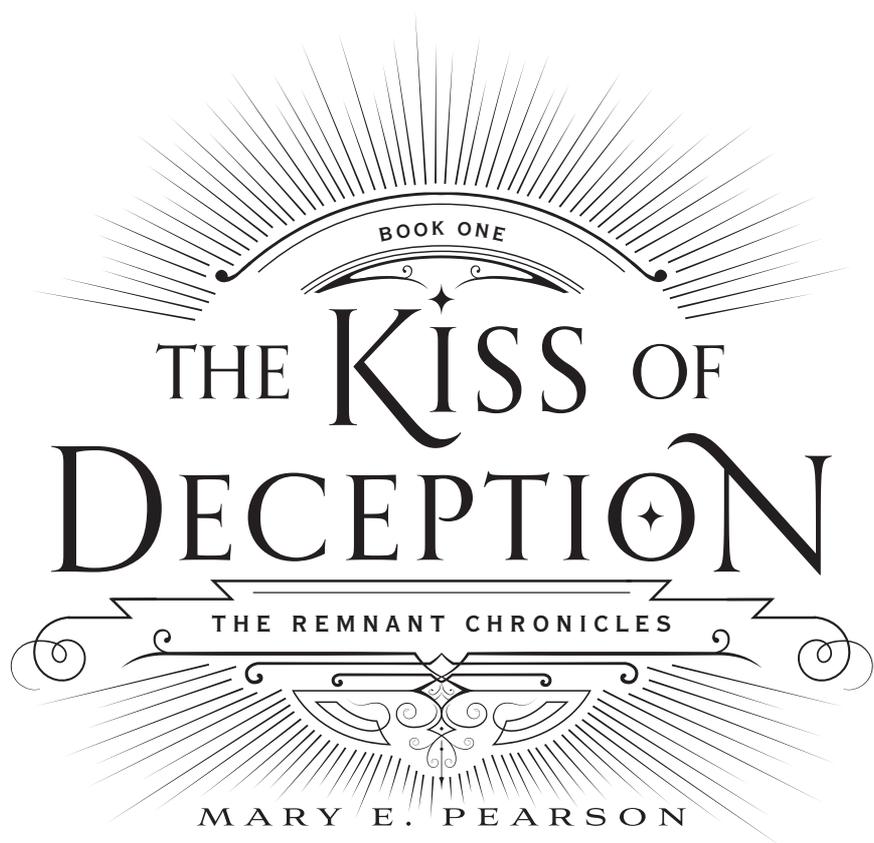


THE KISS OF
DECEPTION



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*For the boy who took a chance,
For the man who made it last*

Journey's end. The promise. The hope.

Tell me again, Ama. About the light.

I search my memories. A dream. A story. A blurred remembrance.

I was smaller than you, child.

The line between truth and sustenance unravels. The need. The hope. My own grandmother telling stories to fill me because there was nothing more. I look at this child, windlestraw, a full stomach not even visiting her dreams. Hopeful. Waiting. I pull her thin arms, gather the feather of flesh into my lap.

Once upon a time, my child, there was a princess no bigger than you. The world was at her fingertips. She commanded, and the light obeyed. The sun, moon, and stars knelt and rose at her touch. Once upon a time . . .

Gone. Now there is only this golden-eyed child in my arms. That is what matters. And the journey's end. The promise. The hope.

Come, my child. It's time to go.

Before the scavengers come.

The things that last. The things that remain. The things I dare not speak to her.

I'll tell you more as we walk. About before.

Once upon a time . . .

—The Last Testaments of Gaudrel

CHAPTER ONE



TODAY WAS THE DAY A THOUSAND DREAMS WOULD DIE and a single dream would be born.

The wind knew. It was the first of June, but cold gusts bit at the hilltop citadelle as fiercely as deepest winter, shaking the windows with curses and winding through drafty halls with warning whispers. There was no escaping what was to come.

For good or bad, the hours were closing in. I closed my eyes against the thought, knowing that soon the day would cleave in two, forever creating the before and after of my life, and it would happen in one swift act that I could no more alter than the color of my eyes.

I pushed away from the window, fogged with my own breath, and left the endless hills of Morrighan to their own worries. It was time for me to meet my day.

The prescribed liturgies passed as they were ordained, the rituals and rites as each had been precisely laid out, all a testament to the greatness of Morrighan and the Remnant from which it was born. I didn't protest. By this point, numbness had overtaken me, but then midday approached, and my heart galloped again as I faced the last of the steps that kept here from there.

I lay naked, facedown on a stone-hard table, my eyes focused on the floor beneath me while strangers scraped my back with dull knives. I remained perfectly still, even though I knew the knives brushing my skin were held with cautious hands. The bearers were well aware that their lives depended on their skill. Perfect stillness helped me hide the humiliation of my nakedness as strange hands touched me.

Pauline sat nearby watching, probably with worried eyes. I couldn't see her, only the slate floor beneath me, my long dark hair tumbling down around my face in a swirling black tunnel that blocked the world out—except for the rhythmic rasp of the blades.

The last knife reached lower, scraping the tender hollow of my back just above my buttocks, and I fought the instinct to pull away, but I finally flinched. A collective gasp spread through the room.

“Be still!” my aunt Cloris admonished.

I felt my mother's hand on my head, gently caressing my hair. “A few more lines, Arabella. That's all.”

Even though this was offered as comfort, I bristled at the formal name my mother insisted on using, the hand-me-down name that had belonged to so many before me. I wished that at

least on this last day in Morrighan, she'd cast formality aside and use the one I favored, the pet name my brothers used, shortening one of my many names to its last three letters. *Lia*. A simple name that felt truer to who I was.

The scraping ended. "It is finished," the First Artisan declared. The other artisans murmured their agreement.

I heard the clatter of a tray being set on the table next to me and whiffed the overpowering scent of rose oil. Feet shuffled around to form a circle—my aunts, mother, Pauline, others who'd been summoned to witness the task—and mumbled prayers were sung. I watched the black robe of the priest brush past me, and his voice rose above the others as he drizzled the hot oil on my back. The artisans rubbed it in, their practiced fingers sealing in the countless traditions of the House of Morrighan, deepening the promises written upon my back, heralding the commitments of today and ensuring all their tomorrows.

They can hope, I thought bitterly as my mind jumped out of turn, trying to keep order to the tasks still before me, the ones written only on my heart and not a piece of paper. I barely heard the utterances of the priest, a droning chant that spoke to all of their needs and none of my own.

I was only seventeen. Wasn't I entitled to my own dreams for the future?

"And for Arabella Celestine Idris Jezelia, First Daughter of the House of Morrighan, the fruits of her sacrifice and the blessings of . . ."

He prattled on and on, the endless required blessings and sacraments, his voice rising, filling the room, and then when I

thought I could stand no more, his very words pinching off my airways, he stopped, and for a merciful sweet moment, silence rang in my ears. I breathed again, and then the final benediction was given.

“For the Kingdoms rose out of the ashes of men and are built on the bones of the lost, and thereunto we shall return if Heaven wills.” He lifted my chin with one hand, and with the thumb of his other hand, he smudged my forehead with ashes.

“So shall it be for this First Daughter of the House of Morrighan,” my mother finished, as was the tradition, and she wiped the ashes away with an oil-dipped cloth.

I closed my eyes and lowered my head. *First Daughter*. Both blessing and curse. And if the truth be known, a sham.

My mother laid her hand on me again, her palm resting on my shoulder, maybe offered as a gesture of comfort, but my skin stung at her touch. Her comfort came too late. The priest offered one last prayer in my mother’s native tongue, a prayer of safekeeping that, oddly, wasn’t tradition, and then she drew her hand away.

More oil was poured, and a low, haunting singsong of prayers echoed through the cold stone chamber, the rose scent heavy on the air and in my lungs. I breathed deeply. In spite of myself, I relished this part, the hot oils and warm hands kneading compliance into knots that had been growing inside me for weeks. The velvet warmth soothed the sting of acid from the lemon mixed with dye, and the flowery fragrance momentarily swept me away to a hidden summer garden where no one could find me. If only it were that easy.

