

My Husband \$Chose Her Over Me Novel

Chapter 11

– Chapter 11

“This can’t be real,” I whisper, but the royal seal mocks me with its authenticity.

Mother’s face has gone pale, the color draining from her cheeks as she reads the document for the third time. The silence between us stretches, taut as a bowstring ready to snap.

“Elara is the heir to Verdana,” I say again, testing how the words feel in my mouth. Each syllable burns. “The woman our family has treated like dirt beneath our shoes for months is the daughter of King Dorian.”

Mother finally looks up, her eyes wide with something I rarely see in them—fear.

“We didn’t know, Caden. There was no way to—”

“Don’t,” I cut her off, my voice sharp enough to make her flinch. “Don’t pretend this isn’t a catastrophe of our own making. We’ve humiliated her publicly. Repeatedly. I’ve dismissed her as nothing but a political pawn.”

I laugh, but it’s a hollow sound that echoes off the oak-paneled walls. “My own wife—the true heir to Verdana—wants nothing to do with me or this family. Can you grasp what that means for our kingdom?”

Mother rises from her chair, her composure returning in increments. “We can salvage this. The alliance with Isolde’s family is nearly complete. If we approach Elara with the proper respect now, perhaps—”

“Respect?” The word explodes from me. I slam my fist against the desk, sending papers scattering. “Is that what you call it? After months of treating her like she was nothing?”

Mother’s eyes narrow. “Lower your voice, Caden. This isn’t helping.”

“You know what’s not helping? Your refusal to acknowledge what we’ve done!” I’m shouting now, unable to contain the fury that’s been building. “You pushed me toward this marriage, claiming it was for the good of our kingdom, and then immediately undermined it by arranging for Isolde!”

“I did what was necessary!” Mother snaps back. “How was I supposed to know? For you to take the throne of your father, you need strong alliances...”

“And how do you expect me to do that now when all you have done is to humiliate and insult her?” I’m pacing now, unable to stand still with the energy coursing through me. “She even asked for a divorce. Do you understand what that means for us? For Verloren?”

We fall silent as the weight of the situation settles over us like a shroud. The alliance with Verdana had been tenuous at best, a fragile connection that we’d carelessly broken. And now, knowing who Elara truly is...

The door creaks open, and Kaela slinks in, her eyes darting between Mother and me suspiciously.

“What are you talking about? Elara?” she asks, her voice dripping with disdain.

Neither of us responds. I continue pacing, while Mother fidgets with the edge of her sleeve, a nervous habit she’s had since childhood.

Kaela’s lips curl into a familiar sneer. “Did that silly woman do something again? She asked for a divorce? What gut!”

My jaw clenches so tight I can hear my teeth grinding. I don’t trust myself to speak.

“Caden,” Kaela says, her voice suddenly saccharine, “Isolda is here to see you. She’s waiting in the east parlor.”

I stop pacing and stare at my sister, incredulous. “Tell her I’m not home.”

“What?!” Kaela exclaims, her eyebrows shooting up toward her hairline. “But you’re home. You don’t want to see her because of Elara? What the hell has that woman given—”

Mother’s hand shoots out, grasping Kaela’s wrist with surprising strength. “Kaela darling,” she says, her voice unnaturally calm, “you need to go to Elara right now and apologize to her for everything you have done to hurt her.”

Kaela looks at Mother as if she’s lost her mind. “What?”

I can’t help the bitter smirk that crosses my face. “Elara isn’t just some random noblewoman from Verdana. She’s the princess, the crown princess, and we’ve treated her like garbage.”

Kaela chuckled softly. “What are you talking about, Caden? That’s ridiculous!”

“Whether you like it or not, you have to believe it because Elara is King Dorian of Verdana’s only daughter and the true heir to his throne.”

Kaela’s eyes dart between Mother and me, searching for some sign that this is a cruel joke. Finding none, she collapses into the nearest chair.

The color drains from Kaela's face so quickly I think she might faint. Her mouth opens and closes several times before she manages to sputter, "What the hell?!"

Chapter 12

– Chapter 12

Kaela still wore the look of disbelief like a second skin, her eyes darting between me and the scroll my mother had just placed back on the table. Her hands trembled ever so slightly, though she kept her voice low and measured.

