

Thorn

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*For every girl who has ever doubted she has
what it takes.*

Chapter 1

“Try not to embarrass us,” my brother says. “If you can.”

I look out at the empty courtyard and pretend not to notice Lord Daerilin smirking to my left. He has always enjoyed my brother’s barbs, especially so these past three years. The other nobles around us shift, though I can’t tell if they’re amused or impatient. Mother frowns, gaze trained on the gates. Perhaps she’s preparing herself for the king’s visit, or perhaps she’s only thinking that there’s little hope I won’t embarrass her.

The thud of approaching hooves grows louder. It sounds like a storm drawing near, a steady, dull rumble that warns of heavy rains and lashing winds. I clasp my hands together tightly and wish this moment over.

The party trots through the open gates, the wooden walls echoing back the clatter of hooves on cobblestones, the jingle of tack. The first riders pull to the side, allowing those behind through. And through. I glance worriedly toward Mother, then back at the riders. I count a score of men, all in light armor, before I realize there must be at least double that. At their center ride five men, all dressed in similar finery.

With no audible command, the whole crowd of horses and

men resolves into formation, the mounted guards lining up two deep to form an aisle between us and the five men at their center. The noblemen dismount in fluid leaps, as if they have no use for hands or stirrups. I catch a glimpse of our stable master waiting to arrange for the horses, his brows shooting up, eyes bright with admiration.

“His Majesty, the king of Menaiya,” one of his men announces as the nobleman who must be their king steps forward from their midst and bows slightly. I ignore the rest of his introduction, long lists of titles, and genealogy. Instead, I study the king. Though he must be older than my mother, the years have treated him well. He is tall and slim. He wears the traditional summer cloak of his people: a flowing, unhooded affair with arms and an open front, silver embroidery cascading along the edges and accenting the midnight-blue cloth. Beneath, he wears a knee-length tunic lightly embroidered with silver and stones, and the curious loose pants of his people. His hair falls free to his shoulders, black laced with silver, setting off the gentle brown of his face and softening an otherwise hawklike countenance. A fine tracery of wrinkles gathers at the corners of his eyes. He glances over our little crowd of nobles and smiles. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in that smile.

“Her Majesty, queen dowager and regent of the kingdom of Adania,” Steward Jerash announces in turn. Mother offers her own curtsy to the king, and we follow her lead. Even though she wears her finest brocade dress—too warm for this early in the fall—she still possesses barely half the majesty the king projects. But then, our kingdom is nothing compared with theirs, a patch of forest fortuitously protected by encircling mountains.

Menaiya is a land of sweeping plains, southern farms, and northern forests. And soldiers. I swallow hard, training my eyes on the ground. We only have fifty men in our whole hall. The king has brought enough seasoned warriors to take our hall and add our kingdom to his as easily as a spare coin to his purse.

Although, if the kitchen rumors are true, he isn't here for that at all. Or if he is, it's a longer game he's playing.

Jerash introduces my brother next, who bows a little lower than the king did. And then it is my turn. I curtsy, aware of the king's scrutiny, the way the whole of his entourage has turned their gaze on me. I keep my eyes lowered and my breathing steady. Let him be kind and gentle, as my father was—and let him have taught his son to be the same.

"Princess Alyrra," the king says. I rise and lift my eyes to his. He studies me as if I were a prize goat, his gaze sliding over me before returning to my face, as cold and calculating as a butcher. "We have heard tell of you before."

"My lord?" My voice is steady and calm, as I've learned to make it when I'm only half frightened. For all my prayers, there's no sign of softer traits in the man before me. "It is said you are honest. An unusual trait, it would seem."

Dread curls tight in my belly. I force some semblance of a smile to my lips. There is no other answer I can give that my family will not despise me for. My brother has gone rigid, his hands pressed flat against his thighs.

"You are most kind," my mother says, stepping forward.

