my eyes. I know my lot in life Pierre, and if it means I have to give up all my conceptions of a happily-ever-after for my kingdom then I will."

"That's not true," Pierre said as he glanced her way. The shafts of light that sparkled through the stable windows cast a soft orange glow around her, emphasizing the sheen of her hair, the glitter hidden in her eyes and the silver layers of her gown. The play of light at her feet and at the walls behind her back provided a beautiful backdrop. How could she say she was not beautiful? "You're blind then. I see a nymph of the highest beauty when I look into your eyes."

Anya blushed and clutched her hands tighter, not daring to look at him. "That's not funny. You should have seen the number of suitors Adele had at her debut. And you've already seen how beautiful Alice is. Sometimes I wonder if my plainness was the reason father put Azarmon in my care. You know, so that those nasty suitors wouldn't grab hold of it."

"Of course it's not funny," Pierre answered sincerely. He took one of her hands in his own and tilted her chin towards him, looking deep into her eyes, which held unshed tears. "It's not funny because it's true. I wouldn't have kissed you otherwise."

He had her, just like that. Her lashes lowered and her lips parted at the slightest brush of his fingertip. He knew he wanted to kiss her again. In fact, he wanted to kiss her now! He bent his head and moved closer, until

## Princess of Azarmon

he could feel her very breath on his lips, until he had both of her hands threaded through his. He pulled her as close as they could get and-

"Anya? Sir Pierre? Are you in here?" Alice called from the doorway, "Stephen and I are going to call for the village priest. You two better be ready in four hours."

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Two men met where a sole lamp post stood between crossroads. Both wore extensively long cloaks. To an ordinary observer, it would have been seen as a simple meeting between two travelers. It was a very common occurrence in Azarmon, for at most times travelers usually banded or paired together for a drink and a good rest once they reached civilization.

But the meeting was not about deciding where to drink or which inn to stay in for the night. It was not even a back and forth banter of the differences between their journeys.

No, this meeting between the two men was of a very different nature.

"Have you got the girl?" One man asked the other in his gruff voice.

"No," the other replied with a voice deeper than the first man's. If one had listened in to their conversation, one could clearly discern which was the younger and which the older. "The men you hired for me followed the wrong girl. Not to mention lost their lives in the process. From the way I see things, you're a complete failure despite your abilities."

"Now, now young man. If I were a complete failure, we would have been caught already. I may have made a wrong decision by hiring common soldiers instead of the elite, but I guarantee you it would have been worse if they found out the real motives behind our attempted abduction."

"It wouldn't have been *attempted* if you listened to me in the first place!" the younger man hissed between clenched teeth. "You promised me the girl if I gave you the kingdom. We had a deal. We should've used my father's soldiers."

The older man grabbed his conspirator by his neck and raised him from the ground with a strength that should not have been possible for a man his age. "I made the deal. You simply took it. And if we had used you father's soldiers, we would have been found out already."

The younger man gulped, attempting to get enough air into his throat and lungs. Some of the light from the lamp post behind him landed on the hood of the man's cloak. The older man was so covered up that the only thing he could see despite the added luminosity were his cold blue eyes. He immediately realized his mistake. What the man said was true; he had only shook hands after he heard the proposal. "Fine! Fine!" he choked.

Upon hearing the agreement, sputtered though they were, the old man released his hold and stepped back into the shadows. "Do not forget that you don't have the kingdom *yet*. You need the girl to gain the kingdom. Then you give the kingdom to me and me alone."

Rubbing his throat with his long, tapered fingers, the younger man stood up from his indignant fall. He too slunk into the shadows, afraid that a view of even the slightest fraction of his face would put him at a disadvantage. He was too concerned with worrying over his being unattended by bodyguards that he did not notice the amused chuckle his companion directed at him. He did not dare to challenge the man again. Instead, he folded his hands behind his back and looked downwards. "The princess has not arrived in Azarmon yet. I

## Princess of Azarmon

intend to gain hold of her by then."

The older man gave a spiteful laugh. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. My dear fellow, you intend to give her the chance to walk away? By the heavens, you are a relation to the king of Pela! You have every right to court the princess and marry her. Then you could rule over your father's kingdom."

"But I have told you that I don't want the throne. You can have both kingdoms, but I'll have your princess in return. Besides, though the king calls me son, I guarantee that he has no tender affections for me. He only married my mother so I would become his legal heir. And my mother married him only for the money."

The older man smirked, though the younger could not see it beneath the shadow cast by his hood. "I must say your old man is not lucky in the field of matrimony, my boy."

"It appears so am I."

"You are not to worry." The old man patted the younger one's broad shoulder before stepping back and going to his horse, which was tied to a nearby tree. He felt through his various items before fishing out a small object that glinted in the moonlight.

"Eh, what is that?" the younger man asked without daring to come closer. He would very much like to keep his head on his body.

He was barely ready to catch the object that the elder threw at him. But he did so, and only afterwards found that what he had caught was a small vial containing a dark violet liquid. "Is this it?" he asked uncertainly, "Is this the love potion?"

"Yes. That, my boy, is a dreadfully potent infatuation-inducing potion. A mixture of brownberry and pinkpetal for sweeping out memory. I figure you can use it to do away with the princess' bitter feelings. In the meantime, I'll be returning to my manor and wiling away the time until Princess Adele's wedding."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because one, our plan of kidnapping the girl backfired. A second attempt will only alert the royal household. Two, no one must know that we are working together. The whole royal family is wary of you, but if they become wary of me there is little chance that you will get your woman. Three, I am most certain your girl will come to the wedding. She is the bride's sister after all."

