

ASHES BETWEEN CROWNS

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To all the
Heroes in my life

Thank you for being

Inspiration

Behind those pages.



Foreword

In an increasingly complex global future, the "Hemamala Upahara" book project, led by Mahamaya Girls' College, stands as a turning point in girls' education. Over a decade, it has successfully nurtured thousands of children to become young authors.

This year, by collaborating with other schools, we aimed to provide students with a wealth of new experiences. The goal was to develop multi-faceted skills, including communication, values, and creative growth. As a result, children have written books that pay tribute to Princess Hemamala, who brought the Sacred Tooth Relic—the supreme symbol of the Buddhist world—to the Hill Country (Kandy).

I extend my gratitude to everyone involved, including the students who contributed their creativity and the teachers who guided them.

Shashikala Senadhira
Principal
Mahamaya Girls' College

Congratulatory Message

It is a great honor for me, as the Governor of the Central Province, to send a congratulatory message for the launch of the books created through the Hemamala Tribute Book Creation Project initiated by Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy.

Education is the fundamental foundation for the progress of society, and it is further strengthened through books and literary creations. It is clearly commendable that students' talents, creativity, and intellectual abilities are emerging through projects such as this.

I believe that this book creation project will provide valuable knowledge and a precious literary contribution not only to the students but to the entire society. Furthermore, I hope that through such efforts, future writers who will bring pride to Sri Lanka will emerge.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation and blessings to the Principal, the academic staff, the students, and everyone involved who dedicated themselves to this successful endeavor. I wish this project and the book launch ceremony great success.

Sarath B.S. Abeykoon

Governor, Central Province

Emeritus Professor, University of Peradeniya

2026-05-10

Congratulatory Message

I highly appreciate the noble and outstanding effort of the Principal and the academic staff of Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, the student daughters, the students of other participating schools, and everyone who dedicated themselves to plan and implement this book publication project. The project was organized under the leadership of Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, with the participation of other schools in the Kandy Zone, with the aim of encouraging children toward book creation within the current school system, as a tribute to Hemamala Kumariya who brought the Sacred Tooth Relic to Sri Lanka.

For several decades, Sri Lanka has been committed to providing free, compulsory, quality, and equitable education to all children, thereby producing a future generation of intelligent and skilled citizens. In such a context, this book creation program for school children helps develop creative ability, critical thinking, and other positive qualities for a balanced and well-rounded personality, and contributes to building a future knowledge-based society.

May all activities of the Hemamala Tribute Book Creation Project be successful through the blessings of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Pradeep Nilanga Dela

Diyawadana Nilame,

Sri Dalada Maligawa.

2026.05.10.

PROLOGUE

THE BALLROOM

The castle was pretty, yet miserable, unseen by others. Every room was filled with beautiful portraits of King Benjamin and Queen Catherine. The kitchen carried a delicate smell while the ballroom was filled with the scent of roses. The Grand Hall had the largest chandelier in the entire kingdom. The kingdom was getting ready for the ball in the evening.

In a small pink room was Princess Ivie getting ready for the ball.

"You know *I can* do it by myself," said Princess Ivie.

"It's best if I do it." Said the servant with an angry expression.

Ivie was a beautiful teenage girl with bright blue eyes and brunette hair. Her face was almost covered with tiny freckles. She had the most innocent heart with the brightest smile.

"All the kings and queens of other kingdoms are going to be at the ball. You must look *perfect*."

The servant shouted at Ivie. Yet Ivie responded calmly with a broken voice.

"Yes, Miss Ruth."

Even though Ruth was a servant, Ivie had to greet her with more respect than the Royal family. Ruth combed Ivie's hair back and tied it into a bun. Ivie wore the most beautiful dress she could find in her closet. Finally, she was ready for the ball.

The whole kingdom was gathered in the ballroom. Ivie sat beside her *stepmother*, while King Benjamin addressed the gathering.

"Good evening, my fellow citizens. Today we gather here to celebrate our daughter, Princess Ivie's *sixteenth* birthday."

The crowd cheered and applauded.

Ivie wasn't sure if this was meant for her.

"Straighten your back, behave well," her stepmother whispered with disappointment.

Even though she wasn't as happy as it seemed, she plastered a fake smile on her face and bowed to the people below.

The ball continued...

After some time, music began to play. Everyone started to dance. Ivie wasn't very interested in dancing.

