

~Ronan's Perspective: Seeing Beyond the Princess's Mask~

The dock was a bustle of activity as my crew readied to set sail, but for once I didn't observe their preparations; my entire focus was riveted to the two carriages bearing the Sortileyan royal crest that were slowly maneuvering their way through the crowd. Though I watched calmly, my mind whirled with the question that had haunted me for months: was I making the right choice?

Farrell, my faithful first mate and devoted friend, stood beside me, his frown deepening the closer the carriage approached. "Are you certain about this, Your Highness?"

"Absolutely. I was certain the moment I offered for the princess's hand." But that wasn't entirely true. Meeting Princess Seren would quickly show me whether or not I'd been an overly optimistic fool.

Farrell shook his head. "Of all the adventures you've concocted, this is your craziest one yet. As crown prince you can have anyone, and yet you chose the *dragon princess*?"

It was too early to determine whether or not that had been one of my better ideas. In any case, he was right to be surprised. All the rumors I'd heard about my future bride swarmed my mind: difficult, cold, aloof, venomous. But those weren't the only things I'd heard about the infamous Sortileyan princess: she was said to also be intelligent, dedicated, proper, and beautiful, traits which would make her the perfect woman to serve as my future consort. Surely a woman who possessed such virtues was more than the poisonous words spoken about her, and if so, I was determined to discover it.

"I have a good feeling about our union," I said. But would an arrangement that looked good on paper also give me what I truly wanted: a love match?

Farrell waited, but when I said nothing more, he bowed. "I'll see to the rest of the preparations, Your Highness...Captain." He departed up the gangplank, leaving me standing alone on the dock just as the carriage rolled to a stop several yards away.

I took a steadying breath, filling my lungs with the salty sea breeze, which as always had a calming effect on my nerves. I braced myself for my first glimpse of my fiancée as the carriage door opened and the princess's guard, Odin, stepped down before turning to assist out the princess.

My breath hooked as a beautiful woman emerged from the carriage with the utmost grace. I eagerly took in her elegant features. She was gorgeous, just as the rumors had said, though her manner was rigid, almost entirely expressionless, yet it did little to mask her beauty. Still, I wanted more than a beautiful wife or even a capable queen to serve by my side. Could this princess also become a companion, a friend, a woman I could trust my heart to?

The servants who'd accompanied Princess Seren began unloading the trunks while she stood regally nearby, her posture perfect, her expression almost serene, as if she were detached from the world around her. She didn't stir until the man I recognized as Prince Deidric began conversing with her. Seren's entire manner changed in an instant to one of displeasure.

I leaned against some barrels to watch the scene unfold. While I was too far away to overhear, by their expressions the prince and princess seemed to be arguing. I studied the stiff way Seren held herself, the wary way her eyes repeatedly darted away from her brother's, the brief flashes of vulnerability that repeatedly pierced her expression before she hastily tucked it away.

My curiosity deepened and I longed for a glimpse behind the mask she seemed to be holding firmly in place. The more I watched her, the less I saw of a dragon princess, and the more I saw of a woman who seemed to be struggling to hold herself together.

An interesting development.

Seren tore her gaze from her brother's to look around the dock, where it settled on me. For a moment we stared at one another before she narrowed her eyes. I lifted an eyebrow in silent question and her nose wrinkled in a surprising yet rather adorable way, especially since it was so out of place on her otherwise regal appearance. Another mystery, one of many I was suddenly eager to begin to solve.

I was distracted when the King of Sortileya stepped out of a second carriage and approached the princess, his entire manner dark and hard. "Seren?"

She stiffened at his booming voice before she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before swiveling elegantly around to curtsy to her father. He paused to look her up and down with obvious disapproval before he gave a curt nod.

"You look well. Crown Prince Ronan shouldn't find any fault with you."

The princess flinched, ever so subtly, and an unexpected flare of protectiveness towards her surged through me. I felt as if I were peeking in on a scene not meant for me to witness, but which concern for Seren made it impossible to look away.

"I'll do my best to be a good wife for him." While Seren spoke confidently, her voice wavered slightly. Did she truly fear I'd disapprove of her? I frowned, even as I felt a sudden urgency to do all I could to prove her wrong.