"And how do you plan to get her alone from the castle? Many people will be watching. The area will be heavily guarded." The young man asked, slipping the small vial into the inner pocket of his cloak.

"There will be too many people to watch over. The guards will keep a tight rein on the girl. They won't allow her to be with anyone unless they are part of the royal household. She'll trust me because she knows me, and nobody will bat an eyelid if I get her away. And by the time I have her, it will be too late." The older man untied his horse and leapt on its back. "And I hope by that time, you'll be ready to take on your role."

The younger man patted the horse's nose before walking past, away from the lamp post and back to the inn. "Don't worry. I'll see to it." he said with tightness in his voice.

"Make sure you do," the old man warned after him as he kicked his horse's side. "Or you'll pay dearly. I control this game, lad. Remember that."

## Princess of Azarmon

The old man rode back to his manor, not looking back. It was as if the conversation had never been at all.

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The ceremony had been lovely, Anya thought.

Earlier, at the start of sunset, Anya had walked her way down the aisle of the Castollan temple. She had changed her silver gown into a velvet buttery-cream sleeveless dress with pearls and gold-embroidered flowers at the square neckline. The skirt paled and flared as it progressed downwards, hiding her glass-slippered feet from view.

Pierre had been dressed in a gold jacket that fit to his body like a second skin. Its lapels were embroidered with black vines, as were the cuffs with shiny gold links. His legs were encased in what must have been the most expensive black breeches and knee-high black boots, going nicely with his dark hair. The gold buttons running on the outer sides of the boots glinted as the sun's last rays fell on him from a round window above the temple altar.

Anya thought that he was the picture of the perfect groom. Mayhap she could imagine, at least once in her life, that her wedding was real. Her wedding was not a coincidence, not Fate's decision. Mayhap she could pretend that the man standing there, waiting for her with a hint of a smile on his face, was a real anxious-excited groom waiting for his lady love.

She put a brave, indifferent front, narrating the legend of the first Man and Woman when the priest told her to do so. She blocked out Pierre's voice as he repeated the original vow of honor that the first Man had said to Woman. And, despite her hand being cold, she did not flinch when the priest pricked her finger and let a drop of her blood fall on the temple fountain to join with Pierre's.

"Now these two have been joined by time, words and blood," the priest had said. "If there is anyone who wishes to stop this marriage, then speak your grounds." And since only Alice, Stephen and Wendell were in attendance as witnesses, nobody had really been there to object. The priest let them proceed with the final part of the ceremony. He put their hands together and Pierre kissed her; on the eyes, on the forehead, on the lips; the representation of union by body.

That part of the ceremony was always Anya's favorite to watch. She had seen friends and relatives marry. She had seen how lovingly a man held his love's hands, how solemn and chaste his kisses were. That was the way Pierre had done it. And even though it was all an act, she was at least thankful that she had felt, even for just a fraction of time, adored.

Yes, the ceremony had been lovely, but tonight it was all coming to an end.

Anya shook her head to concentrate on the present. She hugged herself, pulling her cream and beige stole tighter. She was about to knock on the royal bedroom's door, but Pierre opened it from the other side before she could do anything.

By the heavens! The man was still handsome as ever, even with the way his clothes were messed up. His jacket hung over one shoulder, and one front side of his crisp, white shirt was sticking out. The top buttons of his shirt were unconnected, thus putting his wide chest directly in front of Anya's view. He had rolled his breeches to the knees and pulled his boots off, showing off the sculpted calves he had behind his legs.

"Um," Anya started, almost forgetting what she was about to say. *Darn this blasted attraction*, she cursed to herself.

## Princess of Azarmon

"Coming to bed?" Pierre said in a soft, sensual voice.

Anya gulped and tried to meet his eyes despite the fact that her cheeks could be as red as strawberries. "Um, well, yes - I mean no!"

Pierre raised a brow and folded his hands in front of his chest, causing his shirt to stretch, exposing more of his chest and arm muscles.

"I - it's not what you think. Yes, I am ready to come to bed. But not with you. Never with you."

"Oh? And I suppose you'll be sleeping on the floor?"

"Yes. Fine." she said after several breathless seconds, resolved to do anything to make it so.

Pierre huffed in anger. "For goodness sake, Anya. We're both old enough to go about this. If you're not ready for anything between us, then I understand. But it doesn't mean we can't sleep on that bed, side by side, without touching each other. We've already done so before and nothing happened."

"But it's different now!" Anya protested.

"How is it different?"

"I - know you and you - well, I - I think it's not enough that we know each other. I don't love you Pierre." she finished lamely.

"Oh for crying out loud! We are not going to do anything! What would make you think that not being in love has anything to do about -" he tugged on his jacket and marched out the room, past Anya. "Forget it. I'm sleeping in the library. Good night Anya du Azarmon et de Castolla. I don't love you too."

The moment Pierre turned the corner towards the main steps, Anya released the breath that she did not know she had been holding. She congratulated herself for avoiding the dreaded wedding night. But why oh why did the man's last statement make her feel that her heart had been torn in two?

*I don't love you too.*

## Chapter 5

. o 0 C H A P T E R 5 0 o .

"We build on the west side of the village," Anya said as she spread out a map of Castolla over Pierre's mahogany-colored study table. It was two days after the wedding, and they had not said more than 'good morning' and 'hello' since the disastrous wedding night.

"No."

Pierre's instant refusal pulled Anya out of her thoughts. "But the west side is closer to more homes than the east!" she argued, pointing to the section of bare land she wanted the medical center to be built upon.

"I said no."

"For your information, I was the one who started this project. I assumed that I would be spearheading it."

