

Protect the Throne

By Máire Rock

“You wouldn’t” she said, her hands twisting and turning in her lap.

“I would, and I will” he said forcefully, slamming his hands on the desk and pushing himself upwards.

“You can’t force m—”

“NO” he yelled, cutting her off. “No more discussion. No more “Please Fathers.” No more any of it. It has been decided. And not another word” he said, turning around with his finger already pointed at her

“out of you.”

Her mouth snapped shut, the words that she had been about to yell back dying on the tip of her tongue.

He ran his fingers through his hair, the tiredness coming off of him in waves as he paced behind the desk.

He looked at her with the bags under his eyes, and asked her with desperation creeping into his voice

“Why? Why now? Why wait till the midnight hour?”

She looked down at her hands, at the hem of her dress pooling at her feet. She shifted, and in the smallest voice he had ever heard her speak in, she said “I just...I just don’t love him.”

“Love?” he said, shaking his head with a small chuckle. “You have now decided that you *care* about *loving him?*” his voice raising with every word.

“Father I—”

“We have been through months of talks with his family. He was chosen out of the best families in the kingdom, and we even gave you a choice out of the three boys! We didn’t give your brother a choice. He’s the heir. We didn’t give your older sister a choice. We had to solidify the alliance with Ventra. But you,” he said, his voice low with anger “You’re the third. *You* got the choice. Even when you didn’t deserve one. And ten minutes before you walk down the aisle, you suddenly decide, that loving him, that’s the dealbreaker? You would risk everything because of one small detail?”

She opened her mouth, but all the words that were so ready to come out just moments before were nowhere to be found. The small voice in her head told her to give up. Shouldn’t she be so lucky? He was right. Kaden and Alya didn’t get that choice. She did. But she saw how Kaden’s wife wasn’t happy. How her head bowed whenever anyone walked by. And when she did manage to get a glimpse of her eyes at the dinner table, it was like tears were threatening to spill over into her soup. No, she wouldn’t become like Kaden’s wife. She couldn’t. She wouldn’t bow down. Damn the consequences, she would not be forced into a marriage for something she did not even do. Even though she had admitted to it, she thought guiltily.

She stood up, pulling herself to look directly into her father’s eyes.

“It’s not a choice. Not from where I stand. And I don’t love him, and I *won’t* marry him, no matter what you say.” She said, squaring her shoulders. “You cannot make me. You tell Kaden to jump, and he asks how high. You tell Alya where to go and she rushes to please you. But not me. You can’t control me.” she yelled, releasing all her pent-up anger.

Her father chuckled softly. “Oh Synové” he said, getting up and moving around the desk towards her.

“It’s Syn,” she said quietly. He waved his hand dismissively.

“Synové, it’s time you realized that as long as you are under my roof, I will always control you. Now,” he said, walking up to her and grasping her forearm tightly, “You are walking down that aisle now or so help me, I will risk the entire reputation of this kingdom and my family and tell everyone the reason why we rushed this courtship.”

She blanched but held firm and didn’t say a word. Her mind whirled, trying to think. How to get out? How to get out? One thought took over. Protect Kaden. Protect the throne. All those years of deference to the family took over, and like a balloon, all the fight went out of her. She turned to her dad and gave him a small nod.

“That’s my girl,” he said, finally releasing her. They walked towards the door, and he opened it for her, and her attendant came in and grabbed her train. She walked down the long hallway numbly to the big oak doors. As she paused in front of them, she took a breath. The royal attendant looked at her and she gave him a small nod. With that, he gave the doors three strong resounding knocks that echoed through the hall.

Boom

Her breath caught.

Boom

Her palms started to sweat.

Boom

Her heart started to race.

Someone pressed a small bouquet of tulips into her hands, but she barely felt them. The doors creaked open, and the music began to play. Mechanically she walked down the aisle with prim and proper steps. Her vision blurred, and the only person that she could focus on was her father up at the front and the look of quiet satisfaction on his face. As she reached the dais, she knelt and looked up, and he gave her a small nod. She knew if she raised herself up, he would win. She looked over and saw Kaden standing next to his wife in the front row, his face happy, his eyes sad.

“Protect the family,” her inner mantra said quietly. That pushed her. That made her rise up and accept her fate.