She sat on one of the thrones that were assigned for Royals.

She heard loud footsteps echoing through the hall. A *handsome young* prince approached her.

He was overwhelmed by her beauty. But Ivie didn't care. She wasn't into boys at that time.

"Shall we dance, your majesty?" he asked. She was puzzled to answer.

If she refused him, it would be considered rude. With no other option, she accepted.

They danced and danced till midnight. Ivie was getting tired every second. She excused herself and went straight to her parents.

She tried to leave the ballroom, but her stepmother hesitated. Eventually she left the ballroom.

When everyone was busy, she ran into her room.

Everything seemed fine for others but not for Ivie. She buried her face in the pillow and started crying.

No one was there to *comfort* her, to *listen* to her, to *love* her. Upon hearing her story, the harsh truth will be revealed, and her life was about to change *forever* but...

CHAPTER ONE

LONG-LIFE ENEMIES

“Whenever you’re ready, Your Highness,” said Evandor.

“Ready, Mister Evandor,” said Prince Draven with a thumbs up.

A gun fired. Prince Draven got in position. He held his bow tightly and stretched the arrow. As soon as the second gun fired, he aimed at Mister Evandor and shot his arrow. Mister Evandor shivered all over and held an apple on his head.

The arrow snapped the apple into two. Mister Evandor fell to the ground.

“Well...d- done Pri-Prince Dra-Draven,” he stuttered, eyes wide with exhaustion.

“Come on, Mister Evandor,” said Prince Draven. He helped Mister Evandor get up on his legs.

“You have improved quite a lot,” said Evandor and patted Draven's back.

Draven was a young handsome boy no older than Ivie. He had brown hair with bright hazel eyes that shined across a room full of thousands of people. He wore a blue gemmed necklace which looked like Ivie’s eyes.



Princess Ivie was once Prince Draven’s best friend. But not long after, their families became enemies due to financial problems. On their last day, Ivie gave Draven a blue gemmed necklace to remind him of her. Ever since then they have been separated and were forced to be enemies. Whenever they saw each other, they acted like they were long-life enemies. This made Draven uneasy at first but soon got used to it. Ever since then, they have never seen each other.

Every time Draven glanced at the necklace it reminded him of Ivie. This made him feel like there was a rock boulder inside his heart. The more he thought of her, the more his feelings grew.



Draven and his family were getting ready for battle with Ivie's family. They soon sent a letter to King Benjamin. Prince Draven was one of the warriors. He hesitated at first but later gave in. He was the best at archery, sword fighting and horse riding.

An army of thousands of soldiers were trained daily. They were trained practically like robots. Every soldier copied the exact same movement made by the commander. Thousands of shields and swords were polished. Not for Prince Draven. He was considered a royal warrior not to be trained with other soldiers.

Prince Draven was riding his horse, Becky, on the grass field.

"Your Majesty, look out!" shouted Mister Evandor.

A large rock appeared in front of Draven. He fell off his horse and landed on the grass.

"Did it just appear out of thin air?" Draven said with frustration.

"No, Your Majesty," said Mister Evandor. "You weren't concentrating on yourself."

This left Draven feeling awkward. He hasn't fallen off his horse, even once. It was the weirdest feeling he had ever felt for a long time. Not sad or angry. A feeling deep inside his heart which kept him from failing, a feeling he had been hiding from everyone except himself.

Something he always wanted.

Maybe someone...

CHAPTER TWO

THE NORTHERN TOWER

A sudden knock appeared on Ivie's bedroom door. Ivie quickly wiped away her tears.

"Who is it?" Ivie asked with a broken voice.

"Your Highness," A soft voice answered, "Please let me in." Ivie slowly opened the door.

A young boy appeared and said "Your Highness, I'm Liam. I was a servant once in the palace. You deserve to know the truth."

Ivie was confused. What was he talking about?

Ivie let the boy in. He held a lantern and wore old clothes that were sewn multiple times. He had snuck into the palace secretly without getting noticed.

"What's going on?" Ivie asked with a serious face.

"About your family... Your mom... I mean Queen Catherine, she isn't your real mother."

Ivie's heart weighed. Was this real?

"Then-then who is she?"

"Well... technically she is your *stepmom*." He spoke.

"But-but I thought..." She stammered. Liam nodded with agreement.