"Stephen and I used to play in that area of the village every sunny season. And *only* during the sunny season, because the place floods like the devil when the rains come. That's why the houses there are raised on posts. I say-" he pointed to another bare area a relatively longer distance from the village central plaza, "we build here. It's higher ground, not to mention closer to the caravan road. It'll be easier to restock medical supplies if the caravan can reach it."

Anya glared at him, then at his forefinger obnoxiously pointing to the spot on the map. "How are the people, in the case of an immediate emergency, going to get to the center if it's so far away from the village?"

"Parakeets," Pierre said with a sense of confidence. "Enchanted parakeets."

Anya knew about how other kingdoms, due to difficult transportation, used parakeets to relay important information. Enchanted parakeets, or those that have been spellbound and trained by enchanter, not only knew how to repeat human words but also understood what was being told to them. They could also identify one person from another.

But Anya knew that one enchanted parakeet cost nearly one thousand and seven hundred Azars, or something like three thousand and four hundred Castols. This was the very reason that her father did not demand every Azarmonian household have one, knowing not all Azarmonian families could afford the animal. And besides, Azarmon was located on flat land, and almost all farmers had a pair of workhorses. Travelling was never difficult. If Azarmonians couldn't afford the living convenience, then how could the Castollans? "And how, pray tell, will we be able to buy the villagers enchanted parakeets?"

"We need only one," Pierre answered. "The watchtower in the middle of the plaza is accessible to every house in the village. In case of an emergency, a parakeet stationed at the tower can be sent to the center to fetch a healer. Surely we can afford even just one bird?"

Anya looked out the window, weighing the pros and cons of Pierre's suggestion. She had to admit, the plan was as flawless as it could be. "Fine. I'm leaving you to take charge of getting us a parakeet. But I will oversee the building."

"You are a stubborn over-calculating dictator, my sweeting."

## Princess of Azarmon

"And you," Anya said while darting an annoyed glance at his smug smile, "are an arrogant counselor with impeccable timing, your highness."

"Perhaps that's why we were Fated. We share the same impeccable characters, excluding your lovely eyes."

"Perhaps you've got a big head," Anya said as she collected the map, rolled it and tucked it under one arm. She heard his deep chuckle as she exited the study, and she knew that a small smile graced her face after having been tense for a long while.

"Anya! Thank goodness I found you," Alice called just as Anya was about to open the library door across the study's.

She looked to her left, to find Alice dressed in a pale blue gown similar to hers. Her twin was panting as if slowing down from a long run. "What is it?" Anya asked, walking towards her sister as she was taking deep breaths.

"Father's horses just arrived. And Prince Colin and his soldiers delivered them."

"Prince Colin is here?" Anya asked, almost dropping the map to the floor. "Alice, you must keep him from the castle. Only until I could tell Colin that the next Castollan king is here. And remember, he doesn't know about the wedding, so I have to talk to him about this too."

"Talk to me about what?" Prince Colin appeared at the corner of the hallway, his honey-blond hair and emerald eyes coinciding with his amber and emerald jacket.

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Colin looked from one twin to the other, easily recognizing which one of them was who. The different shades of hair and eyes were a dead giveaway. Alice looked stunning in the pale blue gown, the sapphire stones sewed onto the hem and cropped sleeves making her beauty sparkle. Anya too looked amazing. Surprisingly, the paleness of the dress and the diamonds embedded in intricate patterns on her bodice contrasted wonderfully with her glossy hair. It was such a pity no suitor wanted her hand. If they only knew that she was the real maiden bound to Azarmon, they would not look anywhere else. Then again, it was a poor reason for marriage. Colin was nine-and-twenty, and he had no intention of letting love pass by.

"What's happening to both of you?" he approached the gaping sisters. "This is the first time I've visited without getting so much as a hug. I've never seen you two so still. And speechless."

"Oh Colin," Alice recovered first. "Of course we're speechless. We weren't expecting you to deliver the horses." With this she rushed to Colin's arms and hugged him.

"Well, I'm expecting both of you to come back with me so that you can catch the wedding ceremony and festival. Your father, unfortunately, is stuck in an important kingdom affair," He patted Alice's shoulder and took her hand, placing it on his elbow as he made his way to the other sister. "The engagement festival was a success, but it wasn't the same without you two. Adele also wishes both of you to come as soon as possible. What do you say, Anya? Can you neglect a few duties to leave early?"

"I don't know, Colin." Anya stated uneasily. Colin had been a family friend for as long as she could remember, and it was always very difficult for her to deny anything he asked for. "I have a building I need to plan, not to mention the farmers I need to schedule with the horses. There's also the upcoming caravan, and the rains-



## Princess of Azarmon

"Oh come on, sugar plum." Colin cuddled her, his usual way of greeting. "Please, please, please!"

"Well-"

"Get away from my wife!"

Anya gasped as the tip of a sword cut through the space between her and Colin, the latter looking so shocked that he opened and closed his mouth like a fish. She turned to her left and met Pierre's burning eyes. The man was outraged! "Anya, who is this?"

"You know her?" Colin addressed the question to the newcomer. And then - "Wait. Anya, who is he?"

"I asked first!" The other answered. "Anya, who is he? Is he your lover?"

"You have no right to insult me and Princess Anya that way, young man."

"And you have no right and reason to hold MY WIFE the way you just did now!"

"Wife? You're married? The two of you?! I don't even know you!"

"And I don't know you! So how dare you enter my castle without my permission?!"

"Your castle?!"

"STOP!!!" Alice, feeling that she had been left out for too long, held out her hands to keep both men away from each other and interrupted the argument. "Stop it, both of you. Colin, meet Sir Pierre de Castolla, future king to this land. Pierre, this is Prince Colin de Auria, *bridegroom* to our sister Princess Adele. Now put down that sword before you hurt anyone!"

