



CHAPTER



“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 and 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 my family.

He 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 desperate 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 fine.”

“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 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 couldn’t 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 a 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, unyielding. 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 their 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.