"But... but that's impossible," she whispered, as if saying it too loudly would shatter the room. "We've known Elara for three years. She's your wife, Caden. Her father was that man—the steward of the Westwood Province. If she was a princess like you just said... surely there would've been announcements, formal preparation, royal decrees..."

"King Dorian kept her identity secret," Mother said coolly, her voice tight and edged with something bitter. "He positioned her close to us without revealing her bloodline. Likely as a precaution. Or a test."

I stood near the hearth, the heat of the flames barely touching the ice blooming inside me. I ran my hands through my hair, fingers catching at the roots as if the sting might tether me to some clearer version of this madness.

"We were played," I muttered, barely able to hear myself over the pounding in my skull. "All of us. And now we're going to pay the price for our arrogance. Father knew all along but never told any of us."

Each word struck deeper. Every time I'd looked through Elara rather than at her... Every moment I let court snub her... Every time I turned away when she reached out.

I had married a woman with a country in her blood and fire in her spirit, and I treated her like an obligation.

"I have to find her," I said suddenly, pushing off the wall and heading for the door.

Kaela scoffed. "And say what? 'Sorry I treated you like dirt, but now that I know you're important, I'd like to try again?'" Her voice was sharp, cruel—her usual veneer of court politeness stripped bare.

I turned to her, fury simmering just below my skin. "At least I see what I did wrong. You're still sitting here, scheming your next insult."

Mother stepped in between us before it could go further. "Enough. Both of you. Caden, you can't just run to Elara without thinking. We must handle this carefully."

“I don’t care about strategy anymore!” The words exploded from me before I could stop them, reverberating off the chamber walls. “Don’t you see? Strategy is what *got* us into this mess! All the calculating, the deals behind closed doors, the manipulation—like everyone’s just a name on parchment instead of a person with a heart.”

My chest heaved. I felt stripped bare, raw with realization. “I need to speak with her. Not as a prince, not as a husband. Just... as a man who’s wronged her. A man who knows he may not deserve forgiveness, but still has to try.”

Mother looked at me, something shifting in her expression. Maybe it was fear. Or disappointment. Or perhaps, for the first time, the weight of what we’d all done had started to press on her, too.

The chamber door creaked open, and a page stepped in hesitantly.

“Your Highness... Lady Isolde insists she won’t leave until she speaks with Prince Caden.”

Kaela stood, brushing invisible dust from her skirts. “I’ll entertain her,” she said, her voice sugar-laced with venom. “You deal with... this.”

I didn’t watch her go. I barely heard the door close behind her.

“This has to stop,” I said to Mother, my voice calmer now, but no less resolute. “The arrangement with Isolde, the manipulations, the constant interference in my marriage. It ends now.”

She frowned, arms crossed tightly. “Caden, you don’t understand the complexities—”

“No,” I said firmly, cutting her off, “*you* don’t understand. I’m not your chess piece. I’m the future king. And I will decide how to lead, and who stands beside me.”

Mother stared at me for a long, brittle moment. I saw something flicker in her eyes, not anger, not exactly. Something more reluctant. A quiet acknowledgment of the shift she could no longer stop.

“And what will you decide about Elara?”

The question felt like a blow to the chest. What could I decide? The woman I had ignored, dismissed, and hurt, because I was too blind, too proud to see what stood in front of me now had every reason to walk away.

“I don’t know,” I said softly. “But I know this: I need to make it right. Not because of what she is. Not because she’s King Dorian’s daughter. But because I failed her... and she deserves more than I ever gave her.”

I turned, moving toward the door. “I’m going to find her.”

My footsteps echoing against the marble corridor like the tolling of some old verdict. Each stride carried more certainty, more regret, more urgency.

I had to find Elara. She had walked past me earlier when I saw her in front of father's private chamber and I hadn't seen her around since then. One of the maids had told us that she had left with a carriage and the thought of her leaving and never coming back scared me.

I passed tapestries depicting the great victories of our line, portraits of kings and queens who'd ruled with iron and silk. I wondered how many of them had broken hearts to secure a throne. How many of them died knowing they'd chosen power over love.

I turned a corner sharply, and collided with someone.

My hand flew out, catching her before she stumbled.

Lady Isolde.

She looked up at me, her expression a mixture of surprise and something far more calculated.

"Didn't Kaela just tell me you were not around?" she asked, tilting her head slightly, eyes narrowing with practiced concern. "Are you avoiding me?"

She held my gaze a beat longer than necessary before adding, with a knowing edge:

"Are you avoiding me, Prince Caden?"

