

## Chapter Forty-One: Love Finds A Way

Anala tried to keep her temper in check, cheeks flushed and putting pressure against her lower lip as The Empress walked away, leaving her alone with Drake. She'd *almost* rather be in the arena against the intense ruler than alone with the ice boy.

Arms crossing under her bust, she averted her eyes to stare around the back gathering area, looking for anything to distract her. "I don't know what misunderstanding she's talking about. You made it perfectly clear you don't want to be in the same House as me, to the point of embarrassing your father and everything he did to get you into The Empress' House."

Drake sighed and rubbed between his eyes. "Is... that what you think? Queen's Heel, I thought you were pissed at me for an entirely different reason."

Crimson eyebrows pulling together, Anala looked up at the tall boy with a scowl. "Oh, and how do you expect me to feel?"

He puffed out his colored cheeks, not meeting her hard gaze as he rubbed the back of his neck and looked into the sky. "Hmm. Do you want to continue this up in the sky? The goddess said that there were listening ears, and... I don't want to talk about this with everyone listening."

Anala held up her hand, temper rising with his delay tactics, but her more rational side told her that she didn't want any of this getting out either. "Fine! Where do you want to go to tell me how I should be feeling? And I don't know about you, but I'm definitely *not* 100% after the war that was yesterday. Channeling elements hurts right now!"

"What?" Drake's hair fluttered a little bit as air gently picked him off the ground. "When did I try to tell you how to feel? No, I understand the pain part. Umm. I can carry you if—"

"I'll deal with the pain," she interrupted with a vicious grin. "I hope you make it worth it."

"As do I," he mumbled, being far too cool and calm for the topic, which made her want to strangle him. "Follow me..."

He rose further into the air, not looking troubled or like it hurt at all, and waited for her to join him. Gritting her teeth, she took a calming breath as sparks flashed from her hair, the pressure in her chest tightening like a hand around her heart upon calling the elements to respond to her will. If there were *one* thing she would not do in front of Drake, it would be to cry.

Steeling her resolve, her dress weaved around her legs as the gust cycled around and brought up face to face with the handsome and crafty Tarnash. She was stupid and vulnerable yesterday; that would not happen again.

"Aren't you going, or should I pick out the location?" she huffed.

She tried using her anger to fight past the needles digging into her entire body and threatening to break her emotional stability; The Empress had taught her how to use her emotions as fuel, but that was a double-edged sword.

Drake's only response was to take to the skies, having the nerve to give an annoyingly concerned look back at her. "It shouldn't be far... So, what can you tell me about the goddess that was with The Empress?"

Anala internally cursed him for bringing up a topic she was actually interested in, but she didn't have to tell him anything. "It is too bad you were late and didn't get the chance to hear Princess Castria's explanation. Maybe if you were a better host, then things would be different."

She seethed inside as he directed a sad smile back at her, and she cut the conversation there, turning her gaze to the city they were now flying over to distract herself from the pain.

Lumina was easy to lose herself in when she soared over it, and she spotted dozens of lesser nobility going about their own tasks in the air, but her attention was soon drawn to the stadium, where Drake was taking them.

Sending a wind message to the boy, she winced as a dagger worked into her belly at the more complicated task. “Why are we heading to the stadium?”

“You’ll see,” Drake laughed, gripping his side and grimacing, “I’m really starting to feel the physical drawbacks of yesterday’s competition.”

Not believing him for a second from his earlier attempts to drop her guard, Anala looked away as if disinterested. “Just get it over with then.”

The black-haired boy paused over the large coliseum, staring down at the damage that had yet to be cleaned up, and Anala gulped as she saw the cracked and broken-up arena. Drake brought them right onto the stone stage, bending down to run his hands along a melted segment that twisted around a set of imprinted feet, where The Empress had lodged herself.

He forced a chuckle as they both ceased their channeling. “You were really amazing yesterday... The imprint of that fire tornado that you and Aura created together... mostly you, gave me shivers. You know, you’ve always impressed me, Anala.”