"And to be the princess and future queen expected of you," the king continued. "You're returning to your mother's homeland. Represent Sortileya with grace and decorum to do us and her memory proud."

She merely nodded demurely. The king's rigid expression sobered as he stepped closer and lowered his voice to whisper something I couldn't hear, but which caused her to stiffen and nod again.

"I won't disappoint you, Your Majesty."

"See that you don't." With that, the king strolled away without another word, not even a goodbye. Seren bit the inside of her lip as she watched him go, a vulnerable gesture that assembled another piece of the puzzle that was the dragon princess. She received no love from home, that was for certain.

You'll love her. I just prayed I could follow through with that promise.

I was suddenly quite anxious to be at her side so I could begin my quest to care for her. I shifted impatiently as I waited.

Prince Deidric gave his sister a rather awkward hug and departed. Seren immediately gathered her composure; I could almost see her shove whatever emotions toyed with her rigid features away, burying them deep. Though she hid herself well, I'd already seen enough to know that whatever the rumors claimed, she wasn't emotionless.

She turned towards the ship and stilled when she saw me watching her. She stared back a moment before she gave her head a little shake and glared. My eyebrows shot up and it was all I could do to keep myself from grinning. Little did she realize it was too late for her to play hide and seek with me; I'd already seen enough to know her coldness was a façade.

She and Guard Odin approached, pausing in front of me. He promptly began our long-awaited introduction. "Princess Seren, may I introduce Ronan, Captain of the *Star*,

the ship that will escort you to Bytamia. Captain Ronan, this is Her Royal Highness, Princess Seren."

She looked at me expectedly but I continued to study her, furrowing my brow in concentration. She shifted on her feet, as if my perusal made her nervous.

Love is a choice, I reminded myself before smiling widely at her. She blinked, seeming taken aback. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Seren."

She gasped, breaking the mask she seemed determined to hide behind. "I—what did you call me?"

"Seren. Isn't that your name?" I glanced towards her guard, who nodded. "Excellent, so I didn't fumble that up; doing so would have made an awkward first greeting. Your name is very beautiful. It means *star*, does it not? Just like the name of my ship. A good omen. I think we'll get along just fine." I smiled again.

She only stared, her eyes wide. They were the most lovely shade of pale, blue grey, like clear pools, and within them I could see the emotions she tried to hide, the primary one being uncertainty.

"I—" Her words faltered and she fell silent. I continued to smile but she only scowled. Perhaps pretending not to notice her unease would make her more comfortable and allow her to open herself up to me.

"It's my pleasure to escort you to Bytamia," I continued calmly. "As Guard Odin said, I'm Captain Ronan."

She wrinkled her nose as she took in my attire, far too simple for a captain, before she lifted her chin to a regal tilt. "You're treating me with the utmost disrespect. I'm a princess, and yet you've failed to bow or address me by my title."

"Ah. Well in that case, *Princess Seren*, if you prefer, you can call me Crown Prince Ronan while we remain on land."

She rolled her eyes. "I must warn you, Captain: it's inappropriate to jest about such a thing."

Wait, what? Did she mean...? My eyebrow lifted in surprise. "I have no doubt it would, so allow me to assure you that I'm sincere: I really am Crown Prince Ronan."

"Your teasing only leaves me with an unfavorable first impression," she said stiffly. "You will cease this nonsense at once."

Of all the responses I'd imagined for our introduction, it hadn't been the disbelief filling her expression. This was a problem I hadn't foreseen. But despite the dilemma, I found my lips twitching again, which only sharpened her disgruntled look.

I searched her expression, as if the correct course through these uncertain waters could be discovered within her beautiful clear eyes. Despite her firm resolve, I detected fear, confirming my suspicion that she wasn't ready to know who I truly was. It appeared for now we'd be playing a game of mistaken identity.

I nodded to myself. "Ah, so the princess doesn't like to be teased. Duly noted. If you wish, we'll just make it Captain Ronan, shall we? That's the only title that will matter once we board anyway."

