

# Broken Dreams



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*For Mum and Dad, for always being there for me.  
I love you.*

*And for Thessa, for never giving up on me.*



## 1.

The first time he saw her, she was in the garden of one of the big mansions scattered around the village of Downwater.

He had arrived only that morning. His father, who was an advisor to the king himself, had sent him as his representative to discuss some political issues with the mayor of the province of Dahnport. Xav was supposed to be learning the ins and outs of the job, anyway, and his father thought this assignment would be a useful training for him.

According to the traditions in Nalay, every son was supposed to take over his father's job someday; and so practically every father in the entire land taught his son everything about said job from the moment the son was old enough to understand it. Ever since King Aedd had risen, however, he had slowly started getting rid of every single old-fashioned tradition the land of Nalay still held. Some of the older Nalayans were horrified at the changes, but most people thoroughly enjoyed their newly acquired freedom in some areas.

Xav's father had taken him aside to talk about this a few years ago.

"I understand that you are young and you want to make your own decisions, and I respect that," he had assured his son. "But the position of the king's advisor is a prestigious one, respected by many, and it gives you a certain amount of power. I don't want you to discard that just because you don't want to stick to the traditions."

Xav had sulked a little. "So basically, you're telling me that you won't pressure me into becoming an advisor, but you expect me to become one nonetheless?"

His father had laughed. "Of course not," he had said. "I just want to ask you to give it a chance."

Xav had hesitantly agreed, and his father had told him, "I'm going to teach you some things about the job. Send you out as my representative to do some smaller assignments, discussing certain issues with certain people... just to give you a taste of what it's like. Just until you finish university, and after that, you can make a decision for yourself. I want you to do what you *want* to do, son. Not what everyone expects you to do."

And so here he was, in the province of Dahnport. He had arrived that morning and he had taken some time to unpack and have breakfast first. His meeting with the mayor wouldn't be until the next day, so he decided to go out into the province and explore a bit, since it was so different from the place where he had grown up.

The kingdom of Nalay consisted of three provinces: Frydion, Dahnport, and Venidin. Frydion was mostly known for its mountains, which were supposed to be majestic, as well as for its rather traditional inhabitants – most people living there were either elderly or highly religious, and they tended to frown upon newcomers. Xav had never been there before, but he wanted to travel there someday to see those mountains for himself.

Dahnport, where he was now, was situated in the south and had a warm and humid climate. He didn't really *mind* coming here for the assignment his father had given him – he loved to travel and see all the parts of Nalay he could possibly explore; but he didn't think Dahnport was a very interesting place to stay for long. There were neither buzzing cities nor interesting natural phenomena, and from what he'd seen of it so far, it was a little boring.

The third province, Venidin, was the place where Xav himself had grown up. To him, it was the most beautiful place in all of Nalay. There were forests, meadows, and streams; but there were also cities – huge and majestic cities filled with everything a person could ever need: shops, libraries, museums, restaurants, and theatres.

The capital of Nalay was also situated in Venidin. It was named Toringo and it was where the king lived. Xav himself had grown up just outside of Toringo, in a town called Wae. It was far enough away from the king for their family to have their privacy, but close enough for Xav's father to be able to hurry over to King Aedd's palace whenever he was needed.

The rest of his family lived in Venidin as well. His grandmother lived in a small town close to the border with Frydion and his uncle, his father's younger brother, lived not too far away from that town with his wife and children. Xav and his parents travelled there to visit them sometimes. It was less like the place where Xav had grown up, with its many large



cities, and more like the rest of Nalay – lots of nature and farmlands, and mostly smaller villages where everyone knew one another. Still he loved it there almost as much as he did his own home.

In Xav's opinion, the climate in Venidin was exactly how a climate was supposed to be. It wasn't always cold, the way it was in the Frydion mountains, nor was it always warm and wet like it was in Dahnport. In Venidin, the spring was fresh and green, and the summer warm and sunny. In the fall, the leaves coloured and it rained; and in the winter, there were light grey skies and snow. It was his home and although he loved travelling around Nalay, learning about other cultures and places and seeing so many interesting things, he also knew that, in the end, he would always return to Venidin. It wasn't just because he grew up there. The entire province just had something about it that felt right to him. Like he belonged there.

*Or perhaps, he contemplated as he walked along a muddy road, past a few meadows with cows grazing in them, I'm romanticising Venidin right now because I don't want to admit to myself that I am feeling a tiny bit homesick.*

He had made some small talk with the people he saw, asking them about their lives and the surroundings. He'd found out that most of the people living here were farmers and that there weren't really any big cities nearby. The most important city of Dahnport was named Dahnport City – clearly the people here had very little imagination – and even that city was nothing compared to Toringo, as a farmer had confided in him.

Xav had been surprised. "You've been to Toringo?"

The man had winked at him. "I went to school there," he said. "My parents had saved enough money for me to study there. Best years of my life." He sighed. "But then my old man got sick and died, and I had to come back here to take over the farm. Be glad that the new king is giving you a choice, son," he had said to Xav. "It's no fun having your entire life planned out for you before you can even talk."

Xav mulled that over as he left the village and walked in the opposite direction. He was glad that not only the king, but also his father, had given him the choice to plan out his own life. He shuddered at the mere thought of being forced into being something he didn't even want to be – whether

that be an advisor, a farmer, or even a king. It just wasn't *right* to decide for your children what they had to do with their lives.