The king watches me a moment longer, leaving my mother waiting. Just when I thought I might finally escape my history,

how my family sees me, I find I am mistaken. There is no better future to hope for now. The king has come for me, knowing full well I am nothing to myHe turns to my mother, offering her a courtly smile. At her invitation, he accompanies her up the three stairs and through the great wooden doors of our hall. My brother and I trail behind him, a mix of our nobles and the king's entourage on our heels.

"Honest Alyrra," my brother mocks, his voice loud enough for those nearest us to hear. "What a very clever, sophisticated princess you must be."

I continue on as if I did not hear. It is going to be a long week, watching my back and hiding around corners.

With so many guests, the wine and ale will flow freely, which will only make things worse. Even so, it is not my brother's ire that fills my thoughts as I walk, but what the king intends in his visit, and why.

I manage to slip away when the king retires to his rooms to refresh himself after the ceremonial welcome gifts have been exchanged and light refreshments consumed. He will meet with my mother, brother, and their Council of Lords before dinner. Even though it's unlikely my brother will come after me at once, I take no chances, seeking out one of the few places he would never stoop to check.

The kitchen is caught firmly in the throes of preparation for tonight's feast. Cook shouts orders as she spices a pot. Dara, Ketsy, and three other serving girls hustle to keep up with the chopping, slicing, and gutting. A soldier attempts to knead dough by squishing it between his fingers, and poor little Ano,

who only gets pulled into the kitchen in dire emergencies, struggles valiantly to tie the roast to a spit.

"Give me that," I tell the soldier, rescuing the dough from him. "You help Ano with the goat."

He throws me a grateful glance and joins Ano by the fire. Ketsy perches on a bench beside me, peeling carrots.

"What are they like?" I ask, glancing at her.

She may be just barely out of her childhood, but she understands at once. "Polite. They aren't making trouble and haven't bothered the older serving girls as yet—not like some men who chase them whether they like it or not. But they've only been here a few hours. We'll see."

So we will. It's hard to say how far the Menaiyans' manners will stretch over the week. We'll get a full sense of them yet.

"Dara?" I ask, glancing at the older girl across the table from us.

"Oh, I'll be serving them dinner," she says with a half smile, her eyes on the peas she's shelling. "I'll tell you what I think after that. Anything in particular you want me to pay attention to?"

"How many speak our language," I say, flipping the dough over and starting to knead again. "If they say anything about their prince. What kind of man he is." If he is as shrewd and ruthless as his father, I add silently.

She nods. "I'll see what I can find out."

"What do you think you're doing?" Cook demands loudly.

I twist to find Cook regarding me darkly, hands on her hips. Behind her, the roast is spitted and turning over the fire, the soldier nowhere to be seen.

"It's all right," I say. "I'm just kneading the dough."

"It most certainly *isn't* all right," she snaps, eyes narrowing. "I'll not have the king think we are in such dire straits that our own princess must help in the kitchens. Dara can take the dough. You go sit in the gardens or do whatever it is that great ladies do."

"I've no idea what great ladies do," I say, pulling my bowl away from Dara as she comes around the table toward me. "I'm only a middling sort of lady, and our gardens are all herbs. They're hardly worth sitting in."

"Give it here," Dara says, making a swipe for the bowl.

"You'll give Dara that bowl or you'll not have breakfast tomorrow," Cook says with a glint in her eye. I hesitate, but she has made good on such threats before. "What if His Majesty gets word you're in here with us, hmm?"

"Oh, very well," I say, surrendering the bowl to a smirking Dara.

"Go on now," Cook admonishes me. "I'll let you help again after . . ." She trails off, as aware as I am that there may not be an after. "Go on now, child," Cook repeats, her voice gentling.

I choose my path carefully from the kitchens, giving a wide berth to the meeting rooms, as well as the main hall. This first day's discussion will likely center around the state of our two kingdoms and the relation between them. Each monarch will get a measure of the other. No doubt Mother and her council will harp on about the deplorable condition of the road through the high passes, and how it ought to be better shored up. But, while we rely on our trade with Menaiya, they have much more significant trading partners. I can't imagine the king worrying overmuch about the one road through the mountains to a

tin-cup kingdom. He certainly won't obsess over it with the single-minded zeal of my mother and her council. Perhaps he'll be so disgusted with the discussion he'll shorten his visit and leave tomorrow.