Chapter 13

– Chapter 13

"Are you certain you want to do this?" Marcus asks, his voice low beside me. The worry in his eyes makes me want to turn back, to flee to somewhere that doesn't feel like quicksand beneath my feet.

"Yes," I say, my fingers tightening around the royal decree I'd brought with me—proof of my identity that still feels like someone else's story.

Marcus touches my elbow gently. "I'll wait here."

Marcus was among those the King had assigned to go with me to my father's place in the North. He will be the one to take me to my real father, King Dorian.

The garden path seems longer today, winding through clusters of lilacs that once brought me comfort. Now their scent is cloying, suffocating. I push open the door without knocking—a small act of defiance against the man who raised me on falsehoods.

Lord Edwin Dani sits in his favorite armchair by the window, a book open in his lap. The sunlight catches the silver in his hair, making him look frailer than I remembered. When he looks up, I see no surprise in his eyes.

“Father,” I called out, venturing fully in, annoyance sipping into my veins at the thought of been lied to for 23 years.

“I see you’ve learned the truth,” he says, closing his book with careful precision.

My laugh comes out harsh and brittle. “The truth? Which version would that be? The one where I’m your daughter, or the one where I’m the heir to the throne of Verdana?”

He gestures to the chair across from him. I remain standing.

“Elara—”

“Don’t.” The word slices between us. “23 years, Father—or should I even call you that? 23 years of lies.”

His weathered face crumples slightly at the edges. “I earned the right to be called your father in every way that matters. Blood isn’t everything.”

“Isn’t it?” I thrust the royal decree toward him. “According to this, my blood is the only thing that’s ever mattered about me. The only reason I was sent to Verloren like a lamb to slaughter, to be treated like a nobody.”

He rises slowly, his knees creaking with the effort. “Is that what you think? That I sacrificed you?”

“What else would you call it?” My voice breaks, and I hate myself for it. “You let me marry into a family that treated me like I was nothing. You knew what they would do—”

“I didn’t!” For the first time, emotion cracks through his composed facade. “I didn’t know how they would treat you. The alliance was necessary, but—”

“Necessary for whom?” The words taste like acid. “For Verdana? For King Dorian—my real father?”

Dani crosses the room to a cabinet inlaid with mother-of-pearl. His hands tremble slightly as he unlocks it with a small key he keeps on a chain around his neck.

“Your father—King Dorian—had his reasons for keeping your identity secret. Reasons beyond politics.”

“What possible reason could justify lying to me my entire life?”

Edwin removes a small wooden box from the cabinet. “To keep you alive.”

The blunt answer steals my retort. I sink into the chair I’d refused earlier, suddenly uncertain in my righteousness.

“What do you mean?” I ask, my voice smaller now.

“Your mother—the queen—didn’t die of fever as everyone believes.” Edwin’s eyes are fixed on the box in his hands. “She was assassinated. And they would have killed you too, had they known who you were.”

The room seems to tilt sideways. “Assassinated? By whom?”

“The same people who’ve been trying to destabilize Verdana for decades. The same people who would rejoice to see you dead now.” He places the box on the table between us. “Your father entrusted you to me—his most loyal friend—to raise as my own. To keep you safe until the time was right.”

I stare at the box, afraid to touch it. “And now? Is the time right now that I’ve thoroughly alienated my husband and his entire kingdom?”

A faint smile touches his lips. “The marriage to Prince Caden was your father’s idea. He believed that with you as Verloren’s future queen, both kingdoms would finally have the stability they need.”

“Then he miscalculated,” I say bitterly. “I’ve asked for a divorce.”

Edwin’s eyebrows shoot up. “You what?”

“I refuse to be married to a man who can’t see me as anything but a political convenience.” The words come out in a rush. “Even before I knew who I really was, I deserved better than that.”

“And does Prince Caden know who you really are now?”

My silence is answer enough.

He sighs heavily. “Open the box, Elara.”

My hands move almost against my will. Inside lies a delicate silver circlet—unmistakably royal in its craftsmanship, yet subtle enough not to draw immediate attention.

“Your mother wore this the day you were born,” he says softly. “She made me promise that when the time came, you would have it returned to you.”

I lift it with trembling fingers. It’s lighter than it looks, the metal cool against my skin.

“Why tell me this now?” I whisper, unable to tear my eyes from the circlet. “Why not before my wedding? Before I felt so... alone?”