Again, this step was declared finished, and the artisans stepped back from their handiwork. There was an audible gathering of breath as the final results on my back were viewed.

I heard someone shuffle closer. “I daresay he won’t be looking long upon her back with the rest of that view at his disposal.” A titter ran through the room. Aunt Bernette was never one to restrain her words, even with a priest in the room and protocol at stake. My father claimed I got my impulsive tongue from her, though today I’d been warned to control it.

Pauline took my arm and helped me to rise. “Your Highness,” she said as she handed me a soft sheet to wrap around myself, sparing what little dignity I had left. We exchanged a quick knowing glance, which bolstered me, and then she guided me to the full-length mirror, giving me a small silver hand mirror, that I might view the results too. I swept my long hair aside and let the sheet fall enough to expose my lower back.

The others waited in silence for my response. I resisted drawing in a breath. I wouldn’t give my mother that satisfaction, but I couldn’t deny that my wedding kavah was exquisite. It did indeed leave me in awe. The ugly crest of the Kingdom of Dalbreck had been made startlingly beautiful, the snarling lion tamed on my back, the intricate designs gracefully hemming in his claws, the swirling vines of Morrighan weaving in and out with nimble elegance, spilling in a V down my back until the last delicate tendrils clung and swirled in the gentle hollow of my lower spine. The lion was honored and yet cleverly subdued.

My throat tightened, and my eyes stung. It was a kavah I might have loved . . . might have been proud to wear. I swallowed and

imagined the prince when the vows were complete and the wedding cloak lowered, gaping with awe. *The lecherous toad*. But I gave the artisans their due.

“It is perfection. I thank you, and I’ve no doubt the Kingdom of Dalbreck will from this day forward hold the artisans of Morrighan in highest esteem.” My mother smiled at my effort, knowing that these few words from me were hard-won.

And with that, everyone was ushered away, the remaining preparations to be shared only with my parents, and Pauline, who would assist me. My mother brought the white silk underdress from the wardrobe, a mere wisp of fabric so thin and fluid it melted across her arms. To me it was a useless formality, for it covered very little, being as transparent and helpful as the endless layers of tradition. The gown came next, the back plunging in the same V so as to frame the kavaḥ honoring the prince’s kingdom and displaying his bride’s new allegiance.

My mother tightened the laces in the hidden structure of the dress, pulling it snug so the bodice appeared to effortlessly cling to my waist even without fabric stretching across my back. It was an engineering feat as remarkable as the great bridge of Golgata, maybe more so, and I wondered if the seamstresses had cast a bit of magic into the fabric and threads. It was better to think on these details than what the short hour would bring. My mother turned me ceremoniously to face the mirror.

Despite my resentment, I was hypnotized. It was truly the most beautiful gown I had ever seen. Stunningly elegant, the dense Quiaṣṣé lace of local lace makers was the only adornment around the dipping neckline. *Simplicity*. The lace flowed in a V

down the bodice to mirror the cut of the back of the dress. I looked like someone else in it, someone older and wiser. Someone with a pure heart that held no secrets. Someone . . . not like me.

I walked away without comment and stared out the window, my mother's soft sigh following on my heels. In the far distance, I saw the lone red spire of Golgata, its single crumbling ruin all that remained of the once massive bridge that spanned the vast inlet. Soon, it too would be gone, swallowed up like the rest of the great bridge. Even the mysterious engineering magic of the Ancients couldn't defy the inevitable. Why should I try?

My stomach lurched, and I shifted my gaze closer to the bottom of the hill, where wagons lumbered on the road far below the citadelle heading toward the town square, perhaps laden with fruit, or flowers, or kegs of wine from the Morrighan vineyards. Fine carriages pulled by matching ribboned steeds dotted the lane as well.

Maybe in one of those carriages, my oldest brother, Walther, and his young bride, Greta, sat with fingers entwined on their way to my wedding, scarcely able to break their gazes from each other. And maybe my other brothers were already at the square, flashing their smiles at young girls who drew their fancy. I remembered seeing Regan, dreamy-eyed and whispering to the coachman's daughter just a few days ago in a dark hallway, and Bryn dallied with a new girl each week, unable to settle on just one. Three older brothers I adored, all free to fall in love and marry anyone they chose. The girls free to choose as well. Everyone free, including Pauline, who had a beau who would return to her at month's end.

“How did you do it, Mother?” I asked, still staring at the passing carriages below. “How did you travel all the way from Gastineux to marry a toad you didn’t love?”

“Your father is not a toad,” my mother said sternly.

I whirled to face her. “A king maybe, but a toad nonetheless. Do you tell me that when you married a stranger twice your age, you didn’t think him a toad?”

My mother’s gray eyes rested calmly on me. “No, I did not. It was my destiny and my duty.”

A weary sigh broke from my chest. “Because you were a First Daughter.”

The subject of First Daughter was one my mother always cleverly steered away from. Today, with only the two of us present and no other distractions, she couldn’t turn away. I watched her stiffen, her chin rising in good royal form. “It’s an honor, Arabella.”

“But I don’t have the gift of First Daughter. I’m not a Siarrah. Dalbreck will soon discover I’m not the asset they suppose me to be. This wedding is a sham.”

“The gift may come in time,” she answered weakly.

I didn’t argue this point. It was known that most First Daughters came into their gift by womanhood, and I had been a woman for four years now. I’d shown no signs of any gift. My mother clung to false hopes. I turned away, looking out the window again.

“Even if it doesn’t come,” my mother continued, “the wedding is no sham. This union is about far more than just one asset. The honor and privilege of a First Daughter in a royal

bloodline is a gift in itself. It carries history and tradition with it. That's all that matters."

"Why First Daughter? Can you be sure the gift isn't passed to a son? Or a Second Daughter?"

"It's happened, but . . . not to be expected. And not tradition."

And is it tradition to lose your gift too? Those unspoken words hung razor sharp between us, but even I couldn't wound my mother with them. My father hadn't consulted with her on matters of state since early in their marriage, but I had heard the stories of before, when her gift was strong and what she said mattered. That is, if any of it was even true. I wasn't sure anymore.

I had little patience for such gibberish. I liked my words and reasoning simple and straightforward. And I was so tired of hearing about tradition that I was certain if the word were spoken aloud one more time, my head would explode. My mother was from another time.

I heard her approach and felt her warm arms circle about me. My throat swelled. "My precious daughter," she whispered against my ear, "whether the gift comes or doesn't come is of little matter. Don't worry yourself so. It's your wedding day."

To a toad. I had caught a glimpse of the King of Dalbreck when he came to draw up the agreement—as if I were a horse given in trade to his son. The king was as decrepit and crooked as an old crone's arthritic toe—old enough to be my own father's father. Hunched and slow, he needed assistance up the steps to the Grand Hall. Even if the prince was a fraction of his age, he'd

still be a withered, toothless fop. The thought of him touching me, much less—

I shivered at the thought of bony old hands caressing my cheek or shriveled sour lips meeting mine. I kept my gaze fixed out the window, but saw nothing beyond the glass. “Why could I not have at least inspected him first?”

My mother’s arms dropped from around me. “Inspect a prince? Our relationship with Dalbreck is already tenuous at best. You’d have us insult their kingdom with such a request when Morri-ghan is hoping to create a crucial alliance?”

“I’m not a soldier in Father’s army.”

My mother drew closer, brushing my cheek, and whispered, “Yes, my dear. You are.”

A chill danced down my spine.

She gave me a last squeeze and stepped back. “It’s time. I’ll go retrieve the wedding cloak from the vault,” she said, and left.

I crossed the room to my wardrobe and flung open the doors, sliding out the bottom drawer and lifting a green velvet pouch that held a slim jeweled dagger. It had been a gift on my sixteenth birthday from my brothers, a gift I was never allowed to use—at least openly—but the back of my dressing chamber door bore the gouged marks of my secret practice. I snatched a few more belongings, wrapping them in a chemise, and tied it all with ribbon to secure it.

Pauline returned from dressing herself, and I handed her the small bundle.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said, a jumble of nerves at the last-minute preparations. She left the chamber just as my mother returned with the cloak.

“Take care of what?” my mother asked.

“I gave her a few more things I want to take with me.”