He stepped on a slippery rock and almost ended up face-down in the mud on the side of the road. Catching his balance, he grumbled a curse under his breath. "Damn that stupid rain." He wondered why anyone would want to live here. Or was he just spoiled, having grown up near a big city with everything his heart desired?

He was on his way back to the guest house where he was staying when a sound reached his ears, and he stopped for a moment to listen. It was a person humming a song – a woman, by the sound of it – and he decided to find out where it was coming from. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do except for sitting alone in his room at the guest house, which was an option he did not find very alluring.

Before long, he found himself in a street that seemed to be part of the fancier area of Dahnport, since there were many large manors here and there wasn't a farm in sight. Huh. Perhaps the people of Dahnport weren't as backward as he had thought.

He identified the source of the sound at last. It was a woman – or a girl, really. She looked like she was about his age, perhaps a little younger. She was in the back garden of one of the mansions, busying herself with hanging out the wash. There was a large basket filled with laundry standing beside her, and she was humming a song as she slowly emptied it, attaching the items of clothing to the clotheslines that criss-crossed through the garden.

"You know," he said casually, leaning on the low fence that surrounded the gardens, "somehow, with this climate, I doubt your laundry will be any dryer by tonight."

She let out a soft, tinkling laugh as she lifted the now-empty basket, balancing it on her hip as she looked at him with an amused expression on her face. She took in his dark brown hair, sun-tanned skin, and greenish-blue eyes. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Smiling, he shook his head, and she laughed again. "Obviously. Don't worry, stranger. Later this afternoon, the sun will break through, and everything will be dry before you know it."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Is the climate here so predictable?"

She sighed and blew a curl of hair away from her face. Her hair had been the first thing he'd noticed about her – it was a bright, flaming red, like a beacon in this endless area of grey and brown. Freckles adorned her face, and she had tied her curls back into a loose bun. A few tendrils had freed themselves from it and were now framing her face.

“Everything here is predictable,” she said, and he chuckled.

“That was my first impression,” he confessed cheerfully, “but I had decided to suspend my judgement until I'd get to know the surroundings and the people better.”

“No need for that,” the girl said drily. “Your first impression was right.” She shifted the basket on her hip and extended her right hand. “Cenna.”

“Xav,” he said, shaking her hand.

She looked at him questioningly. “Just Xav?” she asked teasingly. “Is it short for something?”

He grimaced. “Yes... but I'm not going to tell you for what,” he declared. “It's embarrassing. Plus, it's also my father's name; he has always been known by his – our – full name, and I have always been known as Xav, so you can just call me Xav. Okay?”

“Xavier? Xavion? Xaverio?” she guessed.

He laughed and shook his head. “Like I said, I'm not going to tell you.”

She smiled, revealing a row of pearly white teeth. “Well, it's nice to meet you, Xav. It's not like many strangers ever come to our province, and I think it's lovely to meet someone from beyond the borders.” She looked at him curiously. “Where are you from?”

“Venidin,” he replied.

Her eyes lit up with excitement. “Really?” she asked breathlessly. “Is it really as amazing there as everyone says it is?”

He smiled at her enthusiasm, and he nodded. “I grew up just outside of Toringo,” he explained, “in a town called Wae.”

He could hear her soft intake of breath. “Toringo!”

“It's wonderful living there,” he acknowledged. “But it's not so bad to see more of the world, either.”

She laughed again, but this time, it sounded a little bitter. “No, I guess it's not.”

She didn't elaborate, so he decided to change the subject. "Do you live in this house?" he asked, indicating the giant manor.

She nodded. "My father is a renowned businessman, and one of the richest people in town," she said. "My mother used to be a librarian, but she quit her job when she married my father. They bought this house shortly after I was born."

He looked at the house, which seemed far too big for three persons. "Any siblings?"

"Two brothers and a sister," she replied, which made sense to him. "My older brother lives in Dahnport City; he goes to an academy there. My other brother and my sister are younger than I am. They're twins."

"How old are you?" he asked, and she shot him a look.

"Did no-one ever teach you that it's impolite to ask a lady about her age?" she asked, but there was a teasing light in her eyes and so he just chuckled.

"Sorry."

She rolled her eyes. "Sixteen."

"Will you be going to an academy in the city as well, then? In a few years?" he asked curiously, but she shook her head.

"I wish I would," she sighed. "But Father thinks it's not fitting for a woman to learn about anything that is not about running a household or raising children. When I turn eighteen, he's going to marry me off to a rich nobleman."

It struck Xav that no matter how modern King Aedd was and no matter how much he tried to change the traditions, some parts of Nalay were still very old-fashioned. He couldn't believe there were actually still *arranged marriages* in this part of the land, and it didn't do much to heighten his already pretty low opinion of this province. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "It's okay," she assured him. "I've known that my entire life. I'm used to the idea."

They were quiet for a while. Then she started asking him questions about Venidin and what it was like, where he had grown up, and which other places he had seen. He answered her questions the best he could,

telling her about his childhood, his parents, and the deal he had made with his father.

“That’s why I’m here,” he finished. “I’m my father’s representative. I’m supposed to meet the mayor of Dahnport City tomorrow.”

She smiled a bit dreamily. “It must be wonderful to travel around the land like that,” she mused, and he nodded.

“It is,” he said honestly.

“Cenna!” a voice shouted from inside the house. “Are you finished with that laundry?”

“I’m coming!” she called back, and Xav looked at her, bewildered.

“If you’re the daughter of the rich businessman living here, then why are you doing laundry in the first place?” he asked. “Don’t you have servants?”

