

Kingdom of Locks Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: commencing in chapter 6

Furn

Furn held himself tightly as the group covered the ground at a sedate pace. He'd been quite interested to visit the site of the prison break, but the prospect held nothing but dread for him now.

He'd hoped King Bern would put his foot down, but it was no surprise Princess Tora had carried the day. She was skilled at getting her way, he'd noticed. At least in the little things.

His mind drifted back to the uncomfortable conversation he'd witnessed when he and Prince Amell had first arrived back in Fernford. His heart had ached for more than one reason as the queen scolded her daughter for her lack of interest in marrying a prince. There was the obvious reason, of course. But the other reason was that he hated to see the princess so beleaguered. She clearly had no interest in marrying a stranger for the sake of an alliance, and it was horrifying to think she might be pressured into it.

Furn thought of his own parents—steady, productive people who lived simple lives and were, quite simply, happy. They ran their small but prosperous estate together, and they were an excellent team in every way. From a lifetime of watching them, Furn had drawn certain conclusions. Of course, his parents had the benefit of not being royal. But he didn't really believe the principles changed with higher status.

Marriage was a serious, lifelong matter, and it was deeply personal. It shouldn't be undertaken for political reasons.

If only King Bern and Queen Pietra thought like that, he reflected sadly. He didn't blame them—their attitude seemed to be universal among sovereigns. But he worried about his charge sometimes. Amell needed a woman who would appreciate him, and encourage his enthusiasm for life, not try to dampen it with considerations of protocol and etiquette. Such a woman could be highborn, of course. But it seemed more likely that someone of the station his mother wanted for him would be a little more stiff than ideal.

Furn glanced sideways at the figure riding on the prince's other side. At least Amell had time on his side. Princess Tora, on the other hand...

Furn sighed. At twenty-five, he was considered very young by almost everyone he knew. Young for his honored position, young for the maturity with which he was often credited. Why was it that, at five years his junior, the princess was being treated like she was growing old? The idea that she was on the shelf was absurd. She was full of life and energy, graceful, strong, with that willowy figure, and that clear gaze that seemed to see straight through him.

He shook off the thoughts, knowing they were headed down a dangerous path. He'd always tried to be as fastidious in his thoughts as he was about his role, but it was growing more difficult lately. It wasn't as though he was rolling down those paths on his own, he thought, a little aggrieved. It seemed recently like every word, every gesture, every glance of the princess's eyes was designed to make it impossible for him to ignore her.

What was she up to? He'd been in close company with Princess Tora for years. He knew that she was both intelligent and intuitive. There was no way the change in her behavior was accidental, or without purpose. But what was she trying to achieve?

He thought of her comment, a short time before. *There must be something you intend to pursue.* Her eyes had bored into his, as though inviting—no daring—him to pursue the thing he wanted most in the world.

But she couldn't be saying that, surely. For one thing, how could she know how he felt? He'd been so circumspect. And for another, she wouldn't want him to pursue her. Would she?

If it was someone else, he might have thought she was toying with his heart, looking for a flirtation. She wouldn't be the first one to try it. Perhaps it was his exalted position as the prince's personal guard, or perhaps it was his general calm quiet in a community full of boastful men who thought their roles at the castle made them important. Whatever the reason, Furn had caught the eye of quite a number of women over the years, from kitchen maids to ladies-in-waiting.

He'd felt no interest in any of them. They were either silly, so assertive as to be aggressive, or simperingly helpless.

Princess Tora was none of those things. But Princess Tora was a princess. And Furn was a guard. A good guard, it was true—Amell had told him often enough that even the king declared Furn the best guard in the kingdom. The thought brought no comfort. The very fact that his performance of his role had brought him to the king's attention confirmed that his sovereigns were unlikely ever to see him as anything but a guard. His position was set, and though he might spend his days in the same castle, it was far from Princess Tora's world.

They arrived at the prison to find a scene of great activity, and Furn was instantly on high alert. Years of practice had made him good at keeping track of Amell, but having the princess in his care as well was a new challenge entirely. Half the challenge was remembering to still watch Amell, because the prince's sister had a way of occupying Furn's full attention.