One can hope.

Only I do not think he is used to giving up what he wants. If only I knew why he wants *me* for his son.

Especially when he was so quick to mock me before our court. I reach my room without mishap and bolt the door behind me. I would much rather go for a ride, but it is too close to evening and I don't dare arrive late to the feast. It will be hard enough to stay in Mother's good graces as it is. And anyhow, my brother may try looking for me at the stables.

So I dig out my two other best dresses, brush them off, and inspect them for signs of wear. I have three I keep for special occasions, and I've already worn the best for the king's arrival. After all, it's not as if that many foreign kings come visiting. Three dresses are enough for the yearly assemblies and the feasts when my mother's vassals visit, though I suspect the king and his court would expect more. I shrug and settle down to mend a fraying hem.

Jilna checks on me as the day fades. She has been in our employ as long as I can recall, her responsibilities shifting over the years. When my father died, it was she I went to for succor, and as I've grown, she's become the closest thing I have to a lady's maid.

"Cook is making an awful ruckus down there." She runs her hands over the repaired hem. "Did you fix this?"

"Just now. What's she upset about?"

"The dough didn't rise, so she had to start another batch, and the roast isn't cooked through yet, and any number of other things." Jilna straightens, her worn face easing into a smile. "I'm not sure if she just likes grumbling, or if it's her way of ensuring she gets complimented when everything turns out."

"A bit of both, I expect."

"Ha!" Jilna laughs and lays out the dress on my bed. "You'll need jewelry too."

"What for?"

"So you look more like a princess and less like a well-dressed scullery maid."

For all Jilna's efforts, I realize how shabby I must look in my old dress with my string of pearls and my three gold rings as I join my family that evening in the small gathering room beside the hall, waiting for the king to enter. Mother still wears her brocade dress, a massive gold brooch pinned to her breast. My brother wears the long gold chains that were once our father's, his arms crossed over his broad chest, his boots planted firmly. And the king will wear his wealth not in gold but in the muted richness of the fabric of his clothes, the perfect finish of his boots. It is a much more subtle and certain majesty.

"He's coming," Mother says to my brother, voice sharp. "Smile."

They both do, bright and cheery and falsely welcoming. The king, entering with the two other men who are his vassals, glances at them with an answering curve of his lips. Then his gaze turns to me. I look back steadily, wondering what he expects, what he is looking for. His eyes, hard as onyx, give me no answer.

When he speaks, it is to Mother, a quiet greeting that allows us to move forward. I follow them into the hall for dinner and take my usual seat as the rest of our party settles.

"Trying to look your part?" The loud, contemptuous voice is unmistakable. Not that I could forget him. For three years now I have been forced to sit beside my mother's most highly ranked vassal, and the father of my own personal nemesis.

"Lord Daerilin," I say, risking a glance at him. "I see you are wearing your velvet doublet."

Daerilin turns a mottled pink but keeps going. "It's a pity you can't manage to put on something finer for such a guest as this. Especially when he's come all this distance for you."

"Has he?" I ask, managing to let my tone betray only mild curiosity.

My chest feels hollow. I force myself to breathe, to keep my expression neutral. For all that I've discussed this with my friends from among the servants, hearing Daerilin say it aloud chills me. Once it seemed only half real, a strange and unlikely possibility, a fairy tale escape from my own family that bears me little affection.

That was before. Now there is no arguing with the reality of the king, cunning and cold and here for me.

"I would have thought he'd bring the prince with him, then," I continue. It takes all my presence of mind to keep my fingers from clutching the stem of my goblet.

