

Yearning

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Summary: A forbidden love. A desperate, shared yearning.

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Power.
Influence.
Respect.
Responsibility.
Wealth, such as it is.

There's nothing that I lack. No time when I ever go hungry. No moment where I ever need to do anything for myself, if I so choose. No one who would deny me the right to be heard. No one who would dare oppose the laws I set down. I have no lack of protection, each and every time I leave my personal chambers.

But for all of that, I am poor.

Alone.
Isolated.
Frustrated.
Lonely.

None of the things I have matter, if I am destined to be miserable all my days. Not the power I wield, not the status I have, not the constant attendance, not the way people trip over themselves to do things for me. Because, if I'm being honest, I would give it all up if I could. I would become the lowliest of the low if it meant that we could be free to be together.

Marriage.
A family.
Love.

These are the things I want most, if only I had the luxury to pursue them.

Marriage.

To be fair, I guess I already have that. Since birth, I've been married to a man I've never even met. May never meet. A man who, for all I know, may not even still be alive. A man who, even if we find him, may not be deemed worthy of me. And in the wings, ready for the day when the Elders declare my marriage void... another man. A madman ready to pounce on any opportunity to claim me for his own, under the laws that make him next in line for my hand in marriage. A man who, given any half a chance, would be a death sentence to our struggling planet.

A family.

Barring any unforeseen fertility issues, I'll be forced to birth either of these men's children. I won't have a choice. It will be my duty as a wife, to produce heirs to continue the royal line through. I won't have a say in the matter — not when those children will come, not how many there will be. I'll be denied any kind of contraceptive. And, with the exception of a life-threatening emergency, I'll be denied the chance to terminate any of those unwanted pregnancies. I could try to end things on my own through certain, ancient methods, but if I were to be found out, I'd be tried for treason and likely executed.

Trapped.

No matter what, I'm trapped.

It's not that I don't want children. I do. I may not yearn for children in the desperate way some women do, but I would like a family one day. I would love a son with my husband's smile or a daughter with my eyes. It's just... if it was a child conceived with Ching, my love, I would want and embrace that child with my whole being. I would do anything to ensure that I have children with him, if only I could. But the idea of being intimate with and making babies with a stranger — or worse, a lunatic! — kills any desire I have inside for raising a family, because a child should be conceived in love and raised by two parents who are committed to each other, and should never exist just to please some long out-dated societal demands.

Children with Ching. As much as I want that, it'll never be. Our love is forbidden.

We're simply too different. For all that we share — our Kryptonian heritage, our unyielding love — we're of two separate worlds. I had the misfortune of being born to the throne, with high hopes and great responsibilities placed on me since the moment I was conceived. And Ching was cursed with such a low birth status that it's a miracle he's even had an opportunity to ascend as high as he has — as a brilliant military strategist and the head of my personal security detail. Even that almost didn't come to pass. If it wasn't for his unimpeachable track record as a warrior, he never would have been granted a position in the palace security, let alone as my personal bodyguard. And still I had to fight hard to convince the Elders that he was worthy of his post.

Love.

I've been in love with him for a long time. We were barely more than teenagers when I first met him. I remember it like it was just yesterday. He was new to our military, but I noticed him right away as I toured their training camp one morning. He was busy with his drills, but he stood out to me. Ah, he was so handsome. So young and full of fire and determination. So ready to make his mark on our world. So dedicated to our people. So passionate.

I was instantly taken with him.

And, somehow, he noticed me too.

Not Zara, Ruler of New Krypton. But *me*. The *real* me. The woman I am inside.

I found an excuse to exchange some words with him, needing — more than I've ever needed anything in my life — to get to know him. Little did I know that doing so would seal my fate. I fell in love, despite the fact that I *knew* I shouldn't allow myself to feel anything for a man I could never give myself over to. But the damage was done, and it was worse than I ever could have imagined.

Before Ching, I could have been content, if not happy, to accept my fate and the marriage that was arranged whilst I was still safely nestled in my mother's womb. I could have lived with the man called Kal-El and actually made a life with him. I would have had a chance to find some measure of love in the marriage we were both sold into. Even if I never truly loved him on a deep, soul-changing level, I would have at least had an opportunity to care for my husband.