He wished again that King Bern had been in a more disagreeable mood. If only Princess Tora had stayed behind in Fernford. It wasn't that he blamed her for wanting the excitement, but it made him nervous to think of her at a site as dangerous as a magic prison. Particularly given how skilled she was at evading her guards any time she wanted to be unencumbered.

But more to the point, he didn't trust himself around her anymore. He was always terrified he'd slip, give himself away. Since her behavior toward him had changed, he'd tried to avoid her wherever possible. And now he was faced with an entire day in her company. He wondered if her father would have refused if Furn had expressed his concerns about her inclusion. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He took no delight in saying no to Princess Tora, and at the first hint of vulnerability from her, he'd been instantly undone.

Not before she'd accused him of being disagreeable where she was concerned, of course. He'd kept his face straight, but inside he was wincing. He knew what she was referring to. Her attempts to draw him out hadn't always been subtle. If he'd been so inclined, he might even have called it flirting. And he'd always given the stiffest, the coldest of responses.

If only she could understand how much he wanted to smile at her, to laugh at her matter-of-fact humor, to respond when she laid a hand on his arm. If he followed his inclination, he would grasp that hand in his, bringing it to his lips.

He almost groaned aloud. She was driving him to distraction, and he didn't trust himself to engage with her without knowing what was in her mind.

Perhaps he was wrong, and the change in her behavior was only in his head. Or perhaps he'd overestimated her maturity, and she was just playing a game, one that would turn uncomfortable very quickly if he responded with too much warmth.

Or perhaps she was in earnest, which would be worst of all. The idea that the woman with whom he was besotted might actually want him only made the impossibility of their union more heartbreaking.

The day progressed much as Furn had predicted. With her usual masterly tactics, Tora managed not only to remain in his company, but to get him alone for a substantial chunk of time. When she wandered off from the main group, Furn made a valiant attempt to convince her to stay with the soldiers.

"Oh no, that would be dull," she said lightly. "I'm not interested in soldiers."

Her eyes rested expectantly on him, as if inviting him to respond, but he said nothing.

"Want to do something dangerous?" she asked, grinning.

Furn's look became wary. "Dangerous, Your Highness?"

She nodded. "I don't mind a little danger, do you, Furn? That's my thing now. Dangerous situations."

"I don't think I get the joke, Your Highness," Furn said carefully.

"Well, hopefully you'll clue in with a little more time," Princess Tora said, turning and continuing to walk.

Furn followed, his heart picking up speed. What had she meant by danger? It was no exaggeration to say that she herself was the most dangerous thing in his world, but surely she couldn't know that. Surely she wasn't about to attempt a genuine dalliance with him. He tried to imagine how he would respond if she did. He couldn't let her flirt openly with him, but neither could he bear to truly rebuff her.

He was therefore grateful when she instead engaged one of the prisoners in conversation. Of course, the gratitude didn't last long. Memory of their setting came flooding back, and he spent possibly the tensest half hour of his life standing guard while the princess chatted with a convicted criminal as if she was her best friend.

She's going to kill me, he thought with an inner groan. *She's trying to get herself killed, and the stress of it will finish me off instead.*

He had no idea why Princess Tora was suddenly on the hunt for any risks she could find. He'd never seen her chase danger before—that was more in Amell's line. Just another instance of her recent strange behavior, although it was difficult to see how this one could relate to him.

By the time Princess Tora left with the main group at the end of the day, Furn had convinced himself that he was being egotistical to imagine that her change in behavior had anything to do with him. Something else was going on, and he was reading into it, forgetting that the fact that she occupied his thoughts half the time didn't mean he had any place in hers.

“Wonder what brought the princess out here.”

The idle comment drew Furn’s attention as he waited in line to collect his and the prince’s serves of the simple evening meal. He glanced back at the speaker, a soldier whom he didn’t recognize.

“Dunno,” grunted the man’s companion. “Bit unusual for a lady to visit a prison.”