"Then where is my *real* mother?" asked Ivie.

"Queen Seraphina, she's in the Northern Tower" he answered.

"It has been a lie from the very beginning. It all makes sense now." Ivie realized.

"That's why I wasn't enough for her. She thought I'd make her reputation standards low."

“Take me to the Northern Tower,” She demanded.

“It’s a long way to the Northern Tower. Are you sure you want to go there, Your Highness?”

“Of course, she’s my *mother* and I must save her.” Ivie said with courage.

“Well then, as you wish, Your Highness,” he replied.

They both snuck out of the ballroom and made their way to the hallway. After they went to the gardens, the boy lit his lantern and ran across a thick forest.

Ivie followed him. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

He nodded. “Please be quiet, Your Highness.”

“There can be wolves around here.”

Ivie gulped nervously.

After walking for about half an hour, they arrived at the Northern Tower. Ivie hardly managed to keep her dress without getting dirty or her stepmother would turn her into an instant vacuum cleaner.

The Northern Tower was a tall, large building which was old-very old. Ivie was frustrated. More climbing. After climbing forever, they reached the top. It was pitch black. Large rats and mice chased each other. Not a single light but one window. The bright moonlight fell through the window.

A middle-aged woman emerged through the dark. She wore shaggy old clothes. She had black hair and bright blue eyes, just like Ivie. She looked fearful and tired.

Ivie’s heart melted.

The woman looked at Ivie surprised. She instantly recognized her. She remembered Ivie’s bright blue eyes just like the day she was born.

“Ivie?? Is that you?” She asked

“Mo-mother?” Ivie gasped.

She looked at Liam as if she was asking him what to do.

Without hesitation, Ivie ran towards Seraphina and embraced in her warm arms. They both shared a bright smile and shed happy tears.

"Someone's coming. Hide!" cried Liam. Ivie ran towards a pile of old bricks and hid behind it.

Clop- clop. Loud footsteps began to appear.

"Well- well, what have we got here? Oh, Liam. It's you. I thought we would have some lovely guests. It's really boring here. I wonder how you stay here." Catherine crackled.

"Let me go!" Seraphina cried. Catherine laughed.

"Never!" She shouted.

"Look who I am now, a great powerful Queen. Life is so much better without you."

"You'll never be the mother Ivie wants" Seraphina said with anger.

Catherine stayed calm.

"Guards tie her up." She ordered.

"What? No-no-no. Let me go!" Seraphina begged.

Catherine didn't listen to a word.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get back to the castle. I have a kingdom to run. They must be worried about me." She laughed as she walked down the tower.

Ivie quickly ran toward Seraphina and untied the ropes.

"Thank you." Seraphina said. Ivie hugged her.

"We should get out of here." Liam said.

"Mom, you must come with us or else you'll be stuck here forever."

They snuck out the tower and made their way to the dark forest. Everything was pitch black. The moonlight fell and lit the path as if it was helping them. They held each other and ran between the trees. After some time, they

reached the castle. They snuck into the castle and went straight to Ivie's bedroom.

"Mom, you have to hide, or else Miss Ruth will find you and cause a lot of trouble." Said Ivie.

"Who is Miss Ruth?" asked Seraphina.

"Oh... That's the royal servant" Ivie replied.

Suddenly someone called out Ivie's name.

"Ivie, are you in there?"

The door opened and Queen Catherine entered the room. Seraphina and Liam hid inside Ivie's closet.

"Who the hell are you talking to?" she asked.

"Umm... Uh... no one. Just like talking to myself." She lied.

Catherine knew she was up to something.

"What are you hiding?" she asked

"Nothing," Ivie replied.

"Ha... uh," Ivie yawned.

"Oh, I'm tired. I better sleep. Goodnight... mother."

"Um... Goodnight daughter" Catherine replied.

Still mysterious, she left the room. She sensed something weird; Something wrong...

CHAPTER THREE

BACK AT THE CASTLE

After Catherine left Seraphina and Liam came out of the closet. It was past midnight. Ivie was very tired.

"Your Highness, I must leave. Please excuse me," Liam commented.

"Wait... But why?" asked Ivie.

"If the Queen catches me, it'll be all over. And I must return to the Northern tower. The guards are everywhere. Please, your highness," he begged.

"Oh... Of course. You may." she replied.