"And leave his court to play at politics on their own, when the Family is only just holding their nobles and mages in check? Hardly." Daerilin grimaces, reaching for his knife. "How you are related to your mother is beyond me." At his cue, a servant

steps forward and carves three slices of roast goat. She places them on my plate before serving him, though I've made no move to lift my knife. It's been an unspoken rule, since that day three years ago, that the servants see to my needs first. A subtle but consistent statement of loyalty that never fails to irk Daerilin.

I glance toward the soldiers' tables surreptitiously. With their leather-and-bronze armor glinting in the firelight and ebony hair pulled up into tight knots, the foreign soldiers stand out like hawks among sparrows, the hilts of their weapons dark against their hips. Our own warriors and women look pale and washed out beside them, our skin and hair so much lighter. And while our men wear their swords and daggers as well, with friendship bands binding hilt to scabbard, they have none of the practiced grace of the Menaiyans when they walk.

As I study them, I catch the eye of the foreign captain. Like the other soldiers, he wears his long hair in a smooth knot. Without a fall of hair to soften his features, he looks weathered and hard, his eyes flat, ungiving. I look away quickly, turning back to Daerilin. At least he might tell me what my mother hasn't deigned to share.

"We are hardly a strong ally for them," I observe as casually as I can. "I don't see why the king would come so far for me."

"Perhaps they're just looking for a mouse to snap up," he says. "Their royalty do seem to die with impressive frequency. They wouldn't want to upset their closer allies by accidentally killing off the bride." He lifts his goblet in a mock toast. "I daresay no one would raise an outcry if something were to happen to you."

I look down at my plate, the roast still untouched. Perhaps Daerilin is only baiting me. God knows he has enjoyed his taunts these last years. But the Menaiyan queen did die under mysterious circumstances a year ago, and there are precious few members of the royal family left now.

The servant at our back steps forward, refilling my goblet with juice for all that it's nearly full, and for just a moment I feel her touch my elbow, a reassurance that I'm not alone. I smile for her and force myself to take a bite of the roast.

"I hear," Daerilin says lightly, "that this Prince Kestrin is not one to be crossed. Quite a temper he has when he is displeased."

I wish that I could come up with a snide rejoinder, but my wits fail me. Better to remain silent than to continue opening myself to his jibes. When I make no further response, Daerilin turns to discuss a territorial dispute in the south with the lady to his left. The serving girl behind me slips me one of my favorite meat pies, and then, when I cannot manage much of that, a sweet pastry, her hand brushing my shoulder as she steps back.

My gaze returns to the foreign warriors. Their captain eats sparingly, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his dagger. He watches me continually, unapologetically, as if he intends to take his full measure of me this night. No matter how long I look away, when I glance back I find his eyes on me. I doubt there is little he misses. Eventually I drop my hands to my lap and give up all pretense of eating.

Chapter 2

The following morning, I call on my mother as she dresses for a second day of meetings with the king. She waves her maids away at last and peers into the oval mirror that hangs on her wall. It is one of her prized possessions, framed in silver and polished to a shine, just large enough to show her face. She smooths her elaborately coiffed hair, her eyes finding mine through the glass.

“To what do I owe the honor of your presence?” she asks with cool amusement, as if just noticing me. I gather my courage. “I wish to inquire as to the king’s purpose in visiting us.”

“Oh?” Mother smiles, her hazel eyes hooded. “Has it finally occurred to you to ask?”

“I’ve heard rumors,” I say cautiously. And if I had any question about them, they were answered last night by Daerilin. Still, I want to hear it from her. In truth, I wanted her to tell me before I had to ask, fool that I am.

She sighs. “Prince Kestrin is of an age to marry. His father has come to assess your worth as a bride.” “My worth,” I repeat. “And what is that?”

“Not much,” Mother says bluntly. “It is the only issue that

gives me pause. We cannot be sure why he would settle for you." She must have discussed this in detail with her Council of Lords, and even they can find no reason for the king's interest. The thought raises the hair at the back of my neck.

"What has he said, though?" I ask as my mother turns away. "Surely you spoke of it yesterday?"

