

A Beautiful Day for Courtship

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The editing process for Courier's Test included my conducting a character interview for Kel and Allure. The interview ended up about as long as the actual story (um... whoops?), and of course, only a fraction of the information fit into the main plot. Tossing my favorite parts of the interview into a bonus short produced this result. I apologize if the origins cause this story to feel disjointed, but I hope you will nonetheless enjoy!

Princess Allure of the Maple Court was having an impossible time staying in character. Her parents had sent her as a diplomat to Kudora, the elven kingdom that had recently butted up against the enchantments surrounding the Maple Court. She'd assured them that she would behave respectably. She would be dignified. She would represent well not only her parents and their court, but all faeries across the continent.

Reality trounced her intentions and danced away, chortling.

Was it dignified to straddle a horse when she'd never tried riding such a creature before in her life? Was it respectable to sit wrapped in the arms of her betrothed, even if the embrace was necessary to keep her from falling off of aforementioned horse? Was it better or worse that an entire party of knights, scribes, and other servants, not to mention her betrothed's brother, rode with them as witnesses to the spectacle?

And exactly how well was she representing anyone when she could hardly think beyond getting to know her betrothed? Since her arrival at Al Serine, Kudora's capital city, two days previous, she and Prince Keliar had scarcely ceased asking one another questions.

Family life? They both were the youngest sibling, Allure with three older brothers, Kel with one.

Close friends? Allure spent the most time with whoever her fellow performers were in any given season. Kel was consistently the closest with his brother.

Most treasured memory? Allure would never forget the moment the High King, breaking through a dark period, confirmed his love for her. Kel recalled the moment he'd seen his life laid before him as a branching path – his people's approval or Alphere's – and chosen Alphere.

The questions continued on this trip roaming the lush hills outside of Al Serine. The abundant flora and fauna made for gorgeous spring scenery, and Allure kept her wings insect-small against her human-sized back so she wouldn't smack Kel in the face every time they fluttered with delight, which was often.

So much for her role as a mature, graceful, gracious visiting princess.

Not that Kel seemed to mind. His grin seemed to come more quickly with each of her giggles, and the morning's beautiful weather made it all the easier to relax into his hold, swaying in tandem with their horse's steady clop. The day could hardly be more perfect for courtship.

"Marryk," Kel said.

Kudora's crown prince looked up from the stack of papers he was sifting through on his own horse. "Yes?"

"No, we're talking about you," Kel said cheerfully. "Allure wanted to know what I'm most grateful for. You and I have our differences, but you've always had my back."

Marryk's silent stare might as well have been cut from stone, for how little Allure could guess his thoughts. He finally said, "I could hardly do less and call myself your older brother."

“I also appreciate the buffer you make between me and a throne.”

Marryk’s eyes narrowed. “That’s all I really am to you, isn’t it?”

Kel heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Exposed – in front of a beautiful princess, no less. So much for having my back.”

Allure meant to giggle, but what came out was a hum bordering on a squeal.

Her betrothed laughed, and she reveled in both the sound and the feel. “Allure?”

“I love bromances,” she gushed as Marryk absorbed himself in his papers again.

A bunny, hardly the first one she’d seen on this outing but no less adorable for its commonness, twitched its head in the direction of their noisy group. Then, barely taking the time to swallow the clover sticking from its mouth, it hopped out of sight.

Kel tucked a flyaway strand of her hair behind her ear. “Do your brothers have a close relationship?”

“Maybe.” She considered. “Maybe they do, and it’s so normal to me that I miss it. I was thinking of the relationships I see on stage.”

“You like theatre.”

“I perform most weeks, though our wedding preparations—” not to mention getting to know Kel, his family, and his kingdom, “—are taking priority right now. Oh, but I can get you an invitation to my next performance, if you want.”

“I want,” Kel said immediately, and she giggled. “Do you write your own pieces?”

The giggle died in her throat. He was thinking of that play she’d forgotten in the testing chamber, wasn’t he?