She let out another tinkling laugh. “Yes, we do,” she said. “But my father... well, he doesn’t want to spoil us too much, so we have to do all kinds of chores around the house. He thinks it teaches us responsibility. Especially me,” she added with a soft snort, “since I’m off to be someone’s wife in a few years and he wants me to be a good housewife, so once I turned fifteen, I started taking care of basically all the household chores.”

That sounded horrible to him, and he told her so, but she just smiled faintly and shook her head.

“It’s what I’m used to.”

“Cenna!” the voice yelled again, and she flashed Xav an apologetic look.

“I have to go,” she said, clearly regretting that fact. “But it was nice to meet you, Xav.”

He grinned and took her hand, kissing it with a dramatic gesture. “My pleasure, Miss Cenna.”

She chuckled, then left, and he smiled as he watched her disappear into the house.

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Normally, Xav loved discussing politics with people. He was studying the subject at university, after all, in preparation of perhaps becoming the

king's advisor one day; and he liked getting involved in heated discussions about the topic with anyone who was willing to participate.

The mayor of Dahnport, though, as he had discovered within moments after first shaking the man's hand, must be the dreariest and most boring man he had ever met. It was like discussing politics with a dead body.

The man was unwilling to listen to any of Xav's arguments or tips, claiming that he was the mayor and thus he knew best how to rule his province. He just kept on proclaiming that over and over again, until Xav felt like banging his head against a wall. The mayor didn't seem to be passionate about anything. Every word coming out of his mouth sounded as if merely having this conversation was tiring for him, and every syllable he uttered was slow and monotone. It had been the longest conversation Xav had ever had, and in the end, he hadn't achieved much.

He sighed and leant his forehead against the cool glass of the carriage window, watching the meadows and farmlands passing by. What if he wasn't good enough? He hadn't even been able to convince the mayor of Dahnport to institute some very minor changes – and if he truly were to become an advisor to the king, he would have far more important matters to deal with. He would be responsible for solving problems like hunger and drought; for negotiations in war. If he couldn't even persuade a mayor to change a few tiny things in his policies, then how in the world could he ever prevent something as big as a war?

He sighed again. His father would have been able to convince the mayor, he was sure of that.

It was almost dinnertime, and he couldn't help but smile when he saw the sun breaking through, illuminating the golden corn fields and the bright green meadows. Apparently Cenna had been right about the predictability of the weather. The sun showed him an entirely different side of Dahnport, one he hadn't expected to see. In this light, the province was almost... beautiful. He decided it wasn't so bad here as he had first thought.

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He didn't see Cenna again before he returned to Venidin, but as he was travelling back home, he found himself hoping that she would be able to get out of that prison of a house of hers and find her way into the world someday. He knew that there was still a large difference between boys and girls in many parts of the country, but to forbid your daughter from leaving the province or even from studying, only to marry her off at eighteen? That was just plain brutal.

He talked it over with his parents when he got home, and they just smiled sympathetically at him.

"Son," Xalvador said. "I don't think you fully realise how much has changed, exactly, since Aedd became king."

"In my time," Liana added, "it was nothing less than normal for a girl to be married at eighteen. Sometimes even younger. Xav, girls often weren't even allowed to attend school at all. They would become housewives, anyway, and what good was a girl with brains to a man? As long as she took care of the household and the children, the men were happy."

Xalvador frowned. "You make us sound like savages," he complained, and Liana chuckled.

"You kind of were back then, dear."

Suddenly, a thought struck Xav, and he gaped at his parents. "Wait a moment. Were *you* in an arranged marriage?"

Liana and Xalvador exchanged a glance, but then they nodded.

"Yes," Liana admitted. "We were."

Xav was horrified. He had never known that.

"But it was not like we didn't have any choice in the matter," Xalvador hurried to explain. "Your mother and I have known one another ever since we were children, and we used to be friends." He smiled softly. "I remember the day my father told me that I was supposed to marry your mother. I didn't mind so much, and we did fall in love once we were married. It's not like we were forced into it, Xav," he explained. "Our parents knew we liked one another, and they figured we wouldn't mind marrying. It wasn't proper for young adolescents to stay alone for too long. We have loved one another for a long time already. The fact that our marriage was an arranged one doesn't change anything about that."

Xav believed his father, but he was still shocked. He realised that, even though everyone always told him how lucky he was that he could do whatever he wanted with his own life, he had never fully realised what life had been like *before* he had been born. People really hadn't had any choice at all.

"I want to be an advisor," he said, and his father looked at him, slightly startled by the sudden change of subject.

"What?"

"I want to be an advisor to the king," Xav repeated firmly. "And not just because I like the assignments you give me, Dad. I want... I want to help King Aedd to change things in Nalay. I want all these traditions gone; I want every single person to be able to make their own choices regarding their own lives, and I want to contribute to that by becoming one of the king's advisors. Only then will I have the power to actually help do something about it."

Liana squeezed his hand, clearly emotional. Xalvador just smiled at his son, but Xav could see the pride in his parents' eyes and knew he was making the right decision.



## 2.

“Tahn?” Cenna whispered. “Tahn, are you there?”

He appeared from behind a tree, his face lighting up when he saw her, and she didn’t hesitate to run towards him and throw herself into his arms. “I missed you,” she said, her voice muffled by his chest, and he stroked her auburn curls.

“I missed you, too.”

She looked up at him and kissed him lovingly. “Tahn... you’re not going to believe this.”