She pauses, her mouth pressed into an expression of distaste. "He gave only two reasons, neither of which I believe."

"What are they?"

"That he wished for an alliance outside of their own court, so Prince Kestrin chose you of his own accord.

And"—Mother meets my gaze, her eyes darkening with anger—"that you are known to be honest." "Oh," I manage. In an effort to deflect her fury, I ask, "Why would Prince Kestrin choose me?" "He wouldn't."

I bow my head. Perhaps Daerilin is right: they seek a bride no one will miss should she die unexpectedly.

My family has long considered me dispensable, my only use as a tool to secure a political alliance. In Menaiya, I will not even have that value.

"I hope we will reach an agreement by tomorrow," Mother says finally. She is beautiful in the morning sunlight, her hair glowing deep brown, her features smooth and her anger hidden. I can find nothing to say, looking at her and trying to understand. Tomorrow? Betrothed? When we still don't know why?

"Until then, stay out of the way." She turns back to her mirror. When I do not move, she gestures sharply to the door. "Go on, then. I've more than enough to worry about without you underfoot. And do not speak to the king if you can avoid

him. There's no need for him to know any more clearly what a simpleton you are."

I leave in silence. For a moment, I stand in the hallway, considering another whole day closed up in my room, and then I turn my footsteps toward the stable. If my mother wants me out from underfoot, it is but my duty to obey.

Redna saddles Acorn for me at once. "Your brother was just here looking for you," she says softly, guarding her words from the Menaiyan soldiers tending to their horses farther down the main aisle of the stable. "Best ride out at once."

"I'll spend the day out," I assure her.

"There's dried fruit and a flask of water in your saddlebags."

I smile my thanks. Redna pats my arm and hands me the reins.

I take the path that cuts away from the village to the woods, keeping Acorn to a steady trot until we reach the forested paths. The trees stand spaced well apart from each other, the leaf-littered floor dappled with late summer sunlight. I guide Acorn to a dell we have often visited.

Leaving as I did, I have nothing with me to do today, no book to read nor embroidery to finish, nor do I seek any of the herbs that grow among the trees and in the clearings for our wisewoman's use. Instead, I sit on a sun-warmed stone, listening to the soft buzz of insects and the swish of Acorn's tail as he grazes, and think about the king, and his son, and my mother's words.

I cannot find out the king's motivations, and if neither my mother nor her lords can either, then it's unlikely I'll find an answer out here in the woods. But I do know that my mother

fully expects the betrothal to go forward. What I must think on now is just how I intend to present myself to the king in order to escape his contempt as long as possible. He may speak of honesty as if it were a good thing, but his words were a political maneuver. He laid out my worth before the court with a few pleasant words, that he might watch their reaction. He'll find me to be as stupid as my family does soon enough, if he doesn't already. As will his son.

As morning ebbs to noontime, a light breeze starts up.

"Old friend," I say, turning my head toward it. "Is that you?" The Wind answers with a puff of summer. *Here.*

I smile. The Wind has visited me in this dell since I was a child. I learned quickly that it did not speak to anyone else, and over time it has become both my closest confidant and my biggest secret. It's hardly an appropriate thing to visit with woodland spirits—even if this one is nowhere near as capricious as the old tales would have me believe. Now, I say, "The king of Menaiya has come to visit."

The Wind ruffles my skirts. From my perch on a rock, I watch the few blades of grass bend beneath its gentle influence. *Visit?*

"Mother hopes he will betroth me to his son, Prince Kestrin." I think of Menaiya with its sweeping central plains and tongue-twisting language—a language of which I have only a rudimentary knowledge. I cannot imagine living there, in a city with no forests to wander and no one to speak with, no one but a prince I do not know if I can trust. When I lift my hand to pat down a stray lock of hair, I realize my fingers are trembling. I clench my hands together tightly, pressing them into my lap.