Gut tightening, Anala tried to ignore the goosebumps running down her arms. “Aren’t we going on an aerial loop? Weren’t you supposed to clear up some misunderstanding so I can get back to the princesses to *actually* enjoy my day? What?! What’s... with that expression?”

Drake laughed and straightened, turning to face her. She didn’t know what to make of the look he was giving her; his typically cool and controlled composure was tainted by a bit of anxiety, maybe even stress.

“I’ve watched you for a long time, Anala... I know about Aura’s bullying, about the way you look up to your sisters, and how much you put on an act to not feel vulnerable. So... this is all that I can think of to clear things up.”

“Eh?!”

Anala stumbled back at his advance, her heel catching on a ridge and causing her to tumble to the uneven tile. Only, a surge of condensed wind from Drake gathered to save her from the fall, pulling her into the air, and right into the giant—at least, he was a giant to her at this moment—and her arms were too busy trying to prevent her nonexistent fall to resist.

Mind frantic, her blue eyes widened, watching helplessly as Drake drew closer and closer, milliseconds becoming minutes until his hot lips met hers, and an explosion of emotion was sent from their touching skin to the rest of her body.

Toes and fingers curling, she tensed and reflexively brought her fist around to slam into Drake’s strong jaw, allowing her to gasp for air.

“Wha... what in the—what did you just do?!” she gagged, her stinging hand feeling as if it was broken while touching her tingling lips. “We... we aren’t married or betrothed! You c-can’t kiss me! You k-kissed me? I, huh?!”

Realizing she was still floating in the air, telling her that Drake was *still* capable of keeping her stable after her punch, she saw the boy had only moved a little to the side. At least she’d gotten him to blink as if dazed, rubbing the spot she’d struck.

“Eh-haha. Ouch! Yeah, I don’t think I’ll be forgetting that one. Haaa. Totally worth it, though,” he said with an infuriating smirk while running his hand through his now messy, ruffled hair.

Anala didn't know what to say or do, lost in what had just happened; had he *really* just taken her first kiss, which was supposed to only be reserved for your husband? However, what followed made her believe this was a dream because it certainly couldn't be reality.

"Anala Tarkov," Drake said, straightening and manipulating the air so that she could stand again, and despite her ankles feeling weak, she managed to hold herself up; that didn't last long, though. "Will you accept my apology and proposal for an act of taking responsibility?"

"W-What are you doing?" Anala stammered, taking a step back as the boy placed his left hand over his heart, two fingers intertwined, and he got down on both knees to look up at her; it was something every girl in Kaspir dreamed of and awaited and something she didn't expect since she was seen less of as a 'lady' amongst the nobility. "This is not happening! Stop! Stop! I'm serious!"

Green flames lit across her hair, arms pressed against her chest as Drake only smiled and finished the ritual so many little girls got before her. "Will you be my betrothed for the First Winter's Dance of the Academy Waltz? May I have your ring?"

Legs giving way, she whimpered as her shins hit the warped stone ground, staring across at the unbelievable boy who had lured her away to ambush her alone; typically, this was done in public with a large audience, yet this was so much better. It meant it wasn't for show. He didn't do this because it was better for his House; in fact, it could cause a *lot* of trouble between their Great Houses. Yet, he'd opened the door and was waiting for her to step inside.

Every noble girl was gifted a ring on their eighth birthday by their parents, and if someone asked for it, then it was a sign that they wanted to join their House. If she accepted, then the boy would wear it, either on a string or on one of his fingers that it fit on. But this couldn't happen to her! For ten years, she'd left her ring in a drawer, tucked away, which Aura loved to harp on, considering she had dozens of suitors constantly seeking hers.

"Huh?" Vision going watery, she looked down at her hand, bewildered to see a tear fall onto it. "I... I don't understand. I don't have it with me—wh... why me?" she choked. "I'm a troublemaker. I... All the other nobles our age hate me. Aura would jump at your offer, so why me? Is it because I'm sharing a room with the princesses?"

Drake's patient smile made her chest hurt worse than channeling the elements, and he smoothly shook his head. "I know very well that you don't have it with you... since Aura is keen on letting all the boys know. You don't need to have it on you because the ring is not what I am really after."