Her eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"You see, while you may be a princess on land, you're about to become a charge on my ship. Royal station has no part in the life of a common sailor; the sea takes no such things into consideration, nor do I."

She gaped at me for a moment before managing to snap her mouth closed. "How dare you."

I smirked, but before she could retort I talked over her. "I meant no disrespect, but I think it prudent we establish the protocol right from the beginning. Now, please make yourself comfortable, Seren; we set sail shortly."

As much as I wanted to linger, I could sense I'd left Seren uncomfortable, and if I wanted any hope of making our marriage work I knew I couldn't push her. Perhaps I could use her disbelief that I was her intended to my advantage and use the extra time before our wedding to befriend her until I earned her trust; she undoubtedly needed a friend.

I left Seren gaping after me in a rather flustered yet adorable manner and stepped onboard. I paused to savor the gentle, rhythmic swaying movement of the ship on the water, as natural to me as standing on land. Here I was home.

I ran my hand across the smooth wood of the railing before my gaze took in the familiar sails that had carried me through many storms, the helm I'd spent hours steering the ship to all manner of grand adventures, as well as all the dedicated sailors who'd become like brothers to me. Memories washed over me, from when I first set foot on a ship as a gangly youth until now, embarking on what was to be my final voyage. I'd spent so many wonderful days at sea, a time in my life that was about to

come to an abrupt end, thrusting me into the position I'd been born to but at which I floundered, adrift in an ocean with no certain direction.

My gaze flickered towards Seren still standing rigidly on the docks with her guard. I sighed. By her hardened manner, she was clearly displeased. Perhaps it'd been wrong to tease her. Just what sort of adventure lay ahead for me now that she was my future?

I shoved thoughts of her aside as I donned my captain jacket and immersed myself in the familiar preparations to launch at sea. The familiar duties, the bustling of my crew along the deck, and salty sea breeze calmed my thoughts.

When all the preparations had been seen to, I returned to the railing as the anchor lifted and the ship sailed out of the harbor. I looked out across the horizon, watching Sortileya grow smaller as we sailed further and further away. This would be the last time I set sail indefinitely. A lump formed in my throat. I'd miss life at sea. But it was time to put that part of my life behind me.

I became distracted when I caught sight of Seren standing with her handmaiden and guard at the railing overlooking the sea. Intrigued, I paused to observe. Her previously rigid countenance had softened, leaving her eyes glassy as she stared at the receding shoreline. My curiosity returned. What was she thinking? Was she missing her old life and her home? Did she anticipate the future she was sailing towards? How I hoped she did.

She shifted to straighten and pull her shoulders back before turning away from the railing to take in the ship, open fascination slipping past her mask. Ah, so the princess was a curious one, our first discovered commonality. This gave me confidence and I made my way towards her, unable to resist keeping my distance any longer.

"Seren?"

As before she stiffened. I expected her to turn around, but she remained with her back facing me, her gaze once again staring out across the ocean as her homeland drifted further into the distance. "It's Princess Seren," she corrected.

With her back still facing me, I allowed my amusement free-reign now that I didn't fear it riling her. "Everything is in order and we're ready to set sail. I was wondering if you'd like to stand with me at the helm and watch."

She slowly turned to face me with a frown. "Why?"

Ah, so she wanted to pretend she wasn't interested? What a strange game she was playing. I felt myself only grow more intrigued. "I noticed you observing our preparations for launch and thought you'd be interested—"

"I'm not interested. Why would a princess be interested in anything so common?"

Oh, she was totally interested. I grinned and leaned closer; she pressed her back against the railing, as if my presence made her nervous. "You can't fool me; I saw the way your eyes lit up as you eagerly took in every detail as we worked. But if you want to pretend you don't care, who am I to stop you?"

I straightened with a shrug, causing her to shakily release her breath. "Please leave."

It appeared I'd gone too far. I stepped away. "The invitation stands if you change your mind."

I bowed and departed, returning to the helm, but I was no longer smiling. My second interaction with my fiancée had gone just as poorly as our first; perhaps I'd signed up for more than I'd bargained for. I forced myself to push that dark thought away, for it wouldn't do me any favors for the course I'd chosen for myself.

