

Crown of Power Epilogue

Darius – The Wedding

Many mages considered graduation from the Academy one of the most significant events of their lives. For me it had never been anything more than a necessary step on my way to the throne—and the lifetime of constraint and service that would follow. My years of training were supposed to have been a mere formality given I entered the Academy already as skilled as most qualified mages. I had anticipated four years of chafing at the unnecessary restraint of being sequestered at the remote location, attending lessons I didn't need.

Nothing could have been further from reality.

From the moment Verene appeared—nervous but hiding it behind a brave tilt of the chin—my world changed. Together we had won the throne, defeated our enemies, and united my kingdom. I had expected graduation to be followed by a grim struggle for power. Instead it was a moment of triumph and joy.

And yet all of that success dimmed compared to the knowledge that the girl who had graduated beside me was about to become my bride. When my world had tilted and rocked—a lifetime of certainty and purpose called into question—Verene was the one who taught me to trust myself again. There was no one else I wanted ruling beside me. And that was why the ceremony in Kallmon felt far more important than the previous day's graduation.

I peered down the long aisle, currently resplendent with red velvet. Surely she should be arriving by now? The rustle of voices filled the enormous hall where row upon row of white seats had been carefully laid out. Across the aisle, Jareth was trying to catch my eye, but I ignored him, my thoughts on Verene.

I hadn't seen her since we stood side by side in the arena and received our qualifications, and two days was far too long to be apart. The moment I exited the graduation, an officious horde had descended, their congratulations overlaid with talk of schedules.

I had the chance for the briefest hand clasp with Verene before I was expertly maneuvered into a carriage with an enormous pile of reports. I had seen laughter in her eyes as I was

whisked away with a great deal of bowing and scraping. She had the luxury of receiving proper congratulations from her family and friends since the ironclad schedule called for her to make a later departure from the Academy. We needed to stagger our journeys since the bride and groom couldn't spend the night at the same inn on the road to Kallmon. Or so I was assured.

I had arrived in the city barely past dawn, riding in as the populace began to stir. Even so, some of them were already lining the streets, flower petals strewn on the cobblestones. They set up a cheer at the sight of me, and I smiled and waved in response.

The elegant homes and gardens lining the streets were familiar, but my heart lifted at the sight of so many commonborns thronging the main thoroughfare. For once they didn't hurry about their business, deferring to passing mage traffic. Instead they milled around, clearing a path for me by pressing against the fences of the houses and spilling over into any unfenced gardens, trampling the grass unheedingly.

My instructions had been followed, then, and the appropriate announcements made. No mage was to interfere with the commonborns' celebration of their new king's wedding and coronation. And whatever they thought of the edict privately, no one would openly defy me so soon after my great victory in the Empire.

Verene's face flashed before my eyes. My betrothed also played a significant role in my current position of strength. An Ardannian princess with an unstoppable new power was an ally no one could challenge.

For so many years, I had shut out everything else, allowing myself only icy focus and determination. But as my people cheered and shouted my name—many with tears openly running down their cheeks—I let the warmth Verene had brought to my heart settle and expand to include these people as well.

There had been hope in their eyes when they whispered in the streets of a coming change, and now they celebrated that hope for the future openly. I would not let them down.

Even on my wedding morning, as I rode into the city, I eyed the large homes I passed, calculating which of them I could co-opt. Verene had made it clear she wouldn't live in a city lacking basic services for its commonborn populace. She had already convinced me of the need for healing clinics and law enforcement offices that were open and accessible to all.

I imagined her own entrance to the city. The crowds would have swelled by the time she arrived, jostling each other in their eagerness to lay eyes on their new queen in her wedding finery. My pulse sped up as I imagined how beautiful she would look. It was an image I had held on to all morning.

Inside the great hall, a trumpet sounded, signaling that after waiting so long, I was finally to see her. The double doors of the hall swung wide with a clang. I straightened as Bryony appeared on her father's arm. In a distant part of my brain, I registered the way she glowed, looking beautiful in layer upon layer of soft white, and I remembered that after much discussion, it had been determined that the double wedding would not include attendants. But the majority of my mind was focused on the dim shadow in the entryway behind Bryony.

A sharp breath beside me made me spare a single glance for my brother whose gaze was riveted on his bride as she traversed the long aisle. Happiness filled me. For so long Jareth had been all I had, and the darkness and pain of his apparent betrayal had nearly eaten me from within. To have him back at my side, and to see the shadows driven from his own eyes, completed my joy.

I would have given official approval to whoever he wanted to marry, but I couldn't be more pleased by his choice. An energy mage had sufficient status to satisfy our critics, and her presence would help Verene in ways I could not. Whenever I felt the stirrings of guilt for tearing Verene from her own family and people, I remembered she had brought a small piece of her family with her.

But even those thoughts couldn't hold me for long. Another fanfare sounded, and Verene stepped forward on the arm of Prince Lucas.