Anala shivered like the last leaf of a dying tree, filled with new water, her stomach squirmed, and the weirdest sensation of elation she'd ever experienced lifted her into the sky; she couldn't hear anything else as Drake's warm hand took hers, trapping the air in her lungs.

At that moment, her mind returned to their hot bodies pressed against each other, entangled in firm webs, yet this time, Drake was [looking](#) straight into her eyes. It was a joke. A cruel joke. Her rising pulse and thumping heart ached, dreading the fall, but she only soared higher with each word he spoke.

"You don't need to answer right now. I know this is probably overwhelming. So why don't we walk the underground Hall of Water, and I'll tell you why I asked for your ring when I don't really care about the object that much... only what it represents. I didn't come here for The Empress, Anala, I came here for you... You're everything a man could ever want, and I want to be yours, and no one else's."

She was happy to still be on the ground because when he leaned in for a second time, Anala tasted honey and jam on his lips, making her throat constrict. All weight left her, and a

surging thrill cascaded from her chest to between her thighs, fluctuating down to her toes to rise up to the tips of her hair as he drew out every last bit of air from inside her caged lungs, setting her free.

Quakes ran through her bones as his hot lips left hers tingling, and Anala choked for air, feeling a rush of sweet relief that soon left her face bright pink. She dislodged her hands from Drake's, coughing as her tears redoubled, and she hid her lap, hiccuping a little.

"Anala?"

"I-I'll... I'll be right back!" she cried, not feeling an ounce of pain as the wind whipped her into the sky and she rocketed up as fast as possible—her destination, her room at Drake's freaking house. "Why am I such a failure?!" she wept, dying at the embarrassment that struck every fiber of her being. "Why is my body so weird?! I hate it! I hate it! What did he do to me?!"

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Elinor frowned as they came to a stop at the front of the mansion, Nungal giving her a small, secretive smile that was begging for her to bite. Turning away from her lilac eyes to glance at the princesses, Julian, and her father, waiting for their next move since the love-birds weren't back yet.

"We've finished our tour, and it is an excellent dorm, if a bit tight for space, considering the students I expect us to have as the years progress, but I am sure Lilya can handle that. Hmm." She felt her agitation rising with the teasing gleam in the goddess' cosmic stare. "What were you congratulating Drake and Anala on?"

Nungal held her hands behind her back and shifted her hips to bring their attention to the second landing, maintaining her mystique. "I suspect our Lady and Lord will not be joining us. Princess Castria, could you return to your room and offer Anala your support? And Marquess Julian, might you fly off to the stadium arena to console Lord Drake?"

Heather's hands knotted at her front. "I'm... going to be alone with Your Majesties?"

"Can she not join us?" Castria strained a smile, her focus swiftly darting to her for confirmation, causing Elinor to sigh. "Empress?"

"I'm sure things blew up in a bad way. I suppose forcing it could have been the wrong play," she mumbled, finding it somewhat annoying she couldn't decipher the goddess' enigmatic expression. "Go on. It seems Anala and Drake will need some extra help."

Castria shot Heather a sorry smile before backing toward the stairs to pass a few lingering students on the second landing. "We'll catch up as fast as we can!"

Julian scratched his arm before waving at the stressed princess. "Try not to have too much fun."

Heather tried not to fidget with her long red locks pulled around her front as she waved off her friends. "Yeah, how scary can a shopping trip be with the Raven Empress and the mysterious goddess that can snap a kingdom away with the click of her heels."

A stunning smile brightened Nungal's face as she took the princess by the arm and guided her outside, motioning to Elinor with anticipation. "C'mon, Elinor, your dutiful Alchemist should have the coins ready for us. By the way, I don't think they'll be catching up any time soon! I'm sure your *network* will inform you soon enough of the troubled waters our teens have entered."

“What does that mean?” Heather choked. “Goddess, what does that mean?! I once fell off of a boat when I was little because of troubled waters.”

Elinor followed them, her father keeping a close watch on the violet-haired, heavenly woman who had wasted his entire night. “Not pertinent to the story. Can you take back your items with you to... heaven?”

