

## A New Title

"Isa? Isolde?" Realizing that calling from the doorway is futile, I instead walk over to the bed to find her gentle breathing an indication of her still-sleeping state. I sit sideways on the bed, my feet reaching the floor as I lean over to brush a small strand of hair out of her eyes. *Isolde*, I reach out softly, my mind lazily brushing against hers. *Isa, it's time to wake up.*

Her eyes still closed, she groans slightly and turns on her side, facing the wall with her back to me. *I don't suppose this is good enough?* she asks, her voice a gentle, sleepy whisper in my head.

"No, Princess," I say aloud with a sharp emphasis on the title she hates so much. The sunrise pokes its way over the castle courtyard and through the room's large window but is blocked by the three curtains of the four-post bed. If this were her normal bedroom, I'd suspect that she arranged it like that on purpose, but this room is too elegantly decorated for the reluctant little princess. "Come on, Isa," I add, putting my hand on her shoulder. "You can't give a speech like this."

*I can, though. What about...* she yawns, still close enough to sleep that her thoughts pause for a moment. *...our Rædes speech? Either you or Celaena could...* she trails off, drifting even further from consciousness.

I roll my eyes. "That's because you and I were halfway across the world, giving a simultaneous speech there. Not curling up in bed in the same city. Besides," I add, "with this being our first in-person speech, it's important that you actually be there."

*Did you know I gave up my title as a princess?* she asks, her voice simultaneously fuzzy and pointed. *Why do I still have to do this?*

Smiling, I place one arm under her neck, the other under her knees, picking her up. Her light frame makes little resistance as I turn to set her feet gently on the floor, tentatively putting her under her own weight. I'm almost surprised, but she agrees to stand instead of collapsing. "Because you only lost the 'Fair' part of your title," I point out.

She groans again, gathering her hair more neatly over one shoulder, making no effort to hide her sarcastic tone. "Yes, because being the oldest sibling was the thing I was upset about."

"It wasn't my idea. Blame the queen."

She hesitates a moment, and both her body and mindsoul tense briefly as she takes a deep breath. "I suppose it can't be helped, then." She heads to the wardrobe along the opposite wall, pulling out a familiar pink dress, a new silver satin sash added below the bust to match the silver hem at the bottom of the skirt, and a silver tiara. Gesturing for me to turn around as she places the dress on the table, she's quiet for a moment as she begins changing. Adopting a more regal tone, she adds, "I think you'll find, Fair Princess, that your current outfit is also not up to expectations." A teasing smile has slipped into her voice. "Something will have to be done about that."

I pause, debating between two possible responses. In the end, I go with a combination of the two. "Well, I was asked to wake up a certain someone, so I didn't have time to figure it out."

Soon, the rustle of fabric quiets, as Isolde presumably finishes pulling the dress over her head. And a moment later, I feel her hands at my waist, twisting me gently to face her. Before I can say anything, she's pulled me into a hug, turning her face to rest her ear at my collarbone thanks to our height difference. There's no doubt she can now also physically hear the racing heartbeat I've been trying to suppress all morning. *Don't worry, El.* Her voice is a gentle, calming whisper in my head, attached to a soft flow of reassuring emotional energy. *Something will be done about that.*

Aloud, she giggles, turning once again so that her back faces me and pulling her hair to fall in front of one shoulder. "First, though, can you button the back of this dress for me?"

Her laugh is contagious. "You're a bold one, young Isolde, to treat the Fair Princess as your handmaiden," I tease as I fasten the five buttons from the bottom up.

"And yet..." she trails off, and I can hear her smile as I reach around her neck to grab the two threads hanging from the top of the dress's neckline, pulling them back and tying them into a loose bow. To my chagrin, Isa immediately tosses her hair back over her shoulder, the blonde tress fully covering the bow. She steps forward to take the tiara from the table, then makes her way to the door. "Your turn, Elena," she says as she pauses briefly in the doorway, leaving me to catch up.

As I reach her partway down the hallway, we come to a middle-aged woman, clearly identifiable as a member of the castle's staff by her gray button-down shirt and black pants. She bows slightly as we approach. "Good morning, princesses. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Good morning." Isolde and I both nod in her direction. "No, thank you," Isa replies, her voice carrying a softness despite its authority. "As you were, please."

The woman bows again as we all resume walking. After just a moment, Isa and I reach the bedroom I've been staying in. Standing in the doorway, it's the mirror image of Isolde's, though the pattern on the rug is different: whereas hers was striped, this one is decorated with dots. Isolde heads to the wardrobe, opening it to show a combination of the clothes Mother and I brought from Unthern, a pair of dresses gifted to me in Thessia, and several others I don't know the origins of. "What are you thinking, Isa?"

