

# *The Abandoned Princess*

## **Daisy—Introductions**

“Daisy, there you are! We’ll be entering Karema soon. You should put on the jewelry set that Mother sent us as a wedding gift. It’s a family heirloom, remember, so she might be insulted if you don’t wear it.”

I narrowed my eyes at the man with my husband’s face.

“I’m perfectly happy without jewels on this occasion, Xavier. But I’m curious about what you bet Xander when you claimed you’d be able to impersonate him and get me to wear the jewels. I hope it was something edible because I’m feeling peckish.”

Xavier’s shoulders slumped. “But you didn’t even know Kali and I had ridden out early from the city to greet you! How did you know it was me?”

“I told you she’d be able to tell.” Xander strolled into the clearing with a smug smile. “When are you going to give up this fruitless quest?” He slipped a hand around my waist and grinned down at me. “He’s just sore because Kali mistook me for him. Twice!”

“That’s only because I’d never seen you together and didn’t even know you were in the kingdom.” Kali walked over to join us, rolling her eyes. She turned an exasperated look on her husband. “You really should give up harassing poor Daisy. She’s got enough on her mind given she’s about to see her new home for the first time—not to mention meet her new parents-in-law.”

Xander’s arm tightened slightly on my waist. “How are you feeling, love?” he murmured down at me, his eyes concerned.

I raised a challenging eyebrow at him. “Do you really think I’m scared of a little thing like that?”

He grinned. “That’s the Daisy I know.”

I smiled back, although truthfully I felt a teeny bit of nerves. Anyone would. But Sultan Khalil and Sultana Rabia hadn’t been able to leave Kuralan to attend our wedding in Trione, and after several months with my family, it had been past time to depart for our future home in the capital of Kuralan. I had even been excited about the adventure. As much as I had loved being home again, I had spent too long cooped up in the tower to want to stay in one place. At least for now.

Xander stepped away to greet his brother, who had already been back in Kuralan for two months, and Kali approached in his place.

“Don’t worry,” she said softly. “Everyone is excited for you to arrive, and the Sultan is pleased with the terms of the new alliance with Trione. They’re prepared to welcome you with all the pomp you could hope for.”

My eyes widened. “And if I don’t want any pomp?”

Kali laughed. “You’ll have to let them get it over with, I’m afraid. They just don’t want to offend Trione so early in the relationship.”

“There’s not much danger of that,” I said cheerfully. “I’ve never exactly been a conventional princess.”

“If it helps,” Kali said, dropping her voice lower, “I’ve already written to Tillie and asked her to organize an official invitation for you from both the Fortress and the Lanoverian royals. Sultan Khalil won’t say no to that, so as soon as you get itchy feet again, Xavier and I will whisk you off to explore the Great Desert and Lanover.”

“Really?” I gazed at her wide-eyed. “You are truly the best imaginable sister-in-law.”

Kali laughed. “We’re married to troublemaking identical twins—no one has a greater need to stick together than the two of us.”

I sighed with relief, knowing that I already had another trip to look forward to. Kali and I had grown close in the time she had spent in Trione for the wedding, and I had confided in her about not wanting to be tied down too soon. Thankfully she and Xavier felt similarly.

“Are we planning to linger here all day?” Lori asked disapprovingly, surveying us all. “Or are we going to finally reach this city we’ve been told so much about? I was promised no sand, and so far there’s been nothing but sand.”

“Lori,” I laughed, “we left the desert ages ago. We’re standing in the middle of a forest right now.”

“I found some stowaway grains of sand in the back of my slippers only five minutes ago,” she said grimly. “The stuff is insidious. Whoever came up with the idea of an entire desert of sand was unhinged.”

Xavier regarded her with fascinated delight. “I’ve never thought about it quite like that, but you’re quite right. It was a terrible idea.”

I shook my head, still laughing. “You’re both ridiculous.”

Lori’s look of steady approval told me she’d spoken on purpose to make sure I wasn’t feeling too tense.

“Thank you,” I said to her quietly. “For coming with me. I’m so glad you’re here.”

She clucked at me. “We’d spent long enough back in Trione. After so many years away, I’d forgotten how much sand they have there as well. It was almost enough to make me think tenderly of that tower.”

I gasped dramatically. “That’s taking it a bit far, don’t you think?”

“You just wait and see. Now that those twins are back together, it won’t take long before we’ll all be thinking longingly of a nice bit of solitude. You mark my words.”

I shook my head, still laughing. Unlike Lori, I loved seeing my husband with his twin. Marrying Xander meant leaving my own home and family, but I didn’t regret it when it meant we could live alongside Xavier and Kali. It had been delightful to be with Teddy and Millie again, as well as Isla and Ray, but the four of them belonged together in a way I never had, despite our mutual affection. I was pretty sure it was a twin thing.

But in Kuralan, I had the chance to be one of those who belonged—an insider to the twin bond that would always hold Xander and Xavier together.

The guards and various officials who had accompanied us from Trione formed up, and we all mounted again and returned to the nearby road. The city loomed in front of us, but its walls didn't feel intimidating with the gates flung wide in welcome. And in front of them, even more guards awaited us, ready to lead us through the city streets in ceremonial procession.

I would have preferred a quieter entry, with more opportunity to examine the city as we went, but I remembered Kali's words and resigned myself to the reality. There would be time to look around Karema later.

People lined the streets, their bright clothes creating an enchanting swirl of color to match their enthusiastic cheers.

"I convinced Father to give all the people a holiday to welcome you," Xavier said with satisfaction. "They'll be holding their own celebrations throughout the streets."