“Well, she is a bit unusual, isn’t she?” interjected a third. “Or so they say. I mean, why else would she be unmarried by now? Guess no one wants her.”

Furn stiffened, a furious retort on his lips. But he pushed it down, telling himself it was better not to engage with such gossip.

“Well, she’s not much to look at for a princess, is she?”

At that Furn actually turned and stared, fully expecting the man’s companions to refute the words with scorn. Princess Tora had a graceful beauty that had captivated him from the first time he’d seen her.

He was disappointed.

A couple of the men nodded in agreement, only one speaking in lukewarm defense of the princess.

“She’d be all right if she wasn’t so tall. But a man likes a woman to look up to him.”

Furn turned back around, disdain filling him. These men were fools.

“You obviously didn’t see the size of those teeth,” another man guffawed, and Furn clenched his hand around his bowl.

“In fairness,” interjected the first speaker, “if she was a regular lady, she’d be well enough. But princesses are supposed to be stunning, and she’s not that.”

One of the soldiers gave a grunt of agreement. “She’s too up and down, you know,” he said casually. “Not with the curves you like to see on—”

“You will show some respect.” The words came out as a hiss, without Furn even deciding to speak. He simply couldn’t remain silent another moment. “She’s your princess, and infinitely above you.”

The soldiers started, guilty looks passing over their faces as they recognized the prince’s personal guard.

“We didn’t mean anything by it, Sir,” one of them said quickly. Abandoning their places in line, the lot of them hurried away, grimacing at each other.

Furn turned back around, equal parts angry at the men’s rude words, and confused at their apparent blindness to the princess’s charms. Perhaps it was for the best, he reflected. It wouldn’t do to have every fool in the kingdom drooling over her.

The truth of this statement was brought forcefully home some weeks later, when he and Amell returned from the prison to encounter the princess on the arm of the most ridiculous, conceited, self-centered fop in King Bern’s court.

For once, Furn actually wanted to believe that Princess Tora was trying to torment him. It was better than the idea that she was genuinely interested in that fool.

“You’ve been a truly impeccable companion, My Lord,” Tora informed her escort.

Whatever that means.

She fluttered her eyes at the man in a way that would have made Furn laugh if he wasn't struggling to keep his hand from his weapon.

"I look forward to further such walks."

The nobleman's smirk as he looked down at Princess Tora made Furn actually clench and unclench his fist.

"Not as much as I do, Your Highness." The nobleman lifted the princess's hand, the puppy actually having the audacity to press his lips to her skin, as if she'd been one of his flirts.

Furn shifted slightly, trying to hide the involuntary movement of his hand toward his sword hilt. What was the princess doing? Didn't she know this man's reputation? He was one of the greatest scoundrels among the nobility. It horrified Furn to think of him forming even the faintest designs either on Tora's beauty—which any fool would recognize was all the more intriguing by its diversion from the standard idea of beauty—or on her position.

If Furn had his way, the nobleman wouldn't walk anywhere with Princess Tora ever again. On the contrary, the guard would be quite happy to walk the young miscreant off the edge of a cliff.

A little alarmed by the strength of his own reaction, Furn tried to get himself together while Amell said all the things he would like to say himself. Although if he truly gave rein to his tongue, he'd say it considerably more strongly, and preferably to the nobleman instead of to the princess.

Furn's sense of impending disaster grew when Tora laughed off her brother's accusation that she was up to something. Her tone was entirely too airy, and the sparkle in her eye was an irrefutable contradiction to her words. He was so focused on his own inner turmoil, it took him a moment to realize that she'd addressed him.

With the storm raging inside him, he trusted himself to speak with her even less than normal. Amell was wonderfully oblivious to such things, but even he would have to notice something if Furn blurted out that the princess shouldn't let any other man escort her anywhere, because Furn didn't trust a single man in the kingdom to be near her.

