

# So Sweet

## CHAPTER ONE

I STOOD AT the edges of the ballroom praying not to be noticed.

All around me, women and men danced together in swirling patterns of color, an azure tulle that wisped in its passing, a rose damask that shushed over the floor. Pastel gowns and white suits littered the floor, and I stood in my corner hoping the foliage, artfully arranged around me, managed to hide the gold of my dress, that the leaves were large enough they kept my gown from catching anyone's attention.

Why was I even here in the first place?

Because the queen had begged it of me, and I obeyed.

Her dress delivered, its hem stitched and fitted, Ella grabbed my wrist and pulled me to a stop at her side.

*"Stay, Amarice. I would have you attend me this night."*

So odd, her words and her gestures, her plea. The way she took my hands and held me close.

How was I to say no to my sovereign?

*"Of course, my Queen."*

And now I was stuck in a gown my queen had worn for a foreign affair, hiding behind bushes trying desperately to blend in to the scenery.

A golden gown that glowed in the light of the candelabras overhead, that twirled and fluttered and was far above what I should ever wear.

I knew I could not hide for long.

And when the king himself came looking for me, there was no hiding.

His bright smile still managed to make my stomach quiver even after all these years.

*"You were invited, Ama. Stop trying to disappear."*

I took the hand he offered to me, ignoring the sudden looks of shock at my emergence by the few courtiers taking respite along the ballroom walls.

Perhaps I did a better job at hiding than I thought.

“Yes, my king.”

He laughed, and a wave of heat flushed over my cheeks. “That was deplorably said, dear heart. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that mix of despair and disgust in someone’s tone when they’ve agreed with me before.”

“Ella manages it.”

He leaned forward to try to catch my whispered response, and my blush grew hotter. He followed my quick gaze to his wife, so no doubt knew the implication I’d made even if he hadn’t heard my words exactly. “Yes, I suppose she’s the exception. You’ve surpassed yourself yet again, Seamstress. That’s the finest gown I’ve yet seen on my lady.”

Though he said that for every creation of silk and satin I made for the queen, it still made my heart flutter to hear his praises.

“My king—”

He easily looped his arm in mine and led me from my recess towards the throngs of people dancing at the ball. “Relax, Amarice. Eli would have you enjoy yourself. There’s no need to hide.”

I did not mention that I stuck out like a sore thumb amidst this sea of demurely adorned ladies and gentlemen. That I walked with the king who wore matching golds to my own did nothing to diminish the interest gathering in the hungry gazes of his court.

“They’re all looking at me.”

“Seeing as you’ve kept yourself well-hidden while your talents become world renown does that to a person. They want to know who you are, and Ella would see her favored friend well-appointed within her realm.”

“Friend, am I?”

How I wish it was only sarcasm that colored my words and not the desperate hope for the same he promised too.

“Friend, Ama. You know, before she met you, Eli had no female friends within the city, only guardsmen who were too terrified to challenge her with a sword.”

“I’m just a seamstress, your Majesty.”

“You were – are – a confidante, and you gave her a haven when she needed it, and kinship even if she never said the same. Did you know,” he maneuvered us through a gaggle of women blocking his path back to the dais, “Ella would rave about the witch who stuck her clothes with pins? As deadly with a needle as she with her blade, she’d say.”

I snorted. A needle as deadly as a blade. “Can one rave about a witch?”

“You shall have to ask Ella about it later.”

I laughed, and my laughter made me stumble, and his hand shifted from my arm to my waist and this blush was all embarrassment.

“I do apologize, Mistress. The queen constantly berates me for what an oaf I am. I did not mean to trip you.”

He had not, but he spoke the words so reassuringly and so succinctly that the men around him lost the disdainful expressions they’d inherited after my stumble, and the women “oohed” over his chivalrous rescue.

I’d spent years of my life wishing that he would rescue me. Now, having my dreams realized, even in such a small way, I didn’t know how to respond.

His lips twisted up into a small grin, not the smile he’d worn when he found me behind my shrubbery, but something more human, more real, that only I saw as he looked down into my face. “You rescued me once, little Ama. It’s my honor to return the favor.”

Only the sure grip he had on my waist kept me from tripping again.

I'm sure the shock on my face was amusing to behold.

"You're torturing my seamstress, Kit. Careful, or she'll dress me in sackcloth in revenge and then I'll be cross." The queen took my opposite arm, bracketing me between herself and her husband.

It was the oddest sensation, being escorted by royalty, especially royalty who were treating me as other than the commoner I was.

"Be easy, Ama. And ignore him. He thinks that he is humorous and can get away with anything because I'm pregnant and can't take him to the lists. But when he's sleeping in the drawing room, he'll realize otherwise."

"A harsh threat, my love."

"Undeserved, dearest?"

They spoke over my head, my height not nearing theirs at all.

Not that the queen was a giantess by any means, but I stood so short comparatively that I felt like a small child being carried away for some perceived fault.

Was that it? Was I going to be reprimanded? Did the queen not like her dress and this was my turning out from her services after our many years together?

We walked until we reached the buffet, tables spaced around the food to accommodate those who wished to sit while they nibbled the fare provided.

The prince – king – ensured that I had a seat before moving to his wife's side and pulling a chair from beneath the table for her to rest in. She smiled politely at his gesture, though her eyes spoke to the coddling she'd withstood from him as of late. The way his fingers brushed her bared shoulder when she took her seat, and her hand rose to touch his, spoke to the love between them, despite the trying circumstances of the baby waiting to be birthed.