She’d put him off this topic once already. She could answer this question now. She *could*. It wasn’t like it was a secret, even.

“As a little girl, I performed Allure originals all the time.” Trying to keep her voice light, she prayed the High King would give her courage. “King Wheat—” No, wait, she was soon to marry this prince; she could omit formalities. “Father even funded one of them to be performed on a professional scale.”

Memories flashed across her mind, odd details with the clarity of a sparkling stream: the ribbon on the villain’s costume, the miniscule flaw in a flower along the backdrop, the ache of her cheeks as she faked a smile at the faces blurring across her vision.

“The actors and director showered me in so many compliments that I felt I couldn’t refuse their ‘small suggestions’ to improve the piece. Everyone who attended opening night practically drowned me in praise.” She waited until the tightness in her throat eased before she said brightly, “There was just the little matter of the end result being unrecognizable from my original.”

Kel flinched against her back. “Did you ever share your work again?”

“No.”

“No wonder,” he muttered. “Criticism probably would have hurt less than the pretend admiration.”

If anyone would know, he would. As a prince, he doubtless had plenty of experience with false flattery. But she also knew by now that a strangely large portion of his subjects weren’t shy about letting him know their disapproval.

“Have you kept writing, even if you don’t share?”

Her face flamed. “A little. Yes, the play you found was...” Her voice squeaked and died.

“It’s okay.” His voice was soft. “I understand this is a touchy subject, and thank you for sharing as much as you have. But I do hope you’ll give production another try. Maybe we can

find someone in the Kudoran theatre scene with enough understanding of the industry and enough Kindness to offer you that invaluable balance of honesty and encouragement.”

“Maybe.”

He breathed a quiet chuckle. “I’m not asking you to make any promises.”

She nodded and leaned her head back against his shoulder, trying to see his face. The sun chose then to jump out from behind a cloud, and she closed her eyes rather than squint. “Back to lighter topics. Tell me an embarrassing story about yourself.”

His grin moved his cheek against her temple, his short beard catching on wisps of her hair. “Well, there was once this faery king who laughed at me for no apparent reason.”

She lurched forward on the horse in a burst of laughter. “Stop, stop! I’m probably more embarrassed by that than you are, and I wasn’t even there!”

Kel laughed as his arm tightened at her waist and his torso followed hers, making sure she wouldn’t fall. The abrupt movement spooked their otherwise calm horse, but Kel soothed the animal before it could do more than skitter sideways a few steps.

Settling back in the saddle with Allure, he asked, “Does that mean I forfeit the right to turn the question back on you?”

“Well, there was once a time when I had to tell a handsome prince he accidentally betrothed himself to me.”

“That must have been difficult, especially when he started flirting halfway through your explanation.” He was grinning wickedly, if tone was anything to judge by.

“So difficult! And then he started laughing!”

“The nerve of that guy.” His hand moved to the leather pouch at his waist, probably checking that it was still secured.

He always wore it. Was there a story there?

“Right?” As his hand settled around her waist again, she added, “May I ask about that? That pouch you take everywhere.”

His chest stilled but for the sway of the horse. “If you want to. The story’s something of a mood killer, though.”

“I’d like to hear it, but you don’t have to tell it.” She sent a soft, encouraging smile over her shoulder.

Silence reigned for a few moments, long enough for a pair of birds to flutter past, lost in a mating dance.

Then Kel took a breath. “I saw battle once. Right before we made contact for peace talks.” He stopped, his jaw tightening. “I say ‘saw.’ I participated. I... I couldn’t do otherwise. I was *right there*, and my men... my people...”

He shook his head once, sharply. “I sustained only minor injuries, so after the battle, I helped the field medics—” He cut himself off again. “A soldier... a friend... Folduin found his best friend in critical condition and reacted... poorly. I pulled him off the scene.”

He was censoring a lot of this story, wasn’t he? For her sake or his own?