Extricating himself as quickly as he could, he strode down the corridor, still agitated by the memory of that nobleman's lips on Princess Tora's hand. Furn hadn't realized he was capable of such jealousy, but apparently he was. And apparently it took very little to ignite it. The fact that he was only just discovering this was a testament to how unlike the princess it was to flirt so shamelessly.

What was she up to? If she was trying to make him lose his mind, she was succeeding.

Furn knew that Amell wanted to leave at first light the following day, and he was ready before dawn. What he hadn't expected, however, was for the princess to be waiting in the courtyard to see the pair off.

"Princess Tora," he exclaimed, wishing he hadn't been quite so prompt. Amell wasn't there yet, and the princess was alone.

"Furn," she said, smiling weakly. "I'm so glad I caught you. I was afraid I would be too late."

He blinked stupidly, the intensity in her voice making him search her words for hidden meaning. As he stared at her, he realized that she looked pale and exhausted, like she hadn't slept well.

"Are you all right, Princess?" he asked in concern, stepping toward her.

She nodded, swallowing visibly. "I'm fine. I just wanted to say..." She raised her face, meeting his gaze. He liked that she was tall enough to look him right in the eye. "Amell told me about what happened, how you jumped in front of him, and...and nearly died."

Surprise flitted over Furn. Was that what had her upset? Had she...did he dare to hope she'd lain awake all night worrying about *him*? He remained silent, unsure how to respond.

"That was very brave," she said, her voice not much above a whisper. "And I wanted to thank you."

Furn studied her, trying to understand her dejection. "I'm grateful for the kind words," he said carefully, "but you don't need to thank me. It's—"

"Your job, I know," she said, with a touch of dryness. She sighed. "It doesn't make me feel any better to be reminded that it's your role to risk your life if someone attacks my trouble-seeker of a brother."

He gave an amused smile, but she wasn't finished.

"I realized that every time you ride away, I can't know for certain that you'll come back. And I couldn't bear the idea that if something happened to you, our last interaction would be..."

She trailed off, and Furn's mind returned vividly to the encounter in the corridor the day before, when the princess had been escorted by that overdressed scoundrel. Remorse washed over him at the memory of his own conduct, how he'd barely responded when she spoke to him, and all but stormed off.

"I was rude yesterday," he said repentantly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to grieve you." His voice dropped. "I never wish to grieve you."

So much more was on the tip of his tongue, his admiration for her every characteristic, his earnest wish that she could be free of the expectations that weighed her down, the depth of his regard. He held it all in with an effort.

While he struggled with himself, Princess Tora held his gaze out of steady eyes that seemed to search every corner of his heart.

"You have nothing to apologize for," she said at last. "I was the one at fault."

Furn just looked back at her, not trusting himself to say a word.

Tentatively, Princess Tora reached out and placed her hand on his arm. He felt his muscles jump under her touch, and he couldn't quite keep his expression blank.

"I'm glad you didn't die, Furn," she whispered. After the briefest moment of hesitation, she leaned forward and pressed a fleeting kiss to his cheek. "Come back safely."

And then she was gone. Furn stood alone in the courtyard, moving in a daze as he touched his hand to the place on his cheek where the skin still tingled. Had he dreamed that? Had his hopeless desires driven him out of his mind at last?

He hardly knew what to think, but he didn't have to reach any conclusions any time soon. Thanks to Amell's mysterious obsession with the prison and its surrounds, Furn was given little opportunity to see the princess over the next month. Their visits back to the capital were brief and far between. Alarmed by how close he'd come to betraying himself in the courtyard, he mainly tried not to speak with her while in the city.

Of course, that didn't stop him from thinking about her constantly, or from torturing himself by taking every chance he got to set eyes on her. He was just making sure she was safe, he told

himself weakly. Just trying to make sure she wasn't getting herself into trouble, or still encouraging that awful man's flirtation. He wasn't motivated by his own desire to be near her, or obsessed with the memory of her sudden mark of affection in the courtyard. Of course not.

About a month after their assignment at the prison had begun, Furn found himself waiting outside the king's study, ready to serve Amell in whatever way he was needed.