“Because now you’re ready to know.” Dani leans forward, clasping my free hand. “And because now, your father wishes to see you.”

My head snaps up. “He’s here? In Verloren?”

“No. But I can take you to him—if you’ll do one thing for me first.”

My chest tightens with suspicion. “What thing?”

Dani’s eyes are imploring. “Do not leave Caden. He needs you.”

The request lands like a slap and I jerk my hand away.

Chapter 14

– Chapter 14

“Princess Elara has returned!” The herald’s voice rings through the courtyard, and suddenly I’m running.

Protocol be damned. I’ve spent too long measuring my steps, watching my words, shrinking myself to fit into the box the Verlorens had constructed for me. Now, as I see my father standing at the top of the palace steps—older than I imagined, his beard touched with more silver—I can’t stop myself.

“Father!” I cry out, lifting the hem of my traveling dress as I race up the marble steps.

King Dorian’s weathered face breaks into a smile that erases ten years from his appearance. He opens his arms wide, and I throw myself into his embrace, inhaling the familiar scent of pine and parchment that has always meant safety.

“My little star,” he whispers against my hair, using the childhood nickname that I didn’t know about. “You’ve come home at last.”

His arms tighten around me, and I allow myself this moment of weakness, these tears that spill onto the royal insignia embroidered on his doublet. Just for a moment, I’m not a princess or a political pawn or an unwanted wife—I’m just a daughter who has missed her real father desperately.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I murmur, pulling back to look at him properly. The lines around his eyes have deepened, and there’s a weariness in his gaze that wasn’t there when I left.

“And I you,” he says, cupping my face in his calloused hands. “But you’re home now. That’s what matters.”

A discreet cough reminds us that we’re not alone. Lord Dani, stands to the side, along with a collection of courtiers and servants who have gathered to witness my return.

“Your Majesty,” Lord Dani says with a bow, “perhaps we should continue this reunion inside? There are... matters to discuss.”

The warmth in my father’s eyes dims slightly, replaced by the calculating look I know all too well—the face of a king rather than a father. He nods once, then places my hand in the crook of his arm.

“Come,” he says. “There is much to tell you, and I suspect even more that you need to tell me.”

As we walk through the halls of the palace, servants bow and courtiers whisper behind their hands. Word of my arrival has clearly spread quickly. I catch fragments of their hushed conversations—”princess,” “Verloren,” “alliance”—and feel the weight of their expectations settling back onto my shoulders.

The royal council chamber is massive, with its circular table and the great map of the known kingdoms stretched across the ceiling. My father gestures for me to take the seat at his right hand—my mother’s seat, once upon a time, and now mine by right.

“Leave us,” he commands, and the attending servants bow and exit silently. Only Lord Dani remains, taking his customary place at my father’s left.

Once the heavy doors thud closed, my father turns to me, his expression grave. “The news of your identity has spread more quickly than we anticipated. The Verloren family knows now.”

“Yes,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “That’s partly why I’ve returned.”

“Tell me everything,” he says, not as a request but a royal command. “Leave nothing out.”

So I do. I tell him about the cold reception at the Verloren court, about the Queen thinly veiled contempt and Princess Kaela’s outright hostility. I describe the isolation, the whispers, the deliberate exclusion from court functions. And finally, I tell him about Caden—his initial indifference, his growing distraction, and the rumors of a second marriage arrangement with Lady Islode.

My father’s expression darkens with each word, the muscles in his jaw tightening until I fear for his teeth.

“They dared,” he finally says, his voice dangerously soft, “to treat my daughter—the Crown Princess of Verdana—as though she were nothing more than a disposable political token?”

“They didn’t know who I was,” I remind him, though the words taste bitter. “That was the point of the deception, wasn’t it? To see how they would treat me when they thought I held no power?”

Lord Dani clears his throat but didn’t say a word.

Father rises, pacing the length of the council chamber with measured steps. “You must understand, Elara, that the political landscape has shifted dramatically since you left. The eastern provinces are restless, and Verloren’s mineral resources have become more crucial than ever for our defenses.”

“Which is why you arranged my marriage in the first place,” I say, connecting the pieces.

“Yes.” He stops pacing to look at me directly. “We needed the alliance, but I needed to know what kind of man Prince Caden truly is before entrusting him with not only my daughter’s hand but potentially my kingdom’s future.”