Pierre lowered his sword, causing Colin to breathe in relief and wonder. "You two are married? Since when?"

"Two days ago," Pierre said as he sheathed his sword and pulled Anya into his arms, claiming and protecting her at the same time. Colin saw the barely contained jealousy in his eyes and the matching embarrassment in his future sister-in-law's. He guessed that if this was not a love match, it would be pretty soon. "Your Highness," Pierre continued, "Princess Anya is now Anya du Azarmon et de Castolla. Future queen of this land, and my wife."

"Then congratulations is in order," Colin said, not taking his eyes off of the man. "And I have to warn you, de Castolla. Take care of her. There's only one Anya in this world, and she's a jewel."

Pierre laid his head over hers and did not let go of his hold. He closed his eyes as if to imprint in his mind the sensations of holding the princess. "Don't I know it."

"As proven. Impeccable timingâ " Anya murmured as she buried her face in his jacket to hide the hot blush of her cheeks.

Colin looked to Alice, whose only response to the ebbing jealousy in Pierre and silent ire in Anya was a nonchalant shrug and raised brow. He may not have known how this unusual and hasty marriage between, from what he guessed, two complete strangers to each other came about, but he was sure it came about for a reason.

## Princess of Azarmon

He realized that Alice was not one bit disappointed with the match, nor totally elated. If the marriage had come about as a tactic to seize Castolla from Azarmon's hold, then Alice would have assembled the Azarmonian soldiers by now. This was a strange marriage indeed. But before he could ask its nature, an even younger man in a tan shirt and dark brown breeches entered the hall.

"Hey! What did I miss?"

"Colin," Pierre said, "may I present to you my half-brother, Sir Stephen du Castolla."

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The air was filled with tension as Princesses Anya and Alice, Lords Pierre and Stephen and Prince Colin seated themselves at the dining table. The kitchen servants, upon knowing that their masters were to receive the very first visitor to the castle, outdid themselves by preparing many various dishes. There was rabbit and chicken soup, lamb chops dripped with sauce, crisp vegetables smothered with cream and all kinds of sweetmeats. Dessert consisted of custard and caramel cake, as well as peach and apple pie and butter tarts with cherries on top.

If it had not been for Pierre and Colin's chance encounter that morning, Anya would have had more enthusiasm in commenting on the excellent food choices that cook listed on the menu. As it was, she had energy only for a murmur of her appreciation. The rest of her energy was coiled like a spring inside her, waiting to be used for an attempt at stopping the next confrontation between her husband and friend.

Her husband. It was strange that she finally thought of someone as hers. For a brief moment earlier that morning, she swore that he had been not only jealous, but worried her heart was already captured. By Prince Colin, no less! If only Pierre knew how when they were little, she and her twin were the ones who secretly caused the prince and Adele's 'chance encounters' during Azarmonian Festivals. Up to this day, Adele called them the 'royal matchmakers.'

"You two were so clever to set Colin and I up," she once commented, "that I don't quite understand why you never set yourselves up. In my opinion, husbands would be able to temper your penchant for mischief."

Anya giggled abruptly, forgetting that she was having dinner with two amused warriors and two men glaring at each other from across different sides of the table. Alice raised her brow in curiosity, as did Stephen. The two men momentarily interrupted their glaring competition to look at her too.

"Anya?" Colin asked from beside Alice, who was sitting across from her.

"It was nothing Colin," she said feeling a little embarrassed. "I just remembered a few childhood memories."

"Ah, yes!" Alice interrupted, pointing her fork at her sister. It seemed she still had not developed impeccable table manners despite being in the royal court all their lives. "I distinctly remember the pranks we used to pull on poor Colin."

"Exactly what pranks?" Stephen asked, shoving another piece of meat into his mouth by fork.

Colin glared at Alice, daring her to tell any of his humiliating secrets.

"What?!" Alice pleaded, "If it wasn't for my efforts at making a fool out of you, then you would not have received Adele's sympathy and she would not have thought you cute *and* fallen in love with you."

## Princess of Azarmon

"And she would not have decided to marry you," Pierre took a drink from his wine goblet and wiped at his mouth with a cloth napkin. He tossed the napkin down on the table, signaling that he was through with dinner. "What day is the wedding, by the way?"

"Three days from now," Colin focused on Anya. "If you can get your things ready tonight, we can reach Azarmon at around this time. Presuming we can leave early in the morning, unless you prefer sleeping in?"

"Now why would I sleep in?" Anya asked, the puzzlement in her voice and face evident.

Colin stared at her first, then erupted into such a loud round of laughter that Alice and Stephen, who was seated to Alice's left, looked at each other in bewilderment. "You're telling me," the prince said, "that you rose at cock-crow after the wedding night? Anya, you are something! Or maybe there was something wrong with lover-boy?"

Anya heard a low growl beside her. She turned and saw, to her horror, Pierre's face turning into a thunderstorm. She had to take matters into her hands before anything got out of control. Clearing her voice, she dropped her utensils on her plate and sat straighter in her chair. "Colin, that's enough. We're not at father's castle, therefore it's rude and downright disgusting to talk of such things over the dinner table, especially when there's still an unmarried lady present.

"You of all people should know better than to meddle into my affairs, especially my relationship with my husband. Plus, Pierre does not deserve to be insulted at his own table. If I were you, I'd apologize to him before either Stephen or Alice beheads you."

Colin's eyes widened. "Of - of course. Pierre, I am so sorry. I was only trying to make a joke. I didn't mean to meddle with anything! It's just that I'm so used to discussing random topics with Anya that I sometimes forget myself."

Anya discreetly let out her breath under cover of her napkin when she realized that Pierre begun to cool down. "No offense taken, right Pierre?" she said, answering Colin and beseeching Pierre to agree at the same time.