But it wouldn't be so easily abated, especially the more I thought over my interactions with Seren, each more strenuous than I'd anticipated. Had I made a mistake in choosing her? Would my struggles to make an already difficult relationship work be worth the reward?

An image of my parents own loving relationship penetrated my discouragement, reminding me of the future I was determined to sail towards. I recalled the moment I'd chosen Princess Seren to be my bride. The idea hadn't come from my parents, for they'd promised years ago to never pressure any of their sons into a political arrangement, wanting us to have a love match like they shared.

In truth, I first considered Seren after I overheard the advisors discussing the benefits of an alliance with Sortileya before the idea was hastily dismissed—for aligning our kingdom with Sortileya could only come at the cost of aligning with the unpleasant dragon princess, a woman I knew little to nothing about. I'd studied everything I could about this infamous princess. The more I learned, the more sorry I felt for her...and the more intrigued. Just who was this woman with so many admirable qualities yet who was apparently so unpleasant? Surely if one got to know her, she couldn't be that bad.

So I'd offered for her, both for her sake and also for my own selfish motives. My decision had lifted me in the eyes of my parents, whom I wanted nothing more than to emulate, to prove that the foolish days of my youth were in the past and I myself was worthy of the crown they'd one day entrust to me.

Yet my longing for what my parents shared made it impossible to resolve for anything less than a love match, even if I had to choose to make it one myself. For love was a choice. I'd witnessed it every day from my parents in their interactions with each other, towards their children, as well as towards our subjects. The deeper their love grew, the more effortless it seemed to become, until it was a part of them.

It'd be a part of me too. I could love Seren. I *had* to.

The soft sound of footsteps penetrated my thoughts. I looked up from my steering to find Seren herself gracefully approaching. I quickly suppressed my surprise by her presence and smiled, both in greeting and in hope for what her presence could potentially mean.

"Welcome, Seren. Do you want to learn how a ship is steered?"

She lifted her chin in that regal yet stubborn way of hers. "A princess is educated in all manner of subjects." Despite her stiff manner, her eyes were aglow with curiosity, a gleam that grew as she took in the helm with interest.

I nodded. "Rightly so. Come, stand by me." I sidestepped to make room, but she narrowed her eyes and shook her head.

"I'll stay right here."

"You'll see better if you—"

"I'll stay right here," she repeated more firmly, words that were accompanied by a glare I could already tell was a frequent habit of hers.

Hmm, once again she was proving more difficult than I'd anticipated. But not impossible—I'd seen enough of the insecurities she tried to hide to know that her cold behavior was nothing more than a façade. What remained to be seen was whether or not I could crack it. Her presence beside me now gave me hope that she'd eventually warm up to me, if I was but patient enough to draw her out.

"Very well, as you wish. Now, because I know you're curious—"

"I'm not curious," she snapped.

"—I'll explain how the steering works. The ship's wheel runs a pulley mechanism belowdecks that pulls the tiller back and forth, which is attached to a rubber stock."

Her hardened countenance melted away, replaced with a bright eagerness I found rather endearing. As if her excitement caused her to forget her earlier reservations, she took a step closer; I couldn't resist smiling.

"I see," she said. "The tiller provides the leverage needed to turn the device that changes the direction of the ship."

I gaped at her a moment before slowly grinning. "Exactly. The tiller is always moved in the direction opposite to where the bow of the boat is to move. It works in conjunction with the sails, which are controlled by the ropes tied to their corners."

I could almost see her consider my words as she focused first on the helm, then the sails. "So too much sail on either the stern side or the bow would cause the wind to make the ship unbalanced, which could turn the ship in the wrong direction. Correct?"

My eyes widened in astonishment. The whispers that the Sortileyan princess was bright was clearly more than a mere rumor. "It appears the princess is quite intelligent."

"Of course I am," she said. "An unintelligent princess is nothing more than a useless ornament, and it's my duty to use all my capabilities to help my people."

My grin widened. "We're barely into our acquaintanceship and already you're not what I expected. You surprise me, Seren."

"Princess Seren."

"Isn't that what I said?"