The Wind lifts up and brushes back my hair. *Do not fear.*

I cock my head, considering. It is rare for the Wind to string words together, which means it must find this situation of grave importance. I smile. What could the Wind know of marriage?

"I've always expected that I'd have to marry eventually, to someone I didn't really know. But I—I'd hoped it would be someone who might come to care for me, someone with kindness in his heart." I think of the king's first mocking words to me, and his captain's cold assessment, and the distant court, and find it suddenly difficult to breathe. "I am afraid," I finally admit to the Wind, "of what will happen to me there. If I can even survive, as so many of their royal family have not." As none of their women have.

The Wind falls still. I wonder if it can understand, or if it too is lost for words.

I start back to the hall well before dinner, the Wind whispering through the woods with me, leaving me only as the path reaches the main road. Redna greets me with a nod as I enter the gates, deftly reaching for Acorn's bridle to help me dismount.

"They're still in the meeting rooms," she tells me. "But you'd best stay out of the halls."

This time, Cook does not send me away. Instead, she gestures to a stool beside one of the tables, informs me I'm not to work, and leaves me there. No one here will mention my presence outside of the kitchen, not with the king here and my brother on the prowl.

"Have you learned any more from them?" I ask Dara. "Have they mentioned their prince?"

“No, there’s only a handful as speak our language, and they aren’t given to gossip. Their captain, Sarkor’s his name, keeps a keen watch on them.” I have no doubt of that.

“But they don’t kick the dogs and they don’t waste their food,” she says. “I won’t mind them staying here as long as they need, truth to tell.”

And I wouldn’t mind them leaving, if only they will leave me behind.

The next day, on my way to our hall’s temple, I make a dire mistake. I assume the meetings will continue, that I can pass down that corridor without concern, but as I near the entrance to the meeting room, the door swings open. I step back, my stomach lurching as I meet my brother’s eyes. He smiles.

“Alyrra, what a surprise.” He crosses the hall and his hand closes tightly around my forearm. “Why don’t we walk a little?”

I nod woodenly, aware that I don’t dare pull away before the curious gazes of the other nobles leaving the meeting room. My brother leads me down the hall, the pressure of his grip a warning of what is to come.

“Princess Alyrra,” an unfamiliar voice calls from behind us. My brother and I turn together to see the king striding toward us. “I see you wish to converse with your brother. I hope you will not mind my taking a few minutes of your time first?”

“Of course not, my lord,” my brother says for me, releasing my arm. He turns to me, his smile a dark promise. “We can always speak later. I’ll find you.”

The king nods toward my brother and gestures me on. I fall into step with him.

"Do you have gardens here?" he asks. "Somewhere quiet to speak?" "Only herb gardens, my lord."

"Good enough," he says, his teeth flashing between his lips. I lead him down to the back entrance to the gardens, and we walk along between plots of dill, thyme, and chives. I wait, knowing he will speak when he is ready.

"How much does your mother confide in you?" he asks as we near the middle of the gardens. I slide a look at him from the corner of my eye. "Enough. My lord."

His lips quirk, the first true smile I have seen from him. "Is that honest?"

I pause beside a bed of borage. "How much do I need to know, my lord? You are here seeking a wife for your son."

"I am," he agrees. "How often do you participate in the discussions between your mother and the council?" "I don't, my lord. You should know I am not . . ." I hesitate, aware that I have no place telling this king what he should or should not know. Or jeopardizing such an alliance for my land.

"Not what?"

I struggle to find an appropriate way to finish. "Not—it is not thought my place to attend such meetings." "You would never inherit the throne?"

I could inherit, it is true, but I doubt the council would allow it given my history—and certainly not now that I might marry into another royal family, one that would be happy to add our lands to their own. Either way, should my brother die, the council would certainly pass over me in favor of our nearest cousin. "It is unlikely," I say finally.

"I doubt that," the king says. "It has been my experience that

even young men die. What you mean to say is your council would not accept you should your brother die without issue and you were yet unwed. Why?"

If he knows all the answers, why is he asking? I look him in the eye and quip, "Perhaps I am too honest, my lord."