“Irkalla,” Nungal absently corrected, moving a nervous Heather into the sunlight before hopping back and looking her up and down with a critical eye. “Hmm. Why don’t we make a few *minor* adjustments?”

*Irkalla*, she repeated in her mind, testing the name. It felt familiar, but nothing popped into her thoughts. *Nungal’s home is Irkalla... That is such important information. I knew her in my previous life somehow.*

A lump formed in her throat as she studied the woman’s careless enthusiasm while trying to put herself in Heather’s place to spot things none of them could see.

*She knows Butter; but what is our connection?! Gah. I know you can read my mind, Nungal! This may be a fun game for you, and maybe it will be fun to look back on in the future, but right now, I am very frustrated.*

“Oh, I am sure it will be,” the woman snickered, passing the message to her in the flash of a second. “*Maybe you should focus on what is in front of you, though.*”

Heather’s mouth slackened as the goddess snapped her fingers, dying the princess’ hair the same shade as her. “You! How did—my hair... is purple?! Empress!”

“Nungal,” Elinor sighed, rubbing between her eyes, “can we not change the appearance of others without their permission? Can’t you just make an illusion... or an *actual* body double that fits your proportions?”

“It’s not the same,” the woman happily complained, circling Heather to examine her from every angle. “I’ll change it back in a second. It’s hard to gauge how things will look in this dimension since it is so... unrefined. Still, it’s cute, like dressing up little dolls. Sometimes you just have to put it on someone native to the scene to see the proper results. Fashion is a universal harmony, after all! You were the one who taught me that.”

She came to a halt, fixating on the words and impish smirk the goddess sent her way, knowing she’d dislodged her thoughts. It also opened up an awkward moment between her and her father as his frosty blue eyes darted to her.

*“How does she know you, Elinor? What did she mean by that?”*

*Dad... Elinor frowned as she saw Lilya sorting through a chest in front of her stagecoach. Short answer; you know how Butter and I knew each other in our previous life. Well, apparently, we also have something to do with this goddess before being born on Earth. She can obviously listen to our thoughts and conversations... and basically knows the future. All we can do is entertain her. Nungal will get what Nungal wants.*

*“Indeed, I shall!” the woman chimed. “I’m also in communication with Tiffany, looking over her shoulder, so you don’t need to worry about her silence. She is quite enthralled by my input. I can’t wait for the big reveal, Elinor!”*

*Don’t be impatient*, Elinor whispered, releasing the stress building in her chest as she glanced at her father, ignorant to the hag and his wife’s possible revival. *We will address everything at the end of the day, and you are satisfied.*

Nungal’s cheer dampened slightly as she reversed all the changes she’d done on the spinning-eyed princess, overwhelmed by the alien enthusiasm and mannerisms of the goddess, who she now saw as above her own father in power.

*“Until I’m satisfied? If only that were possible... Anyway, let’s get going before you hear the news from Castria.”*

Elinor shook her head and walked to Lilya, waiting by the chest for her to approach, and all of their City Guard escorts stood ready to leave. “How does the treasury look?”

“Excellent, Empress,” the brown-haired woman chirped in a shockingly positive mood compared to her typical tempered self. “Everything related to the Great House of Tarnash has been logged. It wasn’t much beyond the coins, but there were several artifacts. I have two chests of ancient coins on the back, ready to be traded, and this one is of current currency. Trading the two chests will be more than enough for me to build up the House of Raven’s trade empire.”

“That is what I like to hear,” she whispered, pulling out one of the coin pouches that held a certain number of coins inside. “You’ve sorted them into individual bags... As efficient as ever, Grandmaster. I will leave you to return to your very busy schedule. Any meetings today?”

“Yes, in fact... Queen Alivau will be by to see her daughter’s accommodations before speaking to me privately this afternoon. It is sure to be a memorable one.”

“I’m sure it will,” Elinor said, eyes following Nungal as she ushered the 17-year-old teen into the stagecoach like she was an introverted little sister. “Have fun with that.”