But now, everything has changed.

I *want* to give this mysterious Kal-El a chance. I *want* to find some way to learn to care for him. But I can't ever love him, not even a small fraction of the way that a husband and wife should love one another. Gone is my chance to find happiness with this stranger, if we ever locate him in this hopelessly endless universe.

If we find him.

If we can convince him to come back with us.

If.

And if not... I don't even want to *think* about that possibility. A lifetime of being Nor's wife. A short life, I can imagine. Nor's

temper is notoriously fiery and his patience in short supply. A violent death at his hands wouldn't surprise me in the least. Oh, I'm not afraid of him. Revolted by him, yes. But not afraid. I am stronger than he can possibly know.

I'm sure he'll want to break me — to make me meek and obedient. But that's not who I am. I am the Ruler of New Krypton. We few survivors...our fates...I know they rest in my hands. I am not afraid to do what I must in order to keep our people safe. And they will *never* be safe if Nor gets his hands on the power he seeks. So I will *never* allow myself to stop fighting him, no matter what. I will defy him in every way imaginable — as his wife or not. He is and will remain, my greatest enemy, until one or both of us is dead.

I swear, I will do whatever I can to make sure he dies well before I do. Even if it means that my own life is forfeit in doing so.

New Krypton must come first. My *people* must come first.

That's why I have to put my own happiness aside. It's why I *must* find Kal-El and convince him to come back home to New Krypton with me. It's why I am willing, if not completely eager, to find my birth husband. For once he is with me, Nor's position as next in line for the throne means almost nothing.

So I am ready to put aside my feelings for Ching. I am ready to simply love him from afar, as I always have. I am able to put aside the foolish, childhood dreams I once had, of a life made with the man I love. I can make the ultimate sacrifice. I am ready to squash the heart-rending yearnings of my heart.

All for the benefit of my people.

A people who will never know of the day when my heart died.

I want her.

I *need* her.

I will never have her.

No chance. No prayer. No hope. No dreams.

Zara is untouchable.

Of course, I knew this right from the very start. I knew as soon as I recognized her power and position that I had no right to even look at her, let alone desire her. But the heart is too soft and too stupid a thing. It rarely listens to the brain — to reason, to truths. And so, I fell for her, and fell hard.

At first, I don't think I even truly recognized who she was. Oh, I knew she had to have some kind of status. Commoners don't just tour military camps and observe drills. But even that obvious thought never entered my head when I saw her. I simply saw the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on in my young life. Instantly, I was drawn to her. And when she found a reason to speak with me, I became hopelessly lost. My heart. My soul. My life. It was hers and hers alone.

I trained hard. I fought harder. I swiftly ascended the ranks in our military. And when my mandatory service was done, I offered my services as part of the palace security staff. My hope, at the time, was simply for the occasional glimpse of, if not spoken word to, Lady Zara. Little did I know, Zara desired my company as much as I craved hers. She used her power to grant me a job as her personal bodyguard, a position unheard of for someone with my low birth status.

And yet, despite my lowly origins, I came to be respected amongst the rest of my fellow security officers. Even the Elders came to see me for my character, the man I actually am, instead of the low status my birth saddled me with. I know that, at least a portion of that respect, comes from the way I proved myself during my years of military service. In fact, I would dare say that I've managed to increase my social standing through every bead of sweat and drop of blood I've shed while defending our struggling planet.

But the person who is most responsible for pulling my

House's status out of the gutter is Zara. She is the one who secured me my job. She is the one who first believed in me. If she hadn't put her faith in me, no one else would have. She's believed in me even when I haven't.

But being with Zara every day has had its drawbacks too. After years of being together for the majority of the day, our love for one another has only grown stronger. For some, that would be a blessing. For us, it's been a curse. To spend almost every waking hour with the one we want most — the one we'd die for — but are forbidden to love. To fall deeper in love every single day, knowing that a marriage stands in the way. To know that, some day, Zara will find her birth husband. To know that, if she doesn't, she'll be forced to marry a sadistic madman.