“The belongings you need were sent off in trunks yesterday,” she said as she crossed the room toward my bed.

“There were a few we forgot.”

She shook her head, reminding me there was precious little room in the carriage and that the journey to Dalbreck was a long one.

“I’ll manage,” I answered.

She carefully laid the cloak across my bed. It had been steamed and hung in the vault so no fold or wrinkle would tarnish its beauty. I ran my hand along the short velvet nap. The blue was as dark as midnight, and the rubies, tourmalines, and sapphires circling the edges were its stars. The jewels would prove useful. It was tradition that the cloak should be placed on the bride’s shoulders by both her parents, and yet my mother had returned alone.

“Where is—” I started to ask, but then I heard an army of footsteps echoing in the hallway. My heart sank lower than it already was. He wasn’t coming alone, even for this. My father entered the chamber flanked by the Lord Viceregent on one side, the Chancellor and the Royal Scholar on the other, and various minions of his cabinet parading on their heels. I knew the Viceregent was only doing his job—he had pulled me aside

shortly after the documents were signed and told me that he alone had argued against the marriage—but he was ultimately a rigid man of duty like the rest of them. I especially disliked the Scholar and Chancellor, as they were well aware, but I felt little guilt about it, since I knew the feeling was mutual. My skin crawled whenever I neared them, as though I had just walked through a field of blood-sucking vermin. They, more than anyone, were probably glad to be rid of me.

My father approached, kissed both of my cheeks, and stepped back to look at me, finally breathing a hearty sigh. “As beautiful as your mother on our wedding day.”

I wondered if the unusual display of emotion was for the benefit of those who looked on. I rarely saw a moment of affection pass between my mother and father, but then in a brief second I watched his eyes shift from me to her and linger there. My mother stared back at him, and I wondered what passed between them. Love? Or regret at love lost and what might have been? The uncertainty alone filled a strange hollow within me, and a hundred questions sprang to my lips, but with the Chancellor and Scholar and the impatient entourage looking on, I was reluctant to ask any of them. Maybe that was my father’s intent.

The Timekeeper, a pudgy man with bulging eyes, pulled out his ever-present pocket watch. He and the others ushered my father around as if they were the ones who ruled the kingdom instead of the other way around. “We’re pressed for time, Your Majesty,” he reminded my father.

The Viceregent gave me a sympathetic glance but nodded agreement. “We don’t want to keep the royal family of Dalbreck

waiting on this momentous occasion. As you well know, Your Majesty, it wouldn't be well received."

The spell and gaze were broken. My mother and father lifted the cloak and set it about my shoulders, securing the clasp at my neck, and then my father alone raised the hood over my head and again kissed each cheek, but this time with much more reserve, only fulfilling protocol. "You serve the Kingdom of Morrighan well on this day, Arabella."

Lia.

He hated the name Jezelia because it had no precedent in the royal lineage, *no precedent anywhere*, he had argued, but my mother had insisted upon it without explanation. On this point she had remained unyielding. It was probably the last time my father conceded anything to her wishes. I never would have known as much if not for Aunt Bernette, and even she treaded carefully around the subject, still a prickly thorn between my parents.

I searched his face. The fleeting tenderness of just a moment past was gone, his thoughts already moving on to matters of state, but I held his gaze, hoping for more. There was nothing. I lifted my chin, standing taller. "Yes, I do serve the kingdom well, as I should, Your Majesty. I am, after all, a soldier in your army."

He frowned and looked quizzically to my mother. Her head shook softly, silently dismissing the matter. My father, always the king first and father second, was satisfied with ignoring my remark, because as always, other matters did press. He turned and walked away with his entourage, saying he'd meet me at the abbey, his duty to me now fulfilled. *Duty*. That was a word I hated as much as *tradition*.

“Are you ready?” my mother asked when the others had left the room.

I nodded. “But I have to attend to a personal need before we leave. I’ll meet you in the lower hall.”

“I can—”

“Please, Mother—” My voice broke for the first time. “I just need a few minutes.”

My mother relented, and I listened to the lonely echo of her footsteps as she retreated down the hallway.

“Pauline?” I whispered, swiping at my cheeks.

Pauline entered my room through the dressing chamber. We stared at each other, no words necessary, clearly understanding what lay ahead of us, every detail of the day already wrestled with during a long, sleepless night.

“There’s still time to change your mind. Are you sure?” Pauline asked, giving me a last chance to back out.

Sure? My chest squeezed with pain, a pain so deep and real I wondered if hearts really were capable of breaking. Or was it fear that pierced me? I pressed my hand hard against my chest, trying to soothe the stab I felt there. Maybe this was the point of cleaving. “There’s no turning back. The choice was made for me,” I answered. “From this moment on, this is the destiny that I’ll have to live with, for better or worse.”

“I pray the better, my friend,” Pauline said, nodding her understanding. And with that, we hurried down the empty arched hallway toward the back of the citadelle and then down the dark servants’ stairway. We passed no one—everyone was

either busy with preparations down at the abbey or waiting at the front of the citadelle for the royal procession to the square.

We emerged through a small wooden door with thick black hinges into blinding sunlight, the wind whipping at our dresses and throwing back my hood. I spotted the back fortress gate only used for hunts and discreet departures, already open as ordered. Pauline led me across a muddy paddock to the shady hidden wall of the carriage house where a wide-eyed stable boy waited with two saddled horses. His eyes grew impossibly wider as I approached. “Your Highness, you’re to take a carriage already prepared for you,” he said, choking on his words as they tumbled out. “It’s waiting by the steps at the front of the citadelle. If you—”

“The plans have changed,” I said firmly, and I gathered my gown up in great bunches so I could get a foothold in the stirrup. The straw-haired boy’s mouth fell open as he looked at my once pristine gown, the hem already sloshed with mud, now smearing my sleeves and lace bodice and, worse, the Morrighan jeweled wedding cloak. “But—”

“Hurry! A hand up!” I snapped, taking the reins from him.

He obeyed, helping Pauline in similar fashion.

“What shall I tell—”

I didn’t hear what else he said, the galloping hooves stampeding out all arguments past and present. With Pauline at my side, in one swift act that could never be undone, an act that ended a thousand dreams but gave birth to one, I bolted for the cover of the forest and never looked back.



*lest we repeat history,
the stories shall be passed
from father to son, from mother to daughter,
for with but one generation,
history and truth are lost forever.*

—Morrighan Book of Holy Text, Vol. III

CHAPTER TWO



WE SCREAMED. WE YELLED WITH ALL THE POWER OF OUR lungs, knowing the wind, hills, and distance plucked our nervous freedom from any ears that might listen. We screamed with giddy abandon and a primal need to believe in our flight. If we didn't believe, fear would overtake us. I already felt it nipping at my back as I pushed harder.

We headed north, aware that the stable boy would watch us until we vanished into the forest. When we were well within its cover, we found the streambed that I'd seen on hunts with my brothers and doubled back through the trickling waters, walking in the shallow stream until we found a rocky embankment on the other side to use for our exit, leaving no prints or trail behind us for others to follow.

Once we hit firm level ground again, we dug in our heels

and rode as if a monster were chasing us. We rode and we rode, following a little-used path that hugged the dense pines, which would give us refuge if we needed to duck in quickly. Sometimes we were dizzy with laughter, sometimes tears trickled backward across our cheeks, pushed by our speed, but most of the time we were silent, not quite believing we had actually done it.

After an hour, I wasn't sure what ached more, my thighs, my cramping calves, or my bruised backside, all unaccustomed to anything more than a stiff royal gait because these last few months my father would not allow more. My fingers were numb from gripping the reins, but Pauline didn't stop, so neither did I.

My dress streamed behind me, now wedding me to a life of uncertainty, but that frightened me far less than the certain life I had faced. This life was a dream of my own making, one where my imagination was my only boundary. It was a life that I alone commanded.

I lost track of time, the rhythm of the hooves the only thing that mattered, each beat widening the divide. Finally, almost in unison, our gleaming chestnut Ravians snorted and slowed of their own accord, as if a secret message had been spoken between them. Ravians were the pride of the Morrighan stables, and these had given us all they were worth. I looked to what little of the west I could see above the treetops. There were still at least three hours of daylight. We couldn't stop yet. We pressed on at a slower pace, and finally as the sun disappeared behind the Andeluchi Range, we searched for a safe place to camp for the night.