I sucked in a breath. My beautiful, brave girl had never looked more radiant. Her dark hair wound around her head in braids, soft curls falling to her shoulders. As a princess of Ardann, she was entitled to wear a tiara, but the silk of her hair was decorated only with small flowers of purple and white.

My heart stilled and then raced. Her head was bare ready for the ceremony to follow this one. It was a crown of Kallorway, not of Ardann, that would grace that regal head. My queen. At last we were to speak the words that would make Verene mine.

At some point in her tireless planning, Bryony had informed me that Verene's dress was ivory, and I now received an impression of elegance and beauty, and of soft draping folds of satin that extended into a long train. But I found it hard to look away from the joy blazing in her gold-flecked eyes long enough to take in any more details.

It took an eternity and yet a mere breath for her to take the many steps that brought her to my side. Prince Lucas handed her over to me with a shallow bow, his eyes at once serious and joyful.

Verene smiled up at him, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek before her gaze sprang back to mine. It seemed impossible, but she looked as exultant as I felt, as if she had been longing for this moment with equal intensity.

I took both her hands in mine, my eyes never leaving her face as the official spoke a great many words. I barely heard Jareth and Bryony's replies when their moment came, but Verene's promise to tie her life to mine and devote herself to me rang like bells in my mind. And when I repeated the words, my voice came out loud and clear. I had never spoken anything with such conviction.

Verene had proven herself loyal, kind, brave, intelligent, caring, and powerful. And her beauty had tested my control from the very beginning. Somehow this marvelous woman was trusting her heart and her future to me and promising to serve my kingdom at my side. My heart beat so hard I feared it might burst from my chest. Anything that could be achieved by my strength and devotion was hers to command.

I had resolved earlier that I would not let my people down, but I had been wrong. The responsibility and the burden were not mine to bear alone. It was together we would keep faith with our people—together we would bring the change they deserved.

Bryony – The Coronation

I leaned surreptitiously back against my husband's chest and felt his arms slip around my waist. *My husband*. I bit back a giggle. It still felt strange to say the word, even in my mind.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look, my wife?" he whispered into my ear, and I let the softest of laughs slip out.

"Only five or so times in the thirty minutes since our wedding ceremony ended," I whispered back.

"I'll need to improve my ways, then," he replied, burying his face in my hair.

"Don't mess up the arrangement," I hissed at him without turning my face from the front of the room. "We still have an entire evening of dining and celebrations to go, remember."

He groaned quietly. "Are you sure we can't just slip away once this is over?"

"No, of course not." I adopted a stern voice. "This is our one and only wedding day. We'll have every evening for the rest of our lives to spend together."

"I do like the sound of that," he murmured, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

I opened my mouth to reply but closed it again when the official turned from the pedestal at the front of the room, a glittering golden scepter in his hand. He paused for a moment to survey the audience, crowded shoulder to shoulder in the vast space. The wedding guests had been seated, but as soon as that first ceremony concluded, a veritable army of servants had sprung into action, removing the chairs. The great hall could hold an enormous number of seated people, but it still lacked capacity for the coronation.

Additional guests had poured into the room from doors dotted all around the walls, and the hall was now packed full of standing observers. But as prince and princess of Kallorway, Jareth and I had prime positions at the front, beside Verene's family and the full Mage Council.

Princess. Another word I hadn't yet grown accustomed to. How had I ended up here, living my life in a court—the very place I had always sworn I would avoid?

The strong arms around my waist tightened, and all of my concerns vanished. The answer to that question had just sworn his life to mine, and I had no regrets. Especially when my eyes rested on the two dear friends who stood beside the official, facing the crowd. I was safe to commit my future to a kingdom run by Darius and Verene.

I listened intently to the official's opening address, conscious that I was living through a key moment of history. My children would one day complain while their tutors made them study the events of this day. I suppressed a snicker. Any children of Jareth's and mine were sure to protest against sitting still and quietly studying.

But my mind was firmly anchored in the present when the official held out the scepter to Darius, and the new king's firm voice rang through the vast hall.

"I bind myself to Kallorway, and I swear to defend and uphold the Kallorwegian people with all of my strength and ability."

Impossible as it seemed with such a crowd of humanity, utter silence gripped the hall. No one hearing Darius speak could doubt the sincerity of his words, the certainty of his conviction, or the strength of his will.

Verene took a half-step forward and grasped his free hand.

"I, too, bind myself to Kallorway," she said. "And I swear to defend and uphold the Kallorwegian people with all of my strength and ability."

For a brief moment, the deafening silence continued as the assembled crowd absorbed the force of her words and their meaning for the kingdom. And then the room itself seemed to breathe, a deep sigh of release and relief that swept across the hundreds of people within its walls. Together Verene and Darius would keep us safe. They had already proven that.

A wave of sound shook us all, a crescendo of riotous approval that reverberated from the hall to the streets outside and back again, so that it was impossible to tell if the cheering had begun inside or among the massed crowds outside. Kallorway had a new king and queen, and the people roared their approval.

Soon the celebrations would begin, and I doubted they would be contained to a single night. A new dawn was breaking for Kallorway, and all of us would help forge the day to come.