Even from behind, I can tell that she's smiling, and the small giggle she passes me telepathically confirms it. *Hmm... How about this one?* she asks, pulling a deep purple dress from the middle of the rack.

I roll my eyes. *I have bad memories about that dress.*

*It's not...* She falters, turning back toward me but lowering her head in embarrassment. When her words come, they're rushed, almost frantic. *Sorry. I was thinking about what we did before then and not—*

*I liked that part,* I cut her off with a smile. *I'd just prefer a different dress for it this time, okay?* She nods, and I move to the wardrobe myself, considering the options. My eyes latch onto a mid-tone blue one, its shimmering silver sparkles hinting at a slightly metallic appearance. *How's this?* I ask Isa, pulling it out.

She cocks her head, thinking a moment. *This one,* she suddenly asserts, pulling a floor-length wine-red dress and a fairly wide black ribbon from the wardrobe. *As Fair Princess, you command a lot of attention. Given the circumstances, a lot of intrigue as well.* She pauses, considering her words. *For these speeches in particular, where we have to defend our positions and where much of that concern will inevitably be centered on you as unforeseeably Fair Princess, playing to your strength, propriety, and elegance is the best way forward.*

I cross my arms in partially false annoyance. *And you're saying I can't pull off "cute and innocent" like you can?*

*No,* she says, taking a step forward to hand me the dress with a playful shove, causing me to take a half-step back to catch myself. She continues another couple steps, her back to me. *Just put on the dress,* she adds with a slightly exasperated tone.

*Fine.* Part of me is tempted to follow her instructions to the letter and put the dress over my clothes to spite her, but instead, I first remove my more casual shirt and pants, shivering slightly as the air hits my skin. The dress itself seems surprisingly comfortable, its satin exterior a guise for a softer interior layer of fabric. Form-fitting but otherwise modest with its high-cut neckline and sleeves that reach just above my elbow, I also feel a lot less on-display than I expected. *Okay, Isa.*

As she returns to me, she places the ribbon in her mouth while she fastens the buttons from my waist up, skipping the third one. Meant to be almost imperceptible from even nearby, these buttons are fairly small, even for Isolde's hands, so it takes some patience, but she eventually manages. *Ready for the sash?* she asks. When I let out a sound of approval, she takes the ribbon, passing the skipped button—a larger black one that blends with the ribbon—through a small hole in the center, then through the other fold of the dress. Reaching around, she pulls the ribbon tight against my back and crosses the two ends through a matching clasp under my bust. With the base of the ribbon secured, she's able to tie a loose bow with the remaining length. *There. That ought to work.* After a moment, she directs me to sit on the edge of the bed, taking her place behind me.

We're quiet for a while as she begins braiding my hair and I stare into space. "Isolde, First Ambassador to Thessia, Princess of Incerin. Flower of prophecy to empower the Sunlight."

She pauses in her braiding, clearly caught off-guard by her full title, official and otherwise. "Hmm?"

"I've been thinking." And yet still struggling to get words in order. "You dislike being Princess, right?"

She doesn't answer immediately. When she does, her words are slow, methodical. "I don't always enjoy it," she says, emphasizing the verb. "It certainly has its privileges, but I'd be lying if there weren't also parts I found annoying or unpleasant."

"Well..." I say, turning to face her as she finishes the braid. "What if we could find a way for your princess title to be more fun? Unofficially?"

She cocks her head. "How so?"

"What if we made you an unofficial princess of something you do enjoy? That way, when you get called Princess, you can interpret it as your fun label instead."

She simply stares at me blankly for a few seconds before burying her face in her hands, falling forward to land on my lap as I move my hand to lay on her back. *How...* she says between giggles. *How did I never think of that?* It takes almost a minute before her contagious giggle fit is over. Wiping her eyes, but without sitting up, she manages to say, "That's brilliant, and I'm upset that you're the one to come up with it."

"Then we just need to figure out what you're also a princess of. Let's see..." I lean back, placing my other hand behind me for support. "You could be the princess of teasing."

It's a vaguely serious suggestion, but she doesn't seem to take it as such. "I think you've got the wrong sister."

I chuckle. "Okay, then. How about the princess of hugs? You do give really good hugs."

*Hmm...* she smiles, sliding forward slightly to wrap her arms around my waist. *So do you, but I do really like that one.*

*Yeah?* I smile. *Then from now on, you are Isolde, Princess of Hugs.*

With another squeeze, she stands up, smiling. "Let's go do our princess duties, shall we?"