I listened carefully as we rode the horses through the trees and scouted for what might be a likely shelter. My neck prickled when the sudden distant squawk of birds pealed through the forest like a warning. We came upon the crumbled ruins of the Ancients, partial walls and pillars that were now more forest than civilization. They were thick with green moss and lichen, which was probably the only thing still knitting the remains upright. Maybe the modest ruins were once part of a glorious temple, but now ferns and vines were reclaiming them for the earth. Pauline kissed the back of her hand as both blessing and protection from spirits that might linger and clicked the reins to hurry past. I didn't kiss my hand, nor hurry past, but instead surveyed the green bones of another time with curiosity, as I always did, and wondered at the people who had created them.

We finally came to a small clearing. With a last glimmer of daylight overhead, and both of us sagging in our saddles, we agreed silently that this was the place to camp. All I wanted to do was collapse on the grass and sleep until morning, but the horses were just as weary and still deserved our attention, since they were our only real way to escape.

We removed the saddles, letting them fall with an unceremonious clunk to the ground because we didn't have the strength for more, then shook out the damp blankets and hung them on a branch to dry. We patted the animals' rears, and they went straight to the stream for a drink.

Pauline and I collapsed together, both too tired to eat, though neither of us had eaten all day. This morning we had been too nervous over our clandestine plans to even have a proper meal.

Though I'd considered running away for weeks, it had been unthinkable even for me, until my farewell feast last night with my family in Aldrid Hall. That was when everything changed and the unthinkable suddenly seemed like my only possible choice. When toasts and laughter were flying through the room, and I was suffocating under the weight of the revelry and the satisfied smiles of the cabinet, my eyes met Pauline's. She was standing in waiting against the far wall with the other attendants. When I shook my head, she knew. I couldn't do it. She nodded in return.

It was a silent exchange that no one else noticed, but late in the evening when everyone had retired, she returned to my chamber and the plans poured out between us. There was so little time and so much to arrange, and almost all of it hinged on getting two horses saddled with no one the wiser. At dawn, Pauline bypassed the Stable Master, who was busy preparing teams for the royal procession, and spoke quietly with the youngest stable boy, an inexperienced lad who would be too intimidated to question a direct request from the queen's court. So far, our hasty, patched-together plans had worked out.

Though we were too weary to eat, as the sun dropped lower and the light grew dimmer, our exhaustion gave way to fear. We scavenged for firewood to keep creatures that lurked in the forest a safe distance from us, or at least allow us to see their teeth before they devoured us.

Darkness came quickly and masked the whole world beyond the small flickering circle warming our feet. I watched the flames lick the air in front of us, listened to the crackle, the hiss,

and the rustle of settling wood. These were the only sounds, but we listened for more.

“Do you suppose there are bears?” Pauline asked.

“Most certainly.” But my mind had already turned to tigers. I had faced one eye to eye when I was only ten, so close I felt his breath, his snarling, his spit, his utter immensity about to engulf me. I had waited to die. Why he hadn’t attacked instantly I didn’t know, but a distant shout from my brother searching for me was all that saved my life. The animal disappeared into the forest as quickly as he had arrived. No one believed me when I told them. There were reports of tigers in the Cam Lanteux, but their numbers were few. Morrighan wasn’t their natural realm. The beast’s glassy yellow eyes still haunted my dreams. I peered past the flames into the darkness, where my dagger was still inside my saddlebag, just steps outside our safe circle of light. How foolish I was to think of it only now.

“Or worse than bears, there might be barbarians,” I said with mock terror in my voice, trying to lighten both our moods.

Pauline’s eyes grew wide, though a smile played behind them. “I’ve heard they breed like rabbits and bite the heads off small animals.”

“And speak only in snorting grunts.” I’d heard the stories too. Soldiers brought tales back from their patrols about the barbarians’ brutal ways and growing numbers. It was only because of them that the longstanding animosity between Morrighan and Dalbreck had been put aside and an uneasy alliance struck—at my expense. A large, fierce kingdom on the other side of the continent with a growing population and rumored to be stretching

its borders was more of a threat than a somewhat civilized neighboring kingdom that was at least descended from the chosen Remnant. Together, the combined forces of Morrigan and Dalbreck could be great, but alone they were miserably vulnerable. Only the Great River and the Cam Lanteux held the barbarians back.

Pauline threw another dry branch onto the fire. “You’re gifted at languages—you should have no problem with the barbarians’ grunts. That’s how half the king’s court speaks.”

We broke into giggles, imitating the Chancellor’s rumbles and the Scholar’s haughty sighs.

“Have you ever seen one?” she asked.

“Me? See a barbarian? I’ve been kept on such a short chain these last few years, I’ve scarcely seen anything.” My free days of roaming the hills and chasing after my brothers ended abruptly when my parents decided I was beginning to look like a woman so I should behave like one too. I was ripped from the freedoms I shared with Walther, Regan, and Bryn, like exploring the ruins in the woods, racing our horses across meadows, hunting small game, and getting into a fair amount of mischief. As we got older, their mischiefs continued to be shrugged off, but mine were not, and I knew from that point that I was measured by a different stick than my brothers.

After my activities were restricted, I developed a knack for slipping out unnoticed—as I did today. Not a skill my parents would have prized, though I was quite proud of it. The Scholar suspected my meanderings and set weak traps, which I easily avoided. He knew I had rummaged through the ancient text

room, which was forbidden, the texts supposedly too delicate for careless hands like mine. But back then, even though I'd managed to sneak away from the confines of the citadelle, there was really nowhere to go from there. Everyone in Civica knew who I was, and word would certainly have gotten back to my parents. As a result, my escapes had mostly been limited to occasional nighttime forays to dim back rooms for games of cards or dice with my brothers and their trusted friends who knew how to keep their mouths shut about Walther's little sister, and who might have even been sympathetic to my plight. My brothers had always enjoyed the look of surprise on their friends' faces when I gave it as well as I took it. Words and topics were not spared because of my gender or title, and those scandalous chinwags educated me in ways that a royal tutor never could.

I shaded my eyes with my hand as if I were peering into the dark woods searching for them. "I'd welcome the diversion of a savage right now. Barbarians, show yourselves!" I shouted. There was no answer. "I do believe we frighten them."

Pauline laughed, but our nervous bravado hung in the air between us. We both knew there had been occasional sightings of small bands of them in the woods crossing from Venda into the forbidden territories of the Cam Lanteux. Sometimes they even ventured boldly into the kingdoms of Morrighan and Dalbreck, disappearing as easily as wolves when they were pursued. For now, we were still too close to the heart of Morrighan to need be worried about them. I hoped. We were more likely to encounter vagabonds, the drifting nomads who sometimes strayed from the Cam Lanteux. I had never seen any myself, but had

heard of their unusual ways. They rode in their colorful wagons to trade trinkets, buy supplies, sell their mysterious potions, or sometimes play music for a coin or two, but still, they weren't the ones who worried me most. My greatest worries were my father and what I had dragged Pauline into. There was so much we hadn't had time to discuss last night.

I watched her as she absently stared into the fire, adding kindling as needed. Pauline was resourceful, but I knew she wasn't fearless, and that made her courage today far greater than mine. She had everything to lose by what we had done. I had everything to gain.

"I'm sorry, Pauline. What a tangle I've made for you."

She shrugged. "I was going to leave anyway. I told you."

"But not like this. You could have left under far more favorable circumstances."

She grinned, unable to disagree. "Maybe." Her grin slowly faded, her eyes searching my face. "But I never could have left for as important a reason. We can't always wait for the perfect timing."

I didn't deserve a friend like her. I ached with the compassion she had shown me. "We'll be hunted," I told her. "There will be a bounty on my head." This was something we hadn't talked about in the wee hours of the morning.

She looked away and shook her head vigorously. "No, not from your own father."