He laughs. "And too straightforward. You will have to learn to play with your words more." He reaches out, his fingertips brushing my arm where my brother held me. I flinch back reflexively, as if the bruises have already darkened—as if he could see them through my sleeve. He watches me, his eyes glinting in the sunlight. "Once you are Menaiya's," he says, "your brother will never hurt you again."

He dips his head in a bow and leaves me standing among the herbs.

I wait in my chamber all the following day, held in place by Mother's warning of the upcoming betrothal, the king's words my only company. I no longer know what to make of him. Was his promise of protection from my brother calculated to encourage me to overlook his first words to me? Does he think to win my gratitude now in order to use me for his own ends once I arrive in Menaiya? Or does he actually care that I not be harmed?

When the knock I've been expecting sounds, it is late afternoon. Steward Jerash waits to escort me down to the meeting rooms. It is the first time I've entered them since the king arrived.

Jerash announces my entrance to the room and bows low. I feel at once the sharpness of my mother's regard, the

low-browed malice of my brother's. They sit with the king at the head of a great table. Before them, seated in chairs or standing respectfully, are arrayed my mother's closest vassals as well as the king's own retainers. I curtsy. When I rise, I meet my mother's gaze.

She smiles at me, the smile of a merchant having sold her wares. "Alyrra, the king of Menaiya has offered a match for you with his son. Will you accept?"

I have had time enough to find the words for my answer. They are as much for the king as for my family. "I will do only as you wish, Mother."

My brother, sitting beside her, frowns.

The corners of the king's eyes crinkle slightly, as if he is faintly amused. I will be loyal, my answer tells him. And the betrothal will transfer my allegiances to his family. Perhaps this will be enough to gain his protection in his own court.

"It is a good alliance, daughter," my mother replies smoothly.

"Then I accept." My words rustle through the room, carried by the shifting of nobles, the soft exhalations of satisfaction. There could be no other answer to give.

A court scribe lays a sheaf of papers on the table before me. I turn through the sheets quickly, noticing only that my mother has granted me some border estates in our kingdom for the duration of my life, something to still anchor me to Adania. The last page has a few lines of writing, leaving space for our signatures. I sign carefully, pleased at how smoothly I write, at the way my hand does not tremble as I put down the quill and straighten.

The scribe places the papers before the king. As the king

reaches for the quill, I see neither satisfaction nor sorrow in his expression. There is nothing to tell me his emotions; his composure is complete. He leans forward to sign his name in lieu of his son's, and then Lord Daerilin and another lord step forward to sign as witnesses, followed by the two lords accompanying the king. The scribe collects the papers and steps back, and the betrothal is complete.

The king turns to me once more and smiles, though I cannot tell whether it is a true smile or a courtly one.

"I am pleased to have gained a daughter," he says, his words clear and carrying.

"I am honored to be welcomed to your family, my lord." Practiced words, dangerously empty sounding. I had not meant for them to carry so little weight.

I meet the king's gaze, willing him to see me as strong and capable and loyal. But he assessed what my family thought of me upon his arrival, and he has taken his own measure of me since then. The only thing that gives me hope is the promise he made in the herb gardens, and that may have been as much a battle strategy as a kindness. Yet it is all I have to rely on.

My mother speaks then, about the honor such an alliance brings to our land. A moment later, she dismisses me.

The rest of the evening blurs together. Jilna dresses me for dinner, adorning my neck and wrists with jewels from the treasury. Mother announces the betrothal to the hall as soldiers and servants alike cheer. Toasts are made to the new couple's good health. Even Lord Daerilin makes a speech on the long-standing friendship of our two kingdoms, yet I do not quite hear it as I sit beside him, cannot quite recall his words a moment later.

I leave the hall at the end of the meal, my head ringing with the din of so many people, my eyes tearing from exhaustion. I grow aware in a strange, detached way that there have been footsteps behind me for some time. It occurs to me to wonder who follows me, and then a hand closes on my arm and spins me around, shoving me against the wall.