"Thank you for your help. Goodbye." They waved goodbye to each other.

"Mom, you need to hide," she said with a yawn.

"Looks like someone's sleepy," Seraphina laughed. Ivie smiled back.

"I'll hide in the closet. There's plenty of room plus it's warm"

"Is it ok? Are... you sure?" Ivie asked.

"Of course, honey. Now, get some rest. We'll deal with things in the morning," Seraphina smiled.

Ivie got into bed. Seraphina kissed her forehead.

"Goodnight, Ivie"

"Goodnight, Mom"

...

"Everyone, get into position," ordered the commander.

Everyone was running across the castle. Ivie woke up with a gasp.

"What's going on? What's with all this noise?" She put on her dress and ran downstairs.

"What's going on?" she asked her father.

“Draven and his family. They... they are starting a war.” he replied.

Ivie’s heart ached.

“What? A war? But why?”

“Apparently, they want revenge, I think,” he said.

“But dad, there’s something I want to tell you,” Ivie said.

“Not now, dear,” he replied.

“But dad, I- I...”

“Not now, Ivie. I’m in the middle of a war coming up,” he shouted at Ivie.

“You’re the worst dad in the world,” she replied back. Benjamin sighed.

Meanwhile, Ruth came to clean Ivie’s bedroom. She cleaned every single corner of the room. Seraphina sensed someone came into the room. She kept herself as quiet as possible and leaned towards the back. Her heart raced.

“What if she finds me? What if I get expelled from the castle?” she thought.

Just as Miss Ruth was about to open the closet Ivie entered the room gasping.

“Um... What are you doing?” Ivie asked.

“What do you think I’m doing?” Ruth replied.

“Carrying a boom around the castle?”

“Very funny, princess,” Ruth replied.

“And, um... Can you leave the room please, I really need to change my dress. It’s so itchy,” Ivie gave a false impression.

“Oh... really,” Ruth asked mischievously. “What are you hiding?”

“Um... What? Nothing. Why would I ever do that?” Ivie replied terrified.

Ruth looked at Ivie one more time and left the room. Ivie made sure nobody suspected her. She locked her room and opened the closet.

"Oh... thank god. You're okay. I thought you were caught by her." Ivie hugged Seraphina.

Then suddenly, Ivie started crying on Seraphina's shoulder.

"Dear, what's wrong?"

"It's Dr- Draven," Ivie said, her voice trembling with tears.

"What? What about them?"

"They... They're starting a war," Ivie choked out the words.

Seraphina looked at Ivie and hugged her tightly.

"Mom, I don't want anyone to get hurt,"

"I know, darling," Seraphina spoke in a quivering tone.

"Mom, It's not safe here for you," Ivie wiped out her tears.

"But Ivie, I can't let you stay here like this,"

"I'm pretty sure dad will do something. You have to get back to the tower. Before my other mom find out,"

"No Ivie I will not you go to a war,"

"Mum please listen. I know what I'm doing. Please trust me,"

"This better work or I'll -"

"Ok... ok" Ivie gave a confident peek, and they shared fears across their faces.

When everyone was busy, they snuck out of the castle and went to the Northern Tower. Ivie said farewell to her mother. On her way she met Liam. Ivie said everything about the war.

"Promise me, you'll take good care of my mother,"

"I promise, your highness,"

Ivie headed straight towards the castle. Queen Catherine was panicking, running around the castle.

“Quick, the portraits, oh and the jewels. Get them to a safe place,” she said, overwhelmed with fear.

“Oh... mom, what are you doing?”

“Ivie, Go to your room and pack all your jewels. You can’t waste them.”

“Um... why?”

“You don’t know there’s war coming up,”

“So??? What does it have to do with your jewels? Aren’t you afraid that you’ll lose me or dad?”

“Um... Don’t ask stupid questions. Just go to your room,”

The moment Ivie heard that, her heart shattered into pieces. Everyone was right. She only cared about power and wealth.

“Do you even love dad? Are you even my *mother*?” Ivie broke down into tears.

“What? What are you talking about? Of course, I love you and your dad,” Catherine faked her smile to everyone.

“Ivie, don’t make a scene here. I don’t have time to deal with you right now. So, just shut up,”

Ivie stormed out of the hallway. She ran into her room and slammed the door.

“Now what do I do?” She whispered to herself.