I sighed, hugging my shins closer and staring at the glowing embers near my feet. "Especially from my father. I've committed an act of treason, the same as if a soldier of his army had

deserted. And worse, I've humiliated him. I've made him look weak. His cabinet won't let him forget that. He'll have to act."

She couldn't disagree with this either. From the time I was twelve, as a member of the royal court, I'd been required to attend and witness the executions of traitors. It was a rare occurrence, since public hangings proved an effective deterrent, but we both knew the story of my father's own sister. She had died before I was born when she threw herself from the East Tower. Her son had deserted his regiment, and she knew that even the king's nephew wouldn't be spared. He wasn't. He was hung the next day, and they were both buried in disgrace in the same unmarked grave. Some lines couldn't be crossed in Morrighan. Loyalty was one of them.

Pauline frowned. "But you're not a soldier, Lia. You're his daughter. You had no choice, and that meant I had no choice. No one should be forced to marry someone they don't love." She lay back, gazing up at the stars and wrinkling her nose. "Especially not some old stuffy, puffy prince."

We broke into giggles again, and more than the air I breathed, I was thankful for Pauline. We watched the twinkling constellations together, and she told me about Mikael, the promises they'd made to each other, the sweet things he whispered in her ear, and the plans they'd made for when he returned from his last patrol with the Royal Guard at the end of this month. I saw the love in her eyes and the change in her voice when she spoke of him.

She told me how much she missed him but said she was confident he would find her because he knew her like no one else in

the world knew her. They had talked of Terravin for countless hours—of the life they'd build there and the children they'd raise. The more she talked, the more the ache within me grew. I had only vague, empty thoughts of the future, mostly of what I didn't want, while Pauline had fashioned dreams with real people and real details. She had created a future with someone else.

I wondered what it would be like to have someone who knew me so well, someone who would look right into my soul, someone whose very touch sent all other thoughts from my mind. I tried to imagine someone who hungered for the same things I did and wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, and *not* because it fulfilled a loveless agreement on paper.

Pauline squeezed my hand and sat up, adding more wood to the fire. "We should get some sleep so we can make an early start."

She was right. We had at least a week's ride ahead of us, assuming we didn't get lost. Pauline hadn't been to Terravin since she was a child and wasn't sure of the way, and I had never been there at all, so we could only follow her instincts and rely on the help of passing strangers. I spread a blanket on the ground for us to sleep on and brushed the needles of the forest floor from my hair.

She glanced at me hesitantly. "Do you mind if I say the holy remembrances first? I'll say them softly."

"Of course you should," I whispered, trying to display a modicum of respect for her sake and feeling a twinge of guilt that I wasn't compelled to say them myself. Pauline was faithful, while I hadn't made a secret of my disdain for the traditions that had dictated my future.

She knelt, saying the holy remembrances, her voice hypnotic,

like the soft chords of the harp that echoed throughout the abbey. I watched her, thinking how foolish fate was. She'd have made a far better First Daughter of Morrighan, the daughter my parents would have wanted, quiet and discreet of tongue, patient, loyal to the ways of old, pure of heart, perceptive to the unsaid, closer to having a gift than I would ever be, perfect for a First Daughter in all ways.

I lay back and listened to the story she chanted, the story of the original First Daughter using the gift the gods gave her to lead the chosen Remnant away from the devastation to safety and a new land, leaving behind a ravaged world and building a new, hopeful one. In her sweet lilt, the story was beautiful, redemptive, compelling, and I became lost in its rhythm, lost in the depth of the woods surrounding us, lost in the world that lay beyond, lost in the magic of a time gone by. In her tender notes, the story reached all the way to the beginning of the universe and back again. I could almost make sense of it.

I stared into the circle of sky high above the pines, distant and untouchable, sparkling, alive, and a longing grew within me to reach out and share its magic. The trees reached for the magic too, then shivered in unison as if an army of ghosts had just swept across their upper boughs—an entire knowing world just beyond my reach.

I thought of all my hidden moments as a child, sneaking away in the middle of the night to the calmest part of the citadelle—the roof—a place where the constant noise was hushed and I became one of those quiet specks connected to the universe. I felt close there, to something I couldn't name.

If I could only reach out and touch the stars, I would know everything. I would understand.

Know what, my darling?

This, I would say, pressing my hand against my chest. I had no words to describe the ache inside me.

There's nothing to know, sweet child. It's only the chill of the night. My mother would gather me in her arms and lead me back to bed. Later, when my nighttime wanderings didn't stop, she had a lock added to the rooftop door just out of my reach.

Pauline finally finished, her last words a hushed reverent whisper. *So shall it be for evermore.*

“Evermore,” I whispered to myself, wondering just how long that was.

She curled up on the blanket next to me, and I pulled the wedding cloak up over both of us. The sudden silence made the woods take a bold step closer, and our circle of light grew smaller.

Pauline quickly fell asleep, but the events of the day still churned inside me. It didn't matter that I was exhausted. My tired muscles twitched, and my mind jumped from one thought to the next like a hapless cricket dodging a stampede of feet.

My only consolation as I looked up at the blinking stars was that the prince of Dalbreck was probably still awake too, furiously jostling home on a rutted road, his old bones aching with pain in a cold, uncomfortable carriage—with no young bride to warm him.

CHAPTER THREE



THE PRINCE

I CINCHED THE BUCKLE ON MY PACK. I HAD ENOUGH TO get me by for two weeks, and enough coin in my bag if it should take me longer. Surely there would be an inn or two along the way. She probably hadn't gotten much farther than a day's ride from the citadelle.

"I can't let you do this."

I smiled at Sven. "You think you have a choice?"

I was no longer his young ward to keep out of trouble. I was a grown man, had two inches and thirty pounds on him, and enough pent-up frustration to be a formidable foe.

"You're still angry. It's only been a few days. Give it a few more."

"I'm not angry. Amused maybe. Curious."

Sven snatched the reins of my horse from me, causing him to skitter. “You’re angry because she thought of it before you did.”

Sometimes I hated Sven. For a battle-scarred curd, he was too perceptive. I grabbed the reins back. “Only amused. And curious,” I promised him.

“You already said that.”

“So I did.” I placed the saddle blanket on my horse’s back, sliding it down the withers and smoothing out the wrinkles.

Sven didn’t see anything amusing about my venture and continued to present arguments as I adjusted the saddle. I hardly heard any of them. I was thinking only about how good it would feel to be *away*. My father was far more put out than I was, claiming it to be a deliberate affront. *What kind of king can’t control his own daughter?* And that was one of his more reasoned responses.

He and his cabinet were already deploying entire brigades to key outlying garrisons to fortify them and to flaunt in Morri-ghan’s face what decisive strength really was. The uneasy alliance had toppled on its head, but worse than the cabinet’s chest-beating and conspiracy theories were the sorrowful looks from my mother. She was already broaching the subject of finding another bride in one of the Lesser Kingdoms, or even from among our own nobility, missing the entire point of the match in the first place.

I put my foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle. My horse snorted and stamped, as eager as I was to be gone.

“Wait!” Sven said, stepping into my path, a foolish move for someone with his considerable knowledge about horses—

especially mine. He caught himself and moved aside. “You don’t even know where she ran off to. How will you find her?”

I raised my brows. “You have no confidence in your abilities, Sven. Remember, I’ve learned from the best.”

I could almost see him cursing himself. He had always rubbed that in my face when my attention wandered, pinching my ears when I was still two heads shorter than he was, reminding me I had the best teacher and I shouldn’t squander his valuable time. Of course, we both knew the irony of that. He was right. I did have the best. Sven taught me well. I was given to him as apprentice at eight, became a cadet at twelve, pledged at fourteen, and was a fully appointed soldier by sixteen. I had spent more years under Sven’s tutelage than I had with my own parents. I was an accomplished soldier, due in no small part to him, excelling in all my training, which only made it all the more biting. I was probably the most untried soldier in history.

Sven’s lessons had included drills on royal military history—the accomplishments of this ancestor or that—and there were many. The royals of Dalbreck had always had military credentials, including my father. He rose legitimately to the rank of general while his own father still sat on the throne, but because I was the only heir to the only heir, my soldiering had been greatly limited. I didn’t even have a cousin to replace me. I rode with a company but was never allowed on the front lines, the heat of battle long cooled by the time I was brought onto any field, and even then they surrounded me with the strongest of our squad as extra insurance against flares.