Instantly, he looked worried. “Does it have anything to do with your father?” he asked anxiously. “He doesn’t... know about us, does he?”

Cenna quickly shook her head. “No! Thank goodness he doesn’t – you know what would happen then,” she reminded him, and his grip on her tightened.

“I could make an educated guess, yes.”

Cenna laughed mirthlessly. “He would send me to a convent,” she said. “Or marry me off instantly. Either way, he would make sure that we would never see one another again.” She sighed and leant her head against his shoulder. “I wish he would just let me marry you...”

“Me, too.” Tahn planted a kiss on her hair. “But if he didn’t find us out,” he said with an inquiring look at her, “then what did you want to tell me?”

Instantly, her eyes started shining. “He’s allowing me to go to school in Dahnport City!”

Tahn pulled back, baffled, to look into her eyes. “What?”

Cenna nodded happily. “You know I’ve been pleading with him for years,” she said. “He always claimed that women don’t need brains, but my mother persuaded him. She told him that I would be more valuable as a wife if I were educated – that there are men out there who like intelligent women, things like that... I know,” she said when she saw his face. “They make it sound like I’m a product; but Tahn, in my father’s eyes, women *are* nothing more than that. Products he needs to keep in good condition so that he can sell them when the time is right.” She shrugged. “Frankly, I couldn’t care less,” she said, and she meant it. “Tahn, he gave in. He listened to my mother. He’s letting me go!”

Suddenly, he sucked in his breath. "Wait a moment. Does that mean..."  
"Yes!" She threw her arms around him and kissed him again. "I'm going to Dahnport City, Tahn. I'm going to be in the same city as you, and my father won't be there!"

He kissed her back, tangling his hand in her hair and pulling her flush against him. "I love you," he sighed, and she beamed at him and kissed him again.

"I love you, too. So much. Tahn, we can finally be together!"

"Where will you live?" he asked her, and she deflated a little.

"With my brother," she sighed. "Father wouldn't let me go otherwise. But you know Jermain, Tahn – he has had his fair experience with women, and he has never been particularly close to Father. I don't think he would betray us."

"Still," Tahn said worriedly, "I don't think we should tell him."

Cenna shook her head. "I won't tell him." She tilted her head a little to the side. "He probably won't even notice it if I'll be gone most of the day, and even if he does, I doubt he'll care. Jermain is someone who firmly believes in people minding their own business. He will only intervene when he thinks I might be in danger."

"Which you won't be," Tahn promised, taking her in his arms again. "Not as long as you're with me."

She beamed at him.

She knew her father would kill her if he ever found out about Tahn. When they had first gotten together, she had made the mistake of telling her father she had met someone, a boy from a village not too far away. His parents were rich, and she told her father that she wanted to marry this boy.

"Father, I love him," she had pleaded. "His family is a good one; they are of high status, just like us. Can't you let me marry *him*? Please?"

Her father had shaken his head firmly. "Cenna, you are already promised to another man," he had declared. "Wald Mallor is one of the most influential lords in all of Frydion and he has an immense amount of power. Somehow I don't think that this boy of yours can compete with that."

“But I love him!” she had protested. “Isn’t that enough? Isn’t that important to you, too? That I’m happy?”

He had eyed her coolly. “What I want for you is that you are taken care of financially,” he had said. “I want you to be a good housewife. I want you to give me grandchildren. I want you to have a roof over your head and food in the kitchen, and a husband for you to please. What I *don’t* want for you is an illusion.”

“Father, love is not an illusion! Love is –”

“That’s it, Cenna. This conversation is over.” He had turned away and she, in all her stubborn hot-headedness, had stomped her foot.

“I won’t let you keep me away from him!” she had shouted. “I love him and I’m going to be with him, whether you like it or not!”

He had abruptly turned around to face her, and she would never forget the look on his face. Never, ever in her life had she seen her father so angry.

“You,” he had hissed, “are going to stay away from that boy. If I ever catch the two of you together, I will not hesitate to send you to a convent until you are old enough to marry Lord Mallor. Is that clear?”

She had fled upstairs to her bedroom, crying, and they had never spoken another word about Tahn ever again.

Of course, she hadn’t stopped seeing him. At first, they’d been seeing each other at school; a year ago, he had headed off to Dahnport City to study at the academy there, and he only returned whenever he had a few days off. Somehow, though, they always found a way to meet up. Sometimes she sneaked out of the house late at night without anyone noticing; at other times, she made up excuses – she was going for a walk, she needed to go to the market, she was going to have tea with a girl from school.

There had been close calls. One time, she had told her family that she was going to the market, only to go and see Tahn instead. She had completely forgotten that she was supposed to bring home groceries and when she had turned up again, looking a little dishevelled and not carrying any groceries, her family had been suspicious. She had told them that she had been robbed on her way back, which, thankfully, they had all believed; and her father had kept her inside for over a week, claiming that

he didn't want anything to happen to her, because what would Lord Mallor say about that?

Eventually, her mother had placated him – she did that a lot, which Cenna was grateful for – and he had grudgingly agreed to let her outside again. That night she had spent far longer in the woods with Tahn than she usually did, but no-one had even noticed that she had been gone.

She blushed slightly when she thought of that night. Shortly after her father had forbidden their relationship, they had discovered a small cabin in the woods, which was where they met up most of the time. It was deserted, but it had a bed, a kitchen, a fireplace, and some candles to be found, and so it was perfect for them to be together without anyone knowing about it.