"Of course. None taken," Pierre said.

Anya was about to resume finishing off her tart when she felt a hand slip atop her knee. She glanced at Pierre and met his eyes, which were focused on her and her alone. She did not know why, but she impulsively reached under the table to rest it atop his hand. He quickly turned it palm up, and interlocked their fingers. The pad of his thumb caressed the back of hers, and she felt tingles shoot from the tender, intimate gesture.

Pierre smiled at her. He mouthed a thank you for stopping what could have been a messy brawl. Anya smiled back and let herself imagine that she was actually having a normal dinner with her loving husband and close friends. In truth, she and her indifferent husband were deceiving the close friend. They weren't actually in love. They certainly hadn't married for love. They didn't even share the same bedroom.

Anya gasped. "Pierre, I forgot to mention something to you earlier today."

Pierre raised a brow. But Anya ignored him and pulled him out of the dining room before their guest and siblings could say anything. "What have you forgotten? Is it about the health facility?"

Anya stopped when they reached the stairs that led to the upper floor of the castle. "Pierre, you have to get your things from the guest bedroom."

## Princess of Azarmon

"Why?"

"Why? WHY?! We have to sleep together tonight!"

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Anya rolled to her back, feeling rather sore after hastily and silently helping Pierre transfer his things into the royal bedroom. Sure there were three other bedrooms that they could stick Colin in, but Anya was not about to reveal the nature of their wedding. She needed to make Colin think that she and Pierre was a couple. Even if it meant helping the servants lug Pierre's trunks to speed things up.

Anya looked to her side and noticed that Pierre was wide awake too, staring at the canopy with his hands behind his head. And as if sensing that she was staring at him, Pierre turned his head in her direction and smiled. "Now this isn't so bad, is it?" he asked, "Like I said before. We can lie in this bed and not touch each other, like complete adults."

"I could have slept on the floor," Anya muttered as she rolled away from him. But Pierre caught her arm and pulled her to her back again.

"Or I could have chained you to the bed like I did on the first night we met," he chuckled when she scowled at him and made herself as comfortable as she could without any parts of their body touching. "You haven't told me much about yourself. And mind telling me about Lord Maximilian? I reckon from Alice and Pierre that you saved him from drowning in a river. I assume he was a past love?"

Anya almost laughed at the evident displeasure on his face. Instead she snorted and pulled the coverlet tighter around her. Even in the dark of night, with the embers from the fireplace barely illuminating the room, she felt uncomfortable lying next to Pierre. Even if she had her thickest camisole and leggings under her chemise, she felt more than naked. And the fact that Pierre was bare-chested above his black hose was not helping her get sleep. "There's no chance in time that he was ever a past love. Nor will he be a present or future one."

"Care to explain why you're so opposed to him?" Pierre had moved closer. She could sense just by the body heat that was hitting her left side. Anya ignored the sudden temperature change and swallowed before explaining.

"I met Lord Maximilian during my tenth birthday. Even then, Alice and I hated dressing up in frilly outfits, so we decided to skip the dancing and head out for adventure. At that time, father and Magus Napoleon were busy writing up our debut contract, so nobody noticed that we sneaked out of the castle.

Lord Maximilian, who was to be one of our guests, also strayed out of the castle and into the forest. Unluckily, he didn't know that a rogue wolf lived in the part of the forest where he chose to explore. He was chased into the river, and almost drowned when he went over a small waterfall. Thankfully, Alice and I were able to swim over and rescue him before he got more than a broken leg.

"He stayed at the castle for nearly a month because of his injury, and was rude to everyone he met. Even Alice and I couldn't take his foul disposition. But a week after he left to return to his stepfather's kingdom, he came back and hung out with us. At first we would not hear of it, but father and Magus Napoleon insisted we let him in our circle of friends. Ever since then, he's been a thorn in my side. He'll be much more so now that somebody actually married me before he could."

Pierre remained silent all through her story. And when he continued to remain so, she glanced over at him and raised one brow. "What?"

## Princess of Azarmon

"He's a strange one. First he doesn't like you and then he suddenly turns the other way and is infatuated with you. If I were in your place, I would have slapped him in the face."

Anya shivered. She had, on multiple times, did even more than just slap him in the face. But the man hadn't cared. In fact, he had seemed to enjoy the painful attention after attempts to kiss her. "I don't want to talk about him anymore, especially when he's obviously planning something bigger to have me this time. He makes me too nervous."

"Alright. What else should we talk about?" Pierre lifted himself onto one elbow and studied her. If the curtains had been drawn, Anya would have had a better view of his chest.

Anya blushed and looked away, even though it was too dark for him to see any change in color on her cheeks. "Can we talk about you?"

She did not expect him to agree to the topic immediately, being a bastard son and all. She had heard rumors that Kildare fathered a boy on his housemaid, but she had not believed. Funny that now she was married to the person she thought did not exist. His voice was low and soft, droning and rolling like a tender lullaby. He explained about his past, his half-brother, even the scarce encounters with his father.

Anya yawned and instinctively rolled to the warmer part of the bed. Pierre's voice faded as she allowed sleep to take her - and Pierre to wrap her securely in his arms.

## Chapter 6

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*You have to protect Azarmon. It is your destiny.*

*How can I?*

*The only way you can protect Azarmon is if you protect her. Is if you love her.*

*Protect who? Love who?*

*Only your heart can tell you who. But you must, else Azarmon and Castolla will be lost to you. Else she will be lost to you. Beware king, for many deceptions will come your way.*

Pierre briskly opened his eyes, almost blinding himself to the sun's rays seeping through the balcony beside the bed. He squinted and tried to lift his right arm above his eyes to block the light. But he found that he could not move it. Anya, who was still fast asleep and pressed head to foot by his side, was using it as a pillow.

