

## Chapter Two



“Are you nervous?”

If those words had come from anyone other than Prince Liam Dunne’s most trusted servant, he would quickly remind them who they were speaking to. Instead, he let out a long breath, ignoring the pit forming in his stomach, and answered the question. “Not really.”

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Your Highness.”

Pretend? Perhaps Liam’s perfectly crafted mask wasn’t holding up as well as it should. A lifetime of keeping his emotions and facial expressions in check should have been enough to make him appear unbothered by today’s events. “It’s my duty to the United States Southern Sector.”

The fact was, though, Liam should be nervous. He had agreed to an engagement with a complete stranger. He should be questioning everything and everyone who had a hand in this alliance.

But it wasn’t his place to question. Not when his people needed him.

Instead, he stood still as his attendant adjusted his tie and hoped he could convince his parents and bride-to-be that he was content with this engagement.

“It is.” Luka took a step backward and dropped his hands, but his gaze never left Liam’s face.

“Why do I have the feeling there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

A grin lifted the corners of Luka’s mouth. “Just promise me you are doing this for the right reasons and not out of a sense of duty.”

Okay, so he *had* to do better to mask his emotions. Or perhaps Luka just knew him better than most. Liam worked to clear the lump lodging in his throat. “I’m afraid duty is all I’m afforded.”

Luka sighed, reaching for the navy suit jacket and holding it open for Liam to slide his arm through. “Surely, your parents would listen if you had someone else in mind, Your Highness.”

Liam wanted to laugh out loud, but he bit the inside of his cheek instead. Even if someone else had caught his eye and claimed his heart, he wouldn’t be able to follow his heart. His parents loved him, but not more than their people, property lines, and treaties. “I’m afraid, Luka, you’ll just have to be disappointed. The only love I’m afforded is the one for my people.”

A flash of pity flickered across his servant’s face before it quickly vanished. “Well, if anyone could change their minds, it would be you, Your Highness.”

Liam cleared his throat, stepped away from his attendant, and walked over to his desk. Pity wasn’t what he wanted or needed. This was something he had to do—a necessity of his position. Everyone had a role to play in the Southern Sector. Since the Tenebrous Era.

Every aspect of society demanded and depended on it. The former US didn’t climb out of destruction and rebuild for their monarchs to pick and choose which laws they abide by. If Liam could choose for himself this one time ... No, he couldn’t think like that.

The intercom buzzed on his desk, and he eagerly pushed the button to answer it. Anything to distract his wayward thoughts. “Yes?”

“Your Royal Highness, Mr. Aspen is here to see you.”

Liam looked at Luka in surprise. His servant merely shrugged. Liam shifted his attention back toward the intercom. “Thank you. Please send him in.” What did his father’s advisor want with him?

Mr. Aspen entered the office and bowed. “Your Highness.”

“Mr. Aspen. What can I do for you?”

The man raised his head, and a frown played with the corners of his mouth. “Everything for a perfect summer engagement party is ready, and I was just alerted that Princess Amelia has finally arrived.”

“That’s great news, except the face you’re making doesn’t quite match your words.”

Mr. Aspen’s face turned bright red before he held up a tablet—one of the few in existence in the Southern Sector—from his side. “Well, it seems Princess Amelia arrived alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“The royal engagement coordinator, Mrs. Bex, found her in the old chapel with no servants, attendants, or luggage.” Mr. Aspen’s voice grew more incredulous with each item he listed.

*The old chapel?* No one ever went to the abandoned chapel nestled just outside the town square. Not since official church services were outlawed after the Tenebrous Era. What happened, and why would she go there, of all places? “Is she all right?”

“She appears to be, Your Highness. They found her already dressed for the engagement party, but she was alone.”

Liam raised an eyebrow at Mr. Aspen’s reply. “And you are certain no entourage was with her?”

“None, sir.”

His mind whirled in a hundred different directions. Princess Amelia would travel nowhere without guards and all her attendants—a caravan of vehicles and luggage.

What had happened? They must have run into some type of trouble on the road.

“Has there been any word from the Western Sector?”

Mr. Aspen tapped on the screen, and an exasperated sigh followed. “Well, considering this tablet is almost ancient, who knows if a message would get through even if they sent it.”

A laugh tried to work its way through Liam’s lips, but he held it at bay. “Oh, Mr. Aspen, you should be happy that our sector even has that tablet.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” If it were possible, the advisor’s face turned a darker shade of red. The man did not like being called out, especially by Liam. Another couple of swipes on the screen, and he sighed. “No official word from the Western Sector, sir.”

“All right. I’m sure she wouldn’t have come alone, so something must have happened on her trip.” He turned to Luka, a plan already forming in his mind. “Princess Amelia will need attendants.”

“Of course, Your Highness. I will see to it myself.”

Liam held up his hand. “Wait just a moment, Luka, before you go.” He moved from his desk and gestured to Mr. Aspen. “Was there anything else that you needed, Mr. Aspen?”

The man raised his chin. “Well, perhaps we should send the advisor from the Western Sector in to welcome her.”

Liam nodded and silently kicked himself. He should have thought of that and already had the man called for. If something happened on her trip, no doubt Princess Amelia would want and need to let her advisor know. The man had arrived several weeks ago on behalf of the Western Sector to plan and ready everything for his Princess’s arrival. He was condescending and carried himself arrogantly, and for a moment, Liam wondered if he should even bother to send the man. No doubt the princess would be tired and possibly stressed, and Mr. Ortega wasn’t exactly a comforting soul.

But for all he knew, Princess Amelia might be just like him. His stomach churned at the thought. Could he put up with someone who was the exact opposite of him for his entire life?

He longed to get out of this engagement. But he was already

committed, whether he wanted to be or not. And since he was, he couldn't fathom the idea of the woman being upset and scared.

"Yes, alert Mr. Ortega of her arrival and please send in my mother's maid to see to her until we can make other arrangements."

"Of course, Your Highness." Mr. Aspen bowed again before leaving the study.

Liam waited until the man was out of earshot before returning to Luka. Transfers between royal kingdoms didn't happen often—but Luka's family once served in the Western Sector. There were more affluent sectors, to be sure, but Liam had always been grateful that Luka had chosen the Southern Sector. Now, that decision could be an enormous relief to the princess.

"Luka, if Princess Amelia is alone, she's not going to feel very comfortable with the staff we have in the palace."

"That's probably true."

"Do you think your daughter would mind coming to the palace to help until Princess Amelia's attendants arrive?"

Luka's eyes widened, and he hesitated before he spoke. "She was a young girl when we made the trek here, Your Highness, and I'm not sure she would remember much about a servant's life at the palace."

"Well, perhaps just the knowledge she's from the princess's home sector would help." He sighed. "It may make the transition a little easier."

Luka nodded. "You are very kind to think about the princess like that."

"Well, I know firsthand how difficult this is." He sighed. "And I have my entire family and people here with me. She's all alone."

"I will talk to my daughter, Your Highness. I'm sure she would be happy to help."

"Thank you, Luka."

"It's no trouble. I will go ask her now." Luka bowed his head before departing, leaving Liam alone in the vast study.

He looked around, his eyes lingering on the clock in front of

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his desk. In two hours, his life would descend a path that, once started, could not be stopped. Liam did his best to ignore the dread filling his stomach and breaking his heart. He could do this.

Had to do this.

For his family, for the people, and for the Southern Sector.