Tahn offered her his arm. “Shall we go and celebrate?” he offered, and she smiled and accepted his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“I'd love to.”

Tahn had brought some food with him, which Cenna prepared while Tahn started a fire in the fireplace. They snuggled together on the rug in front of it as they ate and Cenna couldn't help but feel happy and calm all over. She knew she couldn't marry Tahn. She knew she couldn't spend the rest of her life with him, but if she went to Dahnport City, at least she had more time. Three years to study. Three years of getting to see Tahn every day without her father interfering, and after that...

“Tahn?”

He looked down at her, noticing the odd tone of her voice. “What's the matter, love?”

She bit her lip. “What's going to happen to us?”

He was silent for a while, up to the point where she thought he wouldn't answer the question at all; but then he said quietly, “What would you like to happen to us, Cen?”

“I don't know,” she whispered. “I mean... I know what I would *like* to happen, but... but that can never happen.”

He softly squeezed her waist. “Forget about what can and can't happen for a moment,” he instructed her. “If anything was possible, anything at all... what would you want?”

“I want...” She thought about that question for a moment. She had never really thought about it before, because she knew that it would never happen, anyway – her father would never allow it. Somehow, however, she knew perfectly well what it was that she wanted.

“I want to go to an academy,” she said softly. “I want to get an education. After that, I want to travel... see everything for myself. The snow on the mountains in Frydion, the beauty of Toringo... I want to do everything my father would never let me do – learn more about the world, study, get a job, travel all around the land...”

She felt Tahn smile against her hair. “That’s a nice dream.”

She looked up at him. “And... and I want you there,” she said, just as softly, but the determination sparking in her eyes told him that she meant it. “Tahn... I want you there every step of the way. I want you with me when I go to class and when I go back home at night, after my classes. I want you to be there as I study and graduate. I want you to come with me, I want us to move out into the world together... and eventually, I want us to settle down someplace nice. I want a family with you. I want to grow old with you.”

He softly planted kisses on her hair, her face, anywhere he could reach; until she was pinned down beneath him and he could look down into her sparkling grey eyes. “Do you want to know what my dream is?” he asked her, and she nodded, holding her breath.

He leant down and kissed her forehead, then her eyelids, her cheeks, and her nose. “I don’t care what I’ll be doing,” he murmured between kisses. He pulled back again to look at her. “As long as you’ll be there doing it with me.”

She smiled and he kissed her lips.

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“Cenna, right?”

She looked up from where she was watering the flowers in the front garden and smiled when she recognised the boy – or young man, really – whom she had seen around here a few years prior.

“Xav, who wouldn’t tell me his full name,” she teased lightly. “I see you found your way back here. Did you so enjoy the predictability Dahnport had to offer in comparison to Venidin?”

He laughed. “No, my father sent me on yet another mission,” he said, saluting, making her giggle.

“Not the mayor again, I hope?” she said, and he grimaced.

“Not this time, thank goodness. That man is *boring!*” he complained.

“Tell me about it,” Cenna agreed, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. “I’ve met him a few times, and I nearly fell asleep.” She eyed him curiously. “So, has much changed since we last met?” she asked. “Still living in Venidin, still going to university, still learning your father’s job?”

He nodded. “Still am. I’ll be graduating in a year,” he told her proudly. “What about you?”

“Well” – she put the heavy watering can down and brushed another stubborn curl away from her face – “believe it or not, I will be continuing my education as well this autumn.”

His face brightened. “Really? That’s amazing! I’m happy for you,” he said sincerely, and she smiled at him.

“Thank you. I finally managed to persuade my father – with a little help from Mother,” she added. “I’ll still be here in Dahnport, but at least I’ll be away from home and learning things.”

“So...” He seemed a bit uncomfortable asking the question, but pressed on nonetheless. “Does that mean the whole marriage thing is... off?”

She actually laughed out loud, though it wasn’t a happy laugh. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I wish that were true. No, it’s just postponed. After I graduate, I will be marrying Lord Wald Mallor of Frydion... but then at least he’ll have an educated wife,” she joked.

Xav didn’t laugh, however. He merely shook his head. “Cenna...”

“It’s fine,” she said, but suddenly, her eyes widened as she caught sight of someone behind Xav. Confused, Xav turned around, only to find a man his age standing there.

“Hi,” he said politely, extending his hand. “I’m Xav. Xav Gauchi.”

The boy shook his hand. “Tahn Genero,” he said, but before he could say anything else, Cenna had moved through the garden gate and pulled the newcomer with her.

“What in Nalay’s name are you doing here?” she whispered harshly. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

“It’s not what you think!” Tahn said quickly. “It’s purely coincidental, I swear. Apparently my mother was supposed to make your mother a quilt, and Mother asked me to deliver it here. That’s all.” As proof, he held up a package.

Cenna let out a breath. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I’m just a little on edge when it comes to... us.”

Xav looked from Cenna to Tahn questioningly. “Are you her boyfriend?” he asked, and Tahn cringed.

Cenna cried, “No!” then cast a guilty look over her shoulder, towards the house, and Xav nodded understandingly.

“Your father?”

The redhead fidgeted, which told him enough, and he reassured her. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to say anything,” he said. “Why would I? I don’t even know your father. And besides,” he snorted, “given the fact that your father still believes in arranged marriages, I’m not too keen on helping him in any way.”

Cenna smiled gratefully at him. “Thank you.”