An impish idea came to her; To spy on Draven. Maybe she will ask him to stop the war. Their Kingdom was over a beautiful mountain which led to a majestic forest. But, for Ivie this was like a piece of cake. She used to explore the outside world with Draven when they were little. This was something she would never expect herself to do. But there was nothing else to do. Ivie knew exactly where to go.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENEMY SOIL

Sneaking out of the castle was no easy task, especially during wartime, when guards surrounded the fortress day and night. Ivie slipped silently into the hallway, careful not to draw her father's attention. She paused behind a towering vase, her breath steady as she observed the corridor. When the coast was clear, she gently pulled aside a heavy curtain and pushed open a massive portrait concealed behind it.

There it was—a secret tunnel leading beyond the walls of Draven's castle. As she stepped through, wonder filled her. Nature had changed so much since the days she had been trapped within the stone walls, and the world beyond felt both unfamiliar and alive.

Sneaking into Draven's castle was far more dangerous than escaping her own.

The fortress loomed like a scar against the night sky, its towers clawing at the clouds. Ivie moved through the shadows with practiced silence, slipping past patrolling guards and climbing the ivy-choked outer wall. War had hardened this place—every corridor bristled with watchful eyes and sharpened steel.

She reached the inner hall and ducked behind a marble pillar, her heart pounding. Memories of another time—another version of this castle—flickered through her mind. Back then, the halls echoed with laughter. Now, they breathed hostility.

When the guards passed, Ivie stepped forward, pulling aside a familiar curtain. The old passage was still there. Some secrets, it seemed, refused to die.

She had only taken a few steps when a blade flashed in front of her throat.

"Don't move."

The voice was calm. Cold. Achingly familiar.

Ivie froze.

Slowly, she raised her hands and turned. Standing before her, cloaked in dark armor and shadow, was Draven himself. His eyes—once warm, once hers—were now sharp with suspicion and fury.

“So,” he said quietly, lowering the sword just enough to study her face, “the ghost finally returns.”

“I could say the same,” Ivie replied, forcing steadiness into her voice. “I thought you were dead.”

His jaw tightened. “You should have hoped I was.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Years of betrayal, bloodshed, and unspoken words stretched between them. Enemies now—leaders on opposite sides of a war that had torn the world apart.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Draven said at last. “If my guards find you—”

“Then kill me yourself,” she interrupted. “That’s what enemies do, isn’t it?”

His grip faltered—just slightly.

“You vanished,” he said, anger cracking through the composure. “Without a word.”

“You chose the throne over me,” she shot back. “You chose war.”

Silence felt heavy between them.

Despite everything, they stood face to face again—two souls bound by a past neither could erase, reunited not by fate’s kindness, but by its cruelty.

And at that moment, Ivie realized the truth was far more dangerous than being caught:

Draven still recognized her.
And she still cared.

...

Ivie had sworn to never return to Draven’s castle.

Yet there she was—pressed against its cold stone walls, cloak soaked by mist, heart hammering as she slipped through the same hidden passage she once used to escape. War had changed the fortress, but the secrets remained. They always did.

She didn't come for him.

She came for information.

Inside, the corridors breathed with torchlight and danger. Ivie moved silently, avoiding guards until a familiar presence stopped her cold.

"You're late," a voice said from the darkness.

Draven stepped into the light, armor gleaming, expression unreadable.

"I didn't ask for your patience," Ivie replied, lifting her chin. "Just your cooperation."

His mouth curved into something almost like a smile. "Still ordering me around in my own castle. Some things never change."

They were enemies—forced into uneasy meetings by necessity. Her kingdom, now ruled by her father and his new queen, was tightening its grip on the borderlands. Ivie returned to them by dawn each time, slipping back into the castle she hated—the one ruled by a woman who wore kindness like a mask and cruelty like a crown.

Her stepmother smiled too easily.

"You look tired, dear," she would say. "The burden of loyalty can be exhausting."

Ivie learned to bow. To stay silent. To play the obedient daughter while secrets rotted the throne from within.

At night, she crossed enemy lines again.

Draven was waiting every time.

Their meetings became routine maps spread across tables, whispered strategies exchanged beneath flickering candlelight. They argued. Constantly.

“You don’t trust me,” Draven said one night.

“You burned my villages,” she shot back.

“And you betrayed my name,” he replied.