"It was the least we could do since the wedding was held in Trione," Xander agreed, clearly pleased at spreading our joy through the populace.

I tried to look everywhere at once, my eyes jumping from the unfamiliar clothing—the long outer robes and sheer chemises in every imaginable hue—to the equally unfamiliar style of the houses. Many of them seemed set back from the road, their front courtyards separated from the road by high walls. But I suspected we were riding past the wealthier homes as we approached the palace, so it was likely the whole city wasn't laid out that way.

When we neared the palace itself, yet more guards awaited us in gleaming rows. As we rode past, they saluted in a glittering wave, ushering us through the palace gates. Once again, the gates had already been thrown open in preparation for our arrival, and a fragrant wave of air hit me as we rode into the vast palace courtyard.

I had grown up beside the ocean in a palace of fabled beauty, so I was no stranger to breathtaking settings. But I was still shocked by the elaborate gardens behind the palace walls. Everywhere I looked was a new, deep shade of green, splashed through with colors even more splendid than those adorning the populace. And weaving through it all was a heady floral scent.

Beyond the plants, the sprawling palace building was a perfect complement to the natural growth, the cream stone and gilt windows a welcome contrast to the greenery. It was a much flatter building than my parent's palace, although larger in land size, and I suspected the heat was responsible. Designed as it was, the carved screens on the many windows would allow cool breezes to flow through the halls.

"It's beautiful," I breathed to Xander who surveyed it critically.

"I'll admit I'm more glad to see it again than I expected," he acknowledged, making me laugh.

"Anyone would be happy to return to such a home."

He smiled at me, nudging his horse closer. "I'm glad you think so since it's your home now."

I sucked in a breath, feeling the weight of it. My new home.

Xander swung down from his horse, reaching up to lift me down.

"I can dismount on my own," I reminded him, even as I willingly allowed his unnecessary coddling.

"Maybe I just want to hold you," he murmured against my hair, making me flush. It was still hard to believe that this handsome man could be my husband.

"Daisy! At last!" A delighted cry rang from the palace doors, and a beautiful girl a few years my senior flew down the shallow steps.

I stepped back from Xander just in time for her to throw her arms around my neck.

"I don't know why I had to be the last one to meet you!" she exclaimed. "I've been waiting so long to meet the girl Xander chose."

I looked at Xander, but he was laughing, showing no inclination to rescue me.

"You're not the last one, Adara," Xavier protested, jumping down from his horse to join us. "She hasn't met Mother and Father yet."

"Can't you be more dignified, Adara?" Prince Tarek asked from the doorway. He looked disapprovingly at his sister—the girl with her arms still around me.

His stiff manner might have put me off except I had already spent some time with him and Zaria in Trione. He took his responsibilities seriously, and his siblings had a habit of bringing out his sternest side—a necessity for balancing their senseless levity, he assured me.

Princess Adara finally let me go, and I couldn't help returning her smile. She'd effectively banished any possible question about the warmth of my welcome.

"Your Highnesses." Lori approached, directing a curtsy in the general direction of the royals.

Adara looked at her with curiosity. "Are you Lori?" she asked.

I looked at her in surprise. I hadn't expected Xander's sister to know my attendant by name.

But Adara looked excited by Lori's affirmative response, making a subtle signal toward the palace doors.

A parade of servants appeared. They all wore elaborate robes and bore trays carrying such items as a bunch of grapes, a pile of oranges, or a golden goblet. I gaped at them as they marched toward us, the final one bearing a large fan.

I was glad my new family was happy about my arrival, but this felt like a bit much.

The servants ignored me, however, instead forming two lines on either side of Lori. The one holding the fan hurried forward and began to fan her as the others took turns offering her their trays.

I gaped at them while Lori calmly accepted the goblet and one of the grapes. The last of the servants bowed deeply to her. "Your suite has been thoroughly swept five times, My Lady, and I will personally guarantee that no sand lingers inside it."

Lori gave her thanks with a placidity I was far from feeling.

“What’s going on?” I whispered to Xander who was doubled over with laughter.

Lori looked calmly at Xavier before addressing me. “I wasn’t too sure about that one, but I suppose he’ll do after all.”

Xavier grinned like the cat that had gotten both the canary and the cream. “Everyone comes around to me eventually. I’m irresistible.”

“Yes, yes, love,” Kali said. “I’m sure no one could resist your charm. But your parents must be waiting.”

“I helped too!” Adara protested. “You two always try to take all the credit. Don’t believe a word they say, Daisy.”

Xander finally straightened, his laughter subsiding. “Don’t listen to my sister. You’ll find we’re people of our word here in Kuralan. As we’ve just proved.”

“But what in the kingdoms…” My voice trailed off as I finally remembered the joking offers the twins had made in their efforts to lure Lori to Kuralan on my behalf.

“You’re outrageous,” I told Xavier, but I was grinning from ear to ear.

“I don’t see anything outrageous about it,” Lori said placidly. “But you should try a grape. They’re lovely.”

I put my arms around Xander’s waist and squeezed. Xavier and Adara might have arranged the particulars, but I knew it was all part of Xander’s effort to ensure I felt at home in his kingdom. He knew how much Lori meant to me.

“Thank you,” I whispered to him.

I still had to meet the Sultan and Sultana—my new father- and mother-in-law—and I knew that would be a more formal affair. But I had no need to fear that meeting. I had been raised a princess—I knew how to be formal when the occasion demanded.

But that moment on the palace steps was my true welcome to Kuralan, and standing there, any remaining concerns dissipated. There was a place for me in Kuralan and a loving family. I had no need to fear my new life. I was ready to embrace becoming Kuralani.