To compensate, Sven had always given me double doses of the dirtiest and lowliest jobs of our squad to quell any rumblings about my favored status, from mucking the stables to shining his boots to loading and carrying the dead off the field. I'd never seen resentment in my fellow soldiers' faces, or heard it on their lips, but I had seen plenty of their pity. An untried soldier, no matter how expertly trained, was no soldier at all.

Sven mounted his horse and rode alongside me. I knew he wouldn't come far. As much as he blustered about my plans—because he was bound by duty to do just that—he was also obligated by the strong bond we had forged through our years together.

“How will I know where you are?”

“You won't. Now, that's a thought, isn't it?”

“And what shall I tell your parents?”

“Tell them I've gone off to the hunting lodge to sulk for the summer. They should like that. A nice safe haven.”

“The whole summer?”

“We'll see.”

“Something could happen.”

“Yes it could. I hope it does. You're not making your case any better, you know?”

I watched him out of the corner of my eye, surveying my gear, a sign he was truly resigned to my vanishing into the unknown. If I weren't heir to the throne, he wouldn't have given it a second thought. He knew he had prepared me for the worst and the unexpected. My skills, at least in training exercises, had been well provend. He grunted, signaling his reluctant

approval. Ahead was a narrow ravine where two horses could no longer ride abreast, and I knew that would be his point of departure. The day was already wearing thin.

“Will you confront her?”

“No. I probably won’t even speak to her.”

“Good, better that you don’t. If you do, watch your *R*’s and *L*’s. It will peg your region.”

“Already noted,” I said to assure him I’d thought of everything, but that detail had escaped me.

“If you need to send me a message, write it in the old tongue in case it’s intercepted.”

“I won’t be sending any messages.”

“Whatever you do, don’t tell her who you are. A Dalbreck head of state intervening on Morrighan soil could be construed as an act of war.”

“You mistake me for my father, Sven. I’m not a head of state.”

“You’re heir to the throne and your father’s representative. Don’t make matters worse for Dalbreck or your fellow soldiers.”

We rode silently.

Why was I going? What was the point if I wasn’t going to bring her back or even speak to her? I knew these thoughts were spinning in Sven’s head, but it wasn’t what he imagined. I wasn’t angry because she’d thought of bolting before I did. I’d thought of it long ago, when the marriage was first proposed by my father, but he had convinced me the union was for the good of Dalbreck and everyone would look the other way if I chose to take a mistress after the marriage. I was angry because she’d had

the courage to do what I hadn't. Who was this girl who thumbed her nose at two kingdoms and did as she pleased? I wanted to know.

As we neared the ravine, Sven broke the silence. "It's the note, isn't it?"

A month before the wedding, Sven had delivered a note to me from the princess. A secret note. It was still sealed when Sven handed it to me. His eyes had never seen the contents. I had read it and ignored it. I probably shouldn't have.

"No, I'm not going because of a note." I gave a short tug on the reins and stopped, turning to face him. "You do know, Sven, this isn't really about Princess Arabella."

He nodded. It had been a long time coming. He reached out and patted my shoulder and then turned his horse back toward Dalbreck without another word. I continued down the ravine, but after a few miles, I reached into my vest and pulled the note from the inner pocket. I looked at the hastily scrawled letters. Not exactly a royal missive.

*I should like to inspect you
before our wedding day.*

I tucked the note back into my pocket.

And so she shall.

There is one true history
and one true future.

Listen well,
for the child sprung from misery
will be the one to bring hope.
From the weakest will come strength.
From the hunted will come freedom.

—*Song of Venda*

CHAPTER FOUR



THE ASSASSIN

I'D GLADLY DO IT MYSELF, BUT I NEED TO RETURN TO MY duties in Venda. You'll be in and out in a day. She's only a royal, after all. You know how they are. And only seventeen at that. How hard could it be to find her?

I had smiled at the Komizar's summation of royals, but an answer wasn't necessary. We both knew it would be easy. A panicked prey doesn't worry about leaving a messy trail. The Komizar had done my job many times. He was the one who had trained me.

If it will be easy, why can't I go? Eben had complained.

This job is not for you, I had told him. Eben was eager to prove himself. He was skilled with both their language and a knife, and being small and barely twelve, he could pass for a child, especially with his mournful brown eyes and cherub face, which

had the advantage of disarming suspicions. But there was a difference between killing in battle and slitting a girl's throat as she slept. He wasn't ready for it. He might hesitate when he saw her startled eyes. That was the hardest moment, and there could be no hesitation. No second chances. The Komizar had made that clear.

An alliance between Morrighan and Dalbreck could make all of our efforts futile. Even worse, the girl is said to be a Siarrah. We may not believe in such magical thinking, but others do, and it might embolden them or make our own people fearful. We can't take a chance. Her flight is their bad luck and our good fortune. Slip in, slip out—your specialty. And if you can make it look like the work of Dalbreck, so much the better. I know you'll fulfill your duties. You always do.

Yes, I always met my duty. Far ahead the trail forked, and Eben saw that as his last chance to resume his campaign. "I still don't see why I shouldn't be the one to go. I know the language just as well as you."

"And all the dialects of Morrighan as well?" I questioned.

Before he could answer, Griz reached out and cuffed the side of his head. Eben yelped, sending a round of guffaws through the other men. "The Komizar wants him to do the deed, not you!" he shouted. "Quit yer whining!" Eben was silent for the remainder of the ride.

We reached the point where our paths diverged. Griz and his band of three had their own special skills. They would weave their way through the northernmost portion of Morrighan, where the kingdom had foolishly concentrated its forces. They'd be creating their own special brand of mayhem. Not as bloody

as mine, but just as productive. Their work would take considerably longer, though, which meant I'd have a "holiday," as Griz described it, while I waited for them at a designated camp in the Cam Lanteux for our return trip to Venda. He knew as well as I did that the Cam Lanteux was no holiday.

I watched as they went their own way, Eben sulking low in his saddle.

Not a job for you.

Had I been that eager to please the Komizar when I was Eben's age?

Yes.

It was just a handful of years past, but it seemed like two lifetimes ago.

The Komizar wasn't even a dozen years older than I was, hardly a full-grown man himself when he became ruler of Venda. That was when he took me under his wing. He saved me from starving. Saved me from a lot of things I've tried to forget. He gave me what my own kind hadn't. A chance. I've never stopped paying him back. There are some things you can never pay back.

But this would be a first, even for me. Not that I hadn't slit throats in the dark of night before, but those throats had always belonged to soldiers, traitors, or spies, and I knew their deaths meant my comrades would live. Even so, each time my blade slid across a throat, the startled eyes would steal a part of my soul.

I would have cuffed Eben myself if he'd brought up the subject again. He was too young to begin losing himself.

Slip in, slip out. And then on to a holiday.



*They thought themselves
only a step lower than the gods,
proud in their power over heaven and earth.
They grew strong in their knowledge
but weak in their wisdom,
craving more and still more power,
crushing the defenseless.*

—Morrighan Book of Holy Text, Vol. IV

CHAPTER FIVE



TERRAVIN WAS JUST AROUND THE NEXT BEND—AT LEAST that was what Pauline had said a dozen times. Her excited anticipation became mine as she recognized landmarks. We passed a massive tree that had the names of lovers carved into its bark, then a little farther along, a half circle of stumpy marble ruins that looked like loose crooked teeth in an old man’s mouth, and finally in the distance, a shining blue cistern crowned a hill with a court of junipers surrounding it. These signs meant we were close.

It had taken us ten days to get this far, but we would have made it sooner if we hadn’t spent two days going out of our way to leave false leads in case my father had trackers hunting us down.

Pauline had been appalled when I bundled up my costly wedding dress and threw it into a thicket of blackberry brambles,

but she was positively mortified when I used my dagger to pry the jewels from my wedding cloak and then sent the mutilated remains downriver tied to a log. She made three signs of penance for me. If the cloak was found by anyone who recognized it, I hoped the presumption would be that I had drowned. For wishing that horrifying news on my parents I should have paid penance of my own, but then I remembered they were not only prepared to send their only daughter away to live with a man she didn't love, but also to a kingdom they themselves didn't fully trust. I swallowed the knot in my throat and said nothing but good riddance as the cloak that my mother, my grandmother, and their mothers before them had worn floated away.