Her beautifully messy hair blanketed his upper arm, and her parted lips breathed in and out near his collar bone. One of her arms was slung over his waist, and both her legs were sandwiching his thigh. Every breath she took caused her chest and stomach to make contact with his side. And her chemise had ridden up to reveal her legs, soft and delicate just like the rest of her. Pierre groaned. Waking up to her form almost crawling all over him was too provoking.

"Anya? Anya?" he whispered close to her ear so that she would not be startled. But she would not wake, and so he had to raise himself on the pillows and gently shake her by the shoulder. "Anya, sweeting, we have to get up."

Anya murmured something about 'not going to hunt no squirrels in the morning,' and pressed closer, burying her head in that warm space between Pierre's jaw and shoulder. Pierre lifted her head and called her again, this time running his hand over the length of her arm. Anya yawned. Her eyelids lifted slowly.

"Good morning, sweeting. Did you sleep well?" Pierre asked, his hand still moving over the same somewhat safe territory.

"Yes," she said in a hoarse morning voice. Then more sharply exclaimed an "Oh!" when she realized where her hands and legs have strayed. "I'm sorry," she apologized as she wiggled away from him. "I didn't know I was moving a lot."

She blushed and sat up, then started pulling down her chemise to cover her limbs. Pierre turned to his side and watched her as she fussed over herself. It was so amusing, the way she rambled and flushed in embarrassment.

"I sometimes tend to move a lot in my sleep, especially when I think too much before I do. But I just can't seem to not think about anything before I go to sleep. And usually when I think, Iâ!" *The only way to protect Azarmon is if you protect her.*

"Did I kick you? I don't know if I kick in my dreams too, but Alice usually does. And it hurts sometimes. I'm so sorry if I did. I assure you I didn't knowâ!" *Is if you love her.*

## Princess of Azarmon

"My mother has been to the healers to ask if they can do anything about my moving in my sleep, but they told her it was normal. Or so mother told me. Father says so too, so I think that it's normalâ" *Only your heart can tell you who.*

"Come here," Pierre said as he himself sat up and stayed where she had lain. The dream had never been clearer. He needed to take her now. It was his destiny, his duty. It was the way things were supposed to be. Anya had already accepted her role. She had slept beside him, had she not? And he was eager to accept his too.

"W-what?" Anya stuttered, letting go of her chemise and gawking at him.

"I said 'come here'," Pierre replied.

"I don't unders-"

Pierre pulled her into his arms so fast that Anya let out a little yelp before being smothered with a kiss so smoldering she had no time to react with anger.

Pierre tasted her lips, those delicate rose petals that had tempted him since the day he met her. His sudden outburst of passion mellowed when Anya tried to pull away. He replaced the blazing trail of his mouth with the mellow press of lips against lips. And then the woman realized that the sudden fire of his desire diffused into the gentle glow of fondness.

Her lips parted for him, her hands pulled at his shoulders to draw him closer, even though she was already crushed to his front and caged in his arms. But still he obliged, pressing against her until they outbalanced and tumbled, he on top of her, she between warm body and downy pillows.

"Oh Anya," Pierre breathed, not once stopping his tender attack, "You're so beautiful, so very beautiful. Anya, sweetingâ my sweetingâ mine."

"Pierreâ please, no." she said even as she tangled her fingers through the dark hair at the nape of his neck.

"Why not? Oh Anya. My sweet, sweet Anya. I adore you. Will you not let me show you how much?" Pierre struggled to keep his needs in check. He decided that it would be better for the both of them if he proceeded carefully instead of rushing and getting it done with.

"Let me love you as the sun rises," he whispered in her ear, causing her to gasp.

Somehow he managed to claim her mouth again without rousing her anger. But as he decided to finally allow his tongue to rove where his lips had caressed, something salty landed on its tip. He stopped, raising himself to look at her. To look on those dark, dark eyes where tears fell from one by one. "Anya? You're crying?"

"I-" Anya sniffed, "I know what you're doing. It's okay. I know you don't love me, so you don't have to pretend. I'm so sorry that I denied you. That was cruel of me. But it's okay. Really. Let's just get this over with."

Pierre stared, and then frowned bitterly. He lifted himself from above her and cursed as he crawled to the end of the bed. He picked up the shirt he had worn the night before and shrugged into it, all the while cursing. All the while angry. And all the while not knowing what had set him off. Perhaps it was the way he had handled things, not allowing her to make the first move. Or Perhaps he was angry at her, for talking about being intimate like it was just another one of the errands she had to finish for the day.

## Princess of Azarmon

"Did - did I say something wrong?"

He glanced over his shoulder, at his *wife* who was now sitting in the middle of the bed. For all her speech and martyrdom, she now looked like a dejected child. Her teary face was far from the drowsy beauty that had awakened at his touch. Pierre's heart shattered just looking at her. How he wished that she loved him. But he himself did not even know if he loved her. "No, you didn't. It was just the shock of the morning. I'll go down for breakfast and then pack for Azarmon. You can sleep in for as long as you want. Your choice."

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The carriage rambled through the thick forest separating Whiteweed Plateau from the rest of the world. It was here Anya roused from a fitful nap that had not lessened the ache in her confused heart. Before her, Alice was still fast asleep. Her twin's head was cradled on one of Stephen's folded jackets, while the rest of her was curled on top of the leather seat.