“I take it you’re supportive of King Aedd and the changes he’s been making?” asked Tahn, and Xav, always loving a good conversation about politics, immediately started discussing the king’s new rules with the other man.

“He seems nice,” Tahn commented after Xav bade them good-bye and left. “How do you know him?”

“He goes on business trips for his father,” Cenna replied, continuing to water the plants. “He passed by once, a while ago – about two years, I think. He wanted to know about the province, and when he told me he’s from near Toringo, we fell into conversation. He knows so much about everything; he’s been everywhere.”

“Someday, you will experience all those things as well,” Tahn told her softly, and she let out a mirthless laugh.

“Thank you for trying to cheer me up, Tahn, but I don’t think I will.” Her eyes shifted towards the house. “You should go.”

He almost reached for her hand, but caught himself just in time. “Will I see you tonight? I have to return to the city tomorrow.”

She hesitated, then nodded and flashed him a quick smile. “Of course. I’ll be there.”



### 3.

Over the next few years, Xav tried his hardest to become the best politician he could be. He studied hard; and even though he found some subjects rather difficult, he managed to pass his exams every time. He went with his father on business trips, but also kept on carrying out assignments for Xalvador on his own, slowly learning everything there was to know about the job.

But then he also started having doubts again. He liked the politics and he liked the travelling, and he had meant what he had told his parents that day – he wanted to make a change in Nalay. The people he had met during his assignments, including Cenna, had convinced him of that. He had met the girl a second time, when he had once again been in Dahnport for an assignment, and he had discovered that she had a boyfriend. That had only heightened his sympathy for her, given the fact that she was supposed to be marrying someone else – someone she didn't want to marry in the slightest.

So yes, he wanted to help; but there was also a sense of discomfort about the thought of becoming an advisor, an itching he couldn't ignore. He didn't want to do all this right away. He could still make a change when he was older. Right now, however, he had almost finished his studies, and he wanted to do so many more things than just getting a job and settling down.

His parents were incredibly proud of him when he graduated, but soon he started to grow restless, and he knew he needed to talk to them. And so one day, as his mother was preparing lunch in the kitchen, he sat down and looked at his father.

“Dad? I need to talk to you.”

Xalvador turned around, slightly unnerved by the solemn tone of his son's voice. “What about, Xav?”

Xav took a deep breath. “My future.”

His father eyed him a bit warily. He sat down at the dinner table and looked at his son. “What about it?”

“I know you want me to be an advisor...”

"I thought you said you wanted that, too," his father interrupted. "Xav, you know that I would never force you into anything. If you don't want to become an advisor, you don't have to."

"I know." Xav chewed the inside of his cheek. "And I did say that. I liked the assignments you had me carry out, and the job seems interesting enough."

"But?" his father prodded when Xav didn't continue right away.

Xav fidgeted a little, unsure of how to say this. Then he just blurted it out. "But I don't want to be an advisor just yet."

Xalvador frowned. "What do you mean?"

Xav sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm not saying I don't want to be an advisor *ever*," he tried to explain. "But you promised me that I could go my own way, do what I wanted to do, and I'm not ready to settle down just yet. There are things I want to do first, places I want to see. I want to visit the mountains in Frydion, see more of Venidin... believe it or not, but I even want to go back to Dahnport. I want to get to know the people, Dad. Being an advisor to the king is great, but I don't want to advise the king about things I don't even know all that much about myself."

His father smiled slightly. "That sounds... sensible. I didn't think I would ever use that word to describe you," he said teasingly, "but really, I think that's a wise decision. You're smart, son. You're much more mature now. And I meant what I said back then. I trust your judgement." His face grew serious again. "But Xav, you need to start thinking about other things than your career as well."

Xav looked at his father inquiringly, and Xalvador clarified, "A family, son."

Xav choked on a sip of coffee. "A *what?!*" he choked out between coughs, and Xalvador rolled his eyes.

"Don't be overdramatic," he reprimanded his son sternly. "You knew this subject would arise someday."

"I just didn't expect it to be today," Xav croaked, and his father smirked.

"Obviously."

Xav sighed and rested his head in his hands. “Dad, I’m not saying I don’t want a wife or children,” he began.

“Your mother would kill you if you said that,” Xalvador warned him. He glared at his son. “And so would I. You’re our only child, and you know your mother wants nothing more than to have grandchildren, Xav.”

Xav grumbled. “Dad,” he said imploringly. “I’ve been carrying out these assignments for you for all these years. I’ve graduated from the academy with a major in the subject of politics. I saw so many things, but I also realised that there are still so many more things that I *didn’t* see. You can’t possibly ask me to just stay here and play the obedient husband, marrying a girl and having tons of babies and not ever going out into the world ever again!”

“You can be so dramatic, Xav,” his mother chided him gently as she put his lunch on the table in front of him. She left again to fetch her husband’s plate and her own, then sat down across from her son. “All we’re saying is that you should at least *consider* the possibility of a wife and children in the near future.”

Xav raised an eyebrow. “How near are we talking here, exactly?”

“You’re impossible to have a serious conversation with,” his father sighed. He made a vague hand gesture. “Fine. Go. Travel, discover things. Stay on the road for the rest of your life. Don’t even *consider* your mother’s poor heart.”

Liana laughed heartily, putting an arm around his shoulders. “Oh, I can see where our son got his sense of drama from.”

They all laughed at that, and Xalvador shook his head with a smile and took a bite of his food. Xav looked at him solemnly.