*Let’s go, Dad. The sooner we start, the more information I can start looking for. Nungal seems to have something to say since she went through all the trouble to come here herself.*

Her dad rubbed his left shoulder as he joined her inside the carriage, the guards strapping the 3rd chest onto the back of the vehicle. *“If she can hear me, then I might as well ask. I’d like to know about your relationship with my daughter, Nungal. Is there baggage that we need to be aware of from her previous life?”*

Sitting in her normal seat, Nungal settling in across from her, Elinor slid open the window to study the exterior. *Dad, I don’t think she’s going to tell us that. At least not until much later.*

Nungal crossed her legs and folded her hands across her thighs, a mischievous gleam in her galaxy-like eyes. *“Don’t be so sure. I can’t help myself since it has been such a long time since I’ve been able to discuss things with you in this manner. Before that... Castria might need some calming down.”*

Her confusion turned into alarm as Castria’s emotional state spiked, yet it took a moment for the girl to respond. Her dad was the one to initiate contact.

*“Castria, what is it?! Is there danger?”*

*“He kissed her! He KISSED her! This is crazy! Anala is totally freaking out, and she—oh, no... No, no, no, no! It’s worse than that! Poor Anala! Oh, no! Tell Heather that I definitely need to support Anala because this is like... This is more insane than any of the adult novels my sister secretly read in Julian’s family library!”*

Elinor took a second to realize this world had a totally different culture and understanding of deviant behavior than Earth. Shockingly, her dad was the one who seemed to be an expert on this stuff as he jumped into the conversation.

*“He took her first kiss before she was married? Hmm. That is very concerning from a noble standpoint. It means...”*

*“Yeah!” Castria screamed, unsure if she should be happy or mad as she ran through the scenario. “He asked for her ring! Her ring! And she didn’t have it on her! Nooo! That’s sooo embarrassing for a noble girl, and that’s not even the worst part—it’s so much worse—I can’t even say! He also kissed her again! Twice!”*

Starting to catch up to the cultural practices, Elinor saw a few more things that needed to be corrected this week before they left, such as getting Castria one of these rings. It would certainly light the flame in the kingdom, knowing there was an available princess with her ring proudly shown off.

*So... let me get this straight. He forced two kisses, which is something only done between betrothed or married couples, and then proposed to 'make up for his mistake.' Am I reading that correctly?* she asked, suddenly realizing what the twinkling-eyed goddess meant by her 'congratulations.' *Is she betrothed to anyone else?*

*"No, no! Empress, you're not keeping up! King Edmon! Can you explain it to her, I've got to take care of Anala. She's a hiccuping mess, curled up under her bed. She doesn't know if she can go back and face him after... the embarrassment—let's just say it was bad!"*

Her father crossed his arms, looking slightly troubled as he studied Nungal, now making small talk with Heather so she wouldn't feel like a 3rd wheel.

*"Anala has a reputation amongst the younger nobility for being a... bit of a brat. Not that she actually is. She's hyperactive, compulsive, and can act without thinking, as you noticed during her battle against you. That being said, I've heard rumors regarding a particular click around Aura that has bullied her for over a decade... Atypical mean-girl behavior while acting nice to her face."*

He gave a sigh that only a father could, taking Elinor's mind back to the many times she'd seen him give her that same look but leave it to her mother to handle; her dad could get very protective over her—he did become undead without a second thought to be with her.

*"Noble girls in this kingdom are bride age available at eight, but that marriage must be accepted by the girl, and, in part, her family. During specifically the girl's First Winter's Dance of the Academy Waltz, they are officially recognized as husband and wife. The years before that come with many gifts and outings, but, at most, the pair hold hands. A kiss is something serious in this world."*

*Well, I guess things did take a turn... Did she reject him?*

Her father grimaced and shook his head, catching Heather's nervous gaze, knowing they could communicate silently at this point. *"I'm not sure. As far as Castria is willing to say, Anala did something so mortifying that she ran away, promising to be back... but now she can't ever show her face to Drake again. It... is an area your mother would typically cover."*