She was as likely nervous as he. The king had been cursed to be the end of the world should he have died. A curse commanded by some god or other, the reasoning behind the spell never discovered.

What if the child was cursed the same?

I could not imagine the fear of what bringing a babe into the world under such dour fate must be like.

"The son is as tiresome as the father."

I met the queen's gaze when she spoke while her husband went to fetch her a refreshment. She rarely broke words over the state of her pregnancy.

I blushed hotter, unable to hide the heat from my expression at the mirth in her gaze.

"Tonight is for joy, Ama. Our troubles will find us come first light, but for now, we pretend, and we dance, and we let ourselves delight in the small comforts of a reel and a waltz."

"I have never danced before, my queen."

"All the more reason to stop hiding behind the shrubbery and find a partner on the floor."

Her words made me grin until I saw the look of discomfort that slipped across her face. "My lady—"

She shifted forward in her seat, a small grimace turning down her lips before she relaxed and looked to be sitting more comfortably.

"The child grows painful?"

"My mother says the babe is shifting down, waiting for his birth. It has grown," she grinned, "unpleasant, in the waning stages of this pregnancy. Here," she reached forward and took my hand, and I, too startled to stop her, allowed myself to be pulled forward to lay my palm against her belly

and the child kicking within her womb. "I swear he hears the music of the ball and wishes to dance. He's been straining all evening towards the sound."

She sighed when the foot, I suppose, pressing against my palm, fell away.

She'd pressed my hand against her stomach the first time she'd felt a kick when I was measuring her for a new dress. A servant had run to fetch the king and I'd born witness to the scene as he dropped to his knees and pressed his cheek to her belly. She'd laughed so hard she cried or cried because she was so happy.

When he stood, he'd wiped the tears from her cheeks and I fled, unable to remain in their presence, the love between them.

Too many women were left begging on the streets when husbands died, or companions fled them. Too many had children that they could not raise or raised alone without the heart of another to share the burden or the joy of the babe.

My mother had raised me by herself.

I forced myself not to wonder what it would have been like to have a family like the king's and queen's would be.

A family never lacking in the love of each other, dedicated to no one else. A gift beyond measure.

"She told you it was a boy?"

The queen snorted and leaned back in her chair, letting my hand drop from her stomach. "She says she knew from the very first moment she felt the life spark inside me."

"She is a very strong sorcerous."

"She's guessing same as you or I. Boy or girl, I only care that the babe is healthy. Both, either, will be loved."

The king returned, his hands laden with plates full of goodies for his wife to feast upon. He laughed when her gaze turned to the sweets, greedily looking upon the cakes and cordials he'd brought for her. He put the fine china down on the table, pulled his hands away quickly, for the queen wasted no time in taking what she wanted. "Perhaps some meat as well, my love; you've not eaten anything else today."

"I've eaten plenty," to which her stomach gurgled, and Kit laughed at her. "It's not my fault your child is a pig."

"And what traits does he gain from you, I wonder?"

She smiled, and he kissed her forehead, and I found myself uncomfortable, more so than before, faced with their affection, so common and so glorious for two such royal personages.

"Ama, I did have a request of you, the reason for siccing my husband on you earlier, I'm afraid."

I dragged my gaze from the expression on her husband's face, the longing I'd never allowed myself to want for the same in my life. "Of course, my Queen. How might I serve?"

"I would have you play escort, for the evening, to my husband, and remain for the night in the palace so that I might have words with you come the morning."

"Escort to your husband? But, my lady—"

"I'm tired all the time, and with the babe so close to its birth, my mother says to sleep as often as I need to. It's nothing, she assures me, but when we planned this ball, I did not think I would not have the stamina to outlast those gathered for it." Her smile was a dimmer shade of happiness, tinged with, perhaps, regret at the limitations of her body or mayhap just at leaving her husband alone for the remainder of the evening."

"We can end the night early, my love."

“Kit,” she took the hand he held out to her, and there was something more in her gaze that he read, and I could not comprehend.

The shadows chasing over her features were not just from exhaustion now but the magic inherent in her being.

When she’d come to me for her wedding gown, the energy I’d always felt pulsing from her skin seemed to have formed a shield around her. Now it was more contained, but even still, she breathed her magic with every exhale and it permeated the very air around her.

To have such power at her fingertips...I wondered what it would be like.

“Of course.” The fake smile played over his lips, his tone holding a joy his eyes did not match.

Gone was the man who had smiled at me when I tripped across the ballroom.

He wore a falsely jovial expression that hid the concern in his gaze, the soldier seeking battle, the king ruling his kingdom, that he wore as his court face.

The knot that I had thought gone from my stomach reemerged and hardened, fearing that whatever unspoken communication they had between them would bode ill for me.

“My lady, if I’ve displeased you, I—”

“No, no, Ama, this is...” She looked to the prince – king – but he shook his head, uncertainty in his gaze as he met hers. “Take this night, dearest. We will speak further in the morning.”

One cannot tell one’s sovereign that she did not want to speak with her when commanded to do so.

And yet I found the words on the tip of my tongue even as the king’s hand fell to my shoulder in a comforting squeeze and the queen patted my knee like I was the very youngest of fools in her presence.

“We will speak in the morning. Be at peace until then.”