"Think you're something special now, don't you?" My brother towers over me, his shoulders blocking out the light, his breath stinking of ale. His eyes are red-rimmed, narrowed with drink and anger.

"Brother," I say stupidly. His hands tighten on my arms, pressing me against the wall, his face hovering just above mine.

"Going to be queen, are you? Think you're better than us now?" His fingers dig into my flesh, nails pressing through the thin fabric of my sleeves to gouge my skin with bruising intensity.

"No," I waver, fear breaking through the bleakness that has gripped me. I need to get away from him.

Now—before the Menaiyans see us, before he hurts me in a way that will be difficult to hide.

"Of course not." His hair falls over his forehead as he leans even closer, speaking into my ear. "You're only doing what you're told, aren't you?"

"It was never my choice," I say, trying desperately to pull out of his grip.

He laughs, tightening his hold on me until a soft cry breaks from my lips. "Oh no, I don't think you're going anywhere quite yet." "Brother—"

"Do you know what a prince does when he marries a little witch like you?" He shoves me hard against the wall. Only the bulk of my hair bound up at the back of my head saves me from cracking my skull against the stone. "There are stories, lovely stories. The poor little princess is found floating in the well one morning, tripped and fell in quite by accident. Or they find her body beneath the palace walls—cast herself off in a fit of madness. These things happen, you see. Terribly sad. But the alliance stands strong, and the family mourns, and the prince remarries." He laughs, winding his hand into the hair at the base of my neck, forcing my head back so that I must meet his gaze.

"I expect he'll have his fun with you. Perhaps he'll throw you to his soldiers and let you choose your future: a brothel or a knife for your throat. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"He's not like that," I whisper, trembling. *Please, don't let him be like that.*

"Are you calling me a liar?"

I swallow a sob, shaking my head. His fingers yank at my hair; loose hairpins scrape my scalp.

"Do you think your betrothal will protect you from me, little sister? After what you did? You *dare* to insult me?" His voice rises as he speaks, spittle spraying my cheek.

"Is the princess unwell?"

My brother starts and twists to look over his shoulder at the speaker.

I sag against the wall as he drops his hand, the coiled weight of my hair dangling from what few pins still hold it.

"This doesn't concern you," he snarls.

"If the princess requires an escort to her room, I would be pleased to provide it," the unknown speaker says, his voice carrying the faint lilt of Menaiya.

I sidle past my brother and find myself facing the foreign captain, Sarkor, who watched me continually through that first dinner. His face is all planes and hard angles in the dimness of the hall. Is he actually challenging my brother?

"Do you require an escort?" Sarkor asks me with a slight dip of his head, as if he were my dancing partner.

From his left ear a small silver hoop gleams in the darkness, set with an emerald.

It takes me two tries to get my words out. "N-no. Thank you." I take another step alongside the wall, then another, the captain watching me impassively, my brother tense with fury. I turn and begin walking, my feet uncertain beneath me. It is only a temporary escape. When my brother finds me again, he will be doubly angry. Ruthless.

Behind me, the captain begins to speak, his voice too low to pick out the words. I can barely keep from breaking into a run as I turn the corner to my room. What if my brother has gotten away from him already? And then I do run, pelting down the hall to my room. I slam the door shut and shoot the bolt home. My breath rattles in my chest. I lean my forehead against the door, half listening for the approach of booted feet.

When Jilna comes a half hour later, she knocks thrice, calling her name that I might know it is only her.

I sit hunched on my bed, listening, but I do not let her in, cannot bear to be touched, to be spoken to now, to have my brother's violence made real by her presence.

She is used to me, used to these things, and when I do not answer she leaves.

I undress slowly, awkwardly. I run my fingers over the bruises on my arms, then brush out my hair, careful of the tender spots where my scalp still aches. But I cannot wipe my brother's words from my memory, cannot escape the echoes of his voice.

It is long and long before I sleep.