*It seems that way,* Elinor whispered, a thought suddenly gripping her stomach and putting a smile on her lips as she saw the same look lift Nungal's eyes. *Wait... Nungal, you wouldn't happen to know where High Lady Tarkov is? She might not want to talk about this with her big sister, but a mother would definitely be a welcomed addition.*

The goddess winked at Heather and put a finger to her lips before turning to speak to her aloud for the princess' sake. *"High Lady Karia is currently trying to look like she is shopping while hoping to run into you. She is quite interested to see what you think about her daughters and the gift she offered you. I would consider the record store—a noble hot spot."*

She looked at Heather, and the redhead swiftly nodded, using her elemental powers. *"Umm. Oh, right! I'll make a connection between you and the driver... Mmgm. My body is still feeling the pain after the arena match—there, it's open."*

*"Change of plans. We're going to the record store to meet with High Lady Karia. A girl needs her mother... and I'm sure High Lord Yeven will be making a stop soon, in any case."*

Her father shifted uncomfortably. *"Are you... sure that is a good idea, Elinor? It may seem a little extreme to us, but this world would see that kiss as something pretty damning,*

*especially from a mother, who takes on the primary role of teacher and protector for their children in the social scene.”*

Elinor’s smile grew. *Dad, of this, I’m sure. If there were any girl Drake could have done that to, it would be a Tarkov girl, because they don’t conform to the typical social etiquette. Can you think how that will look from her mom’s point of view? I don’t think this is anything new to their parents; everyone saw how attentive Drake was to protect Anala against me.*

She turned her gaze back to the street, looking up at the cloudless sky as birds flew between building tops. *Anala may not feel like she has the power in this relationship right now, but she has Drake wrapped around her fingers. Someone’s made her feel beautiful for the first time, and after his performance, everyone can see that there is only one firecracker in his eye. Neither of them can escape each other.*

Nungal giggled, nudging Heather and making her jump. “I feel bad that you’ve been left out. Drake kissed Anala!”

“What?!” the redhead shrieked, shooting up and smacking her head against the ceiling. “Ach! H-He kissed her?! Drake?! He’d never—wait, the battle, when Aura, Anala, and he... were tied up... practically naked,” she squeaked. “Mmmm!”

Her face turned bright pink, steam practically shooting out of her ears. “I’m not thinking about it! I just... oh, wow—what would that feel like?”

Nungal scratched her nose, and leaned closer, whispered, “You know... I can put you in a little daydream with, ahem, a certain someone, but... would that make Castria jealous?”

Elinor felt like she’d been punched in the gut as Heather freaked out.

“No! No! No! I’m just fine imagining it—not that I am! I, umm, no-ho-ho!” she cried, hiding her burning face in her hands and making the goddess double over with laughter, clearly enjoying herself. “Please, stop teasing me, Goddess! Don’t tell Julian how I feel!”

Now, Elinor saw a future collision, with two princesses yanking the poor marquess on both sides, attempting to win him over to their side. She had another idea, though, and she sent a private communication to Lilya.

*“Yes, Empress?”*

*Do everything you can to poach Prince Drew. and stick Castria in situations with the prince... I need to find an out for her since she already has so much guilt about killing Julian’s mother. We need to broaden her selection pool.*

*“Hmm. I will get further details from the others in the Royal Court, but I will attempt to fulfill your order to the best of my ability.”*

*Only if it looks practical and not forced... Her thoughts returned to her schooling days. I don’t want a divide to grow between Heather and Castria... and a boy can do that to girls. Best to nip this in the bud early. Now, I need to speak to a girl’s mother.*

*“Things are already heating up, I hear. You know, I’d kissed and done quite a few other things with forty-seven boys before the age of seventeen. I find the Kaspir Kingdom’s culture quite... conservative for their typical revealing apparel, but I try to respect other cultures. Have a lovely chat with the High Lady, Empress.”*

A little impressed at how experienced her Alchemist was, considering she was in her very early twenties when she died, she cut the connection. Social connections were good to make in kingdom building, and this was an excellent way to bridge two powerful Houses.

*Love finds a way.*