Silence followed—heavy, aching.

But slowly, something shifted.

He listened to her when she spoke. She noticed the way his hands shook after battle. Once, she stayed to stitch a wound he tried to hide. Another time, he let her walk the battlements at dawn, the war quiet for just a moment.

“You hate my castle,” he said softly.

“I hate what power does to people,” Ivie answered. “Including my family.”

He looked at her then—not as an enemy, not as a threat—but as someone who understood.

Between kingdoms, between loyalties, they met again and again—each time, leaving with more trust than before. Each time returning to castles that no longer felt like home.

One night, as Ivie prepared to leave, Draven picked up her hand.

“If we keep doing this,” he said, voice low, “someone will die.”

She met his gaze, heart racing. “If we stop, many more will.”

He didn’t let go.

And in that quiet moment between enemy lands, Ivie realized the truth:

She trusted him more than the rulers of her own kingdom.

And that was the most dangerous thing of all.

CHAPTER FIVE

ENEMIES BOUND BY SHADOW

Ivie returned to her own castle before dawn, slipping through familiar corridors that no longer felt like home.

The banners bore her father's crest—but it was her stepmother who truly ruled. Queen Elowen sat the throne with a jeweled smile and watchful eyes, while Ivie's father stood beside her like a shadow of the man, he once was.

And high above them all, locked away in the Northern Tower, was Ivie's real mother.

"Another restless night?" Elowen asked sweetly as Ivie entered the court.

Ivie bowed. "Sleep avoids me."

"As it should," her stepmother replied softly. "A guilty heart rarely rests."

Ivie said nothing. Silence was survival.

That night, she rode hard through the forest, crossing enemy lands without hesitation. Draven's castle rose ahead of her, dark and waiting.

He was already there when she reached the hidden chamber.

"You're bleeding," Draven said immediately, stepping closer.

"It's nothing," Ivie said, but she didn't pull away when his fingers brushed her arm.

Their meetings had changed. They still argued—still carried the weight of old hatred—but trust had taken root in the quiet moments between words.

"My stepmother is planning something," Ivie said, unrolling a stolen document. "She's feeding false intelligence to both sides. She wants the war endless."

Draven's jaw tightened. "Then she's not just your enemy."

“She never was,” Ivie replied bitterly. “She imprisoned my mother years ago. Told the court she’d died of illness.”

Draven looked at her sharply. “You’re certain?”

“I’ve seen her,” Ivie whispered. “In the Northern Tower. Alive. Fading.”

Something dark and dangerous crossed Draven’s face. “Then we end this together.”

Thunder rolled outside. The room felt suddenly smaller.

“If we’re caught,” Ivie said, voice unsteady, “my father will order my execution.”

Draven stepped closer. “And my council will do the same to me.”

Their eyes locked.

“This alliance,” he said quietly, “will cost us everything.”

Ivie swallowed. “I know.”

The silence broke first—not with words, but with movement. Draven reached for her hand, tentative this time, as if giving her the chance to pull away.

She didn’t.

The kiss was brief—soft, restrained—but it burned with everything they hadn’t said. When they parted, their foreheads rested together.

“We can’t pretend anymore,” Ivie whispered.

“No,” he agreed. “But we can be careful.”

Too careful, it turned out.

CHAPTER SIX

THE NIGHT OF BETRAYAL

The betrayal came from inside Ivie's castle.

A servant she trusted sold her secrets for gold. Catherine acted swiftly—guards sent to the Northern Tower; orders signed in her father's name.

When Ivie returned, the tower doors were sealed tighter than ever. "You're running out of time," Draven said grimly when she reached him again. "So am I."

That night, they made their choice.

Under cover of darkness, Draven led a small force through forgotten tunnels beneath Ivie's castle—paths only Ivie remembered from childhood. Steel was drawn, but little blood was spilled. The truth was sharper than any blade.

They reached the Northern Tower just as dawn bled into the sky.

Ivie found her mother weak but alive, eyes filled with tears at the sight of her daughter.

"You came back," she whispered.

"I always would," Ivie said, breaking the chains herself.

Her mother's gaze shifted to Draven. Fear flickered—then faded.

"He crossed fire for you," she murmured. "I can see it."

Draven bowed his head slightly. "I will get you out," he said. "Both of you."

Footsteps echoed below.

They didn't have much time.