“Dad, I promise that I will settle down someday,” he said. “But I’m only twenty-one years old. I still have the rest of my life to do all those things. But I have the chance to see the world now, the chance to do the things I’ve always wanted to do, and I don’t want to let that opportunity pass and have to regret it for the rest of my life.”

Liana looked at her husband. “You know?” she said in wonder. “I think he actually *has* grown up over the past years.”

Xalvador laughed. Xav just glared at his mother. “Gee, thanks, Mum,” he said drily, which only made his parents laugh harder.

“Oh, honey,” his mother said, rising to her feet and moving around the table to hug her son. “Of course I want you to do all those things for yourself. I want you to be happy. But I just can’t imagine you being gone for such a long time!”

She was sniffing a little, and he smiled and patted her back. “I’ll miss you, too, Mum. I’ll stop by as many times as I can,” he promised. “And we’ll write. But I need to do this for myself.”

Liana smiled through her tears. “Of course, honey. Of course. I understand.” She bit her lip. “When will you leave?”

“I was thinking as soon as possible,” her son answered truthfully, and Liana was shocked.

“Really?”

“What’s the point in procrastinating?” Xav pointed out, and his mother sighed.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “Okay. Though I hate to see you go.”

“Do you need help with any preparations, son?” his father asked, and Xav turned around.

“Yes, actually, there are some things I could use your help with,” he said gratefully. “Planning where I’ll be going exactly, buying things I’ll need for the trip... packing,” he added, and his mother perked up.

“I can help you pack.”

He knew she was eager to help him with anything now that he was still here to be helped, and so he smiled at her. “Thanks, Mum.”

Liana returned his smile, and Xalvador patted his son’s shoulder. “I’m proud of you, Xav,” he said, and Xav fell silent for a moment.

He knew that his father never realised the influence he had on his son, but to Xav, Xalvador Gauchi wasn’t just his father; he was his role model. His hero. He had always looked up to Xalvador because of the person he was, because he was always generous and willing to help people, and because Xav admired the way his father had this important and prestigious job that asked a lot of him, yet still managed to take care of his family without ever making them feel neglected. Xalvador’s approval meant the world to Xav, and to hear his father tell him that he was proud of him meant more to him than he could possibly say.

So he just hugged his father tightly for a moment. “Thanks, Dad,” he said – two simple words, but his sincerity was clear, and Xalvador smiled at him.

As they settled back down around the table, Xav couldn’t help but feel excited, almost giddy. Finally, it was going to happen. The assignments for his father had been a great way to prepare him for this; but in the end, it had only taken him to distinct places, not everywhere he wanted to go. Now, however, his wish would come true. He was going to travel around Nalay, visit all the places he had ever wanted to visit. He wasn’t going to leave a stone unturned, not a mystery uncovered. Soon, the land of Nalay would have no more secrets for him.

He could hardly wait.

4.

“Tell me it isn’t true.”

Cenna stiffened. She cautiously looked at her father, who had just come storming into the room she shared with her brother. Jermain himself was standing behind the older man, looking confused and a little shaken.

“Cenna!” her father roared. She could hear the windows vibrating in their sills, and she couldn’t help but wince.

Could she deny it? She knew he could always tell when she was lying. “Father...”

“Cenna, I am not asking you again.” Aldan Torell’s gaze was piercing. It made her want to run away and hide from him forever – preferably in Tahn’s arms. “The rumours I’ve heard... I’ve heard it said that you have been seen in the city with a boy. I’ve heard it said that you have been *kissing* that boy. Cenna Torell, you know better than to kiss a boy who is not your betrothed! Tell me it’s not true!”

She cringed, but she couldn’t lie to her father. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

There was a deafening silence. Then Aldan let out a slow and audible breath.

“Cenna,” he said in a dangerously low voice. “Have you got any idea what you’ve done? Do you know what shame could be brought upon our family if anyone were to hear of this? Do you know what this could do to the agreement we have with Lord Mallor?” he hissed. “What if he decided he can’t be sure that you’re still pure, and he doesn’t want you anymore?”

Suddenly defiant, she raised her chin and met her father’s gaze. Who was he to talk about her relationship with Tahn this way? It was none of his business, and she couldn’t care less if Mallor decided that he didn’t want her anymore. Nayal knew she never wanted *him*!

“Who says I am still pure?” she asked her father coldly.

Aldan gaped at her.

Then he struck her across the face, making her stumble and fall to the floor.

Cenna gasped. Neither he nor her mother had ever hit her or her siblings before; but right now, her father was angrier, and more terrifying, than she had ever seen him.

"You're not serious," he said, looking pale. He was shaking with anger. "Cenna, tell me you're not serious!"

"Does it matter?" she spat. Then she looked up at him pleadingly, begging him to understand. "Father, I don't *want* to marry Lord Mallor – I want to marry Tahn!"

Her father blanched visibly and she clasped both hands over her mouth, horrified with herself.

"Are you saying...?" Her father licked his lips, trying to stay as calm as he could possibly be, but it was clear that he was on the verge of exploding. "Are you saying that you're still seeing that boy you said you were in love with all those years ago?"

She didn't respond, and his face went so red that it was almost purple. "You never stopped seeing him, did you?"

She bit her lip until she could taste blood. She couldn't believe she had just given Tahn away to her father. How could she have been so stupid as to let that slip?

At least she hadn't mentioned his last name. That was something. She had no doubt that her father would go after Tahn if he knew who he was, exactly; to threaten him, perhaps, or worse. She could never let that happen.