Lord Dani leans forward. “Now that your true identity has been revealed, Princess, we must prepare for the formal reintroduction to court. The nobles are already gathering. They’ll expect an explanation, and a demonstration of strength.”

I nod, feeling a strange calm settle over me. “When?”

“Tonight,” my father says. “A formal reception to welcome home the Crown Princess of Verdana.”

“And to let every kingdom know that you are not to be trifled with,” Lord Dani adds with a thin smile.

My father returns to his seat, taking my hands in his. “There’s more at stake than you know, Elara. The alliance with Verloren was just one move in a much larger game. With tensions rising in the east and whispers of rebellion in the southern provinces, we need to present a united front.”

“But how can we do that now?” I ask. “After what’s happened—”

“That is precisely what we must decide,” he interrupts gently. “And it begins with your reintroduction to the court tonight. You are no longer just my daughter; you are the future of Verdana.”

The weight of his words settles over me. For months, I’ve been treated as insignificant, a forgettable piece in someone else’s game. Now, I’m reminded of who I truly am—not just a princess, but a future queen.

“I won’t disappoint you,” I say, squeezing his hands.

“You never have,” he replies with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

As I rise to leave, my father asks the question I’ve been dreading. “And what of Prince Caden? Now that he knows the truth, what is his response?”

I pause at the door, my back to him so he can’t see the conflicting emotions on my face. For a moment, I remember Caden’s rare genuine smiles, the way his eyes lit up when discussing his people’s welfare, the glimpses of a good man buried beneath layers of royal obligation and maternal manipulation.

But then I remember his indifference, his silent complicity in his family’s treatment of me, his inability—or unwillingness—to see me as anything more than a convenient alliance.

“I’ve asked him for an annulment to our marriage,” I say finally, my voice echoing in the suddenly silent chamber.

Chapter 15

– Chapter 15

Gone was the simple girl from Verloren who preferred comfortable clothes and practical footwear. In my place stood a princess—no, *the* Crown Princess of Verdana—draped in a gown of midnight blue silk that flowed like water when I moved, embellished with thousands of tiny crystals that caught the light with every breath.

“Your Highness, the final touch.” One of the maids—Lina, I think—approached with a delicate silver tiara nestled on a velvet cushion. Her eyes sparkled with reverence as she carefully positioned it atop my carefully styled hair.

“I... I don’t recognize myself,” I whispered, lifting my hand to touch my cheek as if to confirm this elegant creature was indeed me.

They both smiled at my statement. I took a deep breath, trying to calm the butterflies swarming in my stomach. “I’m ready.”

“Not quite.” Mira approached with a crystal vial. “Your father insisted on this particular perfume. It was your mother’s favorite.”

The scent of jasmine and something undefinably exotic filled my senses as she dabbed it at my wrists and neck. For a moment, I closed my eyes, wondering if my mother had felt this same nervous anticipation before attending royal functions.

“Now you’re ready,” Lina said with a satisfied nod. “Remember, Your Highness, shoulders back, chin up.”

I did that and walked out with the two of them trailing behind me.

The grand ballroom of Verdana Palace took my breath away. Massive crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the marble floors, and the walls were adorned with ancient tapestries depicting the founding of our kingdom. I hesitated at the entrance, momentarily overwhelmed by the sea of unfamiliar faces turned toward me.

“Her Royal Highness, Crown Princess Elara of Verdana,” the herald announced, his voice echoing across the suddenly silent room.

All eyes fixed on me as I descended the grand staircase, desperately trying to remember every lesson in deportment I’d received since returning home. The crowd parted like water as I made my way across the floor, whispers following in my wake.

“Is that truly her? After all these years?” “The spitting image of Queen Lyra...”

“I heard she was married to the Verloren prince...”

“Wasn’t she living as a commoner?”

“Elara.” My father’s voice cut through the din as he approached, resplendent in formal regalia. “You look magnificent, daughter.”

I curtsied, as protocol demanded. “Thank you, Father.”

He took my hand and faced the crowd. “Friends, allies, honored guests, tonight we celebrate not just the return of my daughter, but the future of our kingdom. For too long, Verdana has been without its rightful heir. Now, Princess Elara has returned to take her place by my side.”

The crowd erupted in polite applause, though I noticed more than a few skeptical glances. I couldn’t blame them, what did they know of me? A princess raised elsewhere, married to a foreign prince, suddenly returned after years of absence.