Draven lifted Ivie's mother carefully, wrapping her in his cloak. She was lighter than she should have been. That alone filled him with quiet rage.

As they descended, alarms began to ring—Cathrine had discovered the truth too late.

Guards flooded the courtyard.

Draven cut a path through them—not killing unless forced to. Ivie stayed close, blade steady, her mother clutched to her chest.

At the outer gate, Catherine stood waiting.

“You would tear down a kingdom for a ghost?” she sneered.

Ivie stepped forward, shaking with fury. “You locked her away because she stood in your way.”

Catherine smiled. “And I would do it again.”

Draven raised his sword.

“No,” Ivie said quietly. “She doesn’t deserve another moment of power.”

They fled before dawn—horses pounding over frost-bitten ground, the Northern Tower shrinking behind them.

Draven led them into his castle.

“You’ll be safe here until the war comes to an end,” he said with a deep tone.

“Be safe, both of you.” Seraphina’s eyes met their gaze. Not with fear—but bravery.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WAR

The battlefield was already lost before the first blade struck.

Draven knew it the moment the flames rose—too fast, too deliberate. Fire leapt across the plains, fed by oil and lies, turning soldiers into shadows that screamed and vanished.

This was not war.

This was a slaughter.

He moved through it like a ghost, sword heavy in his hand, armor scorched black. His men shouted orders, but the sound came to him as if through water. His mind was elsewhere.

Don't look for her, he told himself.

If you see her, you won't survive this.

Then he saw her.

Across the Fireline, framed by burning banners and falling embers, stood Ivie.

For a moment, Draven forgot how to breathe.

She looked unreal—hair pulled back, armor dented, face streaked with ash. Not the girl he had argued with in candlelit rooms. Not the woman who kissed him like the world was ending.

A commander.

An enemy.

Everything he loved.

His instincts screamed at him to raise his sword.

His heart refused.

Around them, men died. Arrows flew. Flames roared. Yet the space between them felt silent, suspended, as if the world itself waited for his choice.

If I move forward, he thought she would die.
If I turn away, my army dies.

Ivie's hand tightened around her blade—but she didn't lift it.

Neither did he.

Her eyes met him, wide and shining with the same terror tearing through him. Not fear of death.

Fear of choice.

"Don't," he shouted, the word ripping out of him raw and desperate. Not an order. Never that.

A plea.

An explosion tore the ground apart between them, heat slamming into his chest. He staggered back, thrown into smoke and screaming steel.

When he forced himself upright—

She was gone.

"No," he breathed, panic slicing deeper than any blade.

He fought like a madman then—not for victory, but for her. Blood slicked his hands. Pain bloomed hot along his ribs, but he barely felt it.

Then he saw her again closing down this time, shouting orders, turning her sword against her own ranks to save him.

She chose me.

The realization shattered something inside him.

When she dragged him behind the burning wreckage, hands shaking as she pressed against his wound, Draven knew this was the moment everything ended—or began.

"This ends tonight," she said.

He believed in her.

When he stepped into the open and laid down his sword, the fire reflected in Ivie's eyes as she followed him. Not behind him.

Beside him.

For the first time in his life, Draven did not choose a crown, a command, or a legacy.

He chose love.

And the flames did not take them.

They stared at each other's faces smeared with soot, eyes wild, alive.

"This ends tonight," Ivie said fiercely. "Or it ends us."

Draven nodded. "Then we end it."

Together, they made their choice.

As night fell, horns sounded again—but this time, not for attack.

Draven stepped onto the battlefield between the armies, weapons discarded. Ivie followed, tearing the crest from her armor and letting it fall into the mud.

Gasps rippled through the ranks.

"We are done killing for liars," Draven's voice carried across the field. "This war was built on deception."

Ivie raised her voice beside him. "The queen who orchestrated it all has been exposed. The Northern Tower's prisoner lives. The truth will be known."

Silence followed heavily, trembling.

Then one banner fell.

Then another.

By dawn, the fires burned low, and the battlefield lay quiet.

....

When Catherine confronted them in the courtyard, her mask finally shattered.

“You would doom kingdoms for sentiment?” she hissed.

“No,” Ivie replied, standing beside Draven. “I would save them from you.”

By sunrise, the queen was exposed, the court divided, and the war unraveling.

But safety did not lie in either castle.