She remained silent, but that only seemed to enrage her father more. He raised his hand again and she cringed in anticipation.

Suddenly, someone caught her father's arm from behind. "Father, that's enough."

"Stay out of this, Jermain," the man grunted, trying to pull himself free, but his eldest son was stronger.

"Father," he said firmly. "She's my sister. I won't let you hit her again."

"Jermain –"

"Come on, Cenna." Jermain moved past their father and helped his younger sister to her feet, casting a look in Aldan's direction. "Let's go put something cold on your cheek." She could feel her skin burning where her father had struck her.

“Cenna,” Aldan Torell growled. “I will leave you here with your brother now, but I will return in the morning to collect you. I will arrange things with the headmaster. I’m taking you home.”

Cenna’s eyes widened. “You’re pulling me out of school?” she asked, her voice shaking, and her father glared at her.

“It was a mistake to let you go in the first place,” he snarled. “I am taking you home, and I am going to keep you there while I arrange everything with Lord Mallor. You will not be allowed to leave the house under any circumstances, and as soon as we have finished planning the wedding and taking care of everything, you will marry him.”

“But Father –”

“I will see you tomorrow.” With that, Aldan left.

To Cenna, the sound of the door closing behind him sounded far louder than it should have. It sounded final.

Suddenly unable to hold herself up any longer, she slumped against her brother, crying. She couldn’t believe this had happened, but it had. It was happening right now. Ever since she had gone off to Dahnport City, almost two years ago, she had allowed herself to live in an illusion. She and Tahn had been living in their own little bubble of bliss, letting themselves believe that things could stay this way and that it could last forever... that they had a chance together.

She should never have let it get this far, and now she was going to lose him forever.

\*

“Cenna?” Tahn seemed completely bewildered as he opened the door to his room and found her standing there. Tears were running down her face, and he could clearly see the fear and panic in her eyes. The moment she saw him, she broke down; and he caught her in his arms, holding her close. “Cen, what happened?”

She just shook her head, unable to produce any coherent sound. Tahn gently led her into his room, closing the door behind him and setting her down on his bed, before kneeling down in front of her, taking her hands.

“Cenna, talk to me,” he begged her.



She shook her head again, sobbing uncontrollably.

He sat down on the bed next to her and wrapped her in his arms, whispering soothing words in her ear. "Shh, Cen, it's okay, it's okay... I've got you, you're safe with me. You're okay, love. You're okay."

That only made her cry harder, but eventually, she managed to calm down enough to choke out, "It's my father, Tahn."

He tensed.

"He knows," Cenna whispered brokenly, hiding away in Tahn's arms. "He knows about us."

"How?" asked Tahn, his voice sounding strangely strangled. This wasn't good. He knew that much.

"I don't know." Cenna buried her face in his shirt, soaking it with her tears. "I don't know, but he does. He... he says people have been talking about us. They saw us together in the city, someone apparently even saw us kissing... why haven't we been more careful?" she whispered. "We should have been more careful..."

"We thought we were safe." Tahn tightened his grip on her, as if he could keep her safe from that way. "We couldn't know that this would happen, Cen. We thought that since your father wasn't here, he wouldn't find out about us."

"I know." She heaved a long, shuddering sigh. "But we were wrong."

He kissed her forehead softly. "We'll think of something."

"No, we won't," Cenna said. She pulled away enough to look at him. "There's no time, Tahn," she said softly. "It's too late."

"It's never too late," he insisted.

She just shook her head and burrowed into his chest again.

"Cenna, what did he say?" Tahn asked her, fearing that he already knew the answer, but wanting to hear it from her.

She whimpered softly.

"Honey... hey," he said gently, catching her chin and lifting her head so that he could look into her eyes. "What did he say? What happened?"

Only then did he notice the red mark on her cheek and he sucked in his breath with a sharp hiss. "Cenna... did he do that?"

She nodded against his chest. "He... he was furious," she whispered. "He hit me. He has never hit me before. Tahn, he... he's pulling me out of school."

Tahn closed his eyes, resting his chin on top of her head. He wanted to comfort her, but he wasn't sure how. What could they do? Was there anything at all they could do?

"He's coming back for me in the morning," she continued in a choked voice. "He's going to take me home and keep me there until he has arranged things with Lord Mallor. I will be married before the summer."

"No, you won't," he said, suddenly determined and firm in that belief. He didn't know what would happen to them or how they were going to make a life together, but he couldn't just let her go. He loved her too much for that.

"Cenna, I love you," he said honestly, taking her hands in his. Her eyes were filled with tears as she looked up at him, but there was also something else there. Hope. She needed him right now, and he would be there for her. "I love you, and I'm not going to stand by and watch as your father marries you off to another man." He reached out to gently wipe the tears from her cheeks. "We're running away."

She inhaled sharply. "What?"

He squeezed her hands. "Cen, we're running away," he said again, firmer this time. "You and I, together. We're going to get out of here, just the two of us, and we're leaving Dahnport. We'll go somewhere where your father will never find us, we'll find ourselves jobs and earn a living... we'll do all the things you ever dreamt of doing," he promised her. "Everything. The travelling, the job, the family. I won't let him take you away from me, Cenna."

She started crying again, but this time, it was with relief. She flung her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "Really?" she asked breathlessly.

He smiled, stroking her hair. "Really," he said. "I'm not letting you go."

She pulled back enough to be able to look him in the eye, then kissed him passionately. "I love you, Tahn," she said, before kissing him again.