“Your Majesty,” a voice called. “Might I have the honor of being introduced to the princess?”

A young man stepped forward, his bearing unmistakably royal. Tall and lean, with dark hair and piercing green eyes, he moved with the confidence of someone born to command attention.

My father’s expression brightened. “Of course! Princess Elara, may I present Prince Sebastian of Alden. Our kingdoms have long been allies.”

Prince Sebastian took my hand and bowed over it, his lips barely brushing my knuckles. “The rumors of your beauty fall woefully short of reality, Princess Elara.”

“How unfortunate that you’ve been listening to rumors, Your Highness,” I replied, withdrawing my hand perhaps a touch too quickly. “I find they rarely capture the full truth of any situation.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened slightly before a slow smile spread across his face. “Intelligent as well as beautiful. A rare combination.”

My father cleared his throat. “Prince Sebastian has been instrumental in strengthening the alliance between our kingdoms. Perhaps you might honor him with a dance, Elara?”

It wasn’t really a request. I inclined my head. “Of course.”

Sebastian offered his arm, and I allowed him to lead me to the dance floor. As the orchestra began playing a graceful waltz, he placed his hand lightly on my waist.

“I understand you were married to Prince Caden of Verloren,” he said as we began to move in time with the music.

I missed a step, quickly recovering. “News travels fast.”

“In our world, it always does.” His hand pressed slightly more firmly against my back. “I also hear the marriage was... less than ideal.”

“Do you always discuss a lady’s personal affairs within minutes of meeting her?” I asked sharply.

Sebastian laughed.

I fought to keep my expression neutral, though the mention of Caden sent an unwelcome pang through my chest. “You seem very interested in my marital situation, Prince Sebastian.”

“I’m interested in you, Princess Elara.” His directness caught me off guard. “A woman who has lived in two worlds, royal by birth, yet experienced in life beyond palace walls. Such perspective is... invaluable.”

“Invaluable to whom?” I challenged.

He smiled enigmatically. “To anyone wise enough to recognize it.”

The music ended, and Sebastian bowed. “Can we continue this conversation. Perhaps during the garden tour tomorrow? I’d value your insights on the eastern alliance proposal.”

Before I could formulate a response, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to find Lord Dani, his expression grave.

“Forgive the interruption, Your Highness, but there’s an urgent matter requiring your attention.” His eyes flicked meaningfully toward a side door.

“Of course,” I said, turning back to Sebastian. “If you’ll excuse me, Prince Sebastian.”

He bowed. “Until later, Princess.”

I followed Lord Dani through the side door and down a dimly lit corridor, my mind racing. “What’s happened?”

“Not here,” he murmured, leading me to a small antechamber where, to my surprise, my father was already waiting, his expression grim.

“Father? What’s wrong?”

He gestured for me to sit. “We’ve received word from our spies in Dondel. Queen Isobel has learned of your true identity. She’s your uncle’s wife.”

My blood ran cold, even though I have no idea who it was

My father nodded grimly. “You need to leave Verdana.”

“Leave?” I stood abruptly. “I just returned! The reception—”

“Is a perfect distraction,” my father interrupted. “No one will question your early departure; they’ll assume you’re overwhelmed by your first royal function in years.”

“Where would I go?”

Lord Dani and my father exchanged glances. “Back to Verloren,” Dani said quietly.

“What?” I stared at them in disbelief. “That’s madness. If Queen Isobel knows—”

“She knows you’re Verdanan royalty,” my father clarified. “But she doesn’t know you’re aware of your heritage. As far as she’s concerned, you still believe yourself to be the orphaned ward we created as your cover.”

I sank back into my chair, my mind whirling.

“You need to leave tonight,” Dani stressed. “Tomorrow morning might be too late.”

I rose and paced the small room, the weight of the tiara suddenly heavy on my head. “For how long?”

“A week,” my father said. “Long enough for us to assess the situation and make arrangements for your permanent return.”

I stopped and faced them. “Fine,” I said at last. “I’ll go back.”

Relief flooded my father’s face. “Thank you, Elara. Will you consider giving Prince Caden another chance?”

The question caught me completely off guard. I remembered the cold indifference, the public humiliations, the whispers that I wasn’t enough.

I stood, smoothing my exquisite gown. “In one week, I’ll decide if he’s going to be worth giving another chance.”