She scowled at my teasing and I winked, pleased the gesture caused an alluring blush to caress her cheeks. It was all I could do to suppress a chuckle. Despite her prickliness, I was already enjoying our interactions immensely.

I returned to steering. In my peripheral vision I could see the concentrated way she studied each movement of the helm. What was she thinking now? The curiosity almost drove me mad.

She broke our silence first. "I didn't realize steering fell under a captain's duties."

"It technically doesn't," I said. "I have a brilliant helmsman, as well as a very capable first mate who often performs the duty, but I love the task and sometimes can't resist doing it myself. I don't normally steer during a launch, but I had the perfect incentive when I noticed your interest."

She looked as if she wanted nothing more than to deny it, and I found myself wanting nothing more than to discover the reason why. Already things were proving

interesting between my fiancée and myself. If nothing else, I was intrigued by her. It was certainly a start.

"Do you have any more questions for me?"

"Certainly. Your explanation, while adequate, wasn't nearly detailed enough. I'd appreciate more information."

I bowed. "Gladly."

I talked in earnest. At first I kept it basic for fear of boring her. But her grey-blue eyes only glowed the more her rigid mask faltered, revealing her interest. Her detailed, insightful questions soon caused me to delve into the finer points about the ship's construction and how all the parts worked together. My hope for our union grew the more I talked. If she found seafaring fascinating, perhaps there were other interests we shared.

I paused when the princess's handmaiden approached, her expression twisted in misery. Seren's entire manner transformed in an instant, so suddenly I was left quite startled.

"Your Highness—" her handmaiden shakily began.

"What is it, Reece? Are you alright?" Seren stepped almost desperately closer. Her clasped hands shook as her frantic gaze scanned her handmaiden's countenance. "Are you ill?"

"It's the sea." Reece clutched her stomach, her expression pained. "Forgive my interruption. I just wanted to know whether you had need of me, and if not, see if I might gain permission to lie down."

"Even if I did have need of you—which, I must assure you, I don't at the moment—it is of little importance compared to your health. You must lie down at once."

Seren's controlled expression faltered further, revealing fierce worry. Without a look back, she hooked her arm through Reece's to lead her away belowdecks, leaving me standing at the helm already missing her presence beside me.

As I stared after her, another piece to the puzzle that was my fiancée clicked into place: *she's loyal*. It was a trait that was both surprising and not surprising at all. What was startling was the sudden fierce desire coursing through me that one day Seren would exhibit the same loyalty towards me as she'd extended her servant. Was such a future possible? Or would that course prove to be riddled with too many obstacles for us to overcome?

I wasn't pondering long when Farrell arrived. I relinquished the helm to Crest and walked with my first mate along the deck. "How is it going?" By Farrell's smirk, he expected it to be going poorly. And by all accounts that's certainly how it'd appeared, and yet...

I considered. "It's...surprising. And enlightening. She's different that I expected." Certainly more fragile than she let on; whatever came, I'd have to proceed carefully.

He raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "She's certainly not...she's worse."

I frowned. That hadn't been what I'd seen.

He took my frown for disappointment and leaned closer, lowering his voice. "Are you certain you're doing the right thing? As easygoing as you are, I can't imagine such a marriage making you happy. How could you ever learn to love someone like *her*?"

I thought over everything I'd already learned about her, pushing aside her seemingly negative traits and clinging to each positive one like a life preserver: curious, intelligent, loyal...and brimming with secrets just waiting to be discovered.

"It's not a question of *if* I can love her; I *will*."

But despite my determination his question haunted me. *Could* I learn to love Seren? Once more I looked towards where she and her handmaiden had descended, wanting to be with her again, if nothing else than to begin answering that question for myself.

While I certainly didn't love her yet, if what I'd seen so far was any indication, I now knew I could. I *would*. The more time I spent with her, the less I saw of a dragon princess; instead I saw a woman struggling to hold herself together. And as her future husband, there was nothing more I wanted to do than to protect her.

I straightened, resolved to begin immediately. "It's my duty to see how my passengers are faring." But while I was concerned for Reece, it was Seren I found myself eager to see again. Surely that was a good sign, even this early in our relationship.

Perhaps I was on the correct course after all.