It hurts.

Sometimes the pain is so intense that it takes my breath away. Some nights, part of me wishes that I would die before seeing Zara with any husband who isn't me. That's when the bleak thoughts start. What if this Kal-El isn't worthy of her? What if he's slow-witted, or inept in ruling a planet, or — dare I even think it? — as cruel as Nor? What if he would rule New Krypton with an iron fist? What if he would lead us to our destruction, just as surely as Nor would? What if he's somehow, unbelievably, worse than Nor could ever be?

I'll never be able to accept this stranger as my Lady's husband. I'll always resent him. Oh, sure, over time I might be able to hide the disdain I already carry for him, particularly if he winds up being a good man after all. And I'll always fulfill my duties to protect the royal couple for as long as I draw breath. But I know there will always be a part of me that will carry some hatred of the man Zara will be bonded to.

Yet even knowing all of these things, I wouldn't trade my life knowing Zara for a life of blissful unawareness where she never entered my life. No, despite all the heartache I've experienced — and will experience — in my life, knowing Zara has made my life so much better. She's brought meaning to my existence. She's forced me to be a better man. She gave me a reason to fight against the stigma of my birth status and to better my lot in life. She made me believe in — and deeply experience — love, a thing I would never have known without her. A thing I'll never know with anyone else.

She is truly an incredible woman.

Every day, Zara says and does things that surprise me, in the best of ways. I'm constantly in awe of the way she carries herself — such comfortable grace mixed with unwavering determination. She fears nothing for herself, but she worries constantly for the future of our people. Her regal bearing can silence even the most vocal of her critics. Her mind — so wonderfully complex and sharp. Her tongue can offer the softest words of encouragement and love, or it can lash out and wound those on the receiving end. She is confident in a way I've rarely seen before. I've watched her walk straight into Council meetings and shut down every single Elder with her poise, her bearing, her well-thought out arguments.

And her beauty! Oh, her beauty! There is no one in our small, ragged band of survivors who can even hold a candle to Zara. She is absolutely radiant. I feel so unworthy of her and I often wonder what it is that she sees in me. But even as those thoughts run through my head, I am flooded with thankfulness that she *does* see something worthwhile in me.

When I was younger, I used to think that the worst lot in life was being born with such low status as I was. But as soon as I met Zara, I learned that I was wrong. Yearning after someone I could never be with was the cruelest fate the universe could throw at me. A love returned but which can never be acted upon. A lifetime of pining away whilst the woman I love must remain married to another. A life-long sentence of being on the outside looking in, like a starving child who must watch — but is

forbidden from partaking in — a great, never ending feast.

Such is my lot in life.

But, like Zara, I worry for the future of our planet. So I must push aside my love for her and let her fulfill the destiny she was born to. I must let her find her birth husband, wherever he may be amongst the stars. I must *aid her* in finding this Kal-El, if only to prevent Lord Nor from taking her hand in marriage and from ascending the throne. For if Nor becomes Ruler, New Krypton's death will be sealed. So I have to hope against hope that we find this stranger, and pray that he is, in every way, Nor's polar opposite.

For Zara's sake, I hope Kal-El is a worthy husband. I hope he's kind and gentle. And, as much as it pains me, I hope Zara can learn to love him. I want her to be happy, even if it means I am never happy again.

I've known, all my life, that love and happiness are not luxuries many of us can afford. Especially not now, with our people struggling to survive on the rocky little planetoid we've adopted as our new home. For Zara, I know the very idea of falling in love with a man of her choosing was never an option. And that breaks my heart. Even if she can't choose me, she should be free to, at the very least, reject any man — like Nor — who falls far short of whatever standards she chooses to measure him by. She should not be forced into a life of misery and fear. So I have to hope that she can forget the love we share so that she can have the life she deserves with a man who I will always feel is undeserving of her.

And as for me, I will live the rest of my days yearning for a dream I should never have had to begin with.

THE END