He tried to convince himself he was there purely for Amell. The servant who'd told him that the prince's sister was also in the study had nothing to do with it, and neither did the fact that he hadn't had a glimpse of her since their dawn encounter.

When the siblings emerged, Furn told himself firmly that the sudden lift to his heart was the result of seeing his charge well and safe. It wasn't very convincing. He barely listened to Amell's chastisements, smiling when the prince told him that he should be resting. As if he would waste their few moments in Fernford hiding in his own home, away from the castle.

"Thank you, Your Highness," he said. "But I'm perfectly rested."

"I can see that."

The princess's voice drew his eyes to her, and his throat felt suddenly tight at the way she was looking at him. It reminded him of how she'd looked when she flirted with that nobleman, and he wasn't sure whether that made him glad or sorry.

"You look in excellent health, Furn," she went on. "And that's a very nice color on you."

Furn swallowed, feeling horribly exposed. He shouldn't have mentioned that he'd been home and changed. Would she realize that he'd donned a new shirt in the unarticulated hope that he'd run into her, and look his best? Did she really think him attractive? Or was she up to something he couldn't understand? He realized he was shuffling his feet, as restless as Amell, and he stilled with an effort.

"Stop teasing him, Tora," Amell was telling the princess. "You know he doesn't like being the center of attention the way you do."

Furn frowned at what he suspected Princess Tora would take as an insult. Of course she should be the center of attention. She was one of those people who lit up every room. It was only natural.

"I wasn't teasing," the princess protested. "He really does look good."

Furn felt a flush of mingled pleasure and self-consciousness rising, and all at once he knew he'd reached his limit. Talking in a voice that didn't sound in the least natural even to his own ears, he excused himself and fled.

He thought of little else but the princess's compliments all evening, and when he rose before dawn, he felt very little rested. It was with relief that he agreed to spar with the prince, hoping that the exercise would take his mind off the danger that seemed to surround him at every turn.

It worked while they were in motion, but the moment the bout ended, Furn's troubles came back with a vengeance. He turned, still shirtless, to be confronted with the startling sight of the princess standing at the entrance to the training yard.

"Amell," she said brightly, "Furn, what good luck to find you here."

The prince greeted his sister in surprise, but Furn couldn't seem to find his tongue. When he realized Princess Tora's eyes were wandering over his bare chest, however, he sprang into motion, hastening to don his tunic. The gentlemanly part of him thought he should be mortified, but he'd noticed the appreciation in her gaze, and apparently he wasn't all gentleman, because he'd felt a

definite surge of smugness. Staying in good fighting shape was one of the necessities of being a guard.

His thoughts snapped back to the present as the princess addressed him.

"I was wondering if you could help me."

"Help you, Your Highness?" Furn asked, glancing suspiciously at the bow she was holding.

"Yes," Princess Tora said airily. "I'm determined to improve my archery. It's the only kind of fighting princesses are allowed to learn, apparently, and I'm quite out of my depth." She gave him a placid smile. "I've heard you're an excellent archer, and I thought perhaps you could show me how."

"Oh," said Furn, genuinely surprised. Who'd told her he was an excellent archer? He wanted to be pleased to receive another compliment from her, but that one was a stretch at best. "That's... that's very kind of you to say, Your Highness. But I'm not much above average with a bow, to be perfectly honest."

"Nonsense," she contradicted. "I've heard excellent things. And you must be a very patient teacher if you can put up with Amell."

She spoke perfectly matter-of-factly, but Furn felt a laugh trying to fight its way out. For a moment he hesitated, picturing it in spite of himself. In order to show her how to hold the bow properly—not in the woeful way she was doing at present—he'd have to actually touch her. He'd have an unexceptionable excuse to put his hand over hers, to stand closer to her than he ever dared let himself.

"I can give you a refresher, Tora." Amell's cheerful voice cut across Furn's thoughts, returning him to sanity. Torn between amusement and irritation, he watched the prince's good-natured but clearly unwelcome attempts to instruct his sister.