We used the jewels to trade for coin at Luiseveque, a large town about two hours' ride out of our way—three blue sapphires thrown in for the merchant if he forgot where they came from. It felt deliciously evil and exciting to trade in such a way, and as soon as we were down the road, we burst into laughter at our audacity. The merchant had looked at us as if we were thieves, but since the transaction was in his favor, he said nothing.

From there we backtracked, and a few more miles down the road, we traveled east again. On the outskirts of a small village we stopped at a farmhouse and traded the surprised farmer our valuable Ravians for three donkeys. We also slipped him a good amount of coin for more silence.

Two girls arriving in Terravin on grand steeds with the distinctive brand of the Morrighan stables were sure to draw attention, and that was one thing we couldn't afford. We didn't need three donkeys, but the farmer insisted the third would be

lost without the other two, and we found he was right, as it trailed close behind without even a tug from the rope. Otto, Nove, and Dieci the farmer had called them. I rode Otto, the largest of the three, a big brown fellow with a white muzzle and a long mop of fur between his ears. By now, our riding clothes were so filthy from the hundreds of miles we had covered and our soft leather boots so caked in mud, we were easy to ignore. No one would want to look upon us for long, and that was just the way I wanted it. I wouldn't have anything interfere with the dream of Terravin.

I knew we were close now. It was something about the air, something about the light, something I couldn't name, but it streamed through me like a warm voice. *Home. Home.* Foolishness, I knew. Terravin had never been my home, but maybe it could be.

On this last stretch, my gut suddenly jumped with fear that I'd hear something else—the thunder of hooves behind us. What Father's trackers would do to me was one thing, but what they might do to Pauline was another. If we were caught, I already planned that I'd tell them I had forced Pauline to help me against her will. I just had to convince Pauline to stick to that story too, because she was nothing if not true to the core.

"There! Look! Through the trees!" Pauline yelled, pointing into the distance. "The sliver of blue! That's the Bay of Terravin!"

I strained but couldn't see anything except thick stands of pine, a scrabble of oak, and the grassy brown hills between them. I urged Otto on, as if such a thing could be done with an animal

that only knew one speed. Then as we turned the bend, not only the bay but the whole fishing village of Terravin came into view.

It was exactly the jewel that Pauline had described.

My stomach squeezed.

A half circle of aquamarine bobbed with boats of red and yellow, some with billowing white sails, others with large paddle wheels churning up the water behind them. Still others splashed a trail of foam as oars dipped at their sides. They were all so small from this distance they might have been a child's toys. But I knew people manned them, that fishermen called to each other, cheering their day's catch, the wind carrying their voices, sharing their victories, breathing their stories. On the shore where some of them headed was a long wharf with more boats and people as small as ants moving back and forth, up and down, busy with their work. Then, maybe most beautiful of all, surrounding the bay were homes and shops that crept up the hills, each one a different color: bright blue, cherry red, orange, lilac, lime, a giant fruit bowl with the Bay of Terravin at its heart, and finally dark green fingers of forest reached down from the hills to hold the multicolored bounty in its palm.

Now I understood why it had always been Pauline's dream to return to the childhood home she had been uprooted from when her mother died. She'd been sent to live with a distant aunt in the north country and then, when that aunt became ill, handed off to yet another aunt she didn't even know, my mother's own attendant. Pauline's life had been one of a sojourner, but at last she was back in the place of her roots, her home. It was a

place I knew with one glance could be my home too, a place where the weight of who I was supposed to be didn't exist. My joy bobbed unexpectedly. *How I wish my brother Bryn were here to see this with me.* He loved the sea.

Pauline's voice finally broke through my thoughts. "Is something wrong? You haven't said a word. What do you think?"

I looked at her. My eyes stung. "I think . . . if we hurry, we might be able to bathe before dinner." I slapped Otto's backside. "First dip!"

Pauline was not to be outdone, and with a wild cry and prod in his ribs, she got her donkey to race ahead of mine.

Our reckless license was checked as we turned onto the main thoroughfare that wove through town. We tucked our hair into our caps and pulled them low over our eyes. Terravin was small and out of the way, but not so isolated that it couldn't be a stopping point for the Royal Guard—or a tracker. But even with my chin held close to my chest, I took it all in. The wonder! The sounds! The smells! Even the clap of our donkeys' hooves on the red-tiled streets sounded like music. It was so different from Civica in every way.

We passed a plaza shaded by a giant fig tree. Children jumped rope under its enormous umbrella, and musicians played a flute and a bandoneon, puffing out cheerful tunes for townsfolk who conversed around small tables that lined the perimeter.

Farther into town, merchandise spilled from stores onto neighboring walkways. A rainbow of scarves billowed in the breeze outside one shop, and at another, crates of fresh shiny eggplant, striped squash, lacy fennel, and fat pink turnips were displayed

in neat, vibrant rows. Even the tack shop was cheerfully painted in robin's-egg blue. The muted tones of Civica were nowhere to be found. Here everything sang with color.

No one looked at us. We blended in with others who were passing by. We were two more workers on our way home after a long day at the docks, or maybe just tired strangers looking for a friendly inn. In our trousers and caps, we probably looked more like scrawny men. I tried to keep from smiling as I eyed the town that Pauline had described so many times. My smile vanished when I saw three Royal Guards approaching on horseback. Pauline spotted them too and pulled back on her reins, but I whispered a hushed command to her. "Keep going. Keep your head down."

We proceeded forward, though I wasn't sure either of us breathed. The soldiers were laughing with each other, their horses moving at a leisurely pace. A cart driven by another soldier lumbered behind them.

They never glanced our way, and Pauline delivered a relieved sigh after they passed. "I forgot. Dried and smoked fish. They come once a month from an eastern outpost for supplies, but mostly for fish."

"Only once a month?" I whispered.

"I think so."

"Then our timing is good. We won't have to worry about them again for a while. Not that they'd know me anyway."

Pauline took a moment to survey me and then pinched her nose. "No one would know you, except perhaps the swine back home."

As if on cue, Otto hawed at her remark, making us both laugh, and we raced for a warm bath.



I HELD MY BREATH AS PAULINE KNOCKED ON THE SMALL back door of the inn. It immediately swung open, but only the brief wave of a woman's arm greeted us as she rushed away and yelled over her shoulder, "Put it over there! On the block!" She was already back at a huge stone hearth, using a wooden paddle to pull flat bread from the oven. Pauline and I didn't move, which finally caught the woman's attention. "I said to—"

She turned and frowned when she saw us. "Hmph. Not here with my fish, eh? A couple of mumpers, I suppose." She motioned to a basket by the door. "Grab an apple and a biscuit and be on your way. Come back after the rush, and I'll have some hot stew for you." Her attention was already elsewhere, and she yelled to someone who called to her from the front room of the inn. A tall, gangly boy stumbled through a swinging door with a burlap cloth in his arms, the tail of a fish wagging out the end. "Loafhead! Where's my cod? I'm to make stew with a crappie?" She grabbed the fish from him anyway, slapped it down on the butcher block, and with one decisive chop, whacked its head off with a cleaver. I guessed the crappie would do.

So this was Berdi. Pauline's amita. Her auntie. Not a blood aunt, but the woman who had given Pauline's mother work and a roof over her head when her husband had died and the bereft widow had a small infant to feed.

The fish was skillfully gutted and boned in a matter of

seconds and plopped into a bubbling kettle. Pulling her apron up to wipe her hands, she looked back over at us, one eyebrow raised. She blew a salt and pepper curl from her forehead. “You still here? I thought I told you—”

Pauline shuffled forward two steps and pulled her cap from her head so that her long honey hair tumbled down around her shoulders. “Amita?”

I watched the old woman’s expressive face go blank. She took a step closer, squinting. “Pollypie?”

Pauline nodded.