“Jazil, the soldier in critical condition, didn’t make it. I suggested Folduin keep a small something from his friend, something the family wouldn’t mind giving up.” Kel’s voice had steadied, unnaturally so. Like he’d rehearsed this part. “He took a lock of hair. Then he cut a lock of his own hair and wanted mine, too, to make a braid so it’d be easier to keep, he said. Somehow, I ended up with my own braided set.”

He handed her the pouch. Paranoid about losing something so precious to him, Allure carefully loosened the drawstring and gazed in at the tiny braid with three different-colored segments.

“A reminder of the horrors of war?” she guessed.

“You’d think.” He rested his head against hers.

“But it’s not?” She closed the pouch.

He secured the pouch to his waist, making several false starts before settling on, “Before, I could have sworn Folduin disliked me. Jazil was the friendly one. I don’t know why, out of all the people who could have shared his grief, *I* was the one Folduin wanted for the third strand.”

So he also apparently didn’t attach the braid directly to his friendship with either of the soldiers. She might have guessed, then, that he kept the braid as proof that some of his subjects did respect him, regardless of majority opinion. But that didn’t quite fit with what she knew of her true prince, either.

“Hard times can bring people together,” she murmured. “Is that it?”

“Hard times...” he mused. “They show what a person’s made of, stripped of every pretense. Do they cut through petty inclinations? Or reveal nothing but pettiness? Whatever Folduin thought or thinks of me, he’s gold beneath it all. Would to Alphere the same can be said of me.”

“And me.” Her father’s spelled peas could judge character, but Allure wasn’t sure how deep they went. Faery magic had its limits.

The High King did not. She prayed he would ever keep her – and Kel – within his grace, whatever circumstances may bring.

“Keliar.” Marryk angled his horse closer to them, eyeing his brother with something like regal disdain. His stack of parchment hung limply from his hands.

“Yes, Your Highness?” Kel’s use of the title sounded like a tease.

The crown prince tipped his nose higher in the air and shifted his narrow gaze to Allure. “He hopes he’s ‘gold beneath it all.’ Is that what he said?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” She spoke slowly, cautiously.

“You are to call me Marryk and to force a confession from Keliar of his actions during the peace talks with Prelux, the day following the battle.”

Allure looked to Kel for some cue about how she was supposed to react. He’d spent most of her time around his family whispering translations in her ear, despite the fact that they all shared a language. Her favorite so far was on Marryk’s behalf, reworded by Kel as, ‘For the sake of peace, I’ll give the appearance of agreeing, but I still think you’re both full of something that will give me cavities.’

This time, though, her betrothed said nothing. He was blushing – *blushing* – with his gaze rigidly trained on the horizon.

Belatedly, she remembered that he had claimed Marryk always had his back. She beamed. “Spill.”

Burying his face in her hair, he gave a wry chuckle. “I... played a role.”

“What kind of role?”

“Sort of the kind of role where I... might have told everyone... to sit down and shut up or remove themselves from the premises.”

She laughed, half in delight, half in disbelief. “You didn’t!”

“Not in so many words,” he hedged.

“Then your words were...?”

“I... laid down parameters: no generalizing, no sneering, no speaking over one another. Just orderly, this-was-my-intent, this-is-how-I-took-your-action, and this-is-what-I-require-for-peaceful-coexistence talks.”

“And it worked?” she squealed.

“Well—”

“Yes,” Marryk said.

She giggled. “So, basically, you’re the one who ended the war.”

“Well—”

“Yes, Keliar.”

Allure beamed at her future brother-in-law. “I want all the details.”

“Our scribes seem to have lost a copy of the meetings’ minutes. Perhaps you’ll keep an eye out for them?”

Kel groaned theatrically and grumbled, “That means he’s put them somewhere you’ll be sure to find them.”

“Thank you, Marryk!” She glanced over her shoulder at Kel. “Okay?”

He grinned wryly and leaned in for a lingering kiss. “Okay.”

The twitterpated birds flew by again, and a pair of bunnies hustled themselves underground. She couldn’t feel too bad for slipping from her dignified role and being herself. After all, even nature agreed: Today was a *beautiful* day for courtship.