Despite the seemingly angelic pose of her twin, Anya knew that Alice would sit up alert at the slightest sign of danger. For now, she rested. Anya cautiously poked her head out of the carriage and glanced up at the sky. The span of sky and clouds were tinged orange, hinting that it was already close to sunset. Three more hours and they would be above Whiteweed Plateau, where Azarmon stood proud.

It was, in her opinion, a beautiful kingdom. Unlike Castolla, whose buildings were made of sturdy wood and sometimes stone pillars coated thinly with gold-leaf, Azarmon was a proud assembly of establishments and houses, all with white brick walls and white columns. White sapphire decorated every silver-coated surface, and roofs gleamed with shiny red slates. Dark brown or black wood framed every fretted window. The season's flowers spilled over every flower bed. Lush trees dotted the farming fields at intervals. All these were enclosed and protected by a wall seven meters thick and manned by the royal soldiers and warriors.

And beyond the main gate of the wall was the road down the plateau, the road that they wanted to arrive at before nightfall. The road that intersected the wide fields of Whiteweed, the rarest of the herbal plants that grew anywhere else but surprisingly sprouted in abundance on the plateau.

It was necessary for members of the council and the royal household to have some sort of magical degree. Magus Napoleon, for instance, developed a sense of clairvoyance which he used to aid her father. Alice had been trained as a Warrior, her intuition the key to the lightning speed at which she moved during battles. Enchanters used persuasion, as well as several other tricks, to control other beings and bend them to their whims. Healers, such as her, used their photographic memories for memorizing herbal recipes that could help others. And Anya was skilled at recounting available remedies for common illnesses.

Whiteweed was, as she had been taught during her schooling years, a remedy for skin abrasions and wounds. Other plants, such as Redroot and Pinkpetal, were familiar to her too. She used her knowledge to aid the soldiers during war between Azarmon and other kingdoms. The latest war, the one with Castolla, resulted in very little mortalities, mostly by accident. For this she was grateful.

But above all the things that she had done, the healings that she had performed and the prayers she offered for those who were not so lucky, her role as an Azarmonian princess came first. She knew that someday she would have to be married off; she would bear the next heir to Azarmon, and to another kingdom. Suddenly, her simple role seemed like such a daunting task. She much preferred roving over the battlefields and hefting scarred soldiers to safety over having to sit idly on a throne.

Anya sighed. She closed the curtain of the carriage window after settling back in her seat. She could hear the pounding of horses' hooves even though she was fully enclosed by the carriage. Somewhere behind them,



## Princess of Azarmon

Pierre, Stephen and Prince Colin were mounted and riding with the royal soldiers sent to escort them back to the kingdom.

Since the disastrous incident that morning, Anya had not received a word from Pierre. The man now freely conversed with her twin and was able to make several comments addressed to the Prince. But why in the name of the stars had he not talked to her? Or even merely greeted her at the breakfast table?

"Sis? What are you thinking of?"

Anya was startled. She looked at her twin, who was already sitting up and awaiting her answer. "Nothing," she replied, "just letting my mind wander off. What about you? I haven't asked about what you've been doing lately. I heard from Wendell that you've been spending a lot of time with Sir Stephen."

Alice huffed. "Only because the man seems to be getting into difficult situations. I watch him so he doesn't pull any mischief. I don't trust him that much. And I can't believe he eats with his bare unwashed hands after sparring with the Castollan soldiers."

"Oh please, Alice. It's not like we didn't used to do that when nobody was watching."

"But he ate like a pig! None of the manners and finesse of the royal court. And he acts like one too, strutting here and there like he owns the place."

"Technically, he does own the place. His half-brother *is* the future king. And don't forget that despite being raised in the Castollan castle for an amount of years, his mother was just a servant. He's not expected to turn into a complete dandy. And you should be thankful he lent you that 'pillow' you're sleeping on. Otherwise your coiffure would have turned into a bird's nest."

Alice unfolded the jacket, ticked off a few invisible particles and refolded it carelessly. "Still I don't like him that much. I mean, I could never imagine him fit into the Azarmonian court, playing the nice aristocratic gentleman from Castolla."

Anya giggled, and then quickly used her gloved hand to stifle it. "Oh Alice. You never change. You're still masking your infatuation with anger. Someday you'll be surprised by how people can be so different from what you perceive them to be."

"Like how you were surprised that the arrogant bastard king of Castolla could be quite a kisser?" Alice replied slyly.

Anya did not reply, but in her mind she knew the answer. *Yes, it was an unexpected, astonishing surprise.*

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King Malcolm watched from the staircase descending into the courtyard as the gate was opened for the return of his daughters. Behind him, Olivia chewed on her thumb while waiting with him. "Come now, my love. You don't look attractive biting off your nail like that," he said as he turned around to pull her hand away from her teeth. She looked so attractive in her dark red gown with gold embroidery at the sleeves and waist even for her advanced age.

He pulled her closer to him using his right hand holding hers, at the same time spreading his red cloak over her shoulders with the other hand. He enveloped her in his arms under the shared cloak and looked into her eyes. Olivia looked at him with the smile that he fell in love with many years ago. He hand-picked her from

## Princess of Azarmon

the women of the court despite her refusal, and the first few months of their stay in Azarmon castle had been hair-raising. There were petty arguments and misunderstandings, not to mention vases crashing against the walls and dishes shattering like rainfall. But soon they came to an understanding and eventually found the love and passion that they so craved.

He didn't know his wife would have a strong throwing arm. He chuckled at the memory, causing Olivia to frown slightly and raise her thumb to her lips again. Malcolm always considered that a cute gesture, but did not like the anxiety hidden behind it. He again retrieved his wife's hand and enclosed it in his. "I was just thinking about the silly things we used to throw at each other, figuratively and literally speaking. What about you, Livy? Your daughters are coming back to Azarmon. You should be happy."