Berdi’s arms flew open, and she swooped Pauline into her bosom. After much hugging and many half-finished sentences, Pauline finally pulled away and turned toward me. “And this is my friend Lia. I’m afraid we’re both in a bit of trouble.”

Berdi rolled her eyes and grinned. “Couldn’t be anything that a bath and a good hot meal won’t take care of.”

She darted over to the swinging door, shoving it open and shouting orders. “Gwyneth! Gone for five. Enzo will help you!” She was already turning away before the door swung back and I noted how, for a woman of some years who carried a hefty sampling of her own cooking around her midsection, she was spry on her feet. I heard a faint groan waft through the door from the front room and the clatter of dishes. Berdi ignored it. She led us out the back door of the kitchen. “Loafhead—that’s Enzo—he’s got potential, but he’s as lazy as the day is long. Takes after his shiftless father. Gwyneth and I are working on it. He’ll come around. And help is hard to come by.”

We followed her up some crumbling stone steps carved into

the hill behind the inn, and then down a winding leaf-littered path to a dark cottage that sat some distance away. The forest encroached just behind it. She pointed to a huge iron vat simmering on an elevated brick hearth. “But he does manage to keep the fire going so guests can have a hot bath, and that’s the first thing you two need.”

As we drew closer, I heard the soft rush of water hidden somewhere in the forest behind the cottage, and I remembered the creek that Pauline had described, the banks where she had frolicked with her mother, skipping stones across its gentle waters.

Berdi led us into the cottage, apologizing for the dust, explaining that the roof leaked and the room was mostly used for overflow now, which was what we were. The inn was full, and the only alternative was the barn. She lit a lantern and pulled a large copper tub that was tucked in the corner out into the middle of the room. She paused to wipe her forehead with the hem of her apron, for the first time showing any sign of exhaustion.

“Now, what kind of trouble could two young girls like you be in?” Her gaze dropped to our middles, and she quickly added, “It’s not *boy* trouble, is it?”

Pauline blushed. “No, Amita, nothing like that. It’s not even trouble, exactly. At least, it doesn’t have to be.”

“Actually, the trouble is mine,” I said, stepping forward and speaking for the first time. “Pauline has been helping me.”

“Ah. So you have a voice after all.”

“Maybe you should sit so I can—”

“You just spill it out, Lia. It is Lia, right? There’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

She was planted near the tub, bucket in hand, ready for a quick explanation. I decided I would give it to her. “That’s right. Lia. Princess Arabella Celestine Idris Jezelia, First Daughter of the House of Morrighan, to be exact.”

“Her Royal Highness,” Pauline added meekly.

“*Ex* Royal Highness,” I clarified.

Berdi cocked her head to the side, as though she hadn’t heard quite right, then paled. She reached for the bedpost and eased down onto the mattress. “What’s this all about?”

Pauline and I took turns explaining. Berdi said nothing, which I suspected was uncharacteristic of her, and I watched Pauline grow uneasy with Berdi’s silence.

When there was nothing left to say, I stepped closer. “We’re certain no one followed us. I know a little about tracking. My brother’s a trained scout in the Royal Guard. But if my presence makes you uncomfortable, I’ll move on.”

Berdi sat for a moment longer, as if the truth of our explanation was just catching up to her, one of her brows rising in a curious squiggled line. She stood. “Blazing balls, yes, your presence makes me uncomfortable! But did I say anything about moving on? You’ll stay right here. Both of you. But I can’t go giving you—”

I cut her off, already reading her thoughts. “I don’t expect or want any special attention. I came here because I want a real life. And I know that includes earning my keep. Whatever work you have for me to do, I’ll gladly do it.”

Berdi nodded. “We’ll figure that part out later. For now we need to get you two bathed and fed.” She wrinkled her nose. “In that order.”

“One other thing.” I unbuttoned my shirt and turned around, dropping the fabric to my waist. I heard her draw in a breath as she viewed my elaborate wedding kavah. “I need to get this off my back as soon as possible.”

I heard her step closer and then felt her fingers on my back. “Most kavahs don’t last more than a few weeks, but this one . . . it may take a little longer.”

“They used the best artisans and dyes.”

“A good soaking bath every day will help,” she offered. “And I’ll bring you a back brush and strong soap.”

I pulled my shirt on again and thanked her. Pauline hugged her before she left and then grabbed the bucket from the floor. “You first, Your Highness—”

“Stop!” I snatched the bucket from her hand. “From this day forward, there is no more Your Highness. That part of my life is gone forever. I’m only Lia now. Do you understand, Pauline?”

Her eyes met mine. This was it. We both understood this was the real beginning we had planned. The one we had both hoped for but weren’t sure could ever be. Now it was here. She smiled and nodded.

“And you’ll go first,” I added.

Pauline unpacked our few belongings while I made several trips to fill the tub with hot water. I scrubbed Pauline’s back the way she had scrubbed mine so many times before, but then as she soaked, her eyes heavy with fatigue, I decided I’d go bathe

in the creek so she could savor this luxury as long as she wanted. I'd never be able to pay her back for everything she had done for me. This was a small token I could offer.

After meek protests, she gave me directions to the creek just a short walk behind our cottage, warning me to stay near the shallows. She said there was a small protected pool there that had the cover of thick shrubs. I promised twice to be watchful, even though she had already admitted she had never seen it anything but deserted. At the dinner hour, there was no doubt I would be alone.

I found the spot, quickly stripped, and left my dirty clothes and a fresh change on the grassy bank. I shivered as I slipped below the surface of the water, but it wasn't half as cold as the streams of Civica. My shoulders were already warming as I broke the surface again. I drew in a deep breath, a new breath, one I had never taken before.

I am only Lia now. From this day forward.

It felt like a baptism. A deeper kind of cleansing. Water trickled down my face and dripped from my chin. Terravin wasn't just a new home. Dalbreck could have offered that, but there I'd have been only a curiosity in a foreign land, still with no voice in my own destiny. Terravin offered a new *life*. It was both exhilarating and terrifying. What if I never saw my brothers again? What if I was a failure at this life too? But everything I had seen so far had encouraged me, even Berdi. Somehow, I'd make this new life work.

The creek was wider than I expected, but I stayed in the calm shallows as Pauline had instructed. It was a clear, gentle

pool no more than shoulder deep with slick river rock dotting its bottom. I lay back and floated, my eyes resting on the filigreed canopy of oak and pine. With dusk settling, the shadows deepened. Through the trunks, golden lights began to flicker in the hillside homes as Terravin prepared for the eventide remembrances. I was surprised to find that I listened expectantly for the songs that ushered in the evening throughout all of Morrighan, but only the occasional hint of melody caught on a breeze.

I will find you . . .

In the farthest corner . . .

I paused, turning my head to the side to hear better, the burning tone of the words more urgent than any of the holy remembrances of home. I couldn't place the phrases either, but the Holy Text was vast.

The melodies vanished, plucked away by a cool breeze, and instead I listened to the *whoosh* of Berdi's brush as I vigorously scrubbed my back. My left shoulder burned where soap met wedding kavah, as if a battle raged between the two. With each pass of the brush, I imagined the lion crest of Dalbreck shrinking back in terror, soon to be gone from my life forever.

I washed away the suds with a quick dip, then twisted around, trying to view the lion's demise, but the small section of kavah I was able to see in the dim light—the vines swirling around the lion's claw on the back of my shoulder—still bloomed in all its glory. Ten days ago, I was praising the artisans. Now I wanted to curse them.

Snap!

I dropped down into the water and spun, ready to face an intruder. “Who’s there?” I called, trying to cover myself.

Only an empty forest and silence answered back. A doe perhaps? But where had it gone so quickly? I searched the shadows of the trees, but found no movement.

“It was only the snap of a twig,” I reassured myself. “Any small animal could have made it.”

Or maybe a wandering guest of the inn, surprised to have come upon me? I smiled, amused that I may have frightened someone off—before they caught sight of my back, I hoped. Kavahs were a sign of position and wealth, and this one, if examined too closely, clearly spoke of royalty.

I stepped out of the water, hastily putting on my fresh clothes, and then spotted a small gray rabbit darting behind a tree. A relieved sigh escaped me.

Only a small animal. Just as I thought.