"Prince Amell is right, Your Highness," he said, when he could get a word in. "He'd be a better choice to teach you. His marksmanship is at least as good as mine." *And he can touch you without his thoughts straying to places they should never go.*

Bowing to the pair of them, he hurried away, his thoughts dwelling on the princess's face. Sometimes he was in doubt about whether he'd read her correctly, but this wasn't one of those times. She'd been furious with her brother's intervention, no question about it. Her eyes had held a potent frustration as Furn had taken his leave, as if a plan dear to her heart had been thwarted.

He thought back over all the encounters they'd had in recent months, his cheek suddenly tingling from the memory of her touch. He'd wondered at the start whether he'd caught her eye in some way, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to find any other explanation for her behavior. But surely she must know that they had no future. He'd personally heard her mother talk to her about the subject of her marriage more times than he could count. And he refused to believe she was toying with him for her own perverse amusement.

So what, then? His mind flew to the ill-mannered conversation he'd overheard at the prison all those weeks ago. Those soldiers hadn't thought the princess worthy of admiration. He'd dismissed them as fools, but was it possible others shared their view? Was it possible the princess had even gotten wind of the criticisms some of the kingdom's more idiotic subjects leveled at her?

Furn's breath caught at the very idea of Princess Tora doubting that she was appealing enough to pursue. Was insecurity the motivator behind her sudden attempts to gain attention? But he'd been watching her—he knew she wasn't behaving that way around everyone. It was only toward him.

He swallowed, overcome by a complicated tangle of emotions. Did she care for him after all? Were her attempts to draw him out really attempts to convince herself that she was capable of attracting the man who had attracted her?

If she only knew.

Furn had no leisure to consider his new theory. When he and Amell returned to the prison, he thought he knew what to expect. But when the prince emerged from whatever secret place he went to in the forest, it was instantly clear that something was terribly wrong.

The rest of the day was a blur of chaos and confusion. Furn had come up with many theories regarding Amell's absences, but nothing he'd imagined could have prepared him for the moment when he stumbled into the clearing—the prince's cloak wrapped tightly around him—and saw the tower with its two occupants.

Everything that followed—Aurelia's unexpected sacrifice, the desperate ride back to Fernford with Imelda, the frustration of being unable to tell his story, the shame of failing to prevent Imelda's imprisonment, the humiliation of being restrained himself—all of it felt like some bizarre dream. He could barely keep up with the endless layers of revelations.

For the first few hours of his semi-imprisonment, he was more frustrated than afraid, wondering where Amell had gone, and why he hadn't come to demand the release of both Furn and Imelda. Then the report reached him about the prince's injury.

What followed was possibly the darkest place Furn had ever been to. His role—his one role—was to protect the prince. And Amell was more than just a charge. He'd long ago become a friend as well. Furn had sworn to himself that he'd never let serious harm befall the eager young adventurer. And now, as soon as his back was turned, the prince had been shot.

He paced the barracks most of the night, unable to seek comfort in sleep. He no longer felt mortification at the king's decision to restrain him. King Bern was right not to trust him. He'd failed in his most important duty, and he didn't even know if Amell would live until morning.

But when he was brought before the king the next day, the prince was there, paler than usual, bandaged and weary, but undeniably alive, and clearly full of his usual heedless intensity. It was with relief that Furn melted into the background, allowing Amell to set things straight and explain what Furn hadn't even realized he was now free to say.

Naturally, when Amell left for the Enchanters' Guild, to ensure that Cyfrin hadn't yet made a move against the other enchanters, Furn was by his side. He had no intention of letting his charge out of his sight again, especially not while he was recovering from an injury.

Only, when they reached the guild, and it became clear that there truly was danger, Furn found his attention once again divided. Amell was vulnerable, both from his injury and from his emotional reaction to the enchanter. He was personally invested, and therefore much more likely to be rash.

But he wasn't the only one to go bursting into that library. Princess Tora was there as well, and she didn't even have her own guards with her. She'd blithely followed her brother, determined not to miss the action, and in the process, she'd unknowingly made it impossible for Furn to give full focus to his role.