With Ivie’s mother wrapped in a cloak and Draven’s hand firmly in hers, Ivie left the only world she’d ever known.

King Benjamin was furious—not at his enemies, but at himself. How could he have been so blind, so consumed by power that he had mistaken it for love?

He knelt, holding Seraphina in his arms as though she might slip away if he loosened his grip. Tears streaked down his face as his shoulders shook with regret.

“I did this,” he whispered. “I lost you. I lost our daughter.”

Seraphina lifted her trembling hand and gently cupped his face, forcing him to meet her eyes. There was pain there—but also forgiveness.

“You were lost,” she said softly. “But you found your way back.”

Watching them together made Ivie’s chest ache—in the best way. For the first time in years, her family looked whole. She turned toward Draven, softening her features. He met her gaze and smiled, quiet and steady, as if the chaos of the world could no longer reach them.

King Benjamin rose slowly and faced Ivie.

“It’s your time to rule the kingdom,” he said. “The throne should be yours.”

Ivie shook her head, a gentle smile on her lips. “No, Father. I already have everything I need.”

Her eyes flicked to Draven.

Benjamin followed her gaze, understanding dawning at last. "Then... what will you do?"

"I won't rule from a throne," Ivie said calmly. "I'm leaving this castle. I'm choosing my own life."

For a moment, the hall was silent.

Then Seraphina smiled.

And for the first time, King Benjamin did not argue.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROAD BEYOND THE GATES

The castle gates stood open.

Not in surrender.

Not in war.

But farewell.

Morning light spilled across the stone courtyard, soft and pale, as Ivie stepped forward with a small pack slung over her shoulder. She paused once, taking in the place that had shaped her through loss, silence, and survival.

Behind her, the castle was quieter than she remembered. No tension. No watching eyes. Just echo.

Draven waited at her side.

He wore no crown, no armor—only dark travel clothes and a sword sheathed at his back. For the first time since she had known him, he looked unburdened.

“Are you ready?” he asked gently.

Ivie nodded. “I think I’ve been ready for a long time.”

King Benjamin stood near the steps with Seraphina beside him. Her mother looked stronger already, color returning to her cheeks, her hand firmly wrapped around Benjamin’s. Regret still lingered in his eyes—but so did pride.

“I won’t ask you to stay,” Benjamin said quietly. “I spent too many years asking the wrong things of you.”

Ivie stepped forward and embraced him. It was awkward, hesitant—but real.

“Take care of her,” Benjamin said to Draven.

Draven inclined his head. “With my life.”

Seraphina kissed Ivie’s forehead. “Go where you are free,” she whispered. “That’s all I ever wanted for you.”

Ivie smiled through the tightness in her throat.

Then she turned.

The road beyond the gates stretched wide and empty, winding into forest and horizon alike. No banners marked it. No destiny demanded it.

Only choice.

Draven offered his hand.

She took it.

Together, they walked through the gates—not as princess and king, not as enemies bound by war, but as two souls who had survived fire and chosen something quieter, stronger.

Behind them, the gates closed—not in rejection, but in release.

Ahead of them lay uncertainty. Cold nights. New lands. A life built slowly, honestly.

Ivie glanced at Draven, her fingers tightening in his.

“We don’t know where this leads,” she said.

Draven smiled—not sharp, not guarded, but warm. “No. But we’ll walk it together.”

They moved on, side by side, disappearing into the morning light.

And for the first time, no crown followed them.

Only love.

Afterword

With the approval of the Ministry of Education, this research-based project has empowered thousands of student authors for over ten years. Educationists recognize it as a program that significantly enhances the quality of school education.

In alignment with modern educational reforms, encouraging students to author a research work is a milestone in this journey. In this digital age of "Smart" technology, the modern school must demonstrate through research that books and technology should be used together. This is because the unique joy a child receives from a book cannot be replaced by anything else.

To prevent children from drifting away from books—which remain our primary educational tool and storehouse of human knowledge—Mahamaya Girls' College has spearheaded the "Hemamala Upahara" project for many years. Its primary objectives are to foster academic discipline, promote values, and pay tribute to Princess Hemamala, who fulfilled a historic mission to empower women.

We express our gratitude to the Principal, teachers, parents, alumni of Mahamaya Girls' College, representatives of other schools, the Diyawadana Nilame, and the staff of the Sri Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic) for their support.

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