"But Mali, the lookout soldiers said that there are more men on horseback accompanying them here. Shouldn't we be suspicious?"

"Nonsense, Livy-Love," he reassured her with an arm slung over her shoulder. "Prince Colin is with them, as are my most trusted soldiers. They'll be fine. Look. Here comes their carriage now."

The carriage went below the raised portcullis, followed by thirteen men, two of which rode beautiful Trakehners. One of them rode a chestnut Trak, keeping to the end of the procession. The other, regal-looking in a suit of dark green, was atop a black Trak and riding on Colin's side. Malcolm shrugged off his uncertainty at meeting the two gentlemen and proceeded down the steps with Olivia right behind him. He reached the paved drive as the carriage stopped abruptly.

Colin stopped as well, closer to him than the carriage. His riding companion halted several feet behind him. "Your Highness?"

Malcolm smiled at the young man, his soon-to-be son-in-law. Adele was lucky to marry for love. And Colin was an even luckier man to have his Adele. "I see by that tilt of your mouth that you've delivered my daughters safely. I trust there were no complications along the way?"

"Hardly, Sir. They're both in one piece, and grumpy from having been forced to ride the carriage instead of their horses. They seem to value the scenery more than their safety."

"Oh dear. You better hide while you still can. Especially from Alice," Olivia quipped. "She has a mean throwing arm." She shot a taunting look at her husband.

Colin grimaced, causing his horse to jump a bit. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and gestured to the two strangers to come forward. "By the way, I have very fresh news to say to you. This is-

Before he could introduce the two men with him, the loud bang of the wooden door above the courtyard steps and the high squeal of a delighted Azarmonian princess rang out. Adele rushed from the castle interior and down the steps, not minding how the drive's dust would stick to the hem of her pale caramel gown. "Cole! You're back!"

Colin grinned, jumped from his horse and eagerly sprinted to his fiancée, catching her in his arms and swinging her around in a circle. The two lovebirds shamelessly kissed right in front of everyone, causing the servants to smile their approval.

"Oh Mali," Olivia sighed, "children these days. Not a decent bone in them."

## Princess of Azarmon

But before Malcolm could reply to his wife's observation, the dark-haired man on the black horse approached him with a respectful, somehow cautious gaze. Malcolm smiled and raised his hand in salute. "Greetings, young man. You're a friend of Colin?"

The man forced a smile upon his face and returned the salute. "Yes, a recent friend."

The king frowned. "Recent?"

"Yes. I'm more acquainted with your daughter."

"Who?" Olivia interrupted curiously. "Adele?"

"No. I meant my wife, Anya."

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"Pardon?" Malcolm asked at the same time that the other man he still did not know descended his own horse and opened the door to the carriage. From his viewpoint he could see his two daughters descending, noting the dark green gown Anya wore. The swirling embroidery of gold and silver flowers running the whole length of the gown's front, right from the turtleneck collar to the frothy skirt, exactly matched the pattern on the dark-haired man's jacket sleeves. "Are you implying that my youngest daughter is married to you?"

"I was not implying, Your Highness," The man said in a neutral voice. "My name is Sir Pierre de Castolla, the future king of said kingdom once I can be crowned by my wife. Over there is my brother, Sir Stephen."

Malcolm barely heard his explanation, as his gaze was riveted to his youngest daughter, who seemed hesitant to approach them. So instead of rushing to her and hugging her, he proceeded to question the man before him. "Anya never mentioned that she was holding certain affections for anyone."

Pierre descended his horse and moved closer to the royal couple, holding up his palm for their inspection. "You could say that Fate was the one with the affections for me."

The half of the wing brand on his palm astounded King Malcolm. And Olivia gasped in surprise beside him. She did not know the whole story behind the tattoo, but she had been assured by both Malcolm and Napoleon that the man who wore it would be deserving of Anya. Malcolm pursed his lips and rubbed his bearded jaw. Even though he was close to fifty and his hair was graying, his athletic physique remained intact. This factor of his appearance intimidated most people, but he could see that Pierre was not unsettled one bit. "Alright. You've convinced me, young man." He took a quick look at Anya. "Have you been treating her well?"

Pierre gulped. "I've never had a wife before, but I think I'm doing it right."

It was an honest answer, and Malcolm was mildly amused at his insecurity. He wanted to smile, but let out a small cough instead and held out his hand for a shake. "Yes, she's a bit difficult. She doesn't have her twin's temper, but sometimes her practicality can be quite overwhelming."

Pierre grasped his hand and nodded, though a bit of a frown crossed his face. "I try my best to cope."

"And I say you're coping extremely well," The queen held out her hand too. "I can see she hasn't ordered Alice to burn you at the stake yet. I'm Olivia by the way, Queen of Azarmon. And that over there, hugging the life from poor Prince Colin, is my eldest daughter Adele du Azarmon."

## Princess of Azarmon

Malcolm sighed with relief discreetly. Olivia's acceptance of Pierre as their son-in-law was the signal for Anya to come closer.

She made her way to Pierre's side and smiled tentatively at him when he took her hand. Malcolm raised a brow at his wife, but all she did was shrug and caress her daughter's cheek. "Greetings, my Anya. You chose a delightful man in this one."

His daughter blushed. "There wasn't a lot of choosing involved, mother. But he is somehow delightful."

Malcolm took his daughter's hand in his and looked her in the eye. "It's wonderful to finally have you back, my daughter. We'll leave you and your husband alone for now so that you can settle in. But I plan to have a word with you two after dinner. Magus Napoleon has missed you."

Anya smiled genuinely this time. "No need to talk in riddles, father," She looked to her husband. "Pierre already knows."

## Princess of Azarmon

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