When it came down to it, and Cyfrin pulled the room to pieces around them, Furn didn't even think. He made no conscious decision about whom to prioritize. He acted purely on instinct when he threw his body over Princess Tora's, trapping her to the ground and shielding her from the falling stone. A few small fragments bounced painfully off his back, but nothing to cause serious damage. Not that it mattered. He was ready to be crushed if it would keep the princess safe.

He was still crouching, unsure whether the attack was over, when Princess Tora's laugh rang across the ruined space.

"I did it!" she announced. "I actually did it."

Furn straightened slightly, staring at her in utter confusion.

"I wasn't even trying to put myself in danger this time," she explained helpfully, "and I still managed to get in a situation where you were driven to protect me, Furn!" She raised her eyebrows inquiringly. "Did it work?"

Furn's mouth fell open, wondering if her head had been struck after all. "Did it...work, Your Highness?"

"Did saving me from imminent death make you realize your feelings for me?" Tora clarified. "Because I'm practical enough to realize that if that didn't do it, nothing will, and I'll just have to give up."

Furn felt heat rush into his face, and when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. It seemed this was his answer. The changes to her behavior hadn't been in his mind. It was equal parts exhilarating and horrifying to have it confirmed that she'd been intentionally trying to court danger just to get his attention.

"Princess, I..." He paused, his eyes locked on hers. Somewhere in his mind he knew there were others in the room, knew even that the enchanter was still loose somewhere. And yet in that moment, it felt like they were alone, with no one in the world but them.

All at once he realized that if she'd crossed the line she'd been dancing, and was declaring her feelings, the time for caution was past. It was time to be brave.

"There's nothing to realize," he said quietly but steadily. "My feelings are...no secret to me. As I think you've known for some time."

The princess's face glowed with a light that made her familiar features breathtaking. But Amell's sharp voice cut across their moment, reminding Furn that they'd chosen the worst possible place and time to have this conversation.

"Tora, Furn. It's not the time."

"Sorry," Tora said cheerfully, apparently not having noticed the enchanter picking his way forward through the ruins. "Life-threatening situations don't come up all that often, though. I had to make the most of it."

Furn choked slightly, not sure whether to laugh or groan, but there was no time to dwell on her new penchant for danger. He rose quickly to his feet, putting his body between the princess and the enchanter. He watched with anxiety as Amell and Aurelia faced off against Cyfrin. His training and instincts both screamed at him to run to Amell's aid, but he held his ground. It wasn't just about protecting Tora. He was also wise enough to see that this was one fight swords couldn't win.

Fortunately, it turned out that Amell had access to something much more powerful than a sword. Even after it was all over, Furn could hardly believe he'd just witnessed Amell, if not wielding, at least carrying magic strong enough to overcome the enchanter.

Of course, the prince obviously had some pretty strong motivation. Despite having first laid eyes on her the day before, Furn felt no surprise whatsoever when Amell pulled the beautiful Princess Aurelia behind a bookshelf for a private discussion, emerging to declare themselves betrothed.

He didn't follow the conversation closely, distracted by looking Aurelia over carefully, trying to figure out whether she was the kind of girl who would spur Amell to be his best self, or the kind who would hold him back. It therefore came as a shock to him when his mind suddenly registered Princess Tora's voice, raised without a hint of embarrassment over the hubbub.

"I don't want to marry a prince," she declared. "I want to marry a guard." Her eyes flicked to Furn, who was suddenly rooted to the spot. "If, you know...one will have me."

If he would have her? If only that was the sole barrier! They'd be married in a week.

"Princess Tora," Furn murmured, his heart simultaneously leaping and plummeting. "You know I can't...I mean, *I* know I can't. However much I might wish..."

"Might wish to what, Furn?" Princess Tora challenged him evenly.

Their eyes locked, and for a moment that felt endless, Furn's internal wrestle continued. She'd made her feelings clear, and he was in awe that she could truly wish for a life with him. But he couldn't afford to give in to those dreams, to show her the depth of his own affection. Because it was a prize they weren't allowed to win, and it would only make everything infinitely harder. If he told her how he felt, how would he keep walking the tightrope of being Amell's guard, practically living in the castle, and pretending her proximity didn't torment him?

As she waited, silent and patient, Furn saw the truth in her eyes. She wasn't at all sure of his heart, or of his answer. She'd tried repeatedly to draw him out and get him to betray himself. But she hadn't succeeded, thanks to his infernal reserve and his cowardly focus on self-preservation, and she had no way of knowing how close it had come to working. And now, she'd made herself unbelievably vulnerable, fully aware of the possibility that she would be publicly rejected.

Never. Not by him.

All his uncertainty fell away. He felt like he'd stepped off the tightrope altogether, abandoning the balance he'd been trying to strike. His feelings for Tora were a distraction from his role as Amell's guard. It was time to acknowledge that to himself, and deal with the consequences. If his role had to change, so be it. His heart wasn't going to.

"I have loved you for a long time, Princess Tora," he said, peace filling him at the confession. "I admire you in every particular. I don't know how any man could fail to do so. I have no expectations. I'm perfectly aware of the futility of my suit. But if it distresses you to think I'm indifferent, it's worth the pain of failure to assure you that I am not."

"Oh Furn," sighed Tora. "That was incredibly romantic."

Furn stared at her, sure for a moment that she was teasing him. He knew he was too unflappable for romance. He knew that every girl who'd ever tried to flirt with him had come away disappointed. He'd even heard the gossip that followed, about what a cold fish he was. But the princess's gaze wasn't mocking. It was full of satisfaction. Somehow, unbelievably, his solemn and unembellished explanation of his thoughts had been romantic in Tora's eyes.

That was an unexpected windfall.

"I'm glad you think so," he said, smiling warmly at her. Obviously it made no difference. But it was still satisfying to know he'd pleased her.

"Tora," the queen scolded predictably. "You are making a spectacle of yourself, throwing yourself at a guard in a public place."

Furn felt both his heart and his face harden. He realized his reaction was unreasonable—this was exactly what he'd known would happen if the king and queen got any hint of whatever had

been going on between their daughter and their son's guard. He was, and always would be, a guard. Meaning he was, and always would be, ineligible in their eyes.

Tora, of course, wasn't so easily daunted.

"I know, Mother, but Furn doesn't even mind me making a spectacle. Surely that's a sign that he's the one for me."

Furn's heart swelled painfully. It was both agonizing and incredible to hear her say the words aloud.

"Tora," the queen protested.

"He saved my life earlier, if it helps," Tora tried.

"And," Amell added unexpectedly, "he's my closest and most trusted friend, and the very best man I know. The idea has my full support, Mother, and surely that must help a little."

Amazed, Furn looked gratefully over at the prince. Amell didn't even look surprised by the development, which was food for further thought. It seemed he hadn't been as utterly oblivious as Furn had believed. Either way, Furn had never expected Amell to speak up in favor of his suit, and the fact that he'd done so unasked meant more than he could ever put into words.

The queen looked a little taken aback, and to Furn's surprise, she didn't immediately veto the idea.

"We will speak more of it later," she said instead.

Furn's head reeled with something that felt painfully like hope. Was that an opening? Was there some mad, foolish, infinitesimal chance that he might actually be allowed to marry Tora? If he'd believed such a thing possible, he would have moved years before.

The princess certainly seemed to think there was reason for optimism. "That's a foot in the door," she told him. "Which, to be frank, is all I need."

Yes, that was definitely hope blooming inside Furn. He gazed at Tora, his heart thumping erratically, and his thoughts still an absolute daze. His instincts were urging him to cross the space between them in two quick strides and pull her dramatically into his arms, like a satisfactory hero would do.

But the room was full of witnesses, including Tora's entire family, and he stayed in place. He wasn't a hero, he was just a guard.

And yet, still that hope continued to grow within his chest as his eyes locked with Tora's across the space. Just maybe, impossibly